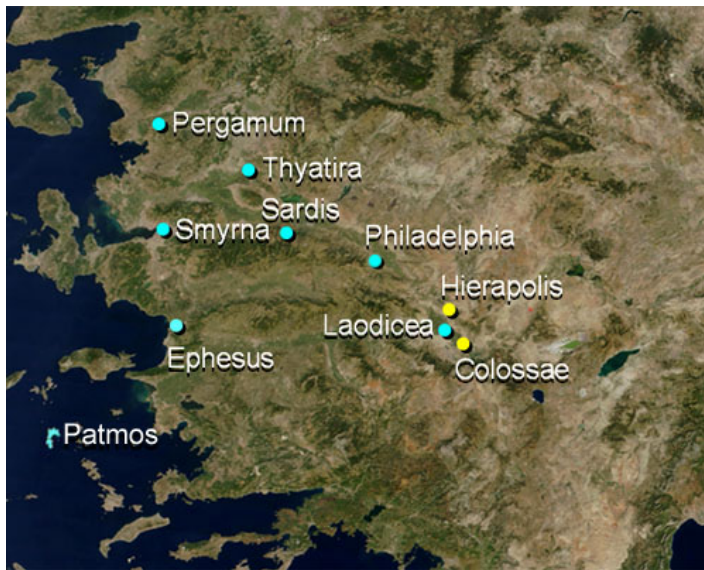


Revelation - Chapter 2 & 3

Christ's Messages to the Seven Churches

Following Jesus' instruction to "write the things which he saw, the things which are and the things which will take place after these things" (Rev 1:19), John first writes in Chapter 1 about "*the things he saw*" which was his incredible vision of the glorified Jesus and Jesus' entry from heaven on the clouds at His second coming to earth. This time every one will see Him and there will be great mourning by those who have rejected Him. Those who have accepted Him as Lord and Savior will spend eternity with Him.



Now in Chapter 2 and 3, John writes about "*the things which are*" which is about the Church Age. Jesus has a message for John to share with the seven Churches. There would have been more than seven churches at that time, so it is significant that the number of letters was limited to seven which is the number of completeness in Scripture.

These messages represent the Churches then and the Churches throughout all of the Church Age including now. These churches' issues illustrate conditions that were common in local churches at that time as well as throughout later history. They are written not only to the Churches but also to the members of the Churches, to us as individual believers.

Many Bible teachers believe that the conditions represented in these seven churches also represent the chronological history of Churches throughout the Church Age. There is certainly some merit to this view and we will examine it, although it is a deduction from the text rather than being stated explicitly. ¹

While each message is specific to each Church, there are similarities among the seven letters:

- Each begins with the same expression, "I know your works." Remember in John's vision, Jesus is standing in the middle of the seven churches (Lampstands) and walks among them. Because He is sovereign and omniscient He is aware of

their every thought, intention and motive. This is Christ's performance evaluation, His review of their faith and works, including points of encouragement and rebuke.²

- Each offers a promise "to the one who conquers." Here He is referring to those who have placed their trust in Him, true believers, who have overcome the unbelief and sin of the world.
- Each has the same concluding sentence: "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." This is Christ's call to action for those who have their ears attuned to hear what the Spirit of God is saying to the churches and to the individual believers.
- Jesus is described in each letter, but His description differs in keeping with the message addressed to the specific church.

Ephesus - The Orthodox, but Lost-love Church

First-century Ephesus was the most important city of Asia Minor and a major center of political, economic, and religious activity. It had a population estimated at 250,000 to 500,000. Ephesus boasted one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, a grand temple dedicated to the fertility goddess Diana and had several temples dedicated to emperor worship.³

It has been said that no church had such a rich heritage as the one at Ephesus. Priscilla and Aquila first introduced the gospel to that city (Acts 18:18–19). Soon they were joined by the powerful preacher Apollos (Acts 18:24–26). Together, the three laid the groundwork for Paul's ministry in Ephesus.⁴



Paul preached the gospel so effectively "that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord" (Acts 19:10). This large city was thoroughly stirred by Paul's message (Acts 19:11–41), with the result that the silversmiths created a riot because their

business of making shrines of Diana was threatened.⁵

Paul founded the church at Ephesus around AD 52 then appointed Timothy as its pastor around AD 65. John probably followed Timothy and Onesimus may have been pastor while John was exiled to Patmos.

