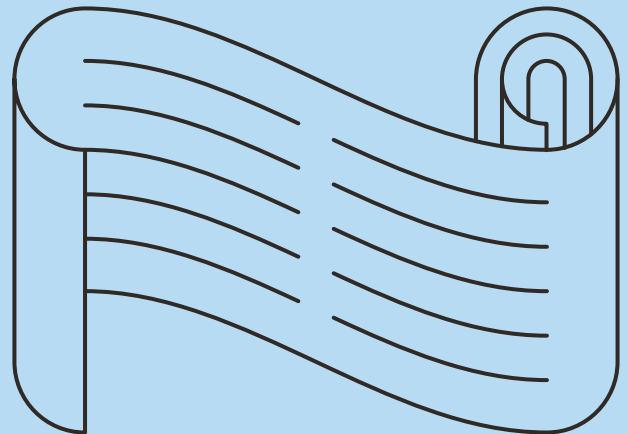
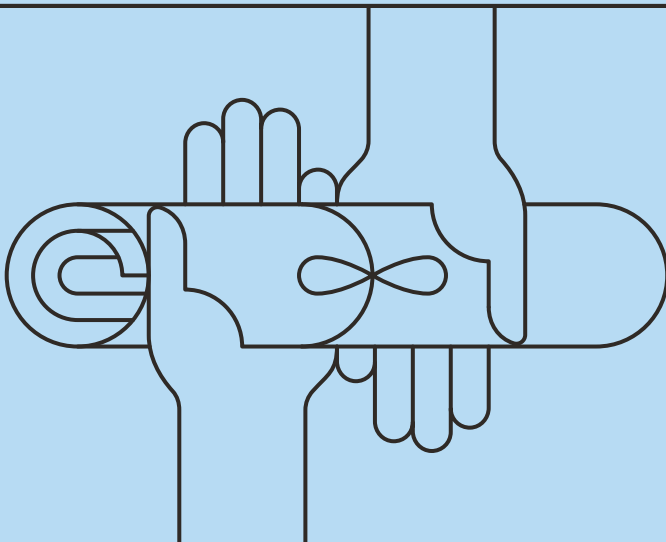
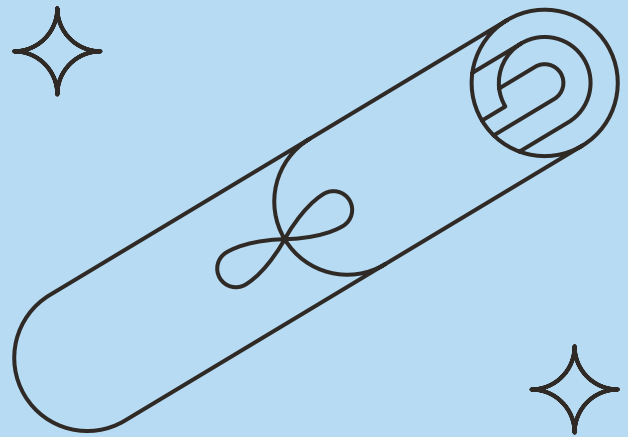


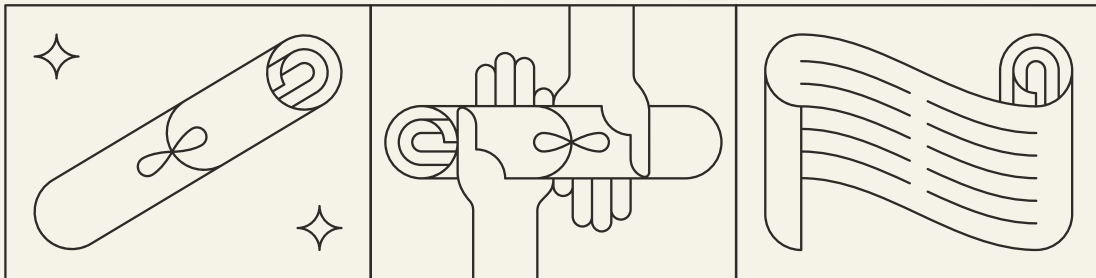
REVELATION

THE HOPE

**THE SEVEN
CHURCHES**

A THREE-WEEK STUDY





“Welcome to our “The Seven Churches” mini-study, taken from our 30-week course on Revelation.

This mini-study is an opportunity for you to study BSF content for yourself. Whether you are intending to try a class or simply do the study on your own, we hope God speaks to you through His Word.

What is BSF?

Bible Study Fellowship is a global community of 450,000 men, women, students, and kids studying God's Word together. Each year, BSF groups study for 30 weeks, either in person or online.

How does the Bible study work?

This sample study includes three lessons. Each lesson takes one week to complete.

To get started:

1. Read and answer the questions for the assigned passage each day.
2. If completing the study in a BSF group, discuss your answers collectively each week.
3. Listen to the weekly teaching on the week's passage (with your group or via the recorded audio lecture).
4. Read the notes with the passage's historical background and life application.

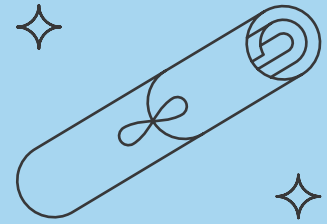
Repeat for each lesson!

How do I join BSF?

If a friend has invited you to join their group, simply attend with them. Otherwise, to find a class in your local area, or to join a BSF Online group, go to join.bsfindernational.org.

We hope you enjoy using this four-fold approach to exploring God's Word in community with others. Thanks for choosing to study with Bible Study Fellowship!

JESUS'S LETTERS TO THE CHURCHES, PART 1



Lesson Questions

Read and answer the questions for the assigned passage each day. If completing the mini-study in a BSF group, answer the questions before the group meets to discuss the answers.

First Day

The notes and lecture fortify the truth of the passage for understanding and application to daily life.

1. What truth in the lecture about Jesus Christ, the Son of Man, impacted you, and why?
2. How did the notes speak into your life's joys or challenges this week?

Second Day: Read Revelation 2:1-7.

Jesus identified Himself and commended the Ephesian church.

3. To the church in Ephesus:
How did Jesus identify Himself, and what did He say He knew?

In what ways did Jesus offer encouragement? What did He hold against them?

What did Jesus say were the consequences for not following His instructions?

What final exhortation did Jesus give?

4. a. From Revelation 1:20, what do the seven stars and seven golden lampstands represent?

b. What action did Jesus take with the lampstands, and how does this encourage you?

5. Which qualities of the Ephesian church do you display, and which would you like to develop?

Third Day: Read Revelation 2:1-7.

Jesus rebuked and warned the Ephesians.

6. How can you discern between true and false teaching? (See also Acts 17:11; Romans 12:2; 1 Corinthians 12:3; and 2 Timothy 3:16.)

7. a. From Matthew 22:36-40, what did Jesus say is the first and greatest commandment? What attitudes or actions might indicate someone has forsaken the first love God commands?

b. In what ways do you express your love for God and others? In what ways might you fall short, like the Ephesians?

8. Explain what Jesus meant by the word “repent.” How might God be calling you to repent?

9. Read Genesis 2:8-9, 15-17; 3:1-24 alongside Revelation 2:7. What do you learn about the Tree of Life, and what hope do you receive from Jesus’s promise in 2:7?

Fourth Day: Read Revelation 2:8-11.

Jesus identified Himself and commended the church in Smyrna.

10. To the church in Smyrna:

How did Jesus describe Himself, and what did He say He knew?

How did Jesus encourage the people? In what ways did He challenge them?

What was Jesus's exhortation to the believers in Smyrna?

11. What do you think Jesus meant when He said the believers in Smyrna were in poverty and yet rich? (See also Matthew 5:3; 6:19-20; and 2 Corinthians 8:9.)

Fifth Day: Read Revelation 2:8-11.

Jesus encouraged the suffering believers in Smyrna.

12. In regard to slander and persecution:
- What did Jesus face, and what should His followers expect? (See also John 15:19-20; 16:1-3; and 2 Timothy 3:12, or share any other Scriptures that come to mind.)
 - Give examples of how Jesus's followers face slander or persecution today.
13. Why did Jesus command Smyrna's believers not to fear suffering? (See also Matthew 10:28-33.)
14. a. How might knowing Jesus Christ equip believers to be faithful in suffering? (Feel free to share Scriptures that come to mind.)
- In what ways have you suffered because of your witness for Christ?

Sixth Day: Review Revelation 2:1-11.

Living for Jesus in a hostile world requires persevering faith.

15. From this week's study, how are you encouraged by Jesus's words and His intimate knowledge of His people?

Next step: Listen to the lecture.

Lecture

Now that you have completed the daily questions, listen to the teaching based on this week's passage. If you are part of a group, you will hear the lecture during your weekly gathering. If you are doing this study on your own, listen to the recorded audio lecture.



There are two ways to listen to this week's audio lecture.

Option 1: Go to bsfinternational.org/trybsf

Option 2: Scan this QR code.

Lecture Notes

Next step: Read the lesson notes.

Lesson 4 Notes

Dig deeper into this week's passage by reading the lesson notes with the passage's historical background and life application.

Revelation 2:1-11

Focus Verse

"Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God."
(Revelation 2:7)

Outline

- Seven Letters to Seven Churches
- Ephesus: Retain First Love of God – Revelation 2:1-7
- Smyrna: Persevere in Suffering – Revelation 2:8-11

Engage

How do you translate the future victory God promises His children into the present strain of daily life? Believers anticipate heaven's joys yet endure earthly suffering. **After documenting his majestic vision of the exalted Christ, John recorded Jesus's down-to-earth messages to seven real churches.** With complete knowledge and customized care, Jesus examined, affirmed, and challenged those who trusted Him while living in a hostile environment.

