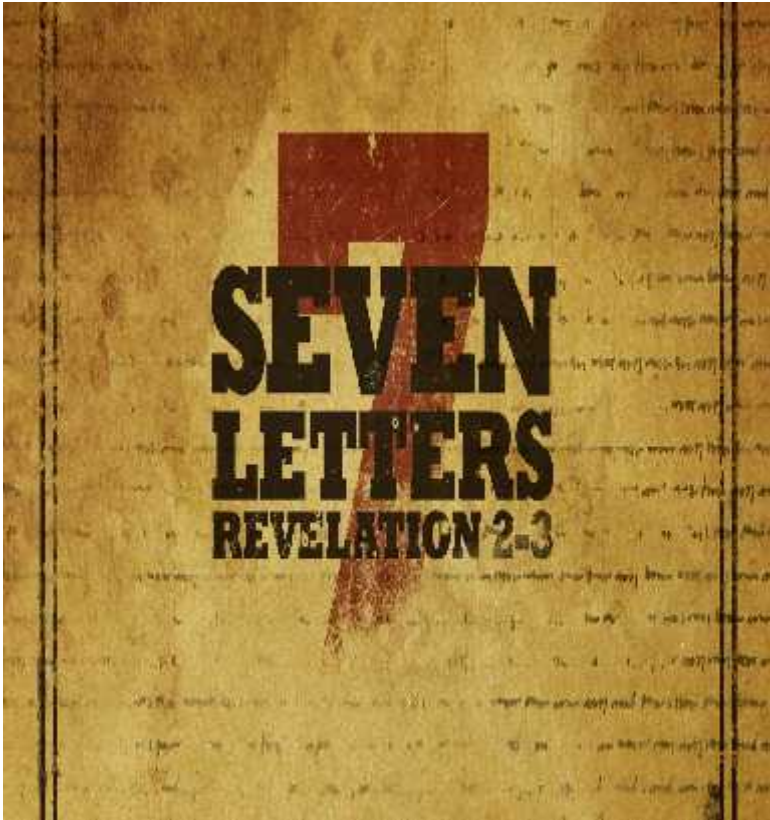


# 7 Churches of Revelation



*“He who has an ear, let him hear  
what the Spirit says to the churches”*



# Book of Revelation:

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## OVERVIEW

Revelation was written about 90-95 AD, though some believe earlier. Authorship is clearly attributed to John, four times the author identifies himself as such (1:1, 4, 9; 22:8). “Revelation” (Greek, apokalupsis) means “an uncovering,” “an unveiling,” or “a disclosure.” In the NT, this word describes the unveiling of spiritual truth (Rom. 16:25; Gal. 1:12; Eph. 1:17; 3:3), the revealing of the sons of God (Rom. 8:19), Christ’s incarnation (Luke 2:32), and His glorious appearing at His second coming (2 Thess. 1:7; 1 Pet. 1:7). In all its uses, “Revelation” refers to something or someone; once hidden, becoming visible. What this book reveals or unveils is Jesus Christ in glory. Truths about Him and His final victory that the rest of Scripture merely alludes to, become clearly visible through Revelation.

## BACKGROUND and 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 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.

The seven churches addressed in Chapter 2 and 3 were actual existing churches when John wrote Revelation. Though not precisely replicated, they also represent the types of churches that are generally present throughout the entire church age.

What Christ says to these churches is relevant in all times. Five of the seven churches were rebuked for tolerating sin in their midst; it is important to note that the ***“dangers from within the church were more destructive than the dangers from without”***. This is not an uncommon occurrence in churches since. The problems in those churches ranged in severity from waning love at Ephesus to total apostasy at Laodicea. The church is warned about sin and exhorted to repentance.

## **HISTORICAL and THEOLOGICAL**

Since it is primarily prophetic, Revelation contains little historical material, other than that in chapters 1–3. Revelation is first and foremost a revelation about Jesus Christ (1:1). The book depicts Him as the risen, glorified Son of God ministering among the churches (1:10), as “the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on 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 God’s creation” (3:14), as the Lion of the tribe of Judah (5:5), as the Lamb in heaven with authority to open the title deed to the earth (6:1), as the Lamb on the throne (7:17), as the Messiah who will reign forever (11:15), as the majestic King of kings and Lord of lords, returning in glorious splendour to conquer his foes (19:11.), as the Word of God (19:13), and as “the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star” (22:16).