Christ complimented the church in Ephesus for:

- Toiling in good deeds (2:2)
- Enduring patiently in trials (2:2-3)
- Standing against false apostles (2:2, 6)

Christians in Ephesus would have been the objects of physical violence, social ostracism, and economic repression. Yet they endured. They bore up under the load. They rejected the teaching of the Nicolaitans who are not specified in Scripture but apparently were a sect wrong in practices and in doctrine. Clearly, Paul, Timothy, and John had taught Ephesus well.

Yet, this diligent, conscientious, industrious and involved congregation had everything except the greatest thing. Thirty-five years earlier, Paul had commended them for their love of Christ. Now in its second generation of Christians they retained purity of doctrine and life and maintained a high level of service, but their love for Christ was missing (Eph 1:15-16). Their failure was a matter of the heart (1 Cor 13:13; Eph 6:24).

Jesus' commands to correct their lost love was to:

- Remember their love of Christ which once burned in their hearts.
- Repent - Change their attitude toward Christ and reclaim their former love for Him.
- Repeat the deeds they did at first. A true love for God is always manifested in the works it produces.

The seriousness of these commands is evident when Jesus tells them they will receive sudden judgment and removal of their lamp stand or witness to the world if they do not change. The church at Ephesus retained its vigor for several centuries and was even the scene of a major church council, but the city declined, the Turks deported its citizens in the 14th century and the church is gone and the city now uninhabited.

Smyrna - The Suffering Church

Smyrna was said to be the most beautiful city in Asia. It was located on a gulf of the Aegean Sea and had an excellent harbor. Just thirty-five miles north of Ephesus, the ancient city of Smyrna today goes by another name: Izmir. In John's day the thriving city was a noted center of science and



medicine, had a famous stadium, library, and theater, as well as a diverse population of perhaps half a million people. As a vital port city, it boasted the second-largest number of exports in Asia Minor.

Life was difficult and dangerous in Smyrna for believers. Under Domitian it became a capital offense to refuse to offer the yearly sacrifice to the emperor. Jews in the Roman Empire were legally excused from sacrificing to the emperor, but Christians enjoyed no such exemption after they had been cast out of the synagogues. Therefore, believers in Smyrna were ostracized, verbally assaulted, boycotted, mistreated and faced execution. Many of the believers at Smyrna were slaves. Most were destitute. Those few who had owned possessions had undoubtedly lost them in the persecution.

In the midst of their suffering, the Lord Jesus Christ came to the church in Smyrna with a message of hope:

- I know your tribulation and poverty - Christ reminded them that He transcends this world and empowers them to do the same.
- But you are rich - He was telling them their spiritual riches are far more important than their material poverty.
- Do not fear - Even though the relentless attacks will continue they will be limited in scope and temporary in duration.
- Be faithful until death and you will receive the crown of life.
- You will not be hurt by the second death. You will spend eternity with God in Heaven.

The church at Smyrna had every human reason to collapse. They weren't experiencing hardship because of any wrong they had done. Though they suffered physically and economically, the Christians at Smyrna clung to their spiritual riches. The church at Smyrna is one of only two churches (along with Philadelphia) that received no condemnation or rebuke in its letter from Christ. Throughout its history, the more the church has been persecuted, the greater its purity and strength.

The Church at Smyrna had what really mattered—salvation, holiness, grace, peace, fellowship, a sympathetic Savior and Comforter. The church at Smyrna was the rich church spiritually, in contrast to the church at Laodicea, which was economically rich but spiritually poor (Rev 3:17).

Pergamum - The Compromising Church

Pergamum was fifty miles north of Smyrna and located about fifteen miles inland from the Aegean Sea. Pergamum had been Asia's ancient capital for about 250 years and was considered Asia's greatest city. Pergamum survives today as the Turkish city of Bergama.⁶

Pergamum was famous for its university with a library of about 200,000 volumes, and for manufacturing parchment resulting in a paper called *pergamena*. Like Ephesus and Smyrna it was a wealthy city, but it was wicked.



