

7 Churches in the book of Revelation (1-3) and their Literal and Spiritual meaning (Second lesson)



Who is John? John was a disciple of Jesus. His parents were Zebedee and Mary Salome and his brother was James. He was a fisherman. As Jesus' disciple, he belonged to the "inner circle". However, he had an embarrassing experience with Jesus, too. When the Samaritan villagers didn't accept Jesus for lodging, anger triggered John and James (Luke 9:54). They said, "Lord, do you want us to call fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" But Jesus gently rebuked them. He reminded them that He didn't come to the world to condemn it. Instead, He came to save it (John 3:17). Yet, John still proved to be a very dependable friend to Jesus in the end. When Jesus was about to die on the cross, John was with His mother, Mary. He became an apostle and evangelist. After Jesus' ascension, John began working with Peter. Together, they preached the gospel of Christ wherever they went. They rendered a sermon at Jerusalem during the Pentecost (Acts 2:14-41). He told the people about the fulfilled prophecies of Jesus in line with His earthly ministry, death, and resurrection. And now that He has risen and went back to heaven, they were to be witnesses of His great love. For this, he encouraged them to receive the Holy Spirit and get baptized. John remained in

Jerusalem for a number of years. Through his evangelistic efforts, he helped establish the early Christian church around 58 AD.

Why was He Exiled at Patmos? John's enemies wanted to stop him from preaching about Jesus. John cared a lot for his new believers. His unwavering fidelity to Christ caused the bitter hatred from his enemies. Since John was the last survivor of Jesus' disciples, his enemies decided to silence his testimony. They sent him to the Roman emperor for a trial. They accused him as a seditious person, publicly teaching theories which would subvert the nation. They sent John to Emperor Domitian in 81 AD. After hearing the charges against John, the emperor cast him into a cauldron of boiling oil. Also, he challenged him to drink poison. But God preserved John's life. John had no trace of burn on his skin. Also, he wasn't poisoned by the drink. Remember Jesus' promise in Mark 16:18 They will pick up serpents [with their hands], and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not harm them. They will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover. John's testimony made his enemies and the Roman emperor even angrier. 4) The Roman emperor finally declared John's exile. The Bible says that he was condemned "for the testimony of Jesus Christ" (Revelation 1:9,). He witnessed God's majesty and power.

Where was he exiled? Patmos is now known internationally as the "Jerusalem of the Aegean," or the "Island of the Apocalypse," because this is where John found refuge in the 1st century AD. The small island of Patmos is about 7.5 miles (12 km) long from north to south and at its widest is 6 miles (10 km) from east to west. The book of Revelation explicitly states that it was written while John was on the island of Patmos. This is the only book in the New Testament where the place of writing is given. According to a tradition preserved by Irenaeus, Eusebius, and Jerome, John was exiled in AD 95 during the reign of Emperor Domitian. His exile ended upon the accession of Nerva in 96.

Tradition: A tradition says that John received the vision of Revelation from heaven verbatim and dictated it to his assistant Procorus, who wrote it down. Procorus is mentioned in Acts 6:5 as one of the seven original deacons. Many other traditions on the island are associated with miraculous works of John and are found in the Acts of John by Prochorus, a pseudipigraphal work that was written in the 5th century and attributed to John's scribe (Acts 6:5).

Explanation of Jesus' Vision: 1:7 Coming with the clouds: John announces the return of Jesus to earth (Mt 24:27, Mk 13:26, 1 Thes 4:15-18)

1:12 Seven Golden Lampstands: Jesus reveals the secrets meaning of seven gold lamp stands in 1:20 as seven churches in Asia Minor (Turkey) and Jesus stands among them. When a church faces problem, Jesus stands there among them and protects them.

Dressed in robe and Golden sash around his waist: It is the symbol of Glorified Christ. Compare the Transfiguration of Jesus in Mt 17:1-8 that talks about Jesus appearing in the cloud and in white cloth.

Golden Sash: This is the dress of the high priest in the NT who goes to the Holy of holies to forgive the sins of the people. Jesus with golden sash comes to forgive people's sins.

