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A Study of the Letters to the Seven Churches

The Letters to the Seven Churches are found in the book of Revelation, in chapters 2 and 3. They are messages from Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church, to the churches in seven cities in the province of Asia Minor, part of the Roman Empire at the time.

Chapter 1 of Revelation introduces John, who receives the vision from Jesus Christ via angels, and is told to write “what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea” (verse 11).

So we begin this study of the Letters to the Seven Churches with a look at chapter 1 of the book of Revelation...

Prologue

1 The revelation from Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, 2 who testifies to everything he saw—that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. 3 Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.

Greetings and Doxology

4 John,

To the seven churches in the province of Asia:

Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits(a) before his throne, 5 and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, 6 and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.

7 “Look, he is coming with the clouds,” (b)

*and “every eye will see him,
even those who pierced him”;*

and all peoples on earth “will mourn because of him.” (c)

So shall it be! Amen.

8 “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.”

John’s Vision of Christ

9 I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. 10 On the Lord’s Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud

voice like a trumpet, 11 which said: “Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea.”

12 I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, 13 and among the lampstands was someone like a son of man, (d) dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. 14 The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. 15 His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. 16 In his right hand he held seven stars, and coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.

17 When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said: “Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. 18 I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.

19 “Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later. 20 The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels (e) of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

Footnotes:

- (a) Rev. 1:4 That is, the sevenfold Spirit
- (b) Rev. 1:7 Daniel 7:13
- (c) Rev. 1:7 Zechariah 12:10
- (d) Rev. 1:13 See Daniel 10:5-6
- (e) Rev. 1:20 Or messengers

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The first part of our study of chapter 1 explores what we know about John, and the situation the early church was in at the time. It is a technical analysis referencing many sources, and citing several scholars, and comes from the article

John of Patmos. (2008, August 27). *New World Encyclopedia*

http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/p/index.php?title=John_of_Patmos&oldid=792705.

BACKGROUND

Patmos

Patmos is a small Greek island in the Aegean Sea. John of Patmos indicates that he was exiled to this isolated location on account of an unspecified persecution, in which his fellow Christians had also been victimized:

I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, which said: "Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea."

Because of the island's association with John's suffering and his writing of the Book of Revelation, Patmos became an important destination for Christian pilgrimages. Today, visitors can still see the cave where John is said to have received his revelation, and several monasteries on the island are dedicated to Saint John of Patmos.

John's identity

Traditional view

The traditional view holds that John of Patmos is identical with John the Apostle who is believed to have written both the Gospel of John and epistles of John. He was exiled to the island Patmos in the Aegean archipelago during the reign of Emperor Domitian or Nero, and wrote the Book of Revelation there. Those in favor of a single common author of the Johannine literature point to similarities between the Gospel of John and Revelation. For example, both works refer to Jesus as a lamb and possess a "high Christology," stressing Jesus' divine side as opposed to the human side portrayed more by the Synoptic Gospels. Moreover, in both the Gospel of John and in Revelation, Jesus is referred to as "the Word of God" (Ὁ λόγος του θεου).

Explanations of the differences among John's supposed works include factoring in their purposes, target audiences, the possible use of different scribes, and John's advanced age when he wrote the Book of Revelation.

Church Fathers

A number of Church Fathers expressed an opinion on the authorship of Revelation, most in the West favoring the view that John of Patmos was indeed the same person as the author of the Gospel of John, but many in the East expressed misgivings.

At the beginning of the third century, the book was accepted as apostolic by Clement of Alexandria and by Origen, and later by Methodius, Cyprian, and Lactantius. Origen's disciple Dionysius of Alexandria (247 C.E.), however, rejected it on the

grounds that, although it was the work of an inspired man, he was not John the Apostle (Eusebius, Hist. Eccl., VII, 25). Dionysius pointed to numerous stylistic and theological differences between Revelation and the Gospel of John, anticipating the arguments of many modern critics.

Some other authorities, especially in the Eastern Church, also rejected the book and thus denied that it could have been written by John the Apostle. It was also excluded from the Peshito, the Syrian version of the New Testament. In the West, Saint Jerome also expressed doubts that John of Patmos was the writer of the Gospel of John.

Modern criticism

With the advent of modern biblical criticism, many scholars, both secular and Christian, came to believe that John the Evangelist (who wrote the Gospel of John), and John of Patmos were two separate individuals. They point to several lines of evidence suggesting that John of Patmos wrote only Revelation, not the Gospel of John or the epistles of John. For one, the author of Revelation identifies himself as "John" several times, but the author of the Gospel of John and the writer of the epistles of "John" never identify themselves by name.

In contrast to the author of the Gospel of John, John of Patmos speaks very much as a Jewish Christian, referring to Jesus as he who "holds the key of David" (3:7) and the "Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David." (5:5) He also condemns the careless attitude of some of the Pauline churches who permitted eating food which had been offered to idols (2:14, 2:20). Moreover, for John of Patmos, the "elect" saints are not Gentile Christians but "144,000 from all the tribes of Israel," with 12,000 coming from each specifically-named tribe (7:4-8). A great multitude of Gentiles "from every nation" are also included, but not among the 144,000 (7:9).

Also, while both the Gospel of John and the Book of Revelation liken Jesus to a lamb, they consistently use different words for lamb when referring to him—the Gospel uses *amnos*, Revelation uses *arnion*. Lastly, the Gospel of John is written in nearly flawless Greek, but Revelation contains grammatical errors and stylistic abnormalities which indicate its author was not as familiar with the Greek language as the Gospel's author.

These factors lead some critics to the opinion that of all the New Testament literature attributed to John the Apostle, the Book of Revelation is the most likely to have been actually written by him.

Date

Most scholars agree that Emperor Domitian is the most likely candidate as the initiator of the persecutions to which John of Patmos refers. Scholars of both critical and traditional orientation agree that John of Patmos appears to have been in some type of imposed exile and that he wrote during a period when the Christian churches were experiencing persecution. According to early tradition, John wrote near the end of Domitian's reign, around 95 or 96 C.E. Others contend for an earlier date, 68 or 69, in

the reign of Nero or shortly thereafter. The majority of modern scholars also use these dates.

Those in favor of the later date cite the fact that the Neroan persecution was limited to Rome, while John of Patmos speaks of the churches suffering persecution throughout Asia Minor. In addition, Irenaeus (d. 185), states that he had received information from those who had seen John face to face and that John recorded his revelation "almost in our day, toward the end of Domitian's reign" (A.H. 5.30.3). According to Eusebius as well, it was Domitian who had started the persecution referred to in the book. Many scholars agree that the famous number 666, identifying the "Beast" of Revelation, refers to Nero. However those favoring a late date see this reference as an allegory, with Nero symbolizing a later tyrant, such as Domitian.

Legacy

Regardless of John of Patmos' true identity, the revelations he recorded have had a major impact. With the exception of Jesus himself, he is the Christian prophet *par excellence*. His promise of the immediate Second Coming of Christ and the establishment of the New Jerusalem has led believers in nearly every generation to see themselves as part of the 144,000 who will reign with Christ for 1,000 years. At the same time, John's vivid descriptions of "woes" and punishments for the vast majority of mankind has led many to despair, since so few seem to be counted among the elect. Throughout history, John of Patmos' visions have motivated numerous millennialist movements, as well as a tremendous volume of literature, and numerous works of art.

In today's Christian world, dozens of groups see the prophecies of John of Patmos as being fulfilled through their ministries, ranging from fundamentalist preachers, to millennialist sects such as the Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh Day Adventists, to popular writers of Christian fiction such as Hal Lindsey and Tim LaHaye, and to new religious movements such as the Unification Church.

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- Hill, Charles E. *The Johannine Corpus in the Early Church*. Oxford University Press, USA, 2006.
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After the greetings and salutations at the beginning of chapter 1, the rest of the chapter is an 'introduction' to the seven letters that will follow (chapters 2 and 3). Having established that he is writing on the authority of Jesus, John confirms that he is giving the churches the message that Jesus gave to him for each of them.

A large chunk of the chapter is taken up with a list of descriptions of Jesus... many of which will be echoed in the Letters to the Churches. He is pictured as being in the midst of the seven golden lampstands, which represent the churches. This suggests that these are individual lampstands (similar to the one pictured at the right) and not the seven-branched Menorah that is described in Exodus 25:31-40, as pictured here



The word translated 'angel' means a messenger and may refer to an actual angel who is appointed to each church, or it may refer to the one through whom this message will get to the congregation... i.e. the bishop, or overseer, or pastor.

The way Jesus is dressed (1:13) is symbolic. The garment down to His feet, with a golden sash around His chest, represents the robe of the priest, the king and the prophet. Jesus fulfills all these roles for the churches to whom He sends these letters. We shall consider other aspects of the descriptions given of Jesus when we look at the individual letters.

The word 'mystery' in verse 20 comes from a Greek word that means a coded message. It refers to something that may be meaningless to an outsider, but makes perfect sense to one who has the key to unlock the secrets. While some of the symbolism in the book of Revelation is difficult to understand (we don't have the inside information on the coded messages), the contents of chapters 2 and 3 -- for those of us who are believers -- should not be at all difficult to grasp. If we read and study with humble hearts, willing to learn, I'm sure that we will be challenged by the messages of the risen Christ to His Church!

