

INDEXED BY MUMMERT  
LETTERS TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES

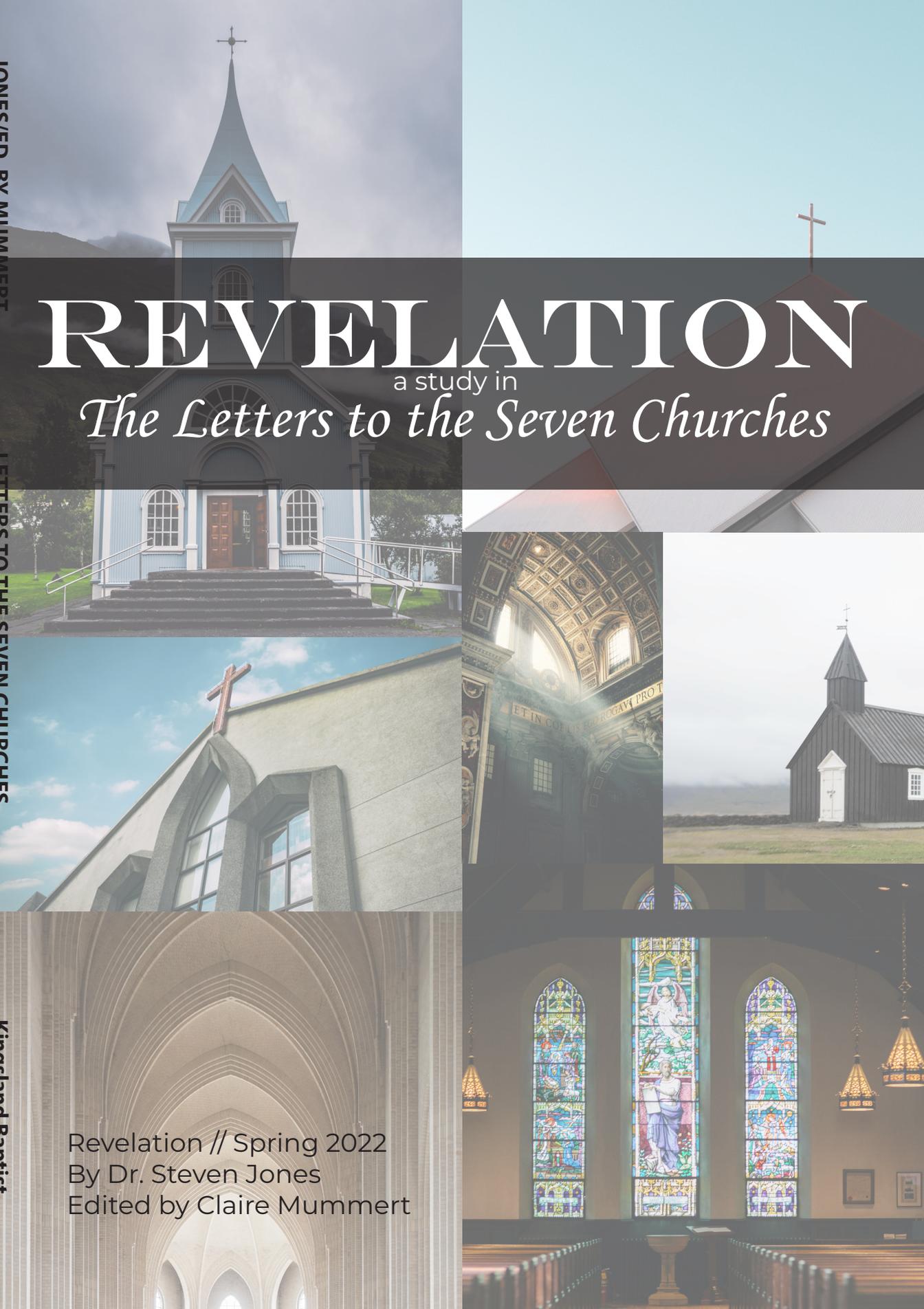
# REVELATION

a study in

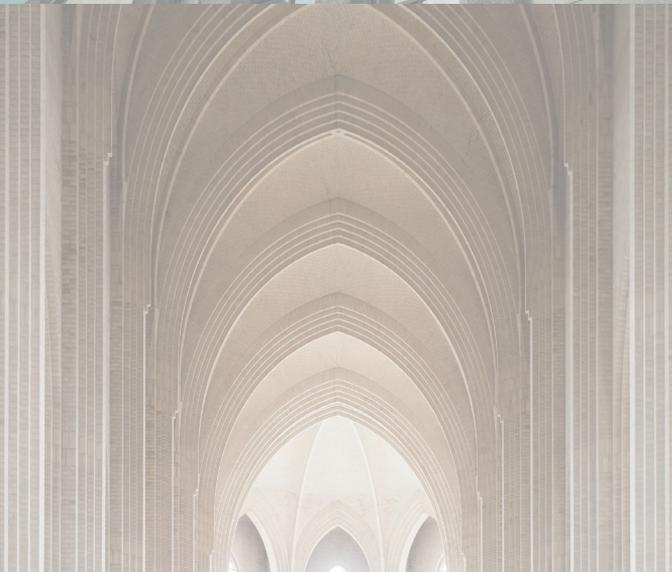
*The Letters to the Seven Churches*

Kingland Baptist

Revelation // Spring 2022  
By Dr. Steven Jones  
Edited by Claire Mummert







©2021 Kingsland Baptist Church

All rights reserved. Except for brief quotations used in reviews, articles, or other media, no part of this work may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by information storage or retrieval system, without permission by the publisher.

Kingsland Baptist Church

20555 Kingsland Blvd., Katy, TX 77450

Scripture quotations taken from:

The Holy Bible, New American Standard Bible (NASB) Copyright 1971, 1977, 1995, 2020 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

Printed in the United States of America

---

# Table of Contents

---

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Introduction.....  | 9  |
| Lesson 1: Ephesus: Forsaking First Love (Revelation 2:1-7).....    | 17 |
| Lesson 2: Smyrna: Don't Fear the Trials (Revelation 2:8-11).....   | 23 |
| Lesson 3: Pergamum: Faithful but Falling (Revelation 2:12-17)..... | 29 |
| Lesson 4: Thyatira: Work Sacrifices (Revelation 2:18-29).....      | 35 |
| Lesson 5: Sardis: Barely Alive (Revelation 3:1-6).....             | 41 |
| Lesson 6: Philadelphia: An Open Door (Revelation 3:7-13).....      | 49 |
| Lesson 7: Laodicea: You Don't Even Know (Revelation 3:14-22).....  | 55 |

---

# How to use this guide

---

Review the context and big picture every week – The goal of a book study is not just to learn each individual lesson, but to build understanding of the Bible, how it fits together, and how to study it.

Try not to use this guide as a script. The purpose of this material isn't to give you exactly what to say. Rather it is to give you the content you need to structure and develop your own lessons. Teach as much as you feel is important for your class. Feel free to go off topic if your own study leads you to approach the passage in a slightly different direction.

Don't feel like you have to cover everything. There is a lot of material in each lesson. Some classes like to cover a lot of ground. Other classes like to camp on one point and drill deep. Start by teaching the Main Point, then teach the Main Bullet Points. Use the extra detail and discussion questions as you see fit. The goal is to generate discussion, specifically regarding life-application. So don't worry if you don't get all the way through a lesson.





# Introduction

Have you ever noticed how certain expressions either lose or change their meaning over time? Take for instance the phrase, “generating more light than heat.” Back before central heating and cooling was part of every house, most homes were heated by wood or coal fires. A fire that generated more light than heat wouldn’t be very useful. You might be able to see a little better, but the primary reason for having it would be lost. But as heaters replaced fireplaces, fireplaces endured in houses not as heat sources but as aesthetic design elements. People like cozying up in front of a fire and watching it. Sure, the heat is nice, but the primary thing people want from a fire nowadays is light. So, generating more light than heat is actually the primary purpose.

All that has made it to where I never remember if the phrase goes “generating more light than heat” or if it’s the other way around, “more heat than light.” The purpose of the phrase, whichever way it goes, is to describe a discussion where people make a lot of noise, have strong opinions, and get mad, but rarely ever change anybody’s minds.

That is precisely the effect the book of Revelation has on people, and why I frequently shy away from teaching it. People like to argue and argue about it. But rarely is anything meaningful accomplished. Maybe, this study is the exception. Revelation is a hard-to-understand book. Hopefully, we can study it with the humility that admits maybe we don’t have it all figured out.

The best place to start is the name of the book. It’s singular: Revelation...no “s”.... not Revelations...every time someone calls it “Revelations,” a Seminary Professor or and Bible Teacher somewhere in the world twitches for some unknown reason.

Its full title, taken from the first verse is: The Revelation of Jesus to John, sometimes shortened to the Revelation of John. But that’s getting ahead of ourselves. Let’s start by finding Revelation in our Bible.

## **Finding Revelation in the Bible**

The Bible is more than a book; it is a library of 66 different books, written over a couple thousand years, in multiple languages, by numerous authors, to multiple audiences. The first step in studying any book of the Bible is knowing where it is located.