His white hair is his wisdom and divine nature. His blazing eyes symbolize his divine judgment of all evil. The sword in his mouth is the power of his word (Heb: 4:12/ Is 49:2). Hand is strength and seven stars are 7 angels for the 7 churches. 1:17 fell at his feet (power) an act of submission 18: He is in control of our life. 1:20 angels of the seven churches: angel or elders and pastors: each church was designated to guard them.

7 Churches: The seven churches described in (Rev 2-3) are seven literal churches at the time that John was writing Revelation. The first purpose of the letters was to communicate with the literal churches and meet their needs at that time and to encourage them in their faith in the midst of external and internal problems. Each of the seven churches describes issues that could fit the Church in any time in its history. Only one of the churches is in another part of the Bible. The Church at Ephesus received a letter, the Book of Ephesians, from the Apostle Paul.

The seven churches are

- (1) Ephesus (Rev 2:1-7) - the church that had forsaken its first love (2:4).
- (2) Smyrna (Rev 2:8-11) - the church that would suffer persecution (2:10).
- (3) Pergamum (Rev 2:12-17) - the church that needed to repent (2:16).
- (4) Thyatira (Rev 2:18-29) - the church that had a false prophetess (2:20).
- (5) Sardis (Rev 3:1-6) - the church that had fallen asleep (3:2).
- (6) Philadelphia (Rev 3:7-13) - the church that had endured patiently (3:10).
- (7) Laodicea (Rev 3:14-22) - the church with the lukewarm faith (3:16).

Where Were the Seven Churches and What do They Symbolize?

1. The Church of Ephesus: The Church that Has Abandoned Its Love for Christ and His Teachings (Rev 2:1-7)

Summary and Explanation: Ephesus was the prominent commercial and cultural center of Asia. Christ's letter to the church of Ephesus praises the congregation for its "deeds...hard work...and perseverance," and for its rejection of false apostles (Rev 2:2-3). Despite its hard work and doctrinal integrity, Christ faults the community for having "forsaken the love [they] had at first" (Rev 2:4). This "forsaken love" can mean that the Ephesians had become less devoted to Christ or that the work they did was no longer motivated by love for one another. The letter to the church of Ephesus does offer the community hope if they repent and rekindle their love for Christian living (Rev 2:5-7).

Significance Today: The lesson in the letter to Ephesus teaches that truth and love must go hand-in-hand. Jesus reveals that a church fashioned in His image must teach God's Truth in love. In Ephesus, there were so many images and goddesses, immorality and worship to Artemis, greek goddess of moon. Initially they were good but later on lost everything. Like the Ephesian church, we can easily fall prey to a cold, mechanical observance of religion. Like the Ephesians, many tend to focus solely on doctrinal purity

and hard work, to the exclusion of true love for Christ. As this letter shows, no amount of zeal for the truth or moral rectitude can replace a heart full of love for Jesus

2. The Church of Smyrna: The Church that Remains Faithful Amidst Persecution (Rev 2:8-11)

Summary and Explanation: Smyrna was home to a large Jewish community hostile to Christians. The Bible notes that slanderous accusations by Jews against Christians had led to Christian persecution by Roman authorities (Acts 14:2, 19: Acts 17:13).

Christ's revelation to the church of Smyrna commends the community for its material poverty but its spiritual wealth, and acknowledges its wrongful persecution (Rev 2:9). Christ does not reprimand this church but warns of impending imprisonment for some of its members, urging them to remain faithful "even to the point of death" and remember the promise of their "victor's crown" (Rev 2:10).

2:6 practices of Nicolaitans: a group of people who compromised their faith for some sinful acts

2:7 tree of life: Two trees were in the garden of Eden (Knowledge and Life). eating from the tree of life brought eternal life with God. Eating from the tree of knowledge brought realization of good and evil. Adam and Eve ate the tree of knowledge disobeyed God. They were excluded from Eden Garden and barred from eating the tree of life (Cross is the tree of life)

Synagogue of satan is the satanic Church. Crown of life: Smyrna is known for athletic games. Crown was victory wreath, a trophy for the champion. Message is remain faithful and receive eternal life. The second death is eternal separation from God

Significance Today: Like the church of Smyrna, Christians are persecuted worldwide in obvious and insidious ways. This letter warns all Christians that although we may suffer greatly, the length of tribulation will be short compared to the promise of eternal life.

