

Session 2 – Chapters 2&3 - Letters to the seven churches

Why are these letters here in Revelation?

Call to repentance is like prophetic writing – but encouragement to persevere is very apocalyptic. There are indications in the text the messages were meant for more than just these seven churches.

The order – an obvious route for someone delivering the letters

The line on the Session 1 map follows a logical path (but also see the notes on structure below)

The pattern - a common pattern with seven elements, though with slight differences

1. Command – *“To the angel of the church in X write...”*
2. Characteristic of Christ taken from image in ch 1 – *“These are the words of him who...”* The characteristics are chosen to suit each individual church
3. Commendation of the church – *“I know...”*
Recognition of the difficulties they face and praise for the virtues they have shown.
Jesus sees us and knows our situation, nothing is missed by him
4. Rebuke of the church – *“But I have this against you...”*
Usually to do with tolerance of people within the church who hold views/practices incompatible with true Christian faith. The primary concern about failings in the church is the impact that has on their witness to Christ in the midst of pagan culture.
God also sees our weaknesses as a community and wants us to change.
5. Exhortation to repent & warning of God’s judgment if the church does not, or Encouragement to persevere in the face of persecution
Either way they are encouraged to strengthen their witness to Christ. Faith in the particular characteristic of Christ referred to at the start of the letter is what will help them do that.
6. Exhortation to heed the message – *“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches”*
7. Promise – *“To the one who (does hear and) conquers / is victorious I will...”*
First and foremost, this is the promise of inheriting eternal life with Christ

All the churches are commended for something, apart from Laodicea

All are rebuked for something, apart from Smyrna and Philadelphia

The structure of the complete set of letters

1. Ephesus - in serious danger of losing its identity as a church of Christ
2. Smyrna - faithful to Christ in spite of persecution, encouraged to persevere under continuing persecution, promised a crown
3. Pergamum - some members are faithful, others have compromised, church
4. Thyatira warned to rid itself of such compromise or face judgment
5. Sardis against those who have done so
6. Philadelphia - faithful to Christ in spite of persecution, encouraged to persevere under continuing persecution, promised a crown
7. Laodicea - in serious danger of losing its identity as a church of Christ

Combined effect of the structure (with churches in worst condition first and last, and those at risk of compromise at the centre) emphasises overall picture of the need for repentance and transformation

At the centre of the middle letter is the declaration that *“all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds”*. Other than the phrase *“Whoever has ears...”* this is the only part addressed to all the churches, but together they indicate a wider audience is in mind.

The detail - Within this pattern & structure, the detail of each letter is tailored to each church

Ephesus

Large, important city/port of entry for Asia Minor; centre of Paul's mission, famous for temple & hugely pervasive worship of Artemis (see Acts 19)

Greeted by the One who: holds the 7 stars & walks among the 7 lampstands (witness of churches)

Jesus knows/commends: their deeds (manner of life), hard work & perseverance, not tolerating wicked people, testing & identifying false apostles, enduring hardship, hating practices of Nicolaitans (Acts 6:5; 15:20,29; Rev 2:14-15, 20-21)

Rebuked for: forsaking the love they had at first (for Jesus and witnessing to him)

Urged to: consider how far they've fallen; repent and do the things you did at first

Warned, if they do not repent: Jesus will come to you and take away your lampstand

The victorious are promised: the right to eat from the tree of life in the paradise (see Gen 2:9; 3:22-24)

Relevance today: Eliminating false teaching is good, but not at cost of love for making Jesus known in the world. A life of witness will lead to eternal life in the kingdom

Smyrna

A rebuilt (resurrected) city; proud of its relationship with Rome and its worship of the emperor(s); mortally dangerous place to be a Christian because of hostility of some Jews & spiritual forces at work through them

Greeted by the One who: is the First & Last, who died and came to life again

Jesus knows/commends: their afflictions & poverty, the slander of certain Jews, richness of faith

Rebuked for: (nothing)

Urged to: not be afraid of what they're about to suffer (prison, persecution 10 days) and to be faithful even to the point of death

Warned, if they do not repent: (nothing)

The victorious are promised: life as victor's crown, will not be burned by 2nd death (cf 20:11-15; 21:8)

Relevance today: Overcoming sin & remaining faithful to Christ may come at the price of being 'overcome' by the world (through persecution), but it is not something to be afraid of, as the reward is far greater.

Pergamum

Capital city of Asia with citadel on 1,000ft steep-sided hill; Temple of Zeus near the top; centre of imperial cult in Asia

Greeted by the One who: has the sharp, double-edged sword
(ultimate power over life & death belongs to God not Roman authorities)

Jesus knows/commends: where they live/Satan has his throne, they remain true to His name, not renouncing faith even when Antipas was martyred ('faithful witness' cf 1:5)

Rebuked for: some hold to teaching of Balaam (Num 31:16 & 25:1ff, sexual immorality & eating food at pagan sacred feasts), and to that of the Nicolaitans

Urged to: repent

Warned, if they do not repent: Jesus will come to them and fight with the sword of his mouth against those who hold to those teachings

The victorious are promised: some of the hidden manna (see Ex 16:32-34; Heb 9:4) and a white stone with new name on it (many interpretations – most likely contrasting entry tokens to pagan feasts with Christians' right of entry to heavenly banquet)

Relevance today: Compromise with the pervading culture so as to keep up and be accepted is extremely dangerous. Acceptance into the kingdom of God is far more precious than acceptance into society.

