

The Book of Revelation

Jesus's Messages to the Seven Churches

Lesson #3 for January 19, 2019

Scriptures: Revelation 2:8-3:22; Isaiah 61:10.

1. Revelation 2 and 3 are chapters which include specific messages to the seven churches mentioned there. Those were actual churches in the days of John. But, there were many other Christian groups in Asia Minor and in Galatia, Cappadocia, etc. that were not mentioned. This suggests to us that the churches mentioned were selected for specific reasons.
2. When comparing the history of the Christian church from John's day until ours, it is clear that each of those seven churches represented what happened later to the larger Christian church during a specific period of time from John's day until the second coming of Jesus Christ. We have no way of knowing whether John recognized this prophetic application of his messages in these two chapters or not. It seems clear that those churches were chosen for clear reasons.
3. However, it is clear that these messages followed a very specific pattern which was commonly used in letters in John's day.

The messages to the seven churches have a common structure, similar in form to ancient letters. (1) Jesus addresses each church by name. (2) He then introduces Himself to each church, using characteristics drawn from [Revelation] chapter 1. (3) He offers an analysis of the strengths and/or weaknesses of each church. (4) Jesus provides counsel suitable to His analysis of each church. (5) An appeal is made to the church to listen to the Spirit. (6) Each message concludes with a promise or promises to those in each church who overcome. In messages four through seven (beginning with Thyatira), the fifth and sixth components are in reverse order.—*Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** 40. [Content in brackets is added.]

4. It is clear that Jesus had not only a very detailed understanding and appreciation of the churches in John's day, but also of the future history of the Christian church until His second coming. In our lesson last week, we reviewed the message to the first church in this sequence, the church of Ephesus. We will now take up the messages to the other six churches.
5. **Revelation 2:8-11:** ⁸ "To the angel of the church in Smyrna write: "This is the message from the one who is the first and the last, who died and lived again. ⁹I know your troubles; I know that you are poor—but really you are rich! I know the evil things said against you by those who claim to be Jews but are not; they are a group that belongs to Satan! ¹⁰Don't be afraid of anything you are about to suffer. Listen! The Devil will put you to the test by having some of you thrown into prison, and your troubles will last ten days. Be faithful to me, even if it means death, and I will give you life as your prize of victory.
¹¹ "If you have ears, then, listen to what the Spirit says to the churches!
"Those who win the victory will not be hurt by the second death."—American Bible Society. (1992). *The Holy Bible: The Good News Translation** (2nd ed., Revelation 2:8–11). New York: American Bible Society. [Bold type is added.]
6. Smyrna, the city of the second church, was beautiful, wealthy, and determined to maintain a high position in the eyes of Rome. It was a center for mandated emperor worship. As time went on, living in Smyrna and refusing to worship Rome or the caesars could lead to persecution, even martyrdom. Today, the ancient city of Smyrna, now known as Izmir, is the third-largest city in Turkey and by far the most flourishing and powerful of the seven cities. One of the most famous post-apostolic Christians by the name of Polycarp was martyred after serving almost 40 years as the principal minister of the Smyrna church. The Jews in Smyrna were so opposed

to the Christians that when Polycarp was arrested on a Sabbath and sentenced to death, the Jews went out, even though it was on Sabbath, and were foremost in gathering firewood to burn Polycarp.

7. Whereas the church at Ephesus represents the prophetic period from the days of Jesus to the end of the 1st century, the prophetic period covered by the church in Smyrna was from approximately A.D. 100 to 313. The 10 years of persecution mentioned in the prophecy (Revelation 2:10) occurred under Diocletian from A.D. 303 until 313.

