

Walking Through Revelation

Understanding the Book of Revelation and the Purpose of Prophecy

The word *revelation* means to reveal or disclose. In a special sense, the book of Revelation is meant to reveal vital issues to the New Testament Church—the end-time Church in particular—about end-time events. God does not want us to be ignorant about the future:

Surely the Lord GOD does nothing, Unless He reveals His secret to His servants the prophets (Amos 3:7 NKJV).

God has always wanted people to be informed, aware, and warned about future difficulties. Throughout the history of Israel, He sent prophets to warn His people about future impending doom. It has always been God's purpose to steer people away from calamity.

Jonah was sent to Nineveh to warn and rebuke the people that if they did not turn away from their evil doings, their city would be destroyed. The people of Nineveh heeded the warning and their city was spared, along with some 60,000 souls and much cattle (Jonah 3).

When the 10 tribes of Israel were heading down the path of debasement through idol worship and disgusting practices, God sent prophet after prophet to warn them to turn back. God also provided a wonderful preview of Earth's history through Nebuchadnezzar's dream and gave Israel hope that they would be returned from captivity to their homeland.

Biblical Prophecy: Warning and Encouragement

God uses prophecy for two purposes: to warn and to encourage. For example, prophecy warns us of the Enemy's plans and encourages us with hope and the promise of victory.

The book of Revelation is full of such warnings and encouragements. It discusses the forces working against Christ and the actions they will take, so that we can recognize them when they happen, and steer clear of any participation with the Antichrist forces.

We also read in the book of Revelation about the promise of final restoration—a new heaven and a new Earth. These come with the final destruction of sin and Satan, the originator of sin. Because Revelation pertains specifically to the end of time, and because we live in the closing time of Earth's history, this book, in particular, deserves our attention if we want to recognize the signs and know the future.

When we understand what is to take place, our fear of the end times won't control us. And that's what God wants. When calamities occur, many are afraid and wonder what is happening. But those that study God's Word don't need to be afraid. In His kindness, God gives us the sure word of prophecy for our warning and encouragement.

The Book of Revelation is a Revelation of Christ

Jesus Christ is the central theme of everything we read in Revelation. He is the heart of the book. It is crucial that as we study some of the darker prophecies about the Antichrist and the final controversy, we remember that Christ is the ultimate Victor over all evil.

The Chiastic Structure of Revelation

The book of Revelation is written as a chiasm. A chiasm is a double list of related items in which the order of the second list is opposite to the order of the first list.

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The chiastic structure divides Revelation into two major groups. The first half deals primarily with the experience of God's people during the Christian era. This is called the historical half. The second half deals almost exclusively with last day events and is called the eschatological half. The word "eschatological" comes from the Greek word *eschaton*, meaning "end."

The historical half covers all of human history. Therefore, it has not been completely fulfilled yet because not all of Christian history has happened yet. For example, the seventh seal, seventh trumpet, and final scene in the great controversy division are still waiting for their fulfillment.

The eschatological half is still to be fulfilled in the future. We can see the inspiration of God in this beautiful demonstration of literary art as well as the love of God who does everything He can to warn us and call us out of the false systems of this world into His marvelous truth.

Is Revelation a Sealed Book?

Many people believe that the book of Revelation is a “sealed” book—one not intended for us to understand. And it is true that the book of Revelation can be difficult to understand, but the fact that it is a revelation, and carries a special blessing for those who study it, means that God intended it to be understood.

In verse 3 the blessing is for those who not only hear, but also take to heart what is written, and one can only take to heart that which is understood.

To understand the book of Revelation we need an intimate knowledge of God and His Word, as well as the promised guidance by the Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit was promised to those who obey God (Acts 5:32). He will lead God's people into all truth (John 16:13).

The great truths of the book of Revelation are hidden to the casual reader, as they are couched in types and symbols drawn largely from the apocalyptic writings of the Old Testament. The book is written in a chiasmic structure that seems to throw events out of sequence, but the structure actually builds in such a way as to highlight the central issues of the great controversy between Christ and Satan.

The book of Revelation was written to show God's people "things which must shortly come to pass" (Revelation 1:1). This statement is true for all generations of God's people—from the time it was written to the very end of time. Each generation can draw solace from its pages because all time periods are covered by these prophetic writings.

It is important to note that the book Daniel is another prophetic book that deals with end-time issues. Revelation and Daniel should really be studied hand in hand, so as we progress through a chapter-by-chapter study of Revelation, we will often be referring to the book of Daniel to shed light on what we are reading.

Revelation 1: Jesus is the Heart of Revelation

Since the book of Revelation was never sealed (as the book of Daniel was), it has been a helpful guide for all people since John wrote it almost 2000 years ago. Part of understanding the book is realizing that Jesus is the heart of the revelation, the one from whom the revelation stems. The book is even called "The Revelation of Jesus Christ" (Revelation 1:1).