Many other rich theological themes find expression in Revelation. John’s vivid pictures of worship in heaven both exhort and instruct believers. In few other books of the Bible is

the ministry of angels so prominent. Revelation's primary theological contribution is to eschatology - the doctrine of last days. In it we learn about the final political setup of the world; the last battle of human history; the career and ultimate defeat of Antichrist; Christ's 1,000-year earthly kingdom; the glories of heaven and the eternal state; and the final state of the wicked and the righteous. Finally, only Daniel rivals this book in declaring that God providentially rules over the kingdoms of men and will accomplish His sovereign purposes regardless of human or demonic opposition.

## **OPEN DISCUSSION**

- What modern-day church in your experience and opinion, is most vibrant and God-honouring? Why?
- If Jesus were to commission one of His apostles to write a letter of our local church, what sort of things would He commend us for? Rebuke us for? Why?

## **OUTLINE of REVELATION**

I. The Things which You Have Seen (1:1-20)

A. The Prologue (1:1-8)

B. The Vision of the Glorified Christ (1:9-18)

C. The Apostle's Commission to write (1:19-20)

II. The Things which Are (2:1-3:22)

A. The Letter to the Church at Ephesus (2:1-7)

B. The Letter to the Church at Smyrna (2:8-11)

C. The Letter to the Church at Pergamum (2:12-17)

D. The Letter to the Church at Thyatira (2:18-29)

E. The Letter to the Church at Sardis (3:1-6)

F. The Letter to the Church at Philadelphia (3:7-13)

G. The Letter to the Church at Laodicea (3:14-22)

III. The Things which Will Take Place after These Things (4:1-22:21)

A. Worship in Heaven (4:1-5:14)

B. The Great Tribulation (6:1-18:24)

C. The Return of the King (19:1-21)

D. The Millennium (20:1-10)

E. The Great White Throne Judgment (20:11-15)

F. The Eternal State (21:1-22:21)

# Church of Ephesus: Revelation 2:1-7

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## AT a GLANCE

Ephesus was an inland city 3 miles from the sea, but the broad mouth of the Cayster River allowed access and provided the greatest harbor in Asia Minor. Four great trade roads went through Ephesus. Therefore, it became known as the gateway to Asia. It was the centre of the worship of Artemis (Greek), or Diana (Roman), whose temple was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.

Paul ministered there for three years (Acts 20:31), and later met with the Ephesian elders on his way to Jerusalem (Acts 20). Timothy, Tychicus, and the apostle John all served this church. John was in Ephesus when he was arrested by Domitian and exiled 50 miles southwest to Patmos.

The church at Ephesus was firmly established and possessed spiritual discernment. They were commended for their steadfastness and refusing to tolerate “the Nicolaitans”. These people crop up again in the letter to Pergamum (refer to Church of Pergamum regarding the Nicolaitans). There was sound teaching but an absence of love – for Christ and one another – which had been their hallmark to begin with. Though doing many “right” things, they were exhorted to repent and return to their “first works” (v.5). They were warned that their “lampstand” would be removed if they did not repent.

## **IN the WORD**

1. How would you describe the condition of the church of Ephesus?
2. What commendations and corrections did Christ have for the church?
3. What do you think it means to “forsake your first love”?
4. What warnings were they given regarding this state?
5. What three steps were they instructed to follow to correct this problem?
6. What promises were obtained if they obeyed these instructions?
7. What would it mean to have their lampstand removed? What do you believe this symbolizes?

## **DISCUSSION**

- a) Why do you believe churches forsake their first love and how is this evident?
- b) What do you think it means to “do the first works”?
- c) John commends the church of Ephesus for many great things they have done, but all their works and labour were worthless. How do you compare to the church of Ephesus as an individual?
- d) What areas in your life do you believe you are doing simply out of routine?