8. **Revelation 2:12-17:** ¹² “To the angel of the church in Pergamum write: “This is the message from the one who has the sharp two-edged sword. ¹³I know where you live, there where Satan has his throne. You are true to me, and you did not abandon your faith in me even during the time when Antipas, my faithful witness, was killed there where Satan lives. ¹⁴But there are a few things I have against you: there are some among you who follow the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak how to lead the people of Israel into sin by persuading them to eat food that had been offered to idols and to practice sexual immorality. ¹⁵In the same way you have people among you who follow the teaching of the Nicolaitans. ¹⁶Now turn from your sins! If you don’t, I will come to you soon and fight against those people with the sword that comes out of my mouth.

¹⁷ “If you have ears, then, listen to what the Spirit says to the churches!

“To those who win the victory I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give each of them a white stone on which is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it.”—*Good News Bible** (Revelation 2:12-17).

9. Pergamum became famous as a center for various pagan cults. Near the foot of the high cliff housing the major religious centers of Pergamum, there was a temple complex dedicated to Asclepius, the Greek god of healing. The Christian church at Pergamum faced challenges from both inside and outside the church. Within the church, a group called the Nikolaitans or Nicolaitans ate food offered to idols and practiced sexual immorality. They were compared to Balaam. (See Numbers 31:16.) The time period covered by the church in Pergamum was from A.D. 313-538. This was a time of rapid spiritual decline and apostasy with many pagan festivals being integrated into the nominal Christian faith. Pergamum was a great cultural center and the capital of Asia Minor. It also had the first known temple built to one of the caesars—the Emperor Augustus—built in 29 B.C. Later, temples were built to the emperors Trajan and Severus.

10. **Revelation 2:18-29:** ¹⁸ “To the angel of the church in Thyatira write:

“This is the message from the Son of God, **whose eyes blaze like fire, whose feet shine like polished brass.** ¹⁹I know what you do. I know your love, your faithfulness, your service, and your patience. I know that you are doing more now than you did at first. ²⁰But this is what I have against you: **you tolerate that woman Jezebel,** who calls herself a messenger of God. By her teaching she misleads my servants into **practising sexual immorality and eating food that has been offered to idols.** ²¹I have given her time to repent of her sins, but she does not want to turn from her immorality. ²²And so I will throw her on to a bed where she and those who committed adultery with her will suffer terribly. I will do this now unless they repent of the wicked things they did with her. ²³I will also kill her followers, and then all the churches will know that I am the one who knows everyone’s thoughts and wishes. I will repay each of you according to what you have done.

²⁴ “But the rest of you in Thyatira have not followed this evil teaching; you have not learnt what the others call ‘the deep secrets of Satan’. I say to you that I will not put any other burden on you. ²⁵But until I come, you must hold firmly to what you have. ²⁶⁻²⁸To those who win the victory, who continue to the end to do what I want, I will give the same authority that I received from my Father: I will give

them authority over the nations, to rule them with an iron rod and to break them to pieces like clay pots. I will also give them the morning star.

²⁹ “If you have ears, then, listen to what the Spirit says to the churches!”—*Good News Bible** (Revelation 2:18-29). [Bold type is added.]