3. The Church of Pergamum: The Church that Compromises Its Beliefs (Rev 2:12-17)

Summary and Explanation: The city of Pergamum was renowned for its pagan practices. The letter to the church of Pergamum lauds the congregation for upholding its faith despite the city's pervasive pagan influences (Rev 2:13). The letter then addresses the church's sin by denouncing some of its members for following false teachings that brought about religious and moral compromise (Rev 2:14-15).

In the letter to Pergamum imagery is borrowed from Israel's wandering in the desert. References are also made to "manna" and the "white stone" with a "new name" worn by the High Priest (Ex 28:9-12). Reference is also made to the false prophet Balaam and the evil king Balak, whom the Jews encountered before entering the Promised Land. As the chosen people approached Canaan from the east, the Moabite king, Balak, sent for Balaam to curse Israel. Balaam practiced divination (Josh 13:22). Rooted in Balak's request was the pagan superstition that specific incantations could drain an enemy's

power. God intervened, first telling Balaam not to go, then warning him, and lastly causing Balaam to bless rather than curse Israel (Num 24-25)

The Lord calls on the community to repent or risk the judgment that will emanate from the “sword of [His] mouth” (Rev 2:16). Those who repent will be given the “hidden manna” that is the grain of Heaven (Psalm 78:24), and a “white stone” or clean slate with a new identity in Christ (Rev 2:17).

Significance Today: Like the Christians in Pergamum, it’s easy to normalize the non-Christian behavior of those around us and allow that behavior to dilute our values (1 Cor 15:33). But the Bible urges us to “not conform to the pattern of this world” but be transformed by the renewal of our mind in accordance with God’s Word (Romans 12:2).

4. The Church of Thyatira: The Church that Follows False Prophets (Rev 2:18-29)

Summary and Explanation: Thyatira was a wealthy commercial city. Jesus’ letter to the church of Thyatira praises it for growing in faith and service (Rev 2:19). The church’s downfall was its devotion to a false prophet that led some members to commit idolatry and immorality (Rev 2:20). Although the false prophet remained unrepentant, Jesus affirms that the congregation can still repent by turning away from the prophet’s ways (Revelation 2:21-22).

Jezebel, the Phoenician princess who married King Ahab, is mentioned. She was the woman who led God’s people into apostasy (1 Kgs 16:29-34; 21:25-26). She supported 850 prophets of Baal (1 Kgs 18:19) and suppressed worship to Yahweh (1 Kgs 18: 4, 13). Elijah’s dramatic confrontation with the prophets of Baal is dramatically narrated in 1 Kings 18:20-40. Both she and those who commit adultery with her are threatened with tribulation (2 Kgs 9:22). Jezebel was killed when she was hurled from a window to the pavement below. Jeru then rode over her corpse, which was eaten by dogs (2 Kgs 9:33-37). The letter also recalls the three and a half years of punishment God visited upon Israel (1 Kgs 17:1; Jas 5:17) The Lord reminds us in this revelation that He will repay each of us according to our deeds (Rev 2:23). The payment for sin is death. Those who persevere in faith, however, will receive a share of Christ’s messianic authority over all nations and triumph over death (Rev 2:26-28).

Significance Today: Just as some in the church of Thyatira were led astray by a false prophet, Christians today fall prey to cult leaders, occult practices, and other false teachings. To share in Christ’s victory, we are to avoid these “so-called deep secrets” of Satan (Rev 2:24) and hold firm to Christ’s teachings.

Meat was offered to pagan idols. In pagan temple, meat was offered to idols. Before they sell, they are supposed to burn it. Why eating meat which was offered to idols was bad? In the ancient world, after a sacrifice was presented to a god in pagan temple, only part of it was burned and the rest was sent to the market to be sold. The Christians can buy it unknowingly and wondered if eating such meat, they were somehow participating in the worship of pagan idols.

