

Our journey through the Book of Revelation begins with the first three chapters. From the prison island of Patmos, John has sent a letter to seven churches in Asia Minor, or modern day Turkey. The letter deals with a divine vision, but it is grounded in history. We can still visit the ruins of those churches today. But a logical is: Why these seven churches?

Again, the answer is grounded in physical history. These churches formed a kind of inner ring. If a letter was sent to them, it would easily be distributed throughout the whole region. And secondly, John was an overseer of this area. These churches were his responsibility. Even from prison, he is caring for them.

But there is a second layer to this answer. We learned last week that this letter was written in *apocalyptic language*; that is, highly symbolic. It starts with this important key:

**Rev1**

4. John, to the seven churches which are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from Him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne,

The number seven is no coincidence. Seven is the number of universality. The warnings, problems, and rewards of the letter are universal to all churches; no matter what the time or place. There are as meaningful today as they were nearly two thousand years ago.

The chapter mentions seven spirits at the throne. Rather than seven spirits, it is really talking about the infinite supply of one Spirit. The Spirit of God is ready to come into “seven churches” or literally, any church willing to heed the warnings.

We don't have time this morning to cover all seven, so let's hit the highlights of three that make a pretty good cross section, starting with...

## QUESTIONS

**WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO YOU, THAT THE BOOK OF REVELATION IS GROUNDED IN HISTORY?**

**WHAT DO YOU THINK THE SEVEN SPIRITS AND CANDLESTICKS SYMBOLIZE?**

### 1. The first church: EPHESUS: The Pearl of the Pagans Revelation 2: 1-6

What was the situation in Ephesus at the time of this letter? For starters, *Ephesus was rich*. Its combination of harbor and cross roads made it the gateway to Asia. It was notoriously *religious and superstitious*. It was known for the temple of Artimus who was so ancient, no one knew her origin. Ephesus was famous for its charms and infallible remedies for sickness.

If you were going to plan a missions strategy, this place sounds like a very unlikely spot. And yet it is in this very place that Christianity saw some of its greatest triumph. One reason may be that, even

though it was notoriously immoral; it was a **city of seekers**. We must never **underestimate the hunger** of a searching heart, no matter what the starting point.

I remember listening to a youth workers assessment of this **postmodern generation**. Even though they hold little respect for organized religion, he saw them as a great hope... because they were **genuinely seeking**. **We live in an Ephesus generation**.

But seeking alone isn't enough. In fact, if a church is going to wade into a world of seekers, it better be **rock solid in its own theology**. Because there's a lot of ideas out there, and it's easy to get taken down the wrong path **little by little**. And that was a problem in Ephesus. A wide spectrum of ideas came through its doors. Jesus warned us back in **Matt 7:15**. Wolves in sheep's clothing will mingle with the genuine congregation. For the Ephesians, wrong ideas that sounded good, lured many away from their "first love."

So the warning was, "**get back to where you started or I'll remove your lamp stand (i.e. my spirit)**." That is the greatest tragedy for any church. We meet, we do our thing, and we don't even notice; God's Spirit just quietly abandons the place; because we're doing **our** thing, and not **His**. It can happen so easily; all we have to do is stop going where God is working. *For your church; do you know where God is working right now?*

But Ephesus had one plus; they **hated the Nicolaitans**. This heresy was a unique brand of Greek philosophy. The unclean flesh had no affiliation with incorruptible soul, so to separate them; go out and commit as many sins as possible with your body.

## QUESTIONS

**IN YOUR WORDS, WHAT TEMPTATIONS LURED THE EPHESIAN CHURCH FROM THEIR "FIRST LOVE?"**

**THE NICOLAITANS SAW A SHARP DIVIDE BETWEEN THE PHYSICAL AND THE SPIRITUAL, DOES THE CULTURE OR CHURCH THINK LIKE THAT TODAY? IN WHAT WAY?**

## 2. Two: SMYRNA: A Church under Persecution

### Rev 2: 9-10

Ephesus may have come first in wealth and beauty, but Smyrna was a close second. It was known as the "ornament of Asia." A zephyr wind blew through its streets and kept it was always as fresh as an ocean breeze.

