



# The Book of Revelation

*“The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever.” (Revelation 11:15)*

# Introduction to Christ's Letters to the Seven Churches (Revelation 2–3)

- Revelation 2–3 contains seven messages from the risen Christ to seven real churches in the Roman province of Asia Minor.
- These were actual congregations facing real pressures, struggles, and temptations — and Christ had something specific to say to each one.
- Though sometimes called “letters,” these messages are better understood as royal proclamations or prophetic oracles.
- The whole of Revelation is *itself* a letter, and these seven messages form its opening pastoral section, grounding the dramatic visions that follow in the concrete life of real churches.

# Introduction to Christ's Letters to the Seven Churches (Revelation 2–3)

- Each message follows a recognizable pattern:
- Christ first identifies himself using imagery drawn from the vision of chapter 1, selecting titles particularly suited to each church's situation.
- He then declares “*I know*” — a reminder that he walks “*among*” his churches as their chief shepherd and sees everything clearly.
- From there, each message typically moves through:
  - A *commendation* (where deserved)
  - A *correction* or *rebuke* (where needed)
  - A call to *repentance*
  - An *exhortation* to hear what the Spirit is saying
  - A *promise* to those who *overcome*
- Not *every* element appears in *every* letter.
- For example, **Smyrna** receives *no rebuke*, while **Laodicea** receives *no commendation*.

# Introduction to Christ's Letters to the Seven Churches (Revelation 2–3)

- The seven messages form a loose chiasm with Thyatira — the longest letter — at the center:
  - A **Ephesus**: unhealthy church
  - B **Smyrna**: *healthy* church
  - C **Pergamum**: unhealthy church
  - D **Thyatira**: unhealthy church
  - C' **Sardis**: unhealthy church
  - B' **Philadelphia**: *healthy* church
  - A' **Laodicea**: unhealthy church
- Taken together, the structure emphasizes an uncomfortable reality: the *majority* of these churches are in *serious* spiritual trouble.
- The healthy churches are the *exception*, not the rule, and the entire collection is *bookended* by troubled congregations.

# Introduction to Christ's Letters to the Seven Churches (Revelation 2–3)

- Some readers, especially in older and dispensational traditions, have treated the seven churches as a kind of prophetic timeline, with each church representing a different chapter in the history of Christianity.
- Most scholars today don't find this convincing — it reads something into the text that simply isn't there.
- Good Bible interpretation means first recognizing that these were *real* churches in *real* cities, so we need to understand each letter in light of the specific history and culture of the city being addressed.
- That said, while these letters were written to *specific* congregations with *specific* problems, what Christ says to them speaks just as powerfully to any church today that faces the same kinds of issues.

# Introduction to Christ's Letters to the Seven Churches (Revelation 2–3)

- Each letter closes with the solemn call: “*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches*”.
- The number **seven** itself carries the sense of **completeness**.
- These churches represent Christ's church **everywhere** and in **every generation**.
- The conditions described — compromise with surrounding culture, spiritual complacency, faithful endurance under persecution, lukewarmness — are not peculiarities of first-century Asia.
- They are the perennial conditions of the church throughout its history — even the church today.
- These letters to the churches give us insight into what Christ thinks of his church as it exists throughout the ages: He sees it, knows it, loves it — and calls it to faithfulness.

# Letter to the Church in Ephesus (2:1-7)

*2:1 "To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands: <sup>2</sup> I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. <sup>3</sup> You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. <sup>4</sup> Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. <sup>5</sup> Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. <sup>6</sup> But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. <sup>7</sup> He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God." (NIV)*

# The Church in Ephesus – Historical Context

- Ephesus was the largest and most important city in the Roman province of Asia, with a population of roughly a quarter million people.
- A major commercial hub and administrative capital, it was dominated by the famous temple of Artemis — one of the seven wonders of the ancient world — along with a strong imperial cult presence.
- Being a Christian there meant constant pressure to conform to a culture thoroughly saturated with pagan religion and emperor worship.
- The church had been founded in the early 50s AD through the efforts of Priscilla, Aquila, and the apostle Paul, who spent up to *three* years there.

