

Lesson 2

Revelation



Letters to the Seven Churches

Early World	Patriarchs	Egypt & Exodus	Desert Wanderings	Conquest & Judges	Royal Kingdom	Divided Kingdom	Exile	Return	Maccabean Revolt	Messianic Fulfillment	The Church

Introduction

The Revelation to John (the Apocalypse) is neither an incoherent jumble of images nor a code book for spotting signs of the Antichrist. Instead, its structure is patterned after something very familiar to 1st-century Jewish Christians—the Mass. The liturgical worship of the early Church was rooted in the history of Israel and had become fully realized in Jesus Christ. The Mass, sometimes called the Divine Liturgy, provides the key to understanding the book of Revelation. After announcing an initial blessing in the first chapter, the work moves on—just as the liturgy moves on—to the penitential rite. In the book of Revelation, this “penitential rite” appears in the form of a series of letters to seven churches. Offering both spiritual counsel and pointed rebuke, the letters issue repeated calls for the churches to “repent” and to “hear what the Spirit says.” In the 1st century, as today, the doorway into the presence of God is through repentance, and this is one of the reasons why the book of Revelation speaks to modern-day Christians. There’s something of each of the seven churches still alive in contemporary Christian communities. All followers of Jesus Christ are urged to be attentive when reading Scripture, especially the final book of the New Testament, in order to “hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

Revelation 2:1—3:22

2 ¹“To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: ‘The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.

²“I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear evil men but have tested those who call themselves apostles but are not, and found them to be false; ³I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name’s sake, and you have not grown weary. ⁴But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. ⁵Remember then from what you have fallen, repent and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. ⁶Yet this you have, you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. ⁷He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.’

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⁸“And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: ‘The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life.

⁹“I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. ¹⁰Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. ¹¹He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who conquers shall not be hurt by the second death.’

¹²“And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: ‘The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword.

¹³“I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is; you hold fast my name and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my witness, my faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells. ¹⁴But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice immorality. ¹⁵So you also have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. ¹⁶Repent then. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth. ¹⁷He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone which no one knows except him who receives it.’

¹⁸“And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: ‘The words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze.

¹⁹“I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first. ²⁰But I have this against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and beguiling my servants to practice immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols. ²¹I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her immorality. ²²Behold, I will throw her on a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent of her doings; ²³and I will strike her children dead. And all the churches shall know that I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you as your works deserve. ²⁴But to the rest of you in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not learned what some call the deep things of Satan, to you I say, I do not lay upon you any other burden;

²⁵only hold fast what you have, until I come. ²⁶He who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, I will give him power over the nations, ²⁷and he shall rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received power from my Father; ²⁸and I will give him the morning star. ²⁹He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’

3¹“And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: ‘The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.

“I know your works; you have the name of being alive, and you are dead. ²Awake, and strengthen what remains and is on the point of death, for I have not found your works perfect in the sight of my God. ³Remember then what you received and heard; keep that, and repent. If you will not awake, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come upon you. ⁴Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments; and they shall walk with me in white, for they are worthy. ⁵He who conquers shall be clad thus in white garments, and I will not blot his name out of the book of life; I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels. ⁶He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’

⁷“And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: ‘The words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one shall shut, who shuts and no one opens.

⁸“I know your works. Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut; I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. ⁹Behold, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie—behold, I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and learn that I have loved you. ¹⁰Because you have kept my word of patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial which is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell upon the earth. ¹¹I am coming soon; hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown. ¹²He who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God; never shall he go out of it, and I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name. ¹³He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’

¹⁴“And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: ‘The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God’s creation.

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¹⁵“I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were cold or hot! ¹⁶So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth. ¹⁷For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing; not knowing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. ¹⁸Therefore I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, that you may be rich, and white garments to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, that you may see. ¹⁹Those whom I love, I reprove and chasten; so be zealous and repent. ²⁰**Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.** ²¹He who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. ²²He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

[Please Note: One of the best ways to meditate on God’s Word is through memorization. A suggested memory verse is always highlighted in the Scripture text, or you may choose a verse of your own.]