- e) If you were to look at our own church today, how do you believe we compare/differ or mimic the condition of the church of Ephesus?
- f) What change do you believe would happen if we were to humbly repent before God as a church and as an individual in areas that mimic that of Ephesus?

# Church of Smyrna:

## Revelation 2:8-11

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### AT a GLANCE

Smyrna means “myrrh,” the substance used for perfume and often for anointing a dead body for aromatic purposes. Called the crown of Asia, this ancient city (modern Izmir, Turkey) was the most beautiful in Asia Minor and a centre of science and medicine. Smyrna’s intense loyalty to Rome resulted in a strong emperor-worship cult. Fifty years after John’s death, Polycarp, the pastor of the church in Smyrna, was burned alive at the age of 86 for refusing to renounce Christ and worship Caesar. A large Jewish community in the city also proved hostile to the early church.

The church at Smyrna is commended for being “rich” despite being poverty stricken. There were no words of condemnation directed towards this church. While they experienced suffering, they were exhorted to “remain faithful to death”. Jesus’ word to them is all encouragement. He had set a definite limit to their suffering and held out to them the gift of life beyond the grave.

## **IN the WORD**

1. Smyrna is one of two of the seven churches that Jesus does not condemn. What is the main focus of this letter?
2. The Jewish synagogue in Smyrna had become a “satan-synagogue” – not in a vague, general abusive sense, but in the rather sharply-defined sense. The synagogue had been accusing Christians of all kinds of wickedness. What advice did the Lord give to the church of Smyrna when it comes to responding to such accusations and their consequences?
3. What is the “second death”?
4. How might the message “be faithful, even to the point of death” have been received by the church in Smyrna?
5. What exhortations and promises were obtained if they obeyed these instructions?
6. How would the promise of the “crown of life” have encouraged those who were suffering?
7. What does it mean that our struggles are not with flesh & blood?
8. What do you think the phrase “not be hurt by the second death” means?

## **DISCUSSION**

- a) Smyrna was known as a church that endured suffering and poverty yet they were rich. What do you think the term “yet you are rich” means?
- b) Today we label a lot of what we go through as a Christian in the west as “suffering” or “tribulation” or “persecution”. We get rejected or someone speaks unkindly about us, or we feel as if we are being treated unfairly. Do you think we correctly apply these terms to our everyday Christian life in context of

how scripture describes “suffering” and “tribulation”? (Please explain your answer)

- c) Jesus acknowledges the trying times and future suffering the church of Smyrna has and will endure. In your own times of struggle, how do you stand on the promises of God and remain faithful to Him?
- d) If you were to look at our own church today, do you believe that we as a church and individuals continue to thrive despite suffering?

# Church of Pergamum:

## Revelation 2:12-17

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### AT a GLANCE

Pergamum literally means “citadel” and is the word from which we get parchment—a writing material developed from animal skin. Pergamum (modern Bergama) was built on a 1,000-foot hill in a broad, fertile plain about 20 miles inland from the Aegean Sea. It had served as the capital of the Roman province of Asia Minor for over 250 years. It was an important religious centre for the pagan cults of Athena, Asklepios, Dionysius (or Bacchus, the god of drunkenness), and Zeus. It was the first city in Asia to build a temple to Caesar (29 B.C.) and became the capital of the cult of Caesar worship.

The church of Pergamum is also praised for its steadfastness. They had made a brave stand despite external pressure, but some had become addicted to false teaching. As a result, old pagan practices were creeping in. The Lord warned He would come and fight with the sword of His mouth, if there was no repentance (12-17). Here, the Nicolaitans are mentioned again. The Nicolaitans were followers of Nicolas. They were involved in sexual immorality and other offenses with no regard to consequence. Nicolas means “one who conquers the people.” Some have speculated that Nicolaus who was made deacon in Acts 6 is the one that brought the teachings of Nicolaitans to the church of Pergamum.

Irenaeus writes that Nicolas who was made a deacon, was a false believer who later became apostate. Because of his credentials he was able to lead the church astray. Like Balaam, he led the people into immorality and wickedness.

