

## TOPIC: THE LETTERS TO THE 7 CHURCHES

### TEXT: REVELATION 2-3

- To Ephesus: "Do not let your love for Jesus grow cold."
- To Smyrna: "Do not fear the persecution of the world."
- To Pergamum: "Trust the Word of God to keep you strong and faithful."
- To Thyatira: "Avoid both sexual and spiritual adultery. Be pure."
- To Sardis: "Wake up now! Strengthen what remains and is about to die!"
- To Philadelphia: "I will open a door of ministry and witness for you."
- To Laodicea: "Don't yield to complacency. Invite me in! Let me revolutionize and transform your life! If you do, you will have a princely position in the age to come!"

### A SEVENFOLD PATTERN

We need to ask 2 questions as we approach these letters:

- (1) Why only *seven* churches?
- (2) Why *these* particular seven?

- The 7 churches were representative of individual churches of any given age, and furthermore, they represent a process and seven key stages<sup>1</sup> in the history of the church.
- The Lord chose these seven churches because they represent conditions that have prevailed throughout church history, from the beginning to the end.
- By either repentance or disobedience, a church may change from one classification to another of these seven basic types--but it can always be found somewhere within this sevenfold pattern.
- As we've previously noted, seven is the number of completeness. These seven letters, then, constitute our Lord's complete overview of the church, stage by stage, from beginning to end.
- We must never forget that *all* of Revelation was written for these seven churches. Each church--not just one particular church from chapter 2 or 3--is expected to know and

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<sup>1</sup> Moreover, as many Bible scholars have pointed out, these letters also serve as a preview of the entire history of the church, from its beginning to its consummation. They represent seven stages or key periods in church history. "Prophecy" Revelation 1:3 supports this view

understand the entire book.

As we explore these seven letters we will briefly trace the different historical periods of the Christian church, while also carefully examining what the Lord says to Ephesus the first Church and Laodicea the last Church, which is our time period in the history of the Church and Philadelphia to which God had nothing negative to say.

We will briefly glance at Smyrna through to Sardis, but please by Tuesday download these sermon notes from today and another comprehensive document from Ray C Stedman to help with your studies. You might find John Piper helpful in his series of Revelation on [www.desiringGod.org](http://www.desiringGod.org)

Somewhere in this sevenfold list we will find your church and every believing Church.

## **THE LIGHT OF TRUTH**

In Revelation 1, light is used as a powerful symbol.

In Revelation 2-3 Jesus is described as holding **seven bright stars** in His right hand, and He is surrounded by **seven golden lampstands**. In verse 19 the Lord commands John,

*The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.*

Note that a lampstand (Church) is the bearer of the light (Truth revealed in Christ).

God calls every Church to be “A light-bearer” holding the light so that the light itself can shine forth, illuminating its environment.

We live in an IT world with the web easily accessible for many in the West, despite the accumulation of so much knowledge only the Church is God’s light-bearer, the lampstand that can bring redemptive light.

Christ commissions us as we go worldwide, to make disciples of all nations. We have a powerful influence to exert and exercise in the world, and that's what these seven dynamic letters are all about.

## **ANGELS IN THE CHURCH**

I believe these seven letters are addressed to the *angels* of the seven churches--heavenly beings responsible for guiding the human leaders of each church.

## EPHESUS (33-100 A.D, 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Century) “Loveless”

*"Do not let your love for Jesus grow cold."*

A Church that is outwardly successful, but was beginning to lose its first love, that underlying motivation that is so necessary for Christians

### AFFIRMATION:

#### 1. They are committed and hardworking.

*"I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance,"*

- They take their faith seriously and put it to work.
- They tell others about their faith. They minister to human needs.
- They reach out to the homeless and the outcasts.
- They are busy people, and the Lord says that is good.

#### 2. They have sound doctrine

*"I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false."*

Their faith was well defined and well defended. They exposed and opposed false teachers.

#### 3. They were not quitters

*"Persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary."*

Despite all the hardships the Ephesians were focused and determined to remain in the Lord

#### 4. Hatred of Nicolaitans practices

Heavy Shepherding (dictatorial leadership), Embraced parts of the Gospel, Loose sexual practices in a nutshell they hatred idolatry and immorality.

### ADMONITION:

*"You have forsaken your first love"?*

### Example: Latana and I

*The way we talked to each other, touched each other's hands, how our eyes meet! We*

were "spaced out." So to speak, lost in each other. We thought only of the wonder of each other.

