



# The Seven Churches of the Apocalypse

“Christ’s Judgment of Church Fidelity & Vitality from Revelation 2 & 3”

*An installment in the series:  
Orthodox Anglicans Studying Scripture*

## Introduction Lesson

### **The Book of Revelation Background**

**Author:** Revelation is traditionally attributed to the “beloved apostle” St. John the Evangelist.

**Date & Context:** Scholars are divided concerning whether Revelation was written just before the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 or during the persecution in the latter part of the reign of Domitian (some time between A.D. 81 – 96) when St. John was in exile on the Isle of Patmos.

**Structure & Content:** The book of Revelation is an oracle of prophecy presented in letter form to seven churches in Asia Minor with which, it is assumed, St. John was acquainted in order to address.

The book is structured as a series of visions experienced by John, first of Jesus Christ Himself; and then—after His letters to the seven churches—of the unfolding of events affecting both the Church in the world. The visions are presented as apocalyptic literature, and are thus presented in very allegorical and symbolic fashion. Scholarly interpretation differs about whether the visions are depicted chronologically or of the same events but from different perspectives.

The content of Revelation is best read as a complementary blend of prophecy concerning both past and future events; and, as an exposition about the ongoing relationships and conflicts between God and His Kingdom, humanity, and Satan. It is also filled with liturgical imagery that has greatly influenced the development of Christian worship.

**Main Message:** It is faithfulness in tribulation. From John’s first vision of Christ, in the letters, and throughout the visions, Revelation is a reminder from God to the churches not to give in to their adversaries but to persevere in their faith. The Greek word *apokalypsis* means “the uncovering of something previously hidden”, i.e. the final triumph of God’s Kingdom. Divine judgment will fall upon human wickedness, and Christ will both protect His Church during tribulation and give it final vindication against its persecutors.

### **The Letters to the Seven Churches**

The letters to the seven churches are written by St. John at the command of Christ to the angel of each church. This is *His* message to them, although John probably knew each one personally. Christ’s judgment of each church is a literal evaluation, but is also meant to be universal criteria for discerning the fidelity and vitality of any church. Each letter follows a standard format:

1. A short introduction of Christ with a descriptive title follows
2. The state of the church is summarized
3. Exhortations are given
4. The message concludes with “He who has ears to hear let him hear,” and a special promise to him who “overcomes”

### **The “Sevens”: Important Symbols**

**The Seven Spirits** – signify the Holy Spirit and His several gifts that he endows to Christians in every Church through the sacrament of Confirmation

**The Seven Stars** – the angels of the seven churches that represent the guardian angel of each community

**The Seven Candlesticks** – the seven churches themselves, recalling the menorah of Old Testament Judaism. While these Asian communities were seven real churches, the number seven signifies fullness, suggesting the entire Church is also in view.





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## First Church Lesson: Ephesus

### Ephesus: Revelation 2:1-7

#### **The Ephesian Church Background**

Ephesus was the provincial capital of Asia Minor: a populous and prosperous city located on important trade routes (see map). Various pagan and occult practices flourished there, especially that of Artemis (Diana) and the emperor (see Acts 19).

Tradition says that St. Paul founded the Ephesian church about A.D. 53-56 and that the Blessed Virgin Mary lived there under the care of the Apostle St. John.

The church remained an important Christian and Byzantine center through the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries (especially the Ecumenical Council of 431), but fell into decline after an earthquake and Arab raids in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, and Turkish conquest in the 11<sup>th</sup> century.

#### **Main Message**

It is that the Ephesian church had successfully persevered in orthodox faith—even discerning false apostles from true—and in hard work for the Gospel and moral uprightness. However, Christ warns them: *“thou hast left thy first love”* presumably for God and each other.

The candlestick is a symbol for each church, but is especially used for Ephesus since it was the metropolitan church of Asia Minor. Thus, it was especially important that this church renew its devotion and combat heresy.

#### **Key Themes**

- Resisting heresy, especially that of the Nicolaitans which was a gnostic sect that encouraged idolatry (probably of the divine feminine) and fornication
- Repentance and renewal of original devotion
- *“The tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God”*: eternal life in heaven for those who persevere, which recalls that of the Garden of Eden which was lost, but can be regained

#### **The Depiction of Christ**

*“These things saith he that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand, who walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks...”*

QUESTION – What is the meaning of this symbolic title for Christ, and where else in Scripture can we cross reference to decipher its origin?

QUESTION – What is the significance of Jesus portraying Himself with this title to the Ephesian church?

