



# The Letters to the Churches

Revelation 2-3

The seven churches were located on the common Roman postal route from Ephesus (if writing from Patmos). Giving indication that these are literal churches in the first century and not churches representing ages of church history.



## About Ephesus

Population: 250,000. Largest and most important city in the Roman province of Asia.

Devoted to the cult of Artemis (Diana) with her temple regarded as one of the seven wonders of the world.

Church established by Paul. Ministered to by Apollos, Priscilla and Aquila, and Timothy. John likely lived there before being exiled and returned following his time on the island of Patmos.

## To the Church in Ephesus

Each letter begins with a description of Christ, then gives commendations and warnings appropriate for each congregation.

1. Commended for their intolerance of evil and imposters (2:2).
2. Commended for their endurance in the faith (v. 2, 3).
3. Rebuked for abandoning their first love (vv. 4-5).
4. Commended for hating the works of the Nicolaitans (v. 6).

Each letter ends with a promise of future reward if the church heeds the message of Christ (2:7,11,17,26-29;3:5-6,12-13,21-22).

#5. Note the call to repentance in verse 5. Jesus said he will come to remove their lampstand. This use of "come" we know isn't referring to the Second Coming but in judgment. This usage must be accounted for in other portions of the book of Revelation and elsewhere in the Scriptures.

For historicists, Ephesus is said to represent the apostolic church, until the end of the first century.

## About Smyrna

Second largest and reputedly the most beautiful city in Provincial Asia. The only city of the seven that still exists today (Izmir).

First city to build a temple to Roma in 195 BC.

Had the largest Jewish population of any Asian city.

In a later generation, Polycarp would be the bishop of this church and would suffer martyrdom.

## To the Church in Smyrna

1. They are suffering, poor, and persecuted by unbelieving Jews who are enemies of Christ (v. 9).
2. They will face even greater suffering (v. 10). There is no historical record of “ten days” of tribulation. This could refer to the greatness of the tribulation rather than its length.
3. The later themes of the dragon (devil), tribulation, and suffering imprisonment are here.
4. “Be faithful unto death, and I will ...” is a repeated theme (2:17,26-28; 3:5,11-12; 12:11; 13:10,18; 14:12; 20:4-6; 21:7).

#1,2 Because of the large Jewish population, and especially if this is before 70AD, they are likely facing persecution and incrimination by the Jews there.

#2. The 10 days may refer to a brief time? We aren't sure as records are limited.

#3. If the synagogue of Satan is referencing the Jews here, then his persecution by the devil is likely a persecution from the Jews.

#5. There is no call to repent! Only Smyrna and Philadelphia do not have a call to repent.

In the historicist view, Smyrna is believed to represent the church under persecution of the Roman emperors (64-313). Then “10 days” is said to refer to the 10 years of Domitian his his persecution.

## About Pergamum

The oldest city and provincial capital of Asia.

Contained the second largest library in the world (200,000 volumes) behind the one in Alexandria.

First to erect temples to Caesar Augustus, Zeus, and Asclepius (the god of healing).

“Satan’s throne” (v. 13) may refer to the conical hill behind the city where several temples, including the throne-like altar of Zeus.

## To the Church in Pergamum

1. They hold fast in faith despite the martyrdom of Antipas (v. 13).
2. Some rebuked for holding the teaching of Balaam and the teaching of the Nicolaitans which the Lord hates (vv. 14-15).
3. Repent of this false teaching or Christ will “come” (v. 16).
4. In forsaking food offered to idols, they will receive the hidden manna (v. 17).

#1. Nothing more is known about this martyr. Probably done by the Roman authorities since this was the capital city.

#2. The teaching of Balaam is described as eating food offered to idols and practicing sexual immorality (part of the Roman/Greek cults in the city). Balaam also did what he did for money. Whether that was the motivation or not, we aren't sure.

Whatever the extent, it was being tolerated by the church.

The city was full of idols so this would have been a temptation.

#3. One of the interpretive decisions in Revelation is to understand what it means that Christ will “come” (1:7; 2:5, 16, 25; 3:9, 11, 20). In this case it means coming in judgment. Not necessarily the second coming in physical form (see also 2:5). The same language is used in the Olivet Discourse to refer to Christ's judgment against Jerusalem and the temple. He visited his people in judgment.

It is likely that in these verses (at least), his coming does not refer to the Second Coming since these churches no longer exist. Their lampstands have been removed (2:5).

Concerning the white stone. There are three views:

1. token of vindication or acquittal. They may receive a black stone by Roman authorities but God has given them an acquittal.
2. Token given to contestants in the Greek games to be traded in later for

1. their actual awards.
2. Token for admission to the feast in the kingdom of God rather than a token for admission to feasts in idols temples.

In this historicist view, Pergamum is said to represent the imperial church after Constantine (313-606). Antipas is seen to be a group of men opposed to the church (anti-papas) who were martyred in Rome and Constantinople. Pergamum is said to mean "married to power" which describes the church being wed to the Roman authorities. It made Rome "where Satan's throne is" the center of Christendom.

## About Thyatira

A small city of little significance.

City had many trade guilds. It would have been difficult to make a living without participating in one of them.

Guilds practiced idolatrous rites at their gatherings. This would have been challenging for believers who could not participate in such rituals.

Lydia was from this city (Acts 16:14). The purple cloth that she sold was a major product of that city.

#1 It was a city of small significance but receives the longest instruction from our Lord.