### **Our "First Love"**

- Wonderful sense of Discovery
- Surety about His Love
- Freedom from sin
- Hearts were filled with gratitude
- Our eyes fixed only on Jesus

### **How do we loose it?**

- When the joy of knowing Christ departs
- Your love for others disappear
- When one loses a healthy perspective of self

### **APPEAL:**

#### **Remember**

*"Remember the height from which you have fallen,"*

Think back, Look back, Recall

#### **Repent**

Change your mind--and change your life.

#### **Return.**

*"Do the things you did at first,"*

Our love for Him and His Word (absorbing its truths with eager eyes)

- As we pray to God continually, trusting Him with all the issues of our lives;
- As we respond to others selflessly and compassionately out of a heart full of wondering love for the Lord Jesus;
- As we praise God from the depths of our hearts, full of gratitude for all He has done in our lives;
- As we sing praises to His name and meditate on His grace--then we are truly returning to our first love.

**SMYRNA "Persecuted," which exactly describes this church. (100-312 A.D 2<sup>nd</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> Century)<sup>2</sup>  
vv.8-11**

And persecution would hang over the church during the general period from the second century to the time of Constantine the Great, the first Christian emperor of Rome, in 320 A.D.

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<sup>2</sup> **The Age of Martyrs**

As we discussed in chapters 2 and 3, each of the seven churches of Revelation represents a period of church history. According to this prophetic view the church in Smyrna represents a period called "The Age of Martyrs," which lasted from about A.D. 160 to the rise of the first "Christian" emperor, Constantine the Great, in A.D. 324. To call this period "The Age of Martyrs" is not to suggest that this was the only time in history when Christians have been martyred. Believers have suffered and died for their faith and their Lord from the earliest days right up to the present day. In fact, it might surprise you to learn that the century that has seen the most Christians put to death for their faith was not the first, second, or third century, *but our own twentieth century!*

But it was during the Age of Martyrs that Christians were persecuted in ways almost beyond our ability to describe or believe. Their bodies were torn apart, joint from joint, upon the racks. Their fingernails were pulled out. They were wrapped in animal skins and thrown into sports arenas to be gored by wild animals for the amusement of others. They were covered with tar, suspended in Nero's gardens, and set alight--grisly human torches to illuminate the festivities of the pagans. Other atrocities against the faithful, as gruesome or worse than those I've already mentioned are described in *Fox's Book of Martyrs*.

One of the prominent early casualties of the Age of Martyrs was Polycarp, bishop of the church at Smyrna. As a young man Polycarp had personally known the apostle John. Perhaps he had even heard the vision of Revelation recounted from the lips of the apostle himself. Without question, Polycarp knew well the words of the letter from Jesus to the church in Smyrna: "Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer . . . Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life."

In A.D. 155, at the age of 86, Polycarp was brought before the Roman proconsul at Smyrna, who demanded that Polycarp take an oath renouncing Christ and placing his trust in "the Luck of Caesar." Polycarp refused. "Eighty-six years have I served the Lord Jesus," replied the bishop. "He has been faithful to me. How can I now be faithless to Him and blaspheme the name of my Savior?"

"Swear by the Luck of Caesar," the proconsul insisted, "or I will have you torn and eaten by wild beasts."

"Hand me over to the beasts," Polycarp calmly replied. "You will not change my heart. I tell you plainly that I am a Christian, even unto the death."

Enraged, the proconsul sent a messenger out into the city to proclaim that the bishop Polycarp had admitted to being a Christian. The messenger gathered a mob together in the arena of Smyrna. There the mob built a pyre of kindling, sticks, and planks, while clamoring that Polycarp be handed to them. The speed with which the bloodthirsty mob was assembled is clear evidence of the intense anti-Christian hatred that poisoned the city of Smyrna.

When Polycarp was delivered to the mob in the arena, several of the people brought forth hammers and nails with which to nail the bishop's hands and feet to the stake to keep him from struggling. "Put away those nails and let me be!" said Polycarp with such an air of authority that the men put down their hammers and nails. "The One who gives me strength to endure the flames will give me strength not to flinch at the stake."

As the wood was piled around his feet and ignited, Polycarp turned his eyes skyward and said, "O Lord God Almighty, Father of the blessed and beloved Son, Jesus Christ, I thank you for giving me this day and this hour, that I may be numbered among your martyrs, to share the cup of Jesus, and to rise again to life everlasting."

His "Amen" was wafted up in the flame and smoke of the pyre.

## "DO NOT FEAR THE PERSECUTION OF THE WORLD."

### AFFIRMATION:

1. The rich, nurturing, loving fellowship of the Christian church family

*"I know . . . your poverty--yet you are rich."*

True riches are found within, where the heart is filled with grace and the love of God.

*"I know your poverty,"*

When our lives are full of rich relationships with other Christians and with God Himself, then we have riches indeed! That was the experience of the church in Smyrna.