Thyatira

Least important of the 7 cities; known for its trade guilds that governed economic activity and were intertwined with religious observances; the god Tyrimnos (Apollo – son of Zeus) guardian of city and patron of guilds

Greeted by the One who: is the Son of God, whose eyes are like fire and feet like burnished bronze
Jesus knows/commends: their deeds, love, faith, service & perseverance, doing more than at first
Rebuked for: tolerating a Jezebel who calls herself a prophet and misleads my servants into sexual immorality, food sacrificed to idols (cf Pergamum) and Satan's 'deep secrets'
Urged to: repent if compromising; otherwise, hold to what you have until I come
Warned, if they do not repent: Jesus will make those who commit adultery with 'Jezebel' suffer and strike her children dead, and will repay you according to your deeds
The victorious are promised: authority over the nations, rule them with an iron sceptre and (and who does my will to the end) dash them to pieces like pottery. Also promised the morning star.
Relevance for today: Taking part in idolatrous activity in an effort to maintain status and reputation is seriously detrimental to faith in Christ. Why try to fit in now when we will one day rule over the nations?

Sardis

Important powerful city in ancient world, declined by Roman times; badly damaged in AD 17 earthquake; rebuilt with help from Rome; huge Temple of Artemis/Cybele still unfinished after 400 years.

Greeted by the One who: holds the 7 spirits of God (cf. Isa 11:2; Zech 4:1-10) and the 7 stars
Jesus knows/commends: their deeds (but they are 'unfinished' v2)
Rebuked for: having a reputation for being alive when they are dead
Urged to: wake up, strengthen what remains & is about to die. Remember what you've received and heard; hold it fast, and repent
Warned, if they do not repent: Jesus will come like a thief, you will not know what time he'll come (cf. Lk 12:35-40)
The victorious are promised: they will walk with Jesus dressed in white (Rev 7:9-10; 3:18; 19:14) (who've not soiled their clothes) never have Jesus blot their name out of book of life (Ex 32:32-33; Ps 69:28; Dan 12:1; but beware of using imagery as doctrine); Jesus will acknowledge their name before the Father and his angels (Mt 10:32; Lk 9:26)
Relevance for today: Reputation in society is not the best indicator of spiritual health. Focusing on our reputation before God is far better. Acceptance from him means acceptance in the heavenly places.

Philadelphia

Held new name Neocaesarea (between 40 and 54 AD) but then reverted to original name; key gateway (open door) to eastern regions of empire

Greeted by the One who: is holy & true (Isa 40:25) and holds the key of David, what he opens none can shut - Isa 22:20-22 (key to temple & therefore to heavenly kingdom?) Jesus has placed an open door before the church (even though they may have been shut out of the synagogue - see v9; Rom 2:28-29; Jn 8:44)
Jesus knows/commends: their deeds, they have little strength, yet have kept his word & not denied his name, keeping his command to endure patiently
Rebuked for: (nothing)
Urged to: hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown
Warned, if they do not repent: (nothing)

The victorious are promised: Jesus will make those of synagogue of Satan fall at your feet & acknowledge he has loved you (Isa 60:14), will keep you from (or through) the hour of trial coming to test the world (Jn 17:15; Rev 6:9-11; 13:5-10), will make you a pillar in temple of God. Never again leave it. Jesus will write on you the name of God, name of the city of God and my new name (Ex 28:36-38; Rev 7:3; 14:1; Phil 3:20; Rev 19:12)

Relevance for today: Remaining holy and true to God can be hard and tiring, but the crown that awaits us is more than compensation; God will equip us and protect us from the judgment coming on the world

Laodicea

Known for its disgusting water supply, banking institutions, textile trade, and its medical school especially its ophthalmology and eye salve

Greeted by the One who: is the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation

Jesus knows & commends: (nothing) their deeds, that they are neither cold nor hot

Rebuked for: thinking they're rich & don't need anything, when actually wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked

Urged to: buy from Jesus gold refined in fire, so they become rich; white clothes to cover their nakedness; salve, so they can see; be earnest and repent

Warned, if they do not repent: Jesus is about to spit you out of his mouth

The victorious are promised: the right to sit with Jesus on his throne

Relevance for today: Beware of seeing ourselves as doing better spiritually than we really are. Our purity of life should be distinctive compared to the world around us. Single-minded devotion to Jesus will help us overcome the pull of the world. Our reward will be a share in ruling over God's kingdom.