Jesus is described as:

- *the one who is, and who was, and who is to come,*
- *the one who is the faithful witness,*
- *the firstborn from the dead,*
- *the ruler of the kings of the earth.*
- *the one who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood,*
- *the one who has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father,*
- *the one who receives glory and power for ever and ever!*

Things said about Him:

- *“Look, he is coming with the clouds,” and “every eye will see him, even those who pierced him”;*
- *all peoples on earth “will mourn because of him.”*
- *like a son of man, dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest.*
- *The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire.*
- *His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters.*
- *In his right hand he held seven stars, and coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword.*
- *His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.*

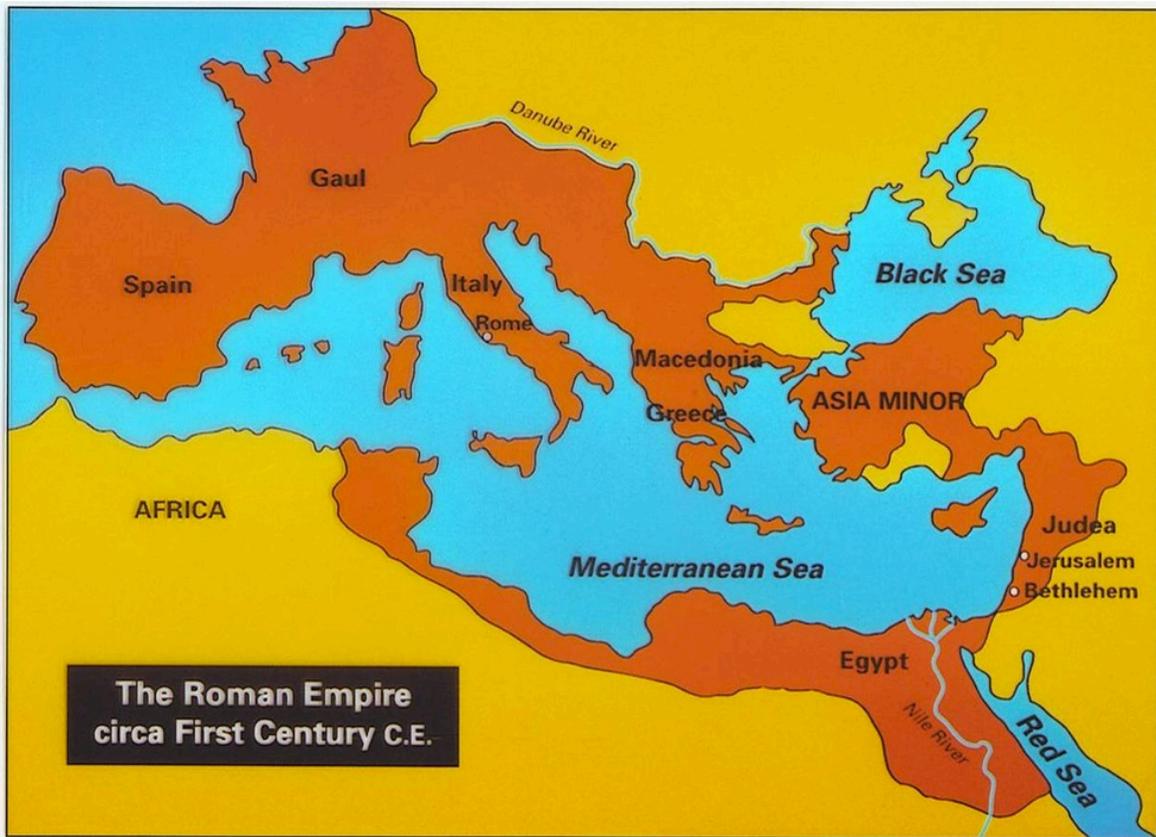
He said of Himself:

- *“I am the Alpha and the Omega. . . who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.”*
- *I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One;*
- *I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever!*
- *I hold the keys of death and Hades.*

At the end of chapter 1 Jesus explains “the mystery of the seven stars... and the seven golden lampstands”

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

Now we turn to the Letters themselves. We set the context by showing on a map where Asia Minor was, as part of the Roman Empire at the time.



Letters to the Seven Churches

- 1 - Revelation 2:1-7 -- Letter to the angel of the church in *Ephesus*
- 2 - Revelation 2:8-11 -- Letter to the angel of the church in *Smyrna*
- 3 - Revelation 2:12-17 -- Letter to the angel of the church in *Pergamum*
- 4 - Revelation 2:18-29 -- Letter to the angel of the church in *Thyatira*
- 5 - Revelation 3:1-6 -- Letter to the angel of the church in *Sardis*
- 6 - Revelation 3:7-13 -- Letter to the angel of the church in *Philadelphia*
- 7 - Revelation 3:14-22 -- Letter to the angel of the church in *Laodicea*

On the map on the following page we have a close-up of the location of the seven cities to whom the Letters were sent. The sequence in which the cities are listed followed the circuitous Roman Imperial Mail route, from Ephesus on to all the cities in order, and from Laodicea returning to Ephesus. This area is present-day Turkey.



We shall consider each letter with reference to the following components:

- the ***Destination*** of the letter -- what we know about the city
- the ***Description*** of Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church
- the ***Commendation*** given to the church
- the ***Rebuke*** given to the church
- the ***Exhortation*** given to the church
- the ***Promise*** given to the church
- the ***Postscript***

Please read all the scripture passages referred to. It is important to see the connection between the different passages, and how one often illuminates another. And please give some time and thought to the questions posed, for this is how we apply to our lives and situations the truths that we learn from the Bible. This is necessary in order to truly become “doers of the Word, and not hearers only” (James 1:22).

Letter 1

The Church at Ephesus: You Do Not Love Me Now As You Did At First

Revelation 2:1-7

“To the angel of the church in Ephesus write:

These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands. I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.

Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first. Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.

Destination

Ephesus, though three miles from the coast, was a port city -- situated on the banks of the river Cayster. It was considered at the time the greatest city in the province of Asia, and was a “free city.” This meant that, while still under Roman rule, it has its own town clerk, its own courts, its own popular assembly, and its own officers appointed to preside over the public games. This made **Ephesus** an important city politically. While it was not at the time this letter was sent, it later became the capital of the Roman province of Asia.

Ephesus, whose name means ‘desirable’, was also important economically. A great commercial centre, it was known as the market of Asia. Its harbour lay at the crossroads of the trade routes connecting east, west and south, and it was, therefore, a cosmopolitan city, having a large population from all around the Mediterranean. In addition to the natives, there were descendants of the colonists from Athens, three other different Greek groups, and a sizable Jewish population.

Important as a religious centre also, **Ephesus** was home to many different religions, and had numerous temples and shrines. Pagan worship was perhaps at its highest here, and superstition ran rampant. The city was the guardian of the goddess of fertility, Artemis, also known as Diana. You may recall that Demetrius and other silversmiths who made idols of Artemis tried to create problems for the Christians (see Acts 19:23-41). The temple of this goddess was home to hundreds of sacred prostitutes, and was also an asylum for criminals. This religion in particular, and the city in general, was notoriously evil. The temple of Artemis was one of the

architectural wonders of the ancient world; another was the theatre that Demetrius and the the mob went into -- a huge building that could seat 24,500 people!

It was extremely difficult for Christianity to grow and spread in the city of *Ephesus*, but it did. The Christians there had to be strong, for their faith was put to the test often and in many ways. The Bahamas today is similar to *Ephesus* of old in that we are at the intersection of a 'tourist route', and we certainly have a mixture of races, nationalities, and religions. Does this make being a Christian here more difficult than in other places?

This was John's home, and legend has it that he brought Mary there to live with him after Jesus died, and she was buried here. We know that Paul loved the church here dearly (see Acts 20:17-38) and they loved him. Timothy was the first bishop of *Ephesus* (1 Timothy 1:3). Here laboured faithful workers, such as Aquilla and Priscilla (Acts 18:19), and Apollos (Acts 18:24).

The city declined considerably in the 5th Century, and the few people who remained there were deported by the Turks in the 14th Century. Ruins are all that remain of this once-great city of *Ephesus*.

Description

The one who sends this message to the saints at *Ephesus* is described as "He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands" (2:1), which echoes the description given of Christ in chapter 1, verses 13, 16 and 20. This speaks of the authority of Jesus, the Lord of the Church. He holds the angels [the messengers] of the church in His 'right hand' -- which is symbolic of God's power and might (see Psalms 17:7, 20:6, and Isaiah 41:13). This is a reminder that He is able to take care of His own. The fact that He 'walks in the midst' should bring comfort to those who believe in Him... a reminder of the promise He gave before He ascended to be with His Father: "I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20).

Commendation

Jesus offers comfort and encouragement with His words, "I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance" (2:2). He is assuring them that they are under His constant care, and that He knows everything they do or experience. You and I need people and situations that are familiar to us, that we know well. We sometimes talk of our 'comfort zone' -- where we feel no threat, no fear, no danger. Jesus is reminding His followers in *Ephesus* that they are familiar to Him... He knows them well, so they should feel comforted by His presence.

He praises their deeds, their hard work. We are not told in the letter what specifically they have done that is praiseworthy, and this probably refers to several things rather than one particular matter or occasion. The way they live generally, in the

day-to-day mix of life, is being commended. Is our lifestyle worthy of praise from our Master? Is Trinity likely to receive His commendation for our deeds... our hard work... our perseverance?

The believers in **Ephesus** are faithful to the truth of scripture, having zero tolerance for those who are evil (see Matthew 7:17-20), and they consistently test those who make apostolic claims (see Matthew 7:14-16). They are patient. Patience is not just a virtue (as the familiar proverb informs us), but it is one of the gifts of the Spirit (see Galatians 5:22-23, where it is called *longsuffering*). They "have persevered... and have not become weary" (2:3), thereby fulfilling the requirement of Jesus to 'let their light shine'. Paul also encourages perseverance (see Galatians 6:9), as does James (see James 5:1), and the church at **Ephesus** -- which, by the time this letter arrived, was over 40 years old -- has been putting it into practice.