Establishing the Authority of the Book

The number seven is very prominent in the book. There are seven churches, seven letters, seven stars, seven candlesticks, seven lamps, seven seals, seven trumpets, seven horns, seven thunders, seven heads, seven crowns, seven angels, seven vials, and seven kings.

Amidst these symbols stands Jesus Christ the great High Priest, the Supreme Judge,

the King of kings. The sanctuary symbols are also prominent throughout the book, revealing Christ as Intercessor, Judge, and King.

Jesus stands in the midst of the seven lampstands. He is the light of the world, and this light is to be spread to the entire world by His Church. The fact that He walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands (Revelation 2:1) is a promise of His presence in the Church throughout the ages.

Jesus is not only revealed as our great High Priest, but as God Himself in Revelation 1. John uses an *epanados* (a repetition of sentences in inverse order) to identify Jesus Christ as the great I AM. John quotes the Old Testament prophets in this sequence to bring to light a salient feature—the divinity of Christ—and in this way to give the highest stamp of authority to that which is to be revealed. The *epanados* is as follows:

Revelation 1:5 **Witness** (Isaiah 55:4)

Revelation 1:7 **Coming with the Clouds** (Daniel 7:13)

Revelation 1:7 **Pierced** (Zechariah 12:10)

Revelation 1:8 **I AM, Alpha and Omega** (Isaiah 41:4; 44:6; 48:12)

Revelation 1:11 **I AM, Alpha and Omega** (Isaiah 41:4; 44:6; 48:12)

Revelation 1:12 **Golden Lampstands** (Zechariah 4:2)

Revelation 1:13-15 **Heavenly High Priest** (Daniel 10:5-6)

Revelation 1:16 **Mouth like a Sword** (Isaiah 49:2)

The first and the last quotes are from Isaiah, the second and second last from Daniel, the third and third last from Zechariah, and the double quote in the middle is from Isaiah. This feature is repeated to highlight it. Christ is the great I AM.

Sadly, some modern translations leave out the second "I AM" quote in Revelation 1:11, thus nullifying the *epanados*.

Christ, the great I AM, is thus the central theme of the book of Revelation. The Church through all the ages is the besieged bride, through whom Christ disseminates His truth to call people out of the world.

The book depicts Satan, the great foe, as the one bent on destroying Christ's work. It describes the unfolding battle, the final destruction of sin, and the establishment of the kingdom of righteousness. The messages are not given to instill fear, but to encourage.

Fear not; I am the first and the last: I am he that liveth, and was dead; and behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and death (Revelation 1:17-18).

Revelation 2-3: Letters to Seven Churches

Revelation 1 discusses how Christ is the Almighty God and the heart of the book of Revelation. Revelation 2 introduces us to seven letters. These letters were written to seven Christian churches that sprang up throughout Asia Minor, which is present-day Turkey.

Although these messages applied to the experiences of the specific churches they were written to, they are also prophetic of the experiences of the Church through the centuries. Each of the letters also contains admonishments appropriate to God's people in every age. We will concentrate largely on the prophetic aspects of the letters to the churches.

John is told, "Write the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter" (Revelation 1:19). This text reveals that John had seen the events described in visions, "which thou hast seen." It reveals that the visions had application for his time, "the things which are." And it reveals that the vision had application for the future, "things which shall be hereafter." This principle is applicable to the letters written to the seven churches. The letters have a *then-time* and an *end-time* application.

The seven churches to which the letters were addressed were Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. These cities stood along one of the ancient postal Roman roads of that day, and, beginning at Ephesus, would have been visited in the order in which they are named. The distance between each is about 50 kilometres; a full day's journey on foot.

The names of the cities are significant in that they convey a spiritual message relevant to the Church as a whole. It is incredible that their names so accurately reflect the history of the Church. It is one of the great evidences for the inspiration of the Word and the omnipotence of God. The letters contain a number of common features that applied to the Church in John's day, but also reflect the Church in prophetic time.

Names in ancient times conveyed a message. One of the names given to the Messiah was *Immanuel*, conveying the message that God would live among us. In the same way, the names of the seven cities convey a message about the state and nature of the Church from John's time to the end of time.

