

# 7 GOLDEN LAMPSTANDS

The Churches of Revelation



# INTRODUCTION

## Revelation 1-3

The power of Revelation is in its dynamic imagery. This imagery fills every scene of the letter. The images are shaped by OT prophecy (there are over 200 allusions to the OT in Revelation), colored by present reality, and filtered through future expectation. Revelation is written in a distinct genre referred to as “Jewish Apocalyptic.” This genre was used to secretly communicate countercultural and, even, seditious truths of encouragement or reprimand to fellow Jews without alarming those in power, such as the Roman government. The author, John, is either an early disciple named John, or, as traditionally understood, the same John of the Gospel and letters. We know from the opening that he has been exiled to the island of Patmos, a common punishment in the Roman Empire for troublemakers. Most likely written in the mid-90’s AD, the state-sponsored persecution under Nero had passed, as had the destruction of the temple, and most likely the persecution under Domitian was underway.

Though the author frames the work in Jewish Apocalyptic language, it is technically a circular letter written to seven major churches in Asia Minor. These appear to be the leading churches in the area, though they aren’t necessarily the seven leading cities of Asia Minor. The seven churches are listed: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. This study focuses on only the specific letters addressed to each of these churches. Most of the churches in Asia Minor were planted through the missionary push of Paul and Barnabas, along with the specific planting efforts of Epaphras (Col. 1:7). By the time of John’s writing, the churches were in their second generation of faith, and some had grown extensively.

As a whole, Asia Minor was a wealthy and ancient part of the Roman Empire. It was a major trade hub for all of Asia and a fertile breadbasket for the Empire. The history of this area was long and rich, as will be seen throughout the study.

# SCHEDULE

Week 1 – Introduction

Week 2 – The Faithful Church: Ephesus

Week 3 – The Persecuted Church: Smyrna

Week 4 – The Pressured Church: Pergamum

Week 5 – The Misled Church: Thyatira

Week 6 – The Complacent Church: Sardis

Week 7 – The Loved Church: Philadelphia

Week 8 – The Lukewarm Church: Laodicea

## HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

1. Read the passage for that week.
2. Read through the notes. On the first page, I offer a summary of the passage as well as some technical notes that might be helpful. Likewise, I try to explore this passage in a broader biblical, theological, or ecological perspective.
3. Discuss the passage with the aid of the discussion questions on the second page, either in a small group, with your family, or just with someone over coffee.
4. In this study, we've included a "Be the Church" section in which you are encouraged to actively engage in some element from that week's study. The hope is to put what you've learned in practice collectively as a church.
5. Engage in the sermons, whether in person as we move through the series or as they are available online.

### Resources:

I used more commentaries and various resources on this study than any to date, and I still feel confused most of the time! This isn't an exhaustive list, but my personal favorites on the seven churches, though not necessarily Revelation as a whole.

- Jeffrey Weima, *The Sermons to the Seven Churches of Revelation: A Commentary and Guide*, Baker Academic, 2021.
- Richard Oster, *Seven Congregations in a Roman Crucible: A Commentary on Revelation 1–3*, Wipf and Stock, 2013.
- Eugene Peterson, *This Hallelujah Banquet*, Waterbrook, 2021.
- G. K. Beale, *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary*, Eerdmans, 2015.
- J. C. Thomas & Frank D. Macchia, *Revelation*, Eerdmans, 2016.
- Grant Osborne, *Revelation: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, Baker Academic, 2002.
- David deSilva, *Discovering Revelation: Content, Interpretation, Reception*, SPCK, 2021.
- Gordon D. Fee, *Revelation: NCCS*, Cascade, 2011.
- Sam Storms, *Our God Reigns*, Mentor, 2024.

# SEVEN GOLDEN LAMPSTANDS

## Revelation 1:1-20

To understand, or at least start to understand, John's Revelation (apocalypse) is to hear the ripe imagery and imagine it in your mind. To let it ruminate a while in *your* spirit by *His* Spirit. These powerful metaphorical images help us know God better and allow us to see the world through Jesus' transcendent eyes. The imagery is everything, and we must slow down to see it. It is no surprise then that the opening image of Revelation is Jesus himself. He is,

*"dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. 14 The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. 15 His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. 16 In his right hand, he held seven stars, and coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance."*

Jesus is the central figure of this apocalypse; he is the "first and last." He is the "Living One" who was dead but is now forever, eternally alive and "holds the keys of death." Everything in the great apocalypse revolves around him, including the seven golden lampstands. This remarkable image would have piqued the imagination of the Jewish-Christian audience. It most likely refers to the menorah, a seven-branched, olive-oil-burning lamp in the Tabernacle and Temple. It provided the light and was to be lit every day by the priests. This imagery mixes with the related imagery given through the prophet Zechariah in the fourth chapter of his prophecy,

*"1 Then the angel who had talked with me returned and woke me up, like someone awakened from sleep. 2 He asked me, "What do you see?"*

*I answered, "I see a solid gold lampstand with a bowl at the top and seven lamps on it, with seven channels to the lamps. 3 Also there are two olive trees by it, one on the right of the bowl and the other on its left." 4 I asked the angel who talked with me, "What are these, my lord?"*

*5 He answered, "Do you not know what these are?"*

*"No, my lord," I replied."*

As a prophet of Hope, Zechariah gives encouragement to the Israelites while in exile. He assures them that the temple will be rebuilt, but, much like us, he doesn't know what the golden lampstands represent. The angel's response reverberates to the churches in Asia Minor and to us today.

*6 So he said to me, "This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel: 'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,' says the Lord Almighty.*

To Zechariah, the lampstands represent the outpouring of God's renewing, life-giving Spirit.

Similarly, John explained the seven golden lampstands,

*19 "Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now, and what will take place later. 20 The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.*

The seven stars that Jesus holds are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven golden lampstands are the churches themselves. Like the menorah in the temple, God dwells among the light of his people, his church. Jesus is pouring out his Spirit through the churches, just like in Zechariah, and the churches are reminded with this powerful imagery that they have prominence and purpose in Jesus' mission. Yet, they are also accountable to Jesus himself, who still walks among them and knows their deeds. These are the seven golden lampstands.

# LETTER TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES

Each letter to the seven churches carries a similar literary structure in which Jesus introduces himself, offers commendation, criticism, instruction, and a promise. Read through all of Revelation 2-3 and fill out the chart below for each church. You will find this incredibly helpful as we continue.

Church	Introduction	Commendation	Criticism	Instruction	Promise

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What stands out to you in the first chapter of Revelation? Try to imagine you have never read it before and were just starting it for the first time. Imagine you knew nothing about it. What would you expect to come after the first chapter?

From just the first chapter, what would you say is the purpose of John's revelation? To whom is he writing and why?

