

# Letters to the Seven Churches

## Studies in the Book of Revelation No. 2

*Please read the second and third chapters of Revelation.*

Near the close of the first chapter of the Revelation, John was told to write the things which he had seen, the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter (1:19). These three time periods form the major divisions of the Book of Revelation — things past (chapter 1), things present (chapters 2-3), and things future (chapters 4-22). Our lesson today covers chapters two and three of the Revelation (the second major division of the Book).

Revelation 2 and Revelation 3 consist of seven letters from Christ to His church. Each letter is directed to a particular church, and yet in a larger sense, the seven letters are directed to all seven churches. The **beginning** of each letter addresses a particular church (through the “angel” — the person in charge); and yet at the **close** of each letter there is a universal application to all churches. Compare verse 1 of chapter two, with verse 7 of the same chapter. In other words, the messages given here apply to Christians throughout the entire church age in all churches.

In these letters, we will notice that our Lord does not close His eyes to the things that are good nor to that which is evil. He commends the churches wherein they have been faithful. He condemns them wherein they have been failing. And since each of these churches had conditions that often exist in every congregation, we can learn lessons from each of the seven letters recorded here. But in addition to this, each of these seven churches pictures a broad period of church history from the time of Christ on down to the present day. Church history can easily be divided into seven major parts, and we will notice these divisions as we go along. There were more than seven churches in Asia at the time John wrote the revelation, but God chose these particular seven because in them there were seven different sets of conditions which represent the state of the church during the entire church age.

The letter to Ephesus pictures the apostolic church of the first century, and so on down through history until we come to Laodicea which pictures the apostate church of the end times. Much could be said about each one of the seven letters, but our purpose in this series of studies is to give a summary of the Revelation, and so we will purposely avoid getting lost in the details of the Book.

### 1. Ephesus — the Apostolic Church

Ephesus was the home of the goddess Diana and of the silversmith Demetrius. The temple of Diana was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world (it ranked with the Pyramids of Egypt). Every year, thousands of strangers visited Ephesus and bought small silver shrines (representing the goddess Diana), and then took them back to their homes sometimes worshipping them as gods.

Diana was the goddess of lust and fertility, and thus open prostitution was practiced daily as a part of the worship practices in the Temple of Diana.

In the midst of these filthy surroundings, there was a church thriving in the city of Ephesus. It was an evangelistic church. It had “labored” and toiled with an enthusiasm for souls. Their witness was so effective that Demetrius was afraid he’d have to go out of the business of making small silver shrines. The Christians were making an impact upon the city.

The church at Ephesus was a separated church. It could not “bear them which were evil” (verse 2). The church exercised discipline. People were excommunicated for worldliness and for irregular conduct. The church was kept clean and this is a characteristic sorely needed in the church today.

The church at Ephesus was an orthodox church. It “tried them which say they are apostles and are not.” False teachers were not tolerated. False doctrines never got a real foothold. The Ephesian Christians hated “the deeds of the Nicolaitans.” The Nicolaitans were a sect teaching that in the church there are two classes of people, the clergy and the laity, and that the clergy are in a class above others. The Ephesians hated this doctrine. They taught the priesthood of every believer, and that at the foot of the Cross every person (clergy and laity) is on the same level.

But already in the church at Ephesus, the early zeal and devotion for Christ was disappearing. They had left their first love (verse 4). They had not departed **completely** from love for God, but their love for Him no longer had the depth and meaning that it once had. Their service was becoming mechanical and their devotion was kind of routine. Their love for the brethren was not that “fervent love” which they had once experienced. The hearts of the Ephesian Christians had chilled.

The remedy for such coolness toward Christ and the brethren is given in verse 5. Our Lord says, “Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works.” Jesus Christ appeals to His church, urging a return to the early zeal and devotion. Repentance is for the church member and not only for the hardened sinner on skid row.

Ephesus is a picture of the first-century church. It was orthodox in the faith. It had many commendable qualities. But already toward the end of the century it was leaving its first love.

## **2. Smyrna — the Persecuted Church**

Smyrna was a beautiful city just forty miles north of Ephesus. Its streets were wide and spacious. It claimed to be the most beautiful Greek city in the world. It was here that Polycarp served the Lord faithfully. It was he who was martyred for his faith, and when his persecutors gave him an opportunity to recant and give up his faith, he said, “Eighty and six years have I served him; he has never done me wrong; how can I renounce my King and my Saviour?”