Read about the letters to each of these churches:

1. Ephesus (which means "desirable")
2. Smyrna (which means "sweet smelling," like myrrh)

3. Pergamos (which means “elevation” or “exalted”)
4. Thyatira (which means “sacrifice of contrition” or “sweet savor of labor”)
5. Sardis (which means “renewal”)
6. Philadelphia (which means “brotherly love”)
7. Laodicea (which means “judgment” or “judging the people”)

A Letter to Ephesus

Background

Ephesus was a prominent city—the gateway to Asia Minor. The city was the center for the worship of Diana (Mother of the gods) and in 480 BC the great temple of Diana was erected here as a symbol to the world. Her temple was four times the size of the Parthenon in Athens and was counted among the seven wonders of the ancient world. The temple was destroyed in 263 AD and only the foundation stones remain.

Historical Application

Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus write; These things saith he that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand, who walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks (Revelation 2:1).

Each letter is introduced with a part of the description of Christ in Revelation 1. Here, Jesus walks among the candlesticks demonstrating His abiding presence.

The name Ephesus means "desirable." There was much that was commendable about the Christian Church here in Ephesus. It had patience and good works, and had tested the false teachers and had remained faithful to the truth. The Ephesian Christians hated the "deeds of the Nicolations," a group who sought accommodation with the pagan world and discounted obedience to God's law.

However, by John's day, before the end of the century, the first stages of disunity were creeping into the Church, provoking the admonishment, "Nevertheless, I have somewhat against thee, because thou has left thy first love" (Revelation 2:4).

The apostle Paul wrote a letter to the church of Ephesus as well. We know this letter as the book of Ephesians and we learn much about this church from his epistle. Paul beseeches the Ephesian Christians to live worthy of their calling to serve God (Ephesians 4:1-2). He explains to them afresh what it means to have put on Christ (Ephesians 4:17-24). His warning to "grieve not the holy Spirit" (Ephesians 4:30) is an indication of the intensity of the battle for the soul.

Paul calls the Ephesians back to unity (Ephesians 4:3-6), and admonishes them not to sin but to walk in love and the light of the Gospel (Ephesians 4:26). These same sentiments are expressed in Revelation's letter to Ephesus:

Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works;

or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent (Revelation 2:5).

Each of the letters to the seven churches ends with an encouragement to overcome and each church is told of a special blessing they will experience in heaven. The church members of Ephesus are given one of the joys that await all of God's redeemed when they reach heaven:

To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God (Revelation 2:7).

Prophetic Application

The Ephesian church represents the first century after Christ. The Church had grown into a force to be reckoned with, and Christianity was starting to challenge the religions and ideological institutions of the day.

The apostle Paul remained in Ephesus for more than two years on his third major journey, and his preaching led to a major conflict between the Gospel and the worship of Diana. This preaching turned many away from idol worship, upsetting silversmiths who specialized in the manufacture of idols (Acts 19:26).

Satan can't stand when souls are taken from his sphere of influence. The rapid spread of Christianity in the first century AD served to escalate the conflict between Christianity and paganism and the inevitable consequence was persecution.

The great pagan religions had been set up by Satan to counterfeit the plan of salvation and to deny access to the world's Redeemer. It has always been Satan's strategy to either force or deceive people to accept the counterfeit rather than the true.

In Ephesus, Christianity struck a blow to the worship of Diana, the Mother of the gods. It is noteworthy that the modern-day equivalent, the worship of Mary as the mother of God, finds its root in Ephesus. In 451 AD, at the Council of Ephesus, the Roman Catholic Church bequeathed the title "Mother of God" to Mary, thus reviving the ancient cult in a modern garb.

A Letter to Smyrna

History

Smyrna was situated 60 kilometers north of Ephesus at the present-day port of Izmir, which today is Turkey's second largest city with one of the most important harbors in the region.

Smyrna housed the shrine to the goddess Nemesis and was one of the last cities to fall to Islam.

Acts 19:10 suggests that the church in Smyrna may have been established by Paul on his third missionary journey.ⁱ

Historical Application

The letter to Smyrna contains no admonishment, and as the name implies, the sacrifice which Christians were called upon to make in this time period served to draw people to Christ (see 2 Corinthians 2:14-15).

To this church, many of whose members would actually suffer death by persecution, Jesus introduced Himself as "the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive" (Revelation 2:8). Then the words of the coming peril were given, "Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days" (Revelation 2:10).

Prophetic Application

These words were fulfilled, for during this period, the most vicious persecutions occurred against the Christians. In 107 AD, Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch in Syria and a friend of John the apostle, was thrown to the lions and eaten alive in the amphitheatre of Rome.ⁱⁱ

In 155 AD, Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna and a close friend of Ignatius, was killed by the sword, his body burned at the stake in Smyrna.ⁱⁱⁱ

It was through the witness of Christian martyrs that Tertullian of Carthage, in Africa, was converted to Christianity at the age of 30, and thereafter became a defender of the Christian faith.