**Read Exodus 25:31-40; Leviticus 24:1-4; Numbers 8:1-4; Zechariah 4:1-14.** How do you see the imagery of these passages as background for Revelation 1? What significant role does the seven-piece lampstand have in the life of Israel? How do we see these same roles in the church of Jesus?

Read through the descriptions of Jesus in Revelation 1 again. How do these images of Jesus compare or contrast with the other ways we see him portrayed in the NT? How do these compare and contrast with the way we see him portrayed in contemporary Christianity?

# THE FAITHFUL CHURCH: EPHESUS

## Revelation 2:1-7

It's not surprising that the church first addressed by Jesus is the church in Ephesus, as it is a priority church in Asia Minor. The church in Ephesus is somewhere around 40 years old by this point and has a long legacy of being a launching point for Gospel ministry throughout the rest of the Roman world. Jesus specifically introduces three themes that will be important throughout the rest of the work: work, perseverance, and the power of his name. The Ephesians are applauded twice for their work and perseverance, as well as their ability to test the authenticity of supposed Christian messengers. They appear to be the first line of defense in keeping faithful the churches of Asia Minor. They not only resist but hate the false teaching of the Nicolaitans (a group we know nothing about from any other sources). Yet, they are reprimanded for forsaking their first love. This is either a reference to their initial zeal in receiving and living out the gospel or, more likely, a reference to the first command to "love one another" (John 13:34). It appears that the aging church in Ephesus is doctrinally sound, but that is not the most important thing in Jesus' church. That is always love. This is so important that Jesus threatens to remove their place as a lampstand, either referring to their salvation or, more likely, to their missional position as a leading church in the region. Still, if they repent, they will be given the incredible reward of eating from the Tree of Life in the paradise of God. Much is at stake for this important church.



## GEOGRAPHY AND BACKGROUND

Ephesus was a major port city connecting the trade routes of Asia to the Mediterranean Sea. It was also a leading tourist and religious city with the major temple to Artemis, the goddess of young women, childbirth, and midwifery. Though silting of the port from the river had caused the city to be moved various times during its history, by this point, the city held nearly a quarter of a million people. Jesus describes himself as "him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands." Weima points out, "After the death of his ten-year-old son in AD 83, Domitian declared that the boy had become a god and that his wife, Domitia, became the mother of a god. He issued a coin to honor his deceased son (RIC 2:213) that portrays him sitting on a globe in a position of power over the world. Depicting his heavenly dominion over the whole universe, he holds seven stars, representing the seven planets, in his outstretched arms... Christ's depiction in the first title as 'the one who holds the seven stars in his right hand' should therefore be seen as a challenge to Roman power."

## Text Notes:

**2:2 – "deeds,"** *Gk. ἔργον, ergon, "work, deed, what is done."* This is one of the primary themes in Revelation, especially in this section, specifically to the seven churches, where it is used a staggering 14 times (2:2, 5, 6, 9, 13, 19\*2, 22, 23, 26; 3:1, 2, 8, 15). The measurement of one's faithfulness or sinfulness is connected to their deeds or the result of their activity. This is not an earned righteousness, but rather an indication of faithfulness.

**2:2 – "persevere,"** *Gk. ὑπομονή, hypomone, "patience, steadfastness, endurance."* This noun is primarily used in scripture as a verb, but here it is only used as a noun carrying the meaning of something you have or something that belongs to you, not necessarily something you do (1:9; 2:2, 3, 19; 3:10; 13:10; 14:12).

**2:2 – "apostles,"** *Gk. ἀπόστολος, apostolos, "apostle."* The word "apostle" is a transliteration (not translation) of the Greek word, which means messenger or minister. It is used in the NT either to refer to a messenger or specifically the chosen leaders of Jesus ministry. It appears that some here are claiming to be "apostles," but aren't presenting a message faithful to Jesus.

**2:3 – "name,"** *Gk. ὄνομα, onoma, "name."* Another primary theme in Revelation (2:13, 17; 3:1, 4, 5, 8, 12; 6:8; 8:11; 9:11; 11:13). Throughout John's writing, belief in Jesus name leads to the forgiveness of sins (1 John 2:12), along with a status as a children of God who inherit eternal life (John 1:12; 20:31; 1 John 5:13). To carry Jesus' name is to carry his authority and honor, even if it causes hardship in this world.

**2:7 – "paradise,"** *Gk. παράδεισος, paradisos, "paradise."* This is another transliteration of the original Greek word. Most likely of Persian origin, it refers to a garden or park. It is only used twice in the NT (Luke 23:43), but 27x in the Septuagint (Greek translation of the OT). Not surprisingly, 17 of those uses refer specifically to the Garden of Eden.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Having read through the notes, now read through the passage one more time. Without looking again at the passage, how would you describe the church in Ephesus in your own words?

Jesus applauds the church for their works, perseverance, and hardship. What do these things look like in their context? What does it look like for our churches today to persevere?

Here we see the importance of “works” for the Ephesian church. We often get worried or worked up about trying to work our way to heaven. What do you see as the connection between works, salvation, and love in this passage?

What do you think Jesus means when he says, “You have neglected your first love?” The notes offer two different suggestions for this. Which one do you prefer, or do you have another thought?

The church in Ephesus is strong at staying doctrinally pure, yet weak at keeping love in the forefront. Have you ever known of or been a part of a church like this before? What was church life like in this kind of church? Why do you think it is so easy to neglect love when focused on doctrinal purity? How do we hold both at the same time?

## BE THE CHURCH

The church in Ephesus carries the torch of the Gospel. Jesus not only walks among the seven golden lampstands but warns the Ephesian Christians that he will remove their lampstand if they do not repent of their sinfulness. It seems clear to me that the church has forgotten how to be a light for a dark world.

So this week, as a reminder, light a candle whether as a small group or, if you're studying this on your own, by yourself. Hold this image in your mind all week. We are called to be a light to the world. Do one practical thing to shine the love of Christ in the world and rekindle your first love this week.