They are also commended for hating "the practices of the Nicolaitans" (2:6). While the scripture does not specify who the Nicolaitans are, we do have a reference to Nicolas, one of the deacons, who was from Antioch (see Acts 6:5). A early church historian writes of Nicolas that he departed from correct doctrine, but another claims that the Nicolaitans -- who were followers of his -- perverted his teachings. What we do know of this group indicates that they believed salvation affects only the soul (spiritual), and not the body (flesh). Therefore, they taught that what you did with your body did not matter, thus using 'liberty as an opportunity for the flesh' which is condemned in scripture (see Galatians 5:13).

This group is also mentioned in the Letter to the Church in Pergamum (2:14-15), where they are linked with those who "hold to the teaching of Balaam," encouraging believers to eat food offered to idols, and to commit sexual immorality. These are two things that Gentiles were required to abstain from, according to the Council of Jerusalem's letter (see Acts 15:28-29). We note that what Jesus commends the **Ephesian** Christians for is hating their deeds, not the Nicolaitans themselves. Like Him, we must hate the sin but love the sinner.

Rebuke

These are good things, to their credit, but all is not as it should be. "I hold this against you," Jesus tells them, "You have forsaken the love you had at first" (2:4). We can understand this in two ways:

- (i) They had lost their enthusiasm for Christ, and the joy of serving Him. How about you? Are you just as excited now as you were when you gave your heart to the Lord? Can you honestly pray with the hymn-writer
Take my life and let it be consecrated, Lord, to Thee.
Take my moments and my days... let them flow in ceaseless praise.?
- (ii) They had lost their compassion and concern for each other. We know that they had this, for Paul commends them for their "love for all the saints" (see

Ephesians 1:15). Had they lost it? How about you? Do you love God's children? Do you have compassion for people in need, in particular your fellow-Christians? While we are required to 'do good to all', we are especially called to care for those who are of 'the household of faith' (see Galatians 6:10).

Exhortation

Jesus challenges His followers at ***Ephesus*** to do do three things. They have to:

1. Remember

The call is to get back to basics, to be 'radical'. Sometimes we use that word to mean controversial or rebellious, but the true meaning of 'radical' is "going to, or being, the root" (Oxford Dictionary). Jesus is calling them to return to the root, to the starting line, to the beginning... from where they "have fallen" (2:5).

2. Repent

To 'repent' means to "feel regret or penitence about something" ((Oxford Dictionary). Repentance comes as result of remembering; it is the action that follows the reflection. This call to repentance is issued to all of the churches that Jesus rebukes (see 2:16, 2:12, 3:3, 3:19), because it is a necessary ingredient in the process of being restored to Him, and growing in His grace.

3. Do

They are challenged to do the things they did at first. This no doubt refers to the things that they did when they first started following Jesus, but it is also a call to have the attitude toward service that they used to have. A reminder again to not get tired of serving... to not grow weary in well doing. Is your attitude toward serving Jesus through His Church as vibrant, positive, and enthusiastic as it used to be? Are you serving Him as joyfully and as frequently as you ought to be?

Let us be reminded from these words of Jesus that our relationship with Him always involves these three components: our ***minds*** (remember), our ***hearts*** (repent), and our ***lifestyle*** (doing His will).

Andrae Crouch's song ***Take Me Back*** is an acknowledgement of the need to go back to our first love... listen to it on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AkQ2VX2I3L4>

Promise

Jesus makes two promises -- one that has negative consequences, and one that has positive results:

• **Negative**

His judgment will fall on them if they are not obedient, and He will "remove [their] lampstand from its place" (2:5). We know from Revelation 1:20 that the lampstands are the churches... therefore this is a warning from Jesus that He will take this church out of its place if it does not shine with His light. The city of

Ephesus no longer exists, and the church that was once there is gone. Why? Did they fail to heed the Master's warning? Was their lampstand removed?

Let the challenge given to them come home to us today, so that we will be a church that remembers, repents, and does God's will. Trinity Methodist Church has been in this place for 155 years, and has been a powerful witness of God's grace and a tremendous influence for good in the community in many ways. But if we leave our 'first love' we may become more of a hindrance to Christ than a help to Him, and run the risk of being removed.

- **Positive**

Jesus promises those who are victorious (that is, those who are faithful and who overcome) that they will "eat from the tree of life" which is in 'the paradise of God' (2:7). We need to go back to the Garden of Eden, where the *tree of life* and *tree of the knowledge of good and evil* were 'in the midst of the garden' (see Genesis 2:9). After Adam and Eve disobeyed God and ate of the *tree of the knowledge of good and evil* (Genesis 2:17), they were no longer able to take of the *tree of life* "and eat, and live forever" (Genesis 3:22) because God put them out of the garden. Their sin robbed them of eternal life.

Jesus promises the redeemed who are victorious that they will have the privilege that Adam's sin had taken away -- to eat of this tree. See also Revelation 22:14, where those who "wash their robes" are blessed with the "right to the tree of life." The faithful and victorious believers (the overcomers) will receive all that God intended for us from the beginning... all that sin robbed us of will be restored.

Postscript

When I served as Minister for the six Methodist churches in North Eleuthera I had to travel to and from Harbour Island quite frequently, and often at night. I bought a C.B. Radio for the car, so that I could keep in touch with the water-taxi operators. I soon developed a special relationship with Reggie 'No Problem' Major, who drove a land taxi (number 24) on Harbour Island. Most times as I was heading toward Three Islands dock, and calling for my water-taxi, Reggie would hear me, and many times he would go to look for my boat driver. Whenever he called me back on the radio he would say, "Rev. Got your ears on?" In other words... are you tuned in? Are you listening?

Jesus did not send these messages to the churches because He needed to say this. No. He sent these messages because they needed to hear this. So do we, for we are His Church, His Body, in this time and place. He wants to know... are we listening?

Everyone of the Letters to the Seven Churches has the same postscript: *Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches*. This repetition is a way of emphasizing that what Jesus is saying is of great significance. And it is clear that this

means everything that He is saying is important to everyone. He wants *all* of us to pay attention to what He says to *each* of us.

As we study these Letters, we need to ask: Do I have my spiritual 'ears' on? Am I truly listening to what Jesus is saying to me and to other believers... fellow-pilgrims on this journey of faith?

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Letter 2

The Church at Smyrna: You are Poor -- You are Rich

Revelation 2:8-11

“To the angel of the church in Smyrna write:

These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich! I know about the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor’s crown.

Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who is victorious will not be hurt at all by the second death.

Destination

The name **Smyrna** means ‘myrrh’ which is an aromatic resin containing perfumes from the crushed leaves of several plants, and was used in anointing oil and embalming fluid. Some scholars see here the symbolism of the church in this city... crushed by persecution yet faithful to Christ and used by Him to help and encourage others.

A large and prosperous city 35 miles north of Ephesus, **Smyrna** was known as the ‘Crown of Asia’ or the ‘Ornament of Asia’. An attractive and pleasant city, it constantly had the gentle west wind blowing through. The one disadvantage of this was that it blew the smell of the sewage back onto the city.

Originally colonized by the Greeks around 1000 BC, it was destroyed by the Lydians 400 years later. A serious earthquake also caused major damage, and for a long time it was the site of scattered little towns. When it was rebuilt around 200 BC it was properly planned, being carefully laid out with wide, straight streets. The most notable of these was the ‘Street of Gold’ stretching between two of the largest temples. The magnificent architecture of the city was dominated by temples, but **Smyrna** also had a huge stadium, a large public library, a music house, and one of the largest theatres in the province of Asia.

Smyrna was the largest port in Asia, with a sheltered harbour in a gulf, and the city spread up the shore over foothills to the great hill of Pagos, on which many temples were built. Like Ephesus, **Smyrna** was:

- home to many religions and nationalities (including a large Jewish population, who were very much against the Christians),
- loyal to Rome, being the first city to construct a temple to the goddess *Roma*, and
- a cultural centre.

Unlike Ephesus, **Smyrna** still exists today -- a thriving port now named Izmir, in present-day Turkey.

Description

Here Jesus identifies Himself as “the First and the Last” who “died and came to life again.” Compare this description with that given in verses 8, 11, 17 and 18 of chapter 1. His authority is based on His eternal nature, and His victory over death is an encouragement for those who follow Him. The one who was dead but now lives sends this message to a church in this city that was dead but has been raised to a new life.

Commendation

Jesus says again (as He did to the church at Ephesus), “I know...” (2:9). He is not like the gods of other religions, who seem far away and out of touch. He does not have to be awakened or aroused (see 1 Kings 18:27; Psalm 121:4; Isaiah 59:1). He knows His children intimately (see John 10:4). He says:

- *I know your afflictions* . . . No details are given here about the afflictions or troubles, but as we read further we learn what some of their trials involved. The word translated *afflictions* literally means “being crushed beneath a weight” -- they have been persecuted for their faith, and they will suffer more before it is over.

Verse 10 says that some of them will be imprisoned, and that would most likely mean death at the end of their prison term. Some will be persecuted, or have their faith put to the test, probably meaning that they would be required to declare “Caesar is Lord!” or suffer if they don’t. Their tribulations will last for “ten days.” Most scholars agree that this is not to be taken literally as 10 actual days, but they disagree on how to interpret it. Some suggest it is symbolic of a short period, an intense but temporary time of suffering. Others suggest it is a reference to the 10 emperors of Rome who each persecuted the Christians, although to varying degrees. Still others suggest it refers to ten years of suffering under the emperor Diocletian, who was the worst of their persecutors.

- *I know your poverty* . . . Again, no details are given here. However, we know from other sources that there were a lot of poor people in **Smyrna** at this time, and certainly many of the Christians would have been in this lower economic and social bracket. The word used here means extremely poor, having nothing. The already

desperate situation was made worse by occasional raids and attacks on crops, cattle, and homes of some Christians. Yet Jesus tells them that they are really rich; reminiscent of Matthew 6:20, where He says, "lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven" rather than on earth (see also James 2:5).