#### **Application Questions**

QUESTION – What spiritual and cultural obstacles can cause any church to “leave its first love”?

QUESTION – In sum, what can we learn from the church at Ephesus about what is necessary to cultivate a faithful and healthy church?







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## **Second Church Lesson: Smyrna**

### Smyrna: Revelation 2:8-11

#### **The Smyrna Church Background**

Smyrna, like Ephesus, was a prosperous city; however, the church there was small and poor due to intense Jewish persecution, to which St. John alludes in verse 9.

Tradition tells us that John himself founded the church in Smyrna. One of his most important disciples, perhaps around the time Revelation was written, was a young St. Polycarp whom John would eventually ordain. Polycarp would follow St. John as the city’s bishop, and underwent martyrdom (by the Romans) in A.D. 155.

#### **Main Message**

It is the importance of enduring opposition and slander, especially from other pseudo-religious groups who claim superiority. In Smyrna’s case, this was from Jews in the local synagogue who rejected Jesus as the Messiah and were persecuting the church for believing in Him.

St. John writes that they will have to bear “10 days” of tribulation, a symbolic number that means a limited time. He foretells that some church members will imprisoned and perhaps even tortured, but that those who persevere will be rewarded by God.

#### **Key Themes**

- Material poverty may hide spiritual wealth; sometimes the poorest churches are the most devout and holy
- Opposition often reveals the true character of persecutors (the Devil’s agents) and those being resisted (God’s Saints)
- Faithfulness that accepts martyrdom (real or metaphorical) is entitled to the “crown of life” from God that delivers us from the “second death” (eternity in hell)

#### **The Depiction of Christ**

*“These things saith the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive ...”*

QUESTION – What is the meaning of this symbolic title for Christ, and where else in Scripture can we cross reference to decipher its origin?

QUESTION – What is the significance of Jesus portraying Himself with this title to the Smyrna church?

#### **Application Questions**

QUESTION – What does St. John want us to learn from Smyrna about not being *fearful*, but *faithful*?

QUESTION – In sum, what can we learn from the church at Smyrna about what is necessary to cultivate a faithful and healthy church?





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## Third Church Lesson: Pergamos

### Pergamos: Revelation 2:12-17

#### **The Pergamos Church Background**

Pergamos was city prominently situated on a tall hill northeast of Smyrna. Although a very intellectual city (it had an extensive library second only to that of Alexandria), it was also a very pagan city dedicated to numerous cults, especially that of the emperor. It’s temple to Caesar probably earned it the ignominious designation “Satan’s seat” in the letter.

The Antipas to whom St. John refers was a Christian martyr (possibly killed in A.D. 92) who challenged the Imperial cult by confessing that Jesus Christ, not Emperor Domitian, was the Lord of the world. Tradition tells us that Antipas was executed by being burned to death in a heated bronze bull.

#### **Main Message**

It is the importance of resisting the *Zeitgeist* of the outside culture, even to the point of death, as the martyr Antipas by his example did. In St. John’s time, the *Zeitgeist* was Greco-Roman paganism; in 21<sup>st</sup> century America, it is the ideology of secular humanism with its corresponding social “values” of moral and epistemological relativism/subjectivism. Christ is keen to see that the Church does not permit any idols to compromise Her allegiance to Him, religious or otherwise.

#### **Key Themes**

- Commitment to Jesus’ Name vs. denying Him
- Cleansing the Church of internal corruption, such as of that of Balaam (as a prototype of greed) and the immoral gnostic Nicolaitans
- Jesus will reward faithful Christians and churches with communion with God and an everlasting identity by baptismal rebirth

#### **The Depiction of Christ**

*“These things saith he which hath the sharp sword with two edges...”*

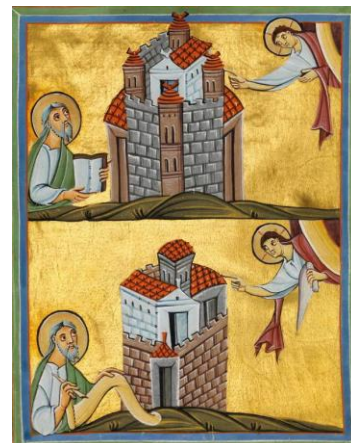
QUESTION – What is the meaning of this symbolic title for Christ, and where else in Scripture can we cross reference to decipher its origin?

QUESTION – What is the significance of Jesus portraying Himself with this title to the Pergamos church?

#### **Application Questions**

QUESTION – What do the hidden manna & white stone symbols teach us about the Church’s identity and destiny?