But the church there, did not know wealth. The word, used here, for "tribulation", means something that is being crushed under a heavy weight. And the Greek used for "poverty", doesn't mean very little, but having absolutely nothing at all (ptocheia). There were destitute for two reasons: First, most came from the poorer class. By more importantly, they were constantly under attack from mobs who would destroy their property.

What happened was; the local law had banned Christianity for six reasons:

- 1) They thought communion was actually cannibalism.
- 2) Fellowship and communion were called "Agape", or "Love Feasts" so they accused them of eliciting orgies.
- 3) Because converting might cause division in the home, they were accused of destroying families.
- 4) Because they didn't hold to any images of their God, they were ardent atheists.
- 5) Because they wouldn't say "Caesar is Lord", they were accused of being politically disloyal.
- 6) Because they foretold the end of the world, they were harbingers of doom and trouble makers.

John warns them of 10 days of tribulation. "10 days" was a phrase used at the time that meant, for a short time. And that's exactly what happened. There would be a burst of administrative energy, people would go after them for a while, and then things would subside. That was the great terror of being a Christian there, these abrupt and random attacks.

But isn't there a real similarity to Christianity today? Thankfully, we aren't physically attacked in our nation; but the dynamic is the same. Every criticism I have ever heard has been on the grounds of misunderstanding. And around the world today, this is happening even more to God's church.

But the vision said that if they endure, they will receive a crown. What's the significance of that? The vision is talking in terms of what they understood. Smyrna was known for its Olympic style games. And it was custom for victorious athlete to receive a laurel crown. The crown was indisputable victory.

As well, it was custom for faithful magistrates who performed the terms of their office to receive a crown. It was a sign of great honor. Furthermore, it was custom to wear a crown of flowers when going to the temples. A crown meant you had the authority to approach God. As a matter of fact, it represented a halo that meant you shared the nature of God Himself! Can you imagine what such a crown would mean to these people crushed at the bottom of the heap?

What a great lesson for Christians in our culture. They weren't promised material prosperity. It might even come at the cost of their physical lives. But the imagery was for something far more. That is still the promise of the Gospel. And it holds a great deal of meaning for those dying, even at this moment.

Their letter finishes with this reminder:

11. "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death."

## QUESTIONS

**THE CHURCH IN SMYRNA WAS MISUNDERSTOOD, HOW IS THE CHURCH MISUNDERSTOOD TODAY? HOW DOES THE CHURCH MISREPRESENT ITSELF?**

**WHY DO YOU THINK THE REVELATION MENTIONS "THE SECOND DEATH"?**

WHAT DO WE LEARN FROM THIS CHURCH ABOUT FAITH AND PROSPERITY?

**3. The third church: PERGAMUM: The Enlightened City in the Deepest Darkness**  
**Rev 2:13-17**

Pergamum wasn't the commercial success of the first two cities, but it surpassed them both for its famous library, second only to Alexandria which was the greatest in the civilized world. And as a storehouse of information, it was a concentrated center for pagan religion. A magnificent altar to Zeus dominated the city. And signs of emperor worship were everywhere.

The revelation starts with a curious address. Usually Christians were referred to as **sojourners**. They were the persecuted moving on in this life, to eternal life. But the verse says, "**I know where you dwel**" or "**stay**". The Greek word means one's **permanent address**. What's more, their permanent address was in **Satan's courtyard**. What's that all about?

Even though it was a center for Satan, they were to **stay and fight the spiritual fight; not run**. Rev 2:14 speaks of **Balaam**, what's his story? The essence of Balaam's error was to **turn one's back on God's people for the sake of material gain**. It was just another way of talking yourself into compromise.

Isn't that exactly where we're at today? The mantra of the day is "**tolerance**." For what? -For **everything**. It is judgmental and small-minded to call anything wrong. What was an embarrassment a generation ago is a badge of honor today. -Entertainment, living arrangements, sexual ethics; let's fit in by compromising just a little, and then a little more. Mickey gave us a great quote today for the today's bulletin. Nearly 800 years earlier, Isaiah warned: **If you won't stand firm; you will not be able to stand at all.** (*Isaiah 7:9 "If you won't 'aman' you won't be 'aman'"*)

**-But how about the reward if they would stand?**

**Rev 2:17 talks about "hidden manna"**, what's that? The "hidden manna" meant all the  **blessings of the Messianic age**. **So what blessings come with Christ?** -Deliverance from eternal death and to eternal life; direction in this life, the power to be a child of God, the freedom of a second chance; and many other things as a result of these things. But here's the thing: you have to be **constantly** eating the manna.