- *I know your enemies* . . . There is no question that Rome was the biggest and most dangerous enemy of Christianity at this time, especially through the persecution by the emperors who thought of themselves as gods. But Jesus here identifies another group who are very much opposed to the Christians. These are "those who say they are Jews" (2:9) but are really hypocrites. Jesus condemns these most severely, calling them a "synagogue of Satan"... which means that they serve the devil rather than the Lord God Jehovah, who they claim to belong to. We have several examples of Jewish persecution of Christians in the early Church in the book of Acts. Of course Saul of Tarsus is chief among them, until he meets Jesus on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-2). We read of persecution in
 - Antioch (Acts 2:50)
 - Iconium (Acts 14:2, 5)
 - Lystra (Acts 14:19)
 - Thessalonica (Acts 17:5)

Jesus commends the faithfulness of the saints at **Smyrna** throughout their suffering and the persecution they have faced, and encourages them not to be afraid of what is yet to come. The tribulation of this world is nothing compared to the 'crown of life' -- the glory of living in God's presence -- that is promised to the faithful (2:10).

Do you have any enemies? Do you pray for them and about them?

Do you feel persecuted sometimes, because of your faith in Christ, and the standards that such faith requires you to uphold?

Does suffering really strengthen faith?

Rebuke

Here we find an exception to the pattern, for there is no real rebuke to the church at **Smyrna**. (The only other church that fares so well is the one at Philadelphia). The Christians at **Smyrna** have been faithful. We wonder whether the suffering, poverty and afflictions they experienced -- their times of testing -- helped to keep their faith pure. Do you think prosperity sometimes causes us to think too highly of ourselves, our accomplishments, our possessions? If we take seriously our calling as Christians, and the mission of the church to serve, we must recognize that we all face many challenges. Having more material things may make it easier in some ways, but (like the believers in **Smyrna**) our faith is being tested every day, for there is a fierce battle going on around us. We, too, must be "strong in the Lord" by putting on the full armor of God, so that we can "stand against the devil's schemes" (see Ephesians 6:10-11).

Exhortation

Jesus had 'been there, done that' in terms of experiencing tribulation, suffering and poverty. But the one who is "the First and the Last"... the one who "died and came to life again" has overcome! He is their (and our) example of what faithfulness can produce: Victory!

"Fear not," says Jesus. Many times He says this, and many times throughout the Bible we are encouraged to give up fear and take up courage. Jesus never suggests that Christians will avoid suffering. Quite the contrary, He states that He sends us out "as sheep in the midst of wolves" (see Matthew 10:16). But, concerning the wolves, He says, "do not fear them" (Matthew 10:16). So what can we learn from suffering, persecution, and afflictions that may help us to be victorious?

Sometimes suffering/tribulation can:

- ***provide discipline*** (see 1 Corinthians 11:30-32; Hebrews 12:3-13)
- ***prevent pride*** (see 2 Corinthians 12:7)
- ***teach obedience*** (see Hebrews 5:8; Romans 5:3-5)
- ***strengthen our testimony*** (see Acts 9:16)

Have you had experiences with suffering, tribulations, financial hardships, difficult relationships, etc. that have helped you in these areas?

"Be faithful," exhorts Jesus (2:10), "faithful unto death." The ultimate price to pay for the follower of Christ is to deny him/herself all the way to the grave. Many in ***Smyrna*** (as well as in other places) would be required to make this supreme sacrifice under the persecution by the Romans and the Jews.

Promise

The promise given to the church at ***Smyrna*** is two-fold -- those who are victorious will:

- 1 - receive the "victor's crown" (2:10)
- 2 - not "be hurt by the second death" (2:11)

1 - the ***Victor's Crown***

This 'crown' is not the royal or imperial crown. The word used here means the laurel leaf wreath -- the 'crown' given to the winners of sporting events, or the headpiece presented to retiring magistrates who had served faithfully and well. It does not symbolize what you are entitled to, or what is your by right. Rather it refers to the prize given for endurance, for holding out to the end. The Greek word is '*stephanos*' which is the root of the name Stephen, who was the first martyr for his faith in Christ (see Acts 7:58-60). Stephen won the victory, he received the crown, because he was faithful, even to death!

There are some other 'crowns' referred to in the New Testament:

- the *Incorruptible Crown* (1 Corinthians 9:25)
- the *Crown of Rejoicing* (1 Thessalonians 2:19)
- the *Crown of Righteousness* (read Paul's testimony in 2 Timothy 4:7-8)
- the *Crown of Glory* (1 Peter 5:4)

These may be understood as additional rewards or benefits of faithfulness. The crown promised to the faithful at *Smyrna* is the "Victor's Crown" or the "Crown of Life" (see also James 1:12) which will be presented to those who have been victorious in living for Christ, to those who have endured to the end (see Philippians 3:13-14). Not necessarily the *successful*, but the faithful. This 'crown' is the privilege to experience true life eternally in the presence of God!

2 - the *Second Death*

This is a peculiar phrase that is found no where else in scripture, except in the book of Revelation... here, and in 20:6, 20:14 and 21:8). Reading the other verses helps clarify its meaning: it is a reference to spiritual death, the final separation from God. The 'first death' is physical death, which we will all experience (except those who are alive when Jesus returns) because our bodies are not designed to last forever. However, we do not have to experience the 'second death' if we are spiritually alive. If we do experience this 'second death' it is because we choose to. Those who choose to live in Christ will die physically (the first death) but will not die spiritually (the second death). Read John 11:21-17 to hear how Jesus explains this to Martha at the time of Lazarus' death.

This is really an echo of the other promise: to receive the Crown of Life, and to be unaffected by the 'second death' are two ways of saying the same thing. If we are faithful to Christ, He will be faithful to us, and He promises us that we will live with Him forever.

Postscript

"Got your ears on?"

Again we are reminded to be spiritual perceptive . . . to be paying attention to what we need to hear. The Spirit is speaking to the churches.

Are we hearing?

Are we obeying?

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Letter 3

The Church at Pergamum: A Few Things Against You

Revelation 2:12-17

“To the angel of the church in Pergamum write:

These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. I know where you live—where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, not even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city—where Satan lives.

Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: There are some among you who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin so that they ate food sacrificed to idols and committed sexual immorality. Likewise, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.

Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give that person a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it.

Destination

Pergamum is the way this name is translated in newer versions of the Bible, which is the neuter form of the name and thought more suitable for a place name. The King James Version renders it ‘Pergamos’, which is the feminine form of the name. True to its name, **Pergamum**, which means ‘elevation’ or ‘height’, was built on a high hill about 15 miles from the Mediterranean Sea, where it overlooked the river Caicus.

Pergamum was the capital of the Seleucid kingdom, one of the sections of Alexander the Great’s empire. This area later came unto Roman control, and continued to be the capital city of the Roman province of Asia for many years before surrendering that position to Ephesus.

It was a wealthy city even though it was not a big business centre. Since it was not a port, and was not located on the main trade routes, it was not as important commercially as Ephesus or Smyrna. However, it surpassed those two cities culturally. In addition to theatres and sporting arenas, it was famous for its University Library, which housed over 200,000 parchment scrolls, until they were sent to Egypt as a gift from Anthony to Cleopatra. Like Ephesus and Smyrna, **Pergamum** was also home to a multitude of religions and had many temples devoted to idol worship. There was an abundance of sacred gardens and groves scattered throughout the city, all with statues and altars.

A huge 400-foot high altar to the Greek god Zeus was built in front of the Temple of Athene, and it looked like a great throne projecting from the hillside.

This temple of Zeus has been reconstructed, and is now housed in the Pergamum Museum in Berlin, Germany (right).



Another notable structure was the magnificent temple to one of the most popular gods who was worshipped here, namely *Asclepios* (also spelled *Esculapius*). He was the god of healing, whose idol was a serpent. It is from this religion that we get the medical symbol depicting one or two serpents wound around a staff (left).

Also, the term for a surgeon's knife -- '*scalpel*' -- is derived from the name of this god of healing.

Pergamum was also famous for the manufacture of paper or parchment. They were forced to develop this industry after they could no longer obtain papyrus (the common writing material made from crushed reeds) when Egypt placed an embargo on papyrus shipments to **Pergamum** around the Third Century BC.

Being an administrative centre meant that it was the headquarters for all Roman activity in the province. The pro-consul (who was in charge of all the governors) lived here and administered the collection of taxes and the enforcement of regulations, including the worship of Caesar.

Description

Jesus here describes Himself as "He who has the sharp, double-edged sword" (2:12). This is an echo of the description given in chapter 1, verse 16, where the sharp, double-edged sword is said to extend out of His mouth.

Roman governors had varying degrees of authority and were basically divided into two classes -- those who had the 'right of the sword' and those who did not. To have this right meant that a governor could authorize the execution of someone on the spot, without a trial or court ruling. So Jesus is here comforting His followers in **Pergamum** with this reminder, that while Roman rulers may have power to end physical life He alone has the power over spiritual life. They may have the 'right of the sword', but only Jesus has the "sharp two-edged sword" that can *create* or *destroy* life eternally.

Commendation

Again Jesus says, "I know...", indicating that He is familiar with their situation. Do we sometimes need this reminder? The old spiritual captures this truth:

*Nobody knows the trouble I've seen
Nobody knows but Jesus."*

He describes where they live -- that is, their address, their place of residence, where they can be found -- as the place "where Satan has his throne" (2:13). This implies that Jesus understands the challenges they face, that it is not easy to be a follower of His in this city. Some scholars suggest that the monument to Zeus is the 'throne of Satan', while others think that the prominence given to *Asclepios* and the serpent idol earned the city this title. Another interpretation (and, I think, a better one) may be that the 'throne of Satan' refers to **Pergamum** as a seat of Roman power, with its Caesar worship and persecution of the Christians.

