



REVELATION:
LETTERS TO THE CHURCHES
COMMUNITY GUIDE



WELCOME

Over a period of seven weeks in our sermon series we will be looking at each of the letters to the seven churches we find in Revelation 2-3. There are seven letters, so maybe a good practice to help us become truly familiar with these letters might be to read the letter for the next sermon each day in the week leading up to the sermon. They are very short, so a couple of minutes each day will help us become familiar with them.

- **26th May - Ephesus: Rev.2:1-7**
- **2nd June - Smyrna: Rev.2:8-11**
- **9th June - Pergamum: Rev.2:17**
- **16th June - Thyatira: Rev.2:18-29**
- **23rd June - Sardis: Rev.3:1-6**
- **30th June - Philadelphia: Rev.3:7-13**
- **7th July - Laodicea: Rev.3:14-22**

Revelation is a book that many of us find quite difficult to understand so we hope you will find it helpful to read the overview and introduction at the beginning of this guide before you embark on the individual studies. As we realise that many communities are not able to meet weekly we are arranging the study material in a way that we hope will enable you to explore as many of these letters as possible. This study guide will follow this pattern:

1. A brief overview of the book of Revelation.
2. A suggested pattern for each meeting.
3. A general overview which draws out a common pattern which is largely found in each letter.
4. THE QUESTIONS, introduced by a short background to each of the churches which will help us to understand the specific references in each of the letters.
5. Some further questions which you can use to reflect on and to discuss with your community when you meet if time permits: - so definitely not intended to be completed in one meeting.

1. A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION.

Although we are only focusing on chapters 2 – 3, the letters to the seven churches, it might be helpful to have a brief overview of the letter as a whole and to understand what the letter as a whole would have meant to its original recipients.

Authorship/date

The traditional view is that the author of this letter was John the Apostle. The background of the letter gives a strong indication that this was written at a time when the early Christian churches were facing persecution as the Roman authorities were beginning to enforce the cult of Emperor worship. The two most likely periods suggested are the latter part of Nero's reign (AD54-68) and the latter part of the reign of Domitian (AD 81-96) with most scholars dating the book around 95AD.

Purpose

The first rule of understanding any book of the Bible is to ask what its original recipients would have understood as all the biblical books were written first and foremost with a specific audience in mind. Only then can we ask what this might mean for us some 20 centuries later.

Michael Wilcox says that the whole of Revelation was written as 'a circular letter, [written to the seven churches in the province of Asia – Rev.1:4] to be read aloud in their meetings as a message directed to their real needs.' And its purpose was to remind them, 'an oppressed minority, how things really stood in the spiritual realm'. Ian Paul says that Revelation 'is a pastoral letter ... [written] to help them understand how Jesus' death and resurrection might equip them to live faithfully in challenging times.'

In other words, as we shall see in the seven letters, this vision is given to encourage the churches in their shared context of persecution, to rebuke the churches in their specific situations and to challenge them to remain firm in their opposition to the forces of evil which were their present and everyday experience.

Apocalyptic literature

<https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/revelation-1-11/>

You might find it helpful to follow this link and watch the first 3 mins 30 seconds of this video as it sets the context for the letter and explains the meaning of apocalyptic and the use of symbolism.

Revelation is essentially a prophecy written in apocalyptic language and the Greek word for revelation is apokalupsis (ἀποκαλυψις) – which is the first word of this book. It was a type of Jewish literature very familiar to John’s audience. (The OT contains several passages written in this style – see Daniel 7:13-14; 8:15-17; 10:4-6; Ezekiel 8:1-2; Zechariah 4:1-4.)

In many ways, as several commentators note, our visual, film and image based society is actually very familiar with apocalyptic imagery. Ian Paul tells us the purpose of this genre: ‘Apocalyptic literature is full of symbolic visions that reveal a heavenly perspective on history in light of its final outcome.’

The symbolism we will encounter in chapters 2 & 3 is largely explained by John in chapter 1:19-20; the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches and the seven lampstands are the seven churches. The seven angels are generally understood to be either: heavenly messengers; earthly messengers/ministers of the churches; or personifications of the spirit of each church. Although some commentators think that none of these fits the situation and that we should take the word not as symbolic but at face value.

The other key, unexplained symbol here is the use of the number seven which is used to denote perfection or completeness

Paul Langham says: ‘... the key to understanding apocalyptic literature ... is this: the future is only ever unveiled in order that it might influence the present.’

Therefore the key question to ask is 'Why' not 'When' which is so often the focus of many discussions and theories about the meaning of Revelation. Why was the vision given to the churches in Asia and why is it still relevant to the Church today?