Heaven's promised joy and security offer believers great encouragement and hope. As we await eternal glory, we stand for the Lord in a fallen and often antagonistic world. John, first-century believers, and people today experience both suffering and God's faithful presence and sustaining grace. **Living for Jesus in a hostile world requires persevering faith.**

◆ Seven Letters to Seven Churches

In Revelation 1:11, Jesus instructed John to record His message for seven churches: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. **The seven letters recorded in Revelation 2–3 open a window into the lives of these seven early churches.**

Many readers mistakenly view Revelation's purpose as simply and solely to give hope for the future. **John's placement of the seven churches in the foreground of the book emphasizes the present value of God's Word and purposes against the backdrop of end-time events.** Revelation holds in view both the "now" and "not yet."

The seven churches each received a specific message. Two of the seven (Smyrna and Philadelphia) received only praise, while two other churches (Sardis and Laodicea) merited mostly rebuke. The remaining three (Ephesus, Pergamum, and Thyatira) read mixed reviews on their spiritual progress. **The individual letters, written to seven specific churches, also speak to a broader audience.**

Together, the seven letters present a group portrait; each church could take in the whole picture as well as look at itself. Jesus repeatedly offered an appeal for *all* who would listen to apply His truth.¹

Various thoughts of prophetic and eschatological significance regarding these seven letters have emerged. A few Revelation scholars have concluded these letters represent the progression of Christ's Church through its history. For example, Ephesus might represent the Church during the apostles' time, with the last-mentioned church of Laodicea depicting the Church just before Jesus returns. Most maintain that these churches embody the commendable and condemnable aspects of churches across the fabric of the Christian community throughout history—past, present, and future. All seven, however, were real churches simultaneously present at a specific point in history.

Integration of the Seven Letters within Revelation

Some interpreters speculate that the origin of the seven letters differs from the rest of the book because fewer symbols and a more straightforward style characterize their writing. However, the descriptions of the resurrected Lord within each letter align with those given of Christ in chapter 1. Additionally, the letters share words and phrases repeated elsewhere in the book, as noted in the table below. **The seven letters to the churches fit smoothly within the whole book of Revelation.**

	First reference	Later references
"the second death"	2:11	20:14
"the morning star"	2:28	22:16
"the book of life"	3:5	13:8; 17:8; 20:12, 15
"the new Jerusalem"	3:12	21:2

Symmetry within the Letters

With little deviation, all seven messages follow the same pattern:

- **Jesus commanded** John to address his letter to the angel of each church.
- **Jesus identified** Himself as the author, adding a description from the vision of the Son of Man in Revelation 1 and other places in Scripture.
- **Jesus encouraged** each church with the statement "I know," attesting to His intimate knowledge of the innermost workings of each church.¹
- **Jesus reprimanded** the church regarding failures.
- **Jesus exhorted** His people to faithfulness.
- **Jesus implored** all to listen to His words—"Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says."
- **Jesus concluded** with a promise to those who are victorious in faith.

1. Lord's omniscience: Amos 4:13; Psalm 11:4-5

1. Hear what the Spirit says: Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 29

The seven letters reflect real situations, call for real repentance, and offer real hope. Christians and churches today face real challenges. **Christians throughout history have found lessons for themselves and their churches in these messages.**

◆ Ephesus: Retain First Love of God – Revelation 2:1-7

The Recipient – 2:1a

Jesus addressed His letters to the angels of each of the seven churches. The Greek word *angeloí* (angels) seems to refer here to angelic beings. Elsewhere in the New Testament, the same word also refers to human messengers.² This term could also designate the chief shepherd or leader of the local church, or perhaps even an emissary bringing John's letter to the church. **What is important is that Jesus's eyes remained focused on His Church.** He knew what each church needed and sent specific messages to offer strength.

Jesus first addressed the church in Ephesus, the nearest of the seven cities to Patmos. Ephesus, with a population of more than 250,000, was the largest and most important city in Asia Minor. Although landlocked today, Ephesus once existed as a major seaport on the Aegean Sea.

Ephesus contained the celebrated Temple of Diana (Artemis), one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. This site made the city a cultural and tourist hub. The apostle Paul ministered in this prosperous city for approximately three years.³ It is thought John made Ephesus the seat of his ministry in his later years. The gospel spread from Ephesus so effectively that all Jews and Greeks living in the province of Asia "heard the word of the Lord."⁴ Threatened by the increasing number of Christians, Ephesian silversmiths rioted for fear of losing income from the sale of idols.⁵ **This city that merged oriental religions and Greek culture desperately needed the good news of Jesus Christ.**

The Sender – 2:1b

Christ identified Himself to the Ephesians as the one "who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands." Stars symbolize ruling authority.⁶ Jesus had earlier explained that the seven stars represented the angels of the churches, and the lampstands signified the churches themselves.⁷ Christ upholds those with authority and responsibility within the church in His strong right hand. No one can take His people away from Him.⁸ Jesus walks among His churches, calling them to shine His purifying light into a dark world.⁹

Words of Praise – 2:2-3, 6

Jesus knew how hard the church at Ephesus worked for the sake of the gospel and commended their perseverance. Jesus also noted they did not "tolerate wicked people," and they measured what they heard against God's Word. **The Ephesian believers had not grown weary, even while enduring hardships because of their commitment to Christ.**

2. Human messengers: Luke 7:27; 9:52; James 2:25

3. Paul's ministry in Ephesus: Acts 19:8-10; 20:17-31

4. Gospel in Asia: Acts 19:10

5. Trouble in Ephesus: Acts 19:23-41

6. Star of Jacob: Numbers 24:17

7. Stars and lampstands: Revelation 1:20

8. Security in Christ: John 10:28

9. Shining light: Matthew 5:14-16; 2 Corinthians 4:6; Philippians 2:15-16

Jesus additionally commended the Ephesian church because they hated the practices of the Nicolaitans. Jesus again mentioned this group in His words to the church in Pergamum.¹⁰ Though little is known about the Nicolaitans, Jesus's words indicate this sect introduced deceptive teaching regarding believers' freedom in Christ. Perhaps the Nicolaitans taught that Christ's victory at the cross freed them to live however they pleased—dangerous for those living in a culture absorbed in idolatry and sexual sin! Jesus's response is startlingly strong: He hated the practices of the Nicolaitans.

Critical Words – 2:4

Despite Jesus's commendation, one serious problem afflicted the church of Ephesus—they had forsaken their first love. What could this mean? When an expert in the Mosaic law once asked Jesus which was the greatest command, Jesus told the man to love the Lord with all his heart, soul, and mind and to love his neighbor as himself.¹¹ Jesus expanded that thought with a new command to love one another as He loved.¹² This great command from Jesus to His people and His church has not changed.

The church in Ephesus had once been a loving church. Paul had expressed thankfulness for their "love for all God's people."¹³ This kind of love only flows out of a deep love for God. Yet somehow this love had deteriorated in the Ephesian church. While they continued to defend truth, the fervency of their original love for God had diminished. **To fight for biblical truth without a love for God and others is to miss the truth entirely.** Love should characterize every church and every believer.

An Exhortation to Faithfulness – 2:5

Jesus exhorted the Ephesians to remember, repent, and redo. How could they forget the sweetness of their former devotion? They needed to recall their earlier days of fervent devotion and love for God. Jesus did not ask them to stir up their own feelings. He commanded them to repent—to turn back to God with a change of mind, will, and direction. He told them to do what they did at first.

This command reached individual believers at Ephesus and spoke to the commitment that should characterize their community. Adopted as God's children, they knew unspeakable blessings.¹⁴ Did they think deeply and continually about God and His grace, His loving redemption in Jesus, and their promised inheritance as His children? Do you?

Failure to love the Lord and one another would mean the removal of the Ephesian church. This was no idle threat. Today there is hardly a trace of the Christian church in this region. Jesus removed the lampstand of Ephesus. The light of this church is gone, and the city lies in ruins. Correct doctrine and hard work alone are never enough. A church without love will die.

An Appeal to Hear – 2:7a

Jesus's call to hear what the Spirit says occurs in His message to Ephesus and in all six remaining letters, speaking to the importance of this appeal. The "ears" spoken of here are not natural ears but a receptivity to accept and apply spiritual truth. When God awakens a believer's spiritual sensitivities, a readiness to receive His message opens within; otherwise, the ears remain unable to hear.¹⁵

10. Nicolaitans in Pergamum: Revelation 2:14-15

11. Greatest commandments: Matthew 22:35-40

12. Love one another: John 13:34-35

13. Love for the saints: Ephesians 1:15

14. Adopted as God's children: Ephesians 1:1-7, 14

15. Uncircumcised ear: Deuteronomy 29:4; Isaiah 50:4-5; Jeremiah 6:10

The Son of God and the Spirit of God work together in perfect unity. Everything the Holy Spirit said to the churches remains vital, transcending time and culture. Jesus explained the work of the Holy Spirit, who would “receive from me what he will make known to you.”¹⁶ The warning in the seven letters to receive the Spirit’s words echoes throughout the ages.

A Promise to the Victorious – 2:7b

Jesus’s final words to the Ephesian church promised “the one who is victorious” would be given “the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.” When sin entered the world, God barred access to this tree in the garden of Eden. Here, Jesus reminds us of the victory He won on the cross—a victory believers share through faith in Him. For all who trust Him for salvation, Jesus removes the awful barriers resulting from sin—death and exclusion from God’s presence.¹⁷ Jesus’s words point to the future He promises His people in the final chapter of Revelation. The Tree of Life again appears in God’s renewed and flourishing kingdom.¹⁸ **Jesus’s victorious people who follow Him in truth and love will enjoy a flourishing, vibrant, productive life forever.**

◆ **Smyrna: Persevere in Suffering – Revelation 2:8-11**

The Recipient – 2:8a

Smyrna, modern-day Izmir, was called the “Ornament of Asia.” About 40 miles (approximately 65 km) north of Ephesus, Smyrna featured a seaport at the mouth of the Hermus River. **This city claimed the poet Homer as a native son and operated as a cultural hub and eventually a center for emperor worship.** Smyrna remained intensely loyal to Rome for at least three centuries.