# THE PERSECUTED CHURCH: SMYRNA

## Revelation 2:8-11

If Ephesus is the leading Roman city in Asia Minor in the first century, then Smyrna is right on its heels. Located about 40 to 50 miles north of Ephesus and stationed on its own beautifully deep Port, Smyrna was one of the great cities of the Roman Empire. Yet, there are significant differences between the social status of Christians in Ephesus and those in Smyrna. We know not only from this letter, but also from other sources that Christians in Smyrna faced serious persecution from the Roman authorities at the prompting of the strong Jewish population in Smyrna. These Jews hated the growth of this new quasi-Jewish movement that declared a crucified Galilean as Lord. The first thing we notice is that Smyrna receives no reprimand from Jesus, unlike most of the other churches. Similarly, whereas in his address to the other churches Jesus knows their “works” (2:2, 19; 3:1, 8, 15), in this case, Jesus instead knows their afflictions, poverty, and the slander against them. Weima rightly points out in his wonderful commentary, “Although ‘affliction’ is the primary issue in this message, it is not the only object of the formula ‘I know.’ Christ is also aware that the church is experiencing ‘poverty’ and ‘slander.’ These three nouns are not equal in importance and emphasis. Rather, ‘affliction’ constitutes the general description and introduces the main commendation of the sermon, and ‘poverty’ and ‘slander’ describe the type of affliction and constitute the specific commendation.” Though Smyrna was a wealthy town known for its incredible outdoor mall, it appears that Christians in Smyrna have been specifically, economically targeted for persecution. They aren’t just poor. They are poor because they have declared allegiance to Jesus (see also Heb. 10:34). During this period, most tradesmen belonged to builders’ guilds, which required participation in pagan religious ceremonies that Christians would not have participated in. Jesus, himself being financially poor throughout his ministry, reminds them that in the eternal view of things, they are in fact rich! The church in Smyrna also faces blasphemy, which is either informal rumors started by the Jewish elite or formal, legal denunciation of Christianity as an illegal religion. We know from later correspondence between Pliny the Younger and Emperor Trajan that this was a real problem, especially in Asia Minor (AD 111–112). Oddly, Jesus then encourages the church to stay faithful even in the face of a ten-day persecution. Commentaries differ on what this refers to, but there are three main possibilities. First, some suggest a specific historical meaning either in the ten periods of Roman persecution or the ten days of the gladiatorial games, which were famous in Smyrna. Second, as numbers are most often symbolic in Judaism, this refers to a complete or whole period of time (Gen. 24:55, Num. 11:19). Finally and most likely, it is an allusion to the ten-day testing of Daniel when he abstained from eating at the King’s table (Dan. 1:2; 5:1–4). Whatever the case may be, for those who persevere, Jesus, “the first and last” and he “who died and came back to life,” will grant them a victor’s crown, keeping them from being “hurt at all by the second death.”

Smyrna 

## GEOGRAPHY AND BACKGROUND

Of the seven cities, only Smyrna still exists. Known as modern-day Izmir, Turkey, it is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the region, dating back to the Bronze Age. Though destroyed by the Persians, Alexander the Great had the city rebuilt closer to the port, which had a well-protected, deep harbor. In many ways, Smyrna was the envy of the ancient world, with two significant temples to Zeus and Cybele that were connected by an incredible agora. A famous street running through the city was referred to as the “Street of Gold,” and a stunning acropolis set atop Mount Pagos surrounded by a group of buildings that were often referred to as the city’s “crown.” In 20 AD, Smyrna was granted the honor of constructing a temple to Emperor Tiberius and became an epicenter of emperor worship from that time forward.

## Text Notes:

**22:8 – “First and Last,”** *Gk. ὁ πρῶτος καὶ ὁ ἔσχατος, o protos kai o eschatos*, “first and last,” “beginning and end.” In Revelation, this title is only used to refer to Jesus (1:17; 2:8; 22:13). This title is taken from Isaiah 44:6 and 48:12 and gives comfort to Christians undergoing persecution who can be assured that Jesus is in control of all of history and will outlast all passing regimes.

**2:9 – “Affliction,”** *Gk. Θλίψις, Thlipsis*, “burden,” “suffering.” This catch-all word carries a kind of persecution, burden, or even external pressure. The KJV translates it “tribulation,” which became overly formalized in the interpretation of this book.

## Text Notes:

**2:9 – “Poverty,”** *Gk. πτωχεία, ptōcheia, “poverty,” “poor.”* This word is only used here and in 2 Cor. 8:2, 9. It seems to carry a more specific meaning of precise economic poverty, most likely caused in this case by either the loss of jobs in a pagan setting or, possibly, mobs destroying their property because of their Christian allegiance.

**2:10 – “Crown of Life”** *Gk. στέφανον τῆς ζωῆς, stephanos tes zoes, “victor’s crown.”* Osborne writes, “A ‘gold crown’ is mentioned several times in Revelation, signifying honor and authority (4:4 of the 24 elders; 9:7 of the locusts; 14:14 of the ‘one like a son of man’). The only other place it is used of believers is 3:11, where it is a ‘crown.’ Here and in 3:11, it does not speak of royalty (that would be διάδημα diadēma, found in 12:3; 13:1; 19:12) but of a victor’s crown, an athletic and military metaphor linked with the idea of ‘overcoming’ in verse 11. A garland wreath was placed around the head of the victorious athlete at the games... Smyrna was famed for its games, and so this would be a natural metaphor.” Likewise, this probably also alludes to the famous group of buildings called the “crown of Smyrna.”

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Jesus refers to himself in two specific ways in v. 8. What are these two images, and how do they offer comfort to a church facing persecution?

The notes provided a few possibilities of what the “ten days” of persecution might be. Which possibility makes the most sense to you and why? What do you think it would have been like as a Christian in Smyrna to hear this “ten-day” reference?

Jesus offers the Christians in Smyrna the “crown of life.” What are the different backgrounds for this image? Where else in scripture do you see crowns talked about? What is the difference between the crown that Jesus wears and the crown we as Christians get to wear?

In his commentary on Revelation, the scholar Grant Osborned writes this, “There are four levels at which persecution can apply in a society like ours where overt persecution seldom occurs: (1) we can identify with the many Christians who are suffering around the world (cf. Rom. 12:15; Heb. 13:3); (2) we can realize that such persecution could happen here in the near future and be ready for it; (3) we can ask ourselves how many compromises we have made in order to avoid any persecution at work or in secular society; and (4) we can endure general trials that draw us away from the world and toward Christ.” Interact a bit with each of these four levels of persecution. What are your thoughts about each of them?

## BE THE CHURCH

Grant Osborne pointed out the four ways that persecution can be applied to our situation where we don’t direct receive legitimate persecution as a church. The first level seems something practical for us to engage in as a church. Spend some time reading about and helping persecuted Christians in some practical way. Check out [persecution.org](http://persecution.org) or [opendoors.org](http://opendoors.org), among many other resources. A good way to practice this is to have a day of fasting in your home, where you specifically give the money you would have spent on food to people undergoing persecution.