Here is where Revelation fits in the roadmap of the Bible:

- The Bible is broken into 2 groups: Old and New Testament
  - o The Old Testament is written in Hebrew and is about how God created a nation called Israel to be His chosen people. He chose them not because they were special, but because they weren't. They were as sinful, stubborn, and rebellious as any people group. He chose them so that He could teach them who He was, and so that they could be a lighthouse to the nations. He chose them because it was part of His plan of redemption, a plan that culminates in the New Testament.
  - o The New Testament is written in Greek and is about two things: Jesus and the Church. The New Testament tells how a man named Jesus was born in Israel, how He taught and performed miracles, how He was crucified, how He was seen alive 3 days later, and how His followers saw that the resurrection of Jesus was the culmination of God's promise of redemption.
  - o Revelation is in the New Testament.
- The New Testament is broken down into 4 groups:
  - o Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John – These books recount Jesus's birth, ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection. They are biographical, but they aren't biographies. Biographies try to tell the whole story of a person's life. The Gospels focus on the ministry of Jesus and especially on the last week of His life.
  - o History: There is only one book in this category, Acts. Its full name is Acts of the Apostles. It is part two of Luke's Gospel. It tells the story of how the Church grew from a few scared followers of Jesus in Jerusalem to a multi-ethnic group spread all over the Roman Empire.

- o Letters: Also called Epistles, this is the largest group of books in the New Testament running from Romans all the way to Jude. More about this below.
- o Revelation: Like Acts, there is only one book in this category. The reason is that there aren't many books like it. It is a type of literature we don't really have any more called Apocalyptic. More about this later but suffice it to say that is an often-misunderstood type of literature.

### **What Kind of Book Is Revelation (v1) – The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ**

The opening word of the book gives not just its title but tells us what kind of book it is. The revelation of John. The name of the book in Greek is “the Apocalypse of John.” Apocalypse is the Greek word translated as “revelation.” Revelation is a type of literature called “apocalyptic.” Often misunderstood as simply a type of literature describing the end of the world, the essence of Apocalyptic literature is at its most basic level what the name means: a revelation, the removal of a barrier allowing access to previously unseen contemporary realities. It means to undercover or reveal. In an Apocalypse, a person is given a “peek behind the curtain” of reality, so to speak. They are given a window into the divine reality. They can see things from the heavenly perspective.

It is a genre in which a divine revelation is given, disclosing the true states of affairs not ordinarily known to humans. Though some of the vision is about the future, the most important aspect of an Apocalypse is an insight into what is really going on in the heavenly sphere. What is offered is not insight into the future but rather an unveiling of present reality not normally perceptible to the human participant.

Apocalypses are intensely symbolic writings written to people suffering for their faith. It offers hope and encouragement that God hasn't forgotten them, their actions are a part of a heavenly struggle, and that despite the success of evil men, ultimately God will prevail.

### **Who wrote Revelation (v1) – To John**

Revelation 1:1 tells us that this book records a vision seen by John. From church history we know that the John mentioned here is most likely the Apostle John who is also associated with the Gospel that bears his

name and three letters. Around AD 70, there was a revolt in Judea in which the Jews tried to seize their independence from the Romans. The Romans crushed it mercilessly and destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem. According to church tradition, John left Judea around that time and settled in Ephesus, perhaps even taking Mary the mother of Jesus with him.

### **To Whom was Revelation Written to (v4) – To the Seven Churches**

Revelation 1:4 says, “John to the seven churches that are in Asia.” This vision is recorded as a letter addressed to Seven Churches in and around Ephesus, in southwest Turkey (see map.) Why these churches? First, because John was currently living in Ephesus, he was familiar with them. Also, because they were experiencing the same persecution as he was. The message is for them first.

But there were other important churches in the era, like Colossae, to whom Paul wrote one of his letters. Why were these churches selected? These churches serve as symbols representing the entire church. There is an older, and now largely dismissed, theory that sees these churches as representing the different eras of the church: Ephesus stood for the early church, Smyrna the period of persecution in the patristic era, Pergamum the time of Constantine, Thyatira the Middle Ages, Sardis the Reformation, Philadelphia the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (missionary outreach), and Laodicea the modern era (time of growing apostasy before the return of Christ).

More likely is that the problems these churches were facing represented struggles that are common to all churches in every place throughout time. Reading the letters to the seven churches is supposed to leave every believer convicted and challenged. This is why every letter ends with, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” All the churches in the area and beyond were supposed to heed the warning and apply it.

### **Why Was Revelation Written (v9) – The Word of God and the Testimony of Jesus**

Revelation 1:9 says that John saw these visions while on the Island of Patmos, a small island just off the southwest coast of Turkey (See map), and that he was on that island because of “the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.”

Most interpret this to mean that John was imprisoned on this island as a punishment for being a Christian. The most likely time for this to occur would be around AD 90. During this time, the Roman emperor was Domitian. Domitian was insane and renewed the persecution of Christians on the grounds that they would not participate in the Imperial cult, which involved showing your allegiance to Roma by offering a pinch of incense to a statue of the goddess Roma, and to the Emperor. When Christians would not do this, they were seen as subversives and anarchists who needed to be punished. It's a book written to people suffering for their faith. It is intended to give hope that God has a plan and is in control no matter what the circumstance.

### **The “Royal Proclamations” to the Seven Churches: Hear Ye, Hear Ye**

- At the beginning of Revelation (chapters 2 and 3), there is a section referred to as “The Letters to the Seven Churches.” Jesus tells John to address specific messages to specific churches.
- Though we call them letters, they are more like royal pronouncements than letters. The whole book of Revelation is the letter. These short sections are like announcements read by a herald. You may have seen something like this in movies or cartoons, a man walks into a town square or throne rooms, maybe some trumpets blow to get people's attention, he unrolls a scroll and reads an important announcement. That is what these are. The Royal Pronouncements of King Jesus. He who has an ear, let him hear.

### **The Form of the Letters**

- Destination – Each letter opens with the name of the church it is primarily addressed to. All the churches are expected to read and learn from all the letters. though each church is expected to read all the letters and learn from them. Each letter ends with something like “hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”
- Description: Each letter begins with a unique description of Jesus that is appropriate for the specific church being addressed and the problems they are having. These self-descriptions are like royal titles listed at the beginning of a royal proclamation.

They are included in the beginning to remind the hearer of some key part of the king's identity so that they will recognize His authority and accept the contents of the message.

- Diagnosis: The body of each letter is like a doctor's diagnosis. Jesus diagnoses the problem in the church. Normally, this takes the form of listing strengths (I know your deeds) and weaknesses (I have this against you).
- Decree: In the final section, the letter ends with a decree. There is something each church is to do in response to the diagnosis. It includes a command to be obeyed, a caution or warning of what will happen otherwise, and a concluding consolation or promise of what will happen to those who heed the words and obey them.







## Lesson 1 | Ephesus: Forsaking First Love

### Revelation 2:1-7

The Spanish Inquisition. The Salem Witch Trial. The McCarthy Senate Hearings. All three are bywords in our society for the misguided distortion of the search for truth that ended up destroying a lot of people's lives. People initially wanted to help defend against the invasion of false ideas, but they ended up distorting the truth themselves, finding what they were looking for under every rock, and eventually ruining, torturing, and killing people who deviated from approved standards.

We say we would never do such things or act in such ways. But the truth is that we routinely do. Our actions reveal that people sadly disagree more with what was being defended than with the methods being used to defend them. When people discover a truth they think needs defending, they are suddenly more willing to adopt bad methods used by their adversaries.

This happens frequently in the church. Paul says in 2 Timothy 4 that the truth needs to be proclaimed in the face of society wanting to have their ears tickled by nice-sounding things that conform to their own understanding of the world. We hear Paul and want to take up arms to defend the faith. But somewhere along the way, we get so focused on the truth that we become consumed with ferreting out every error. We become so determined to speak the truth that we forget that Paul's command in Ephesians 4:15 was for us to speak "the truth in love." Love without truth is too soft. But truth without love is too hard. In the first of the Letters to the Seven Churches in Revelation, Jesus tells the Ephesians that they have been so focused on the truth that they have excluded love. As we study, let us see the dangers of doing this, asking ourselves how we do the same thing and how we can act more like Jesus, full of grace and truth (John 1:14).

### **Destination (v1a): To the Angel of the Church in Ephesus**

- To the Angel of the Church: Each letter is addressed to “the angel of the church.” The word “angel” means messenger in Greek. Some people think that this is a reference to “a guardian angel” or an official in charge of the congregation. More likely, the ‘angel’ of the church is not its guardian angel or the ruling official of the congregation but its prevailing spirit.
- In Ephesus: Ephesus was a city in southwest Asia Minor (Modern Day Turkey). It served as the commercial and religious capital of Asia Minor, having a population of about 250,000. Commercially, it was the place where the goods from overland and sea met. In religion, it was the center of the cult dedicated to worshiping the Roman emperor. It also contained the famous Temple of Artemis (called Diana by Romans) which was considered one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. Ephesus had a sizeable Jewish population. Christianity had also become important in this city (remember Paul’s letter), especially after the Jewish Revolt. In AD 70, after Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed, people in Judea were scattered and many found their way to Ephesus. In fact, that is probably how John himself ends up here. Interesting side note: according to tradition, John brought Mary the mother of Jesus to Ephesus. There is a house in the hills above the city that is purported to be the place where Mary lived and died.

