

Jesus' Messages *to the Seven Churches*



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Rev. 2:8–11, Rev. 2:12–17, Rev. 2:18–29, Rev. 3:1–6, Rev. 3:7–13, Rev. 3:14–22, Isa. 61:10.*

Memory Text: “ ‘ “To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne” ’ ” (*Revelation 3:21, NKJV*).

From Patmos, Jesus sent a letter via John with seven messages to His people. While those messages concern the churches in Asia of John's day, they also each prophetically portray in symbols the condition of the church throughout history.

A side-by-side comparison of these messages shows that they follow the same sixfold structure. Each opens with Jesus addressing the specific church by name. The second part begins with the phrase, “ ‘ “These things says . . . ” ’ ” (*NKJV*), in which Jesus introduces Himself to each church using descriptions and symbols found in chapter 1. Those descriptions of Jesus were suited to the specific needs of each church. Thus, Jesus pointed to His ability to meet their different struggles and situations. Next, Jesus gives an appraisal of the church, and then He counsels the church how to get out of its predicaments. Finally, each message concludes with an appeal to hear the Spirit's message and with promises to the overcomers.

As we saw in last week's lesson in our analysis of the message to the first church in Ephesus, and as we will see this week in our study of the remaining six messages, Jesus offers hope and answers the needs of each church in each situation. Hence, surely He can meet our needs today, as well.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 19.

Christ's Messages to Smyrna and Pergamum

Smyrna was a beautiful and wealthy city, but it also was a center of mandated emperor worship. Refusing to comply with this mandate could lead to the loss of legal status, to persecution, and even to martyrdom.

Read Revelation 2:8–11. How does the way that Jesus presents Himself to this church relate to the church's situation? What was the situation of the church? What warning does Jesus give to the church about what was coming?

The message to the church in Smyrna applies prophetically to the church in the postapostolic era, when Christians were viciously persecuted by the Roman Empire. The "ten days" mentioned in Revelation 2:10 point to the ten years of the Diocletian persecution from A.D. 303 until A.D. 313, when Constantine the Great issued the Edict of Milan, which granted Christians religious freedom.

Pergamum was the center of various pagan cults, including the cult of Asclepius, the Greek god of healing, who was called "the Savior" and was represented by a serpent. People came from all over to the shrine of Asclepius to be healed. Pergamum had a leading role in promoting the cult of emperor worship, which, as in Smyrna, was compulsory. No wonder Jesus said that the Christians in Pergamum lived in the city where Satan's seat is and where his throne was located.

Read Revelation 2:12–15. How does Jesus present Himself to this church? What was His appraisal of its spiritual condition?

The Christians in Pergamum faced temptations from both outside and inside the church. While most of them remained faithful, some, the "Nicolaitans," advocated compromise with paganism in order to avoid persecution. Like Balaam, who apostatized and enticed the Israelites to sin against God on the way to the Promised Land (*Num. 31:16*), these members found it more convenient, and even rewarding, to compromise their faith. Though the Jerusalem Council had forbidden "things offered to idols" and "sexual immorality" (*Acts 15:29, NKJV*), the doctrine of Balaam taught church members to reject this decision. The only solution Jesus can offer to Pergamum is: "Repent" (*Rev. 2:16, NKJV*).

The church in Pergamum is a prophetic picture of the church from approximately A.D. 313–538. Although some members in the church remained faithful, spiritual decline and apostasy increased rapidly.

What does it mean not to deny "My faith" (*Rev. 2:13, NKJV*; see also *Rev. 14:12*)? How can our refusal to deny our faith help us to resist compromise and be "faithful unto death" (*Rev. 2:10*)?

Christ's Message to Thyatira

In comparison with other cities, Thyatira had no political or cultural significance that we know of. Furthermore, the church was obscure. In order to run a business or have a job, people in the Roman Empire had to belong to trade guilds. Thyatira was especially noted for enforcing this requirement. Guild members had to attend the guild festivals and participate in temple rituals, which often included immoral activities. Those who did not comply faced exclusion from the guilds and economic sanctions. For Christians at that time, that meant choosing between total compromise or total exclusion for the sake of the gospel.