Rebuke

Jesus says to the believers at **Pergamum** that He has a few things against them (2:14). There are two blotches on their record:

1 - some "hold to the teaching of Balaam". Read Numbers chapters 22 through 25 for the background on Balaam. John Walvoord (in *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*) points out that:

- ♦ the **way** of Balaam was selling prophetic gifts for personal gain (2 Peter 2:15)
- ♦ the **error** of Balaam was his assumption that God would curse Israel (Jude 11)
- ♦ the **doctrine** of Balaam relates to his encouraging intermarriage and sexual relations with the heathen... and compromise with idolatrous worship, which is the main point being made in this letter.

Obviously those who are living this way in **Pergamum** are a hindrance to the work and witness of the church there.

2 - some "hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans". We have met up with these heretics already, at Ephesus. The modern equivalent would be the Christian who feels it necessary to 'fit in' with the world. To 'stick out' and be different, they might argue, means you lose opportunities to witness. But by compromising standards and engaging in unacceptable behaviour these people are weakening or destroying whatever witness they might have had!

Exhortation

The word from Jesus here, as in several of the other letters, is: **Repent**. The *Living Bible* renders the first part of 2:16 as "change your mind and attitude" while the *New Century Version* reads "change your hearts and lives." That is what is necessary, according to Jesus -- a change of mind and heart that results in a change of attitude and lifestyle. If not, warns Jesus, He will come soon and "fight against them" (the heretics) with the sword of His mouth. This refers to the power of His Word (see

Hebrews 4:12 and Ephesians 6:17), and is a way of reminding them that nothing is hidden from the judgment of God's truth. His word is powerful enough to give life, to convict of sin, to forgive, and to make trustworthy promises. The call from Jesus is for them to do away with the compromising and to be absolutely loyal to Him.

Do we need this reminder sometimes?

Especially when it seems easier and more comfortable to 'go along' to 'get along'?

Promise

The promise from Jesus (verse 17) is that the victorious (the overcomers) shall receive two things:

(i) Hidden Manna

Jesus Himself (the 'Bread of Life' - John5:35) will be their reward, just as the Israelites were nourished by the manna God supplied on their wilderness journey. This refers to spiritual nourishment, and may be understood symbolically through the Sacrament of Holy Communion, which nurtures our relationship with Christ. The 'manna' (heavenly food) is hidden from those whose spiritual eyes are not open through faith in Jesus.

How can we nurture our relationship with Jesus?

How do we grow stronger in faith, and experience more grace?

(ii) A White Stone with a New Name

There is a great deal of disagreement on the interpretation of this promise. William Barclay (in *Daily Study Bible - Revelation Vol 1*) discusses many different views and concludes that it is most likely a reference to the common custom of carrying an amulet or charm, which

"might be made of a precious metal or a precious stone, but often it was nothing more than a pebble. On the pebble there was a sacred name; to know a god's name was to have a certain power over him, and to be able to summon him to one's aid in time of difficulty and to have mastery over the demons. Such an amulet was thought to be doubly effective if no one other than the owner knew the name that was inscribed upon it."

Jesus is giving the victorious overcomers the assurance that they will have all the benefits of His presence and power if they are faithful, and not sidetracked like the followers of Balaam and the Nicolaitans!

Postscript

The Spirit is speaking to the churches, including the ones we are a part of.

Some serious stuff here.... better have your ears on!

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Letter 4

The Church at Thyatira: You Tolerate Jezebel

Revelation 2:12-17

“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. I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first.

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. I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling. 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. 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.

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, except to hold on to what you have until I come.’

To the one who is victorious and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations—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. I will also give that one the morning star. Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Destination

This letter is sent to the church at *Thyatira*, a small city about 40 miles southeast of Pergamum, whose name means ‘contrition’ or ‘song of labour’. The geographical position of this city made it a very important link in the Roman Imperial Mail Route and the commercial traffic of the time. Located in a valley, *Thyatira* was built on a road that connected Pergamum with Sardis, and went on to Philadelphia and Laodicea, making the circuit back to Smyrna via Ephesus (see map on page 10).

The city was commercially important, being on the main trade route. It was also politically strategic as a first defence for Pergamum, although it was exposed and could not be secured for long. Unlike the other cities there were not a lot of religions represented here, and there was relatively little persecution of the Christians.

The main commercial activity revolved around the manufacture of dyed fabric and garments, and the production of bronze armour. The most popular of the dyed fabrics was a purple cloth, dyed with the root of a special plant (see Acts 16:14, where Lydia, “a seller of purple” was from *Thyatira*). Other writings from the period also mention trade in wool, linen, leather goods, bronze, pottery, baked goods, and slaves. Each of the main commercial interests had a guild (a type of union) that the

workers belonged to. We shall see that these guilds were the biggest obstacle to the Christian church in *Thyatira*.

Description

In this letter Jesus is referred to as “the Son of God”, affirming His deity. He is also described as having eyes like “blazing fire” and feet like “burnished bronze” (2:18). These two images come from Daniel 10:6 and Ezekiel 1:7 respectively, and are an echo of the description given in Revelation 1:14-15. They portray the one who is holy and righteous, with eyes that see through our façade and feet that stand firm in His judgment.

Do we see Jesus this way?

Do we understand that we cannot fool Him, or hide anything from Him?

Commendation

Again Jesus says of His followers, “I know...” This time He knows their deeds, their love (the first church to be so commended), for their faith, for their service, and for their perseverance. Several of the Fruit of the Spirit (see Galatians 5:22-23) are evident in this congregation at *Thyatira*. And there is spiritual growth and maturity, for their works have increased -- that they are now “doing more than [they] did at first” (2:19). This is a church that looks strong on the outside, rich in fellowship, with an impressive track record of service for Christ. However, like the sepulchers that are whitewashed (see Matthew 23:27) the outside may look alive while inside is death and decay.

How do you see your church?

How do you think Jesus sees it?

Rebuke

“Nevertheless,” says Jesus, there is something against them: they tolerate Jezebel, who influences many to sexual immorality and to eat food offered to idols.

Who was this woman ‘Jezebel’? You may recall that there was a woman with that name in the Old Testament -- see 1 Kings chapters 19 through 21 for details. Obviously the woman referred to in this letter is having the same influence that the Old Testament Jezebel had. It could be that there really was a woman named Jezebel in the church at *Thyatira*. Or perhaps it could be that ‘Jezebel’ is a label referring to:

- someone in the assembly (one of the prophets?) teaching false doctrine;
- the wife of the bishop (or overseer), who is causing problems;
- a ‘type’ of person rather than a specific individual;
- a ‘spirit’ of disruption and mischief that is infiltrating the fellowship.

Do you know any ‘Jezebels’ -- people who always seem to be intent on stirring up some confusion... upsetting some situation... trying to lead others astray?

William Barclay explains how these believers at *Thyatira* were caught between a rock and a hard place:

"One of the great problems of the Christian Church was that of meat offered to idols... very little of the meat was burned on the altar. The priests received a share of the meat... and the worshipper received the rest. With it he might hold a feast within the temple precincts or he might take the meat home and hold a feast in his own house. Here was the Christian problem. Could a Christian, in a temple or anywhere else, eat meat which had been consecrated to idols? Paul discusses this very problem in 1 Corinthians 8-10.

This problem was complicated by the fact that even the meat in butcher's shops might well have been offered to idols previously. The priests in the temples could not possibly consume all the meat which fell to them and therefore, sold much of their share to the butcher's shops. Such meat was the best meat... The prohibition of meat offered to idols had far-reaching consequences: it came near to cutting off a Christian from all social fellowship with non-Christians, and it also meant that the Christian could not join any trade guild.... all guilds had a common meal as a central part of their practice which might well be held in a heathen temple and would largely consist of meat offered to idols. His abstention from guild membership was equivalent to commercial suicide.

Here is where Jezebel came in. She urged upon the Christians that there was no need to cut themselves off from society or abstain from guilds... Jezebel is to be counted amongst those to whom the claims of commercial success speak more loudly than the claims of Christ."

- from *The Daily Study Bible Series* Revelation Vol. 1, pages 106-107

This Jezebel seems to have influenced many in this church to take part in the trade guilds' feasts and celebrations, which almost always included the eating of meat that had been offered as a sacrifice to idols, and usually ended in wild orgies (2:20).

Have you ever done something that you felt uncomfortable with because it was 'good for business' or helped you 'fit in' with the crowd? Do you know of anyone who took advantage of a situation or a person in order to benefit personally? Have you ever been tempted to do so? Can we really separate our Christianity from our business, social, political or personal life?

Judgment is passed on 'Jezebel' and on all who follow her... those who commit 'spiritual adultery' (2:22). They will have opportunities to repent, but destruction is certain if they do not.

Exhortation

Not everyone in this congregation at *Thyatira* has fallen under the evil influence of this Jezebel (2:24). To those who are faithful Jesus says He will not burden them further. This is reminiscent of Acts 1:28-29, where the Gentiles are reminded that no extra burden is placed on them, and they are required only to be faithful to what they already know is required. So here the church at *Thyatira* is required only to "hold on" to what they have until Jesus comes. This is the first reference in these letters to Jesus' return (2:25), but it is not the only one.

The phrase "Satan's so-called deep secrets" (2:24) is a reference to the practice of subjecting oneself to every kind of sinful behaviour... plumbing evil to its deepest experiences... so as to 'prove' God's grace in keeping the soul pure. This is why Jesus describes them as "so-called" secrets -- that is not at all what He requires. Paul expresses the exact opposite of this kind of thinking, giving us the positive side, when he urges his readers, under the influence of Gods Spirit, to experience the "deep things of God" (see 1 Corinthians 2:9-14).