During Domitian’s reign (AD 81-96), emperor worship became compulsory for every Roman citizen on penalty of death. **Acute suffering for the cause of Christ marks Smyrna’s history.** Polycarp, bishop of the church in Smyrna who once studied with John, refused to sacrifice to Caesar and was burned alive. Elderly at the time of his arrest and known for his good works, the Roman authorities begged Polycarp to renounce Christ and escape execution. He famously replied, “86 years have I served Christ, and He has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?”

The Sender – 2:8b

To Smyrna, Jesus identified Himself as “the First and the Last, who died and came to life again.” How better to identify Himself to a church commanded to worship the emperor or die? Jesus, the source of all things, by whom and for whom all things were created, stood with the church at Smyrna. The life and death of each church member at Smyrna depended not on human enemies but on Jesus Christ, the one who overcame death and lives forever.

Christ’s servants need not fear those who can kill only the body.¹⁹ Jesus expressed care and compassion and gave much-needed courage to the persecuted believers in Smyrna. **The Lord Jesus overcame death not only for Himself but also on behalf of His people.**

16. **Spiritual knowledge:** John 16:14-15

17. **Sin and the Tree of Life:** Genesis 3

18. **Promise of the Tree of Life:** Revelation 22:2

19. **Do not fear:** Matthew 10:28

Words of Praise – 2:9

Jesus knows absolutely everything. **The Lord knew about every attack on every believer in Smyrna.** Their afflictions came from all sides. Jews and Romans alike persecuted God's people. A wealthy city, Smyrna imposed economic sanctions on those who followed Christ, leaving them impoverished. Nevertheless, the poor believers in Smyrna were counted rich by Jesus. He reminded them of the lasting, better riches of God's grace and their true treasure in heaven.²⁰

Jesus knew about the slander these believers endured from those who claimed to be Jews. Not one injurious word escaped His notice. Though these enemies claimed to be children of Abraham, Jesus called them a "synagogue of Satan" because of their antagonism against the church. At first Rome regarded Christians as part of Judaism and exempted them from the requirement to worship the emperor. As more Gentiles came to faith, Christians lost this protection. No doubt, the Jewish adversaries stimulated the unbelieving Romans against Christ's church.

An Exhortation to Faithfulness – 2:10

Our Lord does not promise His people they will avoid suffering for His name. In fact, many Scriptures predict just the opposite.²¹ Jesus promised the church at Smyrna that the devil would put some of them in prison to test them. Even though persecution came from the hands of flesh-and-blood rulers and judges, Satan used the persecutors as mere tools and instruments. The devil is the primary source of assaults against believers.²²

Jesus said those in Smyrna would suffer persecution for 10 days. Some interpret the 10 days as 10 persecutions the Church endured during 300 years of conflict with Rome. Others view the 10 days as 10 literal days of persecution. Another view explains the 10 days as a shortened or divinely limited time of persecution. Jesus Christ, who died and came to life again, told the believers to "be faithful, even to the point of death."

An Appeal to Hear – 2:11a

Jesus repeated His command, "Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches." Jesus called His people in Smyrna to listen with spiritual ears and obedient hearts. This call to hear and receive truth extends to all churches across the ages.

Promise to the Victorious – 2:11b

The blood of martyrs has marked the Church since its birth. Many of Jesus's followers have given up their lives in obedience to Him. **Jesus promised faithful believers in Smyrna the "victor's crown" or "crown of life."** Because a circle of buildings atop one of its hills resembled a crown, crowns were a symbol of Smyrna. Its coins depicted a goddess crowned with a wreath like one worn by a victorious athlete. The Greeks and Romans gave crowns in the same way medals are given to courageous soldiers or triumphant athletes today.

Death does not have the final victory over any Christian.²³ Jesus promised that those who overcome will not be subject to the "second death." Later in Revelation, John defined the second death as

20. **Heavenly treasure:** Matthew 6:20; 19:21; Luke 12:21

21. **Suffering for faith:** Matthew 10:16-31; Luke 9:23; John 16:2, 33; Acts 9:16

22. **The devil our adversary:** John 10:10; 1 Peter 5:8

23. **Crown of life:** James 1:12

God's Redeemed People

The Doctrine of the Church

Revelation 2–3 records seven letters to churches established in Asia Minor. These messages point to truth that transcends these individual churches. **The company of God's redeemed people make up Christ's universal Church, which He promised to build.**¹ Jesus Christ Himself is the head of His Church, also called the body of Christ,² which stretches across human history. All who trust Jesus in saving faith are a part of Christ's universal Church.

Not all members of a local church belong to Christ's true Church. Only those with genuine, living faith in Christ are truly His. Jesus knows who belongs to Him and who does not.³ **The Lord plants believers within a living body—a family of believers called to grow and serve together.** Faith in Christ overcomes typical human barriers, uniting God's diverse people to take the gospel to the world.

To fail to recognize and benefit from the support, accountability, and unity of Christ's Church means to miss out on life's deepest relationships and greatest blessings. God did not intend His people to survive a hostile world on their own. **United by the Holy Spirit and sharing Christ's mission, Christians find amazing solidarity with one another as they love Jesus and seek to live for Him.**

How much do you appreciate the benefits of being a part of Christ's Church? God intends for us to grow in dependence on Him and one another. Whether God's people irritate or bless us, the Holy Spirit's sanctifying work in us will include other believers. One day in heaven, people from every nation, language, and tribe will bow before Jesus in unified worship. **God offers us a slice of heaven's glory as we share fellowship with His children—those who are a part of His enduring, triumphant Church.** The Holy Spirit indwells God's people, and the community of the Church unites them with eternal values in view.

1. **Christ builds His Church:** Matthew 16:18

2. **Body of Christ:** 1 Corinthians 12:27; Ephesians 3:6; 4:1-16; Colossians 3:15

3. **Jesus knows His own:** Matthew 25:31-46; John 10:1-30

being cast into the lake of fire.²⁴ The first death, physical death, does not pose humanity's most serious threat. The second death results in eternal punishment. No greater tragedy exists. All who believe in Jesus await only the first death and experience never-ending life in God's presence forever. Jesus's words filled the suffering believers in Smyrna with enduring hope. **Living for Jesus in a hostile world requires persevering faith.**

◆ Take to Heart

Hold Fast

Through John, Jesus delivered timely messages to seven real churches in Asia, and those truths continue to speak to God's people today. He addressed specific issues confronting each church,

24. **Lake of fire:** Revelation 20:14

offering targeted commendation, correction, and challenge. The messages Jesus spoke to these churches provide the backdrop for the rest of the book of Revelation.

Jesus's first message addressed the church in Ephesus, who worked hard for His cause, upheld truth, and confronted false teaching. **Jesus commended the Ephesians' perseverance but called them to repent and rekindle the love they had at the beginning.** The Ephesians clung to truth but let their love for God and others wane. Jesus warned that the church would be removed if they did not repent but challenged them to victory by hearing and responding to His words.

Jesus's strengthening words to the persecuted church at Smyrna brought commendation and encouragement without correction. Though they were impoverished by their enemies, Jesus declared the believers were spiritually rich. Jesus did not promise immediate relief but instead predicted intensifying suffering at the hands of their enemies. He called the church in Smyrna to faithfulness, even unto death, and promised eternal victory death could not steal away.

Apply It

Jesus remains actively involved in the lives of His people. He knows how to encourage and correct believers perfectly. The Lord knows when we are complacent and half-hearted or faithful and steadfastly persevering. He speaks through His Word, brings comfort and understanding through His Spirit, and offers hope that cannot be crushed by Satan's attacks. The world paints Christianity as a lost cause and an antiquated coping mechanism. Not so! The Lord of eternity—the First and the Last, who died and came to life again—will not be stopped. The ultimate victory of His people and His cause cannot be overcome by persecution, slander, or murder. How real is Jesus to you? What difficult situation invites you to persevere steadfastly with your eyes on your conquering Savior? **Jesus is stronger than anything that weakens you.** Whatever you face, He knows, He cares, and He is at work.

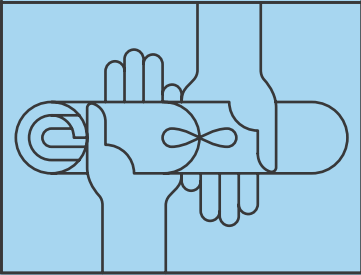
What keeps the flame of your commitment to God burning within your heart? Life has a way of stealing our passion and focus away from the Savior who loves us. The church in Ephesus boldly defended sound doctrine but lagged in love for God and others. What causes us to forget all God has done or become complacent regarding the wonder of our salvation? **It is possible to love and defend the truth and yet fail to operate out of a humble heart dominated by love.** Do you love what you learn from the Bible so that you love God and people? As a Christ follower committed to studying God's Word, ask God to protect you from cold adherence to truth and to awaken irrepressible love within your heart. How will you hear God's call to repent and return to your first love this week? Do you have "ears to hear"?

We often wrongly expect following Christ to be easy. Does unexpected difficulty ever cause you to question God or His ways? The oppressed church at Smyrna refused to be crushed under overpowering persecution.²⁵ Has your commitment to God's Word caused you to be labeled as intolerant, narrow-minded, arrogant, or even bigoted? How is your suffering causing you to cling to the hope found in Jesus? Do you pray for suffering believers around the world? If you are being pressured or persecuted for loyalty to Jesus right now, how has He encouraged you with these letters? In His love, "know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope."²⁶ As the end draws near, God's people will face intensifying opposition and persecution. **May Jesus's commendation matter more to us than this world's approval!**

25. **Not crushed:** 2 Corinthians 4:7-9

26. **Fruit of suffering:** Romans 5:3-4

JESUS'S LETTERS TO THE CHURCHES, PART 2



Lesson Questions

First Day: Read Lesson 4 Notes.