QUESTION – In sum, what can we learn from the church at Pergamos about what is necessary to cultivate a faithful and healthy church?







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## **Fourth Church Lesson: Thyatira**

### Thyatira: Revelation 2:18-29

#### **The Thyatira Church Background**

Thyatira was a commercial city southeast of Pergamos known for its trade guilds. Like Pergamos, it was a very pagan city, and each guild had its own patronal temple where idol worship and sexual debauchery was common at their meetings. It had probably become a temptation for Christian tradesmen there.

The Christian community in Thyatira has remained one of oldest nearly-continuous churches in the world. Although the old city is ruins, the Orthodox community remained there until 1922 when they were deported. However, they were restored in 1988 and have remained since.

#### **Main Message**

Thyatira had a similar situation to Pergamos—the lure of the Nicolaitan heresy—but whereas the latter was noted for resisting it, the former was giving in. Thus, the message from Christ is resisting false doctrine and cleansing itself from corruption. Instead of compromising with secular and evil pressures, the Church needs to “hold fast” to its integrity and stay faithful to Jesus.

#### **Key Themes**

- Tolerating contaminating influences within the Church (personified by “Jezebel”) can lead everyone into disobedience; such error and perversion must be removed, not accepted
- Divine judgment will fall on false Christians who lead others astray, as well as their impure followers, for they are not of Christ but of Satan
- Jesus will reward His faithful with authority over all secular powers and false ideologies, and give them the gift of the “morning star”

#### **The Depiction of Christ**

*“These things saith the Son of God, who hath his eyes like unto a flame of fire, and his feet are like fine brass”*

QUESTION – What is the meaning of this symbolic title for Christ, and where else in Scripture can we cross reference to decipher its origin?

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QUESTION – What is the significance of Jesus portraying Himself with this title to the church at Thyatira?

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#### **Application Questions**

QUESTION – What does the symbolic morning star mean that Christ gives to the Church, both in this world and in the one to come?

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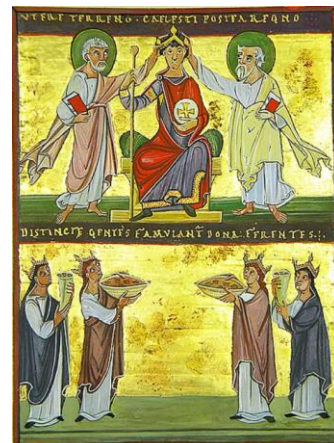
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QUESTION – In sum, what can we learn from the church at Thyatira about what is necessary to cultivate a faithful and healthy church?

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## Fifth Church Lesson: Sardis

### Sardis: Revelation 3:1-6

#### The Sardis Church Background

Christ’s description of the church at Sardis reflected the condition of the city itself. Sardis was an ancient city, once very prosperous and influential but now fallen into decline. It was also very pagan, boasting a temple to the Asian mother-goddess Cybele who was associated with fertility and resurrection.

Just as the Cybelean cult made spiritual claims in only pretense—especially about immortality that only Christianity could really give—so the Sardis church was only giving the appearance of being alive. Although they had visible works for which they might be commended, they had utterly compromised their theology with the paganism without and become *syncretistic*.

The Sardis church seems to have improved by the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. One of its early bishops, Melito, is a canonized saint and was one of the earliest recorded interpreters of the book of Revelation.

#### Main Message

Christ calls Sardis what no church wants to hear—*dead*. The church was declared spiritually dead because their works could not hide their lack of vigilance to the pagan teaching they had allowed into their doctrine. Thus, His main message to them is that they become watchful and strengthen what truth remains among them before everything is lost permanently. Christian life can only exist by being faithful and exclusive.

#### Key Themes

- Remember the original teaching received and hold fast; repent of what they have added to it
- Christ will come as a thief for those who persist in their error (Rev. 16:15; I Thess. 5:2-4; 2 Pet. 3:10)
- He will vindicate the faithful remnant before God

#### The Depiction of Christ

*“These things saith he that hath the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars...”*

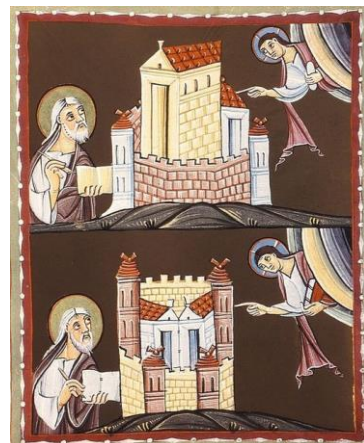
QUESTION – What is the meaning of this symbolic title for Christ, and where else in Scripture can we cross reference to decipher its origin?