The church at Smyrna had many good qualities. In fact, there is nothing here that our Lord condemns. It was an energetic church. The Lord noted their “works” (verse 9), and commended the

church for them. Smyrna was a persecuted church. It suffered a great deal, and worse suffering was yet to come (verse 10). There was a large Jewish population in Smyrna, and these people (along with the pagan portion of the population) united together to ridicule the Christians and to destroy their property. Smyrna was a persecuted church. Also, the church at Smyrna was a poor church. Many of the early Christians came from the lower classes of society; most of them were just plain, ordinary, common people — and the bitter persecution which they suffered only added to their poverty.

Just as the church at Ephesus represents the spiritual state of the entire church period during the First Century, so the trials and persecutions of the church in Smyrna symbolize the spiritual state of the church during the Second and Third Centuries. It was during these centuries that Christians were burned and hanged and crucified and cast into the lions. The word “Smyrna” comes from a Greek word meaning “myrrh,” which is a fragrant spice — but it must be crushed in order to give out its fragrance. Thus the word itself is a symbol of the persecutions of the period.

### **3. Pergamos — the State Church**

Pergamos was a religious center for the worship of pagan gods. It was a wealthy city, filled with temples and statues and altars dedicated to the pagan deities. Pergamos was the seat of Emperor worship. There was a temple in this city set aside for the worship of Caesar as a God.

Satan had great power and authority in the city of Pergamos (verse 13), but in the midst of the pagan atmosphere, there was a little church to which Christ directed this letter. But not all was well at Pergamos. Some held the doctrine of Balaam. The doctrine was the teaching that the people of God should intermarry with the heathen and thus break down the line of distinction between the church and the world. Then too, some at Pergamos held the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, claiming that the clergy had the right to forgive sins, etc., and that the clergy were in a class above the people. However, despite the fact that some held the doctrine of the Balaamites (verse 14) and of the Nicolaitans (verse 15), there were many who had not denied the faith. Some were holding fast (verse 13).

The word “Pergamos” means “a mixed marriage.” It represents that period in church history when the church was married to the state. It all happened in the year 313 AD, when Constantine (the Roman Emperor) announced that he had seen a vision in the sky, and that he was becoming a Christian. Christianity soon was declared the state religion. The church was no longer persecuted. It became popular to be a Christian. Whole pagan armies were baptized into the “Christian” faith. But there was increasing corruption in the church, and there were more departures from the faith. It was during this time that the church changed its nature from a simple and small beginning (with a few elders and a few deacons), to become the great ecclesiastical giant as we see it today.

### **4. Thyatira — the Papal Church**

Thyatira was a prosperous trading center. It was famous for the manufacture of purple dyes and for its clothing industries.

The church at Thyatira was characterized by externalism. There was a great organization and lots of socializing. The last part of verse 19 says there were more works than there was faith. Also, the church at Thyatira was sapped by Jezebelianism. Jezebel was the wife of king Ahab. She was a wicked and obstinate woman. She tried to combine Israel's worship of the true God with the worship of the idol Baal. In John's day there was likely a woman-leader in the church at Thyatira who was somewhat like the Old Testament Jezebel. The Lord says in verse 20, "I have a few things against thee," and in verse 23 that those who follow her ways will meet death. The church at Thyatira was given over to idolatry.

Notice in verse 24 that there was a group within the church at Thyatira which continued in the faith and had not been deceived by Jezebel. The Lord tells the faithful ones to "hold fast till I come." This indicates that it is possible to be loyal to the cause of Christ even in the midst of apostasy.

The church at Thyatira pictures a period in church history known as the Middle Ages. This was the time when the Roman Church with all its idolatry — statues, holy water, worship of Mary, etc. — came into power. In fact, the word "Thyatira" means "a continual sacrifice," and thus pictures the Mass offered as a continual sacrifice for the sins of the people. The Thyatira Church pictures the long period of church history from 500 AD to 1500 AD when Roman Catholicism had control over nearly all of Christendom.