11. The message to Thyatira is almost twice as long as the messages to any of the other churches. Thyatira was famous for its guilds. Guild members were expected to attend guild festivals and participate in temple rituals which often included immoral activities. If one was thrown out of the guild, he would suffer tremendous economic sanctions and perhaps lose his business. Thyatira was famous for a red dye made from madder roots. Lydia, the businesswoman who accepted Christ in the city of Philippi, sold fabrics dyed with this beautiful dye sometimes called “purple goods.” (See Acts 16:11-15.)
12. The church in Thyatira symbolized the condition of Christianity during the Dark Ages from A.D. 538 to 1565. This was the time of total domination of Western civilization by the Roman Catholic Church. But, at the end of this period, the Protestant Reformation arose. It is quite interesting to compare Revelation 2:18-29 and Daniel 10:5-6. Notice that the messengers to these two prophets were very similar in appearance: (1) They had eyes blazing like fire. (2) They had feet shining like polished brass/bronze. Unfortunately, the church in Thyatira tolerated “that woman Jezebel” who clearly felt it was acceptable to practice sexual immorality and eat food offered to idols. Compare the story of Jezebel recorded in 1 Kings 16:31-33.
13. During this time, tradition took the place of the Bible; a human priesthood became dominant, and various relics were worshiped. Works were regarded as the only way to obtain salvation. Those who tried to stick with true biblical religion like the Waldensees were persecuted, and thousands were killed. The true church had to escape to high mountain ranges or remote areas to avoid being killed. Those, however few, who remained faithful were commended by Jesus Himself. Toward the end of the Thyatira period, we see the awakening of the Protestant Reformation with Martin Luther and his predecessors and successors. See Revelation 12:6,13-14 for a brief description of what happened at that time.
14. **Revelation 3:1-6:** ¹ “To the angel of the church in Sardis write:
“This is the message from the one who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know what you are doing; I know that you have the reputation of being alive, even though you are dead! ²So wake up, and strengthen what you still have before it dies completely. For I find that what you have done is not yet perfect in the sight of my God. ³Remember, then, what you were taught and what you heard; obey it and turn from your sins. If you do not wake up, I will come upon you like a thief, and you will not even know the time when I will come. ⁴But a few of you there in Sardis have kept your clothes clean. You will walk with me, clothed in white, because you are worthy to do so. ⁵Those who win the victory will be clothed like this in white, and I will not remove their names from the book of the living. In the presence of my Father and of his angels I will declare openly that they belong to me.
⁶ “If you have ears, then, listen to what the Spirit says to the churches!”—*Good News Bible** (Revelation 3:1-6).
15. This church at Sardis represents the Christian church from approximately 1565 to 1740. Like Pergamum, Sardis was located on a steep high bluff almost unapproachable by any enemy. Even though they felt very comfortable in their safety, one night while they slept, an enemy managed to scale the wall, slip inside the city, and open the gates, letting the enemies of Sardis enter. Twice, the city of Sardis was conquered; first by Cyrus the Great and, later, by Antiochus the Great (not Antiochus Epiphanes); in both cases, someone at night silently managing to crawl up the almost perpendicular escarpments and open the city gates from inside while the population, feeling perfectly safe, was sound asleep. Notice that Jesus warned the Christians from Sardis to watch—an appropriate warning to that city. Compare the warnings to others

recorded in Matthew 24:42-44 and 1 Thessalonians 5:1-8.

16. It is interesting to note that coins were first minted in Sardis around 600 B.C. The church at Sardis was not accused of any open sin or even apostasy but with simple spiritual lethargy. While the Protestant Reformation represented a great religious awakening, it was not long before those who followed the first reformers were impacted by secularism and the rise of educational rationalism. Creeds became the criteria for a church bolstered by dry philosophical arguments.

17. **Revelation 3:7-13:** ⁷ “To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write:

“This is the message from the one who is holy and true. He has the key that belonged to David, and when he opens a door, no one can close it, and when he closes it, no one can open it. ⁸I know what you do; I know that you have a little power; you have followed my teaching and have been faithful to me. I have opened a door in front of you, which no one can close. ⁹Listen! As for that group that belongs to Satan, those liars who claim that they are Jews but are not, I will make them come and bow down at your feet. They will all know that I love you.

¹⁰Because you have kept my command to endure, I will also keep you safe from the time of trouble which is coming upon the world to test all the people on earth.

¹¹**I am coming soon.** Keep safe what you have, so that no one will rob you of your victory prize. ¹²I will make those who are victorious pillars in the temple of my God, and they will never leave it. **I will write on them the name of my God and the name of the city of my God,** the new Jerusalem, which will come down out of heaven from my God. I will also write on them my new name.

¹³ “If you have ears, then, listen to what the Spirit says to the churches!”—*Good News Bible** (Revelation 3:7-13). [Bold type is added.]