# The Church in Ephesus – Historical Context

- Timothy and later the apostle John also provided leadership, making Ephesus one of the most richly shepherded churches in the early Christian world.
- By the time Christ dictates this letter through John, the church is about fifteen years old.
- As the closest city to Patmos and the region's dominant metropolis, Ephesus naturally receives the first message.
- Christ addresses a congregation with a genuinely impressive track record — doctrinal vigilance, perseverance, hard work — but one that has drifted in a critical and not immediately obvious way, setting the stage for both commendation and sobering correction.

2:1 "To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands, says this: (ESV)

- In the verses that follow Christ will give both **commendations** and **condemnations** of this church in Ephesus.
- He does so as one who has **every right** to evaluate them, for he is "**the One who holds the seven stars in His right hand**" and "**walks among the seven golden lampstands**".
- He is not a distant observer.
- Christ moves **among** his churches, sees **everything clearly**, and misses nothing.

2:2 *'I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot endure evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false; <sup>3</sup> I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary.* (ESV)

- His opening words — “*I know*” — carry **enormous** weight.
- This is not **casual** awareness.
- It is the comprehensive, penetrating knowledge of the risen Lord who walks in the midst of his people.
- As Christ gives his evaluation of this church, he will begin **not** with **criticism**, but with a **commendation** — and the commendation is **substantial**.
- Before identifying what is **wrong**, he acknowledges what is genuinely **right**.

*2:2 'I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot endure evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false; 3 I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. (ESV)*

- What he *knows* about Ephesus, he *approves of* in **three** distinct areas:
- **First**, their *diligence*: “*I know your deeds and your **toil**”.*
- The Ephesians were a *hardworking* church.
- “*toil*” is a word that implies exhausting, draining effort — not comfortable, casual service.
- They worked *hard* for Christ in a city that made such work *costly*.
- Scholars note the close parallel with Paul's language in 1 Thessalonians 1:3, where works, labor, and endurance appear together as marks of *genuine faith* in action.

2:2 'I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot endure evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false; <sup>3</sup> I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. (ESV)

- **Second**, their "*perseverance*".
- Living as Christians in Ephesus meant constant friction with a culture saturated in pagan religion and imperial worship.
- These believers had withstood social pressure, economic hardship, and likely personal hostility — and had not buckled.
- They bore it all for Christ's "*name's sake*", which is to say, for Christ himself.
- **Third**, their *discernment*. This may be the most *striking* commendation.
- Itinerant teachers had arrived claiming apostolic authority, and the Ephesians had not simply accepted them.
- They *tested* these self-styled apostles, examined their teaching and conduct against what they knew to be true, and found them to be *frauds*.

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- Paul had **warned** the Ephesian elders decades earlier that wolves would come (Acts 20:29–30).
- And indeed, wolves **had** come — and the church had **recognized** them.
- Ignatius of Antioch, writing to this same church around AD 110, still praised them for allowing **no** heresy to have a foothold among them.
- Verse 3 loops back to **reinforce** the point: they “*are enduring patiently*”, they continued “*bearing up*”, and they have “*not grown weary*”.
- By any **outward** measure, the church at Ephesus looked **exemplary** — active, steadfast, and doctrinally sound.
- What Christ is about to say next will therefore come as a **complete surprise**.

2:4 *But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.* <sup>5</sup> *Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.* (ESV)

- After the commendation comes a **stunning** turn.
- Despite all their **strengths** — the hard work, the endurance, the doctrinal vigilance — Christ says simply: *“I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.”*
- The church that appeared so impressive from the **outside** had a quiet, fatal problem at its **core**.
- The *“love you had at first”* almost **certainly** refers **primarily** to love for Christ himself, though love for God and love for fellow believers are **inseparable** in John's writings.
- The Ephesian church had not abandoned **orthodoxy** or **Christian activity** — they were still working, still enduring, still guarding the truth.
- But somewhere along the way, *“love”* had stopped being the engine driving it all.
- What remained were the **motions** of religion without the **heart** of it.
- **Duty** had replaced **delight**.

