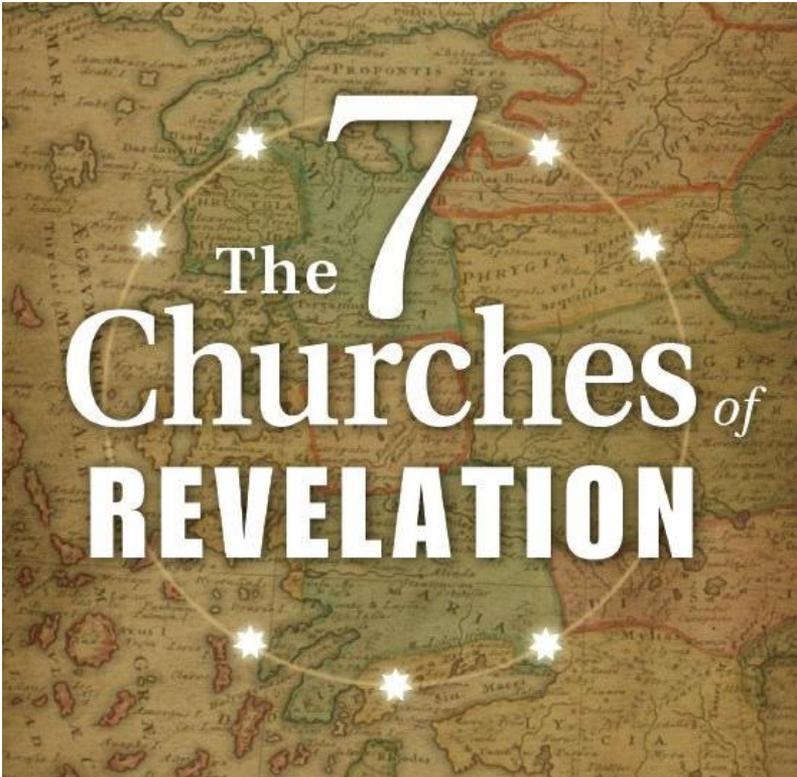


STUDY GUIDE

to Accompany the MLEPC Sermon Series and
RightNow Media Videos with Pastor Joseph Stowell



MT. LEBANON EVANGELICAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

May 1—June 26 Sermon Series
MLEPC.org * YouTube.com/MLEPC

April 24, 2022

Greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ!

Welcome to our Sermon Series for May 1—June 26, 2022. Whether you are studying with a small group or on your own, we invite you to watch the videos available at <https://app.rightnowmedia.org/en/content/details/1158>. If you have not set up a RightNow Media account yet, it is free to do so, and instructions are available here: <https://mlepc.org/rightnow-media/>.

Let's join together and consider the words the Lord has for our church today through these ancient letters to the Seven Churches in Revelation.

Blessings,
Pastor Carolyn
cpoteet@mlepc.org

Sermon Schedule

Sunday	Scripture	Video
May 1	Rev. 1	#1: The Conquering King
May 8	Rev. 2:1-7	#2: The Church that's Left Its First Love
May 15	Rev. 2:8-11	#3: The Church about to be Tested
May 22	Youth Sunday	
May 29	Rev. 2:12-17	#4: The Church that Compromised
June 5	Rev. 2:18-29	#5: The Dead Church
June 12	Rev. 3:1-6	#6: Part 1: The Promiscuous Church
June 19	Rev. 3:7-13	#6: Part 2: The Church before the Open Door
June 26	Rev. 3:14-22	#7: The Lukewarm Church

All photos by Bob Jamison

INTRODUCTION TO THE LETTERS TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES IN REVELATION

When we hear “The Book of Revelation,” we are often struck with fear and trepidation. The thought is that the text of this biblical book is too lofty, too confusing, or simply too terrifying to study. But that couldn’t be further from the truth. The Book of Revelation is not designed to instill fear into the hearts and minds of the followers of Christ, but instead, it is to be an encouragement to readers living in troubled times.

Who, What, Where, When, and How

With the right tools, we can untangle some of the complicated teachings of Revelation. We need to think about the original context of the book—the who, what, when, and where of the book, as well as its genre—how was it written or in what style.