### **Description of Jesus (v1b): Holding in His Hand/Walking Among**

Each letter begins with a unique description of Jesus. If these letters or more like Royal Proclamations (see intro), these self-descriptions of Jesus are like Royal Titles, listed at the beginning. They are here to remind the hearer of some key part of the King’s Identity so that they will recognize His authority and accept the contents of the message.

Many of the images that Jesus uses to describe Himself in these letters are taken from the vision John has of Jesus in Revelation 1:12-20. Jesus highlights one aspect of Himself that is particularly relevant to the specific church He is addressing and the specific problem they are dealing with. Here Jesus repeats the image of Him holding the seven stars and walking among the seven lampstands.

- Holds the Seven Stars in His Hand: This first image is straightforward. Describing the churches as stars reminds them they are important. Saying that Jesus holds them in His hand reminds them both that Jesus is bigger and stronger than them and that He has them and everything involving them under control.
- Walks Among the Seven Golden Lampstands: The Lampstands are more than just candelabras. Any person familiar with Jewish tradition would have read that word and immediately understood them to refer to the menorahs that burned before the Lord. The Lampstands or Menorahs represent the churches and remind them of their role as servants before God and representatives of God to the world. By saying He is walking among them, He reminds the churches that He is in their midst and aware of what they are going through.

He seeks, through this, to remind the church at Ephesus that he has not left them but is still among them. The persecution is not a sign of divine disfavor or abandonment but rather a sign that God is with them. God is so present among them that the powers of evil are trying to destroy them.

### **Diagnosis (v2-4) “I Know”**

After Jesus describes Himself to the churches, He describes the churches to themselves. He gives them a diagnosis of their condition. We are all familiar with what diagnosis is. It comes from a Greek word that breaks down into two parts: dia (thorough) + gnosis (knowledge). It means to have a thorough knowledge of a situation. That is what Jesus has. He shows the churches what He knows about their condition.

- The Good (v. 2-3): “Cannot tolerate evil Men” – In Acts 20, Paul leaving the Ephesians warns them about false teachers who will come in among them after he departs. This letter is written to the generation after the ones Paul had dealt with. What Paul predicted came true. False teachers came among them, and the Ephesians had done a good job of dealing with them.

They tested them and exposed them as frauds. Jesus commends them not just for their deeds, but for their labor and perseverance. He recognizes that it is hard work and that they persevered in it without becoming discouraged.

- The Bad (v.4): “You have left your first love.” – They have forsaken their first love meaning they have forgotten why they were doing this in the first place. Evidently, they had become so focused on weeding out unorthodox belief that they had forgotten the reason for correct belief. Some think “first love” means the Ephesians’ love for God. Others think it means the Ephesians’ love for each other. It probably means both. Remember that Jesus said that the greatest commandment is to love God with your heart, soul, mind, and strength; and that the second one is just like it: love your neighbor as yourself. Yes, mistakes in belief should be corrected but they are supposed to be done with respect, honor, and love. The overarching goal has to be to make all people better followers of Jesus and better brothers and sisters in Jesus.

### **Decree (v5-7)**

After Jesus diagnoses the church, He tells them what He wants them to do. Just like in a royal proclamation, each letter ends with a decree, which contains both some action that is commanded to be performed, a warning about what will happen, as well as a promise of positive reward for those who obey.

- Command (v5-6): “Hate the Deeds” – Jesus tells the Ephesians to remember why they do what they do, to remember how they used to be. The clue to what this means is found in verse 6: “Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.” It is not clear who the Nicolaitans are exactly. Most of the evidence comes from Revelation itself. They were evidently false teachers within the Christian community, who incorrectly taught it wasn’t wrong to participate in Greek religious festivals (remember the Temple of Diana) or to show devotion to the emperor by burning incense to his statue or image. Notice though that Jesus says that the Ephesians “hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans.” That “of” is important. We are called to hate sin not to hate sinners. That is what God does. In fact, His hatred of sin is rooted in His love for us. He calls us to act the same way to others. Evidently in their quest for ensuring correct belief, the Ephesians had started hating all those who disagreed with them. Jesus reminds them: You hate the deeds that I hate, great! Now, love the person because I still do.

- Caution (v5b): “I will remove your lampstand” – If the Ephesians will not repent and return, Jesus says He will “remove their lampstand.” This might sound harsh, but it underscores the importance of what Jesus is saying. When we become so zealous to find the “correct” way that we part from the “ultimate way” of love, we have ceased to represent Jesus. We are not shedding the light He wants us to shed. The result is the loss of our ability to bear light. Paul says the same thing in 1 Corinthians 13:1, “If I speak with the tongues of mankind and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.” The reason this is so important is that when we lose our ability to love others, we end up equating them with their sinful deeds. When we start hating people along with their deeds, we end up doing the opposite of the gospel. Jesus never equates us with our sin. He loves us. He hates the destruction that sin wreaks on our lives. He desires to separate us from our sin. He doesn’t identify us by it. It is the Enemy who seeks to identify us by our sin. Satan shows us our sin and says, “This is who you are, this is all you are, this is who you will always be.”
- Consolation (v7): “Eat of the tree of life” – Each letter ends with a statement like “to him who overcomes.” It lists a reward or consolation that Jesus offers to heeding this royal decree. In this case, the Ephesians are told they will be allowed to “eat of the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God.” The word “paradise” comes from a Persian word meaning “enclosure, garden, royal park.” In using this word, Jesus is probably making a reference to the Temple of Artemis (Diana) at Ephesus. Diana was the goddess of the woods. Her temple was constructed to look like a park, a tree-shrine, and served as a place of protection, sanctuary, and rest. The tree of life evokes images of the tree in the center of the Garden of Eden, whose fruit was denied Adam. It also brings to mind the Cross of Christ, on which God won the ultimate victory not by demonstrating His rights over man, but by demonstrating His love for man. In all of this Jesus is telling the Ephesians that the one who finds divine joy and blessing is the one who combines the love of truth with the love of man.



## Lesson 2 | Smyrna: *Don't Fear the Trials*

### Revelation 2:8-11

There are certain phrases that fill people with dread, and a sense of impending doom. It's different for different people, but some of these phrases include things like "We need to talk" "Can I see you in my office?," "please see the cashier," or, perhaps the worst, "Is Mr. Pibb ok?" They are the verbal equivalent of seeing police car lights in your rear-view mirrors. Our stomach sinks, our pulse increases, our mind starts racing, and perhaps we start sweating. We wonder, we worry, and we think through worst-case scenarios. Then we wonder and worry all over again.

What would it take for you not to be afraid when you heard one of those phrases? One thing that helps is knowing the person who said it. It also helps to hear the rest of the story.

Today, we are going to look at the words of Jesus to a struggling band of believers in the midst of a thriving city called Smyrna. They are impoverished and intimidated. They are suffering for their faith. They are wondering why this is happening and what to do. In response, Jesus said some words that could make anybody's heart sink, "Don't fear what you are about to suffer."

I can imagine the recipients doing a double-take. "Wait, what? What we are ABOUT to suffer? You mean there is more?"

The truth is, though, we are in similar circumstances. Jesus told us that we can expect trouble in this world (John 16:33). James told us to consider it all joy when we encounter various trials (James 1:2). All this points to the fact that we can all expect that we have trials and tribulations that lay ahead of us. The point of this letter isn't to tell us that. The point is to tell us how to handle it. Don't Fear. As we look closer at this letter, maybe we will learn why.

### **Destination (v8a): Smyrna**

The city of Smyrna (modern-day Izmir) was economically a rival of Ephesus and was situated a few miles north of Ephesus. In antiquity, Smyrna was famous for its wealth, fine architecture, and devotion to science and medicine. It was also renowned for its love and worship of the emperor. Three hundred years before Revelation was written, the first temple to the Goddess Roma was dedicated in Smyrna. Seventy years before this letter, the city built a temple in honor of the Emperor Tiberius. Smyrna had a sizeable Jewish population as well. This letter to the church at Smyrna is the shortest of all the letters and is written to people concerning persecution that is about to take place.

### **Description of Jesus (v8b): Sovereign**

This description harkens back to Jesus's words in Revelation 1:17-18, <sup>17</sup>“When I saw Him, I fell at His feet like a dead man. And He placed His right hand on me, saying, ‘Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, <sup>18</sup>and the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades.’”

- First and Last: Jesus describes Himself as the first and the last, that is, God. He is the one who is in control, who created this world, and is doing something in it, who has a reason for the things that are going on. This is meant to comfort those who are about to endure persecution. The God they serve is the one who has an end He is bringing the world towards.
- Dead and Alive: He also describes Himself as the one who once was dead but now is alive. This is designed to remind these people that He has experienced what they are going through. God isn't some being up in the sky who demands things of His people, but who doesn't really know what He is asking. God became flesh, lived a human life, experienced the worst this life had to offer (death on a cross), and then conquered it. When God demands allegiance unto death, He knows what He is asking. And He has already gone ahead of us to show the way, to demonstrate that there is victory and reward for faithfulness.