## **IN the WORD**

1. How would you best describe the condition of the church at Pergamum?
2. The phrase “sharp two-edged sword” can signify judgement. Why do you think this was used in the opening statement to the church of Pergamum?
3. Why do you think it might have been difficult to be a Christian in this place?
4. What is the significance of a “white stone”? What do you believe this signifies?
5. The church of Ephesus was commended for not following the ways of Nicolaitans. The Nicolaitans are mentioned again here in Pergamum as “some hold to their teaching”. Why do you think this happened?
6. What corrections and instructions were they given?
7. What promises were obtained if they obeyed these instructions?

## **DISCUSSION**

- a) Pergamum had lost its ability to say “no” to the surrounding culture. Jesus’ warnings were very abrupt. Should we take these warning seriously and apply it to the current culture of our own church?

- b) What similarities have we allowed the culture of today to dictate the culture of our church? Are we biblical in our approach or do we allow society around us to influence our idea of church?
- c) How can we as a modern-day church avoid or protect ourselves from Pergamum-like tendencies?
- d) As an individual, how have you allowed the culture of the day to influence you more than God Himself?
- e) What is your biggest struggle or compromise as a Christian to stand for the truth found in scripture?

# Church of Thyatira:

## Revelation 2:18-29

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### AT a GLANCE

Thyatira, located halfway between Pergamum and Sardis, this city had been under Roman rule for nearly three centuries (c. 190 B.C.). Since the city was situated in a long valley that swept 40 miles to Pergamum, it had no natural defences and had a long history of being destroyed and rebuilt. Originally populated by soldiers of Alexander the Great, it was little more than a military outpost to guard Pergamum. Lydia came from this city on business and was converted under Paul's ministry (Acts 16:14-15)

In some ways the church of Thyatira was healthy. They were commended that their last works were more than their first. But within the church there was an influential woman advocating easy compromise with the immoral, idolatrous pagan world. Many fell prey to her seductive teachings. Despite giving this "Jezebel" time to repent, she had not. The Lord intended to make her and her followers an example before the other churches (18-29). Those who remained faithful to Christ were promised His power and His presence (the "Morning Star" – Rev 22:16)

There have been some interesting ideas regarding the identity of "Jezebel" as to whether she was a literal person that mirrored King Ahab's wife in the Northern Kingdom regarding the worship of Baal. Baal was the fertility god and his worship involved immoral & licentious practices.



Others believe “Jezebel” is symbolic and stands for a corrupt faction in the church of Thyatira. Regardless of such, here Jezebel is described as a prophetess, a false teacher, an immoral woman and idol worshipper. It was evident that she was a dominant leader and her false teachings permeated the church.

## **IN the WORD**

1. How would you best describe the condition of the church at Thyatira?
2. John both praises and criticises the church of Thyatira. What was the main thrust of his message to this church? Why do you think he needed to do both?
3. In what ways was the church in Thyatira doing well?
4. What were the accusations against the church?
5. What might have caused believers at Thyatira to fall prey to the deception of Jezebel? What happened to those that did tolerate her teachings?
6. What instructions were they given?
7. What promises were obtained if they obeyed these instructions?
8. What/Who is the “Morning Star”?

## **DISCUSSION**

- a) What challenges do churches today face in terms of deception?
- b) Why do you believe this happens?
- c) How can we guard against this as a church and as individuals?

- d) If Christ was to look at our own church today, do you think he would both praise and criticise it like the church of Thyatira? If you answered “no”, explain why. If you answered “yes” explain why.
- e) What can we as a church and individuals learn from the example of Thyatira?

# Church of Sardis:

## Revelation 3:1-6

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### AT a GLANCE

Sardis is situated on a natural acropolis rising 1,500 feet above the valley floor. Around 1200 B.C. it gained prominence as the capital of the Lydian kingdom. Its primary industry was harvesting wool, dyeing it, and making garments from it. The famous author Aesop came from Sardis, and tradition says that Melito, a member of the church in Sardis, wrote the first-ever commentary on certain passages in the book of Revelation.