Because of its library, Pergamum was an important center of culture and learning. It also was a center of worship for four of the main gods of the Greco-Roman world and multiple emperor worship. In other cities Christians were primarily in danger on the one day per year they were required to offer sacrifices to the emperor. In Pergamum they were in danger every day.

The book of Acts does not record the founding of the church at Pergamum. Most likely, the church at Pergamum was founded during Paul's ministry in Ephesus, when the gospel spread from there throughout the province of Asia (Acts 19:10). ⁷

Despite the difficult circumstances, the believers at Pergamum courageously maintained their faith in Christ. Christ commended them for:

- Continuing to hold fast His name, even though they lived “where Satan’s throne is,” Jesus may have been referring to the altar of Zeus which was 120 by 112 feet contained within a colonnaded court that included a podium almost 18 feet high.
- Being faithful even in the days of Antipas, whom Christ described as “My witness, My faithful one, who was killed among you.” Nothing certain is known about Antipas apart from this text. He was probably one of the leaders of the Pergamum church. According to tradition, he was roasted to death inside a brass bull during the persecution by Emperor Domitian. ⁸

Like many churches today, the church at Pergamum failed to obey the biblical mandate to practice church discipline (Matthew 18:15–18). They had allowed false teaching and were in danger of becoming intertwined with the world. The heart of Christ's message to the Christians at Pergamum is that Biblical truth and morality can't exist in a culture of worldly compromise.

Jesus mentions two heresies:

- Teaching of Balaam. Like the Israelites in the Old Testament they participated in pagan practices that would destroy their spiritual power. They believed they could participate in pagan feasts and still join the Church. ⁹
- Teaching of the Nicolaitans. Although not specifically explained in Scripture the context indicates that the teaching of the Nicolaitans led to the same wicked behavior as that of the followers of Balaam. Nicolaitans probably taught that one could participate in pagan sexual practices and still join the Church.

For the first time in John's introduction of Jesus, we see Him as judge and executioner. His exhortation is clear: Repent, change your ways or judgement will come suddenly. The majority of the believers at Pergamum did not participate in the errors of these two groups. Yet by tolerating the groups and refusing to exercise church discipline, they shared in their guilt and incurred the Lord's judgment. Antipas's faithfulness and courage were a rebuke to those at Pergamum who were tempted to compromise with the world.

Jesus' promises to the overcomes or believers are:

- Hidden manna - the unseen source of the believer's nourishment and strength which is Jesus Himself. (John 6:48-51).
- White stone with a new name written on it - No specific explanation is given in Scripture and much has been written about the white stone. One possible explanation is to understand the white stone in light of the Roman custom of awarding white stones to the victors in athletic contests. A white stone, inscribed with the athlete's name, served as his ticket to a special awards banquet. In this view, Christ promises the overcomers entrance to the eternal victory celebration in heaven. There will be a new name written on the stone no one knows but the person who receives it. ¹⁰

Thyatira - Tolerant, Permissive Church

Thyatira was located 40 miles southeast of Pergamum and at the time Revelation was written it was entering its period of greatest commercial prosperity. Its road was important as it connected Pergamum with Laodicea, Smyrna, and the interior regions. It also served as the Roman post road.

Thyatira was situated in an area noted for its abundant crops and the manufacture of purple dye. Although originally founded as a shrine to the sun god Tyrinnus, whose description was somewhat similar to that of Christ in Revelation 2:18, Thyatira was not an important religious center. The primary god worshiped was the Greek sun god, Apollo. Nor does there appear to have been a sizable Jewish population.