5. The Church of Sardis: The Church that is Spiritually Dead (Rev 3:1-6)

Summary and Explanation: Sardis was a city that had endured two surprise attacks despite its fortifications. Our Lord faults the church of Sardis for maintaining an outward appearance of being “alive,” while actually being spiritually dead (Rev 3:1). Alluding to the city’s history of prior surprise attacks, Jesus warns the congregation to “wake up” and repent, lest he “come like a thief” to bestow His judgment (Rev 3:2-3). Those in the church of Sardis who heed Christ’s warning will be “dressed in white,” a symbol of purity and victory, and will be acknowledged in Heaven’s Book of Life (Rev 3:5).

Book of life: names are written in the book of life. The book symbolizes God’s knowledge of who belongs to him. All who belong to God are written in the book of life.

Significance Today: Today, Christians can fall into the trap that ensnared the church in Sardis if we merely go through the motions of practicing our faith without really feeding our spirit. We can avoid becoming “the living dead” by engaging in our faith through Bible study, prayer, and fellowship.

6. The Church of Philadelphia: The Church that Patiently Endured Despite Weaknesses (Rev 3:7-13)

Summary and Explanation: Philadelphia was home to a synagogue community hostile to Christians. Christ praises the church of Philadelphia for remaining faithful in the face of trials despite their limited strength (Rev. 3:8).

Jesus does not reproach the church of Philadelphia but he condemns its persecutors. (Rev 3:9). Christ promises that if Philadelphia’s congregants remain faithful to Him, He will protect them from the “hour of trial” and make them pillars in God’s heavenly temple (Rev 3:10-12).

Significance Today: The message to Philadelphia shows us the blessings that come when we maintain our faith despite life’s tribulations. In fact, those who persevere despite weaknesses will stand strong as pillars in Heaven.

7. The Church of Laodicea: The Church with a Lukewarm Faith (Rev 3:14-22)

Summary and Explanation: Laodicea was a prosperous industrial and commercial center. Jesus’ letter to the church of Laodicea wastes no time denouncing the congregation for its lukewarm faith, threatening to “spit” the congregation out of His mouth (Rev 3:16). Christ scolds this church for allowing its economic prosperity to cause it spiritual bankruptcy and reveals that, despite its economic wealth, only He can provide spiritual wealth (Rev 3:17-18). Those in Laodicea’s church who open the door to Christ will share in His Heavenly banquet and have the right to sit with Him on His throne (Revelation 3:20-21).

3:18: they may be rich but Christ tells them to purchase white clothes from him (his righteousness) and gold from him(his spiritual treasures). Christ says that true value is not in wealth but in right relationship with God

3:19 stand and knock: God can’t operate if we don’t co operate.

Significance Today: Like the church of Laodicea, it's easy to become complacent in our faith during times of abundance. Christ warns us in this revelation that he will "spit out" lukewarm disciples. Instead, Jesus urges us to keep seeking the Lord's face even after His hand has bestowed riches in our lives. Until chapter 3, John speaks of the conditions of the churches in Asia Minor. Now he moves from Asia to universal church. The core message is God will defeat all evil in the end.

What is Jesus' message for us the modern church from 7 churches of Revelation?

We look at Revelation chapters 2-3 where each church is commended for its strengths and instructed in areas where it needs to make changes. But this isn't just ancient history. This study reveals how we, as Christians today, should learn from this instruction so we can understand how we should be living as believers.

Ephesus, a church that lost sight of its first love: A call to return to your first love - Revelation 2:1-7: Don't replace your love for Jesus with religious do's and don'ts.

Smyrna, a church that experienced persecution: A call not to fear - Revelation 2:8-11: When trials come: pray, trust the Lord and walk in faith.

Pergamum, a church surrounded by evil influence: A call not to compromise - Revelation 2:12-17: Live as an overcomer, a bright light: repent, live a life of faith, and avoid a compromised lifestyle.