For all its reputation and “apparent” liveliness, the church of Sardis is rebuked for having a name that they are alive, when in reality they are dead. It was not opposition this church had to overcome; but apathy, indifference and self-satisfaction. The church had compromised with the pagan society in their midst so that eventually it couldn't even be recognized. Though small compromises seemed insignificant, the end result was deadly. They are exhorted to be watchful and to strengthen the things which remain. The church is to hold fast and repent, otherwise the Lord will come upon them as a thief in the night.

## IN the WORD

1. How would you describe the problems the church in Sardis were facing?
2. What does it mean that the churches works are “incomplete” in the sight of God?
3. What is the suggested solution for this church?
4. What promises were obtained if they obeyed these instructions?
5. What are practical ways a church can better live by the power of the Spirit in its ministry?

## DISCUSSION

- a) The church at Sardis had a reputation for being spiritually alive and vibrant, but in reality was dead. Can you think of ways in which your spiritual “*reputation*” exceeds your true spiritual “*situation*”? What is the solution for this dilemma?
- b) How might we “wake up” and “strengthen” what remains of our work before it’s too late?
- c) In verse 4 a small remanent are commended for remaining faithful (did not soil their garments). Like this remanent, how can we ensure that we as a church be found worthy to walk with Christ?
- d) Sardis was known more for it struggles “internally” rather than “externally”. It was decaying from the inside out. Can you recognise this similarity in our church today? Does our “reputation” as a church exceed our genuine” spiritual condition?” (explain answer)

# Church of Philadelphia:

## Revelation 3:7-13

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### AT a GLANCE

Philadelphia is located on a hillside about 30 miles southeast of Sardis. The city (modern Alashehir) was founded around 190 B.C. by Attalus II, king of Pergamum. His unusual devotion to his brother earned the city its name, “brotherly love.” The city was an important commercial stop on a major trade route called the Imperial Post Road, a first-century mail route.

Although Scripture does not mention this church elsewhere, it was probably the fruit of Paul’s extended ministry in Ephesus (cf. Acts 19:10). Like Smyrna, Philadelphia contains no words of condemnation. Some believers from Philadelphia were martyred with Polycarp at Smyrna. Its enemies came from outside, not inside the body of Christ for there is no mention of heresy or division. There are many similarities with that of Smyrna. Both received no blame, only praise. Both suffered from those who claimed to be Jews but were not, both were persecuted it would seem by the Romans, both were assured their opposition was satanic and both were promised a crown.

### IN the WORD

1. How would you best describe the condition of the church at Philadelphia?

2. What protection from enemies does God promise the church in Philadelphia?
3. What is the “open door” that is referenced in Revelation 3:8? Why is it a door that can’t be shut?
4. How does this offer encouragement?
5. What is the “key of David”?
6. What does the “crown” represent in verse 11?
7. What instructions were they given?
8. What promises were obtained if they obeyed these instructions?

## **DISCUSSION**

- a) What is the open door that God has placed in front of today’s church?
- b) John refers to those of the synagogue of satan (v.9) How can we recognise those who ‘say’ they are of God but in reality are not?
- c) With the imminent return of Christ referred too (v.11), do we “hold fast” to what we have that no one may seize it?
- d) The church at Philadelphia was commended for keeping Christ’s word and for persevering in the face of trouble and hardship. What qualities do you think Christ might affirm in your life? How about the area of persevering in the midst of trial? How do you typically respond when times get tough and what needs to change?
- e) Do you think we as a church, would be recognised & commended for the same things (keeping the word, faithfulness, brotherly love) as Philadelphia?

# Church of Laodicea:

## Revelation 3:14-22

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### AT a GLANCE

Laodicea, a prosperous city near Hierapolis and Colossae in the Lycus Valley. The letter refers to several factors in the town's prosperity. It was primarily known for three industries: banking, wool, and medicine (notably its eye salve). Laodicea's water supply was channelled from underground hot springs some distance away, reaching the town tepid (lukewarm). All three industries, as well as the inadequate water supply, played a major part in this letter.