Rev 2:17 also talks about **receiving a white stone with a new name** on it.

Again, the vision **speaks in terms of that place and time**. In the courts of the day, a verdict of a jury would be done with white and black stones- a white stone meant innocent. A black one meant condemnation and death.

Another use of white stone was in a tablet of stone called a **tessera**. If a person was given one of these, they had the right to certain free gifts. It was given as a **high honor** for victory in certain games, and it allowed great social freedom. For the Roman gladiator, it was a trophy of courage. So for the Christian, the picture was one of great honor, and freedom before God.

The white stone with a name meant one more thing- it meant a new beginning. “The verdict is- not condemned; if you live up to this new name.” It meant a **new identity** in the life of Christ.

## QUESTIONS

**PERGAMUM WAS AN ACADEMIC CITY, WHY DO YOU THINK THERE WAS SUCH SPIRITUAL DARKNESS?**

**IN EACH CASE, THE REVELATION TALKS IN IMAGERY TO STIR THE HEARTS OF THAT PARTICULAR CITY. WHY DO YOU THINK THE REWARDS WERE “HIDDEN MANNA” AND WHITE STONES HERE?**

### 4. The fourth church addressed in: THYATIRA: The Blue Collar City

Rev 2: 18-28

It's rather ironic, the longest letter is written to the least important of the seven cities. But the problems that faced it are the most universal.

The city was a **center of craftsmen** and had an extraordinary number of guilds. In modern vernacular, we would say; the place was run by unions. And if you didn't belong to a trade guild, it was commercial death.

But here's the thing- the guilds often held meals that were basically, wild parties in the pagan temples. It was customary to offer food to the gods. The church was specifically instructed to abstain from meat offered to idols, and wild living. So this was quite a dilemma for the Christian: **Faith or career suicide**.

Besides that, there was a woman who is referred to by the “code name” **Jezebel**. Jezebel was a queen from Old Testament history who was infamous for leading God's people away from proper faith. What's more, the word used for “woman”, actually means “wife.” So this woman was very likely the wife of a church leader. She was well thought of, but she was destroying the church. Most likely, she had been preaching practical compromise with the worker's unions.

**How different is that from today?** Just take one point; we are still called to the principle of Sabbath rest and assembling, but how many of us work on Sunday and think nothing of it? We wouldn't think of jeopardizing our careers over such an impractical principle? Does Scripture even hint at that? Imagine the command to Thyatira? Compromise exacts a spiritual cost, that is reality.

Those who remain resist compromise in this world, are promised they will one day rule over it. They will receive the morning star- that means Christ's resurrection; life. He who loses his life will find it.

## QUESTIONS

**THYATIRA WAS A WORKING MAN'S TOWN. WHAT CHALLENGES TO OUR FAITH TODAY IS LIKE THEIRS?**

WHAT DO YOU THINK OF THE COST FOR THEIR FAITH HERE?

CAN YOU THINK OF MODERN EXAMPLES THAT PARALLEL THEIR SITUATION?

IN WHAT WAYS DO CHRISTIANS COMPROMISE WITH CAREER TODAY?

### 5. The fifth church addressed: SARDIS: Fat, Dumb, and Happy Revelation 3: 1-5

This letter is riddled with *references to the city's history*.

The original Sardis stood like a giant watch tower, 1500 feet over the Hermus valley. The city sat on a plateau with sheer drop-offs on every side except one. It had been an *unconquerable fortress*.

Besides that, *they were rich*. Gold was carried down on the river's currents. The king and his people were confident nothing could ever end the splendor of their kingdom. So the king went out and fought the Persian Empire. They were routed, but the king wasn't concerned, they'd simply regroup back in the fortress of Sardis.

The Persians besieged the place, but of course, couldn't get inside because of those cliffs. But through a bribe, they found out a secret, those cliffs really weren't solid rock but were hardened clay that could be climbed. So the Persians climbed at night and found there wasn't a single guard on the walls. Sardis was *so confident they had no watch!* The Persians conquered Sardis and for the next two centuries the populace was never allowed to carry a weapon. They were turned into singers and dancers and they became soft and degenerate.

