

### 3. The Book of Revelation's Letters to Four Churches.

Revelation 2:18-3:22

The Book of Revelation

YouTube Video link: <https://youtu.be/vxZDwuGqoT0>

We are continuing to look at the letters to seven specific churches in the province of Asia in what is now southwest Turkey. In our last study, we looked at the first three: Ephesus, Smyrna, and Pergamum. Today, we look at what Christ had to say to Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. The seven letters were given to the Apostle John by the Lord Jesus and were commendations and corrections to those specific churches at the time of the Revelation. They are also timeless lessons for each of us as individuals as well as for situations in twenty-first-century churches. In Scripture, we hear this statement repeatedly; **“Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”** We should have an ear to heaven and hear what the Spirit of God is saying to us (Revelation 2:29). This phrase appears a couple of times in Mark and once in Luke, but it appears almost twice as many times in these first three chapters of Revelation. He is calling for people to pay careful heed. It's another way of saying, “Listen up! Pay close attention!” In Scripture, the ear represents both hearing and obedience.

#### To the Church in Thyatira

<sup>18</sup>“To the angel of the church in Thyatira write: These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze. <sup>19</sup>I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first. <sup>20</sup>Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. <sup>21</sup>I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling. <sup>22</sup>So I will cast her on a bed of suffering, and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely, unless they repent of her ways. <sup>23</sup>I will strike her children dead. Then all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds. <sup>24</sup>Now I say to the rest of you in Thyatira, to you who do not hold to her teaching and have not learned Satan's so-called deep secrets, ‘I will not impose any other burden on you, <sup>25</sup>except to hold on to what you have until I come.’ <sup>26</sup>To the one who is victorious and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations— <sup>27</sup>that one ‘will rule them with an iron scepter and will dash them to pieces like pottery’—just as I have received authority from my Father. <sup>28</sup>I will also give that one the morning star. <sup>29</sup>Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches (Revelation 2:18-29).

Thyatira was in the middle of a valley on the road from the capital city of Pergamum, connecting Sardis and Philadelphia to Laodicea. Much commerce traveled through the town, and it had a good trade in woolen and clothing goods. Lydia, the seller of purple cloth, was the first person converted to the faith by the Apostle Paul in Europe when he came to Philippi (Acts 16:14), she was from the city of Thyatira. At the time of the Revelation of John the Apostle, there were many trade guilds in Thyatira, so if a tradesman was not a part of the trade guilds, they were restricted from doing business. The trade guilds often met in a temple to false gods and began their meetings with sacrifices and drink offerings, frequently becoming a drunken revelry. Many of the believers of

Thyatira took no part in those meetings, but one among them, a woman by the name of Jezebel, taught that it was okay to compromise their values.

The Lord's letter to Thyatira affirmed the good He saw. He is the One who sees differently than a man sees. He who has blazing eyes of fire can pierce the depths of each man's soul and know our innermost thoughts and motivations. Verse 23 tells us that He is the One **"who searches hearts and minds."** The Lord knows us better than we know ourselves, and it is comforting that in His complete knowledge of us, He loves us greatly (Jeremiah 31:3). Jesus is represented as having feet like burnished bronze (v. 18), the same kind of metal the Altar of Burnt Offering was made of in front of Solomon's temple. In the Old Testament, bronze is a symbol of God's judgment of sin. Legs and feet in Scripture often speak of a person's walk or manner of life. Feet of burnished bronze, perhaps speaks of Christ's life of self-sacrifice for His beloved people.

The Lord affirmed the church on four particular qualities He saw: love, faith, service, and perseverance. He also noticed that they were doing more than they were at first as their love for Him grew (v. 19). However, then came the reproof. They were tolerating false teaching by the woman mentioned earlier, the one named Jezebel. This may not have been her actual name but she is referred to as Jezebel because she is operating in the spirit of Jezebel. By calling the woman Jezebel, the Lord may have been putting before the congregation His view of the woman's distorted teaching. As the letter was read in the church, each would have known to whom He was speaking.