# THE PRESSURED CHURCH: PERGAMUM

## Revelation 2:12-17

Rather than saying he knows their deeds as he does to every other church but one, Jesus begins his letter to Pergamum with the phrase “I know where you live.” Sounds daunting, and it should. Jesus is not concerned with the geographic location as much as their spiritual location. He continues to describe Pergamum as not only the home of Satan, but the throne of Satan. It’s no surprise in this context that Jesus is called “the One who has the sharp-two edged sword.” The sword is a prominent symbol in both the imagery of Revelation and the imagery of the story of Balaam, which helps explain its sudden and surprising reference. The connection between the Balaam story and the church in Pergamum has to do with their sinfulness. In both places, they sin by eating foods sacrificed to idols and by sexual immorality. In one sense, the early Christians could only eat food sacrificed to idols, as every piece of meat available for purchase had already been offered partially as a sacrifice. Yet, in the NT, food purchased in the marketplace was allowed for Christians. Rather, it was food that was involved in a specific religious activity or place that was considered sinful. This was a major problem for urban Christians, especially urban gentile Christians in the first century, as nearly every social gathering took place within various temple complexes and always used food sacrificed to various deities. Of course, sexual immorality has always been a straightforward issue for the people of God. Some have argued that the group of Balaam and the Nicolaitians are two separate problem groups in the church, but most likely they are the same group, as “Balaam” and Nicolaus” means essentially the same thing in their original language (“one who conquers.”) Although the imagery of Manna is well-known in the Bible, what is interesting about this manna is that it is hidden. Most scholars agree that hidden manna refers to the manna that was kept in the Ark of the Covenant. Though the ark had been lost upon the destruction of the temple, Jewish teaching argued that God had stored the ark until the messiah could return and reestablish the kingdom. The second image is widely regarded as the most difficult to interpret of anything in the seven churches section. Most scholars agree that the name written on the stone is a new name given by God to the victorious Christian as described in Isaiah 56:5; 62:2; 65:15. Many interpretations have been offered of the white stone. It might be a jewel adorning the breastplate of the priests, an amulet that offered healing to those who carried it, or a vote of innocence that was commonly cast using a white stone. Some have contended that the white stone is connected with the manna in Num. 11:7, which describes manna as looking like bdellium (possibly a white stone). Another convincing argument is that it is a ticket or token of admission which were commonly given to victors and other highly regarded guests for admission into banquets. Regardless of the precise background, the point is clear that those who hold faithfully to Jesus will be rewarded in the eternal Kingdom of God.

## GEOGRAPHY AND BACKGROUND

Pergamum



For nearly four centuries, Pergamum stood as one of the primary cities in Asia Minor. It’s magnificent, an agropolis was perched just 14 miles inland and could be seen from the waters. It was the capital of the Attalid empire before being ceded to Rome, where in 29 BC it was granted the authority to build a temple in honor of Cesar Augustus. It was famous for its incredible library, said to house over 200,000 volumes. It was also famous for its temple to Zeus. Most notable for this passage is the description of Pergamum as the throne of Satan. Intriguingly, Smyrna, which seemed to be going through specific persecution from the Jewish authorities, is referred to as the *synagogue* of Satan, while Pergamum, which was going through political persecution, was called the *throne* of Satan. What then is this “throne of Satan?” There are a few possibilities. 1. The acropolis of Pergamum was situated high up and might have looked like a giant throne, but this reference is unlikely, as many cities were similarly built. 2. There was a huge U-shaped altar built to Zeus Savior in Pergamum. This altar was 120 ft by 112 ft and was decorated with massive serpent tales to depict the battle between the Olympian gods. 3. The Asclepius hospital was a temple built for the God of healing, Asclepius. This huge building was set on the outskirts of the city. It could be approached from the Via Tecta, which was a half-mile-long road that led to the covered walkways surrounding the temple. Deep pools of healing were connected to the theater as well as a library and a theater. The hospital was decorated throughout with images of snakes. 3. Pergamum was also the seat of Roman power as the capital of Asia. There was a temple to the emperors commissioned by Augustus in 29 BC. Yet, by the time Revelation is written, many cities in Asia Minor contained temples to the Roman emperors as Emperor worship was quickly growing as the fastest “religion” of the Roman world.

## Text Notes:

**2:12 “Double-Edged Sword,”** *Gk. τὴν ῥομφαίαν τὴν δίστομον, ten romphain ten distomon.* This imagery comes from Isaiah 49:2, 11:4. There are two types of swords in the NT: a short defensive sword called a machaira (Rev. 6:4; 13:10, 14) and the one in this passage, a rhomphaia. A rhomphaia was a very long sword used in battle with a slightly curved blade and a long handle that required two hands. It was feared in battle when used by the famed Thracian fighters.

**2:13 – “You live,”** *Gk. κατοικέω, Katoikeis.* Does not refer to a temporary dwelling as is common throughout the NT, but to a permanent dwelling place.

**2:13 – “Antipas,”** *Gk. Ἀντίπας, Antipas.* We have no historical reference to Antipas outside of this passage. Likewise, he is the only martyr spoken of by name in the book of Revelation. Interestingly, the only other person referred to as “my faithful witness” in Revelation is Jesus himself (1:5). Antipas has lived out the fullness of a faithful witness to the same consequences as Jesus.

**2:17 – “New,”** *Gk. καινός, kainos.* That God is going to do something new is a theme in Revelation. This is the first occurrence in Revelation of the word.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Jesus is described vividly in this passage as the great warrior, wielding a double-edged rhomphaia sword, ready to use it against those who will not repent, as the sword of his mouth. How is this imagery of Jesus different from our modern conceptions of Jesus? Be honest, how does this imagery of Jesus sit with you? How do you react when you hear it?

**Read the story of Balaam and Balak in Numbers 22.** What connections do you see between this story and the passage for this week? What do these two passages teach us?

Pergamum is often referred to as the compromising church because they appear to have slowly allowed and participated in sinful behaviors. In so many ways throughout scripture, we see that sin doesn't happen suddenly; instead, it slowly creeps its way in. How have you seen this in your life? How have you seen this in church settings?

Jesus promises hidden manna and a stone with a new name on it. We offered a few possibilities for what these might refer to. Which one connects with you or makes the most sense to you? Sometimes, when I don't want to work out, I imagine how good it will feel when I finish, and that motivates me. Take a minute to imagine receiving the manna and stone from Jesus. What do you feel? How does this motivate you?

## BE THE CHURCH

I love to shoot my bow. I'm fairly accurate, but occasionally I miss the target altogether. When I do, I have to check the arrow (after I find it) to make sure it hasn't been compromised. I check its straightness, the glue on the veins, and tap it against something to make sure the graphite is strong. Even though it might look fine, it needs to be checked. This week, do a little sin audit as a group or with someone else. Ask this simple question of each different category. Would Jesus offer me the manna or the sword in each of these areas: my sexuality, my money, my emotions, my integrity, my language, my racism, my wordless thoughts, and my judgment? Repent where you need to and delight with Jesus where you need to.

