

# **The 7 Churches of Asia Minor**

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**Title:** Unlike most books of the Bible, Revelation contains its own title: "The Revelation of Jesus Christ" (1:1). "Revelation" (Greek Apokalupsis) means "an uncovering", "an unveiling", or "a disclosure".

**Background - Setting:** Revelation begins with John, the last surviving apostle and an old man, in exile on the small, barren Island of Patmos, located in the Aegean Sea southwest of Ephesus. The Roman authorities had banished him there because of his faithful preaching of the gospel (1:9). While on Patmos, John received a series of visions that laid out the future history of the world.

John was told to write down what he saw in a book and to send it to seven churches in the province of Asia (western Asia Minor): **Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea** (1:11). The original recipients of Revelation were the believers in these seven churches. Tradition reports that the apostle John exercised spiritual oversight over these churches while he resided at Ephesus during the final decades of the first century. The order of the listing of the seven churches forms a semicircle beginning in the west at Ephesus, then extending northward to Pergamos, and subsequently southeastward to Laodicea. Revelation was probably sent initially as a circular letter beginning at Ephesus and thence throughout the province.

**Historical - Theological themes:** Since it is primarily prophetic, Revelation contains little historical material, other than that (in chapters 1-3). The 7 churches to who the letters were addressed were existing churches in Asia Minor (modern Turkey). Apparently, they were singled out because John had ministered in them.

As "The faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth" (1:5);

As "the Alpha and the Omega" (1:8);

As the one "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty" (1:8);

As a son of man (1:13);

As the one who was dead, but now is alive forevermore (1:18);

As the Son of God (2:18);

As the one who is holy and true (3:7);

As "the Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God" (3:14);

One of the unusual things about the book of Revelation is that it is the only book in the Bible that contains a promise to everyone that reads it, and all that hear it will be abundantly blessed. The early church read the book of Revelation in its entirety every time they met. There is a curse spoken at the end of Revelation to anyone who tampers with the contents of the Bible.

In Revelation, it appears to me, that our Lord is pulling the curtain aside and allowing us to see what He really is and what He expects from us. Many people call this the Apocalypse which means the revealing.

Revelation is written in symbols so that people cannot understand with their mind but must have faith. So many things in the Bible are veiled to the nonbeliever. So many people look at the Bible literally, but to truly understand, we must understand it through the Spirit.

**Revelation 2:1** "Unto the angel of the church of **Ephesus** write; These things saith he that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand, who walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks"

## **The Loveless Church**

**"Angel"**: The elder or pastor from the church.

**"Ephesus"**: The city of Ephesus was one of the most important commercial and religious cities in Asia Minor. The most famous temple of the goddess Artemis (Diana), was located there. It was also John's headquarters before his exile. Ephesus served as the "mother" church to the others, all of which were connected by the same Roman road.

From the spiritual standpoint of churches today, we would see this church located in the midst of a very worldly surrounding but being a church holding up a standard against the evil surroundings. This church would be a spiritual church guided and taught through the Holy Spirit of God. This church will be found working when the Lord comes back. They have been full of the power and presence of God. Jesus first tells them the good, then tells them of their weakness, as we see in the next verse. Even though this church has worked hard and not given up, we will see here that they have a few shortcomings.

**Revelation 2:2** "I know thy works, and thy labor, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil: and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars:"

**Revelation 2:3** "And hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name's sake hast labored, and hast not fainted."

*This church does not just accept everyone who says he is an apostle. They judge the message before they accept the apostle. It seems that this church is well grounded in the Word. This church (the physical church), was one of the older churches founded by Paul and nurtured by Timothy. This physical church of Ephesus was located in a busy city.*

**"Hast not fainted"**: For over 40 years, since its founding, this church had remained faithful to the Word and the Lord. Through difficulty and persecution, the members had endured, always driven by the right motive, i.e., for Christ's name and reputation.

**Revelation 2:4** "Nevertheless I have [somewhat] against thee, because thou hast left thy first love. "

**"Left thy first love"**: To be a Christian is to love the Lord Jesus Christ (John 14:21, 23; 1 Cor. 16:22). But the Ephesians' passion and fervor for Christ had become cold, mechanical orthodoxy. Their doctrinal and moral purity, their undiminished zeal for the truth, and their disciplined service were no substitute for the love for Christ they had forsaken.