The notes and lecture fortify the truth of the passage for understanding and application to daily life.

1. How did the lecture convict or encourage you as the Lord addressed the churches in Ephesus and Smyrna?
2. From the notes, how do the challenges faced by the early churches relate to churches today?

Second Day: Read Revelation 2:12-17.

The Lord addressed the church in Pergamum.

3. What positive attributes of the church in Pergamum did the Lord commend?
4.
 - a. How did Balaam's teaching lead some of God's people astray? (For more background information, see Numbers 22–25; 31:16.)
 - b. What weapon did Jesus say He would use to fight against wrong teaching, and what does His weapon represent? (See also Ephesians 6:17; 2 Timothy 3:16-17; and Hebrews 4:12.)

c. How might God's Word expose wrong thinking or behavior in your life? Give examples.

5. What rewards did Jesus promise to the victorious, and how does each impact you today? (See also Exodus 16:34; 28:21; Isaiah 65:15; John 6:35; and 1 Peter 2:5 or other Scripture references you find.)

Third Day: Read Revelation 2:18-23.

The Lord addressed the church in Thyatira.

6. What positive attributes of the church in Thyatira did the Lord commend?
7. a. What negative similarities existed between the churches of Pergamum and Thyatira?
- b. The false teacher here was identified, either symbolically or literally, as Jezebel. Read 1 Kings 16:29-33; 19:1-2; 21:1-28; and 2 Kings 9:30-37, along with any other references you find in the Bible to the name Jezebel, and describe her character.
- c. In the Revelation passage, what would be the result of this false teacher's failure to repent of sin?
8. What do you learn about Jesus when you compare verses 19 and 23? How does this challenge or comfort you?

Fourth Day: Read Revelation 2:24-29.

The Lord encourages His followers to live in obedience.

9. How did Jesus commend and encourage believers in Thyatira regarding what to hold on to? How will you hold on to the truth until Jesus comes?

10. a. What is Jesus's will for believers, and how does He reward those who do His will? Share any verses that support your answer.
- b. How do the promises in verses 26-29 motivate you to follow Jesus today?
(See also Matthew 28:18-20; John 14:23; and 1 Corinthians 6:2-3.)

Fifth Day: Read Revelation 3:1-6.

The Lord addressed the church at Sardis.

11. a. What did Jesus know about the church at Sardis, and what did He command them to do?
- b. How do these verses apply to your life?
12. To what do the clean, white clothes in verses 4-5 refer? How do these promises assure or encourage you? (See also Daniel 12:3; Matthew 13:43; Romans 13:14; Jude 23; and Revelation 19:8.)

Sixth Day: Review Revelation 2:12-3:6.

Jesus awakens sinners to repent from sin and live for Him.

13. What have you learned about God in this week's study?

Next step: Listen to the lecture.

Lesson 5 Notes

Revelation 2:12–3:6

Focus Verse

“The one who is victorious will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life, but will acknowledge that name before my Father and his angels.” (Revelation 3:5)

Outline

- Pergamum: Resist False Teaching – Revelation 2:12-17
- Thyatira: Reject Deceitful Leaders – Revelation 2:18-29
- Sardis: Reawaken and Repent – Revelation 3:1-6

Engage

Most people do not enjoy being evaluated. We often face the review of our work or behavior with apprehension. Who would not prefer to be affirmed rather than corrected? We may portray ourselves as stronger and wiser than we really are, deluding others and even ourselves. However, the Lord’s absolute knowledge and penetrating judgment shatter our pretenses.

Jesus commits Himself to the spiritual vitality of His people. He calls individual believers and His unified Church to pursue purity and uphold His truth wholeheartedly.

The churches at Pergamum, Thyatira, and Sardis had turned from false religion to Christ. However, friends and family, the culture around them, and their own past practices tempted them to dangerous compromises and deadly complacency. Deceitful teaching posed a menacing threat to people Jesus Christ had liberated from sin’s tyranny. Jesus’s letters called them to renewed urgency to live for Him—to grasp His majesty, power, and matchless love. Jesus issued a call to repentance and promised His transforming power on their behalf. The same is true today. **Jesus awakens sinners to repent from sin and live for Him.**

◆ Pergamum: Resist False Teaching – Revelation 2:12-17

The Recipient – 2:12a

Contradiction characterized the church of Pergamum. Though the people maintained their stand for Jesus Christ, they tolerated and even embraced wrong teaching about Him.

Pergamum was an inland city about 65 miles (105 km) north of Smyrna in the fertile valley of the Caicus River. The wealthy city boasted a library second only to the library in Alexandria. Pergamum’s library contained an estimated 200,000 volumes, many of which were written on costly sheepskin parchment, which takes its name from Pergamum. People from throughout Asia flocked to this city,

renowned for its medical knowledge and the temple of Asclepius, the god of medicine and healing. **Three temples dedicated to the emperor made the city the center for emperor worship in Asia Minor.** Pergamum also housed temples to Dionysus and Athena and an altar to Zeus that was 120 feet wide, 112 feet deep, and 40 feet high (36 x 34 x 12 meters).

The Sender – 2:12b

Christ described Himself as having “the sharp, double-edged sword.”¹ The Roman proconsul over the region resided in Pergamum and had the right to exercise capital punishment. The sword symbolized his complete sovereignty over this and other matters. Therefore, Christ’s words reminded Pergamum’s believers that they lived under Christ’s authority, whose sword is the Word coming from His mouth, even while also under Roman rule. Rome’s glory would pass away, but Jesus reigns forever.

Words of Praise – 2:13

Jesus knew where and how these Christians lived—“where Satan has his throne.” **Hostility and antagonism toward Christians characterized Pergamum, a stronghold of idolatry.** Why did Jesus refer to the city as the location of Satan’s throne? We cannot know for certain, but Pergamum had more than enough representatives of evil and Satan’s power to cause alarm. The acropolis of the city contained temples to many deities. The emperor’s cult, the altar to Zeus, and the temple of Asclepius—the alleged healing center symbolized by a snake—combined to make Pergamum a place that spelled trouble for any believer.

This church did not renounce their faith in the Lord. Jesus even mentioned a believer named Antipas, who had been martyred for his “faithful witness.” Antipas’s name means “against all.” This courageous believer’s daring stand against all the evil in that city resulted in his earthly death and eternal glory.

Critical Words – 2:14-15

Jesus confronted the unity-severing doctrinal division within the church of Pergamum. Some aligned with the distorted teaching of Balaam or the Nicolaitans. The names associated with both heretical groups mean approximately the same thing, “victor or destroyer of the people,” which may mean the two groups were related.

Balaam appeared as a false prophet during Moses’s day.² He advised Moab’s King Balak to seduce the Israelites into idolatry through intermarriage with Moabite women. This cunning plan invited God’s judgment against Israel.³ **False teachers at Pergamum apparently copied Balaam’s deceptive methods, leading some in the church to eat food sacrificed to idols and commit sexual immorality.**

Most often the meat sold in the public markets was ritually slaughtered and dedicated to the Roman gods. This posed a problem for the church. Paul addressed this, advising believers that eating such meat was permissible if doing so did not harm the faith of the less mature.⁴ However, by the time John recorded Revelation, the risks of this practice had escalated. **The Church father Irenaeus wrote that people in the church not only ate meat from idol sacrifices but often participated in celebration**

1. **Sword:** Ephesians 6:17; Hebrews 4:12; Revelation 1:16

2. **Balaam:** Numbers 22–25

3. **God’s judgment:** Numbers 31:16

4. **Food to idols:** 1 Corinthians 8–10

festivals with unbelievers. This behavior proved dangerous, especially because such festivals often included sexual immorality.⁵

Jesus reprimanded this church because they failed to exercise discernment and authority over the teaching in their church. They allowed false teaching to continue. In the short term, compromise might make life easier, but the Lord calls His Church and each Christian to take the long-term view. You cannot honor Jesus Christ and compromise His Word.

Call to Repent – 2:16

Jesus called the church in Pergamum to repent. If they failed to do so, the Lord would fight against them “with the sword of my mouth.” This is Jesus’s declaration of war against false doctrine with the Word of God. When Jesus confronted some within the church, the whole church was likewise indicted. When both the dross and the gold are put into the furnace, the dross burns off, but the gold comes out purified. The faithful may be separated from sin, but rarely are they exempted from the suffering sin brings.

An Appeal to Hear – 2:17a

Jesus commands all who hear the Spirit’s voice to respond. He again appeals: “Whoever has ears, let them hear.”

Promise to the Victorious – 2:17b

The spiritual blessings God promises His people outshine anything this world can offer. **Jesus promises three things to those who are victorious:**

- **Hidden manna:** Moses put a jar of manna⁶ into the ark of the covenant. God faithfully provided the wilderness-wandering Israelites daily bread for 40 years. Jesus’s “hidden manna” represents what He gives believers—the spiritual nourishment the world cannot see. God would strengthen those who refused the food of idolatrous festivals as they took hold of Jesus by faith. **Those who come to Jesus, the Bread of Life, will never go hungry.** He gives believers life—now and eternally.⁷
- **White stone:** In John’s day, jurors voted with white stones to free a person accused of a crime. White stones also served as entrance tickets to plays and banquets. **In Christ, God frees believers from condemnation for our crimes against Him.** He declares believers righteous in Christ and freely opens the door to His kingdom. Believers in Jesus Christ will also enter the Lord’s great celebration when He returns.⁸
- **New name:** Precious white marble was often used for inscriptions in the ancient world. **In Christ, believers receive a new name reserved for the faithful, signifying their new character and status before the Lord.** The stone is colored white as a symbol of victory and purity.