# THE MISLED CHURCH: THYATIRA

## Revelation 2:18-29

Just as Jesus appears in judgment to the church in Pergamum, he appears similarly to Thyatira with eyes “like blazing fire” and feet “like burnished bronze.” This imagery is taken from Daniel 10:6 in which Daniel has a vision of a man coming in judgment whose “body was like topaz, his face like lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and his voice like the sound of a multitude.” Interestingly, before he gives Daniel the prophecy of judgment on the opposing nations, he refreshes Daniel and strengthens him. So on one hand the vision is of Jesus coming with due justice, but on the other hand he comes in encouragement saying, “Peace! Be strong now; be strong” (Dan. 10:19). The church in Thyatira needs both as they have tolerated a false prophet that Jesus himself names as Jezebel. This infamous nickname is taken from the OT story of King Ahab’s wife Jezebel, who was not only a foreigner but convinced the king to adopt Baal worship by erecting an altar and temple in Samaria (1 Kings 16). She directly opposed and called for the killing of God’s prophet Elijah, as well as promoting sexual immorality and sorcery. The phrase, “I will strike her children dead” (NIV) or “I will kill her children with plague” (NASB), catches our attention as especially harsh and surprising coming from Jesus. It could either refer to her actual children, which might suggest some sort of sexually transmitted disease that also ravaged her children. More likely, though, the language is figurative and refers to those who have been persuaded by her false teaching, which is a more consistent interpretation supported by the continued warning that Jesus “searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds” (2:23). Apparently, this false teacher is presenting some form of “deep secrets from Satan.” Based on the context, it appears that Jezebel’s deep knowledge of Satan allows her and her followers to nullify Satan’s power while they participate in sinful yet commercially and socially important activities. Jesus encourages those who have not fallen into Jezebel’s trap to hold on with no new burden. He promises them “authority over the nations.” The background to Jesus word to Thyatira is undoubtedly the messianic Psalm 2. This important Psalm, placed at the beginning of the Psalter, was a foundational text for the Israelites in promoting the hopeful coming of a Messiah. The early church routinely taught that Jesus was the fulfillment of this prophetic expectation (Acts 4:25-26; 13:33; Hebrews 1:5; 5:5). Jesus uses this specific language to introduce himself to Thyatira (“the word of the Son of God”), and the Psalm is directly quoted in Rev. 2:26-27. A common theme in both Revelation and the rest of the NT is that when Jesus returns as the enthroned king, his disciples will reign along with him as rulers under him and over various nations. Scholars debate the meaning of the morning star as it’s only direct OT allusion is a negative one ascribed to the King of Babylon in Isaiah 14:12. Yet, many have rightly pointed out that in Balaam’s fourth prophecy to the Israelites he says, “a star will come out of Jacob: a rod will arise out of Israel” (Num. 24:17.) Undoubtedly, John is citing this passage later as a description of Jesus in Rev. 22:16. In his commentary Weima points out, “Balaam’s prophecy about the star coming from Jacob was widely interpreted within Judaism as a reference to the messiah. In fact, the star metaphor originating from Num. 24:17 became a stock messianic expression in many Jewish writings (T. Levi 18.3; T. Jud. 24.1; CD 7.18-21; 1QM 11.6-7; 4QTestimonia 9-13).” The reward for the faithful in Thyatira, therefore, is Jesus himself, the bright morning star.



Thyatira

## GEOGRAPHY AND BACKGROUND

Interestingly, Thyatira is the smallest and least significant of the seven churches, yet it receives the longest letter. It originated as a military outpost established by the Attalid kings in the lush Lycus valley. Though it wasn’t large, it was wealthy, sitting along a major trade route. It had strong blue-collar guilds of craftsmen focused on goods such as bronze, wool, and linen. It was especially famous for its red/purple cloth called “Turkish red,” which is most likely what Lydia is selling, as the church is established in Thyatira in Acts 16:14. Each of these guilds functioned like unions or clubs and was the social structure of Thyatira. Behind each guild was a prominent deity. Gordon Fee writes, “Each of these guilds had their patron deities, and the primary social events among the guilds were the festive meals, where food was served in a context where it had been sacrificed to the patron deity. Very often these meals became an occasion for sexual immorality to flourish, where ‘girls’ were made available at the male-only meals.”

## Text Notes:

**2:20 – “Teaching,”** *Gk. διδάσκω, didaskō.* Thomas and Macchia in their commentary note, “It is significant that Jezebel teaches, for within the Johannine tradition, “teaching” is the exclusive domain of Jesus (John 1:38, 49; 3:2; 4:31; 6:25, 59; 7:14, 28, 35; 8:20; 9:2; 11:8, 28; 13:13–14; 18:20; 20:16; 2 John 9), the Father (John 6:45; 8:28), and the Paraclete/Chrisma (John 14:26; 1 John 2:22)... There are no positive examples of human teachers to be found in the Johannine literature. Rather, this Jezebel stands in line with the antichrists and deceivers (1 John 2:22), Balaam (Rev 2:14), and the Nicolaitans (2:15) in her attempts to teach.”

**2:18 – “Burnished Bronze,”** *Gk. χαλκολίβανον, chalkolibanon.* This word only occurs here and in Rev. 1:15. Likewise, we have it in no other surviving Greek text. The normal word for bronze is *chalkos* (found in Dan. 10:6). John appears to use a specific technical term that probably referred to a unique type of metal connected with a local guild in Thyatira.

**2:19 – “Love,”** *Gk. ἀγάπη, agape.* As noted previously, there is only one other use of the noun love in Revelation found in 2:4. The verbal form of the word is also used in 1:5; 3:9; 12:11; 20:9.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The background to the letter to Thyatira is Psalm 2. Read through Psalm 2. What connections do you find between these two texts? How does the early church interpret Psalm 2 through Jesus? What does this teach us about who Jesus is?

Jesus applauds the Christians in Thyatira for their “deeds, love, faith, service, and perseverance.” Then he makes this little but significant statement, “You are doing more than you did at first.” That caught my attention because it seems too often in our spiritual walk, we tend to start off on fire for God, but then slowly over the years, the fire wanes. Yet, Jesus praises those who continue to grow in their work for God. How have you seen your work for God grow or weaken through the years? Why do you think this is?

One of the most wonderful and extensive writers on Revelation is the scholar G. K. Beale. In his shorter commentary, he offers discussion questions. I thought this one would be impactful for discussion, as it was impactful for my own heart:

*At Thyatira, compromise arose out of pressure to conform to idolatrous practices in the community involving perhaps immoral conduct and likely participation in observances in idol temples. Revelation teaches that the Jezebel at Thyatira will reappear throughout the church age in different forms. What practices or social norms exist in our culture that place churches under pressure to conform and compromise? Have you observed specific instances of compromise in your church or fellowship of churches? Are there false teachers today who lead churches astray under the guise of a need to make the gospel more palatable to the world or to help Christians get along better in dealing with the world in their own situations (e.g., in workplaces)?*

## BE THE CHURCH

Do something more for your church. I don’t know what this looks like for your group. It can just be a one-time event or activity: clean the flower beds at church, volunteer to cover childcare one Sunday, offer to make breakfast snacks before church, commit to all attending and sitting together for a whole month of services, meet at a different time just to pray, offer a daily text of encouragement to someone in your family, etc. Choose to grow in your commitment to Christ rather than declining.

