

Revelation Bible Study

Chapters 2-3

Download the chart of the “Letters to the Churches.” Peruse what is said in summary about each church. Then, read the verse and the “notes to help understanding” for each church and respond in the “Meditation/Discussion” section.

Note that the phrase “He who has an ear, let him hear!” This is an exhortation found in many prophetic passages including Jesus’ own teaching (cf. Mt. 13:9). A modern equivalent might be “word to the wise.” (TLSB)

Remember, Revelation is a book of comfort to the Christian!!

Church at Ephesus

2:1-7:

(Notes to help understanding)

Ephesus was the greatest city of Asia Minor at that time, and it was the center for worship of the goddess Artemis (Diana). The temple of Diana was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Paul, together with Apollos, Priscilla and Aquila was instrumental in forming a Christian community years before John became bishop of the church in Ephesus.

2:2 wicked men. This means those who are morally evil. They are lowlifes. False apostles attempted to lead the Ephesians astray with fake teaching credentials. Some years before, Paul predicted the Ephesians would encounter such false teachers. He warned their elders. (PBC p. 27)

2:2 tested.† The necessity of testing for correct doctrine and dependable advice was widely recognized in the early church (see 1Co 14:29; 1Th 5:21; 1Jn 4:1). The method of testing may have been that used by the Bereans (Ac 17:11). (CSB)

2:4 first love. The love they had at first for one another and/or for Christ. (CSB)

John’s letters show a similar concern for Jesus’ command to love one another as He has loved us (Jn. 13:34-35; cf. 1 John 4:7-12; 2 Jn. 4-6). The Lord warned against brotherly love growing cold in the chaos of the end times (Mt. 24:12) (TLSB)

2:5 remove your lampstand. Immediate judgment. (CSB)

The lampstand is the symbol of God’s grace among his people. The threat to remove the lampstand warns us that when a congregation despises the gospel, God will eventually remove his means of grace from them. (PBC)

2:6 Nicolatians. A heretical sect within the church that had worked out a compromise with the pagan society. They apparently taught that spiritual liberty gave them sufficient leeway to practice idolatry and immorality (license for sensual sins).

(Meditation/Discussion)

1. What lessons did you learn from this section? How will they impact your life?
2. What comfort can you take from this section?

Church at Smyrna

2:8-11:

(Notes to help understanding)

Smyrna was closely aligned with Rome and eager to meet its demands for emperor worship. This plus a large and actively hostile Jewish population made it extremely difficult to live there as a Christian.

2:9 poverty. The property and goods of some were confiscated when they refused to worship the emperor. These factors combined to make the church literally poor in this world's goods. Probably it was not easy for its members to find profitable, gainful employment. (Poellot p. 35)

2:9 you are rich. They were rich in God and His blessings of the forgiveness of sins through faith in a loving, ever present Savior, peace of heart, mind and conscience, and all of the other gifts and fruits of the Spirit. (Poellot p. 35)

2:9 synagogue of Satan. The Christians at Smyrna were persecuted by their Jewish neighbors, some of whom seem to have infiltrated their Christian community. These Jews claimed that they (and not the Christians) represented the true inherited faith of Moses and the prophets. But the Lord names oppressors the "synagogue of Satan" referring to the fact that they, as a group, follow the lies of Satan. (CC p. 72)

2:10 ten days.† The time of persecution will be limited and of short duration. (CSB)

2:11 second death.† This is eternal death in hell not some second coming to earth for those left behind in a first judgment. (CSB)

(Meditation/Discussion)

1. What lessons did you learn from this section? How will they impact your life?
2. What comfort can you take from this section?

Church at Pergamum

2:12-17:

(Notes to help understanding)

Pergamum had a library of some 200,000 volumes, and legend suggests that parchment was invented there when papyrus became short in supply. It was famous for its cultic altars and temples, the foremost of which was the great altar of Zeus. Religion played a dominant role in

the life of the city for it was the center of four of the most important religious cults: Zeus, Athene (the city's patron goddess), Dionysos, and Asklepios (the god of healing). It was the seat of a famous school of medicine.

2:13 where Satan has his throne. Satan "ruled" from Pergamum in that it was the official center of emperor worship in Asia. (CSB)

2:13 Antipas. First martyr of Asia. According to tradition he was slowly roasted to death in a bronze kettle during the reign of Domitian. (CSB)

2:14 teaching of Balaam. Balaam advised the Midianite women how to lead the Israelites astray (Nu 25:1–2; 31:16). He is a fitting prototype of corrupt teachers who deceive believers into compromise with worldliness. (CSB)

2:17 hidden manna.† The heavenly food available to the believer who overcomes (cf. Ps 78:24), in contrast to the unclean food of the Balaamites. A promise of everlasting life to those who overcome. (CSB)

2:17 white stone.† Certain kinds of stones were used as tokens for various purposes. In the context of the Messianic banquet the white stone was probably for the purpose of admission. In ancient Greek law courts, a white stone (pebble) was a vote for acquittal. Here it symbolizes Christ's verdict of "not guilty" on all believers. (CSB)

(Meditation/Discussion)

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2. What comfort can you take from this section?

Church at Thyatira

2:18-29:

(Notes to help understanding)

Thyatira was not known for its religious life, though it did have temples dedicated to Artemis and Apollo, the sun –god (Trimnos, the patron god of the city, was identified with Apollo). – Acts 16 tells how Paul was directed in a vision to go to Macedonia. At Philippi, the first important city he visited in Europe, he found welcome Christian hospitality at the home of "a certain woman named Lydia, a seller of purple, of the city of Thyatira." (Poellot p. 44)

2:20 Jezebel. The name is used here as an epithet for a prominent woman in the congregation who undermined loyalty to God by promoting tolerance toward pagan practices. Jezebel stands for and represents the sin of syncretism, a universalistic belief that all religions are of value and are able to be of benefit before God. In the pluralistic society of the Greco-Roman world, many religions were believed to be acceptable before God.

2:22 bed of suffering. Disease was often considered as appropriate punishment for sins (cf. 1Co 11:29–30). (CSB)

Jezebel's bed – for the moment a place of pleasure – will become a place of suffering when both she and her partners are overcome with tribulations. (TLSB)

2:23 according to your deeds. These deeds would reflect a faith life. It does not in any way imply such that our works will save us.

2:24 Satan's so-called deep secrets. Later Gnosticism (see Introduction to 1 John: Gnosticism) taught that in order to defeat Satan one had to enter his stronghold, i.e., experience evil deeply. (CSB)

Jezebel and her followers doubtless acted like the wayward people in Corinth. They ate meat sacrificed to idols and committed sexual immorality, while claiming to be more deeply spiritual than ordinary believers (cf. 1 Cor. 8-10). (TLSB)

2:28 morning star.† In 22:16 Jesus calls himself “the bright Morning Star.” Possibly the gift is the privilege of being with Jesus in all his glory through eternity. (CSB)

In Jewish tradition, the Messiah was associated with the appearance of a star (cf. Mt. 2:1-12). Revelation 22:16 explicitly identifies Jesus as the morning star. (TLSB)

(Meditation/Discussion)

1. What lessons did you learn from this section? How will they impact your life?
2. What comfort can you take from this section?

Church at Sardis

3:1-6:

(Notes to help understanding)

At Sardis there was a dead church in a dead city. Not that Sardis was already a “ghost city,” but its greatest glory lay in the past.

Out of the seven churches, Sardis and Laodicea are the only two that were not bothered by persecution or false doctrine. Yet both suffered from internal spiritual decay that had reached advanced stages. They responded to external peace with internal apathy.

3:1 you are dead. The church, while still outwardly performing rituals of godly pretense, has lost faith and heart toward Christ and God, or at least is in danger of doing so.

3:2 wake up! Christians dare never think that they “have it made” at any time, because Satan is always ready to catch us unawares. (LL p. 35)

3:3 come like a thief.† Not a reference to the second coming of Christ, because here his coming depends on the church's refusal to repent. It refers to a day of judgment that will involve Sardis. Elsewhere in the NT the clause refers to the second advent (16:15; Mt 24:42–44; 1Th 5:2; 2Pe 3:10). (CSB)

3:4 dressed in white.† Description of the redeemed (3:18; 6:11; 7:9, 13; cf. 4:4; 19:14). Scarlet is the color of sin; white is the color of purity and holiness (cf. Isa 1:18). A promise of a verdict of innocence to believers in v. 5. (CSB)

3:5 book of life.† A divine ledger is first mentioned in Ex 32:32–33. It was a register of all citizens in the kingdom community. To have one's name erased from this book would indicate loss of citizenship. It is mentioned seven times in Revelation. (CSB)

(Meditation/Discussion)

1. What lessons did you learn from this section? How will they impact your life?
2. What comfort can you take from this section?

Church at Philadelphia

3:7-13:

(Notes to help understanding)

Philadelphia was known as the “gateway to the East.” Its one great drawback was the fact that it lay just south of a great volcanic plain and was thus subject to earthquakes. It was known for its many temples and cultic festival days.

3:8 open door. This meant a free access to the conversion of the heathen in the world about them. God had already opened for them that door. They are to enter in with the preaching of the Gospel, and he will grant success to the Word, that many heathen shall be converted to Christ.

3:8 little strength. They were outwardly small and insignificant. But they had observed God's Word in all detail, both in doctrine and in practice.

3:11 no one take your crown. This was a symbol of eternal life. (TLSB)

3:12 pillar.† The area of Philadelphia was subject to severe earthquakes, one of which destroyed the city early in the first century. The pillars which survived suggest a symbol of the faithful believers. (CSB)

(Meditation/Discussion)

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Church at Laodicea

3:14-22:

(Notes to help understanding)

The wealthiest city in Phrygia during Roman times was widely known for its banking establishments, medical school and textile industry. Its major weakness was lack of an adequate water supply.

3:16 lukewarm—neither hot nor cold. “Hot” may refer to the hot, medicinal waters of nearby Hierapolis. The church in Laodicea supplied neither healing for the spiritually sick nor refreshment for the spiritually weary. (CSB)

3:18 buy gold. This has eternal value and is reminiscent of God’s gracious call to Israel in Is. 55:1-3. There God urged His people to come and purchase from him bread and wine which really satisfy, and no cost to them, He was inviting them to come to the everlasting covenant promised to David.

3:18 salve...eyes. Apparently it is used here because of the preparation for eye treatment which was made in Laodicea and which helped to give the city a good reputation. But good as it was says Jesus, it was not good enough to cure the spiritual blindness of those who, having eyes, do not see (Mark 8:18). They need the eye salve of the Word of God, which opens the eyes of faith.

3:19 I stand at the door and knock. Usually taken as a picture of Christ’s knocking on the door of the individual unbeliever’s heart. In context, however, the self-deluded members of the congregation are being addressed. (CSB)

3:20 eat with them. This is a picture of intimate communion and close fellowship between Christ and the Christian. (Poellot)

3:21 sit with me throne on my.† A figurative way of promising that believers will reign with Christ. (CSB)

Meditation/Discussion

1. What lessons did you learn from this section? How will they impact your life?
2. What comfort can you take from this section?