Jesus offered the believers at Pergamum great blessings if they heard and responded to His words. **These heavenly gifts belong to those who truly believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and live by faith.** Nothing matters more.

5. **Sexual immorality:** Acts 15:20; Revelation 2:20-22

6. **Manna:** Exodus 16:33-34; Hebrews 9:4

7. **Bread of Life:** John 6:47-58

8. **Wedding banquet:** Matthew 22:1-14; Revelation 19:9

Turning Away from Sin

The Doctrine of Repentance

Faith and repentance go hand in hand. To turn to Christ, we must first recognize the gravity of our sinfulness and seek the hope and healing only Jesus can give. More than saying “I’m sorry” or mourning sin’s painful consequences, repentance involves turning away from sin to deliberately yield to God’s path of righteousness. **God’s kindness leads sinners to repentance.**¹ The Holy Spirit awakens a response to sin that transforms our minds, emotions, and will. Repentance comes as we accept God’s gracious invitation to turn to Him and leave our destructive ways behind.

Responding to the Holy Spirit’s conviction means recognizing our sinfulness and coming to Christ for salvation.² A believer’s path of spiritual growth also involves ongoing repentance, as the Lord renews and transforms our minds.³ The Holy Spirit reveals the specific ways we sin against God through our thoughts, words, actions, and appetites. When we confess our sin, we grow to love and reflect Jesus more.⁴ **Repentance is not a painful process to avoid but God’s gracious invitation to embrace.**

When we fail to repent and surrender to Jesus Christ for our salvation, sin’s escalating damage and diminishing returns await us. Failure to recognize the infinite gap between God’s holiness and our sinfulness leads to wrong thinking about God and ourselves. Without the restoration and forgiveness that repentance and faith in Jesus bring, God’s wrath and judgment cannot be avoided. As believers, when we fail to regularly repent of sin, though our salvation remains secure, we fail to enjoy the full benefits of spiritual growth and walking with Christ.

God compassionately made a way to deliver us from sin’s slavery and condemnation. Through Christ and His atoning sacrifice, God bridges the gap between our sin and His righteousness. In Christ, He made our only way across the great divide—from sin and death to new life and an intimate and eternal relationship with our perfect and holy God. He longs for us to repent and turn to Him for hope and wholeness. Repentance brings the assurance of God’s love and forgiveness. In Christ, we find the peace our soul craves. **Repentance is a gift offered to sinners by a compassionate God.**

1. **God’s kindness in repentance:** Romans 2:4

2. **Holy Spirit’s conviction regarding salvation:** John 16:7-11; 1 John 1:9

3. **Transformation:** Romans 12:1-2; Galatians 5:16-26

4. **Growth through turning from sin:** Colossians 3:1-17

◆ Thyatira: Reject Deceitful Leaders – Revelation 2:18-29

The Recipient – 2:18a

Located 35 miles (56 km) east of Pergamum, Thyatira was not considered a great city in its day. It was known for producing wool and textiles. The city’s trade guilds doubled as social and religious clubs. When God called the apostle Paul to Macedonia, Lydia, a fabric trader from Thyatira, was the

first person from there to open her heart to the gospel.⁹ The church planted in this industrial city received a message directly from Jesus.

The Sender – 2:18b

Jesus, the Son of God, appeared here with eyes “like blazing fire” and feet “like burnished bronze.” **Jesus’s strong and perfectly holy words reflect His character and power.**

Words of Praise – 2:19

Jesus knew every act of love, faith, service, and perseverance within the church at Thyatira. In contrast to the Ephesian church that abandoned its first love, this maturing church was doing more than they had done at first. Their service expressed their inner love for God and His people, reflecting Jesus’s selfless love.

Critical Words – 2:20-23

Thyatira had allowed a false prophet, symbolically named Jezebel, to mislead the church. This self-acclaimed “prophet” taught her followers to indulge in sexual immorality and eat food sacrificed to idols. In that sense, she resembled the ancient Jezebel, wife of the Israelite King Ahab, who promoted Baal worship.¹⁰

This Jezebel of Thyatira promised Christians freedom from God’s moral law and accommodated sinful cultural practices. Trade guilds claimed patron gods, allowing business meetings to include idol worship and sexual immorality. False religion and perverse practices threatened to entrap Christians who failed to look to Christ and grasp God’s holiness.

Like today, God’s standards for sexual purity differed greatly from those accepted by society at large. One popular first-century belief held that because only the spirit mattered, the body’s actions were unimportant. Possibly, Jezebel taught her followers they could commit sexual immorality and eat food sacrificed to idols because nothing involving the body could injure the spirit. Today, many people consider sexual relations outside of a marriage between a man and a woman acceptable. However, God clearly declares these actions sinful. This sacred union is reserved for a husband and wife, whose marriage reflects Jesus’s relationship with the Church, His people.¹¹

Because Jezebel refused to repent, the Lord would “cast her on a bed of suffering.” This phrase may involve double meaning: if she liked the bed of immorality so much, Christ would throw her on a bed—a sickbed! Jesus issued a call for the church to repent. But if they did not, death would come to all who followed Jezebel’s folly. This would alert all the churches that the Lord Himself discerns the internal state of every human heart and judges the outward deeds that reveal that reality.

God is patient, but He does not tolerate sin forever. The Lord gives people time to repent, but His waiting does not mean that He accepts sin.¹² The Lord is sovereign and committed to His people’s purity in belief and behavior. If you are caught in sin, ask God to give you the desire to obey Him. Believe He will. Repent. Encourage those around you to repent. Then praise Him for His mercy.

9. **Lydia:** Acts 16:13-15

10. **Baal worship:** 1 Kings 18:19, 22

11. **Sexual relations:** Genesis 2:24; Malachi 2:14-15; Matthew 19:4-6; Mark 10:6-8; Romans 7:2; 1 Corinthians 7:2, 39; Ephesians 5:31-32

12. **God’s patience:** 2 Peter 3:8-12

Exhortation to Be Faithful – 2:24-25

Despite Jezebel, many in Thyatira remained loyal to Jesus and the gospel. God always preserves His redeemed people. **No matter how hostile the environment, the Lord enables believers to remain faithful and look to Him.**

Jesus recognized and encouraged the faithful who had “not learned Satan’s so-called deep secrets.” This might refer to a very early form of Gnosticism, a false philosophy that promised special knowledge of spiritual mysteries. **Although the depths of God are unsearchable, Jesus openly reveals His truth through His Word and His Spirit.** He encourages His faithful people to hold on to faith, love, and the truth until His return.

Promise to the Victorious – 2:26-28

God gave His Son power and authority to rule the nations with a rod or scepter of iron.¹³ **The Lord’s ultimate victory over those who steadfastly oppose Him will be severe.** He “will dash them to pieces like pottery.” Those who refuse Jesus await His just judgment.

To the victorious, Jesus also promises the morning star. Fittingly, a star in the east announced Jesus’s birth.¹⁴ Both stars and the scepter symbolize authority and royalty.¹⁵ Later in Revelation, Jesus reveals He is the Morning Star.¹⁶ Jesus promises to give His faithful followers nothing less than Himself. **Ultimately, all glory in the world belongs to Jesus Christ and His Church.**

An Appeal to Hear – 2:29

Those who follow Jesus will reign with Him when He returns.¹⁷ Like Christ Himself, His Word is a rock to stand upon! All other ground is shifting sand.

◆ Sardis: Reawaken and Repent – Revelation 3:1-6

The Recipient – 3:1a

The church in Sardis existed in a city steeped in materialism. Sardis sat around 30 miles (48 km) southeast of Thyatira on the military road through the Hermus River valley. Because of the gold in the region, the wealthy city of Sardis boasted a lucrative wool industry and two famous kings: Gyges and Croesus. The Sardis of John’s day was a shadow of its glorious past. **Love for luxury led to moral decay.**

The Sender – 3:1b

Jesus repeated that He “holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.”¹⁸ This phrase, repeated from 1:4 and difficult to interpret, likely symbolizes the Holy Spirit in His perfection—the seven-fold Spirit. **Accordingly, Christ holds the seven churches (the seven stars) and unites them with the Spirit of God (the seven spirits) sent to those churches.** The Holy Spirit works in perfect unity with the Father and the Son.

13. **Mighty scepter:** Psalms 2:9; 110:2; Revelation 12:5; 19:15

14. **Star at Jesus’s birth:** Matthew 2:1-2

15. **Star and scepter:** Numbers 24:17

16. **Morning Star:** Revelation 22:16

17. **Reign with Christ:** Revelation 20:4; 22:5; Daniel 7:22, 27; Matthew 19:28; 1 Corinthians 6:2

18. **Seven spirits, stars:** Revelation 1:4, 16

Critical Words – 3:1c

Jesus knew the truth about the church at Sardis—their deeds and reputation. **Despite their claim to be alive, Jesus declared them dead.** They falsely promoted themselves as a well-regarded and successful church while paralyzed by spiritual deadness and lethargy. God’s verdict overrules human opinion.