Thyatira, a church that embraced evil: A call not to tolerate sin - Revelation 2:18-29: Faith, obedience, and love for God will guide you to persevere when tempted with tolerance for sin.

Sardis, a spiritually dead church: A call to spiritual revival - Revelation 3:1-6: Have you become spiritually lazy? How to be spiritually vigilant and on guard against attack.

Philadelphia, a faithful church: A call to persevere & know you are loved - Revelation 3:7-13: Feeling overwhelmed or anxious? Jesus knows, and He's able to deliver you. Choose faith over fear and learn about promises of God for your life.

Laodicea, a lukewarm, materialistic church: A call to open your heart and recommit your love for Jesus - Revelation 3:14-22: Don't let anything supersede your love and passion for Jesus. He is pursuing you! Is your heart open to Him

This series on 7 churches is a challenge to us to resist a life of distraction or indifference and passionately embrace the life God wants for us. But we can't live that incredible life full of God's promises if we aren't centered on God.

Scope of the Messages: Even though the messages are addressed to these seven specific, historical churches of John's day, they are intended for all churches across all the earth and across all time. This is evident from the fact that each message includes the phrase: "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches". Jesus had used this "he who has an ear" expression before to emphasize important points (Matt 11:14-15; Mark 4:9; Mark 4:22-23; Luke 14:35).

Some of the remarks given in the messages are clearly specific to the historic local church, but in general, the admonishments, encouragements, warnings, and commendations in these messages should be understood as if directed to all churches. The fact that there are seven churches is probably significant because the number seven carries the meaning of wholeness. This suggests that these seven churches are meant to be representative of all churches and all professing Christians throughout the earth and throughout history. Likewise, the seven messages are meant to convey the fullness of the message that the churches need to hear.

Contemporary challenges for global catholicism: The Catholic Church is truly a global Church and the world's oldest institution. With 1.3 billion members, it represents more than 50 percent of the world's 2.5 billion Christians. Its enormous numbers and international organizations make it a transnational actor. Recent estimates put Protestant numbers at roughly 37 percent, with another 12 percent belonging to the various Orthodox Churches. Other communities, less mainstream, include Christian Scientists, Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses, representing about 1 percent. Today the Pentecostal, Charismatic or Renewalist communities, with over 682 million members, are rapidly growing. Yet the face of world Christianity is changing today. The main Churches of Europe and North America continue to lose members, and Catholic losses are significant. While Latin America is the home of some 425 million Catholics, with the growth of evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity, the Catholic Church began losing tens of millions of members. Pentecostals now claim some 70 percent of all Latin American Protestants.

In its various forms Pentecostalism has proved particularly attractive to the poor of Latin America. Pentecostals are effective evangelists with their zeal for sharing their faith, an emphasis on charismatic giftedness and a subjective experience of God, something long lost sight of in western theology. In the United States, the percentage of Catholics has dropped from 23 to 20 percent, with the greatest losses in the Northeast. Losses are most dramatic among young adults. Fully 36 percent of Millennials (those between the ages of 18 and 24), are disconnected from any religious tradition. They are often called "nones," for their negative response to questions about their religious affiliation.

In 1910 Europe was home to 65 percent of the world's Catholics, compared to just 24 percent today. Reasons include low fertility rates, the fact that most Christians are older, and the increasing numbers of those leaving Christianity. The number attending Mass continues to decline. However, while Christianity is declining in the West, it is exploding in Africa, Asia and Latin America. In Africa, the growth of Christianity has been extraordinary, from nine million in 1900 to an estimated 380 million today. According to Todd Johnson and his associates, "By 2050 there will likely be more Christians in Africa (1.25 billion) than in Latin America (705 million) and Europe (490 million) combined."

In Asia, Christianity continues to grow, especially in its evangelical and Pentecostal expressions. In 1970, there were 17 million Asian evangelicals and Pentecostals; today the number is over 200 million. Singapore, South Korea and the Philippines have Mega-Churches with members in the tens of thousands. In Indonesia and Malaysia

Christianity is growing among Buddhists and Confucians. In China Christianity continues to grow, despite efforts of the present government to control it.

