

Lesson 2 Revelation

I Background Information for Bible Study Leaders

A Information for lesson

Scripture: Revelation 2 – 3

Main Focus: Wake-up call to the 7 churches and to us.

Hebrew Scriptures: Numbers 22; 31:16, Hosea 1-2, Ezekiel 16, I Kings 18:19

Major images and meanings: The angel of each church – the corporate spirit of each congregation.

Jesus knocking at the door – possibly a reference to the Lord's Supper.

New terms: Conqueror (from the Greek *nike*) – not militaristic nor triumphal but encouraging and hopeful; follower of the Lamb.

B Main points for Revelation from website:

Seven Letters to Seven Churches

John of Patmos addresses a series of letters to the early Christian communities of Asia Minor (circa 96 AD). The seven letters are like performance reviews of each church. These communities were grappling with issues such as Christians' relationship to the dominant culture, questions of wealth and poverty, and relationships with Jewish communities. John's goal is to persuade these churches not to blend in with their culture but to remain faithful witnesses to Jesus. John also seeks to give them hope (RP 15) (L P 21)

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Eavesdropping on Ephesus and the Other Churches

John employs a pattern with each letter: He begins with a description of Jesus, followed by a performance review of each church. Next, he issues a call for repentance. Finally, he delivers a promise to the "conqueror" receiving the letter. All seven churches are able to listen in on the diagnosis of each others' conditions (RP 15–16) (L P 21-23)

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First Church of Ephesus

- Ephesus was the largest city of the seven and was closest to the island of Patmos.
- John emphasizes that Jesus is alive and watching over each church, and that it is Jesus' message that comes to each church, not John's.
- The church at Ephesus receives high praise for its "patient endurance" (*Rev. 2:2*) and the strict theological standards it applies when attacking false teachers. But John chides the church because its members have forgotten to love one another. (RP 16-17) (L P 23-24)

Second Church of Smyrna and Sixth Church of Philadelphia

- In John's time, the church of Smyrna was economically poor and Philadelphia was powerless. Both were suffering opposition from their neighbors.
- Both churches win heartfelt praise and no blame at all.
- John emphasizes that Jesus himself experienced suffering and death, and thus is able to walk alongside them in their current experiences of poverty and exclusion.
- These two letters also introduce the question of the relationship of Christians to Judaism. We cannot know the specific areas of conflict with Jewish communities in these two cities, but John's criticism should be viewed as a sibling dispute within different branches of the Jewish family—not as anti-Judaism. (RP 17-18) (L P 25-26)

Third Church of Pergamum

- Jesus' urgent message to this church is that it must not compromise or accommodate itself to Roman culture.
- John takes a hard line on food issues because meat sold in city markets would have first been sacrificed to pagan gods. For Christians wishing to participate in banquets or trade guilds, such a strict line meant social marginalization.
- A rival teacher was apparently advocating a more lenient position on eating meat, and John attacks this leader for teaching Christians to "practice fornication," probably a metaphorical reference to idolatry. John wanted his readers to avoid the "fornication" of participating in patriotic acts of worshiping the empire. (RP 18) (L P 26-27)

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Fourth Church of Thyatira

- The fourth letter is the only one that refers to “all the churches” (*Rev. 2:23*).
- Thyatira was a commercial city. Its many trade guilds may have included a few well-off Christians who wanted to participate in civic life.
- John is furious that a *female* rival leader permits Christians to eat meat sacrificed to pagan gods. John labels this prophet “Jezebel”—not her real name, but a pejorative link to the queen of Israel who promoted pagan worship. John uses sexual innuendo to vilify this woman. Yet the activity he condemns is not sexual at all. It is idolatry—worship of the emperor and the empire (RP 19) (L P 27-28).

Fifth Church of Sardis and Seventh Church of Laodicea

- Sardis and Laodicea are the two churches that receive no praise, only blame.
- Laodicea receives the harshest performance review, as well as the most wonderful promise. The prosperous Laodicean church members are rich and feel secure in their wealth. Their lukewarm comfort nauseates God.
- If the church repents of its complacency, its future will be wonderful—the opportunity to share a throne with Jesus, just as Jesus shares a throne with God! (RP 19-20) (L P 28-29)

We Are the Philadelphians, the Laodiceans, All of the Above

- It is possible, though not very comfortable, to see ourselves and our own churches in the letters to the seven churches. The diversity of these ancient churches and the challenges they faced can give insight into the diversity of our churches today.
- We might be so fixed on pure doctrine and theological correctness that we risk losing our “first love.” If so, the challenge is to rekindle our love for one another, for our neighbors, and for God. Perhaps we feel utterly marginalized, poverty stricken or powerless. If so, Jesus’ promises bring a comforting message and a sense of true hope. Four overly-complacent churches are told to repent, and five churches experience sharp rebuke. These rebukes are wake-up calls. The challenge for us is to look for analogous issues today and ways we risk being dangerously seduced by our culture and its way of life.
- The good news is that Jesus stands at the door and knocks. He wants to erase every trace of lukewarm Christianity and set us on fire as witnesses for the gospel. (RP20) (L P 29-30)

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C Lesson Summary

Lesson Two: Seven Letters to Seven Churches

John of Patmos addresses a series of letters to the early Christian communities of Asia Minor. The seven individual letters are like performance reviews, examining the strengths and weaknesses of each church. These seven churches faced challenges unique to each local situation. They grappled with issues such as Christians' relationship to the dominant culture, questions of wealth and poverty, and relationships with Jewish communities. John's letters to these churches are passionate and uncompromising. His goal is to persuade them not to blend in with their culture but to remain faithful witnesses to Jesus. John also seeks to give them hope.