2. The cruel and hostile surrounding society.

*"Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer,"*

And Jesus wanted the church at Smyrna to be encouraged and strengthened, for the pressure and persecution was going to grow *more intense*, not less. He told them. *"I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you."*

The devil (1<sup>st</sup> mention of the devil in Revelation) will cause some believers to be put in prison. Roman prisons were ghastly places where prisoners knew they could be hauled out of their cells and executed at any moment.

Persecution will be limited (ten days) meaning ten separate periods of persecution according to history

We are continually encouraged by the fact that these trials, persecution, and pressures are producing something of eternal value in our lives.

### ADMONITION:

This slander came from false Jews (People who were the physical, genetic descendants of Abraham, but lacked the spiritual insight of their father Abraham). They scorned and slandered the truth. They hated and persecuted people whose only crime was loving God and loving one another.

By persecuting the truth and being far removed from the true faith of Abraham, they were, in effect, "a synagogue of Satan."

### APPEAL:

*"He who has an ear let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death."*

The "**second death**" involves complete, eternal separation from God, a torment of soul and spirit that is so devastating that it is depicted by the effect that fire has on the nerve endings of the human body. It is the fate demanded by those who say, *"I don't want anything to do with God. I don't want*

*God in my life.*<sup>3</sup> The God of love, of grace, of mercy, the God who gave us all free will, will at the final judgment give people what they have demanded all their lives--a total and complete separation from His love.

"If you listen to the message of this letter," says Jesus, in effect, "if you trust me in times of pressure and persecution

I will give you the gift of eternal life and you will have nothing to fear from the judgment of God. You will be kept safe from the second death."

### **PERGAMUM "Compromising." (312-590 A.D, 4<sup>th</sup>- 7<sup>th</sup> Century)<sup>4</sup> vv.12-16**

The church had married the world and troubled due to the infiltration of all the attitudes and value systems.

And this well reflects that period in church history from the **rise of Constantine**, who made Christianity the popular religion of the day, up to the full rise of the papal church in about the seventh century.

#### **AFFIRMATION:**

The first half of the Lord's assessment of the Pergamum church is an affirmation of its strengths. *He affirms the Pergamum believers because they have remained true to His name.* They have refused to budge on the issue of who Jesus Christ is. They hold sound doctrine concerning the fact that Jesus is the God-man--not godlike, not half-man, half-God, *but fully God and fully man in one completely whole person.* Almost all the heresies from that day until our own day flow out of a corruption of this basic truth, out of a denial of the deity of Jesus.

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<sup>3</sup> People like Richard Dawkins and Bill Maher

<sup>4</sup> **The Pergamum Stage of Church History**

As we've previously seen, each of the seven churches of Revelation corresponds to a period of church history. The Pergamum stage is that period of time between the accessions of Constantine the Great in A.D. 324 to the sixth century, when the era of the popes began. During that period of time, the great councils of the church--Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus, Chalcedon, and others--determined and canonized the true doctrine of the person of Jesus Christ--who He was and how He combined in Himself the full nature of God and of man.

But this was also the time of the first "marriage" between church and state, when Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. In fact, the name Pergamum means "marriage" and comes from the same root word from which we get such words as monogamy and bigamy.

Despite the seemingly desirable goal of fostering the rise of Christianity by making it the state religion, Constantine was not an orthodox Christian. In fact, he adopted many pagan practices and brought them into the church where they became accepted. By this time in its history the church was enjoying considerable popularity. It had come to be viewed not so much as a family of faith, but as a formal, institutional, worldly kingdom, much like any other kingdom. As the church's political influence grew throughout the Pergamum period of history, its spiritual influence waned.

Jesus also affirms the fact that the Pergamum believers risked their own lives for the faith.

He says, "You did not renounce your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city--where Satan lives."

The name Antipas means "against all." We do not know much about this man, although he is said to be the first martyr under the Roman persecution in Asia. Tradition holds that Antipas was tortured to death, seared alive inside a hollow brass statue in the form of a bull which was heated until it glowed white-hot. That is the price Antipas paid for being true to his faith in Jesus Christ. He had to literally stand "against all."

## ADMONITION:

There are errors that undermine sound doctrine that the Lord warns against.

Error 1

*The error of Balaam* continues to threaten the church in our own day: it is the practice of pornography, adultery, fornication, and living with someone without the sanction of marriage).

Many individual Christians, individual churches, and even some entire denominations openly tolerate or endorse such behavior, and the result is the same today as it was in Balaam's day: emotional, psychological, spiritual, and even physical damage to many lives.

Those who engage in such behavior are always led away from God and closer to their own destruction.

Error 2

Another error Jesus warns against is "the teaching of the Nicolaitans."