## **5. Sardis — the Reformation Church**

The city of Sardis was known for its wickedness and immorality. The church there had a great reputation. The Lord says "I know your works." They were an open book to Him (as they are in every church). But He says, "You have a name that you live, but you are dead" (3:1). The church had plenty of activity. It had committees and anniversaries and rallies and what have you. Its services were well attended, but as far as spiritual power was concerned, it was dead! The church did however, have a small remnant. There were a few in Sardis who were faithful and had not spotted their garments (3:4).

The characteristics of the church in Sardis are a picture of the church during the Protestant Reformation. Under the leadership of men like Martin Luther and John Calvin, the Reformation swept over Europe and the Dark Ages came to an end. The word "Sardis" means "those who have escaped." It pictures the period in church history when thousands escaped from Catholicism and formed the Protestant churches of the Reformation.

The protesting churches recovered some of the Bible teachings that had been dropped, but still there was little emphasis on real pious Christian living. There was (even in the Protestant churches) lots of machinery and activity and ceremony. They had a reputation for being active, but in reality

there was little spiritual life. It was during this period that small groups (such as the Anabaptists and Brethren and Huguenots and Puritans) sprung up, and stressed pious living and a return to the apostolic faith. Just as in Sardis, there was a remnant that had not spotted their garments, so in the Reformation period, there was a remnant that stressed correctness in doctrine and also holiness in life.

## **6. Philadelphia — the Missionary Church**

Philadelphia was located on the edge of a huge fertile plain. It was famous for its grapes. It was a region plagued with earthquakes. Several times the city was almost destroyed and the people had to move out. Perhaps that's why the Lord promised to the overcomers in verse 12, "I will make (him) a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out." The pillar is strong and sturdy, and over in the City of God there won't be any more earthquakes.

The church at Philadelphia was a conservative church. Here was a congregation that was faithful to Christ and to the Word of God. They had "kept" and not "denied" the name of the Lord (verse 8). The assembly at Philadelphia also was a missionary church (verse 8). Because of their stand for the faith, God opened a door for evangelists to spread the Good News far and wide.

The message to the church at Philadelphia very well pictures the widespread movement to share the Gospel of Christ which was especially evident during the nineteenth century. There was very little evangelism during the Dark Ages, but in the 1700's and the 1800's, men like William Carey and Adoniram Judson and David Livingstone carried the Gospel message to the far corners of the earth.

## **7. Laodicea — the Apostate Church**

Laodicea was a commercial city with many businesses. It was a center for banking and the manufacture of clothing and the making of medicines. One of its famous medications was "eyesalve." The city was so wealthy that when it was badly destroyed by an earthquake in 60 AD, it refused federal funds from Rome, and rebuilt the destroyed section of the city with its own funds.

The church at Laodicea was as a result a wealthy church. The members boasted of being rich and increased with goods (verse 17). There was a lavish building with dance halls and card tables and polished floors. But material riches had blinded their eyes to the real spiritual need. Spiritually they were poor and blind and naked.

The assembly at Laodicea was lukewarm. It was a perfect example of those who participate in outward religious worship but without inner reality. The people of Laodicea were indifferent to the great doctrinal truths of the Scriptures. There was lots of activity and plenty of form, but very little godliness. Our Lord looked down on this congregation and saw the highly trained preacher, and heard the fancy choir singing its anthems, and smelled in on their soup suppers. It was a beautiful building and had a rich treasury, but its members were only lukewarm in their devotion to Jesus Christ.

The church at Laodicea represents the last period in church history. It's a picture of the church of the end times. There is much lukewarmness within Christendom today. People meet together and go through the motions, and then go home the same poor empty souls they were when they came! The folks are decent and respectable, but they are lukewarm. They go to church on Sunday — and give a little and do a little and sing a little — and then go home and live like the world.

The masses have rejected Christ and His way of life and His plan of salvation, but He still calls to each individual, "If any man hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to him" and fellowship with him, and he with Me (3:20).

Paul says (in Titus 2:12) that the grace of God which brings salvation, teaches us that "denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world, looking for that blessed hope, the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ." Friends — time is running out. Every sign indicates that we are approaching the end of the age. The foundations of civilization are crumbling. Political systems are falling into disarray. International agreements have turned to ashes. World economists are running a race with disaster. If there's anything that you still want to get done, you ought to do it quickly. Our Lord's coming may be much closer than we think.

-Harold S. Martin

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#### **BIBLE HELPS**

*Robert Lehigh, Editor*

PO Box 391

Hanover, PA 17331

United States of America