We pray that as you explore these letters together you will come to understand something of the situations facing these first century Christians and find both challenges and encouragements for our church and the wider church in our country and in our world today. Just as this letter was written to all of the churches in the specific region of Asia at that time so it has meaning for all the churches in our global village today.

Series guide writer: Tina Trevett

2. A SUGGESTED PATTERN FOR EACH MEETING

START EACH SESSION WITH AN OPENING PRAYER OR WORSHIP

Gather around in a comfortable space to pray or worship. You may want to start in silence, listen to a worship song or sing some worship songs together. Pray that the Holy Spirit would lead your time together.

DECIDE THE FOCUS

Decide each week what your focus for the session will be and which of the questions or sections of the studies you will be focusing on. Depending on the size of your group you may want to split into smaller groups of 3-4 to discuss the questions you have chosen for the session before coming back together to share your findings.

We have only included 3 or 4 questions on each letter as we are aware that you may be covering more than one letter in each session. Please also use the additional questions in the final section of the study guide to root your discussion in our current church context and to encourage a wider outlook beyond our own situation.

TAKE NOTES AND SHARE

Use the space in the 'notes' section to record anything which has particularly encouraged or challenged you as you study each week. See if there are any common themes which emerge for you which God may be speaking to you about - in encouragement or challenge. If you feel comfortable you might find it helpful to share these with other members of your community

END EACH SESSION BY PRAYING TOGETHER.

You may find it helpful to pray about specific things that have arisen from your discussions:

- Is there some encouragement to give thanks for?
- Is there some challenge - either for us as individuals or for the church, local, national or international - that we need to pray for?
- And, of course, pray for each other and any specific needs you would like to share with the group.

3. THE COMMON PATTERN IN EACH LETTER

Some of us will know these letters well, others of us will be coming to discover them for the first time or will be unfamiliar with them. Whatever your starting point, it may be helpful to take a quick tour below of the pattern of each letter, which has been skilfully and prayerfully designed.

It might be helpful to do this alongside the general introduction as a complete session to familiarise everyone with the letters as a whole before looking at some of the questions in later sessions.

The message to each church broadly follows the same pattern:

1. **Address:**

“To the angel of the church of _____ write:”

2. **Attribute:**

one element of the description of Jesus in chapter 1 is quoted. E.g. ‘these are the words of the first and the last who dies and came to life again’ - the letter to Smyrna: see Rev.1:18

3. **Approval: Commendation - “I know”;**

‘I know where you live - where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name.’ - The letter to Pergamum. Only in the letter to Laodicea is there nothing to commend or praise.

4. **Accusation: Complaint -**

“but I have this against you...”

5. **Advice: Command -**

pay attention to

6. **Assurance: Promise of a reward for those who overcome:**

“The one who conquers will” and each of these, apart from the letter to Laodicea, finds an echo in the final chapters of Revelation.

4. STUDY QUESTIONS

As we explore each of these letters, New Testament expert Tom Wright says that it becomes clear that God is speaking to each of the churches in terms/images/pictures that relate to their own context; what he calls 'local colour'. We will try to draw some of this out in the short summaries below.

First Church: Ephesus - Ask someone to read this introduction.

Ephesus was a centre of imperial power and pagan worship, dominated by a huge temple dedicated to the Roman goddess Diana. This is one of the churches we know quite a bit about as Paul spent over two years there building up the church (Acts 19) and ten years later wrote a letter to them (Ephesians) which, like the letter here in Revelation, is a letter of exhortation and practical advice but does not find any specific heresy to address. In fact he commends them for refusing to tolerate the Nicolaitans: a heretical sect who appear to have had influence in some of the churches in this region.

They taught that their spiritual freedom gave them permission to practice idolatry and immorality which led to assimilation with the surrounding culture.

For several centuries the church at Ephesus was seen as an example of faithful life and witness but today, there are no active Christian churches. Tom Wright says that this is precisely what Jesus, in this prophecy, warns the Ephesian church would happen if they did not repent - see 2:5.

