

ESV STUDENT STUDY BIBLE NOTES

Rev. 1:1–8 Prologue. The terms “revelation,” “show,” “made it known,” and “he saw” prepare readers for symbolic visions.

Introduction to Revelation

Rev. 1:1 revelation of Jesus Christ. Jesus is both the One revealed (referred to as Son of Man, Lion of Judah, Lamb, Word of God) and the Revealer. God gives the unveiled truth to Jesus (5:7). His **angel** gives it to **John** (10:9) for God’s **servants** in the churches. The prophecy **must . . . take place** because it is secured by God’s sovereign purpose and power.

Rev. 1:3 Blessed. The first of seven blessings (or benedictions; see *chart*) is given to **those who hear** and **keep** (or obey) God’s Word. In the early church **one** would read **aloud** while others listened. **the time is near**. See notes on 1 Thess. 5:2–3; 5:4.

Rev. 1:4–6 This greeting identifies the author and recipients. **the seven churches that are in Asia**. Churches existed in other cities of Roman Asia (e.g., Colossae, Troas). Thus Christ’s selection of “seven” (symbolizing completeness) implies that he addresses the whole church through them. **him who is and who was and who is to come**. God is eternal. In Christ he will come at the end of history to judge and save. **the seven spirits**. Revelation teaches that the Holy Spirit is one person (3:6, 13; see Eph. 4:4), but he also appears here as “seven spirits” (compare Rev. 3:1; 4:5), representing perfection. He is also pictured as “seven torches of fire” (4:5) and “seven eyes” (5:6). These descriptions show him as all-powerful and all-knowing. **from** him who is . . . **from** the seven spirits . . . **and from Jesus Christ**. John’s greeting comes “from” all three persons of the Trinity. **the faithful witness**. Jesus was a faithful witness even to death (1 Tim. 6:13). His followers must do the same (Rev. 2:13; 12:11; 20:4). John comforts his persecuted readers with the truth that Jesus has triumphed over death (**the firstborn of the dead**). He is **the ruler of kings on earth**, even Caesar. **made us a kingdom, priests**. Israel’s roles now belong to all who are freed from sins by Jesus’ blood (5:10; see Ex. 19:6).

Rev. 1:7–8 coming with the clouds. See note on 1 Thess. 4:16–17. Jesus is the Son of Man. He will have a universal kingdom (see Dan. 7:13–14). His subjects **pierced** him (Zech. 12:10). **wail**. A reaction to judgment. The coming one is **the Lord God, Alpha** and **Omega** (first and last letters of the Greek alphabet; compare Rev. 22:13). Jesus is both the beginning (the Creator) and the goal of all history.

Rev. 1:9–22:5 Body. John begins the main part of his letter with a vision of “one like a son of man.” This person praises and corrects his seven churches.

Rev. 1:9–3:22 “Things that are”: Christ’s presence with and knowledge of his churches. John’s first vision, of the glorious Son of Man who is spiritually present with his struggling churches (1:9–20), leads to a cycle of seven letters or edicts. Jesus describes each church’s condition and commands

appropriate responses of repentance, faith, and continuing faithfulness (2:1–3:22).

Rev. 1:9 Patmos. An island where Rome exiled political criminals. John's confinement there shows that he is a **partner** with the churches' **tribulation** and **patient endurance**. Patmos is approximately 24 square miles (62 sq. km) in area. It is about 40 miles (64 km) from the mainland of Asia Minor.

Rev. 1:10 in the Spirit. John was surrounded by the active presence of the Holy Spirit. **the Lord's day.** Sunday, the first day of the week, the day Christ rose.

Rev. 1:11 The order in which the churches are listed follows the route a courier would have taken from Patmos.

Rev. 1:13 Jesus often calls himself **son of man** in the Gospels (see Mark 14:61–62). See notes on Dan. 7:13–14; John 1:51.

Rev. 1:14 Hairs . . . like white wool represent divine wisdom (Dan. 7:9; compare Lev. 19:32; Prov. 16:31; 20:29). Jesus' eyes **like a flame of fire** see everything clearly. He can truly say to each church, "I know all about you" (e.g., Rev. 2:18–19).

Rev. 1:15 Christ's feet, **like burnished bronze** (compare 2:18), are strong and stable. They will crush all enemies. **roar of many waters.** Compare Ezek. 1:24.

Rev. 1:16 two-edged sword. God's Word, which searches hearts and judges rebels (compare Eph. 6:17; Heb. 4:12; Rev. 19:15).

Rev. 1:17 the first and the last. The Son of Man affirms his eternal existence, echoing the Lord's boast over idols (Isa. 44:6).

Rev. 1:18 I died . . . I am alive forevermore. John and the churches must "fear not" (v. 17), because Jesus has conquered death forever. On Christ's resurrection, see 1 Cor. 15:42–57.

Rev. 1:19 Jesus' command to **write** introduces the book's main divisions. The letters (royal edicts) to the churches (chs. 2–3) address the things **that are**. John's visions then turn mainly to things **that are to take place after this** (see 4:1).

