

Bonus Lesson: The Letters to the Seven Churches

There are seven churches named in this early part of the letter. Each receives a particular message and then all are asked to listen to the whole of the letter as it applies to all of them. [Fun Fact: the order of the letters is the order in which a messenger from Patmos (where John was) would visit them if he followed the circular Roman road connecting the cities.]

What we see in Jesus’ words to these churches is that he *knows them, warns them, and holds out hope.*

Jesus Knows Them

Every letter contains details that are specific to each city. Let’s look at the letter to the church at Ephesus as an example. **Read aloud Revelation 2:1-7**

The city of Ephesus was large and impressive. Even today as it lies in ruins, a visitor can still see the glory of this ancient city. Jesus ends his letter to the Ephesians by speaking of the tree of life in the paradise of God. This is in comparison to a tree that stood in the garden of the temple of Artemis, the god of the Ephesians. If a criminal came within a certain distance of that tree, she or he would be free from capture or punishment. Jesus reminds his hearers that there is even a greater reward waiting for them.

Here’s a chart that lists some of the elements in the letters that have to do with particular features of each city:

City	Feature	Jesus’ reference
Smyrna	Destroyed and rebuilt	“words of the first and last, who was dead and came to life”
Pergamum	High acropolis with many majestic temples to pagan gods; center of sexual immorality Black local stone used to build; white stones used for inscriptions; also a local tradition of guests at a feast being given a stone with their name on it	“you live where Satan’s throne is” “to everyone who conquers I will give a white stone, and on that white stone is written and new name”
Thyatira	Known for its copper and bronze industries	“the Son of God” whose “feet are like burnished bronze”
Sardis	Seemingly secure city suffered a surprise night attack by Persia	“If you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not

	<p>If a citizen was condemned to death, some cities would blot the person’s name from the official city register.</p>	<p>know at what hour I will come to you.”</p> <p>“I will not blot your name out of the book of Life”</p>
Philadelphia	<p>Philly had frequent earthquakes; a very bad one happened 50 years before this was written.</p>	<p>“Anyone who conquers, I will make them a pillar in the temple of my God. They will never go out of it again.”</p>
Laodicea	<p>Two rivers flowed into Laodicea: a hot spring flowed from Hierapolis and a cold river from Colosse. But the water in Laodicea was lukewarm and undrinkable.</p> <p>Laodicea was wealthy: the banking center of the region, the place of a famous medical school (that specialized in eye care), and a supplier of famous black wool. It refused help after a major earthquake, saying that it was rich enough to care for itself.</p>	<p>“I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm . . .I am about to spit you out of my mouth.”</p> <p>“For you say, ‘I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.’ You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked.”</p>

Jesus Warns Them

In each letter, Jesus warns them about particular threats. Some threats are internal to the church and its members—arrogance, laziness, losing their passion for the Lord, or the fear of suffering. Some threats are external: a “Jezebel,” the Nicolaitans, Jewish leaders who are trying to squash the movement, or the pagans they live among.

Every threat is real and needs to be taken seriously. The stakes are high and there is no time for messing about. They need to get their lives in order.

Each of these encouragements and warnings is given to each church as a whole. No one gets to opt out. Everyone owns what is happening in the church, even if an individual person may not be participating in the problem. Every church is addressed corporately, reminding us that we are all responsible for each other.

Optional Discussion Questions:

1. If Jesus were to make reference to something specific about your floor/ your family/ your church/ your college, as an example of what you are *doing well* what would he say?
2. If Jesus were to make reference to something specific about your floor/ your family/ your church/ your college, as an example of what you *could be doing better* what would he say?

What threats exist for . . .

You personally or as floor/church/family?

Calvin College?

The Christian church in the US in 2016?

The global Christian church in the early 21st century?

Jesus Holds out Hope

At the end of each letter (Revelation 2:7; 2:11; 2:17; 2:26-29; 3:5-6; 3:11-13; 3:21-22), Jesus refers to those who are obedient to him as “conquerors.” He holds out hope that for those who conquer, great blessings await – a tree of life, the crown of life, hidden manna, a white stone, the morning star, white robes, names protected and spoken to the Father, made a pillar, a new name, and place with Jesus on the throne. Wow! (Maybe we should become the Calvin College Conquerors!)

Optional Discussion Question:

What difference does *hope* make in your understanding of the Christian faith?

Closing Prayer (read aloud together):

King of Kings and Lord of Lords,

You know us. You warn us. You hold out hope for us. We pray that we will rest in your knowing, respond to your warnings, and live daily in the true and certain hope of an eternity spent with you. Strengthen us against the schemes of the enemy, and make us conquerors to whom you will one day award the crown of life. To him who lives and reigns forever and ever, one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be glory and honor forever and ever! Amen.