Wright highlights one detail which illustrates his point about the use of 'local colour': The temple of Artemis was situated in a magnificent garden in which a specific tree was both a shrine and a focal point for criminals who could claim freedom from punishment within a certain proximity to it. The letter to the Ephesian church ends with the reference in 2:7 to 'the tree of life which is in the paradise of God'

Questions - Consider breaking into smaller groups if you have a larger Community

- It is possible that the Ephesian Christians' doctrinal discernment - their core beliefs and worldview about God (which Jesus commends), replaced their first love for God. What do you think this might have looked like in practice?
- What are some of the ways that our church can practice 'sound doctrine' (believing what the Bible holds out to us as reality is true), that points to, rather than replaces, our first love of God?
- We live in a society where tolerance is considered a virtue. But the Ephesian Christians are commended for refusing to tolerate wicked people. What does this indicate about God's view of 'tolerance'? (See 2 John 7-11 where the focus is specifically on those who teach false doctrine).
- What "spiritual" activities or practices in your own life have, in the past taken, or still have the potential to take the place of truly loving the Lord Jesus? (See Luke 10:38-42).

SECOND CHURCH: SMYRNA - MODERN IZMIR

-Ask someone to read this introduction.

Smyrna was wealthy due to an exclusive right to import myrrh - an anaesthetic in great demand in the ancient world. It was nicknamed the resurrection city because twice in its history it had been destroyed and had, metaphorically, risen out of the ashes.

This theme of dying and coming back to life underpins this message to the Christians in Smyrna. Just as Smyrna itself had been destroyed and come back to life as a vibrant, beautiful city so too Jesus, 'the first and the last ... died and came back to life' (v8). So Jesus warns the Christians in Smyrna, already experiencing trials and poverty that they are about to face even more persecution and testing. This time of testing will be limited; 10 days symbolising a limited period. And though they may indeed face death through persecution yet they are assured of resurrection - the crown of life - and that they will not be hurt by the second death (2: 10-11 and 20:6)

Like many of the great cities in this region the cult of emperor worship flourished but the Jews were exempt from taking part in the festivities associated with this. But it was the Jewish community here in Smyrna who were the source of the Christians' persecution and suffering, possibly reporting them to the Roman authorities claiming that they were not entitled to the same exemption because they were not true Jews. The verdict of this letter of encouragement and exhortation to faithfulness is that it is the accusers who are not true Jews. (See also notes on the letter to Philadelphia).

Questions - Consider breaking into smaller groups if you have a larger Community

- What is different about the pattern of this message, compared to the one to the church in Ephesus? Which of the elements from the usual pattern is omitted?
- This letter raises a difficult question: why does Jesus, speaking to the church at Smyrna, say that the local community of Jews who are persecuting the Christians are not true Jews? You might find it helpful to read what Paul has to say about this in Romans 2:25-29; 9:1-8; 10:1-4; and 11:1-2.

- Do you think that persecution happens to the Church in our Western society? If yes, in what ways? If no, why not?
- What is your personal response or takeaway from this last question in terms of your own apprenticeship to Jesus? How can we pray for you?

THIRD CHURCH: PERGAMUM - MODERN BERGAMA

- Ask someone to read this introduction.

A city set on a hill, the seat of government of the Roman Empire in the region. When the Roman Governor went down the street, a man would walk in front of him carrying a sword as a symbol of his authority. And when Jesus writes to this church, he reminds them that he holds the double-edged sword. He is the one with the ultimate authority.

It was a city of imposing buildings: the earliest temple for emperor worship; an enormous library; a place for the healing ministry of the priests of Aesculapius, whose symbol was a serpent; and crowning it all a pagan altar of Zeus the savior. A veritable melting pot of pagan beliefs and powers that formed the culture of the society in which the Christians were living and in which they had previously been participants. It's helpful to remember that the early Christians, like many of us today, grew up in a culture and society that was shaped by beliefs and practices that did not have its roots in the Jewish faith and history. This forms the focus of the criticism of this church: surrounded by many pagan alternatives and practices, the church is being led into compromise with the cultural practices of their society. The Nicolaitans were a heretical sect who appear to have had influence in some of the churches in this region. They taught that their spiritual freedom gave them permission to practice idolatry and immorality which led to assimilation with the surrounding culture.

Tom Wright points out that Pergamum's impressive buildings were built of a local black stone with slabs of white marble being used for inscriptions. Also, he notes, that guests invited to a feast were given a stone with their name written on it as a ticket of admission. See 2:17 - the assurance to this church.

Questions - Consider breaking into smaller groups if you have a larger Community

- The introduction to this letter refers to 'the words of him who has a sharp, double-edged sword' (v12, see also v16 and the description of Jesus in 1:16) Compare Ephesians 6:17 and Hebrews 4:12-13. Why is this image particularly apt for the church at Pergamum in light of the criticisms made of her?
- Why do you think it is possible for this church to be commended for 'not renouncing their faith' even under persecution and yet to be tolerating idolatry, immorality and false teaching? What may this have looked like?
- Do you see reflections of this in today's Church in Western society? If so, give some examples.