Jezebel was the daughter of King Ethbaal, the ruler of Sidon, north of Israel in present-day Lebanon. She worshiped Baal, the storm god, and married the king of Israel, Ahab. Once Jezebel became queen of Israel, she proceeded to introduce 800 false prophets and served Baal by leading Israel into idol worship. She was infamous because of her manipulation, intimidation, and murder tactics. King Ahab became passive and submissive to Jezebel in his leadership of Israel. When godly people rose against her, she had them killed (1 Kings 18:4). This woman in Thyatira was holding herself out to be a prophetess and misleading God's people into a compromise with the idolatry of the city as well as sexual immorality (vs. 20-22). Weak leadership in the church was putting up with her instead of putting her out of the church.

The verse, **"Now I say to the rest of you in Thyatira" (v. 24)**, tells us that the letter was read to the congregation, and her sin was brought into the light and made manifest before the believers. She would have heard the Lord giving time and grace to repent, but there was also the warning that, if she did not repent, God would allow sickness to come, not only to her but also to those in the congregation involved with her in sin. These are strong words, but false teachers who take advantage of the Bride of Christ's lack of awareness of spiritual things will be judged. Those teachers who lead people astray should tie a millstone around their necks and throw themselves into the sea rather than corrupt those young in the faith (Luke 17:2). Christ's encouragement to His bride there at Thyatira was for them to hold on to their faith (v. 25). How do we **"hold on to what you have until I come?" (v. 25)**. What things are slipping from your life that you need to hold on to more tightly? We must hear what the Holy Spirit is saying to each of us and hold on to our faith in a time when many are abandoning trust in Christ.

### **To the Church in Sardis**

**3** “To the angel of the church in Sardis write: These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. <sup>2</sup>Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God. <sup>3</sup>Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; hold it fast, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you. <sup>4</sup>Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. <sup>5</sup>The one who is victorious will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life, but will acknowledge that name before my Father and his angels. <sup>6</sup>Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches (Revelation 3:1-6).

The Lord pointed out that He knew the deeds of His church in Sardis, just as He knows our deeds. He spoke about their reputation, i.e., to those looking from outside the church, they looked like a lively church, but Christ knew their actual spiritual condition was one of deadness.

What are the qualities of a dead church? What do you think makes for a healthy expression of Christ in the church?

The church at Sardis was like many throughout the world today. Many people looking from the outside would see them as a lively congregation. They might have had good worship with the gifts of the Spirit in operation, but the church was going through the motions—their heart for the things that God cared about was non-existent. Just as the five foolish virgins lacking in oil were locked out of the wedding banquet with the Lord’s saying, "I don't know you" (Matthew 25:12), this church just played the part of believers; they were hypocrites—stage actors on the scene of life. The church was not going through persecution because it had become like the world system set up by Satan. The enemy of God does not bother the church that does not oppose him. When a group of people or a church is asleep to the things of God, it would be foolish for the enemy to awaken them. Satan’s strategy is to let them sleep. The Lord looked on, and His view was that their deeds were unfinished (v. 2) and lacking in the fullness that pleased Him.

I have now walked with the Lord since 1977 and have been a part of many different kinds of churches on three continents of the world: Charismatic churches, Evangelical churches, Pentecostal churches, and Baptist-leaning churches. I love the church, e.g., old and young, those that practice the gifts of the Spirit, and churches that do not exercise spiritual gifts. As I am now older and hopefully, wiser, I ask myself, “What are the things that show forth the life of God in a church? What does God see or not see when He finds a church with deeds unfinished or falling short?”

Can I offer my opinion? Is Jesus seeing a body of people holding forth the light of the life of God in Christ? Is love for Christ an emphasis among the believers? Are people growing in their discipleship and the Word of God and living out what they have learned? Are people being added to the church and excited at what they have found? It is a fact of life that only those who are mature give birth to others. Adult sheep make lambs, and when lambs come to the point of birth, they are taken care of by the mature sheep. If a body of believers is not reproducing, then deeds are

unfinished with the Holy Spirit not given His place in the congregation. The Lord said to them to wake up and strengthen what they still had, which was slowly dying (v. 2). The Lord had good words to speak to them by saying: “You have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes.” The One who sees within saw their inner robe of righteousness, that they had no dark spots on their character. The promise is wonderful: “The one who is victorious will, like them, be dressed in white” (v. 5).

