

The book of Revelation addresses the subject of the end times. But not all twenty-two chapters deal solely with the future. Chapter one presents a vision of the Glorified Christ that John had in the first century. And chapters two and three are letters that Jesus instructed John to write and send to seven churches in Asia Minor.

We'll see in future weeks the record of a heavenly vision John saw as recorded in chapters four and five. For now keep in mind that the end-times material of Revelation (and there is plenty of it--chapters six through twenty-two) was given in a historical context.

Last time we examined the first four letters as recorded in chapter two. This time we'll focus on the final three letters which are found in chapter three. First a review of...

General Observations about the Seven Letters:

1. *Each letter is addressed "to the angel of the church" in a particular city.*
2. *The order of the letters seems to be geographical in orientation.*
3. *Each letter follows the same basic pattern:*
 - Description of Jesus
 - Words of commendation ("I know...")
 - Words of critique/challenge ("But...")
 - A Concluding Promise ("To him who overcomes I will give...")
4. *Of the seven churches, only two were not criticized: Smyrna and Philadelphia.*
5. *Each letter concludes with "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches," indicating the letters were intended for all.*

The Letter to the Church in Sardis:

Sardis was a city living in the past by the days of the first century. In the sixth century B.C., it was a center of Persian government. But no longer. In John's day, the people of Sardis were known for their luxurious, loose way of life (Ladd, 55). There was a deep spiritual apathy which resulted from the softness and love of luxury which characterized the city.

There was a church there. And as often happens, instead of being distinct from its society, the church was squeezed into the mold of its society. Here's what Jesus said to it.

I. Description of Jesus

Q: How does Jesus describe Himself in verse 1? He's holding two things: "the seven spirits of God [or "the sevenfold Spirit"]" and "the seven stars."

Ladd suggests that the "seven spirits of God" is an allusion to the fullness of the Holy Spirit. He writes (55), "The problem of the church at Sardis was spiritual death; Christ is the possessor of the Holy Spirit who alone can give life."

Q: Who are represented by the seven stars? See 1:20--the angels of the churches

Although the church had fallen into spiritual complacency, she was still the object of Christ's care.

II. Words of commendation ("I know...")

There are none.

Q: What did Jesus say he knew about this church? Verse 1

The church had a reputation. But it was a sham, a coverup. If we had visited the church, our first impressions would have been good. It had a reputation for "being alive." What does that indicate? Lots of activity, perhaps. Organized worship services. Good programs.

Q: But what was the problem, according to Jesus?

Note: Jesus said the church was "dead." Please realize that a "dead" church is not necessarily an inactive church. It may be busy, but its activities are not "complete in the sight of God (2)."

Ladd (56): "Here is a picture of nominal Christianity, outwardly prosperous, busy with the externals of religious activity, but devoid of spiritual life and power."

III. Words of critique/challenge ("But...")

Q: What did Jesus tell the church to do? Notice the imperatives...

--verse 2 Wake up! Strengthen what remains!

--verse 3 Remember, obey, repent