# THE COMPLACENT CHURCH: SARDIS

## Revelation 3:1-6

Do you remember waking up for school as a kid? How did you wake up? Did Mom come get you, or did Dad yell from downstairs? The kids in my house prefer it when their gentle and kind mother wakes them up, because I try to find the most annoying way possible to wake them up! Sometimes I throw on the lights or “caw” like a crow, progressively getting louder till they yell at me. The problem facing the church in Sardis is that they are sleeping when they should be up and moving. Jesus doesn’t come mild and gentle; instead, he declares, “WAKE UP!” In fact, Jesus says that the deeds he knows about them are that they claim to be alive, but are truly dead. Osborne writes, “It is a sad thing when the only accomplishment (‘deed’) of a church is what it names itself, especially when the reality shows that name to be a lie, as here.” Interestingly, Jesus doesn’t warn them about a dangerous intruder coming, but rather that he himself will come! The one who holds the seven spirits and stars surely can wake them from their slumber. The seven spirits (this phrase only occurs in Revelation) refers to either the fullness of the Holy Spirit as a tie back to 1:3 or to the seven angels commonly found throughout Revelation (8:2; 14:1, 6–8; 16:1) and other Jewish writings (1 Enoch 20:1–8; 4 Ezra 4:1). Most likely, this is an allusion to Isaiah 11:2–3. The seven stars are the seven angels of the seven churches (Rev. 1:20). Sardis was famously captured by Cyrus because the legendary king of Sardis, Croesus, arrogantly refused to post guards at the part of the city walls he thought impenetrable. In the same way, the Christians in Sardis aren’t watchful. Still, some have not soiled their clothes and wear the white garments of holiness proudly. This image of walking in white calls to mind for the ancient reader the great Roman processions in which the honored participants would walk triumphantly through the streets, all clothed in white to demonstrate their nobility. To the ones who do wake up, they will also be clothed (again) in white garments, their names will remain forever in God’s book of life, and their reputation will be upheld before God. The book of life is a common object in the OT, first mentioned by Moses in Exodus 32:32–33, but most prominently featured in Daniel 12:1, “At that time Michael, the great prince who protects your people, will arise. There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then. But at that time your people—everyone whose name is found written in the book—will be delivered.”

## GEOGRAPHY AND BACKGROUND

Sardis had once been a leading city of the area, but by this time was in a slow decline. It was founded around 1200 BC as the capital of the prosperous Lydian kingdom. The city was positioned between a 1500 ft precipice on three sides, creating a natural military stronghold. For centuries, it grew in wealth and power, routinely defeating opposing armies with its strength. It was finally fully defeated by the Greek empire in 214 BC when Lagoras and fifteen men climbed the great precipice and sneaked through to open the gates to the city, allowing the great army of Antiochus III to march in. The story of the careless guards who watched only the gates and missed Lagoras was widely shared as a cautionary tale to always be watchful. The main river by the city apparently held deposits of gold, causing Sardis to grow in commerce and prosperity. As a prosperous Roman city, it held a theater, stadium, and agropolis. Most notable, though, was an incredibly large temple to Artemis that had never actually been completed. Yet, in AD 17, a massive earthquake destroyed much of the city, and it had to be rebuilt with help from the Roman Empire. According to the Jewish historian Josephus, Sardis held a wealthy and influential Jewish population with its own synagogue and supply of ritually clean meat.

## Text Notes:

**3:1, 4, 5, 5** – “reputation (3:1), people (3:4), name (3:5, 5),” *Gk. ὀνόματα, onomata*. Literally, “name.” The play on words is missed in the English translations. In 3:1, Jesus tells the church that they have a “reputation” (*Gk. onomata*) of being alive, but this is the same Greek word as in 3:4 that is translated “people.” Thus, they have the name of being alive, but they are actually dead (3:1)... Yet, there are a few names who haven’t soiled their clothes (3:4). Those names will be forever in the book of life and acknowledged before God and the angels. Their name carries their reputation, their integrity.



## Text Notes:

**3:2 - "Wake up,"** *Gk. γίνου γρηγορῶν*. Literally, "Be wakeful or be watchful." This word has the idea of being vigilant like a guard who remains awake during his watch. It's the same word Jesus uses to tell his disciples to "stay awake" in the garden before his crucifixion (Matt. 26:38, 40, 41).

**3:3 - "thief,"** *Gk. κλεπτης, kleptes*. It always catches the reader off guard, but Jesus is routinely described as a thief (Rev. 16:15; 2 Pet. 3:10; 1 Thess. 5:2, 4). The point is not that Jesus will steal something that doesn't belong to him, but that no one knows when he is going to come, like no one knows when a thief is going to come.

**3:4 - "soiled,"** *Gk. μολύνω, moluno*. This word is used three times in the NT. The next usage is Rev. 14:4, where the 144,000 don't defile themselves with women. Wiema writes about the previous occurrence "in 1 Cor. 8:7, where the conscience of the one eating meat sacrificed to idols (i.e., the sin of idolatry) 'is defiled.' Since both these sins are explicitly identified in the immediately preceding sermons of Pergamum and Thyatira, it is tempting to see sexual immorality and idolatry as the source of defilement among most members of the Sardis church, in contrast to the few who avoided them."

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

I have watched many churches die. Some die quickly often imploding, but most die a slow and excruciating death over the years. What does this passage teach us about how and why a church dies? Have you ever known or been a part of a church that was alive in reputation only? What do you think are the warning signs a church should be aware of to prevent a slow death?

It's an issue of reputation. Jesus says that they have a reputation (name) of being alive, but they are actually dead. Whereas there are those whose reputation (name) has integrity and they have not soiled their white clothes. What reputation do Christians have in our world today? Is this reflective of the character of Jesus? What reputation do you have? Is this reputation (still) true? What reputation do you want to have?

It's obvious from this passage that the church in Sardis isn't very self-aware. I have found that in mentoring and teaching Christians of all ages, one of the most difficult problems to overcome is a lack of self-awareness. It's made even worse when someone who is not self-aware thinks of themselves as being very self-aware. One of the best ways to gain self-awareness is to have people who know you and love you speak into your life. Do you have people who will tell you hard truths? How have you grown in self-awareness throughout your life?

## BE THE CHURCH

The Penn State Nittany Lions have one of the largest football stadiums in the country and once a year, usually in their biggest game of the season, they call for a White Out in which every fan in the entire stadium dresses completely in white! It's considered one of the craziest and most intimidating experiences in college football. This week, have a white-out day! Either have everyone in your small group wear white to symbolize our white robes as followers of Jesus, or individually intentionally wear white to remind yourself to be pure and dedicated to Jesus.