## **Diagnosis (v9): Tribulation, Poverty, Blasphemy**

- Real Wealth (v9a): Jesus tells the church at Smyrna that He knows what they are going through. Following Him had cost them a great deal. Evidently, the pagans and Jews of the city had made it hard for Christians to live peacefully in the city or to do business. They had experienced hardship as well as poverty. But then He adds, “but you are rich.” This is an example of “apocalyptic unveiling.” In the world’s eyes and perhaps even their own, their life was hard, and their status was low. But in God’s economy, they are rich. Jesus reminds them to keep their focus on the heavenly realm not on earthly things, because what we focus on shapes what we value. As Jesus said in Matthew 6:19-21, “<sup>19</sup> Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. <sup>20</sup> But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; <sup>21</sup> for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”
- Real Jews (v9b): Jesus also says He knows the source of their hardships. He attributes it to “the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not but are a synagogue of Satan.” Some people think this might be referring to non-Christian Jews getting Christian Jews kicked out of the synagogue. This would cause them to lose the special privileges given to Jews by Rome. Tribulation and poverty would ensue. Jesus isn’t saying all Jews serve Satan. Many Jews accepted Jesus as their Messiah. Others simply separated from the followers of Jesus. But a third category of Jews rejected Jesus and persecuted His followers. Jesus told His followers that people are known by their fruit. This group of Jews had decided to slander Christians. Satan is a name that means accuser. By falsely accusing Christians, they are showing themselves to be doing the work of Satan.

## **Decree (v10-11): Hold On in Hope**

- Command (v10): Do Not Fear/Be Faithful – The command Jesus gives them is twofold. Jesus tells them not to be afraid and to stay faithful. The command is not rooted in divine deliverance. Jesus doesn’t say “don’t be afraid, I will keep you out of harm’s way.” He tells them they still have bad times ahead.

The point of this message is not just to tell them not to fear, but to show them how. Here are some things that help us not fear:

- o God is in Control: Jesus telling them ahead of time reveals that nothing is happening outside God's plan or control. God doesn't cause evil. But evil doesn't wreck God's plan either. Go back to the description of Jesus in verse 8. Jesus is the first and last. He is at the beginning before things happen. He is at the end and sees how it works out. He was dead because people killed Him. But He is living proof that other people's evil towards you doesn't ruin God's plan for you.
- o This is Only A Test: Jesus says this is happening so that they can be tested. The ten-day period is supposed to remind us of the story in Daniel 1:12, 14 where the Jewish youth asked to be tested for a period of 10 days with a special diet. The goal was to show that following God was better. The test is also like the temptations that Jesus went through in the wilderness. Times of testing can be temptations to doubt God and His promises. They can also be opportunity to strengthen our confidence that God's promises hold.
- o The victory is already won: The Smyrnans were suffering and impoverished. They felt insignificant and forgotten. In those moments, it's very easy to think that you don't matter and that no one cares. You can be easily tempted to think staying faithful to God isn't worth it. Jesus reminds them in periods of testing that the goal of the enemy is to get you to abandon God and His promises. In response, Jesus says, "stay faithful, keep holding on, and you will claim the crown of victory."
- Consolation (v10b-11): Escape the Second Death – There are more important things than money and wealth, and the ones who realize what those things are will be granted salvation, victory, and eternal life. This final statement is similar to what Jesus says in Matthew 10:28, "And do not be afraid of those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell." Many times, we allow people to damage our soul in exchange for not harming our body. Sometimes we damage our own soul to prevent harm or hardship from occurring to our bodies. Jesus says, don't worry about those who threaten your body.

They can't damage your soul unless you let them. He tells them, according to the world you are poor and suffering, but you are rich in God's eyes. Now decide who you believe is right and ask yourself why you think that.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What similarities are there between the city of Smyrna and ourselves?
2. What does the description of Jesus reveal to us about who God is? How does it help in the situation the Smyrnans' find themselves in?
3. What does it mean that the Smyrnans are rich even though they are poor? What is Jesus trying to tell them? How does it apply to us?
4. What is the basis for the command not to fear? Why is staying faithful so important?
5. What does the phrase "not hurt by the second death" mean?



## Lesson 3 | Pergamum: Faithful but Falling

### Revelation 2:12-17

Bobby Fischer was one of the best chess players of all time. At age 14, he became the youngest US Chess Champion ever. At Age 15, he became the youngest Chess Grand Master at the time. By 19, he won the World Chess Championship. Beating him would take skill, and perhaps a little bit of wisdom. As Warren once famously said: "How do you beat Bobby Fischer? You play him at any game but chess."

Trying to face an opponent in an area where they have the clear advantage is a sign of folly. You look for weaknesses and attack there. History is full of examples of both the folly of attacking strength and the genius of exploiting weakness.

The same is true in spiritual battles as well. The enemy isn't going to attack in well-defended places or at times when you are most on your guard. Temptations come when we are hungry, angry, lonely, tired, bored, or stressed. They are directed not at places where we have defenses and support structures in place, but in areas that have been left undefended or under-defended. And once the enemy is inside, sin leaves us with a sense of defeat that can cause us to surrender instead of keeping up the fight.

That is the case with the letter to Pergamum. The city had been successful in fighting an important spiritual battle, but while it was doing so, the enemy had snuck in unnoticed. By looking closely at Jesus' words to this church, we can learn the nature of spiritual warfare, hopefully learn to avoid their mistakes, but also what to do when we inevitably repeat them.

#### **Destination (v12a): Pergamum**

Pergamum came to prominence after the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BC. Alexander had united the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern World into one Empire. When he died, it broke apart and was divided into smaller kingdoms. You might have heard about the Ptolemies in Egypt, or the Seleucids in Syria because of their involvement in Jewish History. The Kingdom of Pergamum was another one of these successor states.

Later in 133 BC, it became a piece of the growing Roman Empire when the last king willed the entire kingdom to Rome. Pergamum had two features that were dangerous for Christians: it was the legal center for the district, and it was a religious center. As far as religions, it had probably one of the first temples to Rome (built in 195 BC) and it had one of the first temples to the emperor (built in 29 BC). In addition to the Imperial Cult, there were shrines to Asclepius, the Greek God of healing whose symbol was a snake; and overlooking the city from the acropolis was a temple of Zeus Soter (Zeus the Savior) which possessed a throne-like altar. It is easy to realize why this city was called the place where the throne of Satan was. It also becomes apparent that in a city with both legal and religious importance toleration of those who dissented from Imperial worship was impossible.

### **Description of Jesus (v12b) “sharp two-edged sword”**

Jesus refers to himself as “having the sharp two-edged sword,” a symbol of power. As we learn later in the letter, a martyrdom has occurred, no doubt leaving people to wonder if Jesus is powerless. Jesus says I am powerful. He also calls it two-edged because it cuts both ways. There are problems with the church that need to be fixed. Jesus reveals that His power not only protects the church but also purifies the church.

### **Diagnosis (v13-15) “I know where you live...”**

- The Good: Faithful under Persecutions (v13) – The church has remained faithful to Christ and hasn’t forsaken Him even under great pressure. Even when Antipas was killed, they did not give in. Little is known about him, according to tradition, he was the bishop of Pergamum who, because of his prominence, was also the first martyr. According to later church tradition, he was killed by being burned inside a bronze bull.
- The Bad: False Teachers Snuck In (v14-15) – Remember the Nicolaitans that were first mentioned in the letter to Ephesus. They were false teachers that were condemned by Jesus. Jesus had to remind the Ephesians to hate the false teaching but still love the people. Pergamum had the opposite problem. They had been so vigilant against political persecution that they didn’t notice the false teachers that had snuck in the side door. Verse 14 describes a group whose teaching is compared to the Old Testament prophet for hire named Balaam.

Balaam is most famous for being prevented from cursing Israel in a story from Numbers 22:21-39 involving an angel of the Lord and a talking donkey. But there is more to the story. In Numbers 25, Israelites are tempted to worship Baal-Peor and to engage in sexual immorality. Numbers 31:16 reveals that though Balaam had been prevented from cursing Israel, he taught Balak, king of Moab who tried to hire him, that if the Israelites could be tempted to worship idols and engage in sexual immorality, then they would forfeit God's blessing. Evidently in Pergamum, these teachers had done something similar. It probably was a distortion of the truth that it wasn't wrong to eat meat sacrificed to idols. These teachers might have started there but eventually led the Pergamene Christians to a similar place as the Israelites at Ball-Peor. They were engaging in religious worship at pagan temples and participating in sexual immorality as part of pagan rituals. As verse 15 says, they have become just like the Nicolaitans without even realizing it.

### **Decree (v16-17) "Repent..."**

- Command (v16a): Repent – The error had been subtle, but over the course of time it had led them far off course. The mistake might have been unintentional or even well-meaning. Nevertheless, the command Jesus gives is to repent. Repent is one of those Christian words that has a bad reputation. We think it means to beat yourself up over something you did wrong. The Greek word that gets translated as "repent" means literally "to change your mind." It is focused primarily on where you are and where you are headed, not why. It means realizing that you are lost and heading in the wrong direction and desiring to change course and head in the right direction. Maybe you chose to head in the wrong direction, maybe you were mistaken. Your motives don't matter as much as the direction you are headed in and the destination you are headed towards. The call to repentance reminds us that the descent into sin is often gradual and well-meaning. Nobody chooses things that they know will be destructive. But when we realize that we have gone in the wrong direction, we must make a conscious clear choice, break from where we are, and head in the right direction.