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Study Questions

It’s best to read all of Revelation 2:1—3:22 and *Points to Ponder* before responding to the study questions. To aid in discussion, note Scripture verses where you find your responses.

The First and Second Letters—to the Churches in Ephesus and Smyrna Revelation 2:1-11

1. In Revelation 2:2-5, what are the strengths of the church in Ephesus? What problem does the church there face? How does 1 Corinthians 13:1-3 shed light on this problem?
2. In Revelation 2:9, who is Jesus calling “a synagogue of Satan”? What warning does he give the church in Smyrna?

The Third Letter—to the Church in Pergamum

Revelation 2:12-17

3. In Revelation 2:12, Jesus Christ is called the “one who has the sharp, two-edged sword.” What additional information do other New Testament passages provide about a two-edged sword (see *Eph* 6:17 and *Heb* 4:12)? How will Jesus use this sword to discipline the church in Pergamum?

The Fourth Letter—to the Church in Thyatira

Revelation 2:18-29

4. What is Jezebel’s sin (see *1 Kings* 18:13 and *1 Kings* 21:1-14)? Why does Jesus speak so harshly against the church in Thyatira?
5. Jesus calls the church in Thyatira to repentance. What warning does Jesus give them? What blessing does he promise to those who don’t hold the false teaching, but who “hold fast to what they have” until he comes?

The Fifth Letter—to the Church in Sardis

Revelation 3:1-6

6. What does Jesus mean when he accuses the church in Sardis of being dead but of having “the name of being alive”? The church in Sardis is told: “Remember then what you received and heard; keep that, and repent.” What is it that the members of the church in Sardis—and all Christians—have received (see *CCC* 79)?

The Sixth Letter—to the Church in Philadelphia Revelation 3:7-13

7. How does the church in Philadelphia differ from the ones previously mentioned? What does Jesus promise its members?

The Seventh Letter—to the Church in Laodicea Revelation 3:14-22

8. The Church in Laodicea often is seen as an image of the contemporary Church. What made this church complacent? What happened to the Israelites when life became easy for them (see *Deut* 31:20 and *Hos* 13:5-6)? What is it that most plagues the Church today and causes her members to be “lukewarm”?
9. In these letters to the seven churches in the book of Revelation, Jesus Christ always is presented as the victor. What does it mean to “overcome” or to “conquer” as Jesus commands the churches to do (see *Heb* 12:2-3)? List the promises made in the second and third chapters of the book of Revelation to those churches that conquer.
10. **Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.** In Revelation 3:20 (our suggested memory verse), Jesus promises to be with those who open the door to him (a theme repeated in the Angelus teaching of Pope John Paul II excerpted in *Rome to Home*). Write a description of Jesus based on the following verses from the book of Revelation: 2:1, 2:8, 2:12, 2:18, 3:1, 3:7, and 3:14.

Questions for Reflection

The following questions are designed to help you reflect further about how ideas in Revelation 2:1—3:22 might apply to your own life:

1. The continual refrain of the second and third chapters of the book of Revelation is: “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” Jesus Christ speaks to the churches, so first and foremost one must be in the midst of the churches, in the body of the Church, to receive his message. This message of Jesus to the churches isn’t “personal revelation” given to an individual, but a message consistent with Catholic Tradition and interpreted by the shepherds of the Church. Do you have “an ear to hear” formed by the teachings of the Church? How can you “tune up” your hearing even more so that you will have the very mind of Christ?
2. Which of the letters to the seven churches speaks most directly to you today? Why?

Opportunities for Additional Study

Points to Ponder—*Revelation 2:1—3:22*

The Meaning of Seven

The book of Revelation makes repeated reference to the number seven. For example, in the second and third chapters, readers encounter seven letters to the seven churches from “him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands” (*Rev 2:1*) and who has “the seven Spirits of God” (*Rev 3:1*). Later in his vision, John sees seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls. Some scholars even see seven symbolic persons emphasized in the book—a woman, a dragon, a male child, St. Michael the Archangel, the beast of the sea, the beast of the earth, and the Lamb of God. Other scholars note that Jesus Christ pronounces seven blessings in this final book of the New Testament.