Context: Inspired by the Holy Spirit, the Apostle John, the “Beloved Disciple,” wrote Revelation toward the end of his life. He wrote from the island of Patmos, a Greek territory where he was exiled under the anti-Christian persecution of Domitian, the Roman Emperor from 81-96 AD. The original audience was also being persecuted as he was. As we will discuss below, the specific churches addressed in Revelation 2-3 were in Asia Minor, in what is now Turkey. John wrote four other books, the Gospel of John and the three Epistles of John, but Revelation is in a very different style.

Genre: The Bible contains many different genres, including history books like 1&2 Kings, poetry like the Psalms, biographies like the Gospels, and letters like Philippians. The Book of Revelation fits a genre known as “**prophetic-apocalyptic**”—in fact, the book is often referred to as John’s Apocalypse. **Prophetic literature** in the Bible is designed to reveal the heart and purpose of God through visions, metaphors, and direct messages. **Apocalyptic literature** is also revelatory, but with a bent toward the things that will occur during the “Last Days” (the 50¢ word for that is

eschatological). Instead of instilling fear in its faithful readers, it is designed for discipleship, growth, hope, warning, discipline, and to encourage faithfulness and allegiance to Christ in all circumstances, even hard ones.

John uses visions and direct messages from the Lord to instruct Christians how to believe, think, and act in light of the persecution they face. That persecution could come from the Babylon of old, the Roman Empire of John's present, or any future political, military, economic, or spiritual system that might make a claim to dominion, power, or influence—basically anything other than God.

John wants his readers to know that it is God who is in charge, and God alone. Those who are in Christ need not fear—they need only to “hold fast.” All other powers on earth are simply making a pretense to power, whereas Jesus Christ is “King of Kings and Lord of Lords.”

The Book of Revelation does this in a manner which ties the past into the present and indeed what will happen in the future. Revelation calls us to be watchful interpreters of its message, but it likewise resists human attempts to figure it out once and for all. We need to be cautious of trying to use a one-to-one correspondence between visions and events or trying to prophetically “totalize” its message, as if humans can have the same forethought and knowledge that God does. We are called to prayerfully listen, watch, and with disciplined discernment, apply the message of Revelation to our present moment, as individuals, as a church, and as members of the body of Christ around the world.

The Book of Revelation has a very wide breadth, treating topics as diverse as aligned vs. wayward churches, heretical vs. truthful beliefs, issues facing people in Asia Minor and under Roman “rule,” beasts—whether of the land or sea—which represent terrible historical leaders such as Nero as well as future figures, the role of the antichrist, or any other entity which has sought or will seek to persecute both Jews and Christians, the role of Jews and Christians in salvation

history, the final judgement, the freedom experienced by those who belong to Christ, a description of the New Heavens and New Earth, eschatological timelines, and most importantly, the purpose, role, and beauty of worship, and the object of Christian worship, namely, Jesus Christ, the Lamb who was slain to purchase the souls of human beings.

The Book of Revelation ultimately exists to bring glory to the Triune God, with an emphasis on the claim that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior, and that those who are His are called to remain steadfast until the end, whether that end is the end of our earthly lives, or the return of our Risen Savior.

The Letters to the Churches

For our sermon-related study this Spring, we will be taking a closer look at a very specific part of the Book of Revelation



Ancient Smyrna

known as the *Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia Minor*. These churches sat on trade routes that were central to Asia Minor (modern day Turkey), and the hub of culture, commerce, political power, and military significance at the time of John the Apostle.

These seven churches were so central to the Christian churches in the Roman empire that if a message was given to them, it would then be shared with churches throughout the known Christian world at that time. So, the message to the seven churches was a message for every church, both at the time of John, and now. Ultimately, the message of Revelation was distributed to the entire Christian and non-Christian world, as it was and remains a book within God's eternal and revealed Word.

The letters were and are a direct message from the Risen Lord Jesus Christ to churches in these areas: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. God, by inspiring John to write, gives messages to these churches that are both just and necessary. Both the strengths and the weaknesses of the churches are mentioned, and the intent appears to be both encouragement and warning.

And that is what Christian communities today need. God loves us deeply and wants us to know and understand the truth in Jesus Christ his Son.

In a basic sense, what were the strengths and weaknesses of these seven churches?