- Caution (v16b): I Will Make War – Jesus says that it doesn't matter why you are where you are, or how you got there. If it is in sin, get out. Jesus fights against sin. When we remain in sin, we find ourselves in danger of being involved in something that God is fighting against.
- Consolation (v17) – The letter ends with a promise that those who repent and reject the false teachings that have infiltrated the church will be given three things: hidden manna, a white stone, a new name. Each of these represents an aspect of the promises Jesus makes to those who return to Him.
  - o Hidden Manna: Celebration – Some of the manna from heaven was hidden in the Ark of the Covenant to remind the Israelites of God's faithfulness in the wilderness. To those at Pergamum who refused the banquets of the pagan gods, Christ will give the manna of His great banquet of eternal life in the kingdom.
  - o A White Stone: Restoration – What the stone represents has boggled the minds of scholars. At least seven ideas have been offered. A few of the possibilities include the white stone used to vote for acquittal in a Greek court of law, a good luck charm, a stone on the breastplate of the Jewish high priest, and a ticket to get into a banquet. The truth is that we just don't know. It is probably better to focus on the color of the stone. White. It is a symbol of purity. One of the reasons people don't leave their sin is the belief that they can never be restored. Sin keeps us enslaved by lying to us that we will never be free of it, and never be fully taken back. The white stone is a symbol of the purity and restoration that is promised to those who depart from sin and return to Jesus.
  - o A Name Nobody Else Knows: Freedom – On the stone is written a name which no one else knows. It might sound strange to our ears because a name to us is simply the noise we make to get another person's attention. But in the ancient world, words have power. To know someone's name was to be able to bless or curse them. There was even a tradition of mothers giving their children secret names so that no one could curse their children at the core of their being.

The name which nobody else knows indicates that no one else had power over you. It reminds us that Jesus gives freedom from the power of sin. In Jesus, your past sin doesn't define you. Your identity is not in your sin but in your savior.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Have you ever gotten lost and didn't know it? How did you respond when you realized it?
2. Have you ever been slowly led down a path that eventually led to false teaching? How does it start? What made you realize it?
3. What are some misconceptions about repentance? What does repentance really mean?
4. What are the lies we believe or tell ourselves that keep us from leaving sin?
5. What do the hidden manna, white stone, and new name represent? How does that apply to repentance and restoration?



## Lesson 4 | Thyatira: *Work Sacrifices*

### Revelation 2:18-29

Have you ever played that game called “Keep Away?” Whether it is a basketball, soccer drill, or else just a playground activity, two or more people pass ball between them trying to keep it out of the reach of another person. If the person in the middle succeeds in getting the ball, they trade places with the person who failed to keep the ball away from them. And so, the game goes on.

I hate that game so much. There are those people who insist on antagonizing you with the ball. They hold the ball and taunt you with it just a little bit, then they wait until you get close to them before they toss the ball to someone else. At some point you get tired of chasing the ball. It becomes pointless and frustrating. Normally, when that that happens, the person in the middle either gives up and stops trying or else, resorts to “alternative methods” to make someone give them the ball. I never did this, but I have seen some get so frustrating that they tackled the ones who had been previously antagonizing them with the ball.

Sometimes life feels like a big keep away game. You see something you want so you go after it. You know you need to work hard and are willing to do so, but victory always seems to elude you. You initially try harder but when you feel like life is taunting you, you are tempted either to give up or resort to alternate methods of being successful.

What would you be willing to do to be successful? What would you be willing to give in exchange for achieving your career goals? Many people don't realize what they have sacrificed until it is too late. They give up so many things to chase an ever-moving target of professional success. What happens when you have done that and the thing you seek is still just barely outside your grasp, what would you be willing to do to get it?

That is the situation that was going on in Thyatira. We will find out in just a second that Thyatira was a small town with a business community that had strict entry requirements. If you wanted to do business, you had to play ball. Evidently some in the church there had been willing to compromise their faith in exchange for career advancement.

They had found ways of justifying their behavior, but then Jesus writes this letter. He tells those who have fallen to repent. He tells those who haven't to hold fast. We in our fast paced, corporate success, climb the ladder, career advancement culture probably need to hear this message as well.

### **Destination of the Letter (v18a)**

Thyatira was probably the most insignificant of the towns mentioned in these letters. It was the only one that did not have a temple of the imperial cult. It, oddly enough, receives the longest letter. Thyatira was on the trade road from Pergamum to Sardis, which would explain why the letter is sandwiched between the letters to those cities. It was also a city which figured prominently in the trade of the region. This led to the formation of trade guilds, or unions. Membership in the guild was required to work in the industry. Guilds in the ancient world were organized as religious associations under the patronage of a local god. Membership in a guild, therefore, involved participation in pagan religious worship and festivals. The main guild in Thyatira was dedicated to Apollo, who was the patron deity for textile workers and coppersmiths. The church there had not taken a stand against this but had willingly let its members participate in these for the sake of their businesses.

### **Description of Jesus (v18b)**

- Jesus describes Himself three ways –
  - o Son of God – This is the one place in the book of Revelation where Jesus states unequivocally that He is the Son of God. The Roman emperor frequently referred to himself as the son of god. Apollo, to whom the local guilds were dedicated, was considered to be son of Zeus. By using this phrase to refer to Himself, Jesus is reminding the church that He is their real protector, not the false god of business (Apollo) or the false god of politics (Emperor).
  - o Eyes like the Flame of Fire – This image, as well as the next, is taken from Daniel 10:6. His gaze illuminates everything. He knows all. He sees into the heart. This might also be a comparison again to Apollo, who people also considered a sun god.

o Feet of Burnished Bronze – This is probably an allusion to the bronze craftsmanship done in Thyatira as well to the description of Jesus given at the beginning of Revelation. The word that is translated as “burnished bronze” probably means something closer to “bronze that has been refined by fire.” It’s a symbol of purity. Jesus has walked through the fire, so to speak, and has been shone to be pure. He is now calling His followers to be the same.

### **Diagnosis of the Church (v19-20)**

- Good (v19) – He commends them that they are growing in their faith. They are small but growing as opposed to Ephesus which was large but had slipped back. Jesus highlights the fact that the good deeds they have done are a reflection of the love they have for each other, and the faith they have in God. This leads them to serve one another and to persevere through hard times.
- Bad (v20) – Despite the slow steady growth of the tiny church at Thyatira, there is a problem that needs to be address. They tolerate a false teacher referred to as Jezebel. Jezebel was the name of the Old Testament King Ahab’s Canaanite. Through her influence with Ahab, Jezebel promoted worship of Baal in Israel (1 Ki 16:31–33; 2 Ki 9:22). Based on this connection, people think that Jezebel was probably the wife of a prominent leader in the Thyatiran church.

She seems to have encouraged Christians to participate in the religious festivals associated with a trade guild. Every meeting of a trade guild was essential a worship service for the god who was its patron. If you wanted to be involved in the business, you had to be a member of the guild. In 1 Corinthians 8, Paul had taught that eating in a temple was something a Christian could do if his conscious was clear, and he wasn’t weakening another’s faith. Jezebel seems to have taken the extra step of encouraging Christians to participate in the rituals associated with temple worship, including ritual feasts and sexual immorality.

## **Decree (v21-29)**

### Caution (v21-24) –Judgement

The words that Jesus says next are sometimes read as harsh. But it is important to read verse 21 first: “I gave her time to repent, and she does not want to repent of her immorality.” This is not a case of “I didn’t know the rules” or “I didn’t realize it was such a big deal.” Jesus has been patient. Jesus has given opportunity to repent. She doesn’t want to change. Now Jesus must take steps to protect His church.

Verse 22 begins the description of the judgement that will fall upon Jezebel and her followers. Though most Bibles read, “I will throw her on a bed of sickness,” the Greek uses the word sometimes also translated as “couch” and does not include the words “of sickness.” Scholars assume the bed is a sickbed because of the pestilence listed in the next verse.

The ambiguity of the term is a window into the nature of God’s judgement. The couch/bed referred to here was a piece of furniture used to recline at while dining, as well as to sleep. This couch might be the place where Jezebel had feasted and committed acts of sexual immorality. Now it is going to become her sickbed.

This reminds us that frequently God’s judgement on sin is to let sin run its course. God doesn’t need to judge sin, sin judges itself. Romans 6:23 says, “The wages of sin is death.” Death is what sin pays out. The reason why God hates sin is because sin created death in our lives. Jesus says here that Jezebel doesn’t want to repent, so He will allow her and her followers to suffer the consequences of their sin. The children mentioned in verse 23 are probably her most loyal and ardent supporters. Notice, Jezebel doesn’t want to repent. But Jesus still extends to her followers the opportunity to change their mind and return.

### Command (v24-25) “Hold on to What You Have”

To those who are not associated with Jezebel or her teachings, Jesus tells them to keep doing what they are doing. They are to keep growing in deeds of love, faith, service, and perseverance. Perhaps in this verse we have a window into the temptations the Thyatirans were experiencing that lured them into following Jezebel.

Perhaps they didn't think they had anything important, perhaps they thought that greater involvement in the trade guilds would make them more successful. Jesus reminds them that though what they have might be small in the world's eyes, it is incredibly valuable. They have a great deal. They should hold on to it tightly.

#### Consolation (v26-29)

This is the promise that those who serve God will not go unrewarded. Though they might forfeit business success or career growth by not fully participating in the trade guild rituals, they will not suffer loss of what ultimately matters. The last shall be first and the first shall be last. Those who give up things in order to stay true to the gospel will not be left out in the cold. To the Thyatirans this means that those who have not participated in the guilds but held fast to the teachings of Christ, though they may not have prospered economically, God will repay them. They might not “matter” in the world's categories, but they will rule with authority in the kingdom of God.