The pressure faced by the Christians in Thyatira came from the guilds. To hold a job or run a business, it was necessary to be a member of a guild. Each guild had a deity in whose honor feasts were held, including meat sacrificed to idols and sexual immorality. Christians faced the dilemma of participating or losing their job. How some in the Thyatira church were handling the situation caused Christ great concern. ¹¹

As with the churches at Smyrna and Pergamum, the Bible does not record the founding of the church at Thyatira. It is possible that Lydia and her household helped start the church at Thyatira (Acts 16:14). More likely, the church there was founded as an outreach of Paul's ministry at Ephesus (Acts 19:10). ¹²

Jesus commended the Thyatira church for their:

- Love - Thyatira is the first of the seven churches commended for its love.
- Faith - dependable, reliable, and consistent
- Service
- Perseverance
- Deeds have increased over the years

Thyatira is the smallest church of the seven but received the longest letter. Jesus is described for the first time as the "Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze" (Rev 2:18). The situation required reaffirmation of His deity and His righteous indignation at their sins. He is approaching the Church at Thyatira as the Divine Judge.

Jesus reveals 3 groups in the Church at Thyatira:

- Jezebel and her followers - Christ is referring to a woman who was in their congregation that was similar to the Jezebel of the Old Testament. The original Jezebel corrupted the kingdom of Israel when she married King Ahab, leading the people into idolatry and sin (1Kgs. 16: 31-33). This Jezebel at Thyatira was teaching and leading believers to take part in the sexual immorality that accompanied pagan religion and to eat food sacrificed to idols (Rev 2:20).
- Those who tolerated Jezebel

- The faithful - those who did not hold to her teaching and did not know the deep things of Satan (Rev 2:24).

Jesus has a message for each group:

- Jezebel:
 - Sickness for her and death for her (Rev 2:22). Jesus gave her time to repent and she refused. Therefore it is likely that the bed refers to death and hell, the ultimate resting place for those who refuse to repent.
 - Death for her children - referring to her spiritual children - suffering would extend to her followers also (Rev 2:23).
 - All will know that I am He - judgement would be so dramatic that all the churches would know that Christ is the One who searches hearts and minds.
- Her Followers:
 - Great trouble, distress, severe chastening, unless they repent of her deeds. It was too late for Jezebel since her heart was hardened in unrepentant sin. Still, Christ mercifully warned her followers to repent while there was still time.
- The Faithful:
 - Hold fast until I come - They were to hold on to what they had, refuse to accommodate her wickedness and stand against the deception at any cost. Judgement on Jezebel and her followers would come soon and would purge the church (Rev 2:25).
 - Place no other burden - Jesus' words indicate that it would not be easy so He placed no other burden on them.
 - Authority over the nations - They could look forward to reigning with Christ during the Millennial Period.
 - Morning Star - Christ Himself as described in Rev 22:16

It is not known how many in that church responded to Christ's warning, but, tragically, the Thyatira church as a whole apparently did not obey it. History records that it fell to the Montanist heresy, a movement led by a false prophet who claimed continuing revelation from God apart from Scripture. The church disappeared by the end of the second century.¹³

The letter to the Thyatira Church contains some of the harshest words of judgment in these seven letters. It has an important message for the church today: False teaching and sin are not to be allowed, even under the banner of toleration and unity.¹⁴ To lead other Christians into false doctrine or immoral living is a very serious sin, meriting the most severe punishment (Matthew 18:6–10). In the case of the Old Testament Jezebel, her life ended in a gruesome death (2 Kings 9:30–37).

Sardis - The Dead Church

Sardis was located about thirty miles south of Thyatira in the fertile valley of the Hermus River. Sardis was located on the commercial trade route running east and west through the kingdom of Lydia and was the capital city. In AD 17 it was devastated by an earthquake. Sardis continued to exist but its residents chose to dwell on its dead past instead of prospering, never regaining their former wealth and power. The city seemed to have life, but in fact it was merely a shell of what it had been.

Much of Sardis's wealth came from its textile manufacturing and dye industry and its jewelry trade. Most of the city practiced pagan worship and there were many mystery cults or secret religious societies. The Temple of Artemis dating from the fourth century BC was one of its points of interest and still exists as an important ruin.

Though the details are not recorded in Scripture, the church at Sardis was probably founded as an outreach of Paul's ministry at Ephesus (Acts 19:10). The most prominent person from the church at Sardis known to history is Melito. He was an apologist, a defender of Christianity, who served as bishop of Sardis in the late second century. He also wrote the earliest known commentary on passages from Revelation. ¹⁵



Jesus is pictured as the sovereign Lord of the church, ruling through godly leaders and pastors. He holds in His hands the power of life for the churches. His commendation is really a rebuke. The church at Sardis had a reputation for being alive and apparently was regarded by their contemporaries as an effective church. Jesus declared to them that they were dead.