The number seven points to the concept of a covenant. To enter into a covenant, a person swears an oath. Contracts are different from covenants in that contracts involve promises. If a promise is sanctified with a sworn oath, the contract becomes a covenant. The Hebrew verb meaning “to swear an oath” comes from the Hebrew noun for the number “seven.” A Hebrew swearing an oath in God’s name is, quite literally, “sevening” himself.

The number seven therefore was an essential element of oath ceremonies, and it’s arguable that the repeated use of the number seven symbolizes the covenant relationship between God and his people. This would explain two things in the book of Revelation—the sevenfold blessing of Jesus Christ upon his Church, and why there’s a sevenfold curse symbolized by the trumpets,

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seals, and bowls. When God made a covenant with the people of Israel through Moses, he warned of sevenfold vengeance if the covenant was broken (*Lev 26:18*). A person who enters into covenant under oath also places himself or herself under a curse should the oath be broken. To be under oath is to be under divine judgment, since God's own holy name is attached to the testimony of the person under oath. To lie or to break the oath is to profane God's name. This concept of covenant blessing and covenant curse forms the backdrop for the letters to the seven churches, and is the backdrop for the rest of the book of Revelation as well.

Letters to the Seven Churches

Church tradition understands the letters to the seven churches in both a literal and a more-than-literal sense. In the literal sense, the letters can be read as speaking to John's local circle of churches in Asia Minor and commenting on the various pastoral problems they faced. But the same letters also can be seen in a more-than-literal sense as describing the universal Church during different phases in its history. The letters sometimes are viewed as depicting states of the individual Christian's soul. The letters also can be understood as a recapitulation of salvation history with special focus on the covenants God has made with his people. The seven letters can be seen as corresponding to seven consecutive periods in Scripture—periods of salvation history involving the Garden of Eden, the patriarchs, Israel's wanderings in the desert, the monarchy, Israel in exile, Israel's return from exile, and the religion of Judaism during the time of Jesus.

The church in Ephesus is described using the language of Paradise (*Gen 2:9*), which recalls the story of the Garden of Eden and promises access to "the tree of life." Readers of the book of Revelation learn that the location of this tree of life "is in the paradise of God" (*Rev 2:7*).

Similarly, the letter to Smyrna reminds readers of the age of the patriarchs and particularly the drama of Joseph who was thrown into prison, tested, and eventually raised up to share in the authority of the ruler of Egypt (*Gen 37:1—41:57*).

In its mention of Balaam (*Num 22:1—24:25*), the letter to Pergamum uses an image of spiritual adultery drawn from the Israelites' wanderings in the wilderness. Balaam was a false prophet who counseled Israel's enemies to seduce the Israelites into intermarriage and idolatry. Numbers records that Phinehas opposed this and killed an Israelite man and a Midianite woman who'd slept together by stabbing them through with his sword (*Num 25:6-15*). With Jesus' pledge to "war against them with the sword of my mouth" (*Rev 2:16*), the church in Pergamum is being told that they resemble the people of Israel during their sojourn in the wilderness, and that they can expect a similar judgment. At the same time that it warns of harsh retribution for sin, the letter to Pergamum also mentions "hidden manna," recalling God's special care for the Israelites while they were in the wilderness (*Ex 16:4-31*).

Thyatira's letter draws from the period of monarchy and complains against that church's toleration of "Jezebel." Jezebel, a queen who perverted the kingdom established by David, was the enemy of the prophet Elijah (*1 Kings 16:31—21:26*). The letter to Thyatira uses language specifically drawn from the kingdom of David (*Pss 2:8*).

The letter to Sardis reminds readers of Israel’s prophetic period, summarizing virtually all that the prophets have had to say to the descendants of the 12 tribes of Israel during the centuries of decline after the reign of David: “Remember then what you received and heard; keep that, and repent. If you will not awake, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come upon you” (*Rev* 3:3). The assurances given to the Old Testament prophets of a “remnant,” or small portion, of God’s people who remain faithful to the covenant are echoed in the letter to the church in Sardis.