#### **Discussion Questions**

1. How does Jesus describe Himself to the Thyatirans? What does it mean? What is the relevance for us?
2. What are the Thyatirans doing right? What are the Thyatirans doing wrong?
3. Who was Jezebel? What did she teach? What does this passage teach us about sin, repentance, and God's judgement?
4. Have you ever felt tempted to compromise your beliefs in order to succeed in your career? How do we walk the line between being involved in the world but not letting it change us?
5. What might the temptations/struggles the Thyatirans experience look like for us today? What might a modern version of this Jezebel teach Christians to mislead them?



## Lesson 5 | Sardis: *Barely Alive*

### Revelation 3:1-6

Some plants look dead but are actually alive. I have a flower that I planted in my front garden one spring. It grew, bloomed, and was beautiful right up to the middle of summer when the sweltering Texas heat finally did it in. No amount of water or care could prevent its leaves from withering. Eventually, the drooping stem crumbled into nothing. You couldn't even see where the plant had been after a few weeks. So, I thought nothing of it. Another vegetative victim of Houston heat. Then something amazing happened. The next spring that same plant sprouted, grew, and flowered again. The heat hadn't killed it. The cold hadn't killed it. The roots were still there and strong. The plant was alive beneath the surface. Sometimes what we think is dead is actually just dormant. What we think has been killed by the harsh climate of our current circumstances is just biding its time and waiting beneath the surface to grow and bloom again.

Sadly, the opposite can be true as well. Some plants that look alive are actually dead. I planted a shrub in a different part of the same garden. I dug a big enough hole and put a fairly mature shrub in it. Over the next few weeks and months, I cared for, watered, and tended the shrub. At first, I was proud. It stayed green when other plants were withering. It looked robust and healthy. But soon I began to wonder. It seems like it wasn't growing. I consoled myself that at least it wasn't dying. Perhaps it needed more time, more water, more fertilizer. Maybe it needed to be pruned. Nothing I did ever helped. It never died. It never grew. It just existed in my garden for several years.

What is true of shrubs is also true of people. Sometimes we see people who look like they have their stuff together. They look good from the outside, but over time you notice that no growth and no fruit ever appear. They are exactly the same as they were last year and the year before. They look alive on the surface but what doesn't grow is dying. Sadly, we all go through phases where this applies to us. The good news is that a common problem usually has an available diagnosis. This was the case for the church in Sardis. By reading this letter, perhaps we will learn more about how we can learn to grow again.

### **Destination (v1a): Sardis**

Sardis was about 40 miles south of Thyatira. It was an important crossroads town where five roads came together. Chief among these were roads coming from Pergamum and Smyrna. At the time this was written, Sardis was part of the Roman province of Asia Minor, but at one point it had been the capital of the kingdom of Lydia as well as the capital of the Persian province of Asia. The most famous king of Lydia was Croesus (pronounced KREE-sus). Both the city and the king were famous for their wealth. "Richer than Croesus" is still an expression you hear sometimes. The chief city of Lydia was an interior province of Asia Minor. It was also a heavily fortified town with a searingly impregnable fortress perched on top of the 800-foot-tall cliff. It was only sacked twice in its history. Both times, when people scaled the cliffs, they discovered that the Sardinians were so overconfident that they did not set a watch. During the Roman period, it was the seat of an important religious and political assembly that bound the provinces of Asia Minor together.

### **Description of Jesus (v1b)**

This is one of the briefer descriptions of Jesus in these letters. He is simply, but enigmatically, described as the one "who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars."

- Seven Spirits of God – The seven spirits of God refer to the Holy Spirit. Seven is the number of completion. Saying the seven spirits of God is a way of referring to the Holy Spirit in its fullness. It may also be connected with Isaiah 11:2-3 which lists seven benefits the Spirit of God gives. It also points to the activity of the Holy Spirit in the seven churches.
- Seven Stars – The stars are one of the symbols for the churches these letters are addressed to. The most important aspect of this identification is the number. It is meant as a comfort to the church. Jesus is about to say some harsh things to Sardis. Before He does so, He first reminds them that they are still in His hands. Jesus rebukes not because He hates but because He loves.

## **Diagnosis of the Church (v1c)**

Nothing good is said. It is all bad. They have a reputation for being alive, but it is hollow. They have an outward appearance of being strong in the faith, but they are not. They are like the Pharisees. They are whitewashed sepulchers full of dead men's bones (Matt. 23:27). More importantly, they are like the city they inhabit. Like the ancient city with its empty fortress up on the hill, the church in Sardis had a glorious history in the past, but their present was just as hollow and pointless.

Though Jesus will describe some signs of life the Sardinians still have, He starts by diagnosing them as dead. It's reminiscent of what the father says in Luke 15:24 about the prodigal son when he comes home, "this son of mine was dead and has come to life again."

## **Decree**

It is not too late. It is never too late. Strengthen what remains. Repent. He tells them that they know what they should be doing. They just aren't. They are doing enough to appear to be Christians. But maybe out of fear of persecution, they have been compromising a little (or a lot). Compromise does seem to be the problem because Jesus commends those who have not soiled their garments.

- Command (v2-3a): In John 11, Jesus called His dead friend Lazarus out of the tomb. Jesus does it again here in calling Sardis back to life. These verses contain five commands to show us the path to spiritual renewal
  - o Wake Up – Like the soldiers who slept and let the citadel get sacked, the Sardinians have not been on the alert. The first thing Jesus calls them to is to be on the alert.
  - o Strengthen – There is still time, but there is also urgency. They are called to "strengthen what remains which is about to die." Sometimes we think we will always have all the time in the world. We think God will always take us back when we sin. We think we will always have another chance. This command stresses the immediacy and urgency of the call. It also calls us to focus not on our failures but on the good that remains.

He doesn't call them to see their failures and weep. He calls them to look for what good still remains, cling to it, and defend it. There is still time, but the time is now.

- o Remember – Jesus calls them to a different kind of remembering. The Sardinians were used to remembering their glorious past and resting on their laurels. Jesus tells them instead to “remember what you have received and heard.”. The problem is not that they don't know what they are supposed to be doing. The problem is that they forgot. They knew what they should be doing. They had just found reasons why they felt excused from doing it anymore.

- o Keep It – Knowing is now enough. We have to act on it as well. Many people are great at making plans. But far too often, we never get beyond the list-making phase. We know what we are supposed to do, but we still fail to do it. If that keeps happening, we will fall back into forgetfulness.

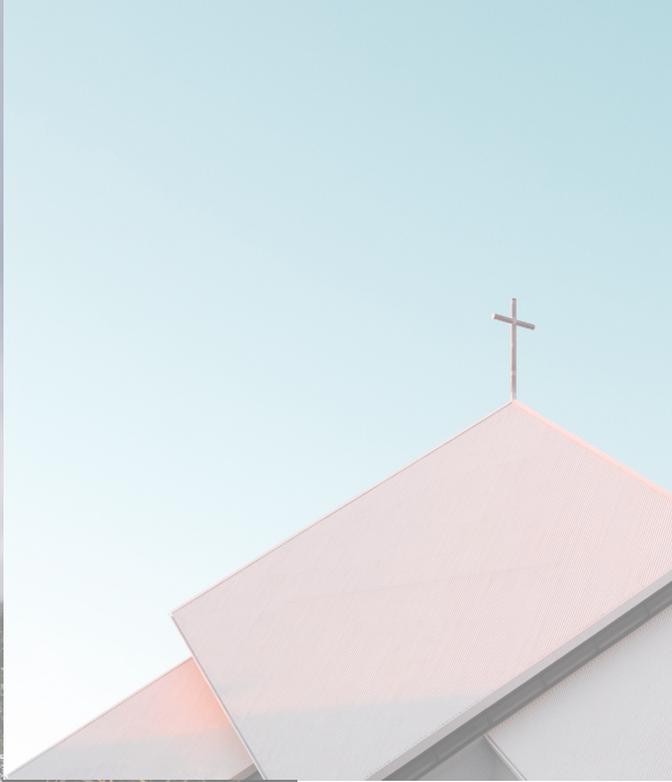
- o Repent – This final command might sound like a meaningless redundancy, something that Jesus throws into all the letters to underscore His message. But the truth is that it is the final stage of this act of renewal. We won't be able to strengthen what remains if we don't remember what we are supposed to be doing. Remembering is worthless unless we put it into action. Our actions will never be able to be carried out for a long time unless we experience a truly radical change in our thinking. That is what repentance means. Changing our approach to life.

- Caution (v3b): I will come like a thief – Other letters had longer warnings about what will happen if they fail to heed the warning. This one states very briefly, “I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you.” Perhaps this was enough for a city that had twice experienced the terrible effects of being caught unawares. Perhaps Jesus knew that a church in this condition didn't need another long lecture. The reminder of possible judgment is present but brief.