Think about how we can experience these deep things of God...

- > What discipline will it take to keep our spiritual life fit and healthy?
- > What must we draw away from in order to be able to draw closer to God?
- > What resource do we have available?
- > Are there people who can help us?

- ★ Who are the most 'godly' or 'spiritually mature' people you know?
- ★ How do think they got that way?
- ★ What can you learn from them?

Promise

There are several promises given by Jesus to the church at **Thyatira**:

- a) Those with the disruptive and wicked spirit of 'Jezebel' will suffer intensely unless they repent (2:22-23).
- b) All the churches shall know that Jesus is the one who "searches hearts and minds" and will repay everyone according to heir deeds (2:23). In the King James Version this verse reads in part, "*all the churches shall know that I am he which searcheth the reins and hearts...*". The word 'reins' literally means 'kidneys'. This gives an interesting angle, when we remember that the function of the kidneys is to purify the blood before it is re-circulated through the body. It is a reminder that our very thoughts, which cannot be hidden from Jesus, must be purified.
- c) The victorious will be given "authority over the nations" (2:26-27). In chapters 18 and 19 of the book of Jeremiah, we read of God likening the nation of Israel to a piece of pottery... they will be shattered because of their disobedience. In a positive spin on this, the obedient and victorious in **Thyatira** will do the shattering. Including a quote from Psalm 2:8-9, this promise -- given under the authority of the Father (2:28) -- can be understood in two ways:
 - (i) The **Messianic Promise**: The faithful in this city that makes bronze armour and clay pottery will be victorious over those who are not faithful;

- (ii) The **Missionary Promise**: The faithful will win many from near and far into the kingdom through their witness and by their influence.
- d) The victorious will also receive the “morning star” (2:28). While this imagery of light may refer metaphorically to **truth** and **wisdom** for the believers, it also clearly means the promise of Christ Himself. The presence of Jesus is promised... the one who described Himself as the “light of the world” (John 8:12) on our earthly journey, becomes for the victorious eternal light. He reflects God’s glory, and is the only light needed in the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:23). It is this same Jesus who is described in Revelation 22:16 as the “bright Morning star” -- He gives Himself.

Postscript

Beginning here (and in the remaining letters) the word of encouragement to “listen up” and “pay attention” truly is a **postscript**, coming at the very end of the letter.

The call is to put our ‘spiritual ears’ on.. to listen to what the Spirit is saying. And again we note that the Spirit’s message is for the churches... which includes us.

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Letter 5

The Church at Sardis: Straighten Up and Fly Right!

Revelation 3:1-6

“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. Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God. 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.

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. 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. Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Destination

Sardis, a city about 50 miles east of Smyrna and 30 miles southeast of Thyatira, was located on the main trade and commercial route. Seven hundred years before this letter was written **Sardis** was a very prosperous city; one of the greatest in the world.

Actually there were two cities: the original was built on a hill 1500 feet up, overlooking the plain of the river Hermus, and the second one grew up in the valley below. The wealth of **Sardis** was legendary, and the city was famous for its jewelry and textile industries, especially dyed wool fabrics. **Sardis** is the place where minted coins, both gold and silver, originated. Pagan worship was prominent, and there were many mystery cults and secret societies.

On two occasions in its history the city fell to enemies because of laziness and arrogance. In 594 BC the Persian King Cyrus defeated the city, and Antiochus the Great did it again in 214 BC -- both times under the same circumstances. In each instance a few enemy soldiers climbed the hill under cover of darkness to find there were no guards posted at the walls. The people of Sardis were so confident that their city was so safe that they did not deem it necessary to watch for enemies. They were tragically wrong.

By the time this letter was written to the church at **Sardis** it was still relatively wealthy, but far from great. Now under Roman rule, it was an 'assize' town (meaning that court cases could be held there) and an administrative centre. In 26 CE it vied for the privilege of being the city to be home for the second temple for Caesar-worship, but it was not selected. The original city on the hilltop was in ruins by this time. Pagan worship was prominent, and there were many mystery cults and secret religious societies. The city also had a famous temple to Artemis that dated from the 4th Century BC. Archaeological digs have revealed that the Christian church was next door to this temple.

The name **Sardis** means "those who came out" or "that which remains" -- today a small village known as *Sart* exists amid the ruins of what once was **Sardis**.

Description

This letter is sent from the one who "holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars" (3:1). As in the previous letters, we find that these descriptions of Jesus have already been declared in chapter 1 -- see verses 4, 16 and 20.

The number 7 is significant, representing the perfection, wholeness or completeness of God. Here it is meant to portray the seven-fold gifts of the Spirit (as in the Messianic prophecy of Isaiah 11) or the seven-fold graces of the Spirit (as listed in Romans 12:6-8), rather than that there are literally seven Spirits. It is the one Spirit who is at work, and giving gifts, toward the goal of completing God's work. It signifies the completeness of His gifts and work, and the universality of His presence -- the Spirit of God is everywhere, doing whatever He needs to do. The seven stars, we have already

been told, are “the angels of the seven churches” (1:20). We have previously discussed who the angels are (see page 7).

The description of the risen Saviour reminds the church at **Sardis** that:

- I. God’s Spirit is with them, working His will and giving them His gifts, making them a part of Jesus’ Body, the Church; and
- II. The supreme authority of the Church is Jesus, and all things and everyone (including the Spirit) are under His control.

Commendation

Jesus says, yet again, “I know your deeds” (3:1), but He has found their deeds “unfinished in the sight of God” (3:2). So even though they are commended for doing good, they have not done what they ought to have done.

There are a few in **Sardis** who have been faithful, who “have not soiled their clothes” (3:4), and these are recognized. It is sad that there are only a few, but encouraging and comforting that the Lord does remember them and commend them.

Rebuke

There are several things wrong in the fellowship at **Sardis**, and Jesus rebukes them strongly for their hypocrisy. First of all, He claims that although they have a reputation for being alive they are, in fact, dead (3:1). He is referring, of course, to their spiritual life, and this hypocrisy is what He condemned the Pharisees for (e.g. Matthew 23:27-28). This idea of being dead spiritually while appearing to have life occurs several times in scripture -- a few examples: Luke 15:24; Ephesians 2:1; Colossians 2:13; 1 Timothy 5:6, and James 2:26. The results of this will be death of our

- **will** -- in time we will develop bad habits because we lose the will to resist temptation;
- **feelings** -- the feelings of fear or guilt we once had will gradually disappear;
- **loveliness** -- things of beauty will become ugly when we allow sin to rule us.

William Barclay points out that the lifelessness of the church at Sardis had a strange effect...

- i) *The Church at Sardis was untroubled by any heresy. Heresy is always the product of the searching mind; it is, in fact, the sign that a Church is alive. There is nothing worse than a state in which a person is orthodox because they are too lazy to think for themselves. They are actually better with a heresy which they hold intensely than with an orthodoxy about which in their heart of hearts they do not care.*
- ii) *The Church at Sardis was untroubled by any attack from the outside, neither by heathen or by the Jews. The truth was that it was so lifeless that it was not worth attacking. The Pastoral Epistles describe those who had drifted away from the true faith by saying that they had a form of godliness but denied its power (2 Timothy 3:5)...*

A true vital Church will always be under attack. "Woe to you," said Jesus, "when all men speak well of you!" (Luke 6:26). A Church with a positive message is bound to be one to which there will be opposition."

- from *The Daily Study Bible Series* Revelation Vol. 1, pages 117-118

Exhortation

The exhortation comes in a powerful 'wake-up call' in verses 2 and 3: "Wake up! Strengthen what remains", and repent." Each point of this call is significant:

◆ ***Wake up!***

This is a call to have watchful attitude, being aware and ready to respond. St. Paul also made this call, e.g. in Romans 13:11 and 1 Corinthians 16:13. In addition to strengthening our faith, Christians must be watchful for temptation, watchful for false teaching, and watchful for the second coming of our Lord.

Recorded in 1975, this song is just as relevant today -- a call to be responsible citizens...

'Wake Up Everybody'

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-TDfPg3Kyc>

Harold Melvin & the Blue Notes
lead vocal: Teddy Pendergrass

◆ ***Strengthen what remains***

The challenge for the church in **Sardis**, and for every church fellowship everywhere, is to reinforce the strengths and gifts they have. By remembering our past, and that God is the giver of all good gifts (James 1:17), we can all be encouraged to build a stronger future.

◆ ***Hold fast and Repent***

These two cardinal points of the Christian faith are echoed here again:

to '**hold fast**' is to be faithful, to be obedient straight through, as per Jesus' example -- see Philippians 2:5-11. To '**repent**' is to make the changes necessary in order to be able to obey, as per Jesus instruction in Luke 5:32.

We might describe these as 'two sides of the same coin' -- the difference being reflected in the tense in which the words are written: 'repent' describes a definitive action, while 'hold fast' indicates a continuous repetition of the action.

Promise

There are a "few people" in **Sardis** who are worthy -- they have not "soiled their clothes" -- of whom Jesus says, "They will walk with me, dressed in white" (3:4). This is a ray of light in an otherwise gloomy situation.

No worshipper (even in pagan religions) was allowed to worship with soiled garments, and this may be a reference to the faithfulness of the few at **Sardis**. James spoke with respect of those whom God the Father accepts as keeping themselves from "being polluted by the world" (James 1:27). It maybe that being dressed in white refers to baptism, and the clean garments that were usually put on the newly-

baptized. Certainly the concept of purification is a part of this idea, that to be faithful to Christ purifies us in the things that matter to God, and therefore we can draw closer to Him.