# THE LOVED CHURCH: PHILADELPHIA

## Revelation 3:7-13

I had a black lab that used to get banished to the “outside” when he would do something bad, like get into the garbage or tear up a pillow. He would sit outside the door and whine with the most pitiful little howl. I imagine he felt pretty lonely and unloved sitting outside with the door shut and totally forgotten forever by the only people he loved! It’s a humorous analogy with some truths for the church in Philadelphia, which must feel locked out and forgotten by the one they love because of the persecution they are facing from the local Jewish community. Jesus writes to remind them that even though it might not feel that way, the door is still open, it always has been, and no one has the power to shut them out. They might feel forgotten, but the true king knows their faithfulness and will reward them when he returns. Jesus introduces himself with three titles rich with OT background. First, he is the “holy one,” a title taken directly from Isaiah where it occurs twenty-five times. Second, he is the “true one.” This polemical title also seems to be ripe with imagery from Isaiah 65:16, “Whoever invokes a blessing in the land will do so by the one true God; whoever takes an oath in the land will swear by the one true God.” Finally, he is the one who “holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open.” This again is a direct quote from Isaiah 22:22, “I will place on his shoulder the key to the house of David; what he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open.” The final imagery is interesting in that it brings to mind the little-known story of Shebna, who was the palace administrator (chief of staff) under Hezekiah, king of Judah. He arrogantly wielded so much power that he vainly carved for himself a tomb to be laid among the kings. Yet, God sent Isaiah to reprimand him and tell him he would die forgotten in a foreign country. In his place, he would bring up Eliakim and give him “the key to the house of David.” Jesus now reigns supreme over the house of David, wielding this same key. Some have suggested that this is a direct response to the local synagogue, which closed the door to Jewish Christians. These titles for Jesus set the stage for the actions he promises to perform. Imagine being a persecuted follower of Jesus and hearing the following promises. Jesus says he has “placed an open door” and will “make those who are of the synagogue of Satan... fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you.” He will also “keep you from the hour of trial,” “make (you) a pillar in the temple of my God,” “write on (the pillar) the name of my God,” and “write on (the pillar) my new name.” Jesus will definitely keep those who have kept his commands! Notably, Jesus does not register a complaint against the church in Philadelphia, nor does he call on them to repent like the other churches. Instead, the Christians will “be made pillars in the temple of God” and be given three new names. First, though they might have been dismissed from the synagogue, Jesus assures them they will be given a greater status than any synagogue could have; they will be pillars in God’s temple. Most likely by the time of this writing, the temple in Jerusalem has been destroyed, and now displaced Jews welcome another temple, but Christians understood that the new temple is God’s holy church. As pillars in this temple, “never again will they leave it!” Second, the names appear to be written on the pillar, as the “them” most likely refers back to the pillar. Rather than their personal names, they will have the new names of their legacy written on the pillars.

Philadelphia 

## GEOGRAPHY AND BACKGROUND

Philadelphia was a young city compared to the rest of the seven churches, having been named after Attalid king Attalus II, whose nickname “Philadelphus” was given to him for the loyalty he showed his predecessor and brother. This was the second name change the city had in the previous century. The city lay about thirty miles southeast of Sardis with rich volcanic soil. The volcanic soil was produced by a major fault line, which had caused the earthquake that destroyed Sardis in AD 17. The Greek geographer Strabo wrote of Philadelphia, “In Philadelphia, the city near it, not even the walls are safe, but in a sense are shaken and caused to crack every day. And the inhabitants are continually attentive to the disturbances in the earth and plan all structures with a view to their occurrence” (Strabo, 12.8.18). He continued, “the city Philadelphia, ever subject to earthquakes. Incessantly, the walls of the houses are cracked, different parts of the city being thus affected at different times. For this reason, few people live in the city, and most of them spend their lives as farmers in the country, since they have fertile soil. Yet one may be surprised at the few, that they are so fond of the place when their dwellings are so insecure; and one might marvel still more at those who founded the city.” (13.4.10). Still, the city was known for its relative prosperity and held a variety of festivals.

## Text Notes:

**3:7 – “Key of David,”** *Gk. τὴν κλεῖν Δαυίδ, ten klein David.* The background story of this phrase from Isaiah 22 is important for understanding all of Jesus’ letter to the church. Weima points out, “A key in the ancient world differed from its contemporary counterpart in ways that accentuate its function as a metaphor for power and authority. First, unlike a modern key, which is small and easily portable, an ancient key was large and awkward to carry. This explains why God promised not simply to hand Eliakim the key to the house of David but to place it ‘on his shoulder’ (Isa. 22:22). Second, unlike a modern key, which can be copied and given to several people, there was typically only one key for an ancient door, which meant that the person who possessed this key wielded unique authority... In the context of Rev. 3:7, this now refers to the absolute authority that Jesus, the true and trustworthy Messiah, possesses to control access to ‘the city of my God, the new Jerusalem’(3:12), that is, the kingdom of God” (Loc. 4308).

**3:9 – “I will make them come and fall down at your feet.”** This is most likely an allusion to Isaiah 60:14, “The children of your oppressors will come bowing before you; all who despise you will bow down at your feet.” The promise in 3:12, “I will write on them... the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem,” is also related to Isaiah 60:14, “will call you the City of the Lord, Zion of the Holy One of Israel.”

**3:10 – “kept, kept,”** *Gk. τηρέω, tereo.* The strength of this little phrase gets lost in the English. Jesus uses the word “kept” or “keep” twice in this verse. The ESV translates it well, “Because you have kept my word... I will keep you from the hour of the testing.”

**3:11 – “crown,”** *Gk. στέφανος, stephanos.* As in 2:10, this crown is not a crown of a king, but the crown that was given to a victor in the great games or in a military battle. It resembles a wreath more than a golden crown we often think of.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Have you ever been left out of something or kicked out of something? What did that feel like? If it’s true that the Jewish-Christians were kicked out of the synagogue in Philadelphia, how do you think that made them feel? How does this passage speak specifically to that scenario for the church? How does this resonate with us today?

Again, G. K. Beale offers a wonderful discussion question:

*Like many churches today, the Christian community at Philadelphia was small.*

*In its own eyes, as well as the eyes of others, it may have seemed insignificant, and perhaps some in it, facing persecution, wondered whether God had even forgotten them. Yet this church receives special commendation and promises from God. Does our Christian culture place too much significance on size? The church at Laodicea, which stood under threat of God’s judgment, was apparently thriving. How can the church at Philadelphia be an encouragement to us when, either as individuals or as a church community, we feel insignificant or even forgotten by God?*

Every time I read through this passage, I am surprised by verse 9, where Jesus says, “I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you.” The ending is what surprises me. Do you find this surprising? Why or why not? What is the significance of this phrase?