- Consolation (v4-6): Though the warning is brief, the promise and reward for hearing His call are great. Though verse 4 mentions a small group “who have not soiled their garments,” the focus of these verses is one full restoration for those who were teetering on the brink of collapse.
- Renewal and restoration: “Clothed in White Garments”– Though they have compromised in the past, if they turn from their old path, repent, and live as Jesus commands, He will restore them completely. They will be like those who have never soiled their garments. They will be clothed in white and be worthy to walk with God.
- Citizenship in the Kingdom: “I will not erase His name”–Though they might be persecuted for their faith, and might lose friends, jobs, even their citizenship (the image of erasing comes from the fact that when somebody lost their Roman citizenship, their name was erased from the books so that it appeared like they never were a citizen), they will still possess the most important thing – fellowship with God and His people. No matter what happens or what they endure, their names will never be erased from the Book of Life.
- Recognition: “I will confess His name”– Though they may appear forgotten, forsaken, and alone, Jesus knows who they are and what they are going through and will be proud to profess a relationship with them before the father.

## **Discussion Questions**

1. What was wrong with the church of Sardis? How would that look in today's church? Have you ever felt that these words to Sardis applied to you?
2. How does Jesus describe Himself in this letter? How does this apply to His message to the church?
3. How does the history of Sardis relate to the situation of the Sardinian church? How would a Sardinian understand the warning that Jesus would come like a thief in the night?
4. Describe the 5 commands that Jesus gives to the church? How are they more of a process than just a list?
5. Why do you think the list of consolations is so big in this letter and the list of cautions is so small?





## Lesson 6 | Philadelphia: An Open Door

### Revelation 3:7-13

Everyone loves an underdog story. We love to see an undersized or underequipped person or team triumph in unexpected ways. But the reason why we love them is that they are unexpected. They are rare. Normally, the underdog doesn't win. Normally the radically superior team triumphs and squashes the underdog into the dirt. Because of that, it is hard to know if you are in an underdog story or not. How do you know if it is worth the fight, or if this is another case of the weaker team losing by several touchdowns?

Scripture is full of underdog stories. But Biblical underdog stories are a little different than the ones the world tells. Biblical underdog stories are not just stories of people in situations beyond their ability who somehow manage to prevail. A biblical underdog story is about people who learn not to trust themselves, not to believe it's all up to them, and to rely on God instead. As Paul says in Romans 8:31, "If God is for us, who is against us?" On our own, we are nothing. With God on our side, we will do great things. This is not a call to try to find a way to get God on your side, but rather an invitation to get on God's side and to trust that He knows what He is doing.

One such underdog story emerges in the letter to the church at Philadelphia. They were small but faithful. Jesus has nothing bad to say about this church. So why does He write the letter? Evidently, they were getting tired and discouraged. Maybe they were starting to wonder if everything was worth it, or if they had the strength to keep going. So, Jesus sends this letter to the church at Philadelphia encouraging them to hold on. As we read it, hopefully we will gain encouragement for when we feel like we don't matter, the task seems too big for us, or we feel like quitting. The invitation Jesus gives them is not "You can do it" but "I already did it, just hold on."

### **Destination (v7a)**

Philadelphia was located in the interior of the country, about 25 miles southeast of Sardis. It was situated along a major road that ran from the port town of Smyrna (about 100 miles away) to the east across all of Turkey. It was founded in the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> century BC because of its extremely fertile soil. The problem was that the soil was fertile because of volcanic activity in the area. Frequent earthquakes troubled the region. The result was that the population was never very big, and most didn't live within the city limits but out in the country. It was virtually destroyed in AD 17 but was rebuilt under the Emperor Gaius (AKA Caligula) and its name was changed to Neocaesarea. Emperor Vespasian in the AD 70's added the name, Flavia.

### **Description of Jesus (v7b)**

Verse 9 reveals that the main conflict was with Jews who were disputing Jesus' messiahship, not with Roman authorities. Perhaps the Jews who denied Jesus were excluding the Christians from the synagogue. Perhaps, the Christians were tired of fighting, maybe they were starting to doubt, or maybe they were just confused about what to do next. The descriptions of Jesus offered here remind them that they are right about who Jesus is and what Jesus is able to do.

- Holy – In Jewish culture, “holy” is a title reserved for God and for His Messiah. Isaiah 40:25 and Habakkuk 3:3 both refer to God as “the Holy One.” In John 6:69, Peter’s confession of Jesus as Messiah includes the phrase: “You are the Holy One of God”.
- True – This word means specifically genuine or authentic. The Jews in the region had claimed Jesus wasn’t the real Messiah. Jesus is reminding them of what they have already accepted. He is the true Messiah, the one the Jews have been looking for.
- Has the Key of David – This final phrase is also a reference to Jesus being the true Messiah but emphasizes His power and authority. It is a reference to Isaiah 22:22 and to the messiah’s ability to control those who come into the house of God. He is the true Messiah. He has true authority. No one thwarts His plan.

## **Diagnosis of the Church (v8-10)**

Nothing bad is said. They are praised for two things and promised reward for them.

- Loyal Confession of Jesus Christ – Because they have remained loyal in spite of their small numbers, God has placed an open door in front of them which no one can close. This means that through their open confession of Jesus as Lord and their desire to stand firm in their faith, Jesus has opened up avenues of witnessing which cannot be closed. The reward they are promised is ultimate vindication over their foes – the Jews who are disputing with them, who slander them, and who currently have power over them will one day acknowledge that the Christians were right.
- Loyal Patience Under Persecution – Because they have stayed faithful to God during persecution, God will stay faithful to them. The phrase literally means that God will guard them during the trials, not that they will be exempt from them. What this means is that because they have exhibited the patient endurance with which, amid trials, Christ is to be served, they will be able to endure what lies ahead.

## **Decree (v11-13)**

- Command (v11a) - Jesus tells them to hold on. Verse 11 begins with the phrase “I am coming quickly.” Jesus has already said this phrase to other churches. But to Ephesus, Pergamum, and Sardis it was a warning. Here it is meant to be an encouragement. He is coming. He appeals to them to hold on and hold out hope a little while longer.
- Caution (11b) – The closest thing we have to a warning comes in the second half of verse 11: “so that no one will take your crown.” The crown here is not a royal crown but a crown of victory. Jesus is saying that they have already won, the only thing that can affect the outcome is if they give up.
- Consolation (v12-13) – To the one who stays faithful to the end, Jesus offers several promises. All of them seem to be promises that what the Jews of Philadelphia had attempted to take away from them would be restored by Jesus a hundred-fold.

- o Pillar – In a town that experienced seismic activity, pillars symbolized stability. Frequently, the only thing left standing after a powerful earthquake might be the pillars of the temple. Jesus is saying though you feel small and weak, I am making you strong. This phrase was also used in the early church to describe leaders. Galatians 2:9 says, “James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars.” Jesus tells the church at Philadelphia that though they are small, they are important. He will make them pillars, integral parts of the structure of the church, holding it up, supporting it.
- o Never Leave – Another feature of a pillar in a temple is that it is always there. You can’t remove it. Though they might have been removed from the synagogue, they will never lose their perpetual communion with God.
- o Inscribed with Names – These names are inscribed on the pillar thus signifying ownership and protection. Philadelphia had been abandoned and rebuilt and renamed several times. Jesus tells them “ I will claim you and you will always belong to me.” Though the Jews of Philadelphia might be ashamed to acknowledge them, God won’t be. He is proud to claim them as His own by inscribing them on them His name, as well as the new name of the city He is building, and the new name of Jesus.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What is the difference between biblical underdog stories and ones the world tells?
2. What does Jesus saying He has the key of David mean?
3. What does Jesus commend the church for?
4. What rewards does Jesus promise the church for their faithfulness?
5. What hope or truth can we gain from this letter to apply when we find ourselves in situations where we feel discouraged or want to give up and give in.





## Lesson 7 | Laodicea: *You Don't Even Know*

### Revelation 3:14-22

Socrates was a Greek Philosopher who lived in Athens in the 400's BC. He was once declared the wisest person in Greece. He didn't consider himself all that wise, so he went around trying to find someone wiser than him. The problem is that when he interviewed people who thought they were wise, he realized they not only lack wisdom, but they also didn't know it. Based on this, Socrates decided that the only reason he was declared the wisest person in Greece was because he knew that he didn't know anything, while all those other people didn't know that they didn't know anything. The Greeks had a word for it, which we apply to second-year high school and college students: sophomore, which means "wise fool."

Though we can laugh at the little game Socrates played. We have to acknowledge that he is right about a lot of people. The worst place to be isn't simple ignorance. The worst place to be is ignorance of your own ignorance. To think you are one thing and discover you are not is a scary place to be. When we see it in other people, we either laugh or sigh. As someone once said, "I hope one day to be as smart as every college sophomore thinks they are."

But what if it's you? How do you know what you don't know? You can't because you don't know you don't know it. It's terrifying to think about. To be self-deluded. That is the situation the church at Laodicea found itself in. If you know any of the letters to the seven churches, you know this one. It is famous for its condemnation by Jesus and has become a synonym for lukewarm Christianity. But the truth is that the famous analogy at the heart of the letter is frequently misunderstood. Far from being a rejection of Laodicea, this letter is a plea from Jesus to realize who they really are and seek what truly matters. It is a guidebook to how to seek awareness of who we really are and to understand how much God loves us even in our sin.