This is possible for them, and for us, because they were -- and we can be -- 'walking' with God, experiencing daily communion one step at a time. Fellowship with God strengthens us to be better servants of His. We know that Enoch and Noah 'walked with God' (see Genesis 5:24; 6:9 and Hebrews 11:5-7). We are encouraged to 'walk in the Spirit' (Galatians 5:16) so that we can be obedient and faithful. The old spiritual captures this promise in these words:

I've got shoes, you've got a shoes, all of God's children got shoes

When I get to Heaven goin' to put on my shoes, goin' to walk all over God's Heaven

Another promise is that Jesus will "not blot out the name" of the faithful from "the book of life" (3:5). Moses volunteered to have his name blotted out if it could save his people (see Exodus 32:32-33), and the Psalmist speaks of this in Psalm 69:28. There are six references to the 'Book of Life' in Revelation, and clearly they indicate those who are privileged to belong to God's family. The possibility of being 'blotted out' contradicts the doctrine of Eternal Security that some propose, that once you are saved you cannot be lost. But this makes it clear that it is possible for one's name to be blotted out from the book of life.

The final promise to the faithful and victorious is that Jesus will confess them to His Father, which echoes His earlier statements in Matthew 10:32-33 and in Luke 12:18-19. He will be faithful to those who are faithful to Him.

Postscript

The same postscript is given at the end of this letters as is given on all the letters: put your spiritual ears on... listen to what the Spirit is saying!

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Letter 6

The Church at Philadelphia: An Open Door In Front Of You

Revelation 3:7-13

"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. 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. 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. 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. I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. 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. Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Destination

This letter is addressed to the church at **Philadelphia**, which is a Greek word meaning “brotherly love”. The city was founded by colonists from Pergamum during reign of Attalus the Second (159 to 139 BC). “Such was the love of Attalus for his brother Eumenes that he was called *philadelphos*, and it was after him that **Philadelphia** was named.” (Barclay)

Philadelphia was situated at point where the borders of three provinces (Mysia, Lydia, and Phrygia) met, and it was built to serve as the gateway for Greek language and culture in its spread to the east. Barclay sees a connection between this and the fact that Christ set before them “an open door that no one can shut” (3:8). He observes:

Three centuries before, Philadelphia had been given an open door to spread Greek ideas in the lands beyond; and now there has come to it another great missionary opportunity, to carry to people who never knew it the message of the love of Jesus Christ. (Daily Study Bible - Revelation Vol. 1)

Built on the edge of a large plain which was made fertile by the volcanic activity of earlier times, **Philadelphia** was an agricultural city, the centre of a huge grape-growing area and a famous producer of wines. It was also in an earthquake zone and suffered a great deal of damage at several different periods. In 17 CE a severe earthquake destroyed 11 cities (including Sardis) and caused tremendous damage to **Philadelphia**. The after-shocks lasted for several years, and many people lived in huts outside the city for fear of falling debris from damaged buildings.

The city went through some name changes, but they were not permanent. After the earthquake of 17 CE the emperor Tiberius gave generous donations for the rebuilding of the city, and in gratitude they changed the name to *Neocaesarea*, meaning the ‘New City of Caesar’. During the reign of the emperor Vespasian the city changed its name again, this time to *Flavia*, for Flavius was the emperor’s family name. It was not long, however, before the original name of **Philadelphia** was restored. This city is one of the seven that still exists today, as Alaşehir, in modern-day Turkey.

Description

In all of the previous letters we have seen a close connection between the descriptions of Jesus given in each letter and that given earlier in chapter 1 of Revelation. In this letter, however, there is very little connection. The descriptions do have their origin in scripture though, as we shall see.

The one who gives these words is “holy and true” and He holds the “key of David” (3:7). Let us look a little more closely at these characteristics of Christ:

- The ***One who is holy***

Throughout the Old Testament God is recognized as the ‘Holy One’ (e.g. Isaiah 6:3; 40:25; 43:15). That title is also applied to Jesus (see John 1:1, 14 and 1 Peter 1:15), where He is described as the one who is ***holy*** (Greek ***hagios***), which means “different... separate from”. This is a recognition that Christ is different from humanity, that He shares the nature of God.

- The ***One who is true***

The meaning of the Greek word is that which is real, as opposed to something artificial/counterfeit, or a facsimile of the real thing. The point being made is that not only does Jesus *speaks* the truth, He is the truth (see John 14:6).

- He has the “***key of David***”

There is a description of Jesus in Revelation 1:18 as having the “keys of death and Hades.” While that does articulate His authority and power, it is not a direct parallel to the description given here in 3:7, which is a quote from Isaiah 22:22:

I will give him complete authority under the king, the descendant of David. He will have the keys of office; what he opens, no one will shut, and what he shuts, no one will open.

The person referred to by Isaiah is Eliakim, a faithful steward of king Hezekiah, who was given authority to open and shut the doors of the palace. Likewise, Jesus has the authority to open or shut the doors of heaven, the doors of opportunity, and the doors of blessing. No one can change what He does!

Commendation

Once again Jesus informs the believers that “knows” their deeds (3:8)... nothing escapes Him. They are commended for their loyalty and faithfulness. For even though they have just a *little strength* they have kept His word, and not denied His name. Their love has expressed itself in obedience, and the Lord has taken note, He has “opened a door” of opportunity in front of them, because they have done what Ray Boltz promises in song to do:

*I pledge allegiance to the Lamb, with all my strength, with all I am,
I will seek to honor His commands -- I pledge allegiance to the Lamb.*

You can hear this (with the lyrics on the screen) at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mECQOt2z7mw>

Rebuke

A distinction ***Philadelphia*** shares with the church at Smyrna is that there is no word of rebuke for the saints. Some have suggested that the reference to their "little strength" is a rebuke, but I take that to be a positive... even a little strength can result in victory when we are faithful. In the words of the old hymn:

*Little is much when God is in it... labor not for wealth or fame;
There's a crown, and you can win it, If you'll go in Jesus' name.*

Exhortation

The believers here are exhorted to "hold fast" to what they have -- continue to be faithful -- so that no one will take their crown/reward. The concept of faithful obedience that lies behind this command has been required of every one of the churches -- so far we have seen it:

- at ***Ephesus*** they must "do the things they did" at first (2:5)
- at ***Smyrna*** they must be "faithful, even to the point of death" (2:10)
- at ***Pergamum*** they must "remain true to my name" (2:13)
- at ***Thyatira*** they must "hold on to what they have" (2:25)
- at ***Sardis*** they must "remember... hold fast and repent" (3:3)

The image of the 'crown' has been mentioned once before, and that was to the church at Smyrna (2:10). See pages 19 and 20 for more on what the crown represents. Here at Philadelphia the crown has already been won by faithfulness, but Jesus reminds them that continued faithfulness is required in order to keep it. No one can take it from them... but God will if they are not faithful.

Promise

More promises are given to the church at ***Philadelphia*** than to any of the other churches. Let's take a closer look at each of them:

1. *Open Door* (3:8)

The door is open for the Gospel of Christ to be taken to new frontiers from ***Philadelphia***. Along the roads that the Imperial Postal Service, the Roman armies, and the merchant caravans traversed, Christian missionaries would go to take the Good News to other places. Note that they are promised the opportunity to witness, not necessarily results from the witnessing -- some plant, some water, but it is God who gives the increase (see Paul's testimony in 1 Corinthians 3:6).

The promise of the presence of Christ is also implied, for He once described Himself as 'the door' (see John 10:7, 9). This can also be understood as a reminder of the power of prayer. Since the veil has been torn open to reveal God as known in Christ (see Matthew 27:51 and Hebrews 9:24) He becomes the 'door'. He urges us to knock in prayer and promises that it will be opened (see Matthew 7:7-8 and Revelation 3:20).

2. *Vindication* (3:9)

In another parallel with the church at Smyrna, the Christians at *Philadelphia* are also persecuted by the “synagogue of Satan”... that is, those who claim to be Jews but are not obedient to God (previously discussed -- see page 18). The Christian Church has replaced the Jews as the true ‘Israel of God’ (see Galatians 6:16) and the promises made to Israel will be fulfilled in the Church. In Philippians 2:9-11 we are told that “every knee shall bow” to Christ, and “every tongue will confess” that He is Lord. The promise here is that the Jews who are persecuting them will eventually bow at the Christians’ feet. In the end those who are faithful to Christ will be vindicated, even though they may suffer persecution for a time.

3. *Deliverance* (3:10)

Their loyalty will be rewarded by deliverance from the “hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world” (3:10). They have faithfully kept the Master’s command to “endure patiently”, which is a way of saying that they have been faithful, as Jesus Himself was faithful. They shall, therefore, be saved from the divine judgment that everyone else shall have to endure. This privilege may also apply to others who are faithful, and it is understood by many to be a reference to the rapture of the church. This would support those who believe that the rapture will happen *before* the time of trouble referred to as the Great Tribulation, which is described later in Revelation, in chapters 6-19.

4. *Christ’s return* (3:11)

“I am coming soon,” promises Jesus. The word ‘soon’ (in some translations it is rendered ‘quickly’) should be understood as ‘suddenly’ or ‘unexpectedly’ rather than shortly or without delay. Jesus said this of Himself before He ascended to heaven (see Luke 12:39-40) and in the letter to Sardis (3:3), so this promise is just a reminder of what they already know, given now to comfort and encourage them.

5. *Pillars with Names* (3:12)

It is in this verse that we see the familiar phrase “the one who is victorious” which usually introduces the promise(s) to the churches. However, in this letter, several promises have been given before this point. Now let us consider what Jesus meant by the promise here to make the victorious “a pillar in the temple of God” and to “write on them” several names.

Pillars

The imagery used here portrays the faithful stalwarts of the Church, such as James, Peter and John (see Galatians 2:9) as “pillars” of God’s temple, which is heaven. Jesus is promising the victorious at *Philadelphia* that they will, with the apostles, be given a prominent place in heaven. The faithful will “never leave” it. This is best understood as a reference to their security in Christ. They will not need to wonder and worry about their safety, as they did when the earthquakes and tremors damaged buildings and dislodged debris... they will be like pillars, standing firm and solid. Or, as the hymn-writer put it: “Safe and secure from all alarms.”