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- This is what makes the problem so *dangerous*: it is *invisible* to most observers.
- The church *looked* healthy.
- Only Christ, walking among the lampstands, could see the cooling at its core.
- His prescription is **threefold** and brisk:
  - “*Remember therefore from where you have fallen*” — not as mere nostalgia, but as a sober reckoning.
  - “*Repent*”, making a decisive break with the present drift.
  - “*Do the works you did at first*” again — because love is not merely a feeling to be recaptured but a practice to be resumed, and often the doing rekindles the feeling.
- The warning is sobering: fail to repent, and Christ will “*come*” and “*remove [their] lampstand*”.
- Whatever the precise timing of that “coming”, the meaning is clear — a loveless church, however orthodox and busy, risks ceasing to be a true church at all.
- Light requires love to burn.

2:6 *Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.* <sup>7</sup> *He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.'* (ESV)

- Before closing, Christ offers one more word of praise: the Ephesians “*hate the works of the Nicolaitans*” — and so does he.
- This group appears again in the letter to Pergamum, where their teaching is linked to eating food sacrificed to idols and sexual immorality.
- In short, they appear to have counseled a comfortable accommodation with the surrounding pagan culture, essentially arguing that Christians could participate in its religious and social life without harm.
- The Ephesians refused this compromise, and Christ explicitly *shares* their revulsion.
- Hating what God hates is *not* narrow-mindedness; it is *faithfulness*.

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- This letter, like the other six, closes with **two** elements:
- **First**, a **solemn call**: *“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches”*
- The phrase echoes Jesus's own teaching style in the Gospels and the commissioning language of the Old Testament prophets.
- Crucially, the word *“churches”* is plural — what is said to Ephesus is meant for all.
- **Every** congregation is to listen and learn from **every** letter.

2:6 Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. 7 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.' (ESV)

- **Second**, a **glorious promise**: “To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God”.
- This image reaches back to Genesis, where Adam and Eve were barred from the tree after the fall.
- What was **lost** through sin will be **fully restored**.
- To overcome — to hold fast in love and faithfulness to the end — is to gain access to eternal life in God's presence.
- The letter that began with **Christ** walking among the lampstands ends with **his people** walking in “**paradise**”.

# Letter to the Church in Smyrna (2:8-11)

*2:8 “To the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. <sup>9</sup> I know your afflictions and your poverty--yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. <sup>10</sup> Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life. <sup>11</sup> He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death. (NIV)*

# The Church in Smyrna – Historical Context

- Smyrna — modern Izmir, the **only one** of the seven cities still inhabited today — lay about forty miles north of Ephesus on the Aegean coast.
- Beautiful, prosperous, and fiercely loyal to Rome, it was the first city in Asia to build a temple to the goddess Roma and later won the coveted honor of hosting an imperial temple to Tiberius.
- This deep entanglement with emperor worship made Christian life there genuinely dangerous.
- A large Jewish population added further pressure, actively opposing the church and reporting Christians to Roman authorities.
- The most famous casualty was Bishop Polycarp, martyred in the mid-second century for refusing to call Caesar “Lord”.
- Of the seven letters, this one is the **shortest** — and one of only **two** containing **no rebuke** whatsoever.
- Christ has **nothing** to correct in Smyrna.
- He only acknowledges their suffering, warns of worse ahead, and calls them to fearless faithfulness.