### **Destination (v14a)**

Laodicea was not quite 50 miles from Philadelphia and about 100 miles east of Ephesus. Along with two other cities, Hierapolis, and Colossae, it formed a triangle in the Lycus Valley in central Asia Minor. We know a Christian church existed there since at least AD 60 because Paul mentions the church there (and in Hierapolis) in Colossians 4:13-16. Laodicea was built at a place where 2 rivers joined. I guess you could call it the Pittsburgh of central turkey. Hierapolis and Colossae were each on one of these rivers a few miles further upstream. Hierapolis was famous for its hot springs and Colossae was famous for its cold mountain streams. By the time the rivers joined, the water in Laodicea had become lukewarm. Laodicea was also famous for its banks, and the wealth that came along with it. When the city was destroyed by an earthquake in AD 17, the city didn't need outside help to rebuild it. Laodicea was also home to a famous school of medicine, which specifically treated eye ailments. They were known for a medicine called "Phrygian powder" that treated eye diseases.

### **Description of Jesus (v14)**

- The Amen – Amen is more than just what we say to end prayers. It means "so be it." It is the acknowledgment that what has been said is valid and true. This meaning is reinforced by what follows.
- The Faithful and True Witness – Jesus is one who never misrepresents, exaggerates, or suppresses His message and therefore, because of His truthfulness and His authority, no matter how surprising or unwelcome the message is, it can be believed.
- The Beginning of the Creation of God – "Beginning" here does not mean "the first thing," but rather means "the source." It points to the fact that God created the world through Christ like John says in Jn. 1:3 "All things came into being by Him and apart from nothing has come into being that has come into being." It can also mean "ruler."

## **Diagnosis of the Church (v15-17)**

Nothing good is said. It is all bad.

- They Are Lukewarm (v15b-16): This doesn't mean what you think. Some people interpret hot as being on fire for God, and cold as rejecting God, and therefore lukewarm is neither. But that is not what this means. Remember the two rivers that met in Laodicea. The hot river was fed by hot springs which people went to for healing and restoration. The cold river that was fed by snowmelt was refreshing for quenching thirsts. The lukewarm water was neither restorative nor refreshing. It just made you want to throw up. Jesus is giving a clue as to how to diagnose if we are self-deceived. Look around at the effect we have on others. Do we as individuals and collectively as a church provide healing for the spiritually sick, or encouragement for the spiritually weary. Or are people repulsed by us.
- They are Self-Deceived (v17): Laodicea was a self-reliant city. Remember how it used its own wealth to rebuild after an earthquake. Evidently, this had permeated their spiritual life as well. They had translated their wealth and independence into spiritual maturity. They thought they were spiritually healthy because they were wealthy and independent. They don't see their true nature. Jesus doesn't mince any words. More than the emperor who thinks he is wearing new clothes but is actually naked, the Laodiceans are poor, blind, and naked. They don't have anything of real value. They don't see things as they really are. They are exposed in a way that is humiliating. They truly are wretched and miserable, and this is made worse by the fact that they are unaware.

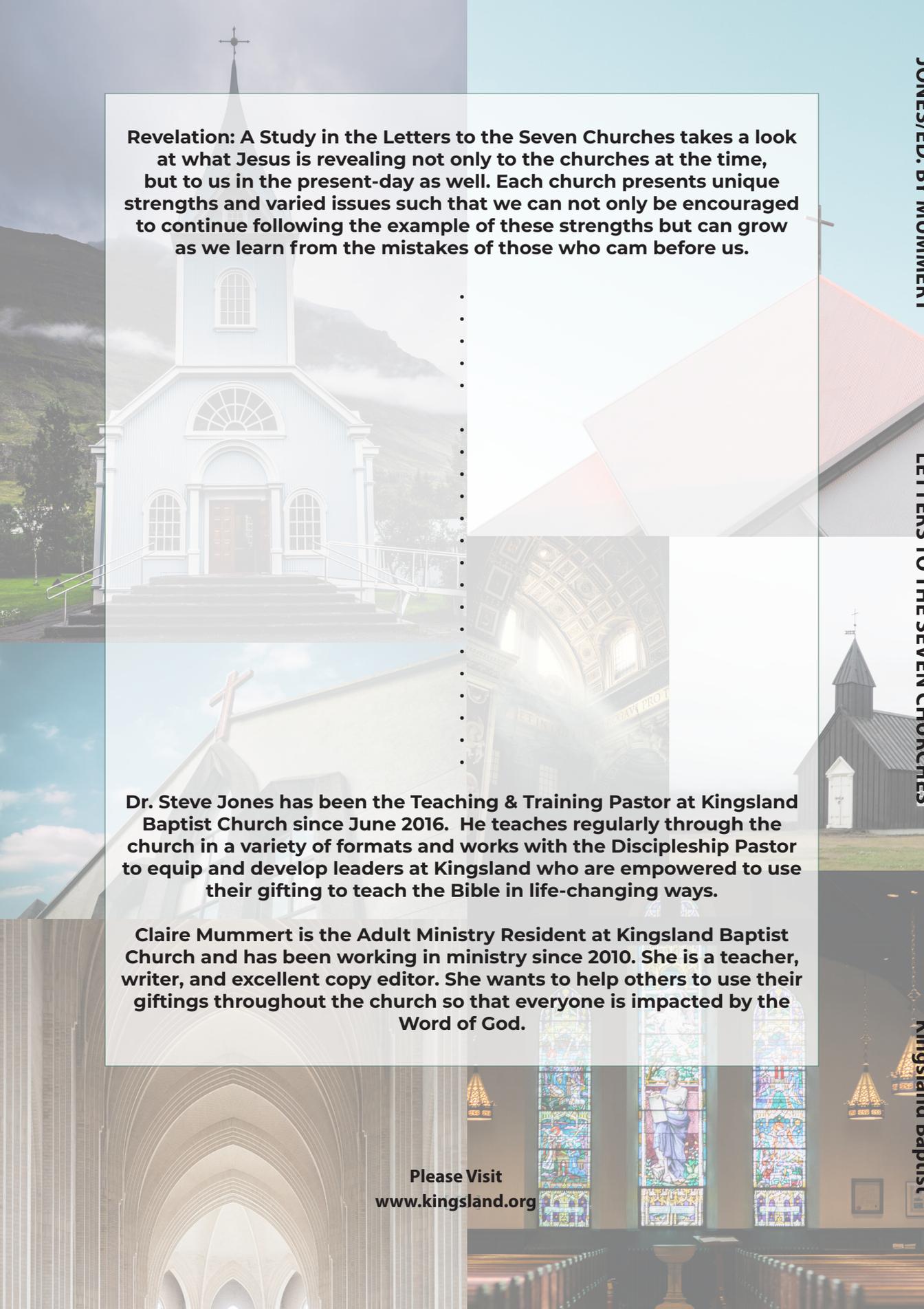
## **Decree (v18)**

- Caution (v18) – Jesus doesn't give much positive commendation to this church. But He does offer advice. He encourages these merchants who have become wealthy to buy from Him things that ultimately matter.

- o Gold Refined by Fire – They should desire to build up treasures in heaven, which is the only true source of wealth. The gold Jesus offers has been refined by fire and is therefore free from impurities.
- o White Garments – They don't realize they were walking around naked. Jesus offers them new garments to cover their spiritual nakedness.
- o Eye Salve – Jesus also wants to heal their vision so that they can see things for what they are and understand their true condition.
- Consolation (v19-22): We often associate rebuke with rejection so it might be startling to us to see that this letter that is filled with so much negative also contains a lot of consolation.
  - o God Disciplines in Love (v19) – He doesn't say these things to condemn the Laodiceans; He wants to heal them. This rebuke is a sign of His deep love for them. It doesn't feel like it at the time, but it is true.
  - o God Keeps Knocking (v20) – God also never gives up on us. We frequently walk away when rejected. We say things like, "Fine, be that way" as we storm off. But God keeps standing at the door, and keeps knocking, and keeps waiting for someone on the inside to let Him in.
  - o God Fully Restores (v21) – Last, and most amazingly, God promises to fully restore those that return. God isn't going to treat the Laodiceans like second-class citizens. They will sit down with Christ on His throne. This is a symbol of full, complete restoration.

## **Discussion Questions**

1. Have you ever known someone who was self-deceived? Have you ever been in a situation where you were self-deceived? How did you discover the truth of your situation? How did you feel when you found out?
2. How do we often misunderstand the hot/cold/lukewarm metaphor? What does being lukewarm really mean?
3. How are the Laodicean's self-deceived? How do we in the church sometimes act like the Laodiceans?
4. What does it mean that Jesus is standing at the door and knocking? What does it mean that this letter is addressed to a church and therefore Jesus standing outside a Christian's house wanting to come in?
5. What does Jesus offer the Laodiceans? How does that apply to us?



**Revelation: A Study in the Letters to the Seven Churches takes a look at what Jesus is revealing not only to the churches at the time, but to us in the present-day as well. Each church presents unique strengths and varied issues such that we can not only be encouraged to continue following the example of these strengths but can grow as we learn from the mistakes of those who came before us.**

**Dr. Steve Jones has been the Teaching & Training Pastor at Kingsland Baptist Church since June 2016. He teaches regularly through the church in a variety of formats and works with the Discipleship Pastor to equip and develop leaders at Kingsland who are empowered to use their gifting to teach the Bible in life-changing ways.**

**Claire Mummert is the Adult Ministry Resident at Kingsland Baptist Church and has been working in ministry since 2010. She is a teacher, writer, and excellent copy editor. She wants to help others to use their giftings throughout the church so that everyone is impacted by the Word of God.**

**Please Visit  
[www.kingsland.org](http://www.kingsland.org)**