Dictatorial leadership, Idolatry and Immorality

## APPLICATION:

This promise is addressed to all those who heed the warnings of this letter, who are vigilant and faithful in the areas of sexual immorality, spiritual superiority, and spiritual pride.

If you and I stand fast against the lure of corruption and the lust for power over others, Jesus promises that we will be given several things--secret things with a special significance.

1. He says He will give us "hidden manna." Christ is the foods for the inner spirit non-believers do not know about.
2. He will give us a white stone.
3. Upon that stone will be written a new name, known only to us

If we know the Lord Jesus and if we keep our hearts pure from the corrupting influences of the world around us, He has promised to give us a new name, a secret name, a special mark of intimacy with Him.

It is not just a name change; it is an identity change (We are new creatures, with a new nature, heirs to a new and exciting destination in eternity--a rich, warm, intimate relationship with Jesus Christ

that goes on and on forever).

## THYATIRA “Corrupt” (590-1517 A.D, 7<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> Century) Dark Ages<sup>5</sup> vv.18-19

In this church spiritual adultery was going on, and the letter is a very accurate description of

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### <sup>5</sup> The Devil's Millennium

We have examined the dynamics of the historic church of Thyatira and its relevance to our own lives and our churches today. Now let's take a prophetic look at the church of Thyatira and discover what age of church history this church symbolizes.

The Thyatiran church, remember, was the most corrupt of the seven churches. Accordingly, this church clearly symbolizes the darkest and most corrupt period of Christian history. It foreshadows the time from the sixth century to the sixteenth century--a thousand-year period that has been variously called "The Dark Ages," "The Middle Ages," and even "The Devil's Millennium."

It was a time when the institutional church had become very powerful and very corrupt. It defiled itself by combining pagan rites and magical practices with watered-down Christian teaching. Believers were taught to venerate and pray to images. The church was organized into a massive, intricate multi-level structure, which more closely resembled worldly government than the simple servant-leadership we see exercised in the New Testament. The elite hierarchy of the church introduced practices, which were unknown in Scripture or the early church. Religious authorities sought to dominate the political sphere of power.

During the sixth century the Bishop of Rome became accepted as the dominant figure in the church, and the office of pope came into being. For centuries the pope was more powerful than emperors and kings. On one occasion the pope summoned a German emperor to Rome and then forced him to stand barefoot in the snow for several hours before he would receive him. When the king was finally permitted to enter the presence of the pope, he was required to crawl on his hands and knees. Such was the power, arrogance, and corruption of the church during "The Devil's Millennium."

Yet, just as there were many within the corrupt church at Thyatira who loved God, who served His people, who had faith in His word, and who persevered, there were many Christians during "The Devil's Millennium" of church history who were equally faithful. The monasteries, which flourished during this time, served as hospitals and refuges for the sick, the poor, and the oppressed. Some of the most beautiful and enduring hymns and literature of our faith were written by devoted Christians of those days--Bernard of Clairvaux, Francis of Assisi, Thomas Aquinas, Meister Eckhart, Jan van Ruysbroeck, Catherine of Siena, and Thomas à Kempis, to name a few.

Yet these devoted, compassionate, faithful people were just islands of light in a sea of religious darkness. The "Thyatira stage" of church history could only be characterized as a period of incalculable oppression, corruption, and depravity. The evil influence of that period of history continues to reverberate in our own time, and it will culminate in a future time that is described for us in Revelation 17 and 18. There we will see the great harlot who rides the beast and who has assumed dominion over the kings of the earth.

It is a common notion among Bible commentators to identify the "harlot" only with the Roman Catholic Church, but I am convinced that this is a serious mistake. Although many of the doctrines, practices, and structures of the Roman Catholic Church are rooted in the "Thyatira stage" of church history, it is not the only branch of Christendom that suffers from these errors.

For centuries we Protestants have strongly differed with Rome over a number of issues, especially the "Three M's"--Mary, the Mass, and the Magisterium (that is, the form of government of the church). But you will find many of these errors also in the great Orthodox churches of the East, the Coptic Church in Egypt, the Anglican and Lutheran churches of northern Europe, and many of the great Protestant denominations in America and around the world. In fact, the seeds of Thyatiran error are everywhere you look.

Wherever there are domineering, power-seeking "church bosses" like Thyatira's Jezebel; wherever Christians begin to accommodate themselves to the moral laxity and impurity of the surrounding society; wherever Christians slip into the idolatrous mindset of allowing ambition, self-gratification, and pride to remove God from the throne of their lives; wherever church structure becomes more important than Christian love, service, faith, and perseverance--at that point, that church, regardless of its denomination or its history, has become Thyatiran in character. The Lord will repay that church according to its deeds.

what is now called the Dark Ages of the church---the period when the church lost its zeal, its purity, its doctrines, became infiltrated with a great deal of superstition and paganism, and lost most of its power. This Dark Age lasted from the seventh century to early in the sixteenth century, and the time of the Reformation.