2:8 *“And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: ‘The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life.’<sup>9</sup> I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. (ESV)*

- Christ addresses Smyrna as:
  - *“the first and the last”* — titles drawn from Isaiah's declaration of Yahweh's eternal sovereignty, now applied to Jesus (Isaiah 44:6; 48:12).
  - *“who died and came to life”* — for a church facing **death**, this is a **pointed** reminder: their Lord has already walked through death and out the other side.
- Christ tells them, *“I know your tribulation and your **poverty**”*.
- In wealthy Smyrna, Christian *“poverty”* was likely the direct result of their faith — lost employment, boycotts by pagan and Jewish neighbors, exclusion from trade guilds — all consequences of refusing to participate in the city's religious life.

2:8 "And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: 'The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life.'<sup>9</sup> "I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. (ESV)

- Though **materially** poor, they are **spiritually** “*rich*” — a direct inversion of the Laodicean church, which **imagined** itself to be **wealthy** while, in reality, being **spiritually destitute**.
- Christ also knows the slander coming from the local Jewish community, who were apparently denouncing Christians to Roman authorities.
- Jesus calls them a “**synagogue of Satan**” — not an ethnic slur, but a theological verdict.
- “**Satan**” means “accuser,” and those falsely accusing God's people are doing Satan's work **regardless** of their ancestry.
- True Jewishness, as Paul argues in his letters (Rom. 2:28–29; Phil. 3:3), is a matter of faith and covenant faithfulness.
- The church at Smyrna, poor and slandered, represents the genuinely rich and genuinely faithful people of God.

2:10 *Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.* <sup>11</sup> *He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.'* (ESV)

- Knowing worse is coming, Christ's first words are simply: “*Do not fear*”.
- Imprisonment awaited some of the Smyrnaeans — not as punishment in the Roman system, but as a holding place before trial and likely execution.
- Behind the Roman authorities stood “*the devil*” himself, using human power to test and potentially destroy the church's faith.
- The “*tribulation*” would last “*ten days*” — almost certainly not a literal period but a symbol of limited, bounded duration.
- The time of trial, however severe, is in Christ's hands and will not last forever.

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- The command is stark and tender at once: "*Be faithful unto death.*"
- Not merely faithful until death *threatens*, but faithful *through* it.
- The reward is the "*crown of life*" — a victor's wreath, but one consisting of life itself, the gift of eternal life from the risen Christ who has already conquered death.
- The letter closes with the promise that the "*one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death*" — identified elsewhere in Revelation as the lake of fire, the final and ultimate separation from God.
- Physical death, however terrible, is not the worst that can happen.
- For those who remain faithful, it is merely the doorway into the presence of the one who was dead and came to life again.
- The worst the devil can do falls short of what Christ has already overcome.

# Class Discussion Time

- Does it surprise you that the **majority** of the seven churches that Christ addresses are in **serious** spiritual trouble?
- If you had to guess, would you say that was true of the churches that exist in the America today? Why or why not?
- For most of the churches, Christ has both a **commendation** and a **rebuke**.
- In each case, he **begins** with the **commendation** before giving the rebuke. Do you think there is something strategic in him doing it in that order?
- Might there be an example here for us as we have need to commend and/or rebuke one another?
- If Christ were to write a letter to our church today, what do you think he would say? What do you think he would commend us for? What might he rebuke us for?

# Class Discussion Time

- Do you find it shocking that a church like Ephesus that is working hard, persevering through trials, and spiritually discerning would, because of a deficiency in love, be in danger of being shut down (having their lampstand removed) by Christ?
- What does this tell us about the importance of love as the motivation behind our Christian behavior?
- *If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, **but have not love**, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, **but have not love**, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, **but have not love**, I gain nothing. (1Cor 13:1-3)*

# Class Discussion Time

- It appears that the persecution the Christians at Smyrna experienced originated in Jewish religious circles.
- Likewise, we know that Jesus was put to death by religious leaders.
- Why is it that so often persecution seems to come from religious people, even apparently-professing Christians (in past times, for example, the Inquisition or established churches in Russia and China)?