## To the Church in Thyatira

1. In respect to work, love, faith, service, and patient endurance they have matured as believers (v. 19).
2. They tolerate “Jezebel” who endorsed and participated in idolatrous practices and sexual immorality (v. 20).
3. She taught “the deep things of God” which were actually the “deep things of Satan” (v. 24).
4. Interesting contrast with Ephesus who did hate false teaching yet abandoned the love they had at first (2:2-4), whereas Thyatira was known for their love but tolerance of false teaching.

#2. Jezebel was not her name but described her character. Metaphors and biblical language from the OT are used to describe contemporary events.

#3. Gnostic thinking prized knowledge (secrets, conspiracies, and deep things) over righteous living. In fact, immoral living was sometimes a sign of superior knowledge that believers were outside the restraints of the law and no longer under moral constraint.

#4. We need to maintain love and stand against what is false. Thyatira had left this going on in the church for a long time. God will then come and judge.

In the historicist view, Thyatira represents the church of the period of papal triumph and persecution (606-1517). The middle church of seven covers the middle ages. Killing her children refers to the Black Death of 1347 that decimated the European population in the Middle Ages.

## About Sardis

The old capital of Lydia.

Was famous for its red dye and woolen goods.

Conquered by Cyrus in 549 BC and by Antiochus in 218 BC because of failing to keep adequate watch.

City was known for its immorality.

## To the Church in Sardis

1. No commendation is given. They are known to be “alive” but they are “dead” (v. 1).
2. Christ promises to “come” against them (v. 3).
3. There is a remnant of faithful believers who have remained pure. They will receive eternal life.

#1. We aren't given details. Is this an external obedience not done with love. Was this hypocrisy where they appeared to follow Christ but were immoral like the rest of the society?

#2. Just as the city was conquered twice previously because they did not watch, so too will Christ come if they do not watch (v. 3).

Blotting out names from the book of life is sometimes said to be a possibility so that believers lose their salvation. But it doesn't say that he will blot out the names of those disobedient, but that he will not blot out the names of the righteous. In other words, just because the church and city are full of corruption, you will not lose your place in heaven. Stand your ground, be faithful, and you will not lose your reward because the people around you indulge in wickedness while professing Christ.

In the historicist view, the church if Sardis was said to be the time of the Reformation to Wesley (1517-1793).

## About Philadelphia

City had a small population due to fear of earthquakes in the city's history.

The city was destroyed in 17 AD by an earthquake so most people lived in the surrounding countryside.

The church existed until the 12th century.

## To the Church in Philadelphia

1. No rebuke is given to the church.
2. Persecution seems to come by way of the Jews but they will be humbled before them (v. 9).
3. There is a greater trial coming upon the world or land that they will be kept from (v. 10).
4. A reference to Jesus coming soon matches references in 1:1,3.
5. God writing his name on them (v. 12) speaks of preservation rather than some tattoo, microchip, or visible seal.

#2. Before the temple's destruction, persecution came primarily from the synagogue and the Jews in Jerusalem. Later, Rome would persecute both groups and bring an end to Judaism and Christianity would become the dominant religion of the Scriptures. The Jews will be subjugated and the Christian church will be victorious.

It could be that in verse 7-8 when he talks about opening the door that he has opened the door to the kingdom for Gentiles and these Jews (who aren't Jews inwardly) cannot bar them from entering the kingdom.

#3. Futurists believe this is a promise of the pre-tribulational rapture. Jesus will keep the church from this terrible time.

However, Jesus "keeping" them doesn't mean rapturing them (John 17:15, "I do not pray that you should take them out of the world, but that you should keep them from the evil one.")

Idealists believe this time is generic. All people experience times of trial. But believers will be kept faithful by the Lord.

Preterists argue that "whole world" is the Roman empire (Luke 2:1) that will test those in the earth (or land, i.e., Israel). In 68 AD with the death of Nero, it greatly shook the Roman empire until Vespasian was made emperor in 70 AD. Fits with "I am coming quickly."

The fact that they will be in the storm but weather it (rather than being taken out) is found in verse 11-12. You will not lose your crown and you will be a pillar in the temple of God.

#4. This coming is a great trial, a time of judgment and a time when believers will be kept safe. Christians were saved from the siege in Jerusalem and from the fate of what happened to Jews there.

#5. This is seen in 7:3, 14:1, Eph 1:13; 4:30. The sealing of the Holy Spirit. There are other allusions in verse 12 to other themes in this book (new Jerusalem which comes from heaven, his new name).

## About Laodicea

Very prosperous city. It was a banking center and producer of black wool clothing and carpets.

Location of a famous medical school and produced a powder substance use to treat eye ailments.

City's water supply came from hot springs 6 miles away at Denizli. While traveling through the aqueduct to Laodicea, the water became tepid, neither hot nor cold.

## To the Church in Laodicea

1. No commendation is given. The church is like their water, not useful. They've grown complacent in their riches and comfort.
2. They are blind to their condition (v. 17).
3. Play on city's strengths to gain reward in heaven (v. 18).
4. Verse 20 is popularly used in evangelism but refers to Christ being an outsider, even in his own church.

Note: verse 14 is not support for JWs or Mormons that Jesus is created. He is the beginning (arche) of the creation of God.

#1. It seems that lukewarm water is a metaphor for lack of zeal. Cold could be opposed to him or it could be that either cold or hot is useful.

Historicists view this church as representing the lukewarm church in the end-times (possibly beginning near the end of the 19th century). We are rich but have lost our faith in Scripture.

Recap the preterist, historicist, futurist, and idealist views of these letters.