### **AFFIRMATION:**

"I know your deeds," your love and faith, your service and perseverance."  
These four qualities--love, faith, service, and perseverance--are inter-related.

Love leads to service. If you love God, you will serve His people.  
Service is the visible sign, the outward expression of a heart full of love.

Faith leads to perseverance.

You now understand that God is in control of all the circumstances of life and things will always work out for His good purpose. When you have faith you keep at your work. You do not quit.

Within the fellowship at Thyatira were many believers who loved God, who served His people, who had faith in His word, and who persevered. As they loved God and served others, the church grew.

That is the way churches grow: People are always attracted by the reality of Christian love, the heartfelt compassion of Christian service, the stirring hope of Christian faith, the challenging example of Christian perseverance.

### **ADMONITION:**

- Tolerance of Jezebel (False prophetess)
- Sexual immorality and food sacrificed to idols
- Do not hold to her teaching

The Lord tells us what her corrupt teaching consisted of: seducing believers into tolerating, accepting, and engaging in immorality and idolatry.

Notice that in the letters to the churches at both Pergamum and Thyatira the Lord links sexual immorality with idolatry.

Now the link between immorality and idolatry becomes clear: If people reject the Lord's authority over their lives and if God is no longer God in their lives, *then they must find another god!* It is impossible for the human spirit to thrive without something to live for, something larger than itself--and that *something* is what a god is! Whatever makes your life worthwhile becomes your god. It may be the god of pleasure, of self-gratification, even of sexual self-indulgence. Or it may be the god of wealth, success, ambition, power, or fame.

### **APPLICATION:**

The purpose of judgment and discipline within the church is *purification*. A pure church is a

strong church.

The church at Thyatira needed this kind of purification. So do many churches in our time. Tragically, there are all too few churches in our time that have the courage, conviction, and obedience to Scripture to undertake the purifying process of church discipline.

The Lord's message of encouragement to the faithful in Thyatira is *Hold on!* "Only hold on to what you have until I come." He says in effect, "Do not let go of the truth. Do not let go of your moral standards. It may be difficult to live for Christ in a worldly and corrupt church. But remain faithful until I come."

### SARDIS "Dead" (1750-1925 A.D, 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> Century) <sup>6</sup> 3:1-6

Is a picture of a church, which has recovered much of its truth, but seriously lacks in vitality.

#### <sup>6</sup> Reformation Winds of Reformation

In 1986, East German Communist party boss Erich Honecker declared that the Berlin Wall would stand for at least a hundred more years. Three years later that wall was pulled down in pieces. Beginning in the spring of 1989, the winds of reform and freedom swept through East Germany, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Romania.

As I watched these exciting, world-shattering events unfold on the evening news and on the front-page of my newspaper, I was reminded of the winds of reform and freedom that swept through Europe more than 400 years earlier during the Protestant Reformation. In the days of the Reformers--Martin Luther in Germany, Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin in Switzerland, and John Knox in Scotland--the gospel of Jesus Christ spread like wildfire throughout Europe, and the cruel walls of spiritual bondage fell before the power of God's Word and God's Spirit.

What many people forget about the Reformation, however, is how rapidly its fire was quenched. Many of the churches founded by the Reformers began to die even within the lifetimes of the Reformers themselves. Why? Because the leaders of the Reformation made a serious error!

Yes, they had correctly and wisely steered Christendom back to a focus on salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. But they made a grievous mistake when they linked the authority and oversight of the church with the civil government of the country in which they lived. Luther looked to the German princes for protection against the power of Rome. Zwingli tied the church to the ruling state in Switzerland. Calvin attempted to establish a theocratic government in the city of Geneva. So also did Knox in Scotland.

The result was a system of state churches spreading across the continent of Europe. Today these state churches are almost uniformly dead, like the church in Sardis.

I had an opportunity to see what the spiritual life of a state church is like when I toured northern Germany, Denmark, Holland, England, and Scotland in 1965. I met many laypeople and clergymen in these countries. The laypeople were uniformly dissatisfied with the stagnant atmosphere in their churches. The clergymen were frustrated by the fact that their duties as state-employed civil servants robbed them of time to prepare sermons and preach the Word of God.