Read Revelation 2:18–29. How does Jesus present Himself to the church in Thyatira (see also Dan. 10:6)? What were the qualities that Jesus commended the church for, and what issue troubled it?

Like the church in Pergamum, the church in Thyatira was pushed to compromise with the pagan environment. The name “Jezebel” refers to the wife of King Ahab, who led Israel into apostasy (*1 Kings 16:31–33*). Jesus portrays Jezebel as spiritually immoral (*Rev. 2:20*). Those church members who compromised the truth and adopted “unclean” pagan ideas and practices were committing spiritual adultery with her.

The church in Thyatira symbolizes the condition of Christianity from A.D. 538 to 1565. During this time, the danger to God’s people did not come from outside the church but from within. Tradition replaced the Bible, a human priesthood and sacred relics replaced Christ’s priesthood, and works were regarded as the means of salvation. Those who did not accept these corrupting influences were persecuted and even killed. For centuries the true church found refuge in wilderness areas (see *Rev. 12:6, 13, 14*). But Jesus also commends the church in Thyatira for their faith and love, works and service—pointing to the Reformation and the beginnings of a return to the Bible.

Think about the words of Revelation 2:25: “ ‘ “Hold fast what you have till I come” ’ ” (NKJV). What do those words mean to us, both corporately and individually? What do we have from Jesus that we must hold on to?

Christ's Message to Sardis

Sardis had a glorious history. But by the Roman period, the city had lost its prestige. While the city was still enjoying wealth, its glory was rooted in its past history rather than in present reality. The ancient city had been built on top of a steep hill and was nearly impregnable. Because the citizens felt so secure, the city walls were guarded carelessly.

Read Revelation 3:1–6 along with Matthew 24:42–44 and 1 Thessalonians 5:1–8. What three things does Jesus urge the Christians in Sardis to do as a cure for their spiritual condition? How did Jesus' warning to "watch" correspond to the city's history?

While Jesus recognizes a few Christians in Sardis as faithful, most of them are spiritually dead. The church is not charged with any open sin or apostasy (as are those in Pergamum and Thyatira) but with spiritual lethargy.

The message to the church in Sardis applies prophetically to the spiritual situation of the Protestants in the post-Reformation period, from approximately 1565 to 1740, as the church degenerated into lifeless formalism and a state of spiritual complacency. Under the impact of the rising tide of rationalism and secularism, the church's focus on the saving grace of the gospel and commitment to Christ waned, giving place to creedal and dry philosophical arguments. The church of this period, although appearing to be alive, was spiritually dead.

Jesus' message to Sardis also applies to every generation of Christians. There are Christians who always talk in glorious terms of their past faithfulness to Christ. Unfortunately, these same Christians do not have much to share about their present experience with Christ. Their religion is nominal, lacking the true religion of the heart and genuine commitment to the gospel.

Keeping ever before us the great truth of salvation by faith in Christ alone, in what ways could we say that our works have not been found "perfect" before God? What does that mean, and how can we "perfect" our works before Him? See Matt. 5:44–48.

Christ's Message to Philadelphia

The sixth church addressed by Jesus was Philadelphia (meaning “brotherly love”). The city was located on an imperial trade road and served as the gateway—an “open door”—to a large, fertile plateau. Excavations indicate that Philadelphia was a center to which people came for health and healing. Shaken by frequent earthquakes, the city’s inhabitants moved to the countryside, living in humble huts.

Read Revelation 3:7–9. How does the way that Jesus presents Himself relate to the situation of this church? What does Jesus’ statement “ ‘ ‘ You have a little strength” ’ ’ (Rev. 3:8, NKJV) say about the condition of the church?