The people of Sardis were surrounded by the grossest form of pagan idolatry. Apparently instead of standing out against its ungodly surroundings, it had made peace with the idolatry, became defiled, marked by inward decay and was now populated by unbelieving people playing church.

Jesus' exhortation to the church at Sardis was:

- Wake up - from their spiritual slumber. The believing remnant needed to look at what was happening in their church, evaluate the situation, confront sin, and make a difference. ¹⁶

- Strengthen - few evidences of spiritual life they still had
- Remember, obey and repent - Revival would come if they would return to the Scriptures, repent and obey God's word.

Similarly, if Sardis refused to repent, Christ would come suddenly and unexpectedly, pierce the hypocritical facade that church was presenting to the rest of the world and expose them to His hand of discipline. Serious words designed to awaken the dead! ¹⁷.

Jesus promise to the few believers in the Sardis church was that they would be:

- Dressed in white - purity of God's people as they are clothed in the righteousness of Christ. Those who share the marriage supper of the Lamb, the victorious Christ, are seen in white robes (Rev 19:7-9)
- Have their Name in book of life - will spend eternity with God
- Acknowledged by God as His own - acceptance by God

To a striking degree, the history of the church at Sardis paralleled that of the city. Located on a hill some fifteen hundred feet above the valley floor, stood Sardis. Its location made the city nearly invincible. Its seemingly indestructible location caused the inhabitants of Sardis to become overconfident. Sardis had twice before fallen because of overconfidence and failure to watch.

Christ's warning to be watchful corresponded to the political history of the city. The letter does not speak of persecution, false doctrine, teachers, or corrupt living. Yet some combination of those things was obviously present at Sardis, since the church had died.

What happened to Sardis? Did they heed the warning? Did revival come? That such a prominent man as Melito served as bishop of Sardis several decades after John wrote argues that at least some revival took place in Sardis. Complacency eventually led to the city's downfall. Through carelessness, Sardis was conquered. The news of its downfall sent shock waves through the Greek world. All that remains today is ruins.

Philadelphia - Faithful Church

The city of Philadelphia, known in modern times as Alasehir, is located in Lydia some 28 miles southeast of Sardis and was named after a king of Pergamum, Attalus Philadelphus, who built the city. The word Philadelphia means "brotherly love."

Philadelphia had a long history, underwent several name changes, and several times was almost completely destroyed by earthquakes. Grapes were one of the principal crops and in keeping with this, Dionysus was one of the chief objects of pagan

worship. Through the centuries a nominal Christian testimony continued in this city and prospered even under Turkish rule. ¹⁸

Little is known about the Philadelphia church apart from this passage. Like most of the other seven churches, it was probably founded during Paul's ministry at Ephesus (Acts 19:10). ¹⁹



This time John describes Jesus as being holy and worthy to judge the spiritual life of the Philadelphia church and the One who has the key of the house of David. This description echoes imagery from Isaiah 22. In a similar way, the Father has handed the keys of authority over God's heavenly blessings to Christ alone. Christ controls access to the Father's spiritual treasury, turning difficult situations into wonderful opportunities. ²⁰

Even though it was the youngest of the seven churches and quite likely one of the smallest, this church received nothing but commendation from Christ. They are one of the two Churches that did not receive a rebuke from the Lord.

Christ commended them for their:

- Deeds - rich in good works
- Little strength - They had nothing like the riches and influence of their neighbor, Laodicea. Nor did they have a rich history and heritage like Ephesus, neither the great reputation of Sardis nor the fame of faithfulness like Smyrna. They were a small church, but had a little power with great potential, because of the holiness, faithfulness, and sovereign authority of their Lord.
- Kept Christ's Word - loyal to God's Word despite the pressures they faced and they were unashamed of their faith

He exhorted them that:

- He had opened a door for them - The picture of Christ's opening the door also symbolizes His giving the faithful Philadelphia church opportunities for service. In Scripture an open door depicts freedom to proclaim the gospel (1 Cor 16:8-9).
- As the geographic gateway to the East, Philadelphia sat at the crossroads of several languages, cultures, and people groups. From an evangelistic and missionary perspective, this dynamic, diminutive church had great opportunities for

ministry. This church's witness was divinely ordained by God and assured by His power and sovereignty.