The church began through the ministry of Epaphras, while Paul was ministering in Ephesus (cf. Col. 1:7). The church of Laodicea is given no words of commendation. They were so self-satisfied that they were totally blind to their true condition. Christ uses harsh words to describe the church (wretched, pitiable, poor, and blind). A complete contrast to how the church viewed themselves (rich, prosperous, in need of nothing). They were so far from what they should be, that Christ describes Himself as being on the "*outside*" and "*knocking*", waiting to come in (v.20). This verse is often interpreted as Christ talking to a non believer, but in the context of where it is written and the preceding verses; He is not standing at the door of a person's heart; but entrance to the church itself. It is also not a desperate plea of "I'm knocking, please let me come in", but a very real statement that

I am not in there (the church) to begin with. Yet even in this condition Christ uses words of encouragement in His correction; *“...those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent”* (v.19) and (v. 20b)... *“If anyone hears my voice and opens the door I will come in to him and dine with him and he with Me”*.

## **IN the WORD**

1. What is revealed in these passages of scripture about the church at Laodicea? What was its heresy?
2. What key descriptive words about their condition stand out to you the most and why?
3. Why did Jesus reference “slave” for their eyes (v.18)?
4. The message to the Laodicea church was that it was “neither hot nor cold”. What are the dangers of a lukewarm church?
5. How does a church move out of this state?
6. What did Christ ‘grant’ those that conquered this state?
7. What promises were obtained if they obeyed these instructions?

## **DISCUSSION**

- a) Do you believe as a church we are self-satisfied and blind to our true condition?
- b) Would Christ “spit us out of his mouth”? Why or why not?
- c) How would you best describe your current spiritual condition - hot, cold, luke-warm?
- d) In reference to the above question, why would you describe yourself this way?
- e) As a church and as an individual, what can we do to protect or prevent ourselves from becoming “lukewarm” and being a church that truly thrives?



# Final Thoughts:

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As we come to the end of our study of the Seven Churches of Revelation, what main points have you learnt and how are you going to apply these truths to your life? Would you think it is fair to say that you can recognise many of the characteristics in these churches (both negative and positive) in our church today? What can we do as individuals and corporately as a church to change the things that God condemns? What can we do as individuals and corporately as church to encourage more of the things God commends?

It is wise for us to note that these letters were not written to outsiders, but the church itself. They were a danger to themselves. Phrases like “repent”, “I have this against you”, “I have not found your works perfect”, “I will vomit you out of my mouth”, “I chasten” are words of judgement/correction to the church, not the world. This type of language is a far cry from what we use in evangelical circles today when a church or individual is in the same position as what is mentioned in the letters to the 7 churches. With the exception of Smyrna and Philadelphia, their fight was internal rather than external. They allowed the lack of love, division, false teaching, comfortableness, self-sufficiency, idol worship, compromising of morals, unsound doctrine and twisting of God’s Word to fit their own mindset and agenda creep into the church. They accepted compromises from the truth of God one at a time, little by little, till eventually some churches were no longer recognised as such. Churches today are in just as much danger to do the same, including our own.

May we as a church family and individuals truthfully evaluate our own lives and the condition of our church in light of scripture, asking God to reveal areas that do not honour Him or His Word. May we ask God to reveal areas in our lives and church that please Him so that we will grow in these areas and encourage one another to do so. But above all this, may we first and foremost ask God to give us a genuine love for Him and for each other. Ephesus did everything right, but still, God had this one thing against them “thou has left your first love”.

May we be known as a people who love God, love His truth and love each other, for His glory and His glory alone. Though we know this scripture all too well, I hope the truth of what it stands for, permeates your heart and mind.

### **1 Corinthians 13:1-3**

*“Though I speak with the tongues of men and angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal.*

*And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.*

*And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing”*



## **7 Churches of Revelation:**

Compiled from our own study of Revelation as well resources from:

ESV Bible

Lion's Handbook to the Bible

Nelson Book of Bible Maps

Warren Wiersbe (Be Victorious)

ESV Mac Arthur Study Bible