D Suggested hymns

Lesson Two: Seven Letters to Seven Churches PH 382, "Somebody's Knocking at Your Door" After singing this spiritual, wonder aloud with your group why the writer uses the words, "knocks like Jesus." How might Jesus knock? Might Jesus knock in different ways depending on what we are thinking or doing? How have you experienced Jesus knocking at your door?

E Hand-outs for the Lesson

Performance Reviews of the 7 Churches

A Prayer for My Church

Copy of "Somebody's Knocking at Your Door."

II Additional information for the Lesson

The ancient mail would have been delivered from Ephesus, a major city in the region, to Smyrna to Pergamum, and so forth, so John wrote his letters accordingly. The seven churches in this lesson are not in the same order as they are found in the book of Revelations. Instead, several churches that are dealing with similar issues and concerns are paired.

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Nicolaitans, mentioned in verse 2:6, are a mystery, except that Jesus hated what they stood for. Some think they were a cult who tried to create a ruling class of priests in the Ephesus church. Others believe they taught sinning was not wrong for it involved the physical body and not the spiritual part of a person. Another group said Christians should indulge in sinful acts, in order to understand why they were sinful. Whoever they were, the Church of Ephesus and Jesus hated them.

III Another suggested lesson outline.

Opening Devotion (RP 21) (LP 32)

Eyewitness News: Program 2

Read the last two sentences of the Summary (RP 15) (LP 21) for 3 reasons for letters

Discuss the 7 ways the letters were alike. (RP 15& 16) (LP 22 & 23)

Read the last paragraph on Eavesdropping on church.(RP 16) (LP 23)

Locating the churches using map foldout.

Give out handout #1. Using it, read the scriptures listed and fill in the performance reviews for the churches.

Look at how the churches in our lesson are grouped. Compare them. (See section II).

Ephesus	Smyrna and Philadelphia	Pergamum
Thyatira	Sardis and Laodicea	

If John were to visit our church and then write a letter of performance, what do you think he would say? Would our congregation want other churches to have the letter read during their worship?

Ask which of the 7 churches best matches our congregation.

Give out Handout #2. Encourage participants to complete the prayer.

Read "Where Is the Hope?" (RP 21) (LP 33)

Read or sing the suggested hymn. Handout #3

Close with prayer. (RP 20) (LP 31)

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Lesson Two Handout One

Performance Reviews of the Seven Churches

(Sample answers are provided for Ephesus.)

Ephesus—patient and hardworking, but no longer filled with love (*Rev. 2:1–7*)

1. Warning/Praise (2:5)

Unless they repent, their lampstand will be removed (church will not exist).

2. Promise for conquerors (2:7)

Conquerors can eat from the tree of life in God's paradise.

3. What might this promise mean?

It might mean a reversal of the punishment Adam and Eve received when they ate from the forbidden tree in the Garden of Eden (*Gen. 3:24*); it might be a sign of favor and life eternal.

Smyrna—poor in material things, but rich in spirit (*Rev. 2:8–11*)

1. Warning/Praise (2:10a–10b)

2. Promises for conquerors (2:10c–11)

3. What might these promises mean?

Pergamum—influenced by local culture; mostly withstanding their evils (2:12–17)

1. Warning/Praise (2:16)

2. Promise for conquerors (2:17)

3. What might this promise mean?

Thyatira—filled with faith, but too tolerant of members who mislead others (2:18–29)

1. Warning/Praise (2:22–23)

2. Promises for conquerors (2:26–28)

3. What might these promises mean?

Sardis—once faith-filled and alive, but now mostly dead (3:1–6)

1. Warning/Praise (3:3)

2. Promise for conquerors (3:5)

3. What might this promise mean?

Philadelphia—powerless and threatened, but faithful (3:7–13)

1. Warning/Praise (3:8)

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2. Promises for conquerors (3:10, 12)
3. What might these promises mean?

Laodicea—rich in wealth, but lukewarm in faith (3:14–22)

1. Warning/Praise (3:16)
2. Promises for conquerors (3:20–21)
3. What might these promises mean?

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Journeys Through Revelation: Apocalyptic Hope for Today

Lesson Two Handout Two

A Prayer for My Church

Lord, I thank you for my church, and for all its ministries to me and to others. Our church seeks to be faithful, Lord. We want to be useful, to be fruitful, and to reach out to others in your name, offering them the same gifts of faith, hope, and love that John talked about so long ago. ☞

One strength of my church for which I offer thanksgiving:

One weakness of my church which needs forgiveness and transformation:

One need of my church for which I ask God's provision and direction:

One blessing that I have received from my church, for which I am grateful:

Hear my prayer for my church, O Lord. Amen.

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Selected hymn for lesson 2. Read or sing together.

Somebody's Knocking at Your Door

Somebody's knocking at your door; somebody's knocking at your door.
O sinner, why don't you answer? Somebody's knocking at your door.

Knocks like Jesus, somebody's knocking at your door;
Knocks like Jesus, somebody's knocking at your door.

Somebody's knocking at your door; somebody's knocking at your door.
O sinner, why don't you answer? Somebody's knocking at your door.

Can't you hear Him? Somebody's knocking at your door;
Can't you hear Him? Somebody's knocking at your door.

Somebody's knocking at your door; somebody's knocking at your door.
O sinner, why don't you answer? Somebody's knocking at your door.

Somebody's knocking at your door; somebody's knocking at your door.
O sinner, why don't you answer? Somebody's knocking at your door.

Answer Jesus. Somebody's knocking at your door;
Answer Jesus. Somebody's knocking at your door.

Somebody's knocking at your door; somebody's knocking at your door.
O sinner, why don't you answer? Somebody's knocking at your door.