This period of persecution came to its climax under Diocletian, who, in 303 AD, launched a vicious, empire-wide effort for the complete annihilation of Christianity. Although he died in 305 AD, the persecution continued until it was finally brought to an end in 313 AD by the decree of toleration issued by Emperor Constantine.

The Diocletian persecution lasted ten years. The ten-day tribulation predicted for this church (verse 10) coincides with this ten-year period when the day-year principle of Biblical prophecy is applied. Persecution cleansed the Church by forcing Christians to consider whether they were truly willing to follow Christ in all circumstances.

In the ancient city of Smyrna, the most expensive homes were on the mountainsides that rose above the bay. This gave it the name "Crown City." We can appreciate the appropriateness of the promise, "be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life...He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death" (Revelation 2:10-11).

A Letter to Pergamos

Background

Pergamos (also called Pergamon or Pergamum) was situated 60 kilometres past Smyrna along the ancient Roman postal road. The name means "elevation" or "exalted." Appropriately, the religious and cultural center of the city was on top of a conspicuous mount.

Pergamos inherited the ancient system of sun worship from Babylon. According to Revelation 2:13, Pergamos was Satan's seat. It was a center of ancient sun worship, and the place where the famous altar of Zeus stood on a terrace on the slopes of the mount.

The leader of Pergamos used the same ancient title and vestments as Babylonian priests. The last pontiff king of Pergamos was Attalus III, who bequeathed his title to Rome in 133 BC, which "ended the history of Pergamum as an independent political entity."^{iv}

Today, the city of Bergama lies at the base of the mountain on which Pergamos once sat. Excavations nearby have uncovered a vast complex which included two temples, a theater, and a medical library. Some of the most famous physicians practiced here.

The medical symbol was a serpent wrapped around a pole—very similar to the symbol representing medicine today. Nearby stood the world's second largest library (after Alexandria), with a collection of some 200,000 volumes.

Historical Application

When persecution could not rid the earth of Christianity, the great adversary turned to deception and compromise to rid the world of its influence.

The letter rebuked the church of Pergamos for fraternizing with those who held the doctrines of Balaam and the Nicolaitans. It was Balaam who led Israel to moral corruption, just before they were due to cross over the Jordan into the Promised Land. The Nicolaitans, a heretical sect who compromised with the pagan cults, had been rejected by the Ephesian church but were courted by the church of Pergamos.

Prophetic Application

The Pergamos period began in 313 AD and continued until 538 AD.

This was a period of deteriorating moral standards and doctrinal corruption. Satan had failed to destroy the Church through persecution so instead he endeavored to destroy her through compromise. Christian standards were lowered, and a union was formed between Christianity and paganism.

It was during the Pergamos period that the Church adopted many pagan practices. The seeds of paganism had already been sown into Rome when King Attalus III had

bequeathed his title *Pontifex Maximus* to the pagan Roman emperors in 133 BC.

In 322 Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity, but kept the pagan title Pontifex Maximus. In his efforts to unite his empire in the early 300s, Emperor Constantine blended the interests of pagans and Christians.

Concerning Constantine's aims, Church historian F.J. Foakes-Jackson declares, "In dealing with the Church, his object was gradually to transfer from heathenism to Christianity all that had hitherto made it attractive in the eyes of the people."

However, in 378 AD, Emperor Gratian refused the title Pontifex Maximus as unbecoming for a Christian. The Roman Catholic bishop then took the title upon himself, as the Catholic Church has done with many pagan sun worship symbols.

The church in Pergamos represents this historical period of compromise. In exchange for religious tolerance and acceptance, the true principles of Christianity were sacrificed to accommodate pagan beliefs.

By the end of the period, in 538 AD, Emperor Justinian decreed Christianity the official religion of the empire, joining church and state.

In spite of this drift from the true faith of the early apostles, there were those who sought to maintain the true faith. Foremost among them was Patrick, who, in the early years of the fifth century, established scores of churches out of which grew the Celtic Church. This church held onto much of the true faith through the centuries of spiritual darkness that followed.

The promise to the faithful of the Pergamos period was, "To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna, and will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it" (Revelation 2:17).

The hidden manna is a reference to a new life in Christ. The new name represents the character transformed through the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit.

A Letter to Thyatira

Background

Thirty kilometers west of Pergamos on the imperial Roman road lay Thyatira, where the town of Akhisar lies today. Apollo, the sun god, was the chief deity of the city. The city was also noted for its industries, the most notable being the dying of cloth—particularly in the colors purple and crimson.

Prophetic Application

The church of Thyatira represents the Church of the Middle Ages. Thyatira received the longest of the letters, containing grave information about the conditions that

would prevail. The Church would be inundated with false doctrines and persecuted for faithfulness to God and His Word.