QUESTION – What is the significance of Jesus portraying Himself with this title to the church at Sardis?

#### Application Questions

QUESTION – What does the juxtaposition of defiled garments and white garments mean, and how does that relate to names in the “Book of Life”?

QUESTION – In sum, what can we learn from the church at Sardis about what is necessary to cultivate a faithful and healthy church?







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## Sixth Church Lesson: *Philadelphia*

### Philadelphia: Revelation 3:7-13

#### **The Philadelphia Church Background**

Philadelphia was a smaller and newer city than the other six, but the church there was troubled with similar difficulties, especially from the local Jews. Verses 8-9 indicate the Christians had probably been excommunicated from the synagogue for proclaiming Jesus as the Christ.

We know from history that Philadelphia eventually did become a larger and fully Christianized city during the Byzantine period, although little remains of the old city in the present day.

#### **Main Message**

It is similar to that of Smyrna, with noticeable parallels in metaphor, too. Christ primarily emphasizes that, while the church has been excluded from the “synagogue of Satan” their faithfulness will be rewarded by a permanent position in God’s new temple (as a pillar) and citizenship in his city the New Jerusalem.

The main message for the whole Church is that God will vindicate His People, before our persecutors now (*“I will make them to come and worship before thy feet, and to know that I have loved thee”*) and at Christ’s Second Coming (*“new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God”*).

#### **Key Themes**

- *Newness*: Christians inherit not just a *new* city (Kingdom of God), but a *new* identity which will be perfected at Jesus’ return
- “Hold fast” to the doctrine (especially of Christ) and the virtues of His saints
- God will allow a time of testing on the world (spiritual and material), but the Church will be sustained and protected

#### **The Depiction of Christ**

*“These things saith he that is holy, he that is true, he that hath the key of David, he that openeth, and no man shutteth; and shutteth, and no man openeth...”*

QUESTION – What is the meaning of this symbolic title for Christ, and where else in Scripture can we cross reference to decipher its origin?

QUESTION – What is the significance of Jesus portraying Himself with this title to the church at Philadelphia?

#### **Application Questions**

QUESTION – Like that offered to Smyrna, what is the “crown” that is promised to Philadelphia for “holding fast” to what they have?

QUESTION – In sum, what can we learn from the church at Philadelphia about what is necessary to cultivate a faithful and healthy church?





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## Seventh Church Lesson: Laodicea

### Laodicea: Revelation 3:14-22

#### **The Laodicea Church Background**

Laodicea was closest (of the other 6 cities) to Philadelphia and was known as the richest city of the region, thanks to the wool industry, banking, and a medical school. That wealth proved to be become a stumbling block for the church, which we hear in Christ’s message. Laodicea was also located not far from Colossae and, like the church there, it was under the ministry of St. Paul who, as we know from Colossians 4:16 received a letter from the apostle (possibly the epistle to the Ephesians) and was also taught by the letter to the Colossians.

The church at Laodicea was important during the Patristic period. It became a “bishopric” and a regional synod (not an *ecumenical council*) was held there in 363 and published 60 famous canons regulating churchmanship, the canon of Scripture, and liturgical practice among the churches of Asia Minor. Christianity was almost entirely driven from Laodicea during the invasions of 1450.

#### **Main Message**

The church at Laodicea is infamous for being accused by Christ for being “lukewarm” (possibly as a result of gnostic heresy). Like the city itself, the church members were pleased with their material wealth as a sign of their success. However, their pride could not hide a nominal, tepid faith reminiscent of the undrinkable water which flowed into the city. Jesus warns them that He will spew them out if they don’t repent of their conceit for the spiritual wealth He describes as gold and white garments.

#### **Key Themes**

- Instead of apathy, zeal for good works
- Dining with Christ: a Eucharistic foretaste of our heavenly feast
- Victorious Christians will reign with Christ

#### **The Depiction of Christ**

*“These things saith the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God...”*

QUESTION – What is the meaning of this symbolic title for Christ, and where else in Scripture can we cross reference to decipher its origin?

QUESTION – What is the significance of Jesus portraying Himself with this title to the church at Laodicea (possibly influenced by Colossian heresy)?

#### **Application Questions**

QUESTION – What does the “throne” promised to the Laodiceans mean? How does that relate to Jesus on His, and where do we find that in Scripture?

QUESTION – In sum, what can we learn from the church at Laodicea about what is necessary to cultivate a faithful and healthy church?