Rev. 1:20 angels of the seven churches. Perhaps human messengers, human pastors, or literal angels sent as messengers. They are probably symbols of each church's character.

Rev. 2:1–3:22 Revelation 2–3 consists of seven "letters" or royal edicts. Each follows a pattern: (1) The royal author describes himself in terms from ch. 1. (2) "I know" introduces the church's condition, both positive (except for Sardis and Laodicea) and negative (except for Smyrna and Philadelphia). (3) Comfort and commands come from the diagnosis. (4) The churches are commanded to hear and obey all of the letters. (5) A blessing is promised to "the one who

conquers.”

Rev. 2:1–7 The church in *Ephesus* is praised for doctrinal purity and endurance but is rebuked for its loss of love. Ephesus was a port city on the west coast of Asia. The city’s landmark was the temple of Artemis.

Rev. 2:1 The words of reflects the OT expression “thus says.” In the OT this phrase introduces either a word from God (e.g., Amos 1:6) or a royal declaration (e.g., 2 Chron. 36:23).

Rev. 2:4–5 the love you had at first. Either the church’s early love for Christ or the believers’ love for one another. Both meanings may be intended (compare Mark 12:29–31; 1 John 4:20). This lack of love resulted in a need to revive the compassionate **works you did at first. remove your lampstand.** In the near future and/or when Christ returns, they will lose their status as a church.

Rev. 2:6 Nicolaitans. An otherwise unknown heretical group. They seduced God’s people to participate in idolatry and sexual immorality (vv. 14–15). They may have presented immorality as freedom in Christ (compare 1 Cor. 6:12–20; 8:1–11:1).

Rev. 2:7 tree of life. A tree in the garden of Eden. It offered eternal life to the pure. Access to it was banned after humanity’s fall (Gen. 3:22–24). It reappears in the new Jerusalem (Rev. 22:1–2).

Rev. 2:8–11 The church in *Smyrna* is encouraged to remain faithful as they endure persecution. Roman Smyrna (modern Izmir) was a harbor city. It was known for its temple to the Mother Goddess and its imperial cult temple to Tiberius.

Rev. 2:9 your poverty (but you are rich). Materially poor, the Smyrnan believers were spiritually rich (compare James 2:5).

Rev. 2:10–11 The **crown of life** (that is, eternal life) is an image based on the laurel wreath given to victorious athletes. God promises it to those who love him (1 Cor. 9:25; 2 Tim. 4:6–8; James 1:12). **second death.** See Rev. 20:4–6.

Rev. 2:12–17 Believers at *Pergamum* remained faithful during persecution, but they allowed false teaching. Pergamum was an important center for pagan and imperial religion.

Rev. 2:12 Christ will use **the sharp two-edged sword** coming from his mouth (compare 1:16) to discipline false teachers (2:16).

Rev. 2:13 Pergamum had temples dedicated to “the divine Augustus and the goddess Roma” and to Asklepios (the god of healing, symbolized by serpents). It also had a large altar dedicated to Zeus. Emperor worship was also strongly emphasized, even required, in the province of Asia. All this idol worship is why Pergamum is called the site of **Satan’s throne**. A believer named **Antipas**

was killed for his faith. Jesus shares with Antipas his own title, **faithful witness** (see 1:5).

Rev. 2:14–16 Balaam. A prophet who advised Moab's king to tempt Israel into sexual and spiritual adultery (Num. 25:1–2; 31:16). Likewise the **Nicolaitans** were spreading sexual and spiritual unfaithfulness at Pergamum (see Rev. 2:6).

Rev. 2:16 If not, I will come to you soon. Jesus' threat refers to his disciplinary action against the church, as at Corinth (1 Cor. 11:30–32).

Rev. 2:17 As God fed Israel in the wilderness, Christ supplies **hidden manna** to **the one who conquers**. A **white stone** was given to winners of athletic contests to gain entrance to banquets. White stones were also used by jurors to vote for acquittal. The manna and the white stone suggest different kinds of eternal blessings and rewards. The **new name** may refer to the Holy Spirit conforming believers to Christ's holiness (Rom. 8:29).

Rev. 2:18–29 Thyatira is praised for its growing love but is criticized for its lack of discernment and for allowing false teaching. The city was a commercial center. Its main industries were metals and fabric (Acts 16:14).

Rev. 2:18 eyes like a flame of fire, feet . . . like burnished bronze. Compare 1:14–15. Such images were familiar to Thyatiran metalworkers. They also echoed OT visions of God's glory (Ezek. 1:27). With fiery eyes, Jesus "searches mind and heart" (Rev. 2:23). His feet will crush his enemies.

Rev. 2:19–20 Thyatira's strengths and weaknesses are the opposite of those at Ephesus. This church is strong in **love** evidenced in **works**, but it lacks discernment and tolerates false teaching. The self-proclaimed **prophetess** who encourages idolatry and immorality resembles **Jezebel** of Tyre. Jezebel married Israel's King Ahab and imposed Baal-worship in the kingdom (1 Kings 16:30–33; 19:1–2).