The message to this church applies prophetically to the great revival of Protestantism during the First and Second Awakenings that took place in Great Britain and America, from about 1740 to 1844. Given the light they had, God’s people did indeed seek to keep “ ‘ ‘ My word” ’ ’ (Rev. 3:8, NKJV) at this time. There was a growing emphasis on obedience to God’s commandments and pure living. The “open door” is apparently the way into the heavenly sanctuary, because “ ‘ ‘ the temple of my God” ’ ’ is also mentioned (Rev. 3:12, compare Rev. 4:1, 2). One door being closed and another door being opened point to the change that would take place in Christ’s high-priestly ministry, in 1844.

Read Revelation 3:10–13. What indications are given that time is short and that the coming of Jesus is drawing near? What is the significance of God’s name being written on His people (see 2 Tim. 2:19)? If a name represents a person’s character, what does Exodus 34:6 tell us about those who bear God’s name?

Great revivals took place in churches on both sides of the Atlantic. In the years leading up to 1844, the message of Christ’s soon coming was proclaimed in many parts of the world. God’s promise to write His name on those who overcome indicates that God’s character will be seen in His people. Just as important as the message that Christ is coming soon is the message that Christ promises to make His people ready for that great event by forgiving their sins and writing His law in their hearts (see Phil. 1:6; Heb. 10:16, 17).

What does the hope of Christ’s soon coming mean to you? How does Christ’s promise to complete the work He has begun give us assurance?

Christians in Laodicea

The last church addressed by Jesus was in Laodicea, a wealthy city situated on a major trade road. It was famous for its woolen manufacturing industry; its banks (which held a vast quantity of gold); and a medical school, which produced eye salve. The prosperity of Laodicea filled its citizens with self-sufficiency. Around A.D. 60, when an earthquake destroyed the city, the citizens declined an offer of assistance from Rome, claiming to have all they needed to do the job. Because the city lacked water, it was supplied through an aqueduct that came from the hot springs at Hierapolis. The source was distant from Laodicea, so the water became lukewarm by the time it got there.

Read Revelation 3:14–17 along with Hosea 12:8. How did the self-sufficient spirit of the city pervade the Laodicean Christians?

Jesus did not rebuke the Christians in Laodicea for a serious sin, such as heresy or apostasy. Rather, their problem was complacency leading to spiritual lethargy. Like the water that reached the city, they were neither refreshingly cold nor hot, but lukewarm. They claimed to be rich and in need of nothing; yet they were poor, naked, and blind to their spiritual condition.

The church in Laodicea symbolizes the spiritual condition of God's church near the close of this earth's history, as certain links with end-time portions of Revelation show. One such link, as given in Jesus' parenthetical warning in Revelation 16:15, refers back to the "white garments" of Christ's righteousness needed by spiritually naked Laodicea (*see Rev. 3:18, NKJV*). The warning to keep one's garments and not walk naked appears in the midst of a reference to the spiritual battle of Armageddon. The timing of Jesus' warning may seem rather strange, at first, because it is no longer possible to receive these garments. After all, probation already will have closed for everyone. But the warning to keep one's garments appears in connection with the sixth plague and Armageddon because Jesus wants to remind Laodicea to be ready now in advance of that terrible conflict—before it is forever too late. Thus, Revelation 16:15 warns Laodiceans that if they fail to heed Jesus' counsel and instead choose to remain naked (*Rev. 3:17, 18*), they will be lost, and ashamed, at His coming (*see 1 John 2:28–3:3*).

Jesus assures the Laodiceans that He loves them. He appeals for them to repent (*Rev. 3:19*). He concludes His appeal by picturing Himself as the lover in Song of Songs 5:2–6, standing at the door and knocking and pleading to be let in (*Rev. 3:20*). Everyone who opens the door and lets Him in is promised an intimate dinner with Him and, ultimately, to reign with Him on His throne (*see Rev. 20:4*).

Read Revelation 3:18–22. What counsel does Jesus give to the Laodiceans? What do gold, white garments, and eye salve symbolize (*see 1 Pet. 1:7; Isa. 61:10; Eph. 1:17, 18*)? What does this counsel say to us as Seventh-day Adventists, who recognize ourselves as the Laodicean church?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “The Revelation,” pp. 578–592, in *The Acts of the Apostles*.

The seven messages to the churches show spiritual decline in the seven churches. The church in Ephesus was still faithful, although it had lost its first love. The churches in Smyrna and Philadelphia were largely faithful. Pergamum and Thyatira compromised more and more until the vast majority of believers in those churches had completely apostatized from the pure faith of the apostles. The church in Sardis was in a very serious condition. The majority of Christians in this church were out of harmony with the gospel, while Philadelphia represented the faithful few. The church in Laodicea was in a condition of such spiritual lethargy and complacency that there was nothing good to be said about that church.

In concluding each message, Jesus makes promises to those in the churches who accept His counsel. One might observe, however, that along with the evident spiritual decline in the churches, there is a proportionate increase in promises given. Ephesus, to whom Jesus gives the first message, receives only one promise. As each church follows the downward spiritual trend, each one receives more promises than the previous church. Finally, the church in Laodicea, while given only one promise, receives the greatest promise of all: to share Jesus’ throne (*Rev. 3:21*).

Discussion Questions:

- 1 How does the increase in promises to each successive church, along with the spiritual decline in the churches, reflect the statement that when sin increases, grace abounds even more (*Rom. 5:20*)? Think of that promise in light of the statement that “the church, enfeebled and defective though it be, is the only object on earth on which Christ bestows His supreme regard. He is constantly watching it with solicitude, and is strengthening it by His Holy Spirit.”—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 2, p. 396.
- 2 Often Christians say that it is hard to be a Christian in industrial, commercial, and metropolitan cities. In the prosperous cities in Asia there were Christians who remained loyal to the gospel and unswerving in their allegiance to God amid the pressures exerted upon them by their pagan environment. What can we learn from this fact? Think of those Christians in Asia in light of Jesus’ prayer in *John 17:15–19*. How does the concept of being in the world but not of the world apply to Christians today, particularly those living in metropolitan cities?
- 3 How can we, as Seventh-day Adventists, better heed the words given to us in the message to the Laodiceans?

Joy in the Morning

By GORATA OBONETSE

One day, a Seventh-day Adventist literature evangelist showed up at our door in Botswana.

My mother was interested and bought three books by Ellen G. White: *Messages to Young People*, *The Desire of Ages*, and a King James Bible along with *The Great Controversy*. Soon she started attending an Adventist church and was baptized. This happened when I was in the eighth grade and thinking about high school.

Mother began to pray and fast because she wanted me to go to Eastern Gate Academy, an Adventist boarding school in Francistown, about a 2½-hour drive from our home in Mahalapye. But my father refused. He said he didn't have money for the tuition.

Mother didn't lose hope and kept on praying. I prayed with her. She woke me in the early morning, and we prayed together. We also prayed in the evening.

But my father didn't change his mind, and I entered ninth grade at a government boarding school in another city. Studying at that school was difficult. Some students used drugs and drank alcohol. The teachers didn't seem to care whether we did our homework—just as long as our parents paid the tuition.

After two years at the school, I decided that I had had enough. I asked my father if I could transfer to the Adventist school.

“No,” he said bluntly.

That night, I cried and prayed. I asked the Lord to help me because I really wanted to go to Eastern Gate Academy. I spoke with my mother, and she read Psalm 30:5, which says, “Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning” (*NKJV*).

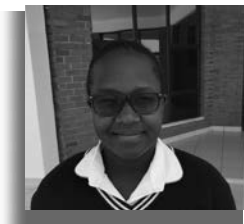
That verse gave me hope.

Two months later, as summer vacation was ending, I asked my father again if I could attend the Adventist school.

“Fine,” he said.

I thanked the Lord! From this experience, I learned that the Lord is always listening. Everything happens according to His plan when we have faith and obey Him.

Now I am 16 years old, and this is my final year at the school. After graduating, I hope to train to become a medical doctor.



My whole family has joined the Adventist Church except my father. Please pray for him, for us, and for the school.

Eastern Gate Academy shares a campus with Eastern Gate Primary School, which opened in 2017 with the help of a Thirteenth Sabbath Offering collected in 2015. Thank you for your mission offerings that support Adventist education around the world.