Call to Repent – 3:2-3

Complacency caused the church at Sardis to sacrifice close identity with Christ. Jesus issued a straightforward command: “Wake up!” He urged the weakened church to strengthen their remaining life and complete the deeds they had started. **If they did not remember the apostles’ teaching, hold fast to it, and repent, this church would not survive.**

Words of Praise – 3:4

By God’s grace, a few in this church remained faithful to the Lord and had not “soiled their clothes.” This soiling or staining symbolized the defilement of a pagan lifestyle that compromised identity with the Lord.¹⁹ **The faithful among them would be counted worthy to walk with Christ dressed in white robes—another symbol of purity and holiness.**²⁰

Promise to the Victorious – 3:5

- **They will walk with Jesus dressed in white.** This repeats the promise in 3:4. Believers will be clothed with light as a garment, shining like the sun.²¹
- **God will never blot their names out of the Book of Life.** In ancient days, a city register held the names of residents, which were erased upon their death or for crimes committed against the city. God also keeps records. His “book of life”²² contains the names of people like the few faithful Sardians. He will “never drive away” those who come to Him²³ nor blot out their names from His Book of Life.
- **Jesus will acknowledge the names of all who trust in Him before God the Father and His angels.**²⁴

An Appeal to Hear – 3:6

Jesus insists all hear the Spirit’s call to repentance and life. The Holy Spirit, with His life-giving power, calls all to hear the gospel and come from death into life. Allow these letters to examine and encourage you as they did the seven churches. **Jesus awakens sinners to repent from sin and live for Him.**

◆ Take to Heart

Hold Fast

In John’s vision, Jesus walked among seven churches and delivered customized messages to examine, commend, confront, and strengthen the faith of believers in each location. These

19. Corrupted garments: Jude 23

20. White clothing: Daniel 7:9; Matthew 28:3; Luke 9:29

21. Shine: Daniel 12:3; Matthew 13:43

22. Book of Life: Exodus 32:32-33; Psalm 69:28; Isaiah 4:3

23. Never drive away: John 6:37

24. Acknowledged: Matthew 10:32-33; Luke 12:8-9

messages resonate with God's people and churches today. Jesus calls His people to faith and righteousness and offers hope to the repentant.

The city of Pergamum was a stronghold of evil and idolatry. **Though many believers suffered for their faith, the church at Pergamum wrongly tolerated false teaching.** Jesus called them to repent and offered hope to those who triumphed in His name.

The church at Thyatira became complacent and tolerated teaching that promoted immorality.

Engulfed in a pagan culture, the faithful among Jesus's people were called by Him to reject false teaching before His judgment fell and the church ceased to exist.

The church at Sardis pretended to be alive, but Jesus proclaimed they were dead. Jesus called them to "wake up!" and repent. He encouraged the faithful few to fortify the remaining healthy roots in the church and promised they would walk with Jesus, clothed in His righteousness.

Apply It

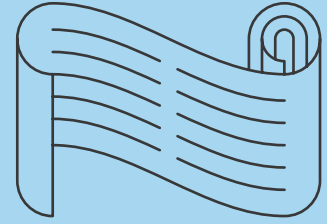
Jesus knows the truth about everything. He cannot be fooled by an external façade that hides the internal reality. As Jesus examined each church, He knew what was strong or weak. He identified compromise and complacency. He perceived when the world's pressure contaminated the purity of His people. Jesus loves His people and does not ignore sin and its carnage in their lives. He calls out sin and offers an invitation to repentance and wholeness. He leads us to reject deadly compromise. He brings God's fire to a cold heart. He rekindles our love and reignites our passion for His cause.

Jesus strengthens us when we are weak to show us that He is strong. Do you recognize God's intimate knowledge of your heart? How will you welcome His strengthening correction?

How can believers remain wholly committed to Christ while living in a world that promotes sin and seeks their allegiance? The fluctuating tide of human ideology regularly begs us to question what we believe. Popular but unbiblical thinking can draw us away from the truth. The pursuit of wealth and sexual freedom the world offers tempts us in many ways. However, Jesus's followers choose to live under His authority and within the protection of His loving boundaries. No supposed pleasure compares with the joy and freedom Christ brings. While this is true, the pressure to conform to the world's standards meets us at every turn. Who influences you in a way that defies God's Word? What sin do you justify because God's way seems too hard? With loving authority, Jesus calls His children to live for Him. **Until believers reach heaven, the Lord promises to provide what they need to stand for Christ.** The world cannot steal what matters most, though it tries. How is God calling you to repent from sin, hold fast to truth, and experience His victory?

Jesus's messages to the seven churches emphasize the corporate identity and unity of His people. God brings us together to stand for Him. Committed to His Word, God's people strive together for purity, integrity, and purpose as we represent Christ to the world. How can you faithfully support your church? Though we live different lives than the believers in Pergamum, Thyatira, or Sardis, people are the same. Jesus knows the truth about churches and individual Christians who appear stable, busy, and productive but are distant from Him. False teaching and worldliness still tempt believers today. Compromise with the world's principles, complacency, pride, and self-absorption still challenge God's people. Does Jesus's approval matter more to you than anything this world offers? **Jesus knows, strengthens, and will reward each one who leans on Him and stands firm.**

JESUS'S LETTERS TO THE CHURCHES, PART 3



Lesson Questions

First Day: Read Lesson 5 Notes.

The notes and lecture fortify the truth of the passage for understanding and application to daily life.

1. In what ways did the lecture inspire you to hold fast to the truth and promises of God's Word?
2. What commendations and warnings did you take to heart when reading the notes?

Second Day: Read Revelation 3:7-10.

Jesus addressed the church in Philadelphia.

3. a. What do the following terms that describe Jesus mean? (Feel free to use other Bible passages for your answers, in addition to those listed.)

Holy (Hebrews 7:26)

True (1 John 5:20)

Holds the key of David (Isaiah 22:22; Matthew 16:19)

- b. What do the key and the door that only Jesus control represent? (See also Revelation 1:18.)

4. For what did Jesus commend the church at Philadelphia? What do these verses infer the believers in Philadelphia were experiencing?

5. Who are those “who are of the synagogue of Satan”? (Compare Revelation 2:9 with 3:9; see also John 8:31-47.)

6. How will you stand for truth in a culture hostile to the Lord Jesus Christ and His people?

Third Day: Read Revelation 3:11-13.

Jesus closed His address to the Philadelphian church with encouragement.

7.
 - a. From verse 11, what does a believer have to hold on to? What holds you secure as you await Jesus’s promised return to earth?

 - b. What is the “crown” no one can take away? (See also 1 Corinthians 9:25; 2 Timothy 4:8; James 1:12; Revelation 2:10; or other Bible passages.)

8.
 - a. What promises did the Lord give to those who are victorious, and what does each mean?

 - b. Which promise means the most to you?

 - c. What do you learn about Jesus in 3:7-13 that gives you confidence when you have little strength?

Fourth Day: Read Revelation 3:14-18.

Jesus addressed the church in Laodicea.

9. What stands out to you from the descriptions of Jesus in verse 14?

10. What assessment did Jesus give the church at Laodicea, and what was His reaction to them?

11. a. Compare what the Laodiceans said about themselves to what Jesus said about them.

- b. What are the spiritual consequences of self-deception?

- c. What helps to keep your heart from growing cold toward God?

Fifth Day: Read Revelation 3:18-22.

Jesus remained faithful to the Laodicean church amid His rebuke.

12. a. What are the true riches and white clothing Jesus mentioned? (See also Isaiah 1:18; 61:10; 1 Corinthians 15:53-54; and 1 Peter 1:3-7.)

 - b. What reward does Jesus promise to those who repent and are victorious?
13. From verses 19-20, how do righteous rebuke and discipline express God's love? (See also Deuteronomy 8:5; Proverbs 3:12; 1 Corinthians 11:32; and Hebrews 12:10.)
14. a. What are some ways God disciplines His people? (See also Genesis 3:16-19; Matthew 18:15-17; Ephesians 6:4; 2 Timothy 3:16; and Titus 3:10.)

 - b. What is a Christian's proper response to God's corrective discipline? (See also Hebrews 12:5-10.) How have you witnessed or experienced this?

Sixth Day: Review Revelation 3:7-22.

Jesus honors fervent faith and rejects complacency.

15. What have you learned about Jesus's desire for His Church in the past three weeks of study?
What have you learned about what He desires for you personally?

Next step: Listen to the lecture.

Lesson 6 Notes

Revelation 3:7-22

Focus Verse

"I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. The one who is victorious I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will they leave it. I will write on them 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 them my new name."
(Revelation 3:11-12)

Outline

- Philadelphia: The Suffering Church – Revelation 3:7-13
- Laodicea: The Lukewarm Church – Revelation 3:14-22

Engage

What helps you remain steadfast—grounded, consistent, and steady—no matter what life brings? A large tree survives gale-force winds because a stabilizing underground root system allows its branches and trunk to bend without breaking. Similarly, when God's people constantly draw life and strength from God Himself, they stand strong when battered by the world.

Believers remain steadfast, not because they are strong within themselves, but because their all-powerful God remains faithful and true.

The final two letters to the seven churches starkly contrast each other. Jesus commended the church in Philadelphia for firmly rooted faith amid discouragement and persecution. The Lord rebuked the lukewarm church in Laodicea for blending in and loving wealth. One church felt weak but stood strong. The other thought themselves rich but were wretchedly poor. How might we love wealth and comfort more than the Lord? He calls us to seek Him above all else.

Jesus honors fervent faith and rejects complacency.

◆ Philadelphia: The Suffering Church – Revelation 3:7-13

The Recipient – 3:7a

The city of Philadelphia was founded by King Attalus II (160-138 BC), who had been given the title *Philadelphus* (a Greek term for brotherly love) because of his love for and loyalty to his brother. Philadelphia sat on a high plateau at the foot of Mount Tmolus, approximately 25 miles (40 km) southeast of Sardis. Few cities in Asia Minor suffered more from violent and frequent earthquakes than Philadelphia. In AD 17, a devastating earthquake destroyed Philadelphia and at least 11 other cities. The rebuilt city experienced long-term economic consequences and exists today as the Turkish

city of Alasehir. Despite these setbacks, Philadelphia retained a Christian population. **The church in Philadelphia was passionately devoted to the Lord Jesus.**

The Sender – 3:7b

Jesus introduced Himself to the Philadelphian church differently than in the other six letters, where His description reflected Revelation 1. **In His letter to the Philadelphians, Christ identified Himself as “holy and true.”**¹ This is a title belonging to God, for the Old Testament continually calls Yahweh “the Holy One.” The Philadelphians heard from God’s Son. Jesus Himself is the truth and always speaks the truth.² The holy perfection and trustworthiness of God and His Word anchor His people.