The spirit of compromise that started with Pergamos would reach its zenith in the time of Thyatira. As the name “sweet savour of labor” implies, works as a means to obtaining grace would become a prominent feature of the time. The introductory statement in the letter to Thyatira highlights this point:

I know your works, love, service, faith, and your patience; and as for your works, the last are more than the first (Revelation 2:19 NKJV).

In this time of spiritual darkness, the truth was abandoned and Christianity was replaced by the old pagan form of sun worship dressed in a garb of Christianity. Forms, rituals, objects, and works replaced the elevating truths of the Gospel. Pagan deities masquerading under Gospel titles replaced Jesus, and the ancient Babylonian mysteries were reintroduced.

Even the pagan vestments with their prominent purple and crimson colors were introduced as the vestments of the priesthood. The symbols of Dagon, the fish god, became symbols of the so-called “shepherds of the flock.”

The promise of the ultimate victory of Christ stands as a rebuke to the Church of the Middle Ages:

And he that overcometh, and keepeth my works unto the end, to him will I give power over the nations: And he shall rule them with a rod of iron (Revelation 2:26-27).

The Symbolism of Jezebel

The letter to Thyatira contains a strong rebuke:

Notwithstanding, I have a few things against thee, because thou sufferest that woman Jezebel, which calleth herself a prophetess, to teach and seduce my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed unto idols (Revelation 2:20).

Ahab, king of Israel, had married Jezebel, a Phoenician Baal worshiper, although God had expressly forbidden intermarriage with heathens. This marriage led to Baal worship being introduced into Israel, even though it was supposedly done in the name of Jehovah.

So it was in the prophetic time of Thyatira. Pagan temples, symbols, and festivals were converted into Christian temples, symbols, and religious festivals. All this was done in the name of true worship of the divine God.

Speaking of this amalgamation, Arthur E.R. Boak declares this:

The long association between pagans and Christians and the rapid incorporation of new converts into the ranks of the Church (after Constantine's "conversion"), exercised

a profound influence upon Christian beliefs and practices. Pagan belief in magic contributed largely to the Christian belief in miracles; and the development of the cult of the saints was stimulated by pagan concepts of inferior divinities, demigods and demons. Many pagan festivals were transferred into the festivals of the Church.^v

Fornication and sacrifices to idols are the symbols of apostasy against God and His Son Jesus, the Word made flesh. We are to eat the flesh of the Son of God—to internalize His truth—not replace it with mere outward forms. Of this, the *Twentieth Century Encyclopedia of Catholicism* says the following:

The missionary history of the Church clearly shows her adaptability to all races, all continents, all nations. In her liturgy and her art, in her tradition and the forming of her doctrine, naturally enough she includes Jewish elements, but also elements that are of pagan origin. In certain respects, she has copied her organization from that of the Roman Empire, has preserved and made fruitful the philosophical intuitions of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, borrowed from both Barbarians and the Byzantine Roman Empire—but always remains herself, thoroughly digesting all elements drawn from external sources...In her laws, her ceremonies, her festivals and her devotions, she makes use of local customs after purifying them and "baptizing" them.

The twin pillars of Roman Catholicism are faith in the Eucharistic mystery and faith in the intercessory role of Mary. The Catholic Church is even considering making this Marian role as co-advocate and intercessor an infallible church dogma.

Neither of these two doctrines can be found in the Scriptures, and they are contrary to the very basis of the Christian faith. Salvation can be found in Christ alone (John 10:9).

Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me (John 14:6).

In the Eucharistic mystery, the bread and wine are said to literally become the body and blood of Christ. Christ's sacrifice on the cross is repeated during each mass, which too is contrary to the plain teaching of the Scriptures:

Who needeth not daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifice, first for his own sins, and then for the people's: for this he did once when he offered up himself (Hebrews 7:27).

For then must he often have suffered since the foundation of the world: but now once in the end of the world hath he appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself (Hebrews 9:26).

But this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God (Hebrews 10:12).

Ignoring a Second Chance

God gives opportunities for repentance. The period of papal supremacy spanned 1260 years, and during all that time Roman Catholicism would not repent from her unfaithfulness to God (Revelation 2:21-23).

When Rome rejected the message of the Reformation, the turmoil that followed led to the greatest sufferings in human history. At the Council of Trent in 1563, the Reformation message was officially set aside. Shortly thereafter Europe agonized under the plague and the 30-year war (1618-1648), but neither of these dreadful situations brought Rome back to a love of the truth.

God is patient with people He has made (See Exodus 34:4-10, 2 Samuel 24, 2 Chronicles 33). His people Israel constantly turned away from Him, but He was constantly providing opportunities for them to turn back to Him, even saying this:

If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land (2 Chronicles 7:14).