- **Ephesus** abandoned its love for Christ and his teachings (Rev. 2:1-7).
- **Pergamum** compromised its beliefs, and therefore its soul (Rev. 2:12-17).
- **Thyatira** was the church that followed false prophets (Rev. 2:18-29).
- **Sardis** was spiritually dead (Rev. 3:1-6).
- **Philadelphia**, the one fully faithful church, patiently endured persecution and tribulation (Rev. 3:7-13).
- **Laodicea** simply had a lukewarm faith (Rev. 3:14-22).

Most of these churches had messed up in a major way, but John also lists what they were doing right, gives them instructions, and reminds them of the hope we have in Christ.

Please join us over the next several weeks as we explore the biblical texts, their historical context, and the theological and spiritual significance of the letters to these seven churches, and more importantly, how they might apply to us as Christ-followers and a community of faith today. We will be supplementing our study with a RightNow media video series, and several questions that will apply to all of the sermons and biblical sections.

Rev. Dr. Steven Aguzzi
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MAY 1 QUESTIONS – WATCH VIDEO #1

Feel free to choose 3-5 questions for your group, depending on how much time you have for discussion.

1. What are your initial thoughts in studying the Book of Revelation, and what are some of the stereotypes associated with this book of Scripture?
2. With each of the churches of Asia Minor addressed in Revelation, we will have further, more in-depth study. But for now, please read Revelation 1:1-3. According to verses 1-2, what is the purpose of this book? In verse 3, how is the book described and what biblical literary genre is it a part of?
3. Please read Revelation 1:4-6. To whom is this part of Revelation addressed? In verse 5, how is Jesus described? According to verse 6, how are we as followers of Jesus described? In general, what do priests do?¹
4. Please read Revelation 1:9-17 and Revelation 4:2 and 5. According to Revelation 1:9, where is John the disciple when he is receiving the visions? Why was he there? Compare and contrast these Bible passages: Exodus 24:9-11², Daniel 7:9, Ezekiel 1:25-28 and Revelation 4:1-11. What are the common themes of these verses? Who exactly is seated on the throne?

¹ Clue: priests offer sacrifices to God. In this context, we as followers of Jesus offer the sacrifice of praise, worship, and adoration.

² Some translations, including a version of the LXX state in Exodus 24:11 that the men of Israel “beheld God, and ate *bread* and drank *wine*.” Why is this significant?

In summary, who is the Book of Revelation about, in terms of its central theme?

5. Please read Revelation 1:20 and compare it to Matthew 5:15-16. In Revelation 1:13, where is Christ walking? What do the lampstands (and candles) represent in Revelation? What function are churches in general, and Christians specifically, supposed to perform?
6. Generally, how is Jesus Christ described in the Book of Revelation so far? How are those who belong to Jesus (his disciples) described in the Book of Revelation so far?

7. In preparation for the next study, please read Revelation 2:1-7. Ponder these questions: where was/is Ephesus and when has its church been mentioned in Scripture before? Read Revelation 2:6. Who were the Nicolaitans and who was Deacon Nicolaites?³



Ancient Ephesus

³ Some scholars claim that the Nicolaitan heresy was a combination of sexual debauchery (Nicolaites was charged with prostituting out his own wife), and *antinomianism*, the categorical rejection of the moral law as if grace and faith do not or not supposed to produce obedience, righteous living, and purity of heart and mind. A proper Reformed understanding of the law can be summed up as such: “We are justified by faith alone but not by faith that is alone.” This means that salvation is a free gift, but it is not to be seen *in contrast with* moral restraint. See Sproul, R. C. *Essential Truths of the Christian Faith*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1998, p.191.

WEEKS 2-8 QUESTIONS

Each of the letters to the churches has the same basic parts: a) an address, b) a description of Jesus, c) a message addressing strengths and weaknesses, d) a command for the future, and e) a promise. We will use the same set of questions for each of the seven churches so we can compare and contrast the messages. Feel free to choose 3-5 questions for your group, depending on how much time you have for discussion.

1. Where is the church and what was unique about their setting?
2. How is Jesus described at the beginning of the letter?
3. What is good about what the church is doing?
4. What is bad about what they are doing?
5. What does God command them?
6. What is promised them?
7. How is their situation similar to our community?
8. How is their situation different?
9. What are some things we need to work on as individuals and as a church?
10. Where do you see hope?

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