The letter to the church in Philadelphia repeats language similar to that used by the Old Testament prophets Haggai, Ezra, and Nehemiah and recalls the Israelites’ return from exile. Like the Philadelphians, the returning exiles had “but little power,” yet God assured them that they possessed his authority to accomplish his work on earth in the face of their enemies. These post-exilic Jews specifically were entrusted with rebuilding the Temple and the city of Jerusalem. The church in Philadelphia is assured: “He who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God; never shall he go out of it, and I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem” (*Rev* 3:12).

Finally, in the letter to the church in Laodicea, readers of the book of Revelation are shown the way that church corresponds to Pharisaic Judaism in the 1st century. The Gospels, especially the Gospel of John, are filled with examples of Jesus rebuking the Pharisees and others of his time who were lukewarm about their faith and blind to the poor and naked, while vaunting their own spiritual self-sufficiency and material riches.

The Church Today

The diagnosis of the problems of the church in Laodicea can rather easily be seen as applying to the state of the contemporary Church in America and in Europe. Scripture isn’t an archeological artifact about 1st-century Christian communities but instead is written so that believers “may be complete, equipped for every good work,” as St. Paul explains to Timothy (*2 Tim* 3:16-17). Modern-day Christians who behave like the members of the church in Laodicea also risk being spewn out of the mouth of Jesus Christ. Believers who heed the call of Jesus Christ to “be zealous and repent” (*Rev* 3:19), however, will just as surely experience God’s mercy.

The book of Revelation begins like the Mass—with a call to repentance and conversion, and a warning of the covenant curses and a promise of the covenant blessings that Jesus Christ desires to heap in heavenly abundance upon his people. The symbolism of this final book of the New Testament is deeply rooted in the Old Testament, but its vision is concerned with the future. Above all, the book of Revelation calls readers to dwell in the present moment by “hearing what the Spirit says to the churches.” This call to live neither in the past nor in the future but in the here and now is one of the marks of authentic Christianity. Jesus commands his followers: “Do not be anxious about tomorrow” (*Mt* 6:34). The book of Revelation also bids Christians to do good and to cease doing evil. The letters to the seven churches aren’t dusty artifacts from the remote past, nor manuals for speculative worries about the future. They’re intended to serve as living guides for Christians of all times and places.

Catechism Connections

- For more information about the two senses of Scripture (literal and spiritual) that guarantee richness in reading the Bible, see *CCC* 115 through *CCC* 117.
- The Catholic Church teaches that Christians are called to repentance even after Baptism. To find out more, see *CCC* 1428 and *CCC* 1429.
- To read about how “everyone’s name is sacred,” and about the importance of a person’s Christian name, see *CCC* 2158 and *CCC* 2159.

Rome to Home

Pope John Paul II taught that Jesus Christ speaks to every person’s greatest need.

Christ wishes to speak to every man of our time—Christ, the most magnificent Interlocutor, who touches the deepest and most difficult problems, and always in full truth and in complete love of man. Yes, Christ wishes to speak to every man. He speaks to him incessantly; he speaks to environments, families, whole nations. He speaks continually to the whole of mankind, he speaks of the fundamental problems, the most important problems, on which man’s dignity on earth and his eternal salvation depend. Behold, he stands at the door and knocks!

—Angelus, March 22, 1981

Summary

In Revelation 2:1—3:22, we observed that:

1. The Revelation to John (the Apocalypse) repeats the number seven in different ways, which can be seen as pointing to the idea of covenant fulfillment.
2. Because of the connection between the number seven and the idea of a covenant, it's reasonable to assume that the author of the book of Revelation is calling readers' attention to the covenant relationship between God and his people.
3. Covenant blessings and covenant curses form the backdrop for the seven letters to the churches.
4. The seven letters correspond to seven consecutive periods in salvation history.
5. The book of Revelation begins like the Mass—with a call to repentance and conversion.
6. Although the symbolism of the book of Revelation is deeply rooted in the Old Testament and its message is concerned with the future, its primary purpose is to call readers to dwell in the present.
7. The letters to the churches can serve as living guides for all Christians.

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Revelation Notes

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