"I simply have no time," said one pastor in Copenhagen, tears brimming in his eyes, "I have to baptize all the babies that are born, marry all the couples, and bury everyone who dies in the parish. I have no time to study." As someone put it, these state-employed pastors are so busy "hatching, matching, and dispatching" their parishioners, they have no time to feed them the life-giving Word of God! I'm sure there are a few genuine believers in these cold and lifeless churches, but I am equally certain that *most* of these parishioners are people with a reputation for being alive, yet who are spiritually dead.

In the historical overview provided by the seven letters of Revelation, the church at Sardis represents that period of church history from the last half of the sixteenth century (immediately following the Reformation) to about the middle of the eighteenth century, the beginning of the Great Awakening. It was a time of great darkness and death in Christendom. The light was not entirely gone, but it was failing until the moment the Spirit of God rekindled the light through men like the Wesleys and George Whitefield.

This is a picture of the period of the Reformation. Although the Reformation churches began in a flaming fire of zeal, they soon died down and whitened to the ashes of a dead orthodoxy.

#### **AFFIRMATION:**

“I know your deeds” some good work but incomplete

#### **ADMONITION:**

**"Wake up!"**

The Lord's words to the church at Sardis are blunt and strong: "You have a reputation of being alive, but *you are dead*." A picture of the dead walking!

The letter to the "First Zombie Church of Sardis" is the most dire and somber of the seven. There are serious issues at stake in this letter--eternal issues. There was a time when the Sardis church was truly alive, quickened by the Spirit of God. The people in the Sardis church once served the needy out of a genuine love for Jesus. They worshiped out of a heart of devotion to their Lord. As a result, they won a reputation for being active and alive.

But as the book of Revelation was being written, the life had departed. A church that had once made an impact on its society had become a corpse--a walking, zombie-like corpse of a church that didn't have sense enough to consent to be buried. It continued to carry out its ghastly, hollow pretense of life.

Honestly face your failure and spiritual dullness! Admit the futility of your self-serving religious activity! Catch a whiff of the reeking corruption of your way of life!

As Christians we must not shrink from the convicting words of the letter to Sardis. Rather, we must bravely face them and ask ourselves, "What has gone wrong with my spiritual life? Why does my worship and Christian service seem so dreary? Why does my church seem so lifeless and unattractive? Why don't people want to come?" As individual Christians and as collective bodies of believers, these are the questions that confront us in the letter to the church at Sardis.

"Wake up!" our Lord cries to us in our worldly lethargy and stupor. "Wake up *now*--or you may *never* wake up!"

**"Strengthen what remains,"** says Jesus to the Sardis Christians. How? By setting their motives aright.

God is watching not only our behavior but also our hearts, monitoring whether we are living to please ourselves or to please Him.

#### **APPLICATION:**

- Remember the Gospel
- Obey the God's Word
- Repent
- Recover the hope of the Lord's return

*Remember, obey, and repent!* Look at yourself, your wrong outlook, and your tainted motives. Recognize that all your prideful religious busyness is little more than a covering of filthy rags for your poverty and sin. Cast yourself upon the grace of the Lord Jesus, believe, and receive His grace. Let it take root in your heart, and then He will give you the life of the Spirit of God. That is what the Christians in Sardis needed. And that is what you and I need today as well.

## **PHILADELPHIA “Faithful” (1750-1925 A.D, 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> Century)<sup>7</sup> vv.7-13**

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### <sup>7</sup> **The Philadelphia Stage of Church History**

Viewed from the standpoint of Christian history, the church at Philadelphia symbolizes a very rich and shining era: the Great Awakening of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, following the decline of the Reformation church.

It was during this "Philadelphia" stage of history that the Moravian Brethren began meeting in small groups for prayer, catching the vision for what God could do in the world, and eventually sending Moravian missionaries throughout the world.

In England the Awakening began with the Puritan Movement. The Puritans included John Bunyan, author of *Pilgrim's Progress*, and John Newton, writer of so many great hymns of the faith, including "Amazing Grace." The Awakening also encompasses the great Wesleyan Revival and George Whitefield's preaching throughout England and in America.

In America men like Jonathan Edwards, the American Puritan theologian who strongly advocated Christian missionary activity characterized the Great Awakening. It included the Methodist circuit riders, who rode horseback from church to church, preaching the gospel up and down the eastern seaboard and eventually moving out across the western plains.

I am personally indebted to a circuit rider named Brother Van who came to the territory of Montana soon after it became populated in the Montana gold rush. He went into the saloons and mining camps, preaching the gospel, winning hundreds to Christ, planting churches throughout the state, many of which are still there. I was for a while a member of a church founded by Brother Van and knew people who knew him well.

The Great Awakening was a time of tremendous missionary activity. During this time, William Carey in England got a vision of the desperate spiritual need in India. He went there and planted the gospel, and a powerful outreach for Christ was born in India. Also from England, Robert Moffat and his famous son-in-law, David Livingstone, took the gospel into untouched regions of Africa.