Challenges: While the Second Vatican Council did much to renew and revitalize the Church, today it faces many challenges, in addition to declining membership. The sexual abuse of minors by clergy, the worst crisis faced by the Church since the Reformation, has done serious damage. Initially dismissed by some in Rome as an American problem, it is now worldwide. The shortage of priests is another challenge, with many of those still active reaching retirement age and new priestly vocations decreasing. In Europe many parishes are being closed or combined into pastoral centers. Some countries are increasingly dependent on foreign-born clergy. Cultural diversity and religious pluralism are also challenges. Catholic Church in China, India and some Islamic countries has to deal with hostile governments, political pressure, lack of religious freedom and persecution. From the beginning of his pontificate, Pope Francis has tried to move the Church forward to a world so much in need of the Gospel. He envisions a missionary discipleship to bring the good news to the peripheries, to all the excluded—the poor, migrants, the suffering.

Looking Ahead: studies suggest that tomorrow's Catholicism would be quite different. It will be largely non-western, non-white, and non-affluent, more conservative on sexual issues, more liberal on questions of social justice; more biblical and evangelical in engaging with cultural issues, more concerned with a strong Catholic identity in the face of religious pluralism. It will be younger and more optimistic, and more open to indigenous religious practice. Tomorrow's Church will be polycentric rather than Eurocentric. Pentecostalism has left its mark on the liturgies and catechetics of Latin America. African theologians are striving to develop an authentically African theology, with women playing an increasingly important role. Asian Churches, particularly in India, struggle with how to present Jesus as Word of God and savior in a context of religious pluralism and their minority status. A decentralized, polycentric Church will be characterized by a more inclusive governance. Pope Francis has challenged Catholics, indeed all Christians "to go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the 'peripheries' in need of the light of the Gospel" (*Evangelii Gaudium* [EG], No. 20). At the center of his concerns are the poor, the disadvantaged and migrants. And if the Church is to successfully evangelize the diverse cultures in which it lives, it must become inculturated (EG 68, 116–128). His choice of cardinals from non-traditional sees and his inclusion of the voices of regional episcopal conferences in his apostolic letters are other indications of this. So is his emphasis on synodality.

Ministerial Leadership: Today, positions of leadership in local communities and dioceses are increasingly filled by lay men and especially lay women. In Africa and Latin America, lay catechists and pastoral agents have long been leading local communities. Catechists in Africa are usually supported by their communities; In Europe and Latin America lay ministers, women among them, conduct funerals, lead services of the Word, and preach at prayer services when a priest is not available. Some churches in the United States have "lay parish administrators" who function as virtual pastors in all but sacramental ministry. The shortage of priests continues to remain a problem in many parts of the world. The secular culture of many western countries has also challenged

long-standing policies of Catholic institutions because of Church teaching on questions of life, sexuality and family.

Dialogue with Cultures: The days when the Church could simply impose its morality on a society through civil law are gone. The Church needs to dialogue with cultures. It needs to consult the sense of the faith (sensus fidei) and the faithful (sensus fidelium). The Church needs also to listen to its theologians, its scholars and to other Churches. A New Ecumenism: With a strong sense of their evangelical mission and the gifts of the Spirit, the new Churches are vital communities. The Churches of the West need to engage with the growing churches of the world. Interreligious Dialogue: Islamic fundamentalism is a problem in Africa and parts of the Middle East, often leading to violence, yet dialogue with Islam is still in its very early stages. In some states of India both Christians and Muslims suffer persecution.

Conclusion: The phenomenon of globalization is bringing the diverse cultures of the world closer together. Catholicism as a global Church reflects that diversity to a remarkable degree. Its special charism has been its ability to hold unity and diversity together in creative tension. Today's Church needs more than ever to draw upon its many wisdom sources, its pastors and ministers, its scholars and theologians, its educational institutions and social ministries, and the faith of its peoples. It must continue to seek greater union with other Churches and Christian communities, and to work for greater interreligious understanding if it is to fulfill Vatican II's vision of the Church as a sacrament of unity with God and all God's people.