



# **THE SEVEN CHURCHES OF ASIA**

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## INTRODUCTION

*“The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show unto his servants, even the things which must shortly come to pass: and he sent and signified it by his angel unto his servant John; (2) who bare witness of the word of God, and of the testimony of Jesus Christ, even of all the things that he saw. (3) Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of the prophecy, and keep the things that are written therein: for the time is at hand.*

*“(4) John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace, from him who is and who was and who is to come; and from the seven Spirits that are before his throne; (5) and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. Unto him that loveth us, and loosed us from our sins by his blood; (6) and he made us to be a kingdom, to be priests unto his God and Father; to him be the glory and the dominion for ever and ever. Amen. (7) Behold, he cometh with the clouds; and every eye shall see him, and they that pierced him; and all the tribes of the earth shall mourn over him. Even so, Amen.*

*“(8) I am the Alpha and the Omega, saith the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.*

*“(9) I John, your brother and partaker with you in the tribulation and kingdom and patience which are in Jesus, was in the isle that is called Patmos, for the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. (10) I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day, and I heard behind me a great voice, as of a trumpet (11) saying, What thou seest, write in a book and send it to the seven churches: unto Ephesus, and unto Smyrna, and unto Pergamum, and unto Thyatira, and unto Sardis, and unto Philadelphia, and unto Laodicea. (12) And I turned to see the voice that spake with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands; (13) and in the midst of the lampstands one like unto a son of man, clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girt about at the breasts with a golden girdle. (14) And his head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; and his eyes were as a flame of fire; (15) and his feet like unto burnished brass, as if it had been refined in a furnace; and his voice as the voice of many waters. (16) And he had in his right hand seven stars: and out of his mouth proceeded a sharp two-edged sword: and his countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength. (17) And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as one dead. And he laid his right hand upon me, saying, Fear not; I am the first and the last, (18) and the Living one; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades. (19) Write therefore the things which thou sawest, and the things which are, and the things which shall come to pass hereafter; (20) the*

*mystery of the seven stars which thou sawest in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands. The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches: and the seven lampstands are seven churches”* (Revelation 1:1-20).

Although the entire book of Revelation was addressed to the seven churches of Asia (1:4,11), the series of lessons before us is primarily intended to deal with the special messages to these churches as recorded in the second and third chapters. However, in order to obtain a meaningful grasp of these messages, it is necessary that we give attention to some basic considerations pertaining to them, which we shall discuss in our introductory lesson and in the following three lessons. The basic scriptural background for these four preliminary lessons is found in the first chapter of Revelation, quoted above, which the reader is requested to carefully study.

The Asia designated as the location of the seven churches is not to be confused with the continent by that name; it is rather the Roman province which was formed about 130 B.C., referred to as a proconsular and governed by a proconsul.

The seven churches are enumerated in 1:11 beginning with Ephesus, which was the nearest to John on Patmos, next Smyrna and Pergamum to the north, and then Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea to the southeast, forming an irregular circle. We are not to suppose that these churches or congregations were the only ones to be found in the province of Asia. From the Bible we know that there were churches in Colossae, to which Paul addressed one of his letters, Hierapolis (Colossians 4:13), and Troas (Acts 20:6-11). Secular history indicates that there were also churches in Miletus, Magnesia, and Tralles.

Who was “John,” the one chosen to write down the “Revelation of Jesus Christ”? It has been commonly held that he was the apostle John, the author of the fourth gospel. This view, however, is not held by every Biblical scholar. As early as the third century, Dionysius, a famous Alexandrian scholar, denied that Revelation and the fourth gospel were written by the same author. Among modern scholars who agree with him are Hugh Martin, James Moffatt, and Adolph von Harnack.

In spite of the objections that have been raised, the testimony to the authorship of Revelation by John the apostle is very strong, to which testimony the writer of this study heartily agrees. The first express reference to Revelation is by Justin Martyr (140), who was born only a few years after the death of the apostle John. In his *Dialogue With Trypho* 81 he writes of Revelation as the work of “a certain man with us, whose name was John, one of the apostles of Christ.” Among other early postapostolic writers who accepted the apostle John’s authorship of Revelation are Irenaeus (180), who was a disciple of a disciple of John, Clement of Alexandria (200), Tertullian (220), Origen (223), and Hippolytus (240). But even if it could be proved that the author was

some person other than the apostle John, we can still accept Revelation as being of divine origin. We have no valid reason for denying that it is the "Revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave him to show to his servants," whether the author was an apostle or some other divinely inspired person.

The time of the writing of Revelation can be established with considerable confidence. In 180 Irenaeus wrote concerning the vision of John on Patmos: "This vision was beheld not in some remote time but almost in our generation, at the end of the reign of Domitian," which would make the time about 94 or 95. This is confirmed by other evidence, which we shall examine in the lesson to follow.

It was in the year 95 that Roman law declared that being a Christian was a crime punishable by death. Up to that time John had himself only suffered banishment on the isle of Patmos, and as yet there had been comparatively few martyrs in the province of Asia. But through divine inspiration John saw the black clouds of persecution gathering and knew that a violent storm of antagonism from the Roman authorities was soon to break on the church. Indeed, that is the principal theme of Revelation, which vividly portrays the irreconcilable antipathy and antagonism between the church and the Roman empire. The one proclaimed its allegiance to the divine Christ, and the other proclaimed its allegiance to Caesar, who himself laid claim to divine rights. Christ versus Caesar! Who would finally win in the fight that lay ahead?

John's vision on Patmos eloquently implies the reality of trouble the followers of Christ have always had to face for His cause and which they will continue to face as long as they abide in this world. The seven churches of Asia were threatened by the vicious blasphemy of Domitian. Rome was armed with the mightiest military might in the world, while the church was armed with the word of God, the sword of the Spirit. It would have seemed to most of John's contemporaries who considered themselves hardheaded realists that the pitifully small, unimpressive societies of Christians, churches of Christ, would soon face extinction when confronted by the imperial power of Rome. But that is not the way John saw it. True, he knew the seven churches would face increasingly worse trouble. He knew that widespread martyrdom was coming, that many of his spiritual compatriots would die horribly and painfully in the conflagration of Roman persecution. But he also knew that Christ would eventually triumph over Caesar, that good would finally conquer evil. He knew that although Rome and evil would win some of the battles, Christ and good would win the war. Thus his message, in spite of its dire predictions concerning the conflict between the church and Rome, is one of great optimism, even the optimism that comes from reliance on the strength and power of King Jesus.

In effect, John tells the seven churches that if they will be faithful to Christ, they will share in His victory. See 2:10. Thus he challenges them

to courage in the face of death, even the courage that Jesus urges in Luke 12:4, "Be not afraid of them that kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do." Rome could kill the body; that was all it could do. But Jesus Christ, "the power of an endless life" (Hebrews 7:16), promised His faithful martyrs the glory, grandeur, and comfort of the new heaven and new earth, where God "shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; and death shall be no more; neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain, any more: the first things are passed away" (21:4).

To understand the book of Revelation in its relation to the seven churches of Asia, we must recognize that its message is primarily intended for its own times, indicated by John's designating it as "the things which must shortly come to pass" (1:1; 22:6). In the main, he wrote of matters that were of basic, practical concern to those whom its message was originally addressed. Much of the misunderstanding of Revelation has resulted from the belief that it contains an unfolding of the entire scope of human history from the time of its writing to the end of time, a "horoscope," with little or no interest to its first readers. In every generation there have been would-be Biblical scholars who have read into it specific contemporary events and persons. In spite of the fact that previous generations have so glibly interpreted the book to fit in with their own catastrophies and evil men, each subsequent generation has been just as ready to carry on the process. But we can be certain that John wrote for the benefit of his Christian brethren in his own generation. His basic purpose was to bring comfort and hope to the seven churches of Asia during the time of Domitian. Whatever prophecies he made that had their fulfillment beyond that time, such as the consummation of the ages in the new heaven and new earth, were also primarily written to give hope to the seven churches as they faced the threat of death for the cause of Christ, to keep before them the realization that all things in the Lord's providence work out for the good of His faithful followers. See 14:13; Romans 8:28.

Those who seek to find the meaning of Revelation in precise references to Napoleon, World War I, World War II, Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, Russia, the Papacy, *ad infinitum*, do so in vain. Their study of the book is an exercise in futility. Yet its message was not exhausted by its primary purpose. Indeed, if its meaning was intended only for the seven churches of Asia, there is no valid purpose for this series of lessons. We must recognize that although John wrote primarily for the benefit of the seven churches, he set the contemporary situation against the background of the eternal. Thus his message is not exhausted by its primary purpose. The church still exists. Although it no longer faces the forces of error and sin represented by pagan Rome, it still is in conflict with error and sin in whatever forms they appear. Although it no longer is threatened by the would-be god Domitian, it still must face certain forces

in the world that demand absolute allegiance and that deny the Deity and supreme authority of Christ. Although it no longer faces the physical savagery of Roman persecution, it still faces the persecution of reproach and slander—the cold looks, the nicknames, the taunts, the social ostracism. See Luke 6:26; 1 Thessalonians 3:3; 2 Timothy 3:12. *And Christ, who is “the same yesterday and today, yea and for ever” (Hebrews 13:8), is still here, to guide, strengthen, and protect His church, to lead it in triumph over all its enemies!*

The relations between pagan Rome and the Lord's church are so basic and fundamental in the message of Revelation that we shall give them more extensive treatment in the lesson to follow.

### Questions

1. What is the Asia designated as the location of the seven churches?
2. What churches other than the seven designated in 1:11 do we know existed in Asia at the time of the writing of Revelation?
3. What evidence do we have that Revelation was written by the apostle John and that the time was about 94 or 95?
4. What is the principal theme of Revelation? What conflict did the seven churches of Asia face?
5. Why can we think of Revelation as being a message of great optimism?
6. Discuss the message of Revelation as being primarily intended for its own times, as being of basic, practical concern to the seven churches of Asia.
7. What is the message of Revelation for the church today?



### CHRIST OR CAESAR

The dominant theme of Revelation is the conflict between emperor worship and the worship of Jesus Christ. If we can grasp the nature of this conflict, we will be able to greatly enhance our understanding of the letters to the seven churches of Asia.

The Roman government recognized, in the words of Field Marshall Lord Montgomery, that "when you command great numbers of men . . . you find that the emotional forces bottled up in them are very strong." Making the appropriate application, it seldom failed to guide the emotions of its subjects into patriotic channels. And it is noteworthy that patriotism and the state religion were indistinguishable. In virtually every ancient society one of the main purposes of religion was to bind the community together, to maintain cohesion among all its diverse elements. Being an international state, composed of a great variety of races, cultures, and religions in the Mediterranean area, reaching from the Euphrates to the shores of Britain, the Roman empire had within its bounds a multitude of gods, but none that were universally accepted. Thus in order to maintain a sense of unity, to bind together all its people in a spirit of patriotism toward the empire, attempts were made by the government to establish a national religion to which all Roman subjects could give their allegiance. During the period of the Roman republic, this need was at least partially met by the invention of the goddess Roma, who became a personification of the state. Later the emperor, or Caesar, was deified as the embodiment of the empire, to be worshipped along with such gods as Jupiter, Juno, Neptune, etc., which the Romans had borrowed from the Greeks.

From the Roman point of view, the recognition of the emperor as the god among gods who personified the state was a reasonable way of encouraging a universal patriotism throughout an empire full of different races, creeds, cultures, and languages. But there was nothing in the deification of the emperor that was meant to antagonize the followers of other religions. To those who were polytheists, one more god was not meant to present any problem; it was not the original intent of the Roman authorities to interfere with any of the local deities. As one writer put it, the imperial religion was set up as "the spiritual symbol of the political union," and Edward Gibbon observed that Rome bestowed "the freedom of the city on all the gods of mankind." So long as they did not upset the public order and were willing at least to give lip service to the deity of the emperor, the followers of all religions were to be tolerated.

Emperor worship developed gradually. Following his assassination in 44 B.C., Julius Caesar was deified by the Senate, and his son and heir was called *divi filius*, "son of god." However, not all the emperors took

seriously the idea of their divinity. Augustus would not allow any worship to be offered him, and he ridiculed the adulation of the court poets. It was only after his death that the Senate made him a god. It is said that during his last illness Vespasian made a jest about his forthcoming elevation to the pantheon of the gods: "I see I shall shortly become a god." Others among the emperors, however, seriously considered themselves as divine, such as Caligula, Nero, Domitian, and Commodus.

It was during the reign of Domitian that trouble for the Lord's church seriously began. In 64, to divert suspicion from himself, Nero accused the Christians of setting fire to Rome. The persecution that followed was marked by fiendish cruelty and savagery. It was, however, confined to Rome, and the Christians suffered for their alleged crimes against the state and not because they refused to worship the emperor. But whereas certain of his predecessors had only accepted the honor, Domitian demanded that he be worshipped as a god. The last of the "Twelve Caesars" and the youngest son of Vespasian, his disposition was marked by suspicion, moroseness, and savagery. When he ascended to the imperial throne in 81, he put to death his own cousin, Flavius Clemens, on a charge of atheism, and banished his cousin's wife Flavia Domitilla, who was his own niece. He lived in constant fear of assassination, distrusting all those around him.

Domitian saw in Christianity a threat to the divine rights he had assumed for himself. He persecuted the Christians because they were Christians and because they refused to recognize him as a god. During his reign the charge of embracing Christianity was the most common one after that of high treason. He deliberately fostered the imperial religion and claimed to be an incarnation of Jupiter. He insisted that every person under his authority call him *dominus et deus*, "lord and god," which was most repugnant to those who worshipped Jesus Christ, the King of kings and Lord of lords. During his reign the universal enforcement of emperor worship was made official. No longer was it necessary to prove a crime against a Christian. Grounds for his conviction were made sure if he refused to offer incense before the emperor's statue and to curse the name of Christ. Many were condemned to death or to the confiscation of their property and banishment to an island.

As we previously noted, it is highly probable that John wrote Revelation when persecution under Domitian was beginning to take effect. He himself had been banished to "the isle that is called Patmos, for the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (1:9). Through the inspired message he received from Christ, he plainly saw the widespread persecution the Lord's church would soon face. The province of Asia was, in fact, the very center of emperor worship. It was there that the first temples were built in honor of the emperors, in which were images, altars, priests, and choirs. In the Roman garrisons the worship of the

emperor's image was a regular military drill. In such an area where emperor worship was so extensively practiced and strictly enforced, the seven churches faced the consequences of certain persecution if they stood firmly for the divine authority of Christ against Caesar.

There may have been differences of opinion among the early Christians as to the proper limits of compromise with the customs of pagan societies, but all those who loyally adhered to the teaching of Christ and His apostles knew that there could be no compromise concerning the matter of divine worship. They recognized only the God of heaven and His only begotten Son as the objects of such worship. They knew that they were obligated to render unto Caesar the things that were Caesar's, according to the command of their Lord (Matthew 22:21). They knew that they were to submit themselves to the political authority of Caesar, even to pray for all those in authority over them (Romans 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:13-17; 1 Timothy 2:1,2). But they utterly refused to regard Caesar and his underlings as anything other than human.

It was exceedingly difficult for the more tolerant Roman officials to understand the obstinancy of the faithful Christians. They felt that Christians were making an unnecessary ado in refusing to worship the emperor, and they often tried very patiently to get them to bow down before the emperor's image. From their point of view, the Christians were not being persecuted for their religious beliefs, since they were granted freedom of worship, but for their refusal to recognize the supremacy of the state as personified by the emperor. In a letter from the church in Smyrna to the church in Philomelium there is an eyewitness account of the trial and martyrdom of Polycarp, which took place only a few years after the writing of Revelation. It is the oldest record of its kind outside the New Testament. The Irenarch Herod, accompanied by his Nicetes, endeavored to get Polycarp to come to his senses, asking, "What harm is there in saying, 'Lord Caesar,' and in sacrificing with the other ceremonies observed on such occasions, and so make sure of safety?" Polycarp replied, "I shall not do as you advise me." Later he was tried before the proconsul, who urged him, "Swear, and I will set thee at liberty, reproach Christ." Polycarp declared, "Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never did me any injury: how then can I blaspheme my King and Saviour?" The proconsul then threatened him: "I have wild beasts at hand; to these will I cast thee, except thou repent." "Call them," answered Polycarp, "for we are not accustomed to repent of what is good in order to adopt that which is evil; and it is well for me to be changed from what is evil to what is righteous." The proconsul then said, "I will cause thee to be consumed by fire, seeing thou despised the wild beast, if thou wilt not repent." Polycarp answered, "Thou threatenest me with fire which burneth for an hour, and after a little is extinguished, but art ignorant of the fire of coming judgment and of eternal punishment, reserved for the ungodly. But why tarriest thou? Bring forth what thou

wilt." At last the stalwart old man was condemned to be burned alive.

In the desire to save one Dionysius from the lions, the Prefect of Alexandria said to him, "What prevents you from worshipping this one god of yours together with those that are natural gods? Dionysius replied, "We worship no other." One more story is quoted here. During the Diocletian persecution, the judge Maximus exclaimed to a veteran soldier named Julius, "What a fool you are to make more of a crucified man than of a living emperor." "He died for our sins," answered Julius, "that he might give us eternal life." The judge said, "Sacrifice and live then." The prisoner replied, "If I choose life, I choose death. If I die, I live for ever." At that the judge, who wanted to save the old soldier, lost his temper and sentenced him to death.

Eventually, the refusal of the Christians to recognize the divinity of Caesar led to the charge of atheism and anarchism being leveled against them. It was generally believed that their attitude was contrary to all proper political order. The prejudice that was raised against them caused them to be blamed for virtually every calamity that befell the empire. William Ramsay observed, "The great danger lay in popular excitement produced by some sudden cause, some general calamity, or signs, prodigies or prophecies, which either made the multitude by a unanimous impulse act as accuser, or raised individuals beyond motives which in saner moments would weigh with them. As Tertullian puts it: 'If the Tiber rises, if the Nile does not rise, if the heavens gave no rain, if there is an earthquake, famine or pestilence, straightway the cry is, The Christians to the lions.'"

In 96 Domitian was murdered by a steward of the niece whom he had banished, his own wife being a part of the conspiracy. The emperors who succeeded him continued to persecute the church, with varying degrees of intensity. The severity with which the law against the church was administered in the provinces largely depended upon the attitude of the reigning emperor. But the local officials also had something to do with the administration of the anti-Christian law. Many of them were quite tolerant, being reluctant to take action. But the law was there and had to be enforced if a person was denounced as a Christian. The Christians thus occupied a very precarious position. They never knew when some mob would be incited to strike or when some intolerant official would begin to enforce the letter of the law. Some Christians proved faithless to the Lord, falling away in the face of danger.

During the reign of Diocletian, in 303, the severest persecution of all broke out. Eusebius, the father of ecclesiastical history, wrote that an edict was issued "to tear down the churches to the foundations, and to destroy the Sacred Scriptures by fire; and commanding also that those who were in honorable stations should be degraded if they persevered in their adherence to Christianity." Three further edicts (303-304) marked successive stages in the severity of the persecution. In the

writings of Eusebius, we read even of the massacre of the whole population of a town because they declared themselves Christians.

As the church faced this last great struggle between Christ and Caesar, its members turned again to Revelation, finding there the issues clearly presented and taking courage from its message of faith in Christ. Rome, "Babylon the Great, the mother of harlots and of the abominations of the earth" was "drunken with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus" (17:5,6); but faithful Christians continued to depend on the Lord for ultimate and final victory. Cyprian of Carthage quoted from Revelation time and time again. He wrote, "The kings of the earth, the senate and people and emperor of Rome have joined together in order to destroy the name of Jesus and His people. They have made laws to put an end to Christianity. Every city, every organization, fights against the name of Christian. But where He leads the fight, His soldiers will always triumph and say, From thee, Lord, comes the victory and I am thy warrior."

The conflict with Rome that the early Christians had to face was by no means the last attack on Christianity by a totalitarian state. Not too many years ago Japan officially stood for an emperor worship very similar to that of ancient Rome. In March, 1937, the Department of Education declared, "Our land is a divine country ruled over by the Emperor who is manifest God." But it was officially announced that the ceremonies were patriotic and not religious. However, some Christian teachers were dismissed for wrongly answering the question, "Which is greater, Jesus Christ or the Emperor?" Following World War II, the emperor formally renounced his divinity, in December, 1946.

The Nazi regime in Germany is another modern example of the virtual deification of the state and the repudiation of Christianity. Hitler said, "A German church, a German Christianity, is a distortion. One is either a German or a Christian. You cannot be both." Julius Streicher, the infamous Jew baiter of Nuremberg, said at a meeting of the German Academy of Education at Munich in July, 1935, "It is only in one or two exceptional points that Christ and Hitler stand comparison, for Hitler is too big a man to be compared to one so petty." Hans Kerrl, the Reich Minister for Church Affairs, declared, "The question of the divinity of Christ is ridiculous and unessential. There has risen a new authority as to what Christ and Christianity really are, that is Adolph Hitler." Alfred Rosenberg, the leading protagonist of Nazi philosophy, said on February 22, 1936, "When a National Socialist dons his brown shirt he ceases to be a Catholic or Protestant and becomes a soldier of Hitler whose religion is faith in the Fuehrer."

The omnipotence of the state is also the prevailing philosophy of communism. However, a discussion of this in our study would take us far afield. But the message of Revelation to the church of every age is that it must be watchful of Caesar at his most benevolent best. It must

perpetually be wary of any tendency toward an omnipotent state. It must indeed render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, but it must never concede to Caesar the prerogatives that belong only to God.

The reply of the apostles to the Sanhedrin, which had commanded them to cease from preaching the gospel, was the reply expected of the seven churches of Asia when their faith was in conflict with Caesar, and it is still the reply expected of God's people today in the face of all opposition to Christ and His word: "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

Martin Luther's courageous utterance in the face of political opposition is a striking affirmation of the supremacy of Christ and His word over the state: "The Word of God is not my word; I, therefore, cannot abandon it; but in all things, short of that, I am ready to be docile and obedient. You shall have my blood, my life, rather than a single word of retraction; for it is better to obey God than man. It is no fault of mine that this matter creates confusion among you. I cannot prevent the Word of Christ becoming a stumbling block to men. I know well that we must pay obedience to the civil magistrate, even though he be not a man after God's own heart; I am quite ready to pay that obedience in any matter that does not shut out the Word of God."

### Questions

1. What was the purpose of the Roman government in establishing a national religion?
2. Discuss the tolerance of the Roman authorities toward all religions.
3. Discuss the development of emperor worship.
4. Why did Domitian persecute the Christians? Why were the seven churches of Asia in greater danger of persecution than the churches in other provinces of the empire?
5. Why was it difficult for the more tolerant Roman officials to understand the obstinancy of the faithful Christians' refusal to worship the emperor?
6. Why were the Christians eventually blamed for virtually every calamity that befell the empire?
7. Discuss the persecution of the Christians during the reign of Diocletian.
8. Discuss the deification of the State in imperial Japan and Nazi Germany. What message does Revelation give the church in every age concerning Caesar, the state?
9. What answer did the apostles give the Sanhedrin when they were commanded to cease from preaching the gospel? What should our answer be today when our faith is in conflict with the state?

### THE LIVING CHRIST

The heart of the first chapter of Revelation, as of the entire book, is the exaltation of the resurrected, living Christ. Unless we wholeheartedly accept this conclusion, our study of the messages to the seven churches of Asia will be futile and meaningless, for it is the relationship of the living Christ to His church that gives significance and meaning to these messages.

Revelation carries us from the Christ of human history to the Christ of eternity, from the suffering, crucified Christ to the resurrected, ascended, enthroned Christ, the King of kings and Lords of lords. It was the living Christ that John saw in his vision on Patmos, who laid His hand on him and exclaimed, "Fear not; I am the first and the last, and the Living one; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades" (1:17,18). In this declaration we are pointed to the Jesus Christ who really lived, who really died, and who really lives. The Lord affirms that He is the first and the last, the Alpha and Omega, the A and the Z. This affirmation, which is three times applied in the sacred scriptures to Jehovah God (Isaiah 41:4; 44:6; 48:12), "is the expression of absolute Godhead" (Richard Trench).

The seven churches of Asia, as well as all other churches of Christ in every age, were bound to recognize the deity and eternity of the One who was head over them. The Christ who gave Himself for the church (Ephesians 5:25) is no mere incident of passing significance in history, but He is the turning point in history. His death on the cross was according to the divine plan that existed before history began. The seven churches were indeed to keep before them the fact concerning the historic Jesus, the man of Nazareth who went about healing the sick, comforting the sorrowful, and giving hope and encouragement to sinners. They were indeed to keep before them the Saviour who had died on the cross. But they were also to keep before them the living Christ, the One who has conquered death in His resurrection and who continually lives to give strength, guidance, and encouragement to His followers, to perpetually give them access to the throne of God's grace. See Hebrews 4:14-16; 7:25. The fact that He once lived on the earth was not sufficient for their needs; they needed the One who continues to live and to intimately relate Himself to the life of each individual child of God. See Galatians 2:20; Colossians 3:3,4; 1 John 5:12.

Churches of Christ today still need the power and presence of the living Christ. They must still recognize His perpetual existence. The modern church has greatly suffered from its members who have stressed in their teaching the historic Christ, the man of Nazareth, but who have failed to present Him as our contemporary. "Is it possible," wrote Benjamin Jowett, "to feel a personal attachment to Christ such as is

prescribed by Thomas a Kempis? I think it is impossible and contrary to human nature that we should be able to concentrate our thoughts on a person scarcely known to us, who lived 1800 years ago." But our Lord is not "a person scarcely known to us," who merely lived many centuries ago. He was the contemporary of the seven churches of Asia, and He is the contemporary of all His churches today.

P. T. Forsyth wrote, "We must have the historic Christ and more. We must have the living Christ. But a living Christ who only ruled His kingdom in the unseen by general laws would be no sufficient Saviour. He must be personal to us. He must be our Saviour, in our situation, our needs, loves, shames, sins. He must not only live, but mingle with our lives. He must charge Himself with our souls. We have in Christ . . . the Sacrificer of our single lives, the Reader of our hearts, the Helper of our most private straits, the Inspirer of our most deep and sacred confessions. That is the Christ we need, and, thank God, for His unspeakable gift, that is the Christ we have."

In portraying Christ to the seven churches of Asia as "the Living one," their contemporary, the book of Revelation would incite them to give reverent consideration to the special messages He is soon to present them by calling their attention to what He means to them: "Unto him that loveth us, and loosed us from our sins by his blood; and he made us to be a kingdom, to be priests unto his God and Father; to him be the glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen. Behold, he cometh with the clouds; and every eye shall see him . . ." (1:5,6). We can be certain that if the seven churches found these words to be truly meaningful, if they responded in loving appreciation of what Christ meant to them, they most surely submitted themselves to the letters they received from Him through John. And it is always true that Christ's disciples will give heed to His will concerning them only as they are gratefully aware of what He means to them, as they constantly remember the great blessings and precious promises they have received from Him.

Let us examine this appeal made by Revelation to the seven churches, calculated to inspire and incite them to submission to the Lord's will, which is the same appeal made to churches of Christ in every age.

1. *He loveth us.* The love for Christ that motivates Christians to obey His will (John 14:23) is the response they make to the love He has for them. "We love, because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). Paul declared, "For the love of Christ constraineth us" (2 Corinthians 5:14). *He loves us!* As this sublime assurance was meant to throb in the hearts of the members of the seven churches of Asia, so also is it meant to throb in the hearts of Christians today. He loves us; thus He desires only what is for our good. When he points out sin in our lives, as He did to certain of the seven churches, He does so because He does not want us to suffer the unhappy consequences of sin. When He exhorts us to righteousness, He does so because He wants us to have the joy and



peace inherent in righteousness.

“Consider the ever-present, timeless love of Jesus Christ. John is writing these words of our text nearly half a century after Jesus Christ was buried. He is speaking to Asiatic Christians, Greeks and foreigners, most of whom had not been born when Jesus Christ died, none of whom had probably ever seen Him in this world. To these people He proclaims not a past love, not a Christ that loved long ago, but a Christ that loves now, a Christ that loved these Asiatic Christians at the moment when John was writing, a Christ that loves us today at the moment when we read. . . . One final word as to the praise which should be our answer to this great love. Our praise of Christ is but the expression of our recognition of Him for what He is and our delight in, and love towards, Him. Such love, which is but our love speaking, is all which He asks. Love can only be paid by love. Any other recompense to it is coinage of another currency. The only recompense that satisfies love is its own image reflected in another heart. That is what Jesus wants of you” (Alexander Maclaren).

2. *He loosed us from our sins by his blood.* The greatest proof and expression of Christ’s love for His followers is the release from sins He has granted them through the blood He shed on Calvary. And the realization of this greatest of all blessings is calculated to inspire them to faithful submission to the will of Christ. See Romans 6:17,18. Concerning the graces of the Christian life, Peter declared, “He that lacketh these things is blind, seeing only what is near, having forgotten the cleansing from his old sins” (2 Peter 1:9). When one forgets the cleansing from his old sins, he will just as surely forget the will of Christ concerning Christian living. Whatever tendencies there were in any of the seven churches to be heedless of the will of Christ were due to their forgetting the cleansing from their past sins, thus their forgetting the divine love that made this wondrous gift possible.

T. G. Selby said, “If the new life is not delighting the eye with its inimitable grace, and filling the air with its reviving freshness, it is because there has been some untimely and disastrous arrest. The past cleansing and its divine motive of perfect life and attainment have been overlooked and forgotten.

“The memory of grace will be a living and effectual inspiration to us at each step of our perfecting. When God first touches our spirits with His cleansing power, that act has in it the potentiality of complete Christian excellence. The sustained remembrance of your conversion will keep fresh and forceful the motive that will stimulate you to the attainment of the various moral and spiritual excellences. You might as well try to grow a cedar tree without roots as seek to cultivate these qualities without the peculiar type of motive supplied by the act of God’s gracious cleansing from sin.”

3. *He made us to be a kingdom, to be priests unto his God and Father.* Now John reminds the members of the seven churches what they *are* because of Christ's love for them: citizens of the divine kingdom and priests unto God. To recall to their minds the exalted position they occupied before their Father was another matter calculated to encourage them to godly living. And all Christians in every age should not only keep fresh in their minds the realization of the freedom from sin they have received from the loving Christ but also continually remember their heavenly citizenship and priestly office.

Members of the church can never be moved to sin when they gratefully remember that Jesus Christ "gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a people for his own possession, zealous of good works" (Titus 2:14). They will want to live in the manner that is compatible with their relationship to Christ as "a people for his own possession." Concerning this glorious, exalted relationship, Peter wrote, "Ye also, as living stones, are built up a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God through Jesus Christ . . . But ye are an elect race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that ye may show forth the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:5,9).

We need to stress again and again that every Christian who would be faithful to his Lord must never forget what he is: not a person of the world, of the mill and run of mankind, but one who has been called out of the world to serve the living God. He must never forget the prerogatives of his heavenly citizenship and priestly office, that he partakes of a divine dignity, that he is arrayed in the robes of Christ's righteousness, and that he has the power to acceptably serve God through Christ.

4. *He cometh with the clouds; and every eye shall see him.* John here reminds the seven churches of the second coming of Christ. The Living one, who has been made both Lord and Christ, who now sits on the throne of His kingdom, will some day come again. See Acts 2:29-39; 1 Corinthians 15:23-25. Nothing is more plainly taught and more highly featured in the New Testament than the second coming of Christ. He who loves us and has loosed us from our sins by His blood, who has made us to be a kingdom and to be priests unto God, will come again to receive His faithful disciples into glory, to finish the work which was begun at His first advent (John 14:2,3; Hebrews 9:28; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18).

John's reminder to the seven churches of the Lord's second advent was calculated to encourage them to godly living, and it will do the same for all other churches everywhere whose members hopefully anticipate this great and glorious event. Every Christian must realize that an understanding, loving belief in the Lord's second coming will tend to purify his life. It was such a belief or faith as this that helped make

it possible for the apostle Paul to remain loyal to his Master. Notice how he connected his upright life with his love of the Lord's appearing, or second coming: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give to me at that day; and not to me only, but also to all them that have loved his appearing" (2 Timothy 4:7,8). When any Christian seriously considers the eventual return of Christ—that He is coming at a time no one knows and that He will receive unto himself all the righteous and reject all the wicked—he is soberly made aware of the necessity of being certain that his life is constantly hidden in Christ and thus is obedient to the divine will. Carefully read 2 Thessalonians 1:10-12; Titus 2:11-14; 2 Peter 3:10-14; 1 John 3:2,3.

### Questions

1. How is Christ portrayed in 1:17,18?
2. Discuss the relationship of the living Christ to the seven churches of Asia as well as to all other churches of Christ.
3. How can the love of Christ for His disciples incite them to submission to His will?
4. Discuss the relationship of godly living to the grateful remembrance of being loosed from our sins by His blood.
5. What is meant by the description of the Lord's church as "a kingdom" and "priests unto God"? Why must Christians constantly keep in mind what they *are* in their relationship to Christ if they would be godly and holy in their lives?
6. What is the connection between loving, hopeful anticipation of the Lord's second coming and upright living?

### SEVEN GOLDEN LAMPSTANDS AND SEVEN STARS

The number seven is a recurring theme throughout Revelation; for example, seven Spirits (1:4), seven golden lampstands (1:12), seven stars (1:16), seven seals (5:1), seven thunders (10:3), and seven bowls (16:1). And either by design or coincidence there are seven beatitudes (1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7,14). Actually, seven may be termed the representative symbolic number of the Bible. The influence of this number, however, was not restricted to inspired writers of the Bible; it also prevailed among the Persians, Greeks, and Romans. It was used as a sacred and mystical number, symbolizing completeness. Before proceeding further in the study at hand, it will be well for us to consider two of its symbolic uses in Revelation.

#### *Seven Golden Lampstands*

Concerning his vision on Patmos, John declared, "I saw seven golden lampstands; and in the midst of the lampstands one like unto a son of man . . . and the seven lampstands are seven churches" (1:12,13,20). Here the *seven* churches of Asia are symbolized by seven golden lampstands. Since the number seven signifies completeness, when John wrote to the seven churches of Asia he was thus representatively writing to the whole church, to every congregation in every age. Therefore, the seven letters are to be considered as of significance to churches of Christ today, and thus the reason for this series of lessons. In the Muratorium Fragment, which was written in Rome about 190 A.D. and contains the earliest list of the books of the New Testament, the writer points out that the apostle Paul wrote to seven churches, and that in so doing he wrote to all the churches. And, surely, just as Paul's letters are meant to be of spiritual benefit to the Lord's disciples today, so also the letters to the seven churches are meant to serve the same purpose.

But why were *these* seven churches selected as recipients of special messages from the Lord when there were others in the province of Asia? A suggestive answer is given by William Ramsay: "All seven cities stand on the great circular road that bound together the most populous, wealthy and influential part of the province, the west-central region." A more plausible answer, however, is that they represent or typify the Lord's church as a whole, their problems and conditions being representative of all the churches of Christ throughout the ages, as expressed by Dean Alford, "A representative, not exhaustive list." William Milligan observed, "We are introduced to the Universal Church under the presentation given of seven Churches of Asia selected for that purpose. These Churches are so selected, that they present us with a picture of the various elements that make up the Church's life. We see her in herself

and in her relation to the world; in her strength and weakness; in her steadfastness and in her declensions; in her prosperity and in her sufferings; in her outward poverty and in her true riches; in the distinction existing between the real and nominal followers of Christ within her borders; in the just indignation of her Supreme Head against the one, and in His leading the other to the full possession of His own triumph in the presence of His Father and their Father, of His God and their God.”

Let us now inquire into the significance of the seven churches of Asia as symbolized by golden lampstands. In this imagery we are reminded of the seven-branched lampstand in the Jewish sanctuary (Exodus 25:31, 32,37; Zechariah 4:2-10; Hebrews 9:2). When John wrote it was in the temple of peace in Rome, where it had been placed following the destruction of Jerusalem. A representative of it is found on the Arch of Titus at Rome. Undoubtedly, John had seen it many times in the holy place of the temple. It signified that Israel, God’s chosen people under the old covenant, should shine in the sanctuary of God and become a light unto the nations. But Israel had failed to enlighten the Gentiles (Isaiah 52:5; Romans 2:17-24).

It was the Lord’s will that the seven churches of Asia should enlighten the world about them, and this is also His will concerning every congregation today. And to affirm that every congregation should be a light-bearing community is tantamount to affirming that every Christian in every congregation should be a light bearer. This light includes both the Christian life and the Christian message. Jesus said to His disciples, “Ye are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a lamp, and put it under the bushel, but on the stand [Greek *luchnia*, same word as here in Revelation]; and it shineth unto all that are in the house. Even so let your light shine before men; that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:14-16). To his fellow Christians Paul expressed the wish that “ye may become blameless and harmless, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom ye are seen as lights in the world, holding forth the word of life” (Philippians 2:15,16).

The light that the churches of Christ are to give to the world is not initiated by them but comes from Christ, who is the “true light, even the light which lighteth every man, coming into the world” (John 1:9). Cf. 2 Corinthians 4:6. In his vision John sees Jesus in the midst of the golden lampstands (1:13), as one might be whose work it was to trim the wicks and renew the oil. Both the light of righteous living and the light of the gospel message come from Christ (Matthew 23:18-20; John 1:17; Galatians 2:20). Thus the responsibility of all churches of Christ to be light-bearing communities, both in living and in teaching, is to present Christ to the world (1 Corinthians 1:23; 2:2; Galatians 6:14;

1 Peter 2:9). If they fail in this divinely-ordained responsibility to preach and imitate Christ, they fail to fulfill their appointed mission and forfeit their right to exist. "If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is the darkness!" (Matthew 6:23).

The lampstands that symbolize the seven churches of Asia are described as *golden*. The idea here may be that of the value of the church in the estimation and appreciation of Christ. So much does he value and love the church, His body, that He gave His life for it (Ephesians 5:25). But the world does not appreciate the worth of the Lord's church. Those seven churches were insignificant to the pagan inhabitants of the great cities where they were located, but they were considered of inestimable value in heaven. Horace Bonar's portrayal of the *golden* lampstands is worthy of consideration: "Generally in Scripture gold symbolizes the holy, the perfect, the Divine. The Churches are in God the Father, and in Christ Jesus our Lord. They are not from beneath, but from above; they are not of the world, even as Christ is not of the world. They are composed of men born from above. With Divine glory they shine; with Divine beauty they stand forth before the world, representing the surpassing and all-precious excellence of Him in whose beauty they are beautiful, and in whose perfection they are perfect. Golden Churches! Golden men! Golden witnesses for Christ and His truth! How much gold is to be seen in the Church today?"

We must not fail to emphasize the *presence* of Christ with His churches. ". . . in the midst of the lampstands one like unto a son of man" (1:13); ". . . he that walketh in the midst of the seven golden lampstands" (2:1). Christ promised His disciples, "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world" (Matthew 28:20). His abiding presence is also revealed in such passages as Hebrews 13:5,6, ". . . for himself hath said, I will in no wise fail thee, neither will I in any wise forsake thee. So that with good courage we say, The Lord is my helper; I will not fear: What shall man do unto me?" The Lord *walks* among the gold lampstands. He does not remain inert and inactive in relation to them. He expresses His unwearied activity as He exercises inspection over His churches, beholding the good and the evil, praising the one and condemning the other. His active presence is meant to be a source of encouragement, protection, and strength for His churches. He is the chief Shepherd of the flock of God (1 Peter 5:4), and He is constantly present to watch over and care for it.

One last point is to be noted. The letters to the seven churches of Asia do not refer to a corporate body including all churches, but to local congregations, unfederated, autonomous, independent, and not centrally controlled. There is no proof that more than one congregation existed in the cities where the seven churches were located, and the diocesan concept of the church is entirely foreign to the teaching of the New Testament.

## Seven Stars

Concerning his vision on Patmos, John further declared, "And he had in his right hand seven stars. . . The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches" (1:16,20). The word "angel" is derived from the Greek *aggelos* (*angebos*), properly meaning "a messenger (from *aggello*, to deliver a message), sent whether by God or by man or by Satan." Hence, it describes any one who is employed to communicate the will of another. Whatever the angels were that John saw in his vision, we definitely know that they were used to communicate the messages addressed to them to the seven churches (2:1,7; 2:12,18; etc.), which messages originated with Christ. They served, then, as those representing Christ to the seven churches.

There has been widespread diversity of ideas concerning these angels. One such idea held by many scholars is that they were heavenly beings who served as guardian spirits of the churches. It is true that the concept of the guardian spirit or angel is a Biblical one; for example, separate nations had their guardian angels (Daniel 10:13,20,21). It seems also that angels had charge of individuals (Matthew 18:10; Acts 12:15; Hebrews 1:13,14). To conclude, however, that the "angels" of the seven churches were heavenly beings, guardian spirits, raises a host of needless difficulties. Why should Christ send letters to heavenly beings through the human agency of John to be read to the human beings who composed the seven churches? Furthermore, the angels shared not only in the praise but also in the censure of Christ, which can hardly be said of heavenly beings.

Another idea concerning these angels is that they represented the ideal embodiment or spiritual personification of the seven churches. But it is plainly evident that the angels are identified with the actual churches and not with their ideal embodiment or spiritual personification. The angels are both rebuked and exhorted. They can sin, fall into heresy, repent, and die. It is most confusing, to say the least, that such things can be said of the ideal embodiment of the churches or of their guardian angels.

Scholars who hold to the foregoing views overlook the fact that the word "angel" refers many times in the Bible to human beings. In Malachi 3:1 the Hebrew word for angel, *malak*, answering to the Greek *aggelos* in Matthew 11:10; Mark 1:2; Luke 7:27, is applied to John the Baptist. In Luke 7:24 the messengers of John the Baptist are called *aggelon* in the Greek. In Luke 9:52 Jesus sends "messengers (*aggelous*) before his face . . . to make ready for him." In James 2:25 the messengers received by Rahab are also called *aggelous* in the Greek.

To conclude, then, that the angels of the seven churches were human beings who served as their spiritual leaders is reasonable and avoids any real difficulties. This conclusion is at least partially confirmed by the use of the word "angel" in the Old Testament to apply to the spiritual leaders of the Jews. Note Malachi 2:7, "For the priest's lips should keep

knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth; for he is the messenger (Septuagint, *aggelos*) of Jehovah of hosts.”

Quoting from the Talmud, Joseph Lightfoot wrote, “On Sabbath eve the minister or *angel* of the synagogue sounded the trumpet from the roof of a high house to notify the faithful of the coming of the Sabbath.” F. Godet says that “the business of this officer [the angel of the synagogue], who was always called a bishop of the congregation, was to offer prayers for the whole assembly, to which the people answered, ‘Amen,’ and to preach, if there were no other to discharge that office. . . . By a name probably borrowed from the synagogue the bishops or pastors of the Seven Churches of Asia are termed the ‘angels’ of the Churches . . . Bishops are often called ‘angels’ by the early writers.”

The bishops, also referred to in the New Testament as elders and pastors, are the Biblically constituted spiritual leaders within the churches of Christ. It was logical that John should send the letters to the seven churches directly to their bishops since they had the responsibility of feeding and tending the flock. See Acts 20:17,28; 1 Peter 5:1-3. No real problem is posed by the fact that each of the seven churches of Asia is described as having just one angel (2:1,12,etc.), whereas such passages as Acts 14:23; 20:17,28 teach that there is to be a plurality of bishops or elders in each local congregation. John may have used the word “angel” to designate the eldership collectively in each of the seven churches, or he may have used it to designate that person in each eldership who, because of his special capabilities, experience, and influence, took the lead in feeding the flock.

“The term *angel*, designating an office, is, in accordance with the enigmatic symbolism of the book, transferred from the heavenly to the earthly superior ministers of Jehovah; reminding them that, like the heavenly angels above, they below should fulfill God’s mission zealously, promptly and efficiently. ‘Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven!’” (A. R. Faussett).

We now inquire into the significance of the seven stars as symbolizing the angels of the seven churches. The word “star” as used in the Bible sometimes symbolizes rulership and leadership (Numbers 24:17; Daniel 12:3). The New Testament teaches that the bishops or elders have the responsibility of human rulership or leadership in the church, as those who are responsible to God for the Christians in their charge. Hebrews 13:17 exhorts, “Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit to them: for they watch in behalf of your souls, as they that shall give account; that they may do this with joy, and not with grief: for this were unprofitable for you.”

The stars of the heavens are guides, and so are bishops of the church. As the north star has guided many a ship on the sea, so also have God’s faithful bishops guided those in the Lord’s church, who are travelling on the sea of life. In so doing, they have followed the example of their



divine Master, the supreme Leader of the church, who is portrayed as "the bright, the morning star" (22:16). Cf. Matthew 2:1-10.

The seven stars are held "in his right hand" (1:16; 2:1), which primarily symbolizes their office as of divine appointment and privilege. True bishops in the church receive their authority from Christ through the Holy Spirit. Unqualified, ungodly men may assume the office of a bishop and be recognized as such by their fellow church members, but they are not recognized as such by Christ. They are not stars in the right hand of Christ but are "wandering stars" (Jude 13), to be rejected by God.

It is also significant that the light these stars in the right hand of Christ shine forth is of divine origin. Faithful bishops are not like torches, consuming their own substance; they derive their light from the source of light.

It is further significant that the picture of the stars being held in the right hand of Christ symbolizes the safety and security the bishops enjoy who faithfully perform their duties in the church. "No one shall snatch them out of my hand" (John 10:28). The Lord who has the power to make bishops and to give them light also has the power to keep them from all harm. When bishops are alert to their responsibilities, trusting in and loving the Lord, there is no power in the world that can remove them from the care and protection of their divine Master.

### Questions

1. What is the significance of seven churches? Assuming that there were other churches in proconsular Asia, why were *these* seven churches selected to be recipients of special messages from the Lord?
2. Discuss the significance of the seven churches as symbolized by *lampstands*.
3. What is the significance of *golden* lampstands?
4. Discuss the presence of Jesus with His churches as designated in 1:13; 2:1.
5. Why is it reasonable to believe that the angels of the seven churches were their spiritual leaders, bishops or elders?
6. Why are the angels of the seven churches symbolized by stars?
7. What is the significance of these stars being held in the right hand of Christ?

## THE CHURCH IN EPHEBUS (1)

*"To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These things saith he that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand, he that walketh in the midst of the seven golden lampstands: (2) I know thy works, and thy toil and patience, and that thou canst not bear evil men, and didst try them that call themselves apostles, and they are not, and didst find them false; (3) and thou hast patience and didst bear for my name's sake, and hast not grown weary. (4) But I have this against thee, that thou didst leave thy first love. (5) Remember therefore whence thou art fallen, and repent and do the first works; or else I come to thee, and will move thy lampstand out of its place, except thou repent. (6) But this thou hast, that thou hatest the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. (7) He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches. To him that overcometh, to him will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the Paradise of God" (2:1-7).*

### **Address**

The first of the letters to the seven churches of Asia is addressed to the angel of the church in Ephesus.

Ephesus was the capital of proconsular Asia, a free city with a municipal government of its own. It was a prominent center of emperor worship. "Of the three great river basins of western Asia Minor—those of the Hermas, Cayster, and Maeander—it commanded the second, and had ready access by easy passes, besides being the natural port and landing place for Sardis, the capital of the Lysian kings." It was most famous for its magnificent temple of Diana or Artemis, the mother goddess of the earth, which, after being burned down by Herostratus on the night that Alexander the Great was born (355 B.C.), was rebuilt at enormous cost, and was considered one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. It is said to have taken 220 years to build. Made of the finest marble, it was 340 feet long and 164 feet wide, being supported by 127 columns. It stood at the head of the harbor. Pausanias said that it "surpassed every structure raised by human hands." Another ancient writer said, "I have seen the walls and hanging gardens of old Babylon, the statue of Olympian Jove, the Colossus of Rhodes, the great labor of the lofty Pyramids, and the ancient tomb of Mausolus. But when I beheld the temple at Ephesus towering to the clouds, all these other marvels were eclipsed."

In the center of the temple, concealed by curtains, stood the image of Diana, said to have fallen from the sky. Immediately behind the shrine was located a safety vault, where the people stored their money for safe-keeping. Indeed, the temple virtually became the treasure house of the ancient world. It was also used as a museum where the best statues and

paintings were preserved. Moreover, it was a criminal sanctuary, a sort of city of refuge, where none might be arrested for any crime within a bowshot of its walls. It was visited by pilgrims from far and near, becoming a source of profit to the local innkeepers, who not only provided board and room but also did a large trade in souvenirs, especially in miniature images of Diana and her shrine, which were often left in the temple as votive offerings. It was stripped of its riches by Nero and was finally destroyed by the Goths (262 A.D.).

Ephesus was also noted for its magnificent theater (Acts 19:29), which was reported to have a 50,000 person seating capacity, the largest in the Greek world. It was carved on the western side of Mount Oreosus, being open to the sky.

The church in Ephesus was virtually founded by the apostle Paul. Toward the close of his second missionary journey, he came to Ephesus, having accompanied Aquila and Priscilla there from Corinth, where he stayed for a time and preached in the Jewish synagogue (Acts 18:18-21). Continuing his tour, he left Aquila and Priscilla to back up his work in Ephesus. He returned on his third missionary journey, where he stayed about three years (Acts 20:31).

The dramatic story of his second stay in Ephesus is recorded in Acts 19 and 20. His work was remarkably successful, one result being a bonfire of magical books. Ephesus was famous for its magical arts. In fact, one type of book was known as *Ephesia grammata*, "Ephesian writings," consisting of formulae of exorcism written on tablets and worn as amulets. The influence of Paul's preaching caused many of those implicated in the magical arts to destroy their books in a great bonfire. Luke observed, "So mightily grew the word of the Lord and prevailed." But Paul's success aroused bitter opposition on the part of the craftsmen whose trade in selling silver shrines of Diana was adversely affected. They started a riot, and Paul had to leave the city.

In His address to the Ephesian church, Jesus described Himself as "he that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand, he that walketh in the midst of the seven golden lampstands." Since this symbolism has already been considered in the preceding lesson, we shall limit any comments here to a brief observation made by Alexander Maclaren: "His strengthening and watchful presence moves among the Churches, and is active on their behalf. That presence is a plain literal fact, however feebly we lay hold on it. He is with us, to hold up and to bless; to observe, to judge, and, if need be, to punish. And He is the same loving and forbearing Lord whom the apostle had learned to trust on earth, and found again revealed from heaven."

### **Commendation**

First, the Lord commends the church in Ephesus. He later censures it, but it is most important to note that His commendation precedes His cen-

sure. If we, like the Lord, would prepare men's hearts to be receptive to the justifiable censure we give them, we too must first praise them for the good they do. Only by so doing can we incite them to eliminate the evil from their lives and to build upon truth and righteousness. Parents need to follow the example of Jesus. If they are successful in reproving their children, it is because they show their love for them, their interest in them, by giving them all the praise they are due. Ministers of the gospel also need to follow the Lord's example. Their words of reproof and rebuke will be truly successful only as they are preceded by every justifiable word of praise. Preaching that is characterized only by scolding and remonstrating is not edifying preaching.

The Lord's praise, as well as His censure, is based upon His affirmation, "I know." Whether He praises or censures, He does so on the basis of *facts*, not speculation. "He knew all men, and because he needed not that any one should bear witness concerning man; for he himself knew what was in man" (John 2:24,25). "And there is no creature that is not manifest in his sight: but all things are naked and laid open before the eyes of him with whom we have to do" (Hebrews 4:13). See John 1:48. The church in Ephesus could know of a certainty that whatever the Lord said about it, whether good or bad, was reliable, completely true.

The Lord begins His praise of Ephesus by saying, "I know thy works, and thy toil and patience." The word "works" here is a general term, which is explained as embracing "toil" and "patience." The church in Ephesus was not just a working church that fulfilled a minimum of responsibility, but one that *toiled*, worked unto weariness. It was not, as many churches are today, merely content with keeping house for the Lord, with its activity virtually limited to churchgoing. Its members knew what it was to suffer actual fatigue in their work for Christ. Obviously, they strenuously labored to lead souls to Christ and to do good unto all men as they had opportunity.

Is the congregation to which you belong like the Ephesian church? Is it "sound in the faith," or is it like so many other churches—*sound asleep*? Indeed, what kind of a Christian are you? Do you toil, work unto weariness, as the Ephesian Christians did? Do you strenuously labor to lead souls to Christ and to do good unto all men as they did? Richard Trench has given some very practical words concerning "toil," from the Greek *kopos*: "Indeed this word, signifying as it does not merely labour, but labour unto weariness, may suggest some solemn reflections to everyone who at all affects to be working for his Lord, and as under his Great Taskmaster's eye. This is what Christ looks for, that is what Christ praises in His servants. But how often does labour, which esteems itself labour for Him, stop short of this; take care that it shall never arrive at this point: and, perhaps, in our day none are more tempted continually to measure out to themselves tasks too light and inadequate than those to whom an office and ministry in the Church has been committed."

Not only did the work of the Ephesian church involve toil but also *patience*. The Greek word here is *hupomone*, signifying "the characteristic of a man who is unswerved from his deliberate purpose and loyalty to faith and piety by even the greatest trials and sufferings" (Joseph Thayer). In its patience the Ephesian church was "*stedfast, unmovable . . . abounding in the work of the Lord*" (1 Corinthians 15:58). In spite of all the efforts of evil men to turn it away from the faith, it steadfastly persevered in its work for Christ. And churches today need this same spirit of patience in the face of every hindrance and opposition to their labors in behalf of Christ.

The Lord next commends the Ephesian church: "Thou canst not bear evil men." This congregation would not accept into its active fellowship any child of God who persisted in evil-doing. It evidently obeyed such injunctions as the following: ". . . have no company with fornicators; not at all meaning with fornicators of this world or with the covetous and extortioners, or with idolaters; for then must ye needs go out of the world: but as it is, I wrote unto you not to keep company, if any man that is named a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such a one no, not to eat" (1 Corinthians 5:9-11); "Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which they received of us" (2 Thessalonians 3:6). See 2 Thessalonians 3:14,15.

How different the Ephesians were from the Corinthians, who tolerated members that were guilty of such sins as fornication, litigation against brethren, divisions, and profaning the Lord's supper! Paul chided them for their stand concerning the fornicator who was living incestuously with his father's wife: "And ye are puffed up, and did not rather mourn, that he that had done this deed might be taken away from among you" (1 Corinthians 5:2). And how different also the church in Ephesus was from many churches today which grant full fellowship to their members who are guilty of such sins as adultery, covetousness, slander, etc.! In fact, this writer knows of greedy, stingy, materialistic men who are recognized as bishops or elders in the churches to which they belong. How can such churches possibly grow spiritually and glorify the name of Christ? When any church is mainly concerned with numbers, an elegant meeting place, and the social standing of its members, it may fill its building for services, but only with those who are unconverted to Christ and who have not the Holy Spirit. Churches today do indeed need to follow the example of the Ephesian church, which refused to tolerate, support, or entertain hospitably in its midst as fellow members of the body of Christ those whose lives were persistently evil. See 1 Corinthians 5:6,7.

The Lord continues His praise of the Ephesian church: "Thou didst

try them that call themselves apostles, and they are not, and didst find them false." See 2 Corinthians 11:13. Those who claimed to be apostles were probably the itinerant preachers who gave the primitive church so much trouble. They were men gifted with volubility and plausibility who could get into the good graces of the churches if they were not carefully investigated. But the Ephesian church carefully tried these men, putting them under the most careful scrutiny. It would not allow any man to preach or teach who was not loyal to Christ. It faithfully followed the injunction, "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but prove the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets are gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1). See 2 John 9-11.

Any church of Christ that allows men to preach and teach without carefully scrutinizing their character and doctrine is a church that treads on dangerous ground. What havoc has been wrought in the body of Christ by preachers and teachers who are doctrinally unsound, who know not the grace of God and the merits of Christ, who are unholy in their lives! No matter how glib of tongue a man may be, no matter how scholarly he may seem, no matter how ingratiating a personality he may have, if he is not loyal to Christ in life and in teaching, he must be deemed false, unworthy and unfit to teach or preach in the Lord's church.

### Questions

1. Describe the city of Ephesus.
2. Discuss the founding of the church in Ephesus.
3. How does Jesus describe Himself in His address to the church in Ephesus?
4. What is the significance of the Lord's affirmation, "I know"?
5. Discuss the significance of the Lord's praise of the church in Ephesus before His censure of it. What lesson should we receive from this?
6. Discuss the Lord's commendation of the church in Ephesus: "Thou canst not bear evil men." What lesson should we receive from this?
7. What did the church in Ephesus do regarding false apostles? What lesson should we receive from this?

## THE CHURCH IN EPHEBUS (2)

The Lord further commends the Ephesian church: "Thou hast patience and didst bear for my name's sake, and hast not grown weary." Here the patience of the Ephesians is connected with their bearing for the name of Christ and not growing weary. It was for the sake of Christ, because of their relationship to Him as His disciples, that the saints in Ephesus patiently worked and toiled in the face of all trials and opposition. And in all their labors on His behalf they did not grow weary. The word "weary" is from the Greek *kamon*, signifying "become faint from toil." The idea here is that they had not become so wearied as to succumb to exhaustion and to quit working for the Lord. One writer puts it: "They had toiled on to very weariness, without wearying of their toil." This is the sense of Galatians 6:9, to be heeded by every Christian: "And let us not grow weary in well-doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not."

Jesus also praises the Ephesian church: "Thou hatest the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate." Note that the Ephesians did not hate the Nicolaitans, who were precious human souls, but their evil works. In so doing, they followed the example of Christ; and we must also imitate Him in hating sin but not sinners.

Who were the Nicolaitans? The first description of these heretics was made by Irenaeus: "The Nicolaitans are the followers of Nicolaus who was one of the seven ordained to the diaconate by the apostles. They lead lives of unrestrained indulgence. The character of these men is very plainly pointed out in the Apocalypse of John as teaching that it is a matter of indifference to practice adultery, and to eat things sacrificed to idols. Wherefore the Word has also spoken of them thus: 'But this thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.'" In a tract entitled *Against Heresies*, Tertullian gives essentially the same description of the Nicolaitans as Irenaeus. But such ancient authorities as Eusebius deny that the Nicolaitans were founded by Nicolaus, one of the seven men mentioned in Acts 6:5. Many competent modern scholars identify the Nicolaitans as representing in general the same group of heretics as those "that hold the teaching of Baalam" (2:14) and the followers of "the woman Jezebel" (2:20). Be that as it may, the Nicolaitans were wicked men; and the Lord praised the Ephesian saints for hating their wickedness, just as He praises His other saints everywhere for hating every form of evil in whomever it is found.

### **Censure**

Now that the Lord has given His disciples in Ephesus the praise they are due, He proceeds to give them the censure they are also due. He has

already disarmed them by His praise, to let them know that He is not arbitrary, capricious, fault-finding, a cruel taskmaster. And now if their hearts have been mellowed by His praise, they are well prepared to give heed to His censure: "But I have this against thee, that thou didst leave thy first love." Some scholars understand "first love" as referring to the love of brethren in Christ for each other. James Moffatt thus translates the verse: "You have given up loving one another as you did at first." It has been suggested that perhaps their zeal for orthodoxy in exposing false apostles had developed into a hypocritical, censorious spirit. This would remind us of those in the church today who have developed an unloving, suspicious, hypocritical keeper-of-orthodoxy complex.

There is no reason, however, to limit the meaning of "first love" to love for the brethren. Richard Weymouth renders the verse: "You no longer love me as you did at first." Edgar Goodspeed's rendering, which is the literal sense of the Lord's reproof, can relate "first love" to God, Christ, and all men: "You do not love as you did at first." E. H. Plumtre has observed, "Whether 'the first love' is that which has God, or Christ, or men, for its object, I am not careful to enquire; for the true temper of love or charity includes all three."

It is significant that Jesus does not accuse the Ephesians of no longer having love for Him and their fellowmen, but of having a love less intense and soul-stirring than they had when they began the Christian life. The stream of their affection had not wholly dried up, but it was ebbing, having lost its original freshness. They were not any less orthodox than before. They offered no hospitality to heterodoxy. They still would not bear evil men. They still hated the evil deeds of the Nicolaitans. They still labored without growing weary and were patient in the face of adversity and opposition. But their religion had become a lifeless, mechanical, ritualistic thing, to be done out of a sense of cold duty rather than of glorious privilege, motivated more by fear than by love. Indeed, all the things for which the Lord praised the Ephesians may be present in any Christian even though there is a decay in love. Illustrative of this is the wife who is most faithful to her husband and yet has far less love for him than she had when they were first married. She has experienced a gradual decay in her love for him and yet still performs all her duties as a faithful wife.

In His censure of them, the Lord sends the Ephesians back to the time of their conversion to Him, when they experienced the freshness and glow of their first love for Him and their fellowmen. And there is a significant message here for every Christian who works for the Lord but is experiencing a decay in love. Do you remember the great love, joy, and gratitude that filled your heart when you first found Christ as your Saviour? You loved Christ and everybody, both saints and sinners. You hated sin and error. You worked for the Lord because you *wanted* to, not just because you *had* to. You found great joy in visiting the sick,



teaching others about Christ, attending worship services, encouraging the weak, restoring the fallen. You gave yourself without reservation in the service of the Lord. Are you now going through the motions of religion, fulfilling your responsibilities to the Lord, but only because you *have* to and not because you *want* to? Have you lost sight of heaven but not of hell, having no desire of going to the one but being fearful of going to the other? *Have you left your first love?*

William Mitchell's disquieting comments are worthy of our serious consideration: "Does it not often happen in the Christian life that the soul retains earnestness, patience, truth, endurance, a hatred of evil, long after it has left its first love; that its religious service is continued, apparently unaltered, while the spirit that prompted that service is changed for the worse? But though love is altered, there may yet remain a sense of duty. None without can detect the difference. The soul itself is perhaps hardly conscious of it: or if conscious of anything, it is that prayer is not so easy and pleasant as it used to be, that the thoughts are more wandering, that temptation is more attractive, and thanksgiving is irksome, unreal, and unblest. The whole tendency of our being is to deteriorate."

### ***Counsel***

Now that the Lord has both commended and censured the Ephesian church, He proceeds to offer it His worthy counsel, which, if followed, will be of incalculable value to it: "Remember therefore whence thou art fallen, and repent and do the first works; or else I come to thee, and will move thy lampstand out of its place, except thou repent." The Lord here counsels the Ephesian saints to remember how they have fallen from their first love, for it is only as they are convinced and convicted of their waning love for Him and their fellowmen that they will "repent and do the first works." Jesus wants them to plainly recognize that they have fallen from the heights of a glowing first love to the depths of a corroded and decayed love, thus jeopardizing their souls. If they would only seriously and soberly reflect on their unhappy plight, they would be in the position to repent, for repentance is best defined as "a change of mind on reflection" (*Liddell-Scott*). And once they repented they would be in the position to do the first works of which Jesus speaks, for reformation of life is always the logical outcome of repentance. See Acts 3:19.

What are these "first works"? Obviously, the works the Ephesians did which were motivated by their first love: works that expressed the fervency of great love for Christ and men, not works done only out of a sense of cold duty. John Culross said, "'And do the first works.' They might seem at Ephesus to have ground for saying, 'We have never ceased working from the very beginning,' and in a sense they had not. But their works were not the same as at first; in a measure the love was out

of them, the love that not merely made them vital, but gave them beauty in the Lord's sight. The summons to do the first works is, therefore, a summons to begin, as it were, over again, throwing love into every deed."

If the Ephesians saints should fail to remember whence they are fallen, and repent and do the first works, Jesus duly warns them: "I come to thee, and will move thy lampstand out of its place." A providential visitation of the Lord is meant here, resulting in the extinction of the church in Ephesus. Coldness and formality can only result in darkness. A church without the glow of its first love is a church that cannot reflect the glorious light of the Saviour, who is perfect love. It is a church that is dying and will eventually become dead unless it repents. This was the tragic fate of the church in Ephesus, which failed to heed the counsel of the Master. There has been no church in Ephesus for ages, and the sight of the ancient city is now a melancholy ruin. Cf. Acts 20:28-30.

Included in the letter written to the church in Ephesus is the Lord's counsel, "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches." This counsel is repeated in each of the other letters sent to the seven churches of Asia. It is obvious, then, that the letters to these churches were intended to benefit not only them but also all other churches of Christ in every age. And the singular pronouns "he" and "him" imply that each individual Christian is to consider these messages in light of his particular spiritual deficiencies and needs, for, after all, the only way the Lord's word can be received by His churches is by the individuals that compose them. Thus we are to understand that the Lord's message to the church in Ephesus is to be heeded by every Christian in every age who patiently labors for the Lord, who cannot bear evil men, who has not grown weary, but who has left his first love. And every church whose members generally have left their first love is warned by the Lord that unless it repents and does the first works, its lampstand will finally be removed from its place.

"He that hath an ear" is that member of Christ's body who has an opened ear—a circumcised ear, which springs from a circumcised heart. Cf. Acts 7:51. The heart that is receptive to the things of Christ will make the ear attentive and ready to receive the word of God. Notice also how such an ear will hear what "the Spirit saith." It is through the Spirit that Christ speaks. Prior to His departure from the earth, the Lord foretold concerning the Spirit: "He shall guide you into all the truth: for he shall not speak from himself; but what things soever he shall hear, these shall he speak" (John 16:13). Cf. John 14:26.

### ***Promise***

The Lord closes His message to the church in Ephesus with the promise, "To him that overcometh, to him will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the Paradise of God." The Greek word rendered here as "him that overcometh" is the same word rendered as "conqueror" in 6:2. It is

repeated at the close of each of the seven letters. It implies that the Christian life is a fight against sin and error, against the world and the devil (John 16:33; 1 John 2:13,14; 5:4,5). Cf. 1 Timothy 6:12; 2 Timothy 2:3. The special evil that prevailed among the Ephesians was the loss of their first love. The overcomer, then, in Ephesus would be the Christian who through divine grace would conquer every tendency to waning love, who would continually deepen and intensify his love for Christ and men. And every Christian should be a conqueror, overcoming every tendency to evil in his life. See 1 Corinthians 15:57; 1 John 5:4.

The promise the Lord here makes to the overcomer or conqueror, is that he will be in the Paradise of God, where he will eat of the tree of life. The word "Paradise," from the Greek *paradeisos*, originally meant a "park or pleasure-grounds" (*Liddell-Scott*). It is the word employed in the Septuagint to denote the garden of Eden. As it is used here it denotes the heavenly Eden, the realm of man's restored state in the presence of God. The "tree of life" denotes both the fact and perfect joy of eternal life in heaven. See 22:2,14. Thus the overcomer or conqueror will live for ever in perfect joy in the presence of his Maker.

### Questions

1. Discuss thoroughly the Lord's commendation of the Ephesian church: "Thou hast patience and didst bear for my name's sake, and hast not grown weary."
2. What did the Ephesians hate of the Nicolaitans? Who were the Nicolaitans?
3. Discuss thoroughly the Lord's censure of the Ephesians: "Thou didst leave thy first love."
4. What counsel does the Lord give the Ephesians, and what does He warn them of if they fail to heed this counsel?
5. Discuss the Lord's exhortation, "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches."
6. Discuss the promise the Lord makes to "him that overcometh."

## THE CHURCH IN SMYRNA

*“And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These things saith the first and the last, who was dead, and lived again: (9) I know thy tribulation, and thy poverty (but thou art rich), and the blasphemy of them that say they are Jews, and they are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. (10) Fear not the things which thou art about to suffer; behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days. Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee the crown of life. (11) He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches. He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death” (2:8-11).*

### **Address**

The second of the letters to the seven churches of Asia is addressed to the angel of the church in Smyrna.

Smyrna was located in Ionia, about fifty miles north of Ephesus, at the head of a gulf which reaches thirty miles inland. It was founded about 1000 B.C. by colonists from Lesbos, at a place now called Bournabat, a short distance from the present Smyrna. Shortly before 688 B.C. it was captured by the Ionians, under whose rule it became a very rich and powerful city. About 580 B.C. it was destroyed by Alyattes, king of Lydia. Nearly 300 years afterwards Antigonus (323-301 B.C.), and then Lysimachus, undertook to rebuild it on its present sight. Subsequently composed of the Kingdom of Pergamus, it was ceded in 133 B.C. to the Romans.

During Roman times it surpassed Ephesus both as a seaport and trading center, disputing with that city and Pergumum the claim to “the first city of Asia.” Many considered it to be the most brilliant city in all of Asia Minor. Its streets were wide and paved. It was widely celebrated for its schools of medicine and science. Among its many magnificent and beautiful buildings was the Homerium, built in honor of Homer, for Smyrna was one of the many places that claimed to be the birthplace of the poet. A crown of buildings encircled Mount Pagus, which presented a magnificent view of the harbor. On the mountain’s slope was a theater which seated 20,000 spectators. A citadel also stood on the mountain, which was called “The Golden Lined Palace.” The temple of Cybele and the Acropolis adjoined the palace. These edifices are reported to have girded the mountain, glittering like a crown; thus Smyrna was often called “the crown city.” Then, too, the citadel itself was called “the crown of Smyrna.” In 23 A.D. a temple was erected in honor of Tiberius and his mother Julia. The Golden Street, connecting the temples of Cybele and Zeus, is said to have been the best in any city of the ancient world.

Smyrna was a center for the worship of Dionysus, originally a nature god of fruitfulness and vegetation who eventually became the god of wine. The mock death, burial, and resurrection of Dionysus was celebrated annually. During the year it was rehearsed and practiced frequently, and then finally on a certain day it was celebrated following a great feast. The priests who officiated at this ceremony were given crowns.

Smyrna was enthusiastically Roman. As early as 195 B.C. it had dedicated a temple to the goddess Roma. About a century later, on learning at a public assembly of the privation being endured by a Roman army in the extreme cold of a winter campaign, its citizens stripped themselves of their own clothes for its relief. Smyrna prided itself on its faithful adherence to its alliance with Rome, and in turn it was held in great esteem by the imperial authorities. Cicero described it as "the city of our most faithful and ancient allies." In 26 A.D., after severe competition, it was chosen by the Roman senate, in preference to Ephesus and Sardis, as the site of a new temple to be erected in proconsular Asia for the worship of the emperor Tiberius.

No authentic information remains as to the time and circumstances of the establishment of the church in Smyrna. In all probability, from its close proximity and commercial relations with Ephesus, the gospel first reached Smyrna from that city. We do not find it visited by any of the apostles or mentioned in any of the New Testament books except Revelation. Some Christians who were merchants or who had been led to settle in the city may have formed the nucleus of a congregation there, which, toward the end of the first century, had become eminent for its fidelity in the face of persecution.

In His address to the church in Smyrna, Jesus describes Himself as "the first and the last, who was dead, and lived again." The significance of this title in its particular setting is seen when we recall the religious facts concerning Smyrna that we have just noted. This title is especially fitting when we realize that it describes the One who *actually* "became dead" (see footnote in American Standard Version) and *actually* "lived again." It was no pretended death, burial, and resurrection that the Lord experienced. The death, burial, and resurrection of the god Dionysus was sheer fancy; but the death, burial, and resurrection of the only begotten Son of God, Deity manifest in the flesh, was absolute reality. No mock Deity and Saviour is He!

Affirming that He is "the first and the last," Christ claims absolute Deity for Himself. He always did exist and He always will exist. John the Baptist testified concerning Him: "He that cometh after me is become before me: for he was before me" (John 1:15). Jesus testified concerning Himself: "Before Abraham was born, I am" (John 8:58); "I am alive for evermore" (1:18). The Hebrew letter testifies concerning Him: "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today, yea and for ever" (13:8). See John 1:1-3.

The eternity of Christ had a very special significance to the saints in Smyrna. As we shall see more fully later, they were being subjected to the most frightful persecution. Jesus, who is absolute Deity, who is the origin of all things and upholds all things by the word of His power (Hebrews 1:1-3), would remind them that they can depend on His unchanging love and power, that nothing is happening to them that is not His concern. He would remind them that when all others are gone He will still be with them, to comfort, strengthen, and encourage them. He would remind them that nothing can separate them from His love, not "tribulation, or anguish, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword" (Romans 8:35). They must continually realize that He who is eternal, who is without beginning and without end, will not leave them nor forsake them. See Matthew 28:20; Hebrews 13:5,6. He who is "the first and the last" would say to them, "I who gave you life will also preserve you. I began the conflict, and I will terminate the fight."

When the Lord reminds the Smyrnans that He "was [became] dead and lived again," it is as if He says to them, "I who lived in the flesh know what persecution is, even unto death. I have been through what you are now going through. They did their worst to me, but I live! I conquered death. Because I live, you shall live also. Therefore, be not afraid of what men can do to you. They may kill your body, but they cannot kill your soul. As death was to me but the gate to eternal glory, so also shall it be to you." Cf. Hebrews 12:1,2.

The affirmation of Jesus concerning Himself in His message to the saints in Smyrna was calculated to sustain them in their tribulation, and it is calculated to do the same for all other saints in every age, whatever troubles and trials they face. Jesus cared for His disciples in Smyrna, and He cares for us who are His disciples today. He supported and sustained them in their hours of trial and adversity, and He will sustain us in our hours of trial and adversity. Through His resurrection they conquered death, and through His resurrection we also shall conquer death.

### **Commendation**

It is noteworthy that only two of the seven churches of Asia received praise unmixed with censure from the Lord: Smyrna and Philadelphia. This, however, does not mean that they were perfect, entirely devoid of sin. "In many things we all stumble" (James 3:2). "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8). There has never been a perfect Christian; and since a congregation consists solely of the Christians who compose it, there has never been a perfect congregation. But even though the churches in Smyrna and Philadelphia were not entirely blameless, they were *essentially* blameless in that their members were sincerely striving by divine grace to love and serve the Lord. The Lord could well overlook their shortcomings

so long as they were growing in their love for and devotion to Him, so long as the direction of their lives was upward rather than downward. And He still holds His disciples *essentially* blameless who have the same loving devotion to Him as His disciples in Smyrna and Philadelphia. See 1 John 1:5-10.

The Lord begins His commendation of the church in Smyrna: "I know thy tribulation." The quotation here is from the American Standard Version, and it is to be noted that the phrase "I know thy works," found in the Authorized Version, is omitted. This is as it should be according to the majority of the ancient Greek texts. But is not the "tribulation" of which the Lord speaks a *work* of patience? It is obvious that if the saints in Smyrna had not borne witness to the name of Christ in Christ-like works, they would not have suffered tribulation for His name. Fellowship in the suffering of Christ is always the result of fellowship in the work of Christ.

The word "tribulation" is from the Greek *thlipsis*, literally meaning "pressing, pressing together, pressure," suggesting the threshing-rollers used by the Romans, those great stones which ground wheat and forced the juice out of grapes. Here the word is used metaphorically to mean "oppression, affliction, distress, straits" (Joseph Thayer). It signifies trials of all kinds. Because of their loyalty to Christ in courageously bearing witness to His blessed name, the saints in Smyrna were subjected to various trials or pressures.

One of the trials they faced was poverty. It is highly probable that the church in Smyrna was principally recruited from the lower strata of society, and its members suffered even greater poverty because of their faith. The persecution they endured partially involved the confiscation of their goods. Whatever prosperity any of them may have had at one time was whittled away through heavy fines levied by the Roman authorities or through the spoiling of their goods by pagan and Jewish mobs. Perhaps others of them earned a precarious living amid the ridicule of their former business competitors. Cf. Hebrews 10:32-34. They all knew what it cost a man to be a Christian, and they must have continually reminded themselves of the words of Christ: "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me" (Matthew 16:24); "So therefore whosoever he be of you that renounceth not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:33). How well do we understand and appreciate these words? How much are we willing to renounce in our lives in order to follow Christ? After all, what can we renounce for the sake of Christ as compared with what He renounced for us?

Well could the Lord exclaim to the saints in Smyrna, "I *know* thy tribulation, and thy poverty!" He *knew* not only by watching but also by His own experience, not only by observing the trials and privation they faced but also by having passed through the same experience.

1 Peter 4:1 declares that "Christ suffered in the flesh." Hebrews 5:2 speaks of Him as being "compassed with infirmity." See John 15:18-20. Jesus said, "The foxes have holes, and the birds of the heaven have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head" (Matthew 8:20). Paul declared, "For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9). Our blessed Lord was born in a stable. In death He was laid in a borrowed tomb. Because He Himself knew what it was to become poor for the sake of the kingdom, He could well understand the poverty of the saints in Smyrna, who so well followed His example.

Not only were the Smyrnans tried by tribulation and poverty but also by "the blasphemy of them that say they are Jews, and they are not, but are a synagogue of Satan." Here the Lord sums up in one terse statement the spiritual condition of the Jews in Smyrna. They were Jews by natural descent, but they were not spiritually of "the true circumcision." As Paul observed, "For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision which is outward in the flesh: but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God" (Romans 2:28,29). These Jews, who were uncircumcised in heart, blasphemed Christ as "the hanged one"; in turn they blasphemed, reviled, or insulted those who followed Christ. They bitterly opposed Christ and did everything they possibly could to persecute His followers. At Polycarp's martyrdom in Smyrna they joined the pagans in clamoring for his being cast to the lions; and when there was an obstacle to this, they then clamored for his being burned alive, carrying logs for the fire with their own hands.

In all probability, the vilifying of the church in Smyrna by the Jews had resulted in the poverty of many of its members. Because of their hatred for Christ's followers, the Jews would publish libelous statements concerning their character and manner of life. This would arouse the ire of the pagan population; and in all likelihood there followed the confiscation of the goods of many of them, which reduced them to dire poverty.

The Lord could deeply sympathize with these saints, because what they were passing through was in many senses almost identical with what He passed through. He Himself had also suffered the persecution and reviling of the Jews. See Matthew 26:67; Luke 16:14; 23:18-25; Acts 2:36.

So wicked were the Jews in Smyrna that Christ described them as "a synagogue of Satan." In rejecting the Son of God, they had rejected God Himself. In being opposed to Christ and His disciples, they proved themselves to be under the leadership of the arch-slanderer Satan whose perpetual aim is to degrade God and His blessed Son. They were "a company of people bearing the image of Satan, copying his example, doing



his work, and supporters of his rule.”

The persecuted, poverty-stricken, vilified saints in Smyrna were, in fact, the richest of the rich. In contrast to their physical suffering and privation, the Lord said to them, “But thou art rich,” as if to say, “The people of Smyrna count you poor, but I count you rich. The blasphemy of the Jews and the persecution of the pagans have virtually robbed you of everything, but you have lost nothing; you possess my unsearchable riches, even the riches you are laying up for yourselves in heaven.” They were consummately rich because they had Christ!

“*But thou art rich.*” These words remind us of the Lord’s conception of riches as revealed in His parable of the rich farmer (Luke 12:16-21). This man, designated by God as a fool, said to himself, “Thou hast much goods laid up for many years.” But how very foolish he was not to realize how really poor he was in the eyes of God! At the close of the parable Jesus said, “So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.” The saints in Smyrna were not laying up earthly riches for themselves, but they were truly rich toward God.

We are also reminded of the words of James 2:5, “Hearken, my beloved brethren; did not God choose them that are poor as to the world to be rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which he promised to them that love him?” The saints in Smyrna were indeed poor as to the world but rich in faith, in the principle that possesses the unseen and imperishable things of God.

And yet again we are reminded of Paul’s conception of his position, which perfectly harmonizes with the Lord’s estimate of the church in Smyrna: “As poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things” (2 Corinthians 6:10).

And now a question of prime importance: *Do you possess the imperishable spiritual riches, the unsearchable riches of Christ?*

### **Counsel**

Following His praise of the saints in Smyrna, Jesus counsels them: “Fear not the things which thou art about to suffer: behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days. Be thou faithful unto death.” We note that the Lord first counsels them to “fear not,” as He tells them of still heavier trials that are soon to come upon them. They have already been tried by tribulation; and they will soon be tried by even more severe persecution, as the devil will cast some of them into prison. The word “devil” in the Greek literally means “accuser.” Through his synagogue, the unconverted Jews, accusations were to be made against certain of the saints that would lead to their imprisonment. See Acts 12:3,4; 16:23.

Jesus affirms that they would be “tried” by this persecution. Richard Trench observed, “The same event is often a *temptation* from the devil and a *trial* from God—God sifting and winnowing the man to separate

his chaff from his wheat, the devil sifting him in the hope that nothing but chaff will be found in him." See James 1:12; 1 Peter 1:6-9.

The duration of their persecution was to be "ten days." It is possible that Jesus here signifies literally ten days. It is also possible that the number ten is used here to denote a few days or short time. Cf. Genesis 24:55. But whether ten literal days, a few days, or many days is the intended meaning, the time would be just for a moment in contrast to eternity. See 2 Corinthians 4:17; James 4:14. It would not be difficult for the saints in Smyrna to obey the Lord's command, "fear not the things which thou art about to suffer," when they contemplated the short duration of their impending suffering in contrast to the eternal joy awaiting them in heaven. Then, too, the knowledge that Christ had not forsaken them, but would continue to be with them throughout all their trials, would also be a source of comfort and courage to them.

And Christians today still face trials that can only last for a little while; they still have the promise of Christ's abiding presence. Thus they still have the same solid basis as the saints in Smyrna for obeying the Lord's command, "Fear not."

With the danger of death continually facing His disciples in Smyrna, the Lord exhorted them, "Be thou faithful unto death." They were to be faithful even to the very limits of death. They were to trust in Christ, to be loyal to Him, even when they were threatened with death as the penalty for being His disciples. In plain language, they were to risk their necks for Him. And what are we willing to risk for Christ? It is plainly evident that those in the church who are unwilling to suffer the slight discomfiture of inclement weather or a few aches and pains to attend religious services and to visit the sick, will never be willing to give up their lives for Christ. They are not truly faithful disciples of Christ, even though they may boast of membership in His church. Neither are those in the church truly faithful to Him who are willing to endure some persecution and discomfiture for His sake, but not to the extent of losing their lives. He who gave His all for us demands that we be willing to give our all for Him, for only by such fidelity can there be the access to God's grace that makes heaven possible.

### **Promise**

To His command, "Be thou faithful unto death," Jesus adds the precious promise, "I will give thee the crown of life." The word "crown" is from the Greek *stephanos*, designating a crown of victory and used here as a symbol of life itself, eternal life in heaven, which is the gracious gift of Christ given to every saint who remains faithful to Him throughout all the trials of life. Those who are willing to die for Christ are those who will eternally live with Him. In losing their lives for His sake, they shall find them (Matthew 10:39).

In facing death for the sake of Christ, the saints in Smyrna were actually facing life, even life eternal, the ultimate outcome of fidelity

to Christ. Out of their tribulation was to come triumph. Out of their loss was to come gain. They had committed "their souls in well-doing unto a faithful Creator" (1 Peter 4:19), and they could have absolute assurance that death would only be to them the transition from the trials of this world to the perfect, unending life with Him whose promises cannot be broken. Do you have this same unshakeable assurance and hope that your fidelity to Christ will be acknowledge by Him in the world to come with a crown of life? See 2 Timothy 1:12.

The Lord closes His message to the church in Smyrna with the promise, "He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death." Man has the power to persecute the Lord's followers, even unto death; but that is the limit of his power over them. He can administer death to their bodies but not to their souls. See Matthew 10:28. And so the ultimate death faithful Christians will suffer will be physical death, the first death, and not the second death, which is eternal separation from God in "the lake that burneth with fire and brimstone" (21:8). Thus those who overcome the trials of life by the grace and power of Christ can face eternity without fear, knowing that they can never be hurt by that death which is really death.

*"He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches."*

### Questions

1. Describe the city of Smyrna.
2. Discuss thoroughly the significance of the Lord's description of Himself in the address of His message to the church in Smyrna.
3. Which churches among the seven churches of Asia received praise unmixed with censure from the Lord? Why do we know that they were not entirely devoid of sin?
4. Discuss the Lord's commendation of the church in Smyrna: "I know thy tribulation, and thy poverty."
5. Discuss "the blasphemy of them that say they are Jews, and they are not, but are a synagoge of Satan."
6. Why could the Lord deeply sympathize with the saints in Smyrna concerning the trials they faced?
7. In what sense were the saints in Smyrna rich?
8. Discuss thoroughly the counsel Jesus gave the church in Smyrna.
9. What is meant by the Lord's promise to His faithful disciples of a "crown of life"?
10. What is the "second death," which Jesus promises will not hurt the person who overcomes?

### THE CHURCH IN PERGAMUM

*“And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These things saith he that hath the sharp two-edged sword: (13) I know where thou dwellest, even where Satan’s throne is; and thou holdest fast my name, and didst not deny my faith, even in the days of Antipas my witness, my faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwelleth. (14) But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there some that hold the teaching of Baalam, who taught Balak to cast a stumbling-block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit fornication. (15) So hast thou also some that hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans in like manner. (16) Repent therefore; or else I come to thee quickly, and will make war against them with the sword of my mouth. (17) He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches. To him that overcometh, to him will I give of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and upon the stone a new name written, which no one knoweth but he that receiveth it” (2:12-17).*

#### **Address**

The third of the letters to the seven churches of Asia is addressed to the angel of the church in Pergamum.

When the empire of Alexander the Great was broken up, following his death, Pergamum became the capital of the powerful, wealthy, and independent kingdom of Mysia. It was located about sixty-five miles northwest of Smyrna. In the second century before Christ, its king founded a library, reported to have contained 200,000 volumes, which later Anthony gave Cleopatra. It became a center of art, culture, and learning. It is interesting to note that the word “parchment” is derived ultimately from the Latin *Pergamena charta*, literally meaning “paper of Pergamum,” and it is held by certain authorities that parchment was invented in Pergamum for the purpose of transcribing books for its great library.

Pergamum became a Roman city in 133 B.C. when Attalus III willed his kingdom to the Roman government. On a hill a thousand feet high behind the city were temples to Zeus, the chief of gods, to Dionysus, the god of wine, to Athena, the goddess of wisdom, and to Aesculapius, the god of medicine. It became the center of the Roman provincial administration and of emperor worship. In 29 B.C. it erected a temple to “Roma and Augustus.” Temples were later erected in honor of Trajan and Severus. A title which it bore, “*Thrice Neokorus*,” meant that in the city three temples had been built to the Roman emperors, in which the emperors were worshipped as gods.

Invalids from all over Asia flocked to the temple of Aesculapius seek-

ing to be cured. It was believed that the remedies that would heal their maladies were revealed to the priests and physicians by means of dreams. Many miraculous healings were claimed, in token of which those who claimed to be so healed made offerings. There was a school of medicine in connection with the temple. Associated with it in the second century A.D. was the famous physician and author Galen. Aesculapius was always associated with the serpent. When he was not shown in the actual form of a serpent, he was depicted as holding a staff with a serpent wreathed around it. This inevitably suggested to both Jew and Christian the worship of the serpent, Satan himself, which was to them a particularly repulsive form of paganism.

We have no account whatever of the establishment of the church in Pergamum. The only instance in which it is mentioned in the New Testament is in this address. There is no reference to it in the ante-Nicene fathers. Some have supposed that Paul, during his extensive work in that part of the world, must have visited a place of such importance, but that is mere conjecture.

Christ speaks of the church in Pergamum as the One "that hath the sharp two-edged sword." That sword is the symbol of the discerning, convicting, converting, and punishing power of the word of God. See Ephesians 6:17; Hebrews 4:12,13. The divine word has the searching power to convict and convert some (verse 13,17) and to condemn to punishment others (verse 14-16). "On the one hand, it was to smite that it might heal, cutting to the quick, reaching the conscience, laying bare the hidden depths of each man's life. On the other, it was also quick and powerful to smite and to destroy."

### ***Commendation***

The Lord's commendation of the saints in Pergamum is accentuated by the fact that they followed Him in an environment that made it exceedingly difficult to maintain any semblance at all of loyalty to Him. Pergamum is described as the place "where Satan's throne is" and "where Satan dwelleth," suggesting the moral and religious corruption that prevailed there. It exceeded all other cities at that time in wickedness. Its pagan inhabitants lived in luxury, accompanied by great vice. Its moral condition tended to be degraded still more by continual contact with strangers from all over the Roman world who came to taste of its luxury and sensuality. It probably had in it more idols than any other place in Asia.

In commending the church in Pergamum for its fidelity in the face of persecution and moral and religious corruption, the Lord first declares, "Thou holdest fast my name." Christ's name is the symbol of His person, and these words of praise affirm that the saints in Pergamum had not denied the person of Christ, but continued to acknowledge Him as their Saviour, Lord, and Master.

Next, the Lord praises the church in Pergamum: "Thou didst not deny my faith." If the Lord intends these words as an explanation of His previous commendation, then the rendering of many of the modern translations is correct: "Thou didst not deny your faith in me." The idea here would be that the church addressed had held fast the name of Christ by maintaining faith in His person. However, if the reading used in this discussion is correct, from the American Standard Version, the Lord did not have in mind the faith of the Christian but *His* faith, which would be the system of religion as revealed by Him. Thus his commendation here of the church in Pergamum would be for its loyal stand concerning His teaching. Not only had they stood fast for the *person* of Christ but also for the *doctrine* of Christ.

The Lord portrays a striking example of loyalty to Him and His word in the church in Pergamum: ". . . Antipas my witness, my faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwelleth." It seems that the rage of Satan against the Lord's followers had broken out in some kind of popular outbreak against the church in Pergamum, resulting in the death of Antipas. Cf. Acts 7; 14:19. How little we know about this man! His name is mentioned only once in the sacred writings. His age, marital status, profession, etc. are all unknown to us. Yet we do know that this simple, obscure Christian held fast to his faith in Christ when the hour of trial came, and his name has come down to us through the centuries as part of the rich spiritual legacy our noble Christian predecessors have left us.

Every Christian in every age is surrounded by evil, to be confronted by some kind of persecution for his loyalty to Christ. Cf. John 15:19,20; 16:33; Acts 14:22; 2 Timothy 3:12. Satan still rages against the Lord's disciples, seeking their destruction. Thus they must ever strive by God's grace to hold fast the Lord's name and to be loyal to His faith or teaching. Can the Lord say to you, "Thou holdest fast my name, and didst not deny my faith"?

### **Censure**

In his complaint against the church in Pergamum (verses 14,15), the Lord does not direct His censure at those who were guilty of holding false teaching but at those who had fellowship with them. He does not say, "I have a few things against some that hold the teaching of Baalam, etc.," but rather, "I have a few things against *thee*, because thou *hast* there some that hold the teaching of Baalam, etc." Of course, the censure of those who held false teaching is necessarily implied (verse 16), but the Lord here is directly rebuking the church for its compromise with error, for allowing false teaching and sin to remain in its midst. Not only was the church in Pergamum threatened by paganism from without but also by compromise from within. The latter was potentially more dangerous to the cause of Christ than the former. See 1 Corinthians 5:1-6.

There is a lesson from the Lord's rebuke here for churches of Christ today. When error and sin are tolerated in any congregation, the Lord is sorely displeased. We who claim to be true disciples of Christ must face up to our responsibility to labor for the purity of the church in both doctrine and practice. It is not enough that we ourselves hold fast the name of Christ and do not deny His faith; we must not tolerate within the borders of the kingdom those who persist in lowering the standard of truth's requirements. We must have the courage and integrity to obey God's word in denying fellowship to any member of the church who persistently engages in false teaching and ungodly living. See 1 Corinthians 5:9-13.

What, then, was the false teaching which the church in Pergamum tolerated and to which Jesus took objection? The Lord first mentions "the teaching of Baalam, who taught Balak to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit fornication." This reference to Baalam was originally recorded in Numbers 25:1-3; 31:16. See 2 Peter 2:15. Overmastered by God when he attempted to curse Israel, Baalam later taught Balak to entice the Israelites to mix with his people in their religious rites, which not only involved the worship of idols but also the eating of things sacrificed to idols and the committing of fornication. A similar teaching was held by certain members of the church in Pergamum, who affirmed that it was not wrong for Christians to eat meat which had been sacrificed to idols and to commit fornication.

The Biblical law against fornication is *absolute*; it is wrong under any and all circumstances (Ephesians 5:3). But the Bible only prohibits the eating of meat which has been sacrificed to idols *relatively*, depending on the particular place and occasion. This practice is only wrong when it could be construed as tacit endorsement of the worship of idols or when it could be an occasion of stumbling for certain of one's fellowmen. The early Christians, who lived in a pagan society, had to recognize that although the meat offered to idols was the same as the flesh of animals slaughtered for other purposes, they could not afford to exercise any freedom they might have in this matter when by doing so their influence for good would be hindered. See Acts 15:29; 1 Corinthians 8; 10:14-33. But there were those in the church in Pergamum who, in addition to teaching that it was right to commit fornication, also taught that it was perfectly in order under all circumstances to eat meat sacrificed to idols. Thus it would seem that they induced certain of their fellow church members to attend the pagan rites and feasts and to knowingly eat of things sacrificed to idols, which resulted in injury to the cause of Christ.

Members of the church today must still exercise every precaution possible in dealing with non-Christians to see that none of their relationships with them are such as to hinder their influence for good. Even though they have certain rights in the realm of indifferent matters, they

must never exercise these rights when the cause of Christ and Christian charity demand that they forego them. They must steadfastly resist every teaching, whether from within or without the church, that would place their rights and liberties above their influence for good.

In His complaint against the church in Pergamum, the Lord next says, "So hast thou also some that hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans in like manner." The words "thou also" probably mean that in addition to the church having those that held the teaching of Baalam, it also had those that held the teaching of the Nicolaitans. However, many expositors regard the Nicolaitans and the followers of Baalam as identical.

Nothing is known definitely respecting the Nicolaitans except that their doctrine and deeds were most wicked. But several of the leaders in the early church affirmed that they were a sect of the Gnostics, who taught that Christians were not under the obligations of morality. It is indeed possible that the Nicolaitans were out-and-out antinomians; that is, people who affirmed that moral law was not binding on Christians. This word means "those against law." Such a diabolical perversion of the teaching of Christ has, strange as it may seem, cropped up in the church again and again. Because men are saved by grace through faith, and not by their own merits or works, it was argued that an "elect person" did not sin even when doing what in another would be wrong. A saved person, then, could commit such an act as fornication without sinning. The antinomians have been described as "patrons of free vice under the mask of free grace." Cf. Romans 6:1,2.

We can readily see how the teaching of such a doctrine in the church in Pergamum, or, for that matter, in any other church, could have induced some of the members to commit fornication and other sins, thus to wreck moral havoc in the church. It is obvious to the genuine believer in Christ that any doctrine that gives license to transgression of God's law, under whatever pretext, is consummately evil, to be rejected by all who would please their divine Master. Those in the church that hold any such doctrine must be denied the fellowship of every Christian who is striving to abstain from evil and to do good.

### ***Counsel***

Now the Lord, having plainly stated His complaint against the church in Pergamum, commands it to repent. Repent of what? Its tolerance of false doctrine within its borders, its failure to maintain discipline among its members. Although the word "repent" in the Greek literally means "to change the mind," as it is used here it also implies the proper course of action in keeping with the necessary change of mind. The saints in Pergamum were not only to change their minds concerning the toleration of false teaching; they were also to follow through with the proper disciplining of those holding false teaching. See Galatians 6:1; Romans 16:17.



The urgency of the Lord's command for the church in Pergamum to repent is revealed in the words that immediately follow: "or else I come to thee quickly." The judgment the Lord had passed on those who held to the pernicious errors of Baalam and the Nicolaitans was soon to fall, and only by the immediate repentance of the church could it be averted.

How dangerous indeed it is for any church to procrastinate when the Lord demands that it repent of its toleration of error and evil! Too often churches will excuse their dereliction of duty in dealing with false teachers and evildoers in their midst by arguing that things will just "work themselves out" and that there is no need of "rocking the boat" or of "agitating the situation." But this only compounds the trouble; error and sin will continue to know away at the spiritual vitals of the church.

We must note that although the Lord commands the church in Pergamum to repent of its failure to discipline the false teachers in its midst, He does not threaten to make war against it as such if it fails to repent but against those holding the errors of Baalam and the Nicolaitans: "I come to *thee* quickly, and I will make war against *them*, with the sword of my mouth." This does not mean, however, that the failure of church to repent would not bring upon it the chastisement of the Lord, but that His opposition would be primarily directed against the false teachers. By the sword of His mouth He threatens to make war against them. This means that He would give the order and some kind of punishment would fall on them. To keep this from happening, it was the responsibility of the church to strive diligently to lead these false teachers back to the Lord. And if we today are truly concerned about the spiritual welfare of those in the church who hold false teaching, truly desirous that they fall not under divine judgment, we also will diligently strive to lead them back to the Lord.

### ***Promise***

After urging "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches," the Lord makes a wonderful promise to "him that overcometh." The first half of this promise is "the hidden manna." The allusion to *hidden* manna is probably to that which was hidden in the ark, symbolizing the heavenly bread that spiritually sustains God's children now and will sustain them throughout all eternity. See John 6:30-35. The spiritual conquerors in Pergamum would be fed by the Lord Himself, to have their souls forever nourished by the heavenly manna He would give them. This manna is hidden from the world, but it is revealed to true believers in Christ, who enjoy its sustaining power now and have the living hope of being nourished by it in the world to come.

The second half of the Lord's promise to the spiritual conquerors is "a white stone," with a new name written upon it known only to the one who receives it. Commentators are greatly divided in their opinions as

to the meaning of this symbolism. But in all probability the white stone here has its counterpart in the white stone used in the classical world as an acquittal in court. Describing his persecution of the church prior to his conversion, Paul said, "And when they were put to death I gave my vote against them" (Acts 26:10). The Greek *psephon*, rendered here as "vote," does not mean a verbal utterance but a voting pebble. Paul cast his voting stone against the followers of Jesus, but Jesus casts His voting stone in favor of them.

But what is the new name written on this white stone, which is known only to the one receiving it? A. R. Faussett refers it to the name of Christ: "The 'new name' is Christ's (cf. 3:12); some new revelation of Himself which shall hereafter be imparted to His people and which they alone are capable of receiving." Alexander Maclaren refers it to the heavenly state of the Christian: ". . . a nature renewed, of new functions committed to the conqueror, of new spheres, new closeness of approach to Him, new capacities, and new powers . . . of a body which is a fit organ for the spirit."

### Questions

1. Describe the city of Pergamum.
2. What is meant by the description of Jesus as "he that hath the sharp two-edged sword"?
3. What is meant by the description of Pergamum as the place "where Satan's throne is" and "where Satan dwelleth"?
4. Discuss thoroughly the Lord's commendation of the church in Pergamum.
5. Who was Antipas?
6. Discuss thoroughly the Lord's censure of the church in Pergamum.
7. Of what was the church in Pergamum to repent? What would happen if it failed to repent?
8. Discuss the Lord's promise given to "him that overcometh."

## THE CHURCH IN THYATIRA

*“And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: These things saith the Son of God, who hath his eyes like a flame of fire, and his feet are like unto burnished brass: (19) I know thy works, and thy love and faith and ministry and patience, and that thy last works are more than the first. (20) But I have this against thee, that thou sufferest the woman Jezebel, who calleth herself a prophetess; and she teacheth my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed to idols. (21) And I gave her time that she should repent; and she willeth not to repent of her fornication. (22) Behold, I cast her into a bed, and them that commit adultery with her into great tribulation, except they repent of her works. (23) And I will kill her children with death; and all the churches shall know that I am he that searcheth the reins and hearts: and I will give unto each one of you according to your works. (24) But to you I say, to the rest that are in Thyatira, as many as have not this teaching, who know not the deep things of Satan, as they are wont to say; I cast upon you none other burden. (25) Nevertheless that which ye have, hold fast till I come. (26) And he that overcometh, and he that keepeth my works unto the end, to him will I give authority over the nations: (27) and he shall rule them with a rod of iron, as the vessels of the potter are broken to shivers; as I also have received of my Father: (28) and I will give him the morning star. (29) He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches” (2:18-29).*

### **Address**

The fourth of the letters to the seven churches of Asia is addressed to the angel of the church in Thyatira.

Thyatira (Greek *thuateria*, meaning “the castle of Thya”) was a wealthy town in the northern part of Lydia, situated on the river Lycus. Before it was refounded by Seleucus Nicator in the third century B.C., it was a small, insignificant town. Although it never became a metropolis, it developed into a commercial center, deriving its wealth from the Lycus valley. Several gods were worshipped there, such as Aesculapius, Baachus, Artemis, and above all Apollo, in whose honor games were instituted.

Lydia, the seller of purple who was converted by Paul at Philippi, was from Thyatira (Acts 16:13-15). Her home town was famous for the dyed goods she sold, the color of which today is known as Turkish red.

Thyatira was especially well known for its trade guilds, which were probably more extensive and better organized than in any other city of the ancient world. Every artisan belonged to a guild, and every guild wielded a wide influence. These guilds were closely connected with the

various forms of pagan worship carried on in the city. Their periodical feasts involved the eating of things sacrificed to idols and were the occasion of sexual immorality, which practices are severely denounced in the Lord's message to the church in Thyatira. It was taught by many in the early church that no Christian might belong to one of these guilds since certain practices associated with them were opposed to Christianity.

According to Acts 19:10, Paul may have preached in Thyatira while he lived in Ephesus, although this is not certain. No account is extant concerning the establishment of the church in this city.

In His address to the church in Thyatira, Jesus refers to Himself as "the Son of God, who hath his eyes like a flame of fire, and his feet are like unto burnished brass." This is the first time in the seven letters that the name of the speaker is designated: "the Son of God." This name solemnly affirms the Lord's divine power and prepares those who are to receive His message for the power promised them in verses 26 and 27. The portrayal of Christ as having "eyes like a flame of fire" is symbolic of His omniscience, designating the One who sees all that transpires in the church. The symbolism of "his feet are like unto burnished brass" pertains to the firmness of His tread when He comes to destroy those who are guilty of the sins His all-seeing eyes have discovered. An aspect of stern sovereignty and power characterizes this epistle.

### ***Commendation***

The Lord commends the church in Thyatira: "I know thy works, and thy love and ministry and patience, and that thy last works are more than the first." This commendation implies that a church's only security is in going forward. This the church in Thyatira was essentially doing: its last works were more than the first. It was "pressing on toward the goal unto the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:14), working more and more in behalf of Christ. We are reminded here of Paul's injunction in 1 Thessalonians 4:1, "Finally then, brethren, we beseech and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that, as ye received of us how ye ought to walk and to please God, even as ye do walk—that ye abound more and more." It is a scriptural axiom that there cannot be too many good works after one is saved by grace.

The church in Thyatira abounded more and more in its love, faith, patience, and ministry. Unlike the church in Ephesus, whose love was waning, it was deepening its love for both God and men. It was growing in its faith, in the principle of dependence upon the Lord. It was growing in its patience, in steadfastness and perseverance under affliction and persecution. It was growing in its ministry, in all readiness to serve and help one another.

Is such growth characteristic of the congregation to which you belong? Or rather is it characteristic of you personally? Each Christian would do well to take a good, candid look at his present spiritual state and see

how it compares with his spiritual state when he was first converted to Christ. Has there been steady growth in love, faith, patience, and ministry, or has there been a decline in all this? No one can stand still in the Christian life. Either his works in behalf of Christ are increasing or decreasing. If any Christian is truly concerned about his eternal destiny and relationship to Christ, he will give the most serious consideration to his need for continual spiritual growth.

### *Censure*

Even though the church in Thyatira was doing more for the Lord than ever before, it still fell short of the will of God, with the Lord forthrightly expressing His disapproval: "But I have this against thee, that thou sufferest the woman Jezebel, who calleth herself a prophetess; and she teacheth and seduceth my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed to idols." It cannot be overemphasized that the sin of this church consisted in the fact that it raised no protest against the woman Jezebel, that it allowed her to promulgate under its shelter the terrible teaching that had also plagued the church in Pergamum, with the most disastrous results. We must observe that the church as such is not charged with complicity in this teaching, but with the toleration of it. Even though its love was abounding in good works, it lacked the moral force and courage to eradicate the evil from its midst. Its love had in it the element of sweet sentimentality that tacitly condoned sin in its midst for fear of causing a disturbance, thus greatly hindering the cause of Christ. And sweetly sentimental members of the church today are also guilty of hindering the cause of Christ as they refuse to courageously and openly take a stand against those in the church who persist in rebellion against God. They need the love that "abounds yet more and more in knowledge and all discernment" (Philippians 1:9), the love that realistically recognizes the presence of sin in the church and that faithfully deals with it according to the will of the Lord.

Who was "the woman Jezebel"? Her name, after Ahab's idolatrous wife, is plainly symbolical, used here as a nickname. She was evidently a woman of the same depraved character as the one for whom she was named. Ahab's wife led her husband to worship Baal, with the consequent killing of the Lord's prophets and the throwing down of His altars. So evil was her influence on him that he "did yet more to provoke Jehovah, the God of Israel, to anger than all the kings that were before him" (1 Kings 16:33). She was obviously a highly persuasive person who utilized whatever means she had available, however unscrupulous, to accomplish her purpose and to reach her goal. For the whole story see 1 Kings 16:29 to 2 Kings 9:37.

The Jezebel of the church in Thyatira was also an unscrupulous woman who was most capable of influencing others to commit wrongdoing. She even went so far as to claim that she was a prophetess, a divinely in-

spired teacher. But she was an utterly false prophetess, whose teaching is portrayed as "the deep things of Satan." She and others who held to her teaching probably boasted of knowing the deep things of God, but the Lord knew that such diabolic teaching was not from the depths of God but from the depths of Satan. What they claimed for themselves was essentially the same as what the Gnostics claimed for themselves, expressed in their arrogant title, meaning "full of knowledge."

There most certainly are deep things of God revealed in His word, and every Christian who desires to grow in the knowledge of the divine word will probe deeper and deeper into its unsearchable riches. Cf. 1 Corinthians 2:6-10; 2 Peter 3:15,16; Hebrews 5:11-14. But beware of those teachers and preachers in the church who boast of their superior knowledge of the Bible, who constantly talk about the *deep* things of God. Their so-called deep things can be from the devil and not from God. In their supposed probing of the depths of God's word, they can overlook, even ridicule and reject, some of its more obvious and basic truths. Their teaching can be purely speculative, after the wisdom of men rather than the wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 2:5). In their intellectual snobbery they assume a disdainful attitude toward those in the church whom they consider their inferiors in divine wisdom and knowledge. They are as potentially dangerous to the life of the church as those teachers and preachers whose sterile conservatism never allows them to go beyond the shallows in their study and presentation of God's word.

In His complaint against the saints in Thyatira for allowing the woman Jezebel to promulgate her ungodly teaching, Jesus informs them that He "gave her time that she should repent; and she willeth not to repent of her fornication." Jezebel was not only guilty of teaching and seducing others to commit fornication but of practicing this sin herself. Yet the Lord had not given up on her; He still evidenced loving concern for her spiritual welfare, desiring her to be His faithful, loving disciple. He had been longsuffering toward her, having given her sufficient time to repent. Cf. 2 Peter 3:9. But she was so depraved and hardened in sin that she stubbornly refused to repent and receive the Lord's forgiveness. Now waiting for her was the judgment of the Lord, whose grace, love, and mercy she had spurned. The Lord declared, "Behold, I cast her into a bed." This figure is in keeping with her sin, and it suggests a fitting judgment. She had defiled the literal bed by her fornication, and now she was to be cast into a bed of suffering and anguish. Perhaps some sickness was to be brought upon her as a temporal punishment for her sins. If such a punishment did not bring her to repentance, waiting for her would be the more terrible bed of perdition where she would suffer forever the consequences of her sins and impenitent heart. See 1 Corinthians 11:29-32.

How dangerous indeed it is for any member of the body of Christ to backslide into sin and to continually spurn the entreaties of the sacred

scriptures for repentance! It is obvious, of course, that as long as he has the capacity for repentance, the temporal punishment he suffers as the consequences of his sins may bring him to his senses and consequently to the Lord's forgiveness. But it is entirely possible for him to reach the point of no return where the relish for the things of the spirit has been destroyed, so that he no longer has the ability to repent of his sins. Now waiting for him is the anguish of eternal perdition. Cf. Hebrews 6:4-6; 10:26,27.

The Lord next declares that He will "cast them that commit adultery with her into great tribulation, except they repent of her works. And I will kill her children with death; and all the churches shall know that I am he that searcheth the reins and hearts." There is widespread disagreement among Biblical commentators as to the difference between "them that commit adultery with her" and "her children." It may be that the former were sufficiently influenced by Jezebel to compromise their spiritual loyalties, whereas the latter wholly embraced her doctrine. M. F. Sadler observed that "this adultery is in all probability spiritual adultery, i.e. idolatry; and 'with her' means, not that they committed actual adultery, but were followers of her leading, and instruments of seducing others into idolatry . . . Her children here must be distinguished from those who commit adultery with her of verse 22, and must be those seduced by her and her accomplices." But however they are to be distinguished, the Lord declares that the former will be punished with tribulation and the latter with death, unless they repent. The term "kill with death" is a Hebraism for "slay with most sure and awful death." See Genesis 2:17. This means that Jezebel's children were not to "die the common death of all men" (Numbers 16:29), but to suffer some terrible and painful form of death.

Jesus affirms that the judgment He is to bring upon the transgressors of the church in Thyatira will be open and manifest, known to the saints everywhere, implying that the letters to the seven churches of Asia are designed for the Lord's church in all ages and places. So plainly will the Lord's hand be seen in His judgment on Thyatira that the whole church will recognize it as His doing. The One who moves up and down in the midst of the churches is a Lord of knowledge (2:2), who is not mocked, who "searcheth the reins and hearts." The word "reins" literally means "kidneys," used metaphorically of the will and affections. The "heart" designates the seat of the intellect or thoughts. This searching power is the prerogative of God, and God alone! Thus the Psalmist declares, "For the righteous God trieth the mind and reins" (Psalm 57:9). It is plain that Christ, claiming to do this, unequivocally asserts that He is God. Cf. Mark 2:8.

The Lord next declares, "I will give unto each one of you according to your works." No other truth of God is revealed in plainer language than this, and yet there is none other so much lost sight of. In reacting

against the false emphasis placed upon works, which tacitly negates salvation by faith through the grace of God and the merits of Christ, many have denied that works have anything at all to do with eternal salvation. But the Christian's works are most significant: they declare whether or not he has faith in and love for Christ the Saviour. If he persists in evil-doing, he declares that he does not truly believe in and love Christ; thus he pronounces condemnation on himself. But if he persists in well-doing he declares that he does indeed believe in and love Christ, depending on His merits and God's grace for eternal salvation.

### ***Counsel***

Jesus now counsels the church in Thyatira: "But to you I say, to the rest that are in Thyatira, as many as have not this teaching, who know not the deep things of Satan, as they are wont to say; I cast upon you none other burden. Nevertheless that which ye have, hold fast till I come." What is the burden referred to here, which Jesus will not put on those who abstain from and protest the sins of Jezebel and her followers? No burden other than the faith or rule of practice once for all delivered to the saints. Those of the church in Thyatira who sought justification for their sins, rejected the law of Christ as the rule of life, considering it an intolerable burden. But it actually is a "light" burden (Matthew 11:30), one which every Christian can bear. Only those responsibilities which are necessary for their spiritual welfare does Jesus lay upon His disciples. Thus He counsels the faithful saints in Thyatira to hold fast the burden which they already have—their love, faith, patience, and ministry—till He comes. Cf. Acts 15:28,29.

### ***Promise***

Now the Lord promises the faithful Christian, the spiritual conqueror: "And he that overcometh, and he that keepeth my works unto the end, to him will I give authority over the nations: and he shall rule them with a rod of iron, as the vessels of the potter are broken to shivers; as I also have received of my Father." We note here that the Christian who overcomes, conquering evil and error, who keeps the works of Christ to the end (Matthew 24:13), will in some sense share in the rule of Christ over the nations. Commenting on this promise, Robert Tuck wrote, "This is a figure of speech. The individual triumph over all individual and all combined and immoral forces is pictured as a rule over riotous nations (compare Ps. 2). Those who, like their Master, refused to win power by doing homage to wrong (Matt. 4:8-10), would share the nobler sway which he now established."

The Lord concludes His promise to the spiritual conqueror: "I will give him the morning star." The Lord speaks thus of Himself at the end of Revelation: "I am the root and the offspring of David, the bright, the morning star" (22:16). It seems then that in some way He promises to



give Himself to the victorious Christian. Concerning this promise, James Cairns observed, "The heart of man needs something to engross it, an object on which it can concentrate all its affections without self-reproach, and which by its admitted sway brings unity into its existence, and concord into all its purposes and aspirations. Now as Christ has fulfilled this end in time, so shall He yet more by His gloriously asserted and devoutly recognized pre-eminence fulfill it to endless ages. His supremacy shall be disclosed as on earth, in its brightest manifestation, it never yet has been. The morning star shall then shine forth unsullied by a cloud. What new displays of grace and glory Christ in these new circumstances shall make, it is not given us to know. And while the morning star shall thus emit new and dazzling rays, oh, how different the impression of delight and rapture which his pre-eminence shall make then on His own people from what it made here! Then shall there be no darkness of ignorance and unbelief to hide His beams—no sin, or world, or self, to divide the heart with Him, no creature worship to impair His ascendancy—no coldness and lukewarmness even in the church to damp the rising flame of love and adoration! Love and adoration shall be spontaneous and irresistible."

*"He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches."*

### Questions

1. Describe the city of Thyatira.
2. Discuss the description Jesus makes of Himself in His address to the church in Thyatira.
3. Discuss the Lord's commendation of the church in Thyatira. Can the Lord make such a commendation of you personally?
4. Who was the woman Jezebel and what were the sins that she advocated?
5. What is meant by the Lord's censure of the church in Thyatira: "I have this against thee, that thou sufferest the woman Jezebel . . ."? What lesson can the church today derive from this censure?
6. What punishment did Jesus say He would bring upon Jezebel and her followers?
7. What does Jesus mean when He says, "I will give unto each one of you according to your works"?
8. Discuss the counsel and promise Jesus gives the church in Thyatira.

### THE CHURCH IN SARDIS

*“And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: These things saith he that hath the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars: I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and thou art dead. (2) Be thou watchful, and establish the things that remain, which were ready to die: for I have found no works of thine perfected before my God. (3) Remember therefore how thou hast received and didst hear; and keep it, and repent. If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee. (4) But thou hast a few names in Sardis that did not defile their garments: and they shall walk with me in white; for they are worthy. (5) He that overcometh shall thus be arrayed in white garments; and I will in no wise blot his name out of the book of life, and I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels. (6) He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches” (3:1-6).*

#### **Address**

The fifth of the letters to the seven churches of Asia is addressed to the angel of the church in Sardis.

One of the oldest and most important cities of Asia Minor, Sardis was the capital of Mysia until about 549 B.C. It stood on the northern slope of Mount Tmolus; at its base flowed the river Pactolus. During the first century B.C., it became part of the Roman province of Asia. In 17 A.D. it was destroyed by an earthquake, and the emperor Tiberius remitted the taxes of the people and rebuilt the city. But Sardis never recovered its former importance. When the letters to the seven churches were written, it was only a third-rate city. It was noted, however, for its purple dye, for its coinage, and for the manufacture of a compound metal known as *electrum*. Its most prominent temple was dedicated to the mother-goddess Cybele, and “her worship, with its eunuch priesthood and its orgiastic rites, was one which tended, as much as that of Dionysus and Aphrodite, to sins of foul and dark impurity.”

No record is extant of the establishment of the church in Sardis.

Jesus described Himself in His address to the church in Sardis as “he that hath the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars.” There is no doubt that “the seven stars” designate the angels of the seven churches (1:20), but what is designated by “the seven Spirits of God”? The Holy Spirit, the third person of the Godhead, with the number seven signifying completeness. The phrase “he that hath the seven Spirits of God” represents Jesus as possessing the Spirit without measure (John 3:34), having the Spirit fully and completely at His disposal to reveal His will and to execute His judgments. Cf. 1:4,5. And His possession

of the seven stars signifies that the angels of the churches are under His authority, serving as ministers of His will.

### **Censure**

The Lord begins His message to the church in Sardis by tersely and emphatically censuring it: "I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and thou art dead." The Lord distinguishes here between the reputation of this congregation and its actual spiritual condition. It had a name for being a living, active church; but the great Heart-searcher, who sees not as a man sees, pronounced it *dead*. A passage parallel to this is 1 Timothy 5:6, "But she that giveth herself to pleasure is dead while she liveth." See also Matthew 8:22; Luke 15:24; Romans 6:13; Ephesians 2:1,5; Hebrews 6:1; 9:14.

We know that Lodiacea deceived itself (3:17), but there is no record that it deceived others. Sardis, on the other hand, had a splendid reputation as a model congregation, spiritually alive and active. There are churches today that are like Sardis in that they enjoy a fine reputation but are virtually dead in the eyes of the Lord. They have a look about them of general well-to-do-ness. They meet in fine buildings. Their services are well attended and conducted in an orderly manner. They seemingly have well-organized programs of work. Their members abstain from the more obvious sins of carnality. But the Lord knows that in the things that basically count—genuine commitment to Him, unceasing prayer, love for God and all men, zeal for good works, worshipful spirit, living witness of Christ—they are sadly deficient. Their good reputation has as its basis a *form* of godliness, but they are devoid of the *power* of godliness (2 Timothy 3:5). Are you a member of such a congregation?

### **Counsel**

The Lord begins His counsel of the church in Sardis in Sardis: "Be thou watchful, and establish the things that remain, which were ready to die: for I have found no works of thine perfected before my God." The command "be thou watchful" reminds us of Paul's exhortation directed to spiritually dead Christians: "Awake, thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall shine upon thee" (Ephesians 5:14). In urging the church in Sardis to be watchful, the Lord would arouse it from its spiritual lethargy and incite it to alertness in meeting its Christian responsibilities. Although most of its members were essentially spiritually dead, they were not so dead entirely. There still existed some spiritual life in them. Thus they were exhorted to "establish the things that remain, which were ready to die," to fan the flame of whatever spiritual ardor they still possessed. Their basic fault was fickleness, the failure to perfect their works before God. The word "perfected" means fulfilled or filled to the full, carried through to the end. But their works were perfunctory;

none of them had been completed. They had made spasmodic efforts, getting enthusiastic for a while, but it never lasted.

Many congregations today remind us of the church in Sardis. They will plan an important program of work, vociferously talk about it, put it into operation for a while, and then gradually lose interest until it either dies or is so carelessly, superficially performed that it becomes virtually dead. Are you a member of such congregation?

Since the message to the church in Sardis was addressed to its angel, it is evident that he had fallen down in his leadership responsibility and thus had to share with the church the blame for not seeing its works perfected before God. And in such churches today at least part of the blame for the failure to complete their work programs belongs to their elders, who lack the fire of enthusiasm to incite the members to steadfastness in working for the Lord. Does the congregation of which you are a member have such elders? It is axiomatic that congregations rarely rise above their leaders. The Lord's church always needs elders, pastors, or bishops who have such deep love for the Lord, such ardent zeal and steadfastness in his service, that they will lead the congregations in which they serve to the completion of any worthwhile task they undertake.

We need to take note that the churches in Sardis and Laodicea were apparently the only churches among the seven not meeting with some kind of opposition—and they were the least satisfactory! There is no reason to believe that the church in Sardis had openly joined hands with its pagan neighbors or that it had renounced the appearance of opposition to the world. The simple, plain fact is that it had not made enough impression on the world to draw its fire. The world could endure it because it was so much like the world. There was not even enough life in it to produce some kind of heresy. It had lost its spiritual vitality and had sunk into a complacent lethargy.

The Lord continues to counsel the church in Sardis: "Remember therefore how thou hast received and didst hear." The Lord does not charge Sardis with a perverse holding of untruth but with a heartless holding of truth. He therefore graciously commands it to remember the zeal, love, and devotion with which it had heard and received the truth at first. Only as it so remembered could Christ be to it in the future what He had been to it in the past. Memory is indeed a precious ally in the Christian life.

The Lord further commands His disciples in Sardis to "keep it;" that is, to hold fast the truth they had received from Him. He also commands them to "repent;" that is, to change their minds concerning the spiritually lethargy and coldness they had succumbed to, with the sure hope of being restored to His favor and of enjoying once again spiritual life and prosperity in Him.

When we in the church today, like the Lord's disciples in Sardis, become negligent of our Christian responsibilities, we too need to remember the ardor and love we had when we first received and heard the gospel, when we first gave ourselves to Christ. We too need to keep the truth we have received from Him, never to let it go. We too need to repent of our spiritual lethargy and coldness so that we can have the same assurance of being again acceptable in the Lord's eyes and of once again enjoying spiritual life and prosperity in Him.

In the Lord's counsel to the church in Sardis is the warning, "If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee." Previously He had commanded them, "Be watchful," and now He informs them of the dire consequences they face if they fail to obey this command. During His earthly ministry, He had twice spoken, with slight variations, of the necessity of His disciples being watchful concerning His return as a thief, at a time known to no one (Matthew 24:42-44; Luke 12:39,40). These words are often substantially repeated in the New Testament epistles; for example, in 1 Thessalonians 5:2-4; 2 Peter 3:10; Revelation 16:15. These references, as well as the words of Jesus recorded in the gospels, pertain to the Lord's second coming at the end of the world. In all probability, however, His reference to His coming upon the church in Sardis pertains to a special judgment He would bring upon it, but with the same stealthiness and as unexpectedly as at His visible second coming. A Greek proverb affirmed that the feet of the avenging gods were shod with wool, expressing the sense which the pagans had of the stealthy approach of the divine judgments and of their possible nearness at the time they were thought to be farthest off. So in an expected moment the Lord promises to bring some kind of judgment on the church in Sardis unless it repents of its spiritual lifelessness and returns to Him.

Today Jesus is still giving due warning concerning the inevitability of His coming upon all in the church who are not watchful, who are spiritually dead. Whatever divine judgment they may escape in this world, they will not escape the Lord's final and inexorable judgment to be brought upon all His unfaithful disciples when He comes again. See Matthew 25:31-46.

### ***Commendation***

The commendation Jesus gives in His message to the church in Sardis is not of the church as such but of its few faithful members: "But thou hast a few names in Sardis that did not defile their garments." The word "names" is used here in reference to persons; and the idea is that even in a church where there was such widespread spiritual lethargy, there were still a few persons who had remained faithful to the Lord. The Lord did not overlook them but graciously set His seal of approval upon them. And wherever the Lord's faithful disciples are, they can have the assurance that He knows and approves them.

The Lord describes His faithful disciples as those "that did not defile their garments." All who come to Christ, accepting Him as their Saviour when they are baptized into Him, are "washed, sanctified, justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of our God" (1 Corinthians 6:11). See Acts 22:16. They have put off the old garment of sin and put on the new garment of righteousness. Cf. Revelation 19:8. It is the will of the Lord that they keep this new garment, which represents their Christian profession, free from the contamination of sin, free from every defilement of the flesh and spirit. They are commanded to keep themselves "unspotted from the world" (James 1:27).

However, if absolute freedom from sin is the idea of the Lord's description of those "that did not defile their garments," then it contradicts what the word of God says about Christians in general: "For in many things we all stumble" (James 3:2); "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us . . . If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us" (1 John 1:8,10). The word "defile" is not from the Greek *mianein*, "to stain," but from *molunein*, "to besmear or besmirch with impurity." The saints in Sardis whose garments were undefiled, as well as all other such saints, were not completely free from the stain of sin; but as compared to their unfaithful brethren, they were *essentially* spiritually pure and clean. When they sinned, as even the best Christians do, they found access through their faith to the cleansing power of Christ's blood, so that "they washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (7:14).

Every faithful Christian in every age can find the constant cleansing power of the Lamb's blood, every moment of every day, if his life is Christ-oriented, if he is striving by God's grace through a living, vibrant faith to obey the divine will. This is the teaching of 1 John 1:7, "If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanseth us from all sin."

Jesus promises concerning the spiritually undefiled of the church in Sardis: "And they shall walk with me in white." Since no defilement can enter heaven (21:27), only those whose spiritual garments are undefiled will walk eternally with the Lord in white. "Walk" implies spiritual life; also liberty, for it is only the free who can walk at large. The grace and dignity of long, flowing garments is seen to the best advantage when the person wearing them is in motion; for example, "the scribes desire to walk in long robes" (Luke 20:46). Richard Trench observed, "And all this has its corresponding truth in the kingdom of heaven. God's saints and servants here in this world of grace, and no doubt also in that world of glory, are best seen and most admired when they are engaged in active services of love. And such they shall have. They shall walk with their Lord (cf. Zech. 3:7), shall be glorified together with Him (Rom. 8:17; John 17:24); His servants shall serve

Him (Rev. 22:3).”

Those whose garments are undefiled will walk in white because “they are worthy.” The word of God attributes a certain worthiness to man, which is never absolute but always relative. See Matthew 10:10,11; 22:8; Luke 20:35; 21:36; 2 Thessalonians 1:5,11. No man, however righteous he may be within himself, is absolutely worthy to receive the heavenly inheritance, for such worthiness could only result from a life entirely devoid of sin. Moreover, such worthiness would reckon eternal salvation as a reward for human merit and not as a gift of God through the merits of Christ. Cf. Romans 6:23. The worthiness that the faithful, obedient Christian has which makes it possible for him to walk in white has been put on him by Christ (7:14-17). Cf. Ezekiel 16:14, “. . . perfect, through my majesty which I had put on thee, saith the Lord Jehovah.” See John 14:1-6.

### ***Promise***

The Lord now sets forth a promise which every member of the church in Sardis could receive, as well as every other member of His church in every age, if he would fulfill the condition attached to it: “He that overcometh shall thus be arrayed in white garments; and I will in no wise blot his name out of the book of life, and I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels.” The unfaithful members of the church in Sardis could receive the promise here given if they would overcome their spiritual lethargy by following the Lord’s counsel as recorded in verses 2 and 3, to have their garments cleansed by the blood of Christ. Those few persons whose garments were undefiled could also receive this promise if they would continue to faithfully serve the Lord and to keep themselves free from the besmirchment of sin.

Notice carefully the phases of this beautiful promise made to every spiritual conqueror. First, “He shall thus be arrayed in white garments.” White is the symbol of purity. In heaven there will be no stain of sin at all on the redeemed. They shall “shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (Matthew 13:43). The glorified body of the resurrection, free from all impurity, will be transformed and transfigured into the likeness of Christ’s body (Philippians 3:21), to be forever clothed with His perfect brightness.

Second, “I will in no wise blot his name out of the book of life.” These words have no meaning at all unless it is possible for those whose names have once been in the book of life to have their names blotted out of it. A register was kept in ancient cities of their citizens, and the names of the dead were erased from it. And every person who has come to Christ for salvation, becoming a citizen of the divine kingdom, has his name written in the book of life. See Luke 10:20; Philippians 4:3; Hebrews 12:23. But any one who fails to overcome, who departs from the power of spiritual victory in Christ, faces the sure doom of having his name

blotted out of the book of life, thus having his heavenly citizenship taken from him and being consigned to eternal perdition. "And if any was not found written in the book of life, he was cast into the lake of fire" (20:15).

The words "blot out" are from the Greek *exaleipho*. Graphically contrasted with its use in 3:5 is its use in 7:17; 21:4, where it is translated as "wipe away": "And God shall wipe away every tear from their eyes." Those who go to hell will have their names obliterated, completely wiped away from the book of life, but those who go to heaven will have their tears obliterated, completely wiped away from their eyes.

Jesus completes His promise to those that overcome: "I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels." During His earthly ministry Jesus had declared, "Every one therefore who shall confess me before men, him will I also confess before my Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 10:32); "Every one who shall confess me before men, him shall the Son of man also confess before the angels of God" (Luke 12:8). No one can overcome, to be victorious over the temptations and trials of life, unless he confesses Jesus before men. The victorious Christian has risked his temporal life by confessing Jesus in the midst of ridicule, opposition, and persecution. Jesus will thus confess his name before the Father and the heavenly angels. "Let every one under scorn and opposition remember this, and he will find strength to undergo all that is laid upon him. Let him remember that the trials and tribulations he endures for Christ's sake are only for a moment, while the honor of the Lord's confession of his name before God and the holy angels is for ever and ever."

*"He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches."*

### Questions

1. Describe the city of Sardis.
2. Discuss Jesus' description of Himself in His address to the church in Sardis.
3. What was the difference between the reputation of the church in Sardis and its actual spiritual condition?
4. Discuss thoroughly the counsel Jesus gives the church in Sardis, noting the application to be made from this counsel to churches of today.
5. What warning does Jesus give in His counsel to the church in Sardis?
6. Discuss the commendation Jesus makes of the few faithful Christians in Sardis. What promise does He make concerning them?
7. Discuss the promise Jesus makes concerning every Christian "that overcometh."



## THE CHURCH IN PHILADELPHIA

*“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 none shall shut, and that shutteth and none openeth: (8) I know thy works (behold, I have set before thee a door opened, which none can shut), that thou hast a little power, and didst keep my word, and didst not deny my name. (9) Behold, I give of the synagogue of Satan, of them that say they are Jews, and they 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. (10) Because thou didst keep the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of trial, that hour which is to come upon the whole world, to try them that dwell upon the earth. (11) I come quickly: hold fast that which thou hast, that no one take thy crown. (12) He that overcometh, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go out thence no more: and I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God, and mine own new name. (13) He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches” (3:7-13).*

### Address

The sixth of the letters to the seven churches of Asia is addressed to the angel of the church in Philadelphia.

Philadelphia is a Greek word meaning “brotherly love.” It was so called in honor of Attalus II, king of Pergamon, who was given the title Philadelphus because of his loyalty to his elder brother and predecessor Eumenes II, king of Lydia. It is not so ancient as many of the other cities of proconular Asia, being founded in 189 B.C. In 133 B.C. it became a Roman possession. It stood at the foot of Mount Tmolus, on the banks of the little river Cogamus, about 105 miles from Smyrna. Its location was most favorable for commercial and strategical purposes. Its wines were famous. Its coins bore the image of Baachus, the god of wine. On the coins of the first century the city is called Neocaesarea. Under Vespasian it received the name of Flavia. It also sometimes bore the title of “Little Athens” because of the magnificence of its temples and other public buildings.

No record is extant of the establishment of the church in Philadelphia.

In His address to the church in Philadelphia, Jesus first describes Himself as “he that is holy.” The Lord here claims to be *ho hagios*, the Holy One. See Daniel 9:24. Richard Trench wrote, “The *hagios* is separate from evil, with the perfect hatred of the evil. But holiness in this absolute sense belongs only to God. . . Jesus claims to be ‘The Holy One,’—a

name which Jehovah claims for Himself,—implicitly claims to be God; takes to Himself a title which is God's alone, which it would be blasphemy for any others to appropriate, and, unless we allow the alternative that He is guilty of this, can only be accepted as Himself God."

Jesus next describes Himself as "he that is true." The Greek word for "true" here is *alethinos*, meaning genuine or real, distinguishing Jesus as truly God from the false gods and from those who say that they are what they are not (verse 9). Furthermore, He is genuine or real as fulfilling all that is involved in the name God, such as Light (John 1:9; 1 John 2:8), Bread (John 6:32), the Vine (John 15:1), as distinguished from all those who only partially realize the characteristics of God (John 5:35; Psalms 80:8; 105:40).

Lastly, Jesus describes Himself as "he that hath the key of David, he that openeth and none shall shut, and that shutteth and none openeth." "The key of David" means authority over the house of David. The original reference here is to the removal of one of the king's minister's (Shebna), and the substitution of another (Eliakim) to take his place. Concerning Eliakim, Jehovah declared, "And the key of the house of David will I lay upon his shoulder; and he shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open" (Isaiah 22:22). As the antitype of Eliakim, Jesus has authority over the heavenly house, the kingdom of heaven, which is the antitype of the house of David. In the opening vision of Revelation we are told that Christ holds "the keys of death and of Hades" (1:18). Now we are told that He holds the keys of the heavenly kingdom, with absolute power of admission and exclusion. He alone finally and irrevocably determines who will be saved and who will be lost, who will go to heaven and who will go to hell. Any man who takes it upon himself to determine the eternal destiny of another, presumptuously assumes a prerogative that belongs only to Christ. Cf. James 4:11,12.

### **Commendation**

No other church among the seven is more richly praised than Philadelphia. The Lord begins His commendation: "I know thy works (behold, I have set before thee a door opened, which none can shut), that thou hast a little power." The figure placed here in parentheses symbolizes a door of usefulness and an assurance of success. It is a figure used also by Paul: "For a great door and effectual is opened unto me" (1 Corinthians 16:9). See Acts 14:27; 2 Corinthians 2:12; Colossians 4:3. No greater sign of divine approval can come to a church than the opening before it of larger and wider possibilities of usefulness, such as the Lord gave Philadelphia. It is evident that this congregation had been so zealously engaged in good works and in preaching the gospel that it was in the position to do more than ever in the Lord's service. Cf. Matthew 25:29. And the Lord's providence provided Philadelphia an opportunity for greater service which no

opposition could effectively hinder, a door which no one could shut. "The safety of a church lies more truly in enterprising service than in self-culture. The healthiest church is the most active one."

The Lord's observation, "thou hast a little power," is praise rather than covert blame; in fact, it is probably the highest praise He gives the saints in Philadelphia. This writer doubts that the Lord's words here mean that persecution had been so oppressive as to virtually exhaust the church so that it had only a little power left, but rather describe the church before any persecution came upon it. From the beginning its ability had probably been small. It was probably small in numbers, poor in worldly goods, and of little account in the eyes of men. Its weakness, however, was not a liability but an asset. The Lord could say to it what He had said to the apostle Paul: "My grace is sufficient for thee: for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9). These words remind us of Isaiah 40:29, "He giveth power to the faint; and to him that hath no might he increaseth strength." Weak though Philadelphia was in itself, yet it utilized the power of the Lord to accomplish great things in His service.

The Lord continues to praise the church in Philadelphia: "Thou didst keep my word, and didst not deny my name." The Greek words for "keep" and "deny" are in the aorist tense, alluding to some particular occasions in the past when, being put to the test, the church had proved itself faithful to the Lord. Whatever loss of property and life these followers of Christ had been threatened with during times of persecution, they continued to keep his word and refused to renounce His name. And, after all, the real test of any person's loyalty to Christ is not the perfunctory keeping of His word and the confession of His name when no danger is involved. The real test comes when one must, if necessary, renounce all that he has in this world to stand up for Christ. Where would you stand if you had to face such a test?

Because of their unremitting loyalty to Him, Jesus promises the saints in Philadelphia: "Behold, I give of the synagogue of Satan, of them that say they are Jews, and they 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." Again, as in His message to the church in Smyrna, Jesus refers to the persecuting Jews as a synagogue of Satan. Although they boasted of being Jews, God's chosen people, because they were of the fleshly seed of Abraham, they were actually under the influence of Satan, representing him rather than the God of heaven. See Romans 2:28.

We note that the promise Jesus makes to Philadelphia in respect of its Jewish adversaries is larger and richer than that to Smyrna. To Smyrna the promise was that the Jews should not prevail against the faithful in it; to Philadelphia the promise is that it shall not only prevail against the Jews but also that some of its Jewish adversaries would worship before its feet. Commentators do not all agree as to the significance of this

worship. Some believe it implies that certain of the Jews would be converted to Christ; for example, A. R. Faussett: "This is an instance of how Christ set before her an 'open door,' some of her great adversaries, the Jews, being brought to the obedience of faith. Their *worshipping* before her feet expresses the convert's willingness to take the very lowest place in the Church, doing servile honour to those whom once they persecuted, rather than to dwell with the ungodly."

However, there is nothing in the meaning of the word "worship" that demands the foregoing explanation. A footnote in the American Standard Version states, "The Greek word denotes an act of reverence, whether paid to the creature, or to the Creator." We are reminded here of Isaiah 49:23, "They shall bow down to thee with their faces to the earth, and lick the dust of thy feet." It may be true that some of the Jews in Philadelphia were converted to Christ, but the idea seems rather to be that the Jews in general worshipped or bowed down at the feet of the saints in the sense of contritely acknowledging that God was with them and that He truly loved them as His own. Albert Barnes observed, "If the word *worship* is used here in the sense of divine worship properly so called, it means that they would be constrained to come and worship the Redeemer 'before them,' or in their very presence; if it is used in the more general signification, it means that they would be constrained to show them favor and respect. The latter is the probable meaning; that is, that they would be constrained to acknowledge that they were the children of God, or that God regarded them with his favor. It does not mean necessarily that they would themselves be converted to Christ, but that, as they had been accustomed to revile and oppose those who were true Christians, they would be constrained to come and render them the respect due to those who were sincerely endeavoring to serve their Maker."

In further praise of the church in Philadelphia, the Lord makes another promise: "Because thou didst keep the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of trial, that hour which is to come upon the whole world, to try them that dwell upon the earth." What is meant here by "the *word* of my patience?" The word of the gospel, which teaches steadfastness in expectation of the Lord's coming again. "*My* patience" is the patience which the Lord requires of His followers, and which He Himself practiced in perfection during His earthly ministry. The church in Philadelphia had proved itself steadfast in the face of the trials it had already faced, and now the Lord promises a reward in kind: "because thou didst *keep*, etc., I also will *keep* thee from the hour of trial." The Christian's fidelity is always rewarded by the Lord's fidelity. This promise to the saints in Philadelphia, however, does not mean that they would be exempted from persecution or whatever other calamities the churches of Christ in general would be subjected to. But it does mean that the Lord would keep them from the hour of trial in the sense that He would sustain them, giving them the grace and power to bear under whatever

difficulties they would face. And the Lord makes this same promise to His faithful followers in every age. He does not promise them freedom from trials but the spiritual resources to endure them. Cf. 2 Timothy 3:12; 4:18; 2 Corinthians 12:9; Hebrews 4:16.

The "hour of trial" is described as coming "upon the whole earth, to try them that dwell upon the earth." The phrase "all the earth" may either denote the whole world, the entire Roman empire, or the Roman province of which Philadelphia was a part, proconsular Asia. See Luke 2:1; Acts 19:27. Perhaps all that is implied is that the trial would be general or extensive so as to include the "whole world" as the phrase would be understood by those to whom the epistle was written. It probably represented to them the world they were familiar with, proconsular Asia and its outlying areas.

Whatever the trial was of which Jesus speaks, it was to "try them that dwell upon the earth," meaning that it was to try the sinners as well as the saints who would be subjected to this calamity. Whenever great catastrophies come upon the earth, they are trials not only to the church but also to the world. God is putting sinners to trial or proof, whether or not they will at last repent of their sins and return to Him. Times of great tribulation are also trials brought upon stubbornly persistent sinners to bring out their unbelief, hardness of heart, and blasphemy against God. Thus Moses speaks of the trials brought upon Egypt (Deuteronomy 4:34; 7:19; 29:2, 3). These trials brought out the pride and stubbornness that were in Pharaoh and in his servants.

### *Counsel*

The Lord now counsels the church in Philadelphia: "I come quickly: hold fast that which thou hast, that no one take thy crown." What is meant here by the words "I come quickly"? Some commentators believe that they pertain to the imminent coming of the Lord in the trials of which He has just spoken. Others believe that they refer to the coming of the Lord at the end of the world. Without denying the possibility of the former view, this writer is inclined toward the latter view. The Lord's announcement here of His second coming would prove of great comfort to those saints who had already suffered for the sake of Christ and now were to face even greater tribulations. It would incite them to follow the Lord's counsel in holding fast that which they had: faith, hope, patience, zeal, devotion, and little means accomplishing no little work.

If it is true that Jesus here refers to His second coming, the word "quickly" poses no problem. Even though He has yet to make His second advent, with 1900 years having passed since he directed His message to Philadelphia, in a sense, His coming has always been imminent. He is always standing before the door, ready to come again at any time (James 5:7,9; Philippians 4:5). "But forget not this one thing, beloved, that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years

as one day" (2 Peter 3:8). And since one's eternal destiny is sealed both at his death and at the second coming of Christ, the two are virtually synonymous. When one dies, inasmuch as his place in eternity is concerned, Christ has indeed come again. See 22:7,12,20.

The saints in Philadelphia were not only to hold fast that which they had in view of the second coming of Christ but also "that no one take thy crown." This is the "crown of righteousness" (2 Timothy 4:8) or "the crown of life" (2:10) waiting for all who are faithful to Christ. "Let no man,' Christ would say, 'deprive thee of the glorious reward laid up for thee in heaven, of which only one, even thyself, can ever cause thee to lose indeed'" (Richard Trench). See Colossians 2:18.

### ***Promise***

The previous promises Jesus made to the church in Philadelphia would have their fulfillment in this world (verses 9 and 10), but the promise He now makes is to be fulfilled in the world to come: "He that overcometh, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go out thence no more: and I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God, and mine own new name." This description pertains to the glorified state of the Lord's church, the spiritual kingdom that shall exist for ever in heaven.

First, the Lord promises that the one who overcomes, who is spiritually victorious, will be made "a pillar in the temple of my God." In a sense, there will be no temple in the heavenly city because there will be no division of things into sacred and secular, for all things will be holy unto the Lord. But that wonderful city will be one great temple, in which the glorified saints will not be merely *stones*, as they were in the spiritual temple on the earth (1 Peter 2:5); but they will all be eminently exalted as *pillars*, immovably firm (unlike the city of Philadelphia, whose temples were so often leveled by earthquakes).

The Lord next promises that the one who overcomes "shall go out thence no more." The Greek is stronger, literally meaning "never more at all." In the heavenly kingdom the door will be shut once for all, not only to exclude others (Matthew 25:10; Luke 13:25) but also to include safely the eternally redeemed saints. He who reaches heaven will have the absolute assurance that he will never be in danger of falling into sin and forfeiting his exalted estate as a pillar in God's temple. Cf. Matthew 6:20. Augustine said, "Who is there that would not yearn for that city, out of which no friend departs, and into which no enemy enters."

The Lord further promises that the one who overcomes will have written on him "the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem . . . and mine own new name." Inscriptions were often made on pillars, and they have actually been found on the sides of the four marble pillars which survive as ruins at Philadelphia.

On such pillars the names of distinguished and honored persons were inscribed. And so in heaven the glorified saints, represented as pillars in the temple of God, will have the name of God written on them to declare that they belong to Him and thus are highly honored and exalted by Him. Cf. 7:3; 9:4; 14:1; Exodus 28:36-38.

The name of the city of God, which will also be written on the glorified saints, will signify their eternal residence in the heavenly city, the city which Abraham looked for (Hebrews 11:10). This glorious city is called "the new Jerusalem" (3:12) and "the holy city Jerusalem" (21:10). Paul calls it "the Jerusalem that is above" (Galatians 4:26). In Hebrews 12:22 it is called "the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem." How wonderful it will be for those who overcome to "enter in by the gates into the city" (22:14), to dwell for ever in that beautiful realm of perfect joy and peace! See 21:10—22:5.

The new name of Christ to be written on the person who overcomes will denote his eternal union with God in Christ, as one who has been redeemed by Christ and will dwell with Him for ever. It will be a new name in that it is at present incommunicable (19:12). But the mystery of this new name, which no man in his present condition is capable of knowing or receiving, will eventually be imparted to all who become conquerors through Christ, when they are glorified in the new Jerusalem.

*"He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches."*

### Questions

1. Describe the city of Philadelphia.
2. Discuss thoroughly the Lord's description of Himself in His address to the church in Philadelphia.
3. Discuss thoroughly the Lord's commendation of the church in Philadelphia: "I know thy works (behold, I have set before thee a door opened, which none can shut), that thou hast a little power."
4. Under what circumstances did the church in Philadelphia keep the Lord's word and refuse to deny His name?
5. What is meant by the persecuting Jews worshipping at the feet of the saints in Philadelphia?
6. Discuss the promise Jesus makes to those who "didst keep the word of my patience."
7. What is meant by the promise "I come quickly"?
8. What is meant by the counsel Jesus gives the church in Philadelphia: "Hold fast that which thou hast, that no one take thy crown"?
9. Discuss thoroughly the promise Jesus makes in His message to the church in Philadelphia that will have its fulfillment in the world to come.

## THE CHURCH IN LAODICEA (1)

*“And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: These things saith the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God: (15) I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. (16) So because thou art lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spew thee out of my mouth. (17) Because thou sayest, I am rich, and have gotten riches, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art the wretched one and miserable and poor and blind and naked: (18) I counsel thee to buy of me gold refined by fire, that thou mayest become rich; and white garments, that thou mayest clothe thyself, and that the shame of thy nakedness be not made manifest; and eyesalve to anoint thine eyes, that thou mayest see. (19) As many as I love, I reprove and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent. (20) 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. (21) He that overcometh, I will give to him to sit down with me in my throne, as I also overcame, and sat down with my Father in his throne. (22) He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches” (3:14-22).*

### **Address**

The last of the letters to the seven churches of Asia is addressed to the angel of the church in Laodicea.

Laodicea was a large and wealthy city situated on the banks of the river Lycus, about forty miles east of Ephesus and eleven miles from Colossae. It was founded by Antiochus Theos (261-246 B.C.), second king of Syria, who named it for his wife Laodike, by whom he was afterwards poisoned, and who populated it with Syrians and Jews taken from Babylonia. It was a place of little importance until proconsular Asia was formed in 190 B.C. It then became a great and wealthy center of industry. It was especially famous for the high-grade black wool which it produced. As the meeting place of several trade routes, it developed into a leading financial center, with extensive banking operations. In its vicinity was located a renowned school of medicine, which specialized in the treatment of eye trouble with the well-known Phrygian powder, probably manufactured in Laodicea. So wealthy did it become that when it was almost destroyed by an earthquake in 60 A.D., its citizens rejected the proffered aid of Rome and soon rebuilt it at their own expense.

There was a church in Laodicea about 60 A.D. when Paul wrote his letter to the Colossians. In this epistle, Paul makes mention of the Laodicean saints: “For I would have you know how greatly I strive for you, and for them at Laodicea, and for as many as have not seen



my face in the flesh" (Colossians 2:1). We are not sure whether Paul is saying here that he had never been to Laodicea, or that he is distinguishing the saints there from others who had never seen him. However, his later salutation in the same epistle to the "brethren that are in Laodicea" (4:15) indicates that he knew them personally. We also note that he directs Colossae to exchange epistles with Laodicea: "And when this epistle hath been read among you, cause that it be read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and that ye also read the epistle from Laodicea" (4:16). The letter to Laodicea has been lost.

In the address of His message to Laodicea, Jesus describes Himself as "the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God." This is the only instance in the Bible where the word "Amen" is used as a proper name. Cf. Isaiah 65:16. It is derived from a root signifying "to make firm." Thus it came to mean "true, certain." Not only what Jesus says is true, but He Himself is the *Truth*. He alone can say, "Verily [Amen], I say unto you." This is the language of Deity, answering to "as I live, saith Jehovah" in the Old Testament. The title Jesus here gives Himself harmonizes with His message to Laodicea: His unchanging fidelity as "the Amen" contrasts with Laodicea's wavering loyalty, "neither hot nor cold" (verse 16).

The phrase "faithful and true witness" is an explanation of the name Amen. He who is the Amen, the Truth, is faithful and true in all the witness He bears concerning the heavenly things He has seen. Being divine, He witnesses as no one else to the absolute truth of God and His revelation. Thus the saints in Laodicea are to unquestionably recognize that no matter how searching and severe is the Lord's message to them, it is absolute faithful and true, worthy of their complete, unreserved confidence.

Jesus is "the beginning of the creation of God." He is the source of all creation, the instrument through whom all things were made. "All things were made through him; and without him was not anything made that hath been made" (John 1:3). See Colossians 1:15-17; Hebrews 1:10. It may be, however, that the idea here is that Jesus is "the beginning of the creation of God" in a spiritual sense; that is, He is the creator of the new spiritual creation, the church. William Milligan said, "The third appellation cannot be limited to the thought of mere material creation, as if equivalent to the statement that by the Word were all things made. . . . In chap. 1:5, immediately after Jesus has been called the 'faithful witness,' He is described as the 'First begotten of the dead,' and we shall not be able to resist the conviction that the words before us refer primarily to the new creation, the Church, that redeemed humanity which has its true life in Christ." Whether the reference is to Christ as the means of material or of spiritual creation, either of these concepts is a strong guarantee to the Laodiceans as to the faithfulness of His witness in the message He is about to give them.

## Censure

The Lord has no praise to offer the Laodiceans, only censure. He forthrightly declares, "I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So because thou art lukewarm. . . ." The word "hot" in the Greek is *zestos*, literally meaning "boiling hot." It is a form of the word *zeo*, which is translated in the New Testament as "fervent"; for example, "*fervent* in spirit" (Acts 18:25; Romans 12:11). Thus a Christian who is described as hot is one who is fervent in spirit, who fairly boils with zeal for the Lord and His work. His love for God is truly a divinely-produced heat.

The antithesis of "hot" requires that "cold" should here mean more than negatively cold; it should rather mean *icy* cold, having never yet been warmed. It designates those who have never made any pretense at all of being followers of Christ. The Laodiceans were not so cold as these, but neither did they have fervency of spirit in serving the Lord. They were betwixt-and-between Christians, described as "lukewarm," having very little warmth of Christian love. Their works, which Jesus called their attention to, were obviously limited to the barest, conscience-easing minimum and performed with little enthusiasm.

As it has been throughout its entire history, the body of Christ is still plagued by lukewarm members. They are the members who are careless in private prayer, Bible study, and self-examination. Their attendance at public worship is usually limited to one service weekly. They tend to be niggardly in their giving. They show little concern for the work programs of the local congregation. Hardly ever do they visit the sick, comfort the mourners, or in any other way manifest real concern for sick, sinful, suffering mankind. They even tend to exalt the sin of lukewarmness to the rank of a virtue. They speak admiringly of the zealous business man and the zealous citizen; but when they speak of the zealous Christian, the word suddenly changes its meaning and becomes little better than a sarcasm and a sneer. They are smug, self-complacent, and self-satisfied.

Concerning lukewarmness, Boyd Carpenter has well remarked: "An intermediate state between these is the lukewarm, such as one neither earnest for God, nor utterly indifferent to religion. They are perhaps best described as those who take an interest in religion, but whose worship of their idol of good taste or good form leads them to regard enthusiasm as ill-bred or disturbing, and who have never put themselves to any inconvenience, braved any reproach, or abandoned any comfort for Christ's sake, but hoped to keep well with the world, while they flattered themselves that they stood well with God."

Jesus expresses His utter abhorrence of lukewarmness by saying, "I would thou wert cold or hot." We can readily understand why the Lord prefers His followers to be hot rather than lukewarm. Over and over

again His word demands undivided loyalty to Him, a zeal for truth and righteousness that knows neither compromise nor abatement (Matthew 6:24; Romans 12:11; 1 Corinthians 15:58; Titus 2:14; etc.). But why should the Lord prefer those who are cold, who have never accepted Him as their Saviour, Lord, and Master, to those who remain lukewarm? Would it not seem that although lukewarmness is very inferior to hotness, it would be preferable to absolute coldness in the things of God? The answer is affirmative if the lukewarm state is a transitional state to a warmer, in which a Christian is growing in his zeal for the Lord. But the answer is negative if the lukewarmness is a continuing condition (verse 17).

The Lord prefers the state of coldness to lukewarmness because, wrong though it is, it is more honest and honorable. There is no pretense or hypocrisy about it. The cold person knows exactly where he stands, but the lukewarm person only pretends to stand up for Christ—all his professions of love and devotion are patently insincere and false!

Furthermore, the Lord prefers coldness to lukewarmness because it offers more hope of change. There is always hope for such a person that when he learns the truth of the gospel he will be convicted of his sins and accept Christ as his Saviour, becoming a *hot*, fervent Christian. But how difficult it is to convert the person who has just enough religion to lull his conscience into a sense of false security, who believes that it is well with his soul when in actuality he no longer trusts in the Lord for salvation and thus faces utter rejection by the Lord!

The self-deception and self-satisfaction of the lukewarm Laodiceans is emphatically expressed in the Lord's rebuke: "Because thou sayest, I am rich, and have gotten riches, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art the wretched one and miserable and poor and blind and naked." What are these riches of which the Laodiceans boasted? Primarily, spiritual riches. In their self-complacency and self-satisfaction, they thought of themselves as having reached a high pinnacle of spirituality, as knowing the truth and being sound in the faith. With this estimate of themselves, they would naturally feel that they had need of nothing spiritually. Cf. Luke 12:21; 1 Corinthians 1:5; 4:8; 2 Corinthians 8:9.

But we must not rule out the possibility that the Laodiceans were physically rich, taking great pride in their abundance of temporal things. The city of Laodicea was well-known for its temporal prosperity, and in all likelihood the disciples of Christ who lived there shared in its prosperity. When we take into account the danger of such riches to the Christian's spiritual welfare (Matthew 13:22; 19:21-23; Mark 10:22,23; 1 Timothy 6:9,10,17), we can easily understand how temporal wealth could produce the lukewarmness that prevailed in the church in Laodicea, which would make its members feel that since they were materially self-sufficient they were also spiritually self-sufficient. Just as poverty in spirit can be fostered by physical poverty, so also the sense of spiritual

self-sufficiency can be fostered by physical wealth.

There are lukewarm churches of Christ today that take great pride in the worldly attainments and wealth of their members and the elaborate, expensive buildings in which they meet for worship. They may think of themselves as being strong churches, possessing the truth and being sound in the faith, but the Lord knows how really spiritually impoverished and empty they are. So also the high estimate the Laodiceans had of themselves was exactly the opposite of Christ's estimate of them. Notice His description of them:

They were *wretched*. This word signifies "being worn out and fatigued with grievous labors, as they who labor in a stone quarry, or are condemned to the mines." So the Laodiceans were in the sight of the Lord in the condition of wretched, abject slaves.

They were *miserable*. This word, used only here and in 1 Corinthians 15:19, signifies those who are especially to be pitied. How different was the Laodiceans' estimate of themselves: "I have need of nothing!" In their self-exaltation and pride they were unaware that they were the objects of pity rather than of praise.

They were *poor*. Notwithstanding their boast of having enough, they were spiritually impoverished, possessing little of the true riches of the spirit.

They were *blind*. They boasted of their spiritual insight, but they failed to see their lukewarmness and the truth that could make them free. Cf. 2 Peter 1:9.

They were *naked*. They may have dressed their bodies with expensive finery, but their souls were not clothed with salvation, holiness, and purity. Cf. 1 Timothy 2:9,10; 1 Peter 3:3,4.

*Wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked!* That is the valid description of every lukewarm, self-complacent, self-satisfied member of the body of Christ who has ever lived.

## Questions

1. Describe the city of Laodicea.
2. Discuss the description Jesus makes of Himself in His address to the church in Laodicea.
3. What is meant by the Lord's use of the words "hot," "cold," and "lukewarm"? Why does He prefer men to be either hot or cold rather than lukewarm?
4. What were the riches of which the Laodiceans boasted?
5. Discuss the Lord's description of the church in Laodicea: "Thou art the wretched one and miserable and poor and blind and naked."

## THE CHURCH IN LAODICEA (2)

### Counsel

Although the church in Laodicea was self-satisfied and self-complacent, its condition was not entirely hopeless. There was still the possibility that it would renew its zeal for Christ and His work. Thus Christ pleaded with it: "I counsel thee to buy of me gold refined by fire, that thou mayest become rich; and white garments, that thou mayest clothe thyself, and that the shame of thy nakedness be not made manifest; and eyesalve to anoint thine eyes, that thou mayest see."

We first note that the buying Jesus here advocates was to be done of Him. We are reminded of Colossians 2:2,3, ". . . Christ, in whom are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge hidden." In the rich mercantile city of Laodicea many splendid temporal things could be bought, but only of Christ could the Laodiceans buy the spiritual things they needed. The word "buy" does not imply that the Laodiceans could merit or deserve the goodness of God, which He freely bestows on all those who turn to Him for help. See Isaiah 55:1. The price to be paid was the renunciation of their self-righteousness and self-sufficiency, the price which Paul declared that he gladly paid in order to gain Christ (Philippians 3:7,8). We "buy" of Christ whenever we give up anything, however dear to us, that would prevent us from receiving Christ and His mercy and goodness. Cf. Luke 14:33.

And what is the "gold" the Lord counsels the Laodiceans to buy, which, when they have made it their own, they will no longer be spiritually poor? It is the kind of gold that has been "refined by fire," which has been proved to be pure and which has retained its bright luster and beauty. Richard Trench affirms that the gold spoken of here is faith, referring to the prayer of the apostles, "Lord, Increase our faith" (Luke 17:5). Others regard it as love, without which faith is of no account. "But it may mean pure and undefiled *religion*, or that grace or *Divine influence*, which is more valuable to the soul than the purest gold to the body" (Adam Clarke). Laodicea was a city of extensive money transactions, noted for the purity of its gold, as contrasted with its counterfeits. But the gold the Laodicean church could buy was infinitely purer and more valuable than the kind it could buy from the merchants of its city.

Jesus next counsels the Laodiceans to buy of Him "white garments." The wools of Laodicea, of raven blackness, were famous throughout the Roman world, but the offer of Christ is raiment of dazzling white for them who will put it on. This raiment can be Christ Himself, whom the Laodiceans had so shamefully rejected in their spiritual lukewarmness. "But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfill the lusts thereof" (Romans 13:14). If the Laodiceans will

again put on Christ, as they did when they were baptized (Galatians 3:27), they will have their sins covered, to be dressed in the righteousness or justification which is imputed through the Lord's mercy and grace. Cf. Philippians 3:9. But not only will they be dressed in the *imputed* righteousness of Christ but also in His *imparted* righteousness, in the white raiment of the graces of Christian living. See Galatians 2:20. "White raiment," said M. F. Sadler, "is the symbol of forgiveness and purity. The robes must be washed and made white in the Blood of the Lamb, and the soul and spirit must be clean in the sight of Him that searcheth the heart. And yet these two whitenesses, the two purities, are in the sight of God but one. He that hath righteousness imputed has it also imparted, or the imputation is useless."

By putting on Christ, thus to be forgiven of their sins and to receive the power for holy living, the Laodiceans will have removed "the shame of their nakedness." In the East to strip a person of his clothes is the image of putting him to open shame. So also to clothe one with fine apparel is the image of doing him honor. Man can discover the shame of his sinful life, but God alone can cover it so that his nakedness will not be manifest in the last day. "Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered" (Psalms 32:1). See Matthew 22:11-13; 2 Corinthians 5:10.

Jesus further counsels the Laodiceans to buy of Him "eyesalve." An ointment called *collyrium* was the common dressing for weak eyes which the Laodiceans could buy in their city. But Jesus, the Great Physician, offers them an eyesalve infinitely more precious, which will heal them of their spiritual blindness so that they can see the shamefulness of their lukewarmness and the Christ who can take away their sins and make them fervent Christians. This eyesalve is the illuminating power of the Holy Spirit through the divine word, referred to in 1 John 2:20 as "an anointing from the Holy One." Cf. Psalms 119:105,130.

And now the Lord tenderly and compassionately says, "As many as I love, I reprove and chasten." Jesus has severely reprovved and chastened the Laodiceans because of His love for them. Others might overlook their faults out of a false kindness, but Jesus is intolerant because of love. See Proverbs 3:11,12; Hebrews 12:5,6. Augustine said, "He scourgeth every son whom He receiveth. And shalt thou be an exception? If excepted from suffering the scourge, thou art excepted from the number of sons."

In His declaration of love for the Laodiceans, Jesus is encouraging them not to despair but to regard His reproof and chastening as meant for their good, as an incitement to repentance. And thus He commands them, "Be zealous therefore, and repent." The word "zealous" is derived from the same Greek word as "hot": *zeo*, to boil. The Laodiceans had not been "hot"; they therefore are now commanded to be zealous, or hot, and thus to repent of their careless, lukewarm state. The use of

the present tense in the Greek, translated as "be zealous," implies a life-long course of zeal. The lukewarmness of the Laodiceans had been a continuing condition, but the Lord urges them to make hotness, or zeal, a continuing condition.

In verse 20, in words of surpassing beauty and tenderness, the Lord appeals to the Laodiceans, who have shut Him out of their lives, to allow Him to return to them. This appeal is made to the individual person, to "any man." The lukewarmness of the Laodicean church, as well as of every other church, was the lukewarmness of the individual members who composed it; thus the recovery of any lukewarm church can only be the recovery of its individual members, one by one.

The Lord begins His appeal to the lukewarm Laodiceans: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock." We have in these loving words the long-suffering and condescension of Christ as He requests and waits for entrance into the hearts of those who have lost their zeal for Him. He who Himself is "the door" (John 10:7), and who bids us "knock" that it may be "opened" unto us (Matthew 7:7; Luke 11:9), is first Himself to knock at the door of our hearts. For if He did not knock first, no one could ever knock at His door.

Continuing His appeal to the lukewarm Laodiceans, Jesus says, "If any man hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to him." Not only does Jesus knock, but He also speaks, which stresses the urgency of His appeal to enter the hearts of His lukewarm disciples. But the *knock* and *voice* of Jesus may remain unheard and unheeded. It is in the power of every person to close his ears to them. There is no irresistible force that would compel anyone to grant Jesus entrance into his heart. The Lord does indeed knock and speak, pleading for entrance into a man's heart; but He does not break down the door. This answers to the truth that He *draws* us, not *drags* us (John 6:44). If the door of any man's heart is opened to give Jesus entrance, it will have to be done by the exercise of his own free will, because he truly desires Him to come into his life.

"In Holman Hunt's great picture called 'The Light of the World,' we see One with gentle, patient face, standing at a door, which is ivy-covered, as if long closed. He is girt with priestly breastplate. He bears in His hand the lamp of truth. He stands and knocks. There is no answer, and He still stands and knocks. His eye tells of love; His face beams with yearning. You look closely and you perceive that there is no knob or latch on the outside of the door. It can be opened only from within. Do you not see the meaning?" (J. R. Miller).

The Lord's coming into the heart of the one who hears and heeds His appeal for entrance results in a most delightful reciprocity: "I will sup with him, and he with me." This imagery denotes intimacy and friendship. Among those of the ancient East, supper was the principal social meal; and in virtually all societies, to eat together has been the symbol

of friendship. The lukewarm Laodiceans had rejected the friendship of Christ; they no longer enjoyed the intimacy of fellowship with Him. What glorious blessings were waiting for them if they would only give heed to the Lord's knock and voice, allowing Him, the Friend of friends, to come into their hearts!

And the Lord is appealing to every lukewarm member of His church today to hear and to give heed to His knock and voice, to open the door of his heart so that the sunlight of His presence, friendship, and fellowship may flow in.

But what if the Laodiceans had refused to be zealous and repent; what if they had refused to grant Jesus entrance into their lives? The answer Jesus gave them is plain and pointed: "So because thou art lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spew thee out of my mouth." The imagery used here is intensely strong, denoting the deep disgust and utter loathing the Lord has for spiritual lukewarmness. The word "spew" is from the Greek *emeo* (the derivation of our word "emetic"), literally meaning "to vomit." The very thought of lukewarmness, of something tepid, is nauseating. Cold and hot drinks were common at feasts, but never lukewarm. Just as tepid water produces nausea, so tepid Christianity is nauseous to Christ. The land of Caanan is said to have *vomited out* its former inhabitants for their abominable acts; the children of Israel were warned not to commit the same, lest in like manner it *vomit them out* (Leviticus 18:28; 20:22). But the warning to Laodicea is even more terrible: to be spewed or vomited out of the mouth of Christ, to be rejected by Him as with the most disgusting, loathsome kind of nausea.

If every lukewarm Christian could only realize how utterly repugnant his condition is to Christ, he would hasten with the greatest sense of urgency to repent and to grant the Lord entrance into his life.

### **Promise**

Toward the close of His message to the church in Laodicea, Jesus makes the promise, "He that overcometh, I will give to him to sit down with me in my throne, as I also overcame, and sat down with my Father in his throne." The word "throne" here symbolizes the state of highest glory and exaltation. Because He overcame, winning a complete victory over the devil and sin, Jesus has received the honor and glory of sharing His Father's throne. He promises that those who realize victory through Him in overcoming the world will also be highly honored and glorified as they share His throne with Him. He declared, "And the glory which thou hast given me I have given unto them. . . . Father, I desire that they also whom thou hast given me be with me where I am" (John 17:22,24). Paul wrote, "Therefore I endure all things for the elect's sake, that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory . . . if we endure, we shall also reign with him" (2 Timothy 2:10,12). The lukewarm Laodiceans, as well as lukewarm Christians in every age,



spiritually degraded though they were and threatened with utter rejection by the Lord, could eventually enjoy the greatest reward Jesus promises His followers if they would only receive Him again in their lives, to serve Him with burning zeal.

*"He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches."*

### Questions

1. Discuss the things which Jesus counseled the church in Laodicea to buy of Him.
2. What attitude does Jesus have toward the Laodiceans in reproving and chastening them?
3. What does the Lord mean by His command, "Be zealous therefore, and repent"?
4. Discuss thoroughly the appeal Jesus makes to the lukewarm Laodiceans in verse 20, which begins with the declaration, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock."
5. Of what does Jesus warn the Laodiceans if they refuse to repent of their lukewarmness?
6. Discuss the promise Jesus makes to the person who overcomes.