FOURTH CHURCH: THYATIRA - MODERN AKHISAR

- Ask someone to read this introduction.

Thyatira was famous for its many trade guilds; Lydia, (Acts 16:4) a trader in purple cloth, was from Thyatira. In particular it was renowned for the smelting of copper and bronze which links to the description of Jesus in v18: 'eyes like blazing fire and feet of burnished bronze.'

The only way you could get a job was by joining a guild. Each of these were connected with the worship of a pagan god. Once a month there would be a banquet dedicated to their patron god. The health of the god was toasted, and a burnt offering would be dedicated to the image of the god and often these sessions would end with an orgy.

The church at Thyatira is criticized for tolerating within their midst a self-proclaimed prophetess referred to here as Jezebel (see 1 Kings 16:31 - the Sidonian princess who married Ahab, King of Israel, and introduced Baal worship). Like the church at Pergamum, they are being led astray and Jesus' message to the church at Thyatira is quite clear: as Tom Wright puts it 'the church has no business compromising at any point with pagan worship and the practices that reflect and embody it.' Her false teaching appears to be linked to that of the Nicolaitan sect referred to in the letter to Pergamum (see above).

Jesus here in verses 26-27, which allude to OT references in Psalm 2, Isaiah 30:14 and Jeremiah 19:11, emphasises his authority to rule over all nations and reminds the church at Thyatira of his promise, that those who overcome will share this authority.

Questions - Consider breaking into smaller groups if you have a larger Community

- From the description in verses 18-19, what impressions would a visit to the church at Thyatira have given you?
- Jesus charges this active and loving church with being too tolerant of evil in its midst. Despite their pleasing appearance, sin was destroying them. Are there similar dangers for the church today? What might they be?
- What might the warnings in this letter look like if written to the church today?

FIFTH CHURCH: SARDIS - MODERN SART

- Ask someone to read this introduction.

The city of Sardis was surrounded on three sides by cliffs, so its residents felt their city was impregnable but more than once it had been captured by stealth - by unexpected attacks during the night.

The church at Sardis was large, had a tremendous reputation and everyone flocked to it - it was the place to be. But their future was doubtful. The believers had a form of godliness but no power and Jesus warns them that unless they 'wake up' he too will come like a thief in the night. This is not a reference to Jesus' second coming but to the warning in v2-3: that unless they 'wake up ... and repent' they will be overcome as the city itself had been during its history. Their 'reputation' would fade as the city's glory and reputation had faded. Tom Wright comments that this may be a reference to the idea that such a church 'with a reputation for being alive, but [actually] dead' may well simply collapse or fade away under pressure unless it repents: reputation and complacency not being solid bases for survival.

There is a promise for those 'who have not soiled their clothes' (v4). Tom Wright comments that the meaning of this phrase is unclear but offers two possible explanations: it could refer to the spiritual laziness which seems to characterize the church at Sardis - lazy people don't wash their clothes! Or it may be a specific reference to some sort of immoral behavior tolerated within the church, which fits the pattern of the churches at Thyatira and Pergamum. Either way, the promise for the faithful few is that they will walk with Jesus and be clothed in the white robe of his righteousness. There are several references to those being in the presence of God being dressed in white robes: Rev. 4:4; 6:11; 7:9, 13-14; 19:14.

Questions - Consider breaking into smaller groups if you have a larger Community

- There is a warning here about relying on 'reputation'. How do we ensure that, as a church, we are not simply relying on our reputation?
- What does a church that has both a form of Godliness and power look like? What would All Saints look like?
- Consider taking some time to pray for the church, its leaders, ministries, each of us, that this may be a growing reality.

SIXTH CHURCH: PHILADELPHIA - MODERN ALASHEHIR

- Ask someone to read this introduction.

Philadelphia was a small city, only 30 miles from Sardis, but important commercially because of its location on trade routes within central Asia. It had had to be rebuilt after the earthquake in AD 17 which had destroyed many of its large public buildings and temples.

The letter has similarities to the letter to Smyrna: no fault is found with either church and both face opposition from 'the synagogue of Satan.' It would appear that the much larger and more established synagogue community was, 'using its civic status to block the advance of the message about Israel's Messiah.' Tom Wright goes on to reflect on what was a live debate within Judaism in these early days of the spread of Christianity: 'Which of these groups can properly claim to be the true Jews? ... Jesus is quite clear: Those who follow him, the Davidic Messiah, are the true Jews.' (See also the notes and questions in the section on Smyrna)

There was widespread persecution of the Christians by the Roman authorities during this period and the church at Philadelphia would not be exempt but they are promised that they will be kept from 'the hour of trial' (v10). The Greek for this phrase could also be translated: 'kept through the hour of trial' which seems to make more sense of the following exhortation to 'hold on to what you have, so that no-one takes your crown.' And links with the promise in v8 of 'an open door that no-one can shut.'