*2 Timothy 3:5: "Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away."*

Probably this church has gotten too sophisticated for healing and deliverance. Perhaps some of the world's music had crept in unaware. Perhaps this church has begun to entertain more than teach. This church is more appealing to the world than to God.

**Revelation 2:8 "And unto the angel of the church in Smyrna write; These things saith the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive;"**

## **The Persecuted Church**

**Revelation 2:9 "I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich) and [I know] the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but [are] the synagogue of Satan."**

Smyrna was a rich and beautiful commercial city in Asia Minor and was recognized by Rome as its loyal ally and a center of emperor worship. In His message to this church, the Lord again commended their good works, "*I know your works, tribulation, and poverty*". These believers were persecuted and often lost their means of livelihood as a result of their commitment to the Lord.

Perhaps, their **poverty spoken of** here indicates that they are not obsessed about having worldly wealth. They are not rich in things the world would class as wealth. Their wealth is of spiritual things. The treasure that we should all be seeking is the treasure stored up in heaven

This "**synagogue of Satan**" that comes against them is what we were discussing before. These are religious people with an outward appearance of belief but with no inward conviction. This literal church at Smyrna had many martyrs who stood against the evil, idolatrous people around them even unto the death.

In our day, it is the same situation. If we are in God's army, we must be willing to stand for what is right even unto death. The Spirit and the flesh (world), will be locked in battle until the return of Jesus. The world and its system, and even the idolatrous church is opposed to true righteousness and holiness. Jesus is coming back for a church that is without spot or wrinkle.

"Some say they are Jews": Although they were Jews physically, they were not true Jews but spiritual pagans (compare **Rom. 2:28**). They allied with other pagans in putting Christians to death as they attempted to stamp out the Christian faith.

Making a public confession of their faith meant poverty, hunger, imprisonment, and sometimes death. The word "tribulation" used here paints a picture of a huge rock crushing whatever lies beneath it. The word conveys intense and constant pressure. Can you identify with that? Many of you are experiencing "intense and constant pressure". You aren't forgotten! Jesus sees and knows.

**But know this:**

**Not all those who claim to be Christians are actually Christians.** If we are not careful, we will be like these Jews. We may say we are a Christian, and the world might actually believe that we are because of our outward appearance, but Jesus looks at the heart.

**Matthew 7:22-23** *"Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works?" "And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity"*

**Revelation 2:12** *"And to the angel of the church in Pergamos write; These things saith he which hath the sharp sword with two edges;"*

## **The Compromising Church**

It was also the center of worship for four of the most important pagan cults of the day: Zeus, Athene, Dionysus and Asclepius. They were not forgotten. Jesus recognized their faithfulness despite the satanic environment in which they lived. In the original Greek, the words "holdest fast" means, "to hold onto desperately with all of one's power." These Christians were holding onto their faith with everything they had and Jesus commended them for their faithfulness.

**Revelation 2:13** *"I know thy works, and where thou dwellest, [even] where Satan's seat [is]: and thou holdest fast my name, and hast not denied my faith, even in those days wherein Antipas [was] my faithful martyr, who was slain among you, where Satan dwelleth."*

Jesus says that He knows **where they dwell**. He is referring to the very evil surroundings. This was an educational center. There were great libraries and places of worldly education.

This church is committing sin; compromising with the heathen around them. Many times, worldly wisdom and faithfulness to God are not cohesive. The Bible says that "The carnal mind is enmity against God" (**Romans 8:7**).

Faith is not fact. The educated mind wants to prove by facts. Faith, I say again, is not fact:

**Hebrews 11:1-2** *"Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." "For by it the elders obtained a good report."*

**"Where Satan's seat [is]":** The headquarters of satanic opposition and a Gentile base for false religions. On the acropolis in Pergamum was a huge, throne-shaped altar to Zeus. In addition, Asclepius, the god of healing, was the god most associated with Pergamum. **His snake-like form is still the medical symbol today.**