God is the same way with the people of Babylon. He longs for them to return to Him (Jeremiah 51:8-9). Just as God raised up Elijah with a message of reform in the days of Jezebel, so God raised up some within the Church who called for reformation during the Church's long history and even after its rejection of the Reformation.

A Letter to Sardis

Background

Sardis (today called Sart) was the capital of the province of Lydia, situated some 40 kilometers southwest of Thyatira. The city stood on a hill, and at the foot of that hill were the temples of Artemis and Zeus.

In view of Sardis' location and natural protections, the people of Sardis considered the city impregnable. They felt so secure that their guard was not always up in time of crisis. History reveals that the city was conquered without resistance by both Cyrus and Antiochus, and in this lies a spiritual lesson. In its opening address, the letter to Sardis says, "I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead" (Revelation 3:1).

Prophetic Application

This mention of death takes us into the post-Reformation period, from the close of the Council of Trent in 1563, to the beginning of the great religious awakening in the 18th century. This period has been fittingly described as "the age of dead orthodoxy."

Instead of the reformers continuing their work of restoration, they submitted to the protection and support of the civil authorities. While separating from Rome, the

Protestant Church became subject to the state.

The Reformation was rooted in Christ. It is the Gospel of Christ that led the reformers out of the spiritual darkness that had all but extinguished the flame of Christianity. Sadly, this early fervor was gradually replaced by formalities as the community and the state accepted the new churches.

The inability of the various reform factions to find unity based on the Word also led to the formation of numerous denominations, each adopting the creed of its founders. The great work of reform faltered and even resulted in bitter infighting.

Added to this, the Counter Reformation launched by the Roman Catholic Church gradually eroded faith in the Scriptures and even set the tone for tolerance and acceptance of the teachings of Rome. The Church of Sardis was given this warning:

Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God. Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent. If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee (Revelation 3:2-3).

The Reformation had failed to fortify itself against complacency and became the easy prey of those who wished to destroy it. In the midst of persecution, many courageous reformers were willing to lay down their lives rather than to deny Christ. It is to these that Christ says, "Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with me in white: for they are worthy" (Revelation 3:4).

The message to Sardis is a message calling believers back to the truth and to steadfastness in faith:

He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels (Revelation 3:5).

A Letter to Philadelphia

Background

Philadelphia lies 45 kilometers east of Sardis and today the city of Alashehir stands where the ancient city stood. Philadelphia was situated at the foot of the mountains leading to Anatolia and, as such, was the doorway to this region.

Historical Application

And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write; These things saith he that is holy, he that is true, he that hath the key of David, he that openeth, and no man shutteth; and shutteth, and no man openeth (Revelation 3:7).

The letter to Philadelphia contains no reproof. The time period it represents was to open the door to the Gospel so that it could be spread to the ends of the world. The Word of God was to be restored and truth would triumph.

Prophetic Application

Philadelphia means "brotherly love." The Philadelphia period is the period of the Great Awakening of the 18th century. It is the period of mission. The words of commendation were, "I know thy works: behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it: for thou hast a little strength, and hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name" (Revelation 3:8).

During the Philadelphian era, the great conflict between truth and terror reached its pinnacle. The Millerite movement reaffirmed the truth of the Word and its prophetic importance, and the era of world mission began.

William Carey became the messenger to India in 1793, and Robert Morrison to China in 1807. In 1817, Robert Moffat carried the message to Africa and John Wesley challenged the doctrines of Calvin. Between 1804 and 1834, numerous Bible societies were established, and the door for the Gospel was opened.

As always in an age of spiritual enlightenment, Satan endeavored to destroy the work by the introduction of counterfeit movements. Spiritism in all its forms saw its modern revival at that time. Out of the French Revolution of 1789-1799 came the concepts of humanism and atheism that were to form the foundation stones for communism. The period also saw the rise of many false prophets who would claim special revelations contrary to the Word of God.

Holding to the Truth

The Great Awakening of this time was met with suspicion and even hostility by the established churches of the day as they refused to accept new light on the Scriptures. The age of Philadelphia was an age of brotherly love among those who embraced the truths of the Second Coming of Christ, but they were derided and mocked for their stance.

Behold, I will make them of the synagogue of Satan, which say they are Jews, and are not, but do lie; behold, I will make them to come and worship before thy feet, and to know that I have loved thee. Because thou hast kept the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth (Revelation 3:9-10).

The word *Jews* used here is a reference to Jewish Christians (see Romans 2:28-29; Galatians 3:28-29). The Jew referred to here represents those Christians who would reject the light and ridicule those who believed it.

The promise is also given that the Philadelphian era would not be subjected to the time of trouble prophesied by Daniel that was to precede the coming of Christ. The

promise of Christ's soon return given in verse 11 ("Behold I come quickly") is further evidence of the historic continuous nature of the prophetic content of the letters to the seven churches.