### **To the Church in Philadelphia**

<sup>7</sup>“To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. <sup>8</sup>I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. <sup>9</sup>I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars—I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you. <sup>10</sup>Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth. <sup>11</sup>I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. <sup>12</sup>The one who is victorious I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will they 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 is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on them my new name. <sup>13</sup>Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches (Revelation 3:7-13).

When an earthquake demolished the city of Philadelphia in AD 17, because of the tremors, many of the population went to surrounding areas, fearing the same thing would happen again. Those who remained received rebuilding help, as did Sardis, from the emperor Tiberias Caesar. The name of the town was changed to Neocaesarea in honor of the support, but the city remained small. To receive help from others and to walk in humility is to crush the pride that seeks to elevate itself in the human heart.

More than eighty years later, when the Lord called attention to the church in Philadelphia, He had no criticism for the church; instead, He affirmed them by telling them that He saw their deeds and that they had endured patiently, even though they had little strength (v. 8). They had kept God’s Word and not denied His name. For their faithfulness to Him, He promised that each victorious individual would have the name of their God written on them, along with residence in the city of God, the new Jerusalem (v. 12).

The Lord said that He is the One who holds the key of David, perhaps an allusion to a prophecy by Isaiah, “I will place on his shoulder the key to the house of David; what he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open” (Isaiah 22:22). This prophecy speaks of an heir to the line of David, One who will be given all sovereign power and authority over the earth. His keys open all doors that seem shut. This power and authority is given to the Church to exercise under Christ’s leadership and direction. The city of Philadelphia was a border town of Lydia, Mysia, and Phrygia; beyond were people outside of Roman and Greek culture, i.e., Barbarians. It could be that because Christ found nothing wrong in the church, it might be the reason that He set before them

an open door. What kind of open door was He giving them? It could be an open door to take the Gospel to those cities not yet won for Christ. First, those opposing them from the local synagogue would be defeated (v. 9), those expressing the will of Satan to destroy the body of believers.

How do you think Christ destroys opposition? (v. 9). What is God's way of stopping opposition to the advance of the Kingdom of God?

For Saul, the man who became the Apostle Paul, God changed his heart from opposing the believers to one working with them. I believe that his conversion came as a result of believers suffering under persecution and crying out to the Lord in prayer. Time and again in the Scriptures, when believers cry out to the Lord in prayer, He moves in power to deliver and save His people. Think of Israel in Egypt; God came to help them when they cried out to the Lord (Exodus 2:23, Judges 3:9, 4:3, 6:7). Jesus said to the church in Philadelphia that He had placed before them an open door. I take that to mean that from there, Christ would empower godly men and women who would take the Gospel east and northwards. Even though they had little strength, they had the kind of endurance and love of the Word of God that the Lord could use. The Lord doesn't need big churches to carry on His work; the reduction of the army of Gideon to 300 was a good lesson for us (Judges 7:2-8). When God gets the glory, even a small body of believers will have open doors given to them. Philadelphia was only a small church. The Lord was looking for faithfulness to endure the tests He allowed them to experience (v. 10). Because they endured the attacks from the synagogue, He said He would keep them:

Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth (Revelation 3:10).

There's a lot of controversy about this verse; for some, it speaks of the time of tribulation yet ahead for believers in the twenty-first century, but why would Jesus promise something to those in the first century that He had no intention of fulfilling? Some suggest that God will keep His faithful believers from enduring a time of tribulation by rapturing them out before it starts, but there is a difference between the tribulation and the time of God's wrath. Yes, God will keep us from the time of His wrath by the catching up (rapture) of believers (1 Thessalonians 4:17) before the wrath of God comes. But like many of the believers of John the Apostle's day, we will have to experience persecution and tribulation [The Greek word *thlipsis* means heavy crushing pressure]. It is interesting that in verse 10 of the passage above, the word translated into English as "keep," *tereo*, does not mean "to remove," as many pre-tribulation rapture proponents say. It means to guard against loss or injury and comes from the root word *teros*, which means to guard.<sup>1</sup> Author H.L. Nigro says of this verse of Scripture:

In fact, many Bible versions do not translate this phrase "keep you from." The New American Bible translates this as "save you from," *The Living Bible* translates it as "protect you from," and *The Amplified Bible* translates it as "keep you (safe) from." In its footnotes, *The New International Version* explains, "The Greek for this phrase can mean either 'keep

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<sup>1</sup> <https://biblehub.com/revelation/3-10.htm#lexicon>

you from undergoing' or 'keep you through.'" In either case, it does not mean "to remove."<sup>2</sup>

There are several possible interpretations of the word *keep*. How will the Lord keep us? It could be that, just as Israel was protected amid the ten plagues of Egypt, we may have to endure the difficulties of the time of tribulation, but God will keep and preserve His people, even though some will be martyred: "When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained" (Revelation 6:9). Paul, the Apostle, wrote that Christ will come from heaven to rescue believers not from the tribulation and trouble of that time but "from the wrath to come" (I Thessalonians 1:10). May the Lord continue to give us light amid the darkness of the days we are in.

### To the Church in Laodicea

<sup>14</sup>"To the angel of the church in Laodicea write: These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation. <sup>15</sup>I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! <sup>16</sup>So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth. <sup>17</sup>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. <sup>18</sup>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. <sup>19</sup>Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent. <sup>20</sup>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. <sup>21</sup>To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I was victorious and sat down with my Father on his throne. <sup>22</sup>Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (Revelation 3:14-22).

We come now to the seventh church where Jesus told John to write a message. Laodicea was a church possibly founded by Epaphras (Colossians 4:12-13) situated forty-five miles southeast of Philadelphia and a hundred miles east of Ephesus. The great Roman road heading eastward from Ephesus ran right through this city, making it a center of trade, banking, and communication. A six-mile-long aqueduct supplied the city with water, but it came to them tepid and lukewarm, and not good to taste.<sup>3</sup> The Lord had nothing encouraging to say to them, only strong words of correction, basically saying that, like their water piped from elsewhere, their behavior made the Lord nauseous and wanting to vomit.

What was so offensive to Christ? More than likely, it was their self-sufficiency and indifference toward Christ's message of the Gospel. Perhaps it stemmed from the same earthquake that struck the area in AD 17, for this city refused help from Caesar, wanting instead to rebuild the city with their own resources. Today, many have this same attitude of wanting no support from those who offer, choosing instead to stand on their own two feet and not rely on others. This attitude is modern paganism, i.e., that of self-expression and self-reliance. The Laodicean attitude was one of "I am

<sup>2</sup> H.L. Nigro, *Before God's Wrath*, Published by Strong Tower Publishing, Milesburg, PA 16853, Page 107

<sup>3</sup> Charles R. Swindoll, *Swindoll's Living Insights, Revelation*, Printed by Tyndale House Publishers, Carol Stream, Illinois, Page 82.

rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing” (v. 17). However, the Lord saw them as wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked (v. 17). What an indictment!

The church of Laodicea was illustrative of people today who do not feel their need for a relationship with God; they think they can do quite well on their own. There are some leaders today who propagate this false religion of being all that you can be by utilizing the power of self. Instead of relying on God and His resources, this writer believes that ungodly men, motivated by Satan, are planning to rebuild humanity to try to escape their physical weakness and death. This evil plan is utilizing new technology to create a new human species with the human brain connected to a central hub of knowledge *via* a brain interface, a form of technology commonly called Transhumanism, a topic that on Google has more than 7 million pages and excerpts. Transhumanism, this writer believes, will be used to enhance human intellect and physiology to try to significantly overcome human weakness. Satan made this promise in the beginning, “**You shall be as gods**” (Genesis 3:5), all apart from walking in dependence on God.

Technology (in particular, the internet and mobile phones) has revolutionized modern life. Although communication has greatly improved, do you see ways in which this technology can cause us to be more isolated and self-dependent?