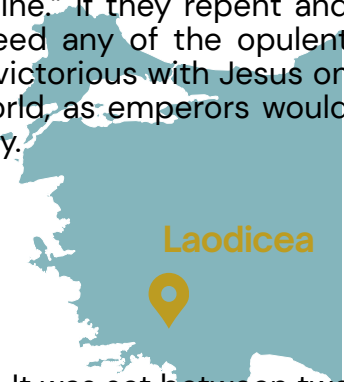
## BE THE CHURCH

Recently, I was walking up to Busch Stadium to watch a Cardinals game. The crowd was moving slowly as we neared the gate to enter the stadium. I looked down and noticed that the bricks under my feet had names inscribed on them and notes of dedication. I almost felt guilty walking on them! Jesus says that for the faithful, the new names of their lineage will be written on the pillars of the new temple of God. Take some time to walk by a monument with names on it this week. As you do, imagine your name being written eternally on God’s temple. Try to picture what that would look like and ask God for the fortitude to finish your journey faithfully.

# THE LUKEWARM CHURCH: LAODICEA

## Revelation 3:14-22

I reached for the coffee mug on my desk and anticipated the hot, bitter taste of fresh energy. Instead, I was dismayed to find nasty, room-temperature muck filling my mouth. I spit and gagged it back into the cup as quickly as I could, only then noticing I had taken a drink from the mug I had used last week and never cleaned up afterwards. In his commentary, Weima calls Laodicea, "The Church of Vomit and Vanity." What a perfectly nasty description. Jesus himself says he will spit them out. The church is neither hot nor cold, much like the local water in Laodicea, which was fed from a distant hot spring, but by the time it reached the city was lukewarm. In the ancient world (as today), cold water could be drunk and hot water used for baths, but lukewarm water was worthless, like the works of the Laodiceans. What happened to the church in Laodicea? We get insight from the words of 3:17, "You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.'" It appears that the growing prosperity of the Laodicean Christians has created spiritual laxity. Jesus offers them no commendation like the other churches receive; instead, he slams them, "you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked." His self-description in the opening verse serves as an important background to this statement. Jesus is no passing philosopher; he is the "Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation." These three phrases come from Isaiah 65:16-17 and recall the hope of a new Jerusalem and a new creation where *all* eat and drink out of God's abundance. The Laodiceans are reminded then that there is nothing they have that Jesus needs, and, in fact, he has all that they could ever truly need. He invites them to disdain their passing opulence, and instead, he offers them three things. First, "gold refined in the fire." Second, "white clothes to wear." Third, "salve to put on your eyes, so you can see." Each of these three metaphors is rich with local meaning. As a major economic and banking center, Laodicea knew the importance of securing finances in real assets such as refined gold. Laodicea was also well known as a textile powerhouse famous for its rich black wool produced by local sheep. Finally, Laodicea was home to a famous school of Ophthalmology noted for its locally produced eye salve. Yet, these metaphors also recall the vision of Jesus as already provided in revelation. In his commentary, Beale points out, "Notice how in the initial vision Christ was attired with a golden girdle, His hair was white like wool, and His eyes were like flaming fire, which correspond strikingly to the three products mentioned in this verse. The gold, the white garments, and the eyesalve all point to one thing — Christ. Their illness can be remedied only through a renewed relationship with Christ, by buying true spiritual resources from Him." The Laodiceans now expect a harsh consequence if they don't repent, but instead Jesus offers only positive consequences as he says, "those whom I love I rebuke and discipline." If they repent and respond, they will be invited to the great king's banquet that will far exceed any of the opulent banquets thrown by the local wealthy elite. In fact, they will be invited to sit victorious with Jesus on his throne. The double-throne (bisellium) was well known in the Ancient world, as emperors would often be depicted either sharing their throne with their predecessor or a deity.



## GEOGRAPHY AND BACKGROUND

Laodicea was the final of five cities lying on the major trade route of Anatolia. It was set between two rivers and was incredibly wealthy due to its banking, textiles, and medicine. It was also set in one of the most fertile areas of Asia Minor. The church in Laodicea was directly connected to two sister churches in Hierapolis (about six miles away) and Colossae (about ten miles away). These were planted by Epaphras (Col. 1:7; 4:12-13) and known to be in close communication (Col. 4:16). Interestingly, Hierapolis was world-renowned for the hot springs that made it a medicinal haven. Likewise, Colossae sat at the foot of Mount Cadmus, where it was fed year-round with cold, fresh water. Laodicea, on the other hand, had no close water supply and had to transport its municipal water from hot springs nearly five miles away through a series of aqueducts, which resulted in the water being lukewarm and full of minerals by the time it arrived at the city. The Roman Geographer Strabo notes, "The changing of water into stone (hard water) is said also to be the case with the rivers in Laodiceia, although their water is potable." That the Laodiceans were reprimanded for their opulence is not surprising, as Laodicea was home to some of the wealthiest individuals of the Roman

## GEOGRAPHY AND BACKGROUND

Empire. Many of the magnificent buildings, walkways, theaters, stadiums, and temples were constructed entirely upon the donations of singular individuals or families. Strabo again writes, “it was the fertility of its territory and the prosperity of certain of its citizens that made it great” (12.8.16). This self-reliance was an applauded aspect of Laodicea, which rebuilt after an earthquake in AD 60 without any help from the Roman Empire, as the historian Tacitus writes, “Laodicea arose from the ruins by the strength of its own resources, and with no help from us” (Annals 14.27.1).

### Text Notes:

**3:16 – “lukewarm,”** *Gk. χλιαρός, chlairo.* This is the only use of this word in the NT and Septuagint. It is even uncommon in ancient Greek.

**3:18 – “counsel,”** *Gk. συμβουλεύω, sumbeleuo.* This word is only used 5 times in the NT (Matt. 26:4; John 11:53; 18:14; Acts 9:23). In each occurrence, it means to take counsel or consult together for a decision. It’s interesting in this usage in that Jesus does not implore or demand, rather he counsels them much as a financial advisor might.

**3:18 – “to buy,”** *Gk. αγοράζω, agoradzo.* Again, Jesus uses a commercial or financial term in his hope of repentance for the Laodiceans. This may again be an allusion to Isaiah 55:1, “Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.”

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Laodicea’s background information might be the most pertinent for understanding what Jesus writes in his metaphors. Which of the various metaphors caught your attention this week, and why? Why is the background information helpful in unpacking this metaphor?

Jesus reprimands the church in Laodicea not only because of its wealth but because its wealth has created self-sufficiency that leads to spiritual laxity. How do you see this happening in our culture today? How have you seen this play out in your own spiritual life?

Jesus states bluntly, “those whom I love I rebuke and discipline.” I think we would freely admit that we believe Jesus loves us. Why do you think we are hesitant to recognize Jesus rebuke and discipline in our lives? What do you see as the connection between love and discipline in scripture vs. love and discipline in our world today? How have you seen Jesus rebuke and discipline in your own life?

## BE THE CHURCH

As we close this study, it’s interesting to compare and contrast the various churches. Take a minute to scan back through all seven churches. What stands out to you as you think about them in comparison to one another? Which church will you remember? Which one resonates best with our current church, either in its specific local setting or in our broader culture as a whole?

## REVELATION 1:19-20

“Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later. The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and **the seven lampstands are the seven churches.**”