The American missionary Adoniram Judson pioneered a major outreach into Burma. Hudson Taylor took the gospel into inland China. David Brainerd gave his life on the American mission field at the age of 29, living, caring, and witnessing among Native Americans.

This was the time when so many of the great evangelists of church history emerged: George Whitefield, John Wesley, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, Charles Finney, and Dwight L. Moody. Out of the ashes of a deteriorating Reformation, God's Spirit brought forth new light and new life, a new and vibrant awakening throughout the Christian church.

All of the great people, events, and movements of the Great Awakening were foreshadowed by the church at Philadelphia in Asia Minor. Even while so many other surrounding churches were sinking into death and decay, the Philadelphia church was coming marvelously alive.

Lord has nothing evil to say, nothing to correct. He commends it because it is true and faithful to the word. It has a little strength, he says, and this pictures the church age of the nineteenth century, when the church is awakened and thrust out into the far corners of the earth in the great missionary movement of the last century.

#### **AFFIRMATION:**

They discovered power in the Holy Spirit, and God wants them to use that to capacity.

When Jesus is present with us throughout each day, and when our lives serve to reflect the life and character of Christ, then doors of ministry open before us. This is true of each believer in an individual sense, and it is true of entire churches.

#### **ADMONITION:**

No complaints only delight

#### **APPLICATION:**

#### **A TRIUMPHANT PROMISE**

In verse 10, the Lord gives the Philadelphian church a word of amazing encouragement and promise.

*3:10 "Since you have kept my command to endure patiently,<sup>1</sup> I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth."*

The Great Tribulation is coming, the Lord says, "**to test those who live on the earth.**" This phrase is widely misunderstood to refer to all those who are residents of the planet. But no, "those who live on the earth" are metaphorically those who live as though this life is all there is, who have their minds set upon the things of the earth, who are worldly minded.

The amazing promise of verse 10 is that the church will be delivered from that hour of trial.

*"I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world,"*  
says the Lord.

So the church will be kept from the time of trial, caught up and removed even before the Great Tribulation begins. This is the promise of the departure of the church, which Paul describes so beautifully in 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17:

*For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.*

The Philadelphia church was a little church with a little power, a little church that tried, a church against which the Lord had no complaint. Are we holding on to what we have, obeying the Word of God, remaining faithful to the name of Jesus, guarding our eternal crown?

May it be said of your life and mine that we, like the believers in Philadelphia, are Christians who truly delight our Lord!

### LAODICEA “Lukewarm” (20<sup>th</sup> -21<sup>st</sup> Century and Beyond)<sup>8</sup> vv.14-22

The rich church that says, "We don't need anything from God at all. We've got money, influence, power; that's all we need."

And God says, *"You blind fools! Don't you know you don't have anything; that you are wretched and poor, pitiable and blind? I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire."*

And he pictures himself standing outside the door of the church, knocking for admittance. If,

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#### <sup>8</sup> The Laodicean Stage of Church History

In this, as in all six previous letters, we must step back and take the long view of church history. Each of the seven churches of Revelation represents a time when the prevailing atmosphere of the worldwide Christian church matched the conditions described in the letter. Looking back across twenty centuries of church history, we can see how accurate each of these prophetic symbols has been.

Now we come to the seventh age of the church, the Laodicean period. It is clear, as both history and prophecy confirm, that Laodicea symbolizes the church of the twentieth century, the last age of the church--

The Laodicean period is characterized by the phenomenon of people dictating what will be taught rather than submitting to the authority of the Word of God. It is significant, I believe, that the name "Laodicea" means "the judgment of the people," or to put it loosely, "people's rights." For isn't that the cry of our times?

Laodicea is where the people tell the ministers what to preach. We see this happening around us today. The apostle Paul predicted in his second letter to Timothy that in the last days, "men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths."<sup>3</sup> Tragically, this is already taking place around us.

There used to be a time when the church taught that the natural self with whom we were born needed to be crucified, denied, and kept under careful control. Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, he must *deny himself* and take up his cross and follow me."<sup>4</sup> Yet we live in a day when churches are openly, brazenly advancing the self, teaching that we should assert the self and discover the powers and possibilities of the self, all apart from the necessity of a new birth.

Once the inerrancy of Scripture formed the bedrock of all evangelical churches. You could depend on the fact that the Bible was fully accepted as the inspired Word of God. But now churches, colleges, and seminaries which call themselves evangelical are rethinking the nature of Scripture, denying its inerrancy, and claiming it cannot be fully trusted. Instead of people submitting themselves to the judgment of the Word of God, we have people submitting the Word to their own judgment!