Even though the Lord saw their condition, in verse twenty, we see the loving-kindness of God as the Savior comes to us and knocks on the door of our hearts, refusing to give up on those far from Him. When people are blind, they cannot even see the door where Christ is knocking. We need the servants of God to lead us by the hand to the doorway. Can you think of this writer today as one leading you in your blindness to the door so that you can hear the One whose heart longs for you? There is no one like Christ, for who has ever heard of a God who goes in search of the ones He loves? All religions are humanmade philosophies of a man doing his best to climb to God with his own energy, but Christianity is different in that the Creator God comes down to us in the person of His Son to make the way for us. He is the Great Shepherd of the sheep searching for the lost of His flock (Matthew 18:12-14).

Verse twenty tells us that He will not force His way upon us but graciously waits for us to open the door at His knocking and sit down to a meal with us. It is a picture from the book of Song of Solomon, where the Lover stands at the door of the house of His beloved and asks to come in (Song of Solomon 5:2). In Old Testament times, the greatest act of peace and intimacy between two people was to sit and eat together face to face. “**If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me**” (v. 20). In New Testament times, there were three meals a day, breakfast was *akratisma*, little more than bread. There was *ariston*, a picnic snack by the sidewalk or wherever one happened to be at the time, and lastly, there was *deipnon*, the main evening meal of the day where people lingered over it at the end of their day's work.<sup>4</sup> Christ used this word, *deipnon*, to call the Laodiceans and us to Himself. How gracious it is for our God to want to linger with us and enjoy our intimate fellowship, just like He did with Abraham (Genesis 18:1-8) and Moses (Exodus 24:9-11).

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<sup>4</sup> William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible, The Revelation of John, Volume 1*. Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh. 1976. Page 147.

Like the famous painting by Holman Hunt, Christ is pictured knocking at the door of the church, but also knocking on the door of our hearts (v. 20). When the painting was unveiled, people criticized it saying that there was no handle on the outside of the door. Holman Hunt responded that his painting had no mistake, saying that the handle on the inside represented that only the one on the inside could open the door. Christ will not force His way into our lives. It is up to us to respond and acknowledge His presence and by opening our hearts to open the door to Him. His response is assured. He will come in and have fellowship with us. This is table fellowship, meaning that we will share a meal. At that time, a common meal indicated a strong bond of affection and companionship. As such it is also a common symbol of the intimacy to be enjoyed with Christ in His coming Messianic kingdom.

In verse 22, the message to the seven churches finishes with the exhortation to hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches. We are reminded that the messages to the seven historic churches in Asia are, at the same time, a composite word to the church universal throughout time.<sup>5</sup>

To summarize these warnings, they are the danger of losing our first love (Ephesus), fear of suffering (Smyrna), doctrinal compromise (Pergamum), moral compromise (Thyatira), spiritual deadness (Sardis), failure to hold fast (Philadelphia), and lukewarmness (Laodicea). These warnings are brought home to us with remarkable accuracy for the Church worldwide today.

Let's finish with a look at the reward. We must always remember the great joy and threefold promise for the overcomer as the people of God. There is: 1) They will be arrayed in white garments, 2) Their names will not be blotted out of the Book of Life, and 3) Christ will confess their names before God and the angels.

White garments or robes are mentioned seven times in the Book of Revelation. These garments could have multiple meanings. Primarily, they could symbolize purity. They could also represent the spiritual resurrection body that the believer will receive when the mortal body is cast aside. White attire is appropriate for our heavenly state. There is another meaning, which would have been understood in that day. It was a Roman custom to wear white on the day of triumph, so this attire could also be for a triumphal procession.

If you are worried that you may not overcome, I remind you that the saints overcome in battle through the Blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony. He is faithful, the One who has promised to be with us forever. Look to Him, who is the author and finisher of your faith!

Keith Thomas

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<sup>5</sup> Robert H. Mounce, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament -The Book of Revelation-Letters to the Seven Churches*. Copyright 1977 by Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. Page 130.