Rev. 2:21–23 The "prophetess" has many lovers and **children**. These are spiritual children whom she influences.

Rev. 2:24–25 the deep things of Satan. Deceptive promises of secret spiritual knowledge through false religions.

Rev. 2:26–28 The morning star is Christ (see 22:16). He is Israel's ruler and rescuer. Balaam predicted his rise (Num. 24:17).

Rev. 3:1–6 The church in *Sardis* has a few who remain faithful, but their faith does not result in good works. Most of the impressive Roman-era remains now visible at Sardis were constructed by the emperor Tiberius after the tragic earthquake of a.d. 17. The emperor Tiberius helped sponsor reconstruction efforts, earning greater local renown for himself. In John's day the structures included a theater, a stadium, a central marble road, and many temples.

Rev. 3:1 the seven spirits of God. See note on 1:4–6.

Rev. 3:2–3 The church in Sardis is near death, but not beyond Christ’s ability to **wake them up**. Twice in its history Sardis had been conquered when its watchmen failed to see the enemy climbing its cliffs and walls, so the people knew the importance of alertness. **like a thief**. A frequent NT image (Luke 12:39–40; 1 Thess. 5:2–4; 2 Pet. 3:10; Rev. 16:15). Humans cannot predict the timing of Christ’s return.

Rev. 3:4–5 There is hope for **a few names**, alert and faithful believers. Christ promises them the conqueror’s reward. They will have communion with him (**walk with me**) and the **white** clothing of victory (see note on 6:9–11). Their **name** is secure in his **book of life** (20:15).

Rev. 3:7–13 *Philadelphia* is praised for enduring in faith. In recognition for the aid after an earthquake in a.d. 17, the city was briefly renamed Neocaesarea (“Caesar’s New City”). Jesus promises his suffering church an infinitely greater name, “the city of my God, the new Jerusalem” (v. 12). Philadelphia lies near a fertile valley known for growing wine grapes.

Rev. 3:7 Jesus holds the **key of David**. He has absolute authority to admit to or exclude from God’s kingdom (compare Isa. 22:22; Matt. 16:19).

Rev. 3:8 an open door. Paul used the phrase “open doors” to describe opportunities for ministry (see 1 Cor. 16:9). That sense is possible here. More likely, Jesus is offering them an open door into God’s heavenly sanctuary (see Rev. 3:12; 4:1). **little power**. Christians in Philadelphia were weak yet were holding onto Jesus’ word (3:10–11).

Rev. 3:9 Members of **the synagogue of Satan** (compare 2:9) **say that they are Jews** but they serve God’s enemy, for they persecute Christians.

Rev. 3:10 hour of trial. This trial is **coming on the whole world**. It will happen before the day of judgment. Revelation envisions a brief future period of intense persecution for the church (see 19:19; 20:7–9). This time will include ever more intense manifestations of God’s wrath against rebellious humanity (6:10; 8:13; 11:10; 13:8, 12, 14; 17:2, 8). Some believe this verse means Christ will take believers out of the world before a literal “great tribulation” period begins (the “pretribulation rapture” view). Other interpreters, however, see this as God’s promise to protect and remain faithful to believers who endure patiently during this difficult time.

Rev. 3:14–22 *Laodicea* is criticized for its spiritual immaturity. The city was a commercial center. It had thriving medical and textile industries. It was so wealthy that it declined imperial disaster relief after an earthquake in a.d. 60. The city did not see itself as “poor, blind, and naked” (v. 17), but Jesus does not find anything in its church to praise. Laodicea was famous for its worship of Zeus.

Rev. 3:14 Jesus contradicts the church’s boast, “I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing” (v. 17). **the beginning of God’s creation**. This does not mean that Jesus is God’s first creation (see Col. 1:15–17 and notes). It means that he is the one who began God’s creation (see note on John 1:3). This

phrase signifies Christ's sovereign rule over the created order (see Rev. 21:6; 22:13).

Rev. 3:15–16 The church's **lukewarm** indifference was disgusting to Jesus. **Cold** and **hot** water both represent something positive, for cold water refreshes in the heat and hot water gives warmth in the cold.

Rev. 3:17–18 The Laodiceans were spiritually blind, bankrupt, and naked. They had no resources to **buy** from Jesus **gold** or **garments** or **salve** for their eyes. They could "purchase" these necessities only by his grace (see Isa. 55:1–4).

Rev. 3:19–20 Like a loving father, Christ will **reprove** those whom he loves (compare Prov. 3:12). **I stand at the door and knock**. Jesus is the master of the house. He expects alert servants to respond immediately to his signal and welcome his entrance (Luke 12:35–36). **eat with him**. A picture of close personal fellowship.

Rev. 3:21 I will grant him to sit with me on my throne implies that Christ will give some of his ruling authority to his people (compare 20:4; 22:6; Luke 19:17; 1 Cor. 6:3; 2 Tim. 2:12).