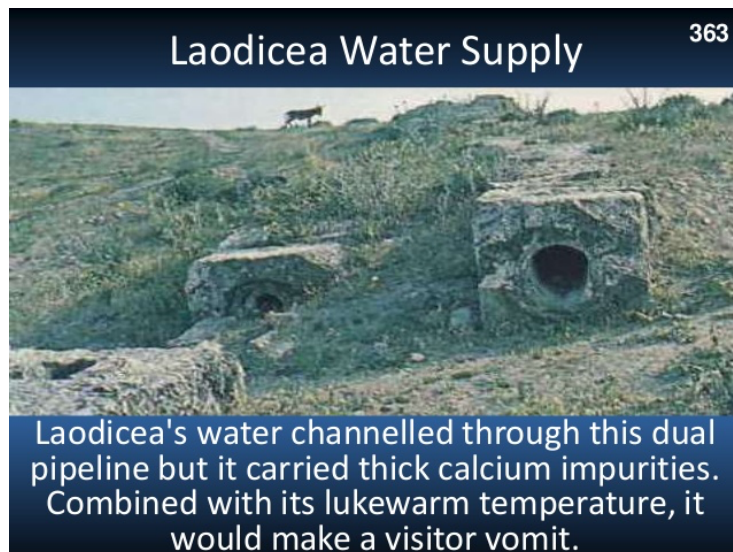
- Their adversaries would be humbled before them
- They would be kept from the Tribulation Period as would all believers
- Hold fast what you have - He will return suddenly and quickly
- They will remain strong and secure

The letter to the faithful Philadelphia church reveals that the holy, omnipotent God pours out His blessings on churches that remain loyal to Him. ²¹

Laodicea - Lukewarm, Useless Church

Laodicea was located on the road to Colosse about 40 miles Southeast of Philadelphia. The city was so wealthy that it paid for its own reconstruction after a devastating earthquake in A.D. 60, rejecting offers of financial aid from Rome.

Laodicea was a major banking/financial center of Asia Minor. The city attracted people of means and money flowed freely through its streets, reflected in its building, its businesses and in its church. The city was also famous for the soft, black wool it produced that was only found in Laodicea and made into luxury clothes and carpets. It was an important center of ancient medicine producing an eye salve for the treatment of blindness that was exported all over the Greco-Roman world.



In spite of everything it had going for it, Laodicea had one major problem. It lacked a supply of good water. Eventually their water supply problem led to an abandonment of the city. The city as well as the churches are now in ruins.

The New Testament does not record anything about the founding of the church at Laodicea. Like most of the other six churches, it was likely established during Paul's ministry

at Ephesus (Acts 19:10). Paul did not found it, since when he wrote Colossians some years later he still had not visited Laodicea (Colossians 2:1). ²²

In addressing the church at Laodicea Christ introduced Himself using three divine titles.:

- The Amen - it is true or certain; Christ is the truth. He is affirming that He has accurately assessed their spiritual condition.
- True Witness - Everything He speaks is the truth. This description was in preparation for the stern word of rebuke which Christ would give the church in Laodicea.
- Ruler of God's Creation - As "the Ruler of God's creation" Christ existed before God's Creation and is sovereign over it (Col 1:15, 18; Rev. 21:6). ²³

No word of commendation was extended to the Laodicean church and the letter begins with the most scathing rebuke found in the seven letters. They were pictured as utterly abhorrent to Christ because they were lukewarm. ²⁴

There are three spiritual states that Christ refers to here. One is cold, which describes the unbelieving world's reaction to the gospel of Jesus Christ, or hot, as those who show genuine spiritual fervor and leave no question as to their faith in Christ. The third state is lukewarm.

Lukewarm describes those that are not genuinely saved, yet they do not openly reject Christ. They attend church and claim to know the Lord. Like the Pharisees, they are content to practice a self-righteous religion. They are hypocrites playing games (Matthew 7:22–23). ²⁵

Lukewarm had a special meaning to the people at Laodicea. Their water was piped in and therefore was lukewarm. In the ancient world people drank in their feasts as well as in their religious sacrifices either hot or cold water - never lukewarm. Some churches make the Lord weep. Others make Him angry. The Laodicean church made Him sick (Rev 3:16). ²⁶

All their wealth had made them self-sufficient, they were content with their wealth and they had no need for the Lord. They were unable to see their spiritual deficient. Christ told them they were: wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked (Rev 3:17). He was speaking of their spiritual state. In spite of all their riches, they lacked what matters most in life: a saving faith and relationship with Jesus Christ.

Jesus' exhortation compared their material wealth and living conditions to their spiritual state. They were urged to replace their material wealth and possessions with only what Christ could offer: spiritual gold, spiritual clothes, and spiritual sight only obtained through salvation in Jesus Christ.

Laodécia's Self Efforts	Christ's Offer
Ordinary gold	Gold refined by Christ's fire so they would become rich spiritually - priceless riches of true salvation
Beautiful clothes	Christ's white garments so that they would be clothed in righteousness and not spiritually naked
Eye salve they produced	Eyes anointed by God so they could see spiritually

Next Jesus graciously offers the Laodicean church salvation. Christ was outside this apostate church and wanted to come in—something that could happen only if the people repented. The invitation is a personal one, since salvation is individual. The picture of Christ outside the Laodicean church seeking entrance strongly implies that there were few believers there or no believers at all.²⁷

The church at Laodicea was the last, most tragic, and also the most threatening of the seven letters written to the Churches. It has the grim distinction of being the only church that Christ offers nothing positive. Representing the church at the end of the age we can see many similarities to our churches today.

Too many Christians are more interested in their personal and family wealth rather than the lost, churches are busy building their own buildings and entertaining their members rather than reaching the lost and introducing them to a saving and lifelong personal relationship with our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Biblical truths, morals and ethics are being replaced with worldly views and social mores and practices.

Bible teachers have reached new heights of fame and wealth and many are more interested in telling stories about themselves than the One who came to save us and loves us more than we can even imagine. Scriptures that apply to the end of the church age and end times are ignored or made to somehow apply to our lives today rather than used in the context they were written in.

Our material wealth and resulting self-sufficiency can mask the fact that we have become “wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked” (Rev. 3: 17) Christ’s message to the church today is the same as it was then: Repent and open the door of our hearts to Christ before the night of judgment falls.

“Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me. ‘He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My

Father on His throne. 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.' "" (Revelation 3:20–22, NASB95

Chronological View

There does seem to be a prophetic revelation as to the course of the age in the seven letters written to the Church. In the order that the letters were given they do seem to foreshadow the successive predominant phases the Church has come to pass. Even the meaning of the names suggest the succession of the development of the periods within the ages. It appears that the history of the first three churches is consecutive; where the history of the remaining four overlaps, and then practically runs concurrently to the end - the Coming of the Lord. ²⁸

Beginning with Ephesus the main movement of church history seems characteristic of the apostolic period. Smyrna is characteristic of the severe persecution of the early church. The history of the 3 centuries that followed is a record of increasing corruption of the church, departure from biblical doctrine, and an attempt to combine Christian theology with pagan philosophy. This is characteristic of the church at Pergamum.

The message to the church in Thyatira seems to foreshadow that period of church history known as the Middle Ages, preceding the Protestant Reformation. In that period the church became corrupt as it sought to combine Christianity with pagan philosophy and religious rites so that many of the church rituals of that period are directly traceable to comparable ceremonies in pagan religion.

During this period also there began the exaltation of Mary, the mother of our Lord, which has tended to exalt her to the plane of a female deity. The church was taught that intercession to God would be made through Mary, apart from whose favor there could be no salvation. Along with this, the church experienced spiritual depravity and idols in the form of religious statues were introduced. Gross physical and spiritual immorality resulted similar to the church at Thyatira. ²⁹

Sardis pictures the church in the time of the Protestant Reformation. A great mass of Christendom was dead even though it had a name that it lived. During those years only a small believing remnant took their stand for true biblical revelation and trusted in Christ as Savior. The characteristics of the church in Sardis remarkably parallels those of the Roman church that sparked the Reformation.

The church at Philadelphia is characteristic of the true Church in the last days. This church has devoted its energy and efforts to spreading the Gospel and leading others to faith in Jesus Christ.

The church at Laodicea represents the last days or latter days of the Church during the Church Age. This period immediately precedes the Great Tribulation and in some measure is a preparation for it. The Scriptures that set forth the last days for the Church give no consideration to political or world conditions but are confined to the Church itself. These Scriptures picture men: ³⁰

- As departing from the faith (1 Tim 4:1-2)
- Denying the power of the blood of Jesus (2 Tim 3:5; Rom 1:16; 1 Cor 1:23-24; 2 Tim 4:2-4)
- Leaders will be unregenerate men (1 For 2:14)
- Denial of God (Luke 17:26; 2 Pet 2:6)
- Denial of Christ's return (2Pet 3:3-4)
- Denial of the faith (1 Tim 4:1-2; Jude 3)
- Denial of sound doctrine (2 Tim 4:3-4)
- Denial of a separated life (2 Tim 3:1-7)
- Denial of Christian liberty (1 Tim 4:3-4)
- Denial of morals ((2 Tim 3:1-8, 13; Jude 18)
- Denial of authority ((2 Tim 3:4)

This condition at the close of the age is seen to coincide with the state within the Laodicean Church, before which Christ must stand to seek admission. In view of its close it is not surprising that the age is called an "evil age" in Scripture. ³¹

Chronological View of Jesus' Message to the Seven Churches

Church	Character	Meaning of Their Name	Approximate Dates	Time Period	Characteristic
Ephesus	Orthodox but Lost-love Church	Beloved or Desired	Pentecost to 100 A.D.	Apostolic Period	Time of sowing, organization and evangelism
Smyrna	Suffering Church	Myrrh or Bitterness	Nero to 300 A.D.	Martyr Period	Persecution Enemy revealed
Pergamum	Compromising Church	Thoroughly Married	300 to 800 A.D.	Decreasing spirituality & increasing worldliness	Worldly alliance. Great external growth.
Thyatira	Tolerant, Permissive Church	Continual Sacrifice	800 to 1517	Middle Ages/ Dark Ages	Rise of papal church; universal authority & cruel persecution of the saints of God. Doctrinal Corruption. Empty profession. Rise of the state church.
Sardis	Dead Church	Those Escaping Renovation	Reformation	Reformation	God's intervention in grace & power to cripple papal authority & introduce into Europe the light which was dimmed for 300 years
Philadelphia	Faithful Church	Brotherly Love	The Last Days	Reformation	True Church of the last days
Laodicea	Lukewarm, Useless Church	People Ruling	Last Days	Apostasy	Present general state of the professing Church - lukewarm or Christless

Summary

The letters to the seven churches contain a remarkably complete treatment for problems that face the church today. Problems faced in the church's first-century are as prevalent today as they were then. The amazing thing is that Jesus, Himself has given us the answers to the problems. Sadly, today mainstream contemporary teaching in the church is staying away from the book of Revelation, entirely missing this significant revelation from God. This is clearly to the church's loss.

Jesus knew how difficult life can be on this fallen earth especially as we get nearer to the time He returns. Difficult days have come and we see happening in the world either the beginning of or the things written in the Bible about this time period as stated in the list above. We would do well to hear and heed His call on how to keep our spiritual fires burning.

Church	Christ's Warnings	Christ's Solution
Ephesus	Danger of losing our first love	Fresh devotion to Christ
Smyrna	Danger of fear of suffering	Do not fear (Rev 2:10)
Pergamum	Danger of doctrinal compromise	Hold fast Biblical truths
Thyatira	Danger of moral compromise	Hold fast Biblical moral standards
Sardis	Danger of spiritual deadness	Wake up from spiritual slumber
Philadelphia	Danger of not holding fast	Keep My Word
Laodecia	Danger of lukewarmness	Open the door and I will come in and save you