Jesus “holds the key of David.”³ This designation communicates the absolute authority the Father has delegated to His Son over His kingdom and people.⁴ Jesus alone opens heaven’s door to everyone who trusts in Him, giving free access to God. Because Jesus holds the keys, no one can lock His people out of the promised eternal destiny He has opened for them. What is more, Jesus entrusts these kingdom keys to His people.⁵ He delegates to believers the authority to share the gospel; they know that all His promises remain true forever.

The Words of Praise – 3:8-10

As in the letter to Smyrna, Jesus offered unconditional praise to the church in Philadelphia. The Philadelphian community despised these believers. Even though this church had little strength, they remained faithful and kept God’s Word. They had not denied Christ’s name.⁶ This challenges Christ’s Church and individual believers today. Will we remain faithful despite cultural pressure and beliefs that oppose God and His Word? Or will we blend in with the culture?

The message here focuses on the imagery of the “open door.” **Jesus placed an open door before them that no one could shut.** Their adversaries would not prevail. Perhaps the Roman authorities did not afford Gentile believers in this church the same privileges and protections as the Jews, such as exemptions from following Roman rituals and allowances to follow ancestral practices. The problem may have been theological, as the Jewish community claimed they alone were God’s true people. However, Jesus promised these Gentile believers an open door of fellowship with God even if they were shut out by their Jewish neighbors.

Jesus described the oppressors of this church as “the synagogue of Satan” and “liars.” Those responsible for the opposition claimed to be Jews but were not true believers. Paul wrote, “A person is not a Jew who is only one outwardly.”⁷ Jesus, the King of the Jews,⁸ once said to a Jewish crowd, “If you were Abraham’s children, then you would do what Abraham did. ... If God were your Father, you would love me ... [but] you belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning ... and the father of lies.”⁹ Satan and his murderous lies stand behind the persecution of Jesus’s followers. Jesus promised the Philadelphians that one day their persecutors would fall at their feet and acknowledge Jesus’s love for His people.

1. **Holy:** Daniel 9:24; Acts 2:27; 13:35; Hebrews 7:26

2. **Jesus is truth:** John 1:17; 8:14; 14:6

3. **Key of David:** Isaiah 22:22; Ezekiel 34:23-24

4. **Father and Son:** John 3:35

5. **Keys of the kingdom:** Matthew 16:19

6. **Faithful to God’s Word:** Isaiah 56:4-5

7. **False faith:** Romans 2:28-29

8. **King of the Jews:** Matthew 2:2-6; 27:37

9. **Father of lies:** John 8:39-44

Jesus assured these dear believers that their relationship with God did not depend on their own strength. He added a promise: “Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial.” Jesus did not promise that every believer will escape persecution but promised to uphold His people, even if their faithfulness leads to death. Throughout history, faithful believers have suffered terrible persecution and hardship. God remains firmly in control. He sovereignly and personally preserves His people in their suffering.

Jesus promised to protect the church at Philadelphia from the “hour of trial” that would test all the inhabitants of earth. Some scholars believe this promise refers to the great tribulation, the worst time of suffering that will ever come on the earth.¹⁰ Some believe Christians living on earth when this suffering begins will be “raptured,” or taken to heaven. This event is known as the “pretribulation rapture” of the Church. The pretribulation view holds that believers will escape ferocious persecution and suffering brought by God’s judgment on the earth at this time.¹¹ According to this view, people who come to faith during these terrible events will endure the tribulation with God’s help.¹² Other Bible scholars believe the Church will be taken to heaven midway through the tribulation (midtribulation rapture). Still others believe Christians will remain on earth throughout this period (posttribulation rapture).

The Bible is clear that believers will “meet the Lord in the air,” whether raptured previously or when He returns.¹³ We can rest secure that Jesus holds and keeps His people through the fiercest of circumstances. **Jesus’s presence and power give His people strength to live for Him, whatever happens.**

Are you currently enduring persecution? **God promises to preserve His Church, not to spare His people from suffering.** We cannot assume Jesus will remove believers from pain and tribulation. However, we can be sure that nothing will separate believers from God’s love.¹⁴

The Exhortation – 3:11

In the wake of His praise for the church in Philadelphia, Jesus promised His certain return: “I am coming soon.” **Jesus repeatedly affirms His return in Revelation.**¹⁵ Believers patiently await Jesus’s return with joyous expectancy. However, for those who live as if the Lord will not return, this promise is not a cause for comfort but distress.

The Lord urged this church, and all believers, to hold on tightly to what they had so no one could take their ultimate reward. They had zeal, patience, and the ability to accomplish much with little worldly means. No one had robbed this church of its heritage. They had not denied the Lord even in the face of persecution from Satan or their fellow citizens. They had not succumbed to societal pressures that violated God’s Word. Their testimony of faithfulness speaks to us today.

Jesus did not promise that every believer will escape persecution but promised to uphold His people, even if their faithfulness leads to death. Throughout history, faithful believers have suffered terrible persecution and hardship. God remains firmly in control.

10. **Great distress:** Matthew 24:21

11. **Persecution:** 1 John 2:18; Revelation 13:1-10

12. **Faith during the tribulation:** Revelation 13:7-10

13. **Believers rise to meet Jesus:** 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17; Revelation 20:6

14. **Remain in God’s love:** Romans 8:38-39

15. **Christ’s return:** Revelation 22:7, 12, 20

The Promise to Victors – 3:12-13

Jesus gives four promises to those who are victorious in His power:

- Jesus will make each one **“a pillar in the temple of my God,”** never again to leave the temple. This promise contrasts the stability of God’s people with the instability of earthquake-prone Philadelphia.
- Jesus will **“write on them the name of my God.”**
- Jesus will **“write on them the name of the city of God.”**
- Jesus will **“write on them my new name.”**

A pillar supports the weight of a structure and represents great strength and permanence. Surely this speaks of a privileged place in God’s presence and Church. Names were often inscribed on pillars to honor individuals. Jesus promises great names for His faithful people, whom He identifies and claims as His own. He will permanently inscribe His own name on them. There will be no question about to whom God’s people belong forever. Their permanent address is the new Jerusalem, God’s city. They also receive Jesus’s new name, perhaps a reference to facets of His eternal nature He will reveal at His second coming. **Jesus loves His people and marks those He loves as His own; they bear His name and reflect His character.** These beautiful promises give great hope and strength to those who have ears to hear.

◆ Laodicea: The Lukewarm Church – Revelation 3:14-22

The Recipient – 3:14a

Jesus’s last message to the seven churches addressed the church at Laodicea. A city in the fertile valley of the Lycus River, Laodicea was 40 miles (64 km) southeast of Philadelphia and 100 miles (160 km) east of Ephesus. The city was only 10 miles (16 km) from Colossae, close enough that Paul told the churches at Colossae and Laodicea to share his letters they had received.¹⁶ Hierapolis, with its famous hot springs, sat 7 miles (11 km) to the north.

Laodicea’s physical and economic attributes offer helpful background to Jesus’s message. Laodicea was famous for glossy black wool, banking, and a renowned school of medicine. Its “Phrygian powder” was endorsed as a cure for eye defects. **Laodicea’s wealth promoted a self-sufficient spirit.** When an earthquake hit Laodicea in AD 60, the citizens rejected Rome’s offers to help and rebuilt on their own.

A 6-mile-long (10 km) aqueduct brought Laodicea’s water supply from the south. The water came from hot springs and was cooled in transport through the aqueduct. Another channel also delivered warm water to Laodicea. **While the city had water, its poor quality would at times make people vomit.**

A significant Jewish population resided in Laodicea. A Greek ruler had transported 2,000 Jewish families to the area about 300 years before. This church was probably planted by Epaphras, a Gentile friend of the apostle Paul.¹⁷

16. **Shared letters:** Colossians 4:16

17. **Epaphras:** Colossians 4:12-13

The Sender – 3:14b

Jesus described Himself to the Laodiceans with three powerful names: “the Amen,” “the faithful and true witness,” and “the ruler of God’s creation.”

- The term “amen” comes from the Hebrew word meaning firm, trustworthy, or true. Here the word likely alludes to Isaiah 65:16 (twice rendered in the NIV as the “one true God”). “**Amen**” literally means “let it be so,” or as it is often translated, “truly.” In the Gospels, Jesus often used the term to introduce His sayings: “Truly I tell you” or “Very truly I tell you.”¹⁸
- **Jesus Himself is the truth and has power to fulfill every word He speaks.**¹⁹ He will never deceive us. We can trust Jesus fully in all He says and does.
- **Jesus is the ruler of all creation.** This is what Paul meant when he said of the Lord Jesus Christ, “All things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”²⁰

The Words of Reprimand – 3:15-17

Jesus began with His familiar words, “I know your deeds.” **He could not commend this church that was neither cold nor hot, but lukewarm.** Lack of zeal created a complacent and apathetic community as distasteful as their lukewarm water. This church offered neither passionate heat nor cool refreshment. The Laodiceans’ smug self-confidence left a bad taste in Jesus’s mouth.