Later, the city fell again to Alexander the Great in the same way. Forgetting their previous lesson, the Greek soldiers climbed up the cliffs by night, *found no one watching*, and conquered the city. *Rev 3:2 was speaking right out of their history when it warns, "be watchful."*

By this time, the city had again become very wealthy. It was a *city of financiers and manufacturers* in a new art of dying wool.

It was a church that had all kinds of money to throw at good sounding activities and nice facilities. It was busy and attractive... and *spiritually flat*.

Barclay writes this about of the church there:

**The terrible accusation against the Church at Sardis is that, although it has a reputation for life, it is, in fact, spiritually dead.**

In our culture today, *we have some beautiful churches*, they are bustling with activity. They have the best trained staffs, the largest youth programs, and plenty of options to pursue. Those things are great, but it does not mean there is real spiritual life there. You can be busy in church stuff; busy attracting people, and be so compromised or diluted, that it has nothing to do with spiritual life at all. All you have to do is get *overconfident and stop being watchful*.

Spiritual life demands we engage our **minds** (*know why you believe*); **hearts** (*settle for nothing less than a fire within*); and bodies (*live what you know*).

It's an old story, but today, it isn't one church, it is a nation of churches. The warning for us is **still the same, "watch out!"**

**So what is the reward for those who held true?**

-White robes. To the Roman culture; the symbol was clear: they were the robes of celebration, of victory, of purity; even of resurrection.

**QUESTIONS**

**IN YOUR OWN WORDS, WHAT WAS THE BIG CONCERN OF THE SARDIS CHURCH?**

**IN WHAT WAYS MAY THE CHURCH BE "FAT, DUMB, AND HAPPY" IN OUR DAY?**

**WHAT ARE SOME SIGNS THAT A CHURCH BE BUSY BUT YET SPIRITUALLY DEAD?**

**1. Six: PHILIDELPHIA: The purest and curiously, the weakest of the churches**

The principle still holds; when we are weak, He is strong.

**2. Seven: LAODICEA: The White Collar City**

**Rev 3: 14-21**

Because of its position on the crossroads, the city was very wealthy. It was a great manufacturing center of clothing. It was a famous medical center. It was especially known for an ear and eye salve. And it was known for its hot and cold running springs.

Laodicea was a city of accomplishment, progressiveness, professionals, and high living. Sounds great! Yes, but it is also the only city of which God has nothing good to say. In fact, He says they make Him sick!

They are neither hot nor cold in their faith. But there are some interesting subtleties to the wording. The original wording isn't simply "hot" or "cold" but hot and cold to the extremes. They make God sick because they avoid any extremes, they are just lukewarm... blah.

Because they are materially rich, they don't recognize their true poverty. Because they look good on the outside, they have no idea how miserable and naked they really are. They are in for a spanking!

But then, another interesting subtlety of wording. Verse 19 God says He chastens those He loves. Usually the word used is the highest form of love- the Greek word, "Agape." "Agape" is kind of; love

of the head. But the word used here is “philein” which is a love of the heart, an affection. Despite how these people are, God has a deep affection for them, so He’s going to discipline them.

## QUESTIONS

WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE WHEN A CHURCH IS NEITHER HOT NOR COLD?

HOW CAN IT BE THAT THE CHURCH MADE GOD NAUSEOUS, AND YET HE HAD A DEEP AFFECTION FOR THEM?

## CONCLUSION

The Revelation to John is rooted in literal history but transcends into timeless spiritual warnings. We can unlock the real lessons if we learn to the literal and meld it with the spiritual.

By the way, ***how did things go for the original churches of this letter?*** While Christianity evangelized to the north, there was none to the south. Eventually the Arab world was galvanized under another religion they never dreamed was possible. And what historians describe as a “human tsunami” rolled over this region, brutally crushing every church in its path; the rich ones, the practical ones; even the ones too powerful to ever fall. ***The “candlesticks” were taken away.***

***We ARE those churches***, but the history of our choice hasn’t been fully written yet. -*Asleep or awake? -Obedient or compromising?* The warning and promises are just as real for us today?  
***Which path are we walking?***