

## Why Was Revelation Written?



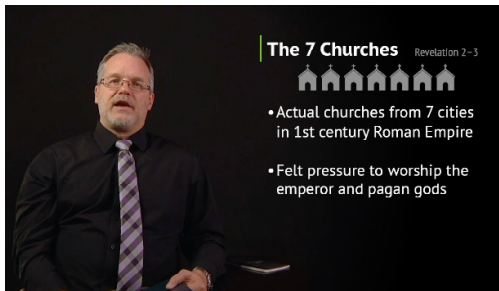
*David Mathewson, PhD*

*Experience: Associate Professor of  
New Testament at Denver Seminary*

Why was the book of Revelation written? We talked a little bit about the kind of book it is: Revelation is a prophecy and an apocalypse. It communicates symbolically, and it's a letter. It's meant to address the specific needs of specific churches living in the first-century Roman world. But why was it written? One common misunderstanding is that Revelation was written to comfort Christians undergoing persecution. Now, that's partially true because some Christians were indeed suffering persecution at the hands of the Roman Empire.

But when you read the seven messages to the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3, which provide the background for the book, it's interesting that only two of those seven churches were suffering any kind of persecution. And at the time of his writing, John knew of only one church member who had died for his faith, a man named Antipas. The other five churches hadn't suffered persecution. In these chapters, Jesus evaluates these seven churches, because this entire book—this vision, this apocalypse, this prophecy—is for them. It's meant to address their situation.

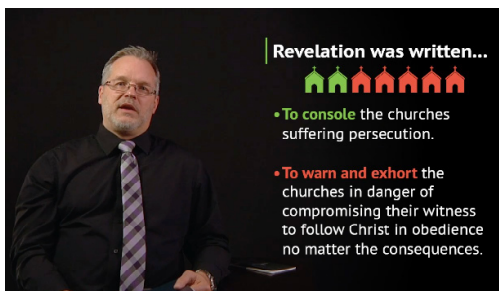
Revelation was written to seven actual churches in the first century struggling to live out their faith in the Roman Empire. Rome was the dominant empire of the day. Rome made a number of claims about itself: Rome was the savior of the world and at the center of the universe. It provided salvation. It provided peace. It provided prosperity for those who came under its empire. There was even a system of worshiping and showing allegiance to the emperor. All seven of these cities had temples to pagan gods, but many of them also had temples to emperors. Sometimes the role of the Roman citizen would have carried with it the mandate to show gratitude towards the emperor as the one responsible for your prosperity, which would have included pagan feasts and other opportunities for worshiping the emperor.





Christians in the Roman Empire basically had two responses. They could resist and pay the possible consequences: ostracism, persecution, loss of job. So far, only one man had lost his life for this, but John foresaw more of this coming. The other response was to compromise: to worship Jesus Christ, but also worship the emperor. Those churches that had made this latter choice were now in such danger of losing their witness that John warns them about compromising their faithful witness and becoming too close to the Roman Empire.

So, in chapters 2 and 3, we find Jesus evaluating his seven churches. Five of them fall short and receive a largely negative evaluation; and they're told to repent. These five churches had become so comfortable and so complacent in their lives within the Roman Empire that John is writing to warn them to wake up. In fact, that's what he tells one of the churches: Wake up and pay attention to what's going on! They have become just like their surrounding culture. They have become so much like the pagan Roman Empire that they're in danger of losing their witness.



Revelation, then, is written to do two things. First, it consoles those who are suffering. For those churches who are suffering persecution because they have maintained their faithful witness and have taken a stand for the person of Jesus Christ and the truth of the gospel, the book of Revelation is meant to bring comfort and provide consolation. However, for the other churches, for those five churches in danger of compromising their witness, the book of Revelation is meant as a warning and an exhortation to wake out of their slumber and to maintain their faithful witness no matter what the consequences.

One of the things Revelation does is to unveil the true nature of Rome. It shows that like some of the famous cities and empires in the past (such as Egypt, Babylon, and Tyre), Rome is also a godless empire. It's bent on violence. It's bent on injustice and oppression. It's idolatrous. And for that reason, Jesus wants to dissuade His people and churches from becoming too comfortable with Rome, from throwing in their hat with the Roman Empire and looking too much like their pagan surroundings. Instead, Revelation is a call for God's people to be faithful in the midst of this.

One common misunderstanding people may have is that during this time Christians were being thrown into the arena and torn apart by wild animals or being dragged into the streets by legions of Roman armies and soldiers marching through the cities. This

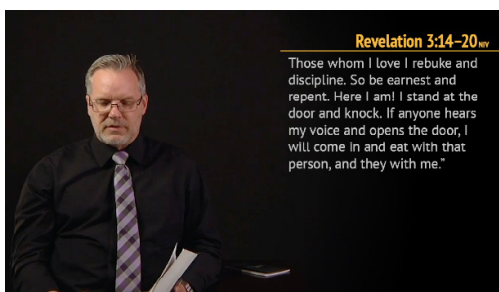
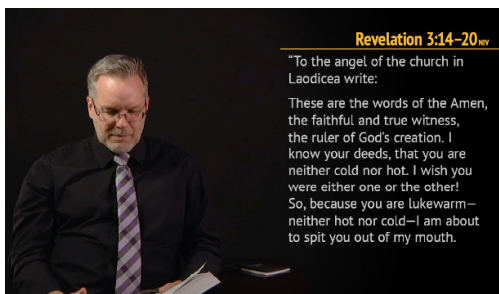
did happen much later, but at this time, much of the pressure on Christians did not come from the emperor or from Rome itself. Most of it came at a local level from cities like Pergamum and Ephesus and Thyatira and Smyrna and Sardis and Laodicea, where officials were keen to keep favor with Rome by demonstrating their loyalty. A refusal to worship the emperor or to participate in certain feasts or occasions to show your allegiance to Rome and the emperor would have been seen as an extreme act of ingratitude or defiance.

So, most of the pressure on Christians was not coming from the Roman Empire, but from some of the local officials. In a couple of the letters, you read that even the Jewish synagogue was putting pressure on Christians; perhaps calling them out before the Roman authorities to get them into trouble.

But in any case, Christians had two options. Again, number one, they could take a stand. And two of the churches did that in chapters 2 and 3. They could take a stand for their faith and suffer the consequences in the form of ostracism, lost jobs, other forms of persecution, and eventually even death. The other response was to rationalize and say, well, it's possible to be a Christian but to also demonstrate allegiance to Rome, to also show allegiance to the Roman emperor. Five of the churches had gone that route. And Revelation functions to warn them against what they're doing.

One of the letters I'd like to read to you, just so you get a sense of what the church was up against, is the very last one to the church of Laodicea. The church of Laodicea is a good example of a church that had compromised with Rome. They were so enmeshed in the Roman economy and Roman religion that they were in danger of completely losing their witness. And Jesus' words to them are rather strong words of warning calling them to repent. And here's what Jesus says to the church of Laodicea (Revelation 3:14–20).

These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation [Jesus Himself]. I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other. So because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth. You say, "I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing." But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked [spiritually]. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you



can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see.

Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.

I'll stop right there. But you get the sense. Laodicea is a church that has so compromised their witness that Jesus has nothing good to say about them.

Revelation, then, functions in two ways. Number one, it exhorts the church. It exhorts the church to follow the Lamb in obedience and faithful witness. But second, it exhorts them to follow Him no matter what the consequences they might face. In a sense, that summarizes the entire purpose of the book of Revelation. Revelation was written to encourage and exhort the church—then and now—to follow the Lamb in complete obedience and faithful witness, no matter what the consequences it might bring.

