



**WEDNESDAY NIGHT  
CONNECTION  
NOW AND LATER**  
The Seven Churches of Revelation

*Koester: "Those in search of seven-headed monsters may find the messages to the seven churches to be rather tame, yet these chapters are among the most important in the book because they create the context in which the later visions can be understood. They make clear that John's visions do not float freely in heaven but address issues confronting Christian congregations on earth."*

**A LETTER TO SEVEN CHURCHES:**

Though most people remember Revelation for its imagery and visions, the book starts rather tamely with a series of letters to seven churches in Asia Minor:

**Revelation 1:10-11: "On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, which said: 'Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea.'"**



Though some have tried to interpret these seven churches “spiritually,” this seems to be a reach. The fact that these churches existed is well documented by history, and it seems a bit of a stretch to take them as anything else.

Yet, this being Revelation, there is great symbolism in John addressing this letter to exactly seven churches (though there were many more in Asia). As Paul Spilsbury explains:

*“The fact that John was writing to seven churches and not just one tells us that Revelation is a kind of circular letter intended for a broad audience. This suggests that the message of the book is fairly wide-ranging... The fact that Revelation addresses precisely seven churches is its way of alerting us to the fact that it is really speaking to the whole church.”*

The importance of the letters to the church abroad is confirmed by a refrain that appears in each one: **“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”** All those who come into contact with these seven letters need to listen to them and apply them to their own situation. Just because these letters were written to seven historical churches doesn’t mean they have no bearing for us. Even today, we can see ourselves in each of these churches. Again, Spilsbury puts it best:

*“In a sense these seven churches represent a kind of snapshot of the state of the church at any given time. There will always be some who are doing well and others who are complacent. There will always be some who need warm encouragement while others need a sterner word to get them moving.”*

Christ knows these churches intimately (which we’ll talk about later) and He knows what they excel at and what they lack. He is not detached from His church. He is very aware of what is going on among us.

Yet, as Beth Moore rightly points out, we dare not look at these letters as merely applying to us as a corporate entity. Fitting with our current emphasis “I Am Cornerstone,” it’s important that we allow ourselves to apply each of these letters into our own lives. These letters can be interpreted corporately, but they must also be applied individually because...

\_\_\_\_\_ ARE THE CHURCH!!

Sam Storms: *“In the final analysis, Jesus cares comparatively little about numerical size, cultural relevance, social influence, or financial prosperity. What matters most to Him and must therefore matter most to us is whether a church holds forth His name, proclaims the gospel of which He is the center, and heeds His words as guidance to govern its life and loves. Is your church Jesus-driven? Is He prized above all earthly treasures?”*

## WHAT'S IN THE LETTERS?

While the content of the seven letters differs depending on the situation of the church, each letter shares a common structure. For the most part, each of the letters to the seven churches includes the following parts:

- THE \_\_\_\_\_
- IDENTITY OF \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_ OF THE CONGREGATION
- \_\_\_\_\_ OF THE CONGREGATION
- CALL TO \_\_\_\_\_
- CALL TO \_\_\_\_\_
- CALL TO \_\_\_\_\_

As we will see, there are a few exceptions to this pattern. The churches in Philadelphia and Smyrna receive no word of condemnation. The church in Laodicea, on the other hand, receives no commendation. Still, this breakdown of the letters gives us an easy way to discuss the content of these letters...

## THE ADDRESS:

Each letter begins with basically the same address:

**“To the angel of the church in [city name] write:”**

This interesting way of addressing the churches has led to a lot of speculation about the identity of the “angel” of the churches. A few of the more interesting suggestions:

- The \_\_\_\_\_ of the Congregation
- The \_\_\_\_\_ of the Congregation
- The \_\_\_\_\_ of the Congregation
- The “\_\_\_\_\_ Church”

None of the explanations is completely satisfactory, with scholars and commentators basically split on how this should be understood.

## THE IDENTITY OF CHRIST:

In each letter, Jesus addresses Himself as the author. These letters are Jesus' direct correspondence to His people. He wants them, therefore, to know His authority to commend and condemn the church in this way. Here is how Christ identifies Himself in each letter:

<u>Church</u>	<u>Christ's Identification</u>
Ephesus	<b>"These are the words of Him who holds the seven stars in His right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands." (2:1)</b>
Smyrna	<b>"These are the words of Him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again." (2:8)</b>
Pergamum	<b>"These are the words of Him who has the sharp, double-edged sword." (2:12)</b>
Thyatira	<b>"These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze." (2:18)</b>
Sardis	<b>"These are the words of Him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars." (3:1)</b>
Philadelphia	<b>"These are the words of Him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What He opens no one can shut, and what He shuts no one can open." (3:7)</b>
Laodicea	<b>"These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation" (3:14)</b>

Interestingly, each of these descriptions of Christ goes back to the opening vision of Revelation 1:

**Revelation 1:12-18: "I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, and among the lampstands was someone 'like a son of man,' dressed in a robe reaching down to His feet and with a golden sash around His chest. His head and hair were white like wool as white as snow, and His eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and His voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In His right hand He had seven stars, and out of His mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance. When I saw Him, I fell at His feet as though dead. Then He placed His right hand on me and said: 'Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.'"**

**Sam Storms:** *"One cannot read these seven letters without noting the utter and unequivocal Christocentricity of their content. Christ is the center of which all church life is the circumference."*

## STRENGTHS OF THE CONGREGATION:

After introducing Himself, Christ commends (almost) every church for the things they are doing right. Though we don't have time to dwell on each one of these churches, it's worth noting the qualities Christ saw as admirable in His church:

<u>Church</u>	<u>Christ's Commendation</u>
Ephesus	<b>"I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary."</b> (2:2-3)
Smyrna	<b>"I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan."</b> (2:9)
Pergamum	<b>"I know where you live—where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city—where Satan lives."</b> (2:13)
Thyatira	<b>"I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first."</b> (2:19)
Sardis	<b>"I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead..."</b> (3:1)
Philadelphia	<b>"I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name."</b> (3:8)
Laodicea	<i>No word of commendation given...</i>

A few of the more interesting observations from these commendations:

- The Churches each had to deal with \_\_\_\_\_:
  - False Teachers
  - Persecution/Death
- Christ says He knows their "\_\_\_\_\_."
- Most churches are praised for their \_\_\_\_\_
- A few churches are in a very \_\_\_\_\_ place!

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. **“I know your deeds”** is a common refrain in the letters to the churches. How does it make you feel to know that Jesus is so actively involved with His church? What ramifications does this have for us as the church?
  - a. How does it make you feel to know that Christ walks among the churches and holds them in His hand? What encouragement does that give us?
  
2. If Jesus wrote a letter to Cornerstone, what do you think He would commend us for? Why? If Jesus wrote a letter directly to you, what do you think He would find to commend you for? Is there a church you identify with more than the others? Why?

## WEAKNESSES OF THE CONGREGATION:

While He begins by building the churches up, Jesus is honest about some of their faults. As a matter of fact, for some churches He has some rather strong rebukes. Here’s what Christ had against some of these churches:

<u>Church</u>	<u>Christ’s Rebuke</u>
Ephesus	<b>“Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love.”</b> (2:4)
Smyrna	<i>No rebuke given...</i>
Pergamum	<b>“Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality. Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.”</b> (2:14-15)
Thyatira	<b>“Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols.”</b> (2:20)
Sardis	<b>“I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God.”</b> (3:1-2)
Philadelphia	<i>No rebuke given...</i>

Laodicea

**“I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth. You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.” (3:15-17)**

Again, we don’t have time to dwell on all the faults of these churches. Still, there are some pretty interesting things going on here that we need to pay particular attention to:

- The Ephesians loved \_\_\_\_\_ more than they loved God
- The churches in Pergamum and Thyatira fell into false \_\_\_\_\_ which lead to moral compromise.
- The church in Sardis had lost touch with \_\_\_\_\_
- The church at Laodicea is the antithesis of the church in \_\_\_\_\_
- Laodicea had become \_\_\_\_\_ with where they were.

### CALL TO REPENT:

As it turns out, Jesus isn’t bringing up these faults in order to bash His church. He’s bringing them out in the open in order to heal them and help His bride overcome them. So, Jesus tells these churches exactly what must be done in order to deal with their own individual issues:

<u>Church</u>	<u>Christ’s “Advice”</u>
Ephesus	<b>“Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.” (2:5)</b>
Smyrna	<b>“Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.” (2:10)</b>
Pergamum	<b>“Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.” (2:16)</b>

Thyatira	<b>“So I will cast her on a bed of suffering, and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely, unless they repent of her ways. I will strike her children dead. Then all the churches will know that I am He who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds. Now I say to the rest of you in Thyatira, to you who do not hold to her teaching and have not learned Satan’s so-called deep secrets (I will not impose any other burden on you): Only hold on to what you have until I come.” (2:22-25)</b>
Sardis	<b>“Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.” (3:3)</b>
Philadelphia	<b>“I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars—I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you. Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth.” (3:9-10)</b>
Laodicea	<b>“I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see. Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears by voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.” (3:18-20)</b>

Repeated Words in These Verses:

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

If the churches do not do these things, Christ promises judgment on them. Interestingly, as we’ll see throughout the course of this study, these judgments mirror some of the judgments later leveled on Babylon.

*“These letters are exhortations attempting to draw the reader closer to God.”*

CALL TO LISTEN:

As mentioned earlier, each letter contains this familiar refrain:

**“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”**

To **“hear”** does not just mean listening; it also implies \_\_\_\_\_!!

This ties in with something John wrote in the opening prologue to the letter:

Revelation 1:3: **“Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.”**

CALL TO OVERCOME:

Finally, each letter ends with an exhortation to overcome. Christ has called His churches to be victorious—to stand firm against the systems and sins of this world. To those who can overcome—literally “conquer”—Jesus makes some very impressive promises:

<u>Church</u>	<u>Christ’s Promise</u>
Ephesus	<b>“To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.” (2:7)</b>
Smyrna	<b>“He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.” (2:11)</b>
Pergamum	<b>“To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it.” (2:17)</b>
Thyatira	<b>“To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations—‘He will rule them with an iron scepter; he will dash them to pieces like pottery’—just as I have received authority from my Father. I will also give him the morning star.” (2:26-28)</b>
Sardis	<b>“He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and His angels.” (3:5)</b>
Philadelphia	<b>“Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it. I</b>

**will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on him my new name.” (3:12)**

Laodicea

**“To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on His throne.” (3:21)**

Earlier, we talked about the fact that Christ’s condemnations are tied to the fate of Babylon. Interestingly, the promises He offers to those who overcome are tied to John’s later vision of the New Jerusalem:

**Revelation 19:7-8: “Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and His bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear. (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints.)”**

**Revelation 21:4: “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”**

**Revelation 21:6-7: “He said to me: ‘It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life. He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son.”**

**Revelation 21:22-23: “I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp.”**

**Revelation 21:27: “Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life.”**

**Revelation 22:1-5: “Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb, down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and His servants will serve Him. They will see His face, and His name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign forever and ever.”**

## ONE FINAL PROMISE:

Certainly, one might describe Revelation as a book about how God makes all things perfect. One of the greatest lessons in these letters is that Jesus will one day make His church perfect. Individually and corporately, we will be perfected by our Savior. Consider the problems the churches faced:

- They dealt with false prophets
- They dealt with “false Jews”
- They lived around “Satan’s throne”
- Some persecuted to the point of death
- Sin and impurity in the church
- Perseverance in the face of extreme trial

When we finally get to the new heavens and the new earth, things are radically different. All the forces opposing the church are taken away, and the church experiences perfection:

- Foundations of New Jerusalem are the \_\_\_\_\_ (21:14)
- Gates of city adorned with the names of the \_\_\_\_\_ (21:12)
- Live where \_\_\_\_\_ throne is (22:1)
- A place of \_\_\_\_\_ life (21:4)
- Church finally and totally \_\_\_\_\_ (21:27)
- Those who were persecuted \_\_\_\_\_ forever (22:5)

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. If Christ wrote you a letter, what do you think He would identify as your weakness? Why? What solution would He propose to this weakness? Would He tell you to repent? Remember? Endure? How do you think you would respond to such a request?

2. In your mind, what is the greatest promise of all those held out by Christ in these letters? Why? Does seeing these promises motivate you to live differently? Why or why not? What practical things can you do to live each day in light of these promises?

Koester: “We have seen that those who were first addressed by the book faced issues ranging from persecution, to assimilation, to the complacency that arises from prosperity. Now we will ask how the scenes of the heavenly throne room, the four horsemen, and other visions can help to awaken the complacent, to strengthen the persecuted, and to bring those tempted to assimilate to a renewed sense of faithfulness. The promises that were made at the end of each message are not forgotten in the visions that follow, but point us to the final chapters of Revelation, when the faithful find everlasting life in the New Jerusalem.”