This is the age of compromise within the church. The church of the twentieth century is fast becoming a drifting church, a lukewarm church, a nauseating church in the eyes of the Lord. Once the church exhibited a burning desire to evangelize the world, to save those who were lost. Today, that desire has cooled in many churches, because pastors are telling their congregations that God is too loving to condemn anyone to an eternal separation from Himself. They say that good people who live good lives, even though they live apart from Jesus, will still be saved.

The church in the twentieth century is drifting away from the biblical truth that all have sinned and fall short of the standard of God's perfection, and that no one comes to the Father except through Jesus Christ. Even while the lostness of mankind is made unmistakably plain by the rise of crime, the plague of drug abuse, the failure of morality, the increasing pollution of our planet, compromising Christians in complacent churches continue to preach a feel-good "gospel" that has nothing to do with the authentic good news of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

Once it was unheard of that Christians would suggest that the killing of unborn babies should be condoned, or that practicing homosexuals should be ordained to the ministry or married in religious ceremonies. Yet these things are taking place today at an accelerating rate. Truly, this is the age of Laodicea.

as I have suggested, these letters outline the record of history, then it appears that we are in Laodicean times.

## **GOD'S WORD TO LAODICEA**

*"And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God's creation."*

Jesus gives the Church in Laodicea 2 things:

1. A Warning
2. A Promise

Before the Warning and Promise He gives his Identity showing His credibility and power.

"**Amen,**" he means that he is reliable; he is God's confirmation, God's "yes" to all divine promises "Amen" is simply means firm, true or faithful.

So, the one who speaks to us in this letter is God the Son, the source of all God's creation, including us. Therefore he has all power and reliability to accomplish his threats and fulfill his promises.

### **AFFIRMATION:**

### **ADMONITION:**

#### **The indictment:**

They are lukewarm meaning- half-hearted in their relationship with God.

- They do not have the fervor and warmth and zeal of a true lover of Christ; nor are they outright unbelievers who flatly reject Jesus and make no pretence of faith. They are halfway in between.
- Christ has a moderate influence on their lives.
- No burning desire for God, no passion for God's word, no experience of true fellowship, no depth in prayer
- They believe in Moderation in all things

#### **The Warning:**

Jesus' warning to the lukewarm church is that he will spew them out of his mouth.

The faith that saves is not a lukewarm, half-hearted faith. And so he warns Laodicea, and every other church, if you do not repent (as verse 19 says) and become zealous, or hot, then the mechanical, cool superficiality of your faith will be your destruction, and I will spew you out of my mouth.

The essence of lukewarmness is I need nothing, when there is an appeal are you one to go for prayer ministry or not, if not beware of lukewarmness. V.19

Lukewarm people are spiritually satisfied; they don't need anything from God, more seriously they don't need God.

### **APPLICATION: v.18**

God's plan:

- That our poverty be replaced by spiritual wealth
- That our nakedness and shame be covered with the robes of righteousness and good deeds (3:4; 7:14; 19:8)
- That our blindness be healed so we can see things as they really are and escape from the dream world of self-satisfaction.

And there is only one place we can get these things—from Jesus himself.

Do you need to understand Scripture?

Then ask yourself, "Do I have the Spirit of truth in my life?"

Have I received that anointing salve which will open my eyes to see?"

That, truly, is the most critical question each of us must answer within our own hearts. And that question brings us to the most vivid and poignant images in the Bible--the image of Jesus standing at the door of our hearts, knocking, waiting, earnestly desiring to come in and have fellowship with us.

Jesus' advice is:

Buy from me:

- Gold (How does one buy when broke?) Well Jesus already knows this v.17, they are also blind and naked (this means they can't even work to change their circumstance)
- White Clothes (Wealth, Power, and Wisdom)
- Eye Salve

Jesus tells them you don't need to go out and work, you need to pray, one simply needs to

invite Jesus in.

*"Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me."*

We can harmlessly apply this (like many do) to unbeliever, but that is not the context, this is addressed to lukewarm believers.

*"I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me."*

It is a beautiful picture of our relationship with Jesus. He comes in. we have fellowship together, we have communion together, we dwell together in the same place.

And so the text closes with a promise to those who conquer.

Verse 21:

*"He who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne."*

Christ conquered sin and Satan and death by never veering from the path of love. It cost him his life; but he gained the world.

In the last verse of Revelation 3, we hear the Lord's refrain for the final time:

*"He who has an ear let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."*

Are we listening to what the Spirit says to you and me in the church at the end of the twentieth century? The promises and warnings to the seven churches are as relevant to our lives as to the lives of the first-century believers. The seven letters could be summarized as follows:

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