

Lesson 3: Message To The Churches, Part 1

Key Text: Revelation 2:1-17

Lesson Objectives

In this lesson we will discover:

- a) What can we learn about Jesus through the churches?
- b) What are the three ways to apply the messages to the churches?
- c) In what format is each letter written?
- d) What can we learn from the message to the Ephesus church?
- e) What can we learn from the message to the Smyrna church?
- f) What can we learn from the message to the Pergamum church?

Words You Should Know

ἐκκλησία (e-clay-SEE-a) – church - an assembly of people called from one place to another for a specific purpose.

What can we learn about Jesus through the churches? (Rev. 1:12-16)

Through the messages to the churches, we gain a unique and composite image of Jesus. Almost all of the various characteristics of the resurrected Christ mentioned in Revelation 1 are used to introduce the messages to the seven churches. The seven descriptions of Christ portray different aspects of his ministry to the churches. The particular aspect of Christ used in each message relates to the specific situation and need of each church. In the same way, the four gospels give different portraits of Jesus. Each gospel presents a unique picture of Jesus meeting the problems and needs of the people to whom it was sent.

To each individual church Jesus presents himself in a unique way. No church gets the whole Jesus, and no two of them share the same aspect of Jesus. Jesus walks among them, serving each of the churches individually and meeting them where they are.

The glorified Lord still walks in the midst of his church. He speaks to his end-time church today through the Revelation of Jesus Christ. He presents himself to his people in various ways, addressing problems in their different life situations and needs. He meets them where they are now, as he met the Christians of those seven congregations.

What are the three ways to apply the messages of the churches?

1. Historical – Commissioned by Christ, John wrote to the churches as their pastor to help them with the challenges of their pagan environment. The historical perspective attempts to understand how the messages applied to the actual churches in Asia as they faced the rise of persecution in their ranks.

2. Universal – These messages were sent in their entirety to each church as one letter. The entire letter was to be read to all the churches. Since each message ends with an encouraging word to hear what the Spirit has to say to the churches (see Rev. 2:7,11,17,29; 3:6,13,22), each message applies equally to all the churches. This means the messages speak to all Christians across different time periods in various locations. For example, today's church may essentially be Laodicean in nature, but some churches or individuals may display with the characteristics of other churches.

3. Prophetic – Since there were many more than 7 churches in the region of these churches, a symbolic function is implied in the use of the number 7. (This is also based on the idea that the book of Revelation was written using symbols. See Rev. 1:1). A close examination of the churches shows that the spiritual condition of the churches corresponds with spiritual condition of Christianity throughout the history of the church. The 7 messages provide a far-reaching survey of the 7 churches from the first century until Jesus returns.