Jesus responded violently to the disgusting indifference of this church. The Greek word translated “spit” can mean “vomit.” **The apathy of this congregation was enough to make Jesus forcefully spew them from His mouth!**

The wealthy Laodiceans were unaware of their spiritual poverty. **Arrogant independence and casual commitment make a church useless to Jesus.** Complacency is spiritually crippling. Failure to recognize our money, abilities, and opportunities as God’s gifts leads to spiritual poverty.²¹ Whether wealthy or poor, God’s children look to Him to supply their daily needs. Christian maturity leads believers to increasingly depend on God in all things.²²

Jesus expressed His love for this church by speaking piercing words to unmask their dangerous deception. Jesus’s perception, not people’s limited insight, exposes the truth. The people in this proud church felt capable, confident, and secure in their own wealth, yet Jesus said they were wretched and pitiful. They boasted medical expertise to heal blinding eye conditions, yet Jesus declared them blind. Laodicea produced highly prized fabric, but Jesus proclaimed they were naked. Their material comfort put them in spiritual jeopardy. Unless they recognized their spiritual bankruptcy, they had no eternal hope.

The Exhortation – 3:18-20

Jesus did not write off this church but graciously counseled them and invited them to repentance. He called the people to recognize their spiritual poverty and buy from Him “gold refined in the fire.” Jesus stood ready to meet their needs. He offered them white clothes to cover their nakedness—

18. Jesus’s use of “Amen”: Matthew 17:20; 21:21; Mark 11:23; John 1:51; 3:3, 5; 6:32

19. Truth: John 14:6

20. Created by and for Jesus: Colossians 1:15-17

21. God’s gifts: John 3:27; 1 Corinthians 4:7

22. Dependence on the Lord: Proverbs 3:5-6; John 15:5

Deeds that Honor God

The Doctrine of Works

In His seven letters to the churches of Asia Minor, Jesus evaluated the deeds that revealed each church's spiritual condition. External actions flow from within; what we do indicates who we truly are. Scripture teaches that sin's entrance into the world corrupted our ability to do anything that satisfies God's righteous standards on our own.¹ In other words, we cannot be saved by human works, no matter how hard we try. However, when sinners receive salvation in Christ, they become a new creation.² The indwelling Holy Spirit produces works that glorify God and offer evidence of salvation. **No one can be justified by their works, but God-honoring works offer proof of a regenerated heart.**

Ephesians 2:8-10 clearly expresses the relationship between works and salvation: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith ... not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." **God saves believers and empowers them to work for Him, by His grace alone.**

Most people wrongly believe they can earn God's favor and control their own eternal destiny. This idea appeals to human pride. We often try to feel good about ourselves by judging ourselves as better than most. Many think that if their good deeds outweigh the bad ones, God will be pleased. The problem with this approach lies in the fact that God's perfection is the standard required. Without God's gracious gift of salvation through Christ, our works accomplish nothing of eternal value.

Recognizing the truth about our sin-contaminated works is the first step toward a spiritually fruitful life. **Humbled by their sinfulness and God's abounding grace, believers look to Christ to provide what their efforts cannot.** God works in and through His people to take the gospel to the world. Believers live transformed lives that demonstrate Christ's power to reclaim what sin has stolen and to glorify God. A redeemed life reveals a regenerated heart. Works do not save us but are a product of saving faith. How has God transformed your motives and actions as you walk with Him, in the power of the Holy Spirit? All glory belongs to God for His work to save and sanctify His children!

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1. **Sin's corruption:** Romans 3:23
 2. **New creation:** 2 Corinthians 5:16-18

what Isaiah called "garments of salvation"—and robes of righteousness.²³ Jesus extended to them healing salve for their blinded eyes—renewed spiritual vision. Salvation is God's gift, but we must empty our hands to receive it. **The Lord and His Word are the believer's true gold.**²⁴ God purifies His people and tests the genuineness of their faith.²⁵

Jesus reassured the Laodicean church that His rebuke and discipline exhibited His love. His strong words arose from His loving compassion. God disciplines those He loves.²⁶ Jesus graciously called

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23. **Garments and robe:** Isaiah 61:10
 24. **True gold:** Job 22:25; Psalms 19:9-10; 119:72; Matthew 13:44-46
 25. **Tests of faith:** Job 23:10; Proverbs 17:3; Malachi 3:3; 1 Peter 1:6-7
 26. **Lord's discipline:** Hebrews 12:4-11

this church to repentance. When we recognize we are poor and needy, Jesus stands ready to lead us to enduring spiritual riches. Jesus pursues us and exposes our hearts because He loves us.

Jesus's final encouragement to the Laodicean church depicted Himself standing at the door knocking. The Lord stood at the door of this church and asked to be admitted. What a gracious Savior! Jesus promised restored intimacy without reproach if they opened the door to Him.

The Promise to Victors – 3:21-22

Jesus promised the victorious an unimaginable privilege—to sit with Him on His throne! As a man, in the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus overcame sin, Satan, and death. He now sits with His Father in glory. The naturally strong or self-sufficient are not those who share in Christ's future reign. Jesus makes this promise to all who hear His voice and turn to Him. He reprimanded Laodicea more harshly than any church yet gave this lukewarm church the greatest promise.

Jesus honors fervent faith and rejects complacency. Jesus calls us to fight and defeat this world's pressures and the sin that remains within us and our communities. He created us to know and worship Him. He delights to restore the repentant. As we depend on Him, Jesus transforms even deeply engrained patterns of sin. Jesus can take someone who repents from the lowest depths to the highest heights. No one sees you more clearly or loves you more deeply than your Savior.

◆ Take to Heart

Hold Fast

Jesus's letters to the seven churches addressed their unique situations and offered customized evaluation, encouragement, correction, and instructions. **His final two letters addressed churches in Philadelphia and Laodicea with glaringly different messages.** Jesus discerned the truth about each church, cutting through persecution and pretense to expose truth and offer guidance. Like the other letters, these messages ring with relevant truth for our day.

The Christians in the Philadelphian church endured pressure and persecution from Satan's cohorts—people who claimed to be Jews but opposed God. **Jesus, who is holy and true, promised these weary believers that no enemy could shut them out of His plan for them.** Acknowledging the patient endurance of the faithful, Jesus promised to protect them from eternal harm and reveal the truth to their foes. Assuring His soon and certain return, Jesus defined His rewards for His victors—He would uphold and deliver His people, giving them new strength, a new name, and untold blessings.

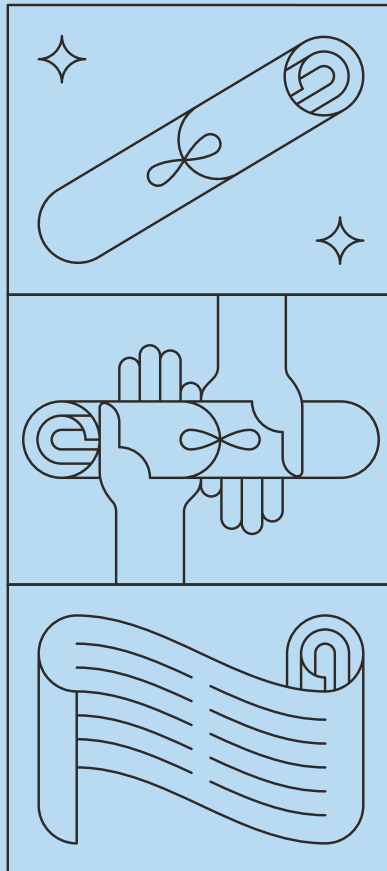
Jesus had nothing good to say about the church at Laodicea. Neither hot nor cold, Jesus rebuked this lukewarm church for their complacency. The church considered themselves rich, but Jesus declared them wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked. **With grace on display, Jesus exhorted this self-deceived and straying church to return to Him in earnest repentance.** He stood at their door, knocking and calling them to receive the spiritual sight and eternal life He offered. Jesus loves people enough to confront their sin and call them to repentance. The world tempts Christians to compromise, but Jesus calls His people to unwavering commitment to Him and His kingdom.

Apply It

Do you find it difficult to stand for Jesus and keep His Word amid societal pressures? As popular opinions ring in your ears, are there parts of the Scriptures you choose to ignore or dispute? To follow Christ requires living a countercultural lifestyle in many ways. Honoring the Lord in a world that mostly rejects Him is often difficult. God knows everything about the opposition you face in your workplace, neighborhood, or family because you stand for Christ. **The Lord promises His presence and power when our own strength feels small.** Vindicated and preserved by Christ, believers can stand strong in a world that can make them feel weak. How will you trust the Lord to strengthen and sustain you through the pressures in your life?

How have Jesus's words shaken your complacency? We often consider ourselves strong while unaware of our vulnerability and weakness. What do you consider your source of wealth and strength? Could it be that you are actually poor in prayer, worship, patience, or compassion? Are you poor in love and forgiveness of others, or poor in holiness? **Jesus stands ready to give you the gold of His presence.** He relentlessly pursues your heart. He will not be satisfied with a casual, compromised relationship with you. Jesus is not content to allow you to value this world's tinsel more than eternity's treasure. He will lovingly discipline you to call you to uncompromised commitment. Jesus pierces our self-deception with clarifying truth. Will you ask Him to lead you to specific repentance and renew your mind to recognize what matters most?

Where is your confidence—in God and His Son, or the blessings He gives? Do you say you trust Jesus, yet cling tightly to material security? Do you speak of fellowship with the Lord yet rarely pour out your heart to Him? When we recognize God's strength and our neediness, prayers for His help, strength, wisdom, guidance, and power become a regular part of life. How will you begin to live in moment-by-moment dependence on your Savior? Start by asking God to reveal the truth about your priorities and lead you to change. Over what rebel territory in your heart will you ask Jesus to reign supreme? How will you trust the Lord to supply His strength to be victorious? Jesus rules God's creation; His reign and rule over your life offers you the greatest security that can be known.



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