18. This message to the church in Philadelphia was prophetically addressed to a relatively-short, one-century time period from 1742 to 1844. It was a time of great religious awakening in Europe and North America. After the Lisbon earthquake in 1755 and the dark day in New England followed by a night in which the moon turned to blood, people began to awaken to the prophecies in the Bible about those events. Religious societies were started up including *the British and Foreign Bible Society* with the aim of making portions of Scripture or complete Bibles available in many of the languages of the world which had not yet been reached by Christianity.

19. Philadelphia, like other cities mentioned in these two chapters, was prone to a lot of earthquakes. On one occasion, the earthquake was so serious that the people moved out into the fields, living in tents or huts during the long period of aftershocks. Philadelphia is the only church that was not criticized in any way. It was during the Philadelphian period that William Miller and others in other parts of the world, began to preach about the soon coming of Jesus Christ. Miller concluded from Daniel 8:14 that its prophecy reached down to 1844.

20. Of course, Seventh-day Adventists understand that 1844 was important in church history as the final date in the prophecy of 2300 days/years of Daniel 8:14. It was the time when Jesus’s ministry in heaven changed from being a ministry like that of the priests doing their daily duties in the ancient holy place, to a ministry like that of the high priest on the Day of Atonement in the most holy place. It was the beginning of the pre-advent judgment.

21. **Revelation 3:14-22:** ¹⁴ “To the angel of the church in Laodicea write:

“This is the message from the Amen, the faithful and true witness, who is the origin of all that God has created. ¹⁵I know what you have done; I know that you are neither cold nor hot. How I wish you were either one or the other! ¹⁶But because you are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, I am going to spit [VOMIT] you out of my mouth! ¹⁷You say, ‘I am rich and well off; I have all I need.’ But you do not know how miserable and pitiful you are! You are poor, naked, and blind. ¹⁸I

advise you, then, to buy gold from me, pure gold, in order to be rich. Buy also white clothing to dress yourself and cover up your shameful nakedness. Buy also some ointment to put on your eyes, so that you may see. ¹⁹I rebuke and punish all whom I love. Be in earnest, then, and turn from your sins. ²⁰Listen! I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with them, and they will eat with me. ²¹To those who win the victory I will give the right to sit beside me on my throne, just as I have been victorious and now sit by my Father on his throne.

²² "If you have ears, then, listen to what the Spirit says to the churches!"—*Good News Bible** (Revelation 3:14-22). [Content in brackets is added.]

22. The church at Laodicea represents the history of the Christian church from 1844 until the second coming of Jesus. Ancient Laodicea was a very wealthy city situated on a major trade route. It was famous for its role in the textile industry, producing garments made of black wool. Its banks held a great deal of wealth. It had a medical school which had produced a famous eyesalve. In A.D. 60 there was a tremendous earthquake which essentially destroyed the city. Although Rome offered to help them rebuild the city, the citizens of Laodicea declined that offer of assistance from Rome, saying they did not need any help.
23. Laodicea was one of three cities mentioned in the Bible which are not far from each other: Hierapolis, Laodicea, and Colossae. (See Colossians 2:1 and 4:13-16.) The city of Hierapolis was located near several hot springs that produced very warm water in which people loved to bathe. It is believed to be the burial place of the disciple Phillip. On the southern side of the valley, was the city of Colossae, located at the foot of several high mountains and next to a cold stream coming out of those mountains which had almost a year-round snowpack. Laodicea had neither the cold stream nor the hot springs and got its water from springs in the valley near the present town of Denizli; the water was merely lukewarm. Those pipes have recently been found.
24. The major sin of the Christians in Laodicea was not some heresy or some open sin or even apostasy; their problem was complacency and spiritual lethargy. Because the Laodiceans considered themselves rich and increased with goods and in need of nothing, God literally said He would vomit them out of His mouth. He went on to say that they were poor and naked and blind. What a statement for a city with the history of Laodicea. Later, in his book in Revelation 16:15, John warned all people who are like the Laodiceans: If their condition did not change, they would be lost and ashamed at His coming. See Revelation 16:15 and 1 John 2:28-3:3. Nevertheless, Jesus loved the Laodiceans. He gave them a marvelous promise that if they would buy the gold, white—not black—garments, and eyesalve which He offered, they will be seated beside Him on thrones in heaven.
25. It is interesting to notice that:

In concluding each message, Jesus makes promises to those in the churches who accept His counsel. One might observe, however, that along with the evident spiritual decline in the churches, there is a proportionate increase in promises given. Ephesus, to whom Jesus gives the first message, receives only one promise. As each church follows the downward spiritual trend, each one receives more promises than the previous church. Finally, the church in Laodicea, while given only one promise, receives the greatest promise of all: to share Jesus' throne (*Rev. 3:21*).—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** for Friday, January 18.

26. So, how should we feel about God's end-time church in which we are living?

We should remember that the church, enfeebled and defective though it be, is the only object on earth on which Christ bestows His supreme regard. He is constantly watching it with solicitude, and is strengthening it by His Holy Spirit.—Ellen G. White, *Manuscript 155*,* 1902 (November 22, 1902); *2SM** 396.2.

27. There is another interesting fact demonstrated by these messages to the seven churches. In Hebrew thinking, important messages are often arranged in a *chiastic* order. By that, we mean that the first message has similarities with the final message; the second message similarities to the next to last message, down to the central and most important message being the one in the middle, not the one at the end. Thus:

The letter to Smyrna (second letter) shares many similarities with the letter to the Philadelphians (sixth letter): both are largely positive messages. The letters to Pergamum (third letter) and Sardis (fifth letter) are to churches in steep decline. The message to Thyatira (the fourth and middle church) is twice as long as the others and is different from all the others (see theme IV). This arrangement means that the first and last letters (to Ephesus and Laodicea) also are parallel. This structure suggests that Laodicea, like Ephesus, suffers from a deficiency of love.—*Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** 40.

28. Is that a correct representation of God's faithful people at the end of time?

29. Another interesting progression seen in these messages is as follows:

But this word picture leads into the most encouraging part of the messages to the seven churches. The first church gets one promise: the tree of life. The second church gets two: the crown of life and deliverance from the second death. The third church gets three: hidden manna, a white stone, and a new name. The fourth church gets four promises; the fifth church gets five; the sixth church gets six. Each church gets more promises than the church before, and the seventh church, Laodicea, gets the loftiest promise of all: to sit with Jesus on His throne.—*Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** 41.

30. If we say that Thyatira was the center of the chiasm, what is special about the church at Thyatira? First of all, it was the longest period—from A.D. 538 to 1565—and the message to the Thyatira church was twice as long as any of the other six messages. During this time while the Roman Catholic Church dominated Western civilization, there were the Waldensees and other faithful groups who remained God's true people. Thyatira is unique among all seven churches in that its Christianity actually improved toward the end of its period rather than declining. That represented the time of the Protestant Reformation.

31. Despite these promises, there is another serious factor which must be commented on. The great Christian expansion mentioned that came under the Philadelphian period had a dark side; many of the missionaries who went out from Europe and North America carried with them not only Christianity but also a lot of Western civilization expansionism with economic and political aims. This led to the fact that today, in many areas of the world, Christianity is under direct attack. The final events in this world's history will demonstrate that Christians will have to work very hard to spread the gospel under most difficult circumstances.

32. Seventh-day Adventists recognize that we live in the final time period mentioned in this prophecy. Are we true Laodiceans? It is interesting to compare Revelation 3:18 from the Laodicea prophecy with Revelation 16:15. These two verses are unique in the Bible in mentioning four issues: Seeing, clothing, shame, and nakedness. Is there a relationship between the prophecy to Laodicea and the final events including the plagues mentioned in Revelation 16? Are we awake and watching faithfully so we may not be caught unprepared when Jesus returns? This link between the Laodicean message and the final plagues noted in Revelation 16 surely tells us that the church of Laodicea represents the final chapter of church history in our world. Are we ready for the second coming which will end our church's history on this earth and bring the glorious second coming of Jesus Christ?

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