

Lesson 4 – Overview

The Seven Churches of Revelation

John was told to write letters to seven different churches telling them about the visions that God gave him on the Isle of Patmos. This lesson provides an overview of the messages to the churches and begins examining the first letter to the church at Ephesus.

God commanded John to, “Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea.” (Rev 1:10) From this we can conclude that the book/letter was written as one document whereby all the churches would see the message to every church involved. Churches could learn from another by looking at the strengths and weaknesses of individual churches.

Seven Churches in Revelation – Their Ultimate Significance

The passage suggests three things we should recognize.

- I. The churches are actual places
- II. There is a historical significance to each church
- III. There is prophetic significance related to the universal Christian church throughout the ages.

The seven churches in Revelation are literal churches from the first century AD. However, the seven churches in Revelation also have spiritual significance for churches and believers today. Indeed, the primary purpose for John writing his letters to the seven churches was to deliver Christ’s “report card” for the churches of that time (*near future*). However, a second purpose for John’s inspired writings was to describe seven types of churches (and individual believers) that would surface time and again throughout history (*far future*). These short letters to the seven churches of Revelation act as important reminders to those who call themselves “followers of Christ”.

Part of Paul’s ministry involved both establishing new churches as well as visiting these churches on a regular basis to equip the saints and build up the believers in the faith. Looking at the location of the seven churches a logical pattern for a circuit riding preacher would be from Ephesus around the horn to Laodicea.



I. Churches are actual places

Following the sequence of churches in Revelation the letter would be delivered to Ephesus, then Smyrna, up to Pergamum, down to Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and last to Laodicea.

II. The historical significance of the churches

Seven Churches in Revelation – Then and Now

The seven churches in Revelation are located in western Asia Minor (present-day Turkey), accessible by way of the Aegean Sea and the ancient trade routes between the West and East. For various reasons, whether trade, military, or pure hedonism, these cities were major cultural hubs throughout history. During the first few centuries after Jesus Christ, these Roman-controlled cities were also important in early Christianity. Here are the seven churches of Revelation as described by the writer John in the late first century AD (click on the name to dig deeper into the archaeology):

1. [Ephesus](#) – The desirable church that left its first love ([Revelation 2:1-7](#)). Ephesus was the influential capital city of Asia Minor on the Aegean Sea. Ephesus is now known for its huge metropolis of ancient streets, arches and ruins.
2. [Smyrna](#) – The persecuted church that suffered poverty and martyrdom ([Revelation 2:8-11](#)). Smyrna was located north of Ephesus in a powerful trading position on the Aegean Sea known for its harbors, commerce, and marketplaces. The primary ruins of Smyrna are located in the modern Turkish city of Izmir.
3. [Pergamum](#) – The worldly church that mixed doctrines and needed to repent ([Rev 2:12-17](#)). Pergamum is located on the plains and foothills along the Caicus River in Western Turkey. It was considered a major city in Asia Minor since the 3rd century BC, and became a Greek and Roman hub for temple worship.
4. [Thyatira](#) – The false church that followed a seductive prophetess ([Rev 2:18-29](#)). Thyatira is located in western Asia Minor about 42 miles inland from the Aegean Sea. The ancient city was known for its textiles and dyeing trade, and is now known as the Turkish city of Akhisar.
5. [Sardis](#) – The "dead" church that fell asleep ([Revelation 3:1-6](#)). Sardis is located on the banks of the Pactolus River in western Asia Minor, 60 miles inland from Ephesus and Smyrna. Popular ruins include the decadent temples and bath house complexes.
6. [Philadelphia](#) – The church of brotherly love that endures patiently ([Revelation 3:7-13](#)). Philadelphia is located on the Cogamis River in western Asia Minor, about 80 miles east of Smyrna. Philadelphia was known for its variety of temples and worship centers.
7. [Laodicea](#) – The "lukewarm" church with a faith that's neither hot nor cold ([Rev 3:14-22](#)). Laodicea is located in the Lycus River Valley of western Asia Minor, a primary trade route between the cultures of the West and East. Laodicea was known as a primary hub for the Roman aqueduct system.

III. The prophetic significance of the churches

The seven churches are representative of the character of churches in John's day, but the same message to the churches speaks to the universal church today (i.e. Valley View Baptist Church). How do we know God is speaking to our church? Consider two verses.

First, "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches" (2:7). All churches are to listen to the message and take action.

Second, Rev 2:23 says, "ALL the churches shall know", not only the seven churches but ALL churches. The problems addressed in the churches are universal from Paul's day to present day church history.

Chapters 2 and 3 constitute a part of "the words of this prophecy" (1:3; 22:18) Chapters 4 and 5 states, "what things will be hereafter" (4:1) which points to a prophetic significance. Churches still fall into these same categories today.

Looking at the ups and downs of these churches (near future when written) throughout time gives a prophetic picture of the future health of churches today and beyond (far future) plus a warning to improve.

Let's review early church patterns:

Ephesus pictures the early decline of vital Christianity at the close of the first century, in that she had left her first love.

Smyrna covers the period of martyrdom prevailing during the first three centuries familiarly known as the ten general church persecutions.

Pergamos [Pergamum] prefigures the union of church and state under Constantine including the development of priestcraft and moral corruption.

Thyatira portrays the domination of the Roman hierarchy, when a corrupt spiritual leadership under the guise of a lewd woman "knew the depths of Satan."

Sardis points to the days of the Reformation at which time "a few names ... which ... [had] not defiled their garments," again brought a saving message to a benighted Christendom and a needy world.

Philadelphia speaks of a period of orthodoxy and evangelism inaugurated by such leaders as Wesley and Whitefield, at which time all the nations of the world presented "open doors" for the reception of the Gospel.

Laodicea stages the end-time apostasy in language precisely the same as that employed concerning the last days by Jesus and the apostles Paul, James, Peter, John, and Jude. [*In conclusion, there are 3 legitimate ways to view these churches*]

(*"A Revelation of Jesus Christ," by J.B. Smith, Herald Press, Penn., 1961, pp. 61-62*)

The seven churches are:

1. Real places
2. Historical in nature
3. Prophetic for the church today

Next Week – Lesson 5 – The Church at Ephesus and Smyrna