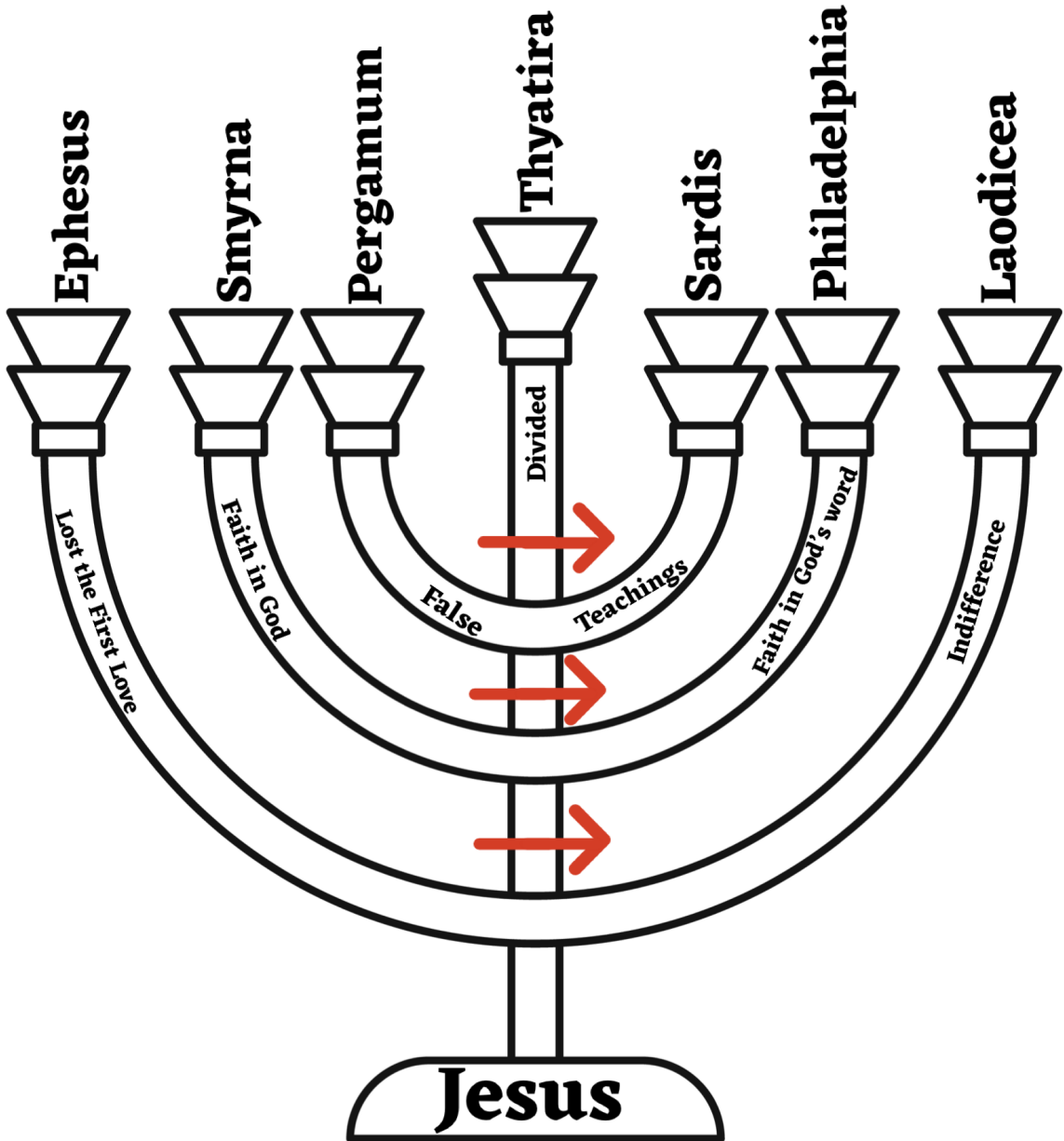
In what format is each letter written?

Each message follows the same format:

1. An address (shout-out to the church)
2. An introduction of Jesus
3. Jesus' appraisal of the church
4. Jesus' counsel and warning to the church
5. An appeal to hear the Spirit
7. A promise to those who overcome.

What can we learn from the messages to Ephesus, Smyrna, & Pergamum
(See the attached charts)

Next Week: Messages to the Churches (Part 2)



Relationship between the 7 Churches

Chapters 2; 3 – THE LETTERS TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES OF ASIA

I. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE CITIES AND THE CHURCHES

- A. *Ephesus* (Rev. 2:1-7). As a wealthy and prosperous seaport at the mouth of the Cayster River, Ephesus was the largest city of the Roman province of Asia with a population of perhaps 300,000. The city had a large theater which held about 24,500. Other important buildings were the agora or marketplace, library, baths, gymnasium and burial monuments. It was the center of the mother goddess worship of Artemis (Greek) or Diana (Roman) and the site of the great temple of Diana, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The area is now desolate—silt from the river has filled the harbor, and the ruins of the city lie in a swamp some five to seven miles inland—the lampstand was removed. Paul visited this city at the end of his second journey and spent three years here during his third journey (Acts 18:19-21; 19; 20:17, 31).
- B. *Smyrna* (Rev. 2:8-11). Noted for its beauty, this city had a superb natural harbor making it a commercial center. As early as 195 B. C. Smyrna allied herself to Rome, building a shrine for pagan Roman worship. The city was given the honor of erecting a temple to the Emperor Tiberius in A. D. 23, thus becoming a center for the cult of emperor worship. Smyrna claimed to be the first city in Asia—first in beauty, first in literature and first in loyalty to Rome. The church at Smyrna may have been founded by Paul during his third journey (cf. Acts 19:10). Polycarp, a pupil of John, was martyred here, burned at the stake in A. D. 155.
- C. *Pergamos, Pergamum* (Rev. 2:12-17). The kingdom of Pergamum was bequeathed to Rome in 133 B. C. and organized into the Roman Province of Asia. The city remained the political capital of the province for more than two centuries. A library of 200,000 volumes was the largest outside of Alexandria, Egypt. Parchment, *pergamena*, was developed here when papyrus from Egypt was no longer available, partly due to shortages and partly due perhaps to the rivalry between the two cities over their respective libraries. Pergamos was the religious center of the province with temples to the patron deities of Zeus, Dionysus, Athena and Asklepios, the latter the god of medicine and healing which was worshiped under the emblem of a serpent. A temple to Roma and Augustus was erected in 29 B. C. as the first temple in the empire dedicated to the imperial cult. Later a second temple to Trajan and a third to Severus were built. Nowhere was it more difficult for the faithful than Pergamos where Christianity and Caesar worship confronted one another.
- D. *Thyatira* (Rev. 2:18-29). Under Roman control from 190 B. C., Thyatira was a wealthy city, a thriving trade and manufacturing center noted for its purple dye and dyed garments. The purple or crimson dye was obtained from the madder root manufactured locally and was much cheaper than the Phoenician *murex* dye. In Philippi, Lydia, a seller of purple from Thyatira, was Paul's first convert in Europe (Acts 16:11-15). Trade guilds were numerous with workers

in wool, linen, leather, and bronze, potters, bakers, dyers, and slavers. Membership in these trade guilds or unions, necessary for social and financial success, required pagan worship, feasts involving food sacrificed to idols, and sexual immorality. The origin of the church here is unknown (cf. Acts 19:10).

- E. *Sardis* (Rev. 3:1-6). One of the oldest cities of Asia Minor, Sardis was the capital of ancient Lydia. Built on a rock hill rising fifteen hundred feet from the plain below, Sardis was a citadel inaccessible on three sides with the fourth side easily defended. The kings ruling the city were noted for their wealth and luxury but also for their propensity for weakness. Pride and arrogance were the qualities of its citizens. Croesus, the last ruler of Lydia and legendary as the wealthiest king in history, was defeated by Cyrus the Persian in 549 B. C. The city fell again in 218 B. C. to Antiochus the Great, ruler of the Seleucids. Thus the fortress city of Sardis was twice surprised as “a thief in the night.” An earthquake destroyed the city in A. D. 17 and was rebuilt with the help of Tiberias who contributed from the national treasury and remitted taxes for five years. There were altars and shrines to pagan deities, but most impressive was the temple of the nature goddess Cybele whose worship was similar to that of Diana of Ephesus. Sardis with other cities of the province competed for permission to build a second temple for emperor worship, but the honor was given to Smyrna. Christians in Sardis dwelt in a complacent city with a past but no future, a pagan city steeped in immorality for eight centuries.
- F. *Philadelphia* (Rev. 3:7-13). The name Philadelphia means “brother loving” or “brother lover.” The city was founded by Attalus II Philadelphus, king of Pergamos (159-138 B. C.), who named the city out of his devotion to his brother and predecessor Eumenes II. Founded for the purpose of spreading Greek culture and language, from its beginning it was a missionary city for the promotion of Hellenism. Philadelphia was a center of the wine industry, and the Greek god of vine and wine, Dionysus, was the chief pagan cult. The city was often called “Little Athens” because of its many temples and festivals to pagan deities. Also destroyed by the earthquake in A. D. 17, Philadelphia, like Sardis, was rebuilt with the help of Tiberias. Opposition to the church came from wealthy Jews who had a large and beautiful synagogue.
- G. *Laodicea* (Rev. 3:14-22). Founded by Antiochus II, a Seleucid king (261-246 B. C.), and named for his wife Laodice, the city was wealthy and a center of Hellenic culture. In the vicinity were temples of ancient deities and a famous school of medicine which developed an eye medicine known as Phrygian powder. A special breed of sheep in the area produced raven-black wool which was manufactured into highly prized garments. As a noted banking center together with its trade, the city was one of the wealthiest of its day. In A. D. 60. Laodicea was almost entirely destroyed by an earthquake, but its wealthy citizens rejected aid from Rome, rebuilding the city with their own resources. Due to its affluence the city was an attractive retirement center for the wealthy resulting in their lukewarm attitude toward social issues. Today Laodicea lies in a heap of ruins. This city had no extremes, and this characteristic was reflected in the attitude of the church.

Comparison Chart – Letters to the Seven Churches of Revelation

	Ephesus (2:1-7)	Smyrna (2:8-11)	Pergamum (2:12-17)	Thyatira (2:18-29)	Sardis (3:1-6)	Philadelphia (3:7-13)	Laodicia (3:14-22)
Portrayal of Jesus	7 stars in hand Walks among lampstands						
Praise for the Church	Patient endurance. Toil, sound doctrine hates Nicolaitans						
Criticism of the Church	Abandoned earlier love						
Exhortation: A. Correction/ Encouragement	Remember, repent, do earlier works						
B. Penalty/ Reward	Lampstand can be removed						
Promises to Overcomers	Eat of the tree of life						
General Admonition	“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”						