Names

The people of *Philadelphia* knew about names and the changing of names. Here Jesus promises to write on them three names:

(i) the "name of my God"

God told Moses that His name would be put on the Children of Israel (see Numbers 6:22-27) as a part of the blessing they would receive. It may be in echoing this idea that Jesus promises the faithful at *Philadelphia* that they will also be blessed, with God's name written on them. Or it may be a reference to the practice of the time that when a priest died a new pillar was erected in the temple in which he had served, with his name and the name of his father inscribed upon it. In either case, the promise is clearly one of blessing by being identified closely with (having the same name as) God.

(ii) the "name of the city of my God" - the new Jerusalem

This represents their citizenship with God, that they shall be marked as those who belong to the new Jerusalem, which is described later in Revelation, chapters 21 and 22. This would be especially meaningful to the Christians at *Philadelphia*, who had seen enough of the uncertainties of life in earthly cities -- the promise of belonging to the eternal city would be a source of great comfort.

(iii) Jesus' "new name" that only He knows

The third of these 'name-promises' is the most personal -- Jesus will write His own new name on each of the faithful believers. We know that many titles have been given to Jesus throughout scripture, and He may be known by different names (e.g. Isaiah 6:9). However, He has a new name written on Him "but no one except Himself knows what it is" (see Revelation 19:12). Here He promises that His new name will also be written on the faithful, clearly identifying them as belonging to Him. Surely there can be no greater blessing than to know Jesus claims us for His own!

Postscript

Again the reminder... better be listening!

From the church at *Philadelphia* we are encouraged that even a little strength can accomplish a great deal when we are faithful and obedient to our Lord. And we can be comforted or warned (as the case may be) by the assurance that Jesus will return for His Church.

Pay attention!

*"It does not take
great people to do
great things,
it only takes
consecrated people."*

- Phillips Brooks

Letter 7

The Church at Laodicea: Get in Gear!

Revelation 3:14-22

“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. I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth. 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. 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.

Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent. 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.

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. Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

Destination

There were at least 6 cities called **Laodicea** in the ancient world, and this one was identified as “Laodicea on the Lycus” (the river Lycus) to distinguish it from the others. It was founded around 250 BC by Antiochus of Syria, and was named after his wife, Laodicë.

The road from Ephesus to Syria was a main east-west thoroughfare, and it went straight through **Laodicea**, which is what gave the city its significance. One of the main north-south roads also passed through the city, so it evolved into a major commercial centre during the rise of the Roman Empire.

Barclay comments that **Laodicea** “has the grim distinction of being the only Church of which the Risen Christ has nothing good to say.” He goes on to point out some characteristics of the city that leave their mark in the letter:

- I. It was a great **banking and financial centre**. One of the wealthiest cities in the entire Roman Empire, the citizens rebuilt the city at their own expense -- refusing help from the provincial government -- after a devastating earthquake in 61 CE.
- II. It was a great centre of **textile and clothing manufacture**, specializing in mass-production of cheap outer garments, as well as in more upscale specialty tunics. A rare breed of sheep grazed around this city, sheep which produced a violet-black, glossy wool that was in high demand.

- III. It was a major *medical centre*, with a large medical school located just to the west of the city. They were particularly famous for the production of two medications: an eye salve, and an ear ointment.
- IV. There was a *very large Jewish population* in *Laodicea*. Based on the amount of money seized by the Roman authorities that Jews were sending to Jerusalem to pay Temple tax, it was calculated that there were at least 7,500 male Jews (only males paid the tax) living in the district at this time.

Description

In this letter Jesus is described as the:

- ***'Amen'***

This may go back to either of two origins:

- a) in Isaiah 65:16 God is referred to as the 'truth' or the 'amen', guaranteeing that His word can be trusted. So Jesus can be trusted to speak the truth.
- b) In the Gospels Jesus sometimes begins his teachings "verily" (or 'truly'), and in the Gospel of John it's often doubled -- e.g. John 1:51 "Verily, verily, I say unto you...". The Greek word for 'verily' is *amen* -- so referring to Jesus as the 'Amen' assures hearers that His word is reliable.

- ***'Faithful and True Witness'***

He is the witness on whom we can rely to tell the truth, and to tell it in such a way that He is faithful to God who reveals the truth.

- ***'Beginning of the Creation of God'***

This phrase could be taken to mean that Jesus was the first to be created, but the Greek indicates the truer meaning is that Jesus is the one in whom all creation has its origin, as expressed in John 1:3 and Colossians 1:15-17.

Commendation

This is the only of the seven churches from Jesus in which there is no commendation. There is "no redeeming feature" (Barclay).

Rebuke

The church at *Laodicea* is the one that is most severely condemned and rebuked. Their vacillation between 'hot' and 'cold' gives them a nauseating quality, which will make the Jesus vomit them out of His mouth. Barclay observes: "Hard as it may sound, the meaning of the terrible threat of the risen Christ is that it is better not to even start on the Christian way than to start and then to drift into a conventional and meaningless Christianity."

Jesus condemns their indifference. This attitude, that produces apathy, is hard to combat. It is the main thing that will erode the Christian witness because it robs us of passion, joy, and commitment. As Barclay points out, "The one impossible attitude to

Christianity is neutrality." This is the rebuke of Jesus to the church at *Laodicea* -- neutral is not an option... either you are going forward or you are sliding back.

When I was in seminary in Jamaica one election season there was a joke making the rounds... One person asked another, "Who you voting for? JLP or PNP?" They answered. "Me dun-no, maybe me ah stay neutral." The first person responds, "You can't stay neutral -- you must get in gear!" Same message for the church at *Laodicea*.

Exhortation

The tragedy of the church at *Laodicea* was that she was convinced of her own wealth and blind to her own poverty. Because they say, "I am rich; I have acquired wealth, and do not need a thing," Jesus counsels them to:

Buy from Him:

- **Gold**, refined in the fire... they need to understand what constitutes true wealth. They prided themselves on their wealth and the independence it gave them. They need to understand, says Jesus, that we are never rich enough to not need God.
- **Garments**, white (pure)... they need to understand that only God can supply the spiritual garments needed to hide our 'nakedness' -- see Colossians 3:12-14.

Apply to their eyes ointment, that they may see... to open their spiritual eyes to be able to perceive who God is and how He works in and through them. The eye-salve that they prided themselves on producing, and that they exported to many other places, could not cure their spiritual blindness.

Repent (verse 19)... this echoes the rebuke given to many of the churches who received these letters. To repent is to turn around or to change direction so that we move in the right way, the way that is in sync with God's will.

Promise

The promises from Jesus are a combination of judgment, discipline and compassion:

1. Jesus chastens those He loves

The first of the promises Jesus gives is one that we do not like to hear... "I rebuke and chasten those whom I love" (verse 19). This teaching runs through Scripture, and we hear it expressed by God in various forms throughout the Bible -- some examples can be found in Proverbs 3:12, 13:24, 23:13-14, 27:6; in Psalm 94:12; in Job 5:17; in 1 Corinthians 11:32; and in Hebrews 12:5-8.

2. Jesus Knocks at our Heart's Door

Some commentators suggest that the inspiration for this picture of Jesus knocking at the heart's door may come from the Song of Solomon where (in 5:2-6) the lover declares: "Hark! My beloved is knocking. Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, perfect one."

Here we have an image of Christ pleading, in love, for hearts to open to fellowship with Him, to be nourished by Him, and to faithfully follow Him. The word used for 'eat' (sometimes rendered 'sup' or 'dine') is from the Greek word for the evening meal... the one that was the biggest of the day, unhurried, including fellowship around the table. Hence this metaphor may also point to heaven, to the eternal relationship with Christ.

3. *Jesus grants the Victorious to sit on the Throne*

The **throne** represented the authority of the ruler, and Jesus promises that His faithful followers will share His victory and experience His power. We need to remember that in ancient times in Eastern cultures the throne was more like a couch or settee than a single seat -- there was room for more than one.

Postscript

Again the reminder to whoever can hear... pay attention!

It is a way of emphasizing the individual ('whoever' has ears... each of you) , while at the same time including everyone (let 'them' hear... all of you).

This is important. Do not ignore, or neglect, what Jesus is saying to His Church, whenever and wherever we are.

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Here is the YouTube link to the video I used as a summary of the Letters, produced by 'Vision' and narrated by David Hughes.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=useuNRoL_oo

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Conclusion

When we turn the page in the book of Revelation, and begin chapter 4, we see John shifting gears, as he says:

At this point I had another vision and saw an open door in heaven.

And the voice that sounded like a trumpet, which I had heard speaking to me before, said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must happen after this."

What must happen "after this" would have been the future for those who received the letters. As it is for us. John writes largely in coded messages about what is to come. We cannot decode a lot of Revelation, but we can clearly learn from the Seven Letters.

In chapter 5 John records the 'new song' that was being sung for the Lamb, and then declares:

Again I looked, and I heard angels, thousands and millions of them! They stood around the throne, the four living creatures, and the elders, and sang in a loud voice:

*"The Lamb who was killed is worthy
to receive power, wealth, wisdom, and strength,
honor, glory, and praise!"*

And I heard every creature in heaven, on earth, in the world below, and in the sea—all living beings in the universe—and they were singing:

*"To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb,
be praise and honor, glory and might,
forever and ever!"*

Whoever has ears to hear, let us listen to this hymn of praise. And let us

Rise up, O saints of God!
Have done with lesser things;
Give heart and soul and mind and strength
To serve the King of kings!

(William Pierson Merrill)