The promises of future reward in verse 12 are comprehensive and fulsome, echoing the language of Revelation 21 and 22: the vision of the New Jerusalem.

Questions - Consider breaking into smaller groups if you have a larger Community

- In contrast to the letter to Sardis, what does this letter teach us about the source of the church's 'success' in being God's faithful witness? (See also Psalm 127:1-2)
- What ways have you been able to discern the open doors that God is placing before you?
- How can we continue to do this as a church?
- Is there anything currently that you are discerning or asking God about that you would like us to pray with you today?

SEVENTH CHURCH: LAODICEA - MODERN PAMUKKALE

- Ask someone to read this introduction.

Laodicea was an immensely rich and prosperous city, so prosperous that it declined help to rebuild after a second earthquake in AD61. The citizens of Laodicea boasted of their material prosperity. They were a banking centre, and a clothing centre famous for tunics made from local black wool. Their medical school was renowned for its Phrygian powder, a paste applied to your eyes to you see more clearly.

Though it was a vibrant commercial centre, they lacked a good water supply. Situated in the Lycos Valley, it was near to Hieropolis, where there were medicinal hot springs; and to Colossae, where there was wonderful streams of cold water flowing from snow-capped Mount Cadmus. But Laodicea's water travelled along lead pipes from these sources, was warmed in the sun and, by the time it reached Laodicea, was completely undrinkable unless, as Tom Wright notes, 'for medicinal reasons you wanted to make yourself physically sick.'

There is an abundance of 'local colour' in the images in the letter to this church and whilst this is the only church about which Jesus has nothing good to say, yet there is challenge, hope and invitation: 'Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent' (v19). It continues with one of the most well-known verses: 'Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.' Famously depicted in the Holman Hunt painting, 'Light of the World'. Jesus holds out, even to this this church which Jesus says he 'is about to spew out of my mouth' (v16) an invitation to repent and the letter ends with what Wilcox says is 'perhaps the most majestic reward of all; a seat at the divine banquet and a place on the throne of heaven' (v21 - see Matt.19:28).

Questions - Consider breaking into smaller groups if you have a larger Community

- Chapter 3:20 is often used evangelistically in preaching to non-believers as an invitation. Is that its meaning here? Who was this being addressed to in this letter? What does it mean within this passage?
- The Laodiceans' wealth and comfort seem to have blinded them to their real spiritual needs. We live in similarly wealthy and comfortable times. Are there times when you have been blinded to your 'true' need? Please share where appropriate.
- What about our church? Where have we been historically or even recently blinded to our need?

Some further questions which you can use to reflect on and to discuss with your community when you meet if time permits: - so definitely not intended to be completed in one meeting.

Consider our church - what do we learn from the letters to these churches?

- If Jesus were to write a letter to All Saints what might he say to us:
 - In approval - commendation?
 - In accusation - criticism?
 - In advice - command?
- What are the positive lessons we need to be encouraged by from these letters?
- How can we help each other to avoid the pitfalls of the churches addressed in Revelation?

- The Church in England is no longer at the centre of power as it once was.
- Who now has power in our society and culture?
- What impact does this have on us as we live as Christians in a society which no longer tolerates our beliefs and values as having relevance for society?
- You might like to share specific examples of situations where this impacts your daily life.
- How can we support each other in this?
- How might these letters encourage us to look beyond our own situation to pray for and support those churches which are facing persecution from their ruling authorities as these churches were from the ruling Roman authorities?
- Are there some practical ways we as individuals and communities might help each other to do this?

FURTHER RESOURCES FOR GOING DEEPER

Books

Understanding Revelation

Paul Langham

How to Read the Book of Revelation

Ian Paul

Revelation: Faithfulness in Testing Times

Ian Paul

Revelation Unwrapped

John Richardson

The Message of Revelation

Michael Wilcox

Revelation for Everyone

Tom Wright

Advanced:

The Theology of the Book of Revelation

Richard Bauckham

The NIV Application Commentary: Revelation

Craig S. Keener

Websites:

<https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/revelation-1-11/>

**'Whoever has ears, let them
hear what the Spirit says to
the churches.'**



Revelation 2v7