To the Church of the Middle Ages (Thyatira) the message was given to "hold fast what you have till I come" (Revelation 2:25), whereas in Philadelphia the Church is given the same admonition but this time in reference to His soon return. The Great Disappointment came as a major blow to many in the Advent movement and the counsel to "Hold fast what you have that no one may take your crown" (Revelation 3:11) is appropriate to this era.

"Not I, but Christ" was the watchword of the Philadelphian Christians, and the same motto should be for all of Christ's followers. Once we lay our selves down in humility, Christ and His love can conquer through us. The Word-based unity and love-based community of the Church of Philadelphia is a shining example of what all who aspire to follow Christ should seek to acquire.

A Letter to Laodicea

Background

Laodicea was situated 60 kilometers southeast of Philadelphia and was a famous health resort. The city was popular for its hot baths and the collyrium eye salve that was produced there.

The hot water for the baths was ingeniously piped to the resorts in insulated pipes, but because of the distances involved, the water was often only lukewarm by the time it arrived at its destination. The symbol of lukewarmness applied to the Laodicean Church is thus very appropriate.

Mineral-rich waters are also extremely unpalatable when taken lukewarm, and this feature makes the words of the Faithful and True Witness regarding those who refuse to accept His counsel all the more appropriate.

The church in Laodicea was likely established by Paul's companion Epaphras.^{vi}

Prophetic Application

Laodicea is the "nation of judgment." It is the last Church, the last light bearer on Earth before the coming of Christ. This letter is to God's people in our time.

All the letters were written to the Church—to God's people, His representatives. The letters reflect the spiritual condition of the Church in each time period and some of the letters contain severe reproofs. These reproofs were designed to touch the hearts of God's people, so that these wrongs might be corrected and the promises validated.

In all the letters, except the letter to Laodicea, there is a commendation, and it is vital for God's people at the end of time to take heed of the Laodicean counsel because, sadly, we have done nothing to commend.

The message to Laodicea is not a message of hopelessness. It is a message of hope. The message is not designed to discourage but to encourage. If the message is heeded, then the malady of the Church can be corrected. The message stems from One who can read the heart. It stems from the Faithful and True Witness—to deny the message is to deny the omnipotence of God.

And to the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write; These things saith the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God (Revelation 3:14).

The message is from the Amen—the One in whom there is no lie, the Creator. The word "beginning" is translated from the Greek *arche*, which, when taken in the active sense, means the initiator of the action, in this case Creation. In this introduction is concealed all the majesty of Christ, His character, and His law.

The memorial of His Creation is the Sabbath, which is also the seal of God making the law of God valid. The message to Laodicea is to His people, the remnant of those who obey God's commandments and hold the testimony of Jesus.

The Remnant

In Revelation 12, the remnant is made of followers of Christ, members of the Church, that seek to follow God in all things:

And the dragon was wroth with the woman, and went to make war with the remnant of her seed, which keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ (Revelation 12:17).

They are the ones that wake up from their Laodicean slumber and take the reproofs to heart. The remnant is made up of true and faithful believers of God that follow after the Second Advent movement of the 1800s, those that are looking for the soon return of Jesus Christ and who are seeking to align themselves with God's Word and the truths lost after the Reformation.

Instead of thinking that all is well and following materialistic gain, they recognize their sinful condition and return to the principles of the Reformation and allegiance to God. They base their faith on the Word and seek unity in truth and love based on Truth. To them is entrusted the final message of warning to a dying world. The message to be given is the Three Angels' Message of Revelation 14. It is a message that will cause controversy and will be opposed by Satan by every conceivable means. To live out the message will require great patience, endurance, and an abiding trust in Christ.

Here is the patience of the saints; here are they that keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus (Revelation 14:12).

The devil wages war against the remnant in order to hinder God's work. He wants to prevent the message from going out into the world. How would he best achieve this? By so preoccupying the Church with issues not directly related to the message that there is no time or energy left to do the work that the Church was instructed to do. The Church is to be a light to the world—it is one of the golden lampstands (Revelation 1:12-13).

But so many are now preoccupied with life, with the prize of success, financial wealth, pleasure seeking, and selfish ambition. Sadly even professing Christians display this same zeal for worldly gain. This is the Laodicean state.

The Lukewarm Church

In the letter to Laodicea, there is a rebuke about the state of the heart:

I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth (Revelation 3:15-16).

This rebuke is to the Church, but a church is compromised of individuals. This diagnosis of our state is an individual diagnosis, and we must each individually heed the warning. Lukewarmness is an unacceptable state and will result in eternal loss. The state of lukewarmness must be remedied.

Because thou sayest I am rich and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked (Revelation 3:17).

Why are we lukewarm?

We are lukewarm because we believe we are rich and have the truth. We believe we are not deceived. Even among those who know that the truth rests on the twin pillars of obedience to God (the keeping of His commandments) and the faith in Jesus there is manifested a spirit of complacency, a false sense of security, and a lack of devotion and dedication to Christ.

The Jews made the mistake of trusting in their obedience to God's law, rather than the merits of the Messiah, providing them with a façade of righteousness. The great bulk of Christians today trust in the merits of Christ without obedience to His precepts. This is just as dangerous. Although Christ's robe of righteousness is offered freely to anyone who believes and confesses Jesus Christ as Lord, the next step is a fitness for heaven—a submission to Christ's refining work in our lives that changes us from the inside into new people.

The people of the remnant know this. Justification and sanctification are gifts from God through the merits of Jesus Christ. Obedience is a consequence of this abiding trust in Christ.

Why are we "wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked?"

We are wretched because we are deceived. We are miserable because we think we are not deceived when we are, and are unhappy even while we persist in having our own way even though only God's ways promise true joy. We are poor because we believe that we have embraced the truth when we have missed the boat.

We are blind because we think we are capable of discerning truth from error when we cannot. We are naked because we believe we are clothed with the righteousness of Christ, when the garment we are wearing is a garment of our own making.

Professed Christians, like all people, must be called back to obedience to God. They must be urged to separate themselves from false religion and to uphold the principles of the law of God rather than accept the mark of the Beast.

Faith, Love, and Discernment

I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eyesalve, that thou mayest see (Revelation 3:18).

The gold we are instructed to buy is the gold of faith and love that is devoid of self. The white raiment is the righteousness of Christ, a garment containing no stitch of our own making. The eyesalve is spiritual discernment that enables us to recognize where the problem lies—with each of us. The message to Laodicea is intended to produce a change in each individual, not to produce discord among brothers.

Through Christ, We can Overcome

As we have seen, there is no commendation for the church of Laodicea, which represents us in the end-time Church. Even though there is no commendation for us, all is not lost. God loves us and wants us see ourselves in our true light. Achieving this recognition and transformation is painful, but altogether necessary:

As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent (Revelation 3:19).

Rebukes hurt our pride, but chastening goes beyond that. It is to be afflicted. God permits circumstances to so overwhelm us that there will no longer be any recourse to self. Moreover, our worst traits are revealed in times of great stress. Those who will hold on to their Redeemer, even if He throws their hip out of joint, will, like Jacob, receive the blessing. The case of those rebuked is not a hopeless one, but evidence that God cares.

Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me (Revelation 3:20).

The heavenly Merchantman has wares to sell without price, refined by God in the fire of affliction and He gives us a promise of His indwelling spirit.

To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne (Revelation 3:21).

The prize is an eternity with God. If I refuse to open the door, if I refuse to let God change me, the knock will get fainter and eventually cease. The blessings of God that He wishes you to buy are to be unselfishly disseminated to others. We are to lift up our voices like a trumpet:

Cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and shew my people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins. Yet they seek me daily, and delight to know my ways, as a nation that did righteousness, and forsook not the ordinance of their God: they ask of me the ordinances of justice; they take delight in approaching to God (Isaiah 58:1-2).

If the Laodicean message is heeded, then the truth will go out to all nations because our concern for self will be lost in Christ. In a time of great spiritual darkness, it is vital that we as today's Laodicea proclaim the message with power. The promise made to the prophet Isaiah will finally come true:

*Arise, shine; For your light has come!
And the glory of the LORD is risen upon you.
For behold, the darkness shall cover the earth,
And deep darkness the people; But the LORD will arise over you,
And His glory will be seen upon you.
The Gentiles shall come to your light,
And kings to the brightness of your rising.
Lift up your eyes all around, and see:
They all gather together, they come to you;
Your sons shall come from afar,
And your daughters shall be nursed at your side.
Then you shall see and become radiant,
And your heart shall swell with joy;
Because the abundance of the sea shall be turned to you,
The wealth of the Gentiles shall come to you (Isaiah 60:1-5 NKJV).*

Then we will indeed be rich with a richness that can never fade.

i "Smyrna," *Bible Places Online*.

ii Benjamin Harris Cowper, *Tales of the Martyrs of the First Two Centuries* (Oxford University Press, 1859):21-28.

iii Paul Burns and Alban Butler, *Butler's Lives of the Saints: February* (Minnesota: The

Liturgical Press, 1998): 228.

iv "Attalus III Philometor Euegetes," *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*.

v Arthur E. Boak, *A History of Rome* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1921): 387.

vi "*Revelation 3:14*," at Biblos Online