

# **Truth for Today**

*The Bible teaching radio programme*

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## **A Study of Scripture Sevens: Letters to the Seven Churches Part 2 - Revelation 2:18-3:22**

### **General introduction**

The Book of Revelation as a whole shows how God will bring His ways on earth to a fitting climax, both for His own glory and for the honour of His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. This talk is the second of two on the messages to seven local churches, recorded in Revelation 2 and 3. Today, we are going to concentrate on the last four: Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea. But, before we begin, let us remind ourselves that the seven churches may be viewed in at least four ways:

#### **1. Historically**

First, historically. These addresses outline for us the history and spiritual condition of seven local churches. They did actually exist. They functioned at the same time in the first century AD in what we now know as Western Turkey. They are a lesson book in themselves, but much, much more than merely a history lesson.

#### **2. Personally/Individually**

Second, they can quite fairly be considered to give the spiritual and moral history of any individual person. We know that we ourselves fluctuate in our interest and degree of commitment to the Lord and in the freshness of our souls. At any moment, or phase, in our spiritual history as individuals, we almost certainly compare with the state of one or other of the seven churches. We must guard against gaining or giving the impression that we think that we can ever reach or achieve a high plateau of spiritual state or experience where we are beyond the need to hear the challenge of the Holy Spirit's call.

#### **3. Parochially/Locally**

Third, we can look at them parochially or locally. They can legitimately be seen to reflect the spiritual and moral history of a local church. What we are as individuals determines what we are locally and collectively as an expression of the Christian church.

#### **4. Prophetically/Panoramically**

A fourth major valid interpretation discerns in these seven addresses the projected ecclesiastical and moral history of the whole of the church period. They look at its full dispensational life cycle. They give us a panoramic survey as to how the Christian church has fulfilled and will fulfil its responsibilities from when it was inaugurated on The Day of Pentecost right through to The Rapture. The letters stimulate and challenge the affections to hold on till the Lord comes.

To get the best value for our time, today we shall look only at this last application.

### **Relevance of historical and geographical data.**

It is interesting that the seven assemblies lie on a circular route. The locations can still easily be visited in the same order in which the addresses are given. A courier delivering the letters would take the same route, in clockwise order, as presented in the text, beginning with Ephesus, and ending at Laodicea.

Each of the seven places was the focal point of a post code district under the Roman administration. Of course, the Christians would use their own couriers to transmit these and other important letters. It is interesting, nevertheless, to see that the all-knowing, all-wise God had allowed men to devise and set up a system that would be useful to Him to do His own work, if He considered it expedient for Him to do so. Likewise, the historical and geographical details given are all relevant to the lessons we need to learn. I commend the study of them to any who wish to get the most help from these scriptures.

The first three addresses begin a progressive, consecutive outline of the responsible history of the Christian church. They take us from The Day of Pentecost on which the Christian church was inaugurated, until about 300 AD. The conditions outlined in the last four churches can be seen to have emerged consecutively from where the address to the third church left off, but will run on contemporaneously until the personal return of the Lord Jesus for those who have believed that He died for them and rose again.

Each address follows the same pattern:

1. The Lord refers to the vision recorded in Revelation 1:9-20. He draws out moral features of Himself which are particularly significant to the state into which that church had fallen. Properly digested, and applied, this could have preserved it from falling into that state. It can still sustain the faith of the godly in time of trial.
2. The Lord asserts His perfect knowledge. He says, "I know" to each church (Revelation 2:2, 9, 13, 19; 3:1, 8, 15), then gives His approval or condemnation of what He finds.
3. There is a closing call from the Holy Spirit to the church. He gives special warnings, words of encouragement, and a special promise to those who respond to the challenge.

This sight of the Lord, if properly discerned, and the call of the Holy Spirit, if responded to, will enable us to become overcomers. That is, one who prevails, one who is willing to be obedient to the revealed will of God, no matter in what minority he or she finds himself or herself, and at whatever personal cost. We must trace through the details given relative to the various local churches, and note the progressive decline. They affirm that whatever the general condition, there is always the opportunity for individuals to 'overcome' on a personal basis. The challenges involved, both as individuals, and in our local churches, must be faced.

Now, there are three major points of distinction between the third church, Pergamos, and the fourth, Thyatira.

1. First of all, the Lord refers to His Coming again in the messages to each of the last four churches, beginning with Thyatira. The conditions found in them will persist to the end of the dispensation, when He does indeed come again.
2. Secondly, in each of the last four churches, there is an identifiable remnant of individuals, called overcomers. Although a minority amongst the main body of nominal adherents, they are determined to be true to their God.
3. Thirdly, to Ephesus, Smyrna and Pergamos, the call to hear what the Spirit says to the churches precedes the promise to the overcomer. To Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea, the promise to the overcomer comes first. A point evidently arrives in the history of the professing church when the true, faithful element becomes a small minority of the total. The masses are now beyond the Spirit's appeal. From here on, only an overcomer will listen to His voice, and respond.

### Thyatira (Revelation 2:18-29)

Rome was the imperial capital of the known world from about 750 BC to about 500 AD. Following that, Rome became the acknowledged ecclesiastical (and political) capital of the religious world in the so-called 'dark ages'. They lasted from about 500 AD to about 1500 AD. Sadly, the description of Thyatira matches exactly the spiritual and moral conditions in that period. No sober, serious minded student of scripture and history can honestly avoid this conclusion. Recognition of the evils of such a system does not, of course, diminish the need for Christian love towards individuals beguiled by that system.

The promise to each overcomer is, "I will give him the morning star" (Revelation 2:28). The morning star shines most brightly, when the surrounding background is at its darkest, immediately before the dawn. It is the herald of the coming day. This is a **moral** picture. The overcomer is given the light in his soul of the coming of the Lord. He will end that system. He will execute His judgment upon it. This light was given even in the Dark Ages. Even in the darkest days of the church's history, God preserved a testimony unto Himself. There were always individuals who had right thoughts of the Lord, and His Coming. The faithful individual who has the Morning Star given to him has no desire at all to reign now. He is prepared to wait for the Lord to reign (2 Timothy 2:12). As always, God gives the faithful individual light as to the **future** to **regulate** his attitude and conduct at the **present** time.

**Sardis (Revelation 3:1-6)**

Sardis is about 30 miles south of Thyatira, continuing the circuit from Ephesus which ended at Laodicea. The so-called Sardis period began about 1500 AD, following what is commonly referred to as the Reformation. The address to Sardis is not a description of the Reformation itself, but its aftermath.

Historically, the moment came when God raised up men who were determined that their faith and practice would be governed by the Word of God alone. Giants of the faith at that time included those like Martin Luther and William Tyndale. This was truly a work of the Holy Spirit, following many centuries of spiritual darkness and superstition, which had marked the Thyatiran period. How very sad it is that so few in **our** day are really in the enjoyment of the blessing men like them secured, at such great personal cost.

As we come towards the end, the call to the overcomer becomes more urgent and distinctive. In all the difficulties of our day, let us take courage. Let us, also, be watchful, being strengthened, holding fast until the Lord comes.

**Philadelphia (Revelation 3:7-13)**

With Thyatira and Sardis, the features listed could be identified with large, publicly recognisable, ecclesiastical bodies prominent at the time. At Philadelphia, the qualities commended are to be identified with the moral conditions of individuals or relatively small groups which are largely unnoticed by the world at large. There are, however, strong grounds for accepting that the commended features began to come to light in a very special way at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century AD.

The need for Philadelphians arose from the dead formalism into which those affected by the Reformation inevitably subsided. The letter to them emphasises the need for simple obedience to the Word of God. It is the most encouraging word to the soul of the seven addresses. No rebuke is given. No criticism is implied. If I, or we, are trying our hardest to do the right thing in the right way for the right reason, it would be all too easy to assume that this letter refers to me, or to us. The devil will certainly tempt us to give way to that kind of complacency, even self-congratulation. We must be on our constant guard to avoid such a lapse.

Philadelphia, the name of which means 'brotherly love', is about thirty five miles south and a little to the east of Sardis. It lies on a highway in a river valley. It provides an 'open door' for trade and communications. Christ opens the door of opportunity into all the purpose and counsel of God, but closes the door against all evil. It depends on our own exercise whether or not we go through the door, and enter into an appreciation of all that He makes available. These things can only be perceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and appropriated by faith.

The door is open only to those with the moral qualities stated and implied. Furthermore, if the Lord Jesus places before us an open door of opportunity, no power of Satan can close it. Neither is there any need of human support to maintain it.

Those exercised feel their feebleness. They rely only on the Lord, not on themselves (2 Corinthians 3:5). They are not marked by any display of power that would attract the attention of the world, or please the flesh. But, behind their felt weakness, there is the mighty power and strength of the Lord Himself supporting them. True Philadelphians accept the support of the One Whom the saints at Pergamos rejected for the support of the world. They are faithful to all that Christ has revealed to them. They don't just talk about it; they live it. The danger is that it is so very easy in attempting to take high ecclesiastical ground to slip into a Laodicean condition. As a safeguard, every true Philadelphian willingly submits to the personal control of the Lord Himself. He alone can open and shut spiritual and moral doors.

I, and we, cannot and must not CLAIM to be Philadelphia, as individuals or as a local church. At the same time, I and we can and should AIM to be Philadelphian in character, seeking to be preserved from thinking more highly of ourselves than we ought to think (Romans 12:3). It is not CLAIMING a POSITION or STATUS, but AIMING to be in a CONDITION, that counts. We would be well advised to look for Philadelphian qualities in other believers and guard against Laodicean tendencies in ourselves.

**Laodicea (Revelation 3:14-21)**

The Christian church was inaugurated on the day of Pentecost, the fiftieth day from when Christ was raised out from among the dead. Since that auspicious start, we Christians, as a whole, have become increasingly worldly and much less Christ-like or Christ-centred.

The last letter, to Laodicea, describes things as they are in the present day. This is the very end of the Christian church period, immediately before the coming of the Lord. It is significant that the Lord attributes blindness to the

Laodiceans. God always delivers blessing in pristine beauty and condition. Committed to man, things soon deteriorate and fall away. How salutary that the last condition of the Christian witness immediately before the coming of the Lord is described as including the distressing, helpless condition of blindness. The lesson is clear. None is so blind as he who doesn't want to see.

Notwithstanding the appalling general condition, the Lord does not give them up. He calls for overcomers, even in Laodicea (Revelation 3:21). If the Lord appeals for an overcomer, there must be the prospect of there being one. There is always room for recovery, and some response from individuals. If consciences are awakened, repentance might well be brought about. But, we must listen to His voice and we must obey it.

As always, the Lord Himself is both the source and the standard for everything He offers us. When He lived on the earth, He was always faithful to His Father in heaven. Whatever the opposition! Whatever the personal cost to Himself! Having gone back to heaven, He is now seated in honour alongside His Father. He awaits His day of glory, when He shall sit on His own throne, and receive universal honour and acclaim. He now speaks to those who have committed themselves to be faithful on earth to Him while He is in heaven, "To him ... will I grant to sit with Me in My throne" (Revelation 3:21).

### **Closing remarks**

The best antidote to Laodiceanism is to read The Epistle to the Colossians, take heed to it, and live by its principles. "Seek those things that are above, where Christ sitteth at the right hand of God" (Colossians 3:1). In a very positive way, it is safe to look for Philadelphian qualities in other believers, and keep guard against Laodicean tendencies in ourselves.

Christ is coming again. He will sustain Christians on earth until then. We who are alive and remain have the privilege and responsibility of being true and faithful to Him while we wait for Him to come. We must be good stewards of whatever He has entrusted to us in the meantime.

If you are interested in following up the subject in more depth, please ask for copies of more detailed talks about each church. They will gladly be sent to you for your careful consideration.

May the Lord bless you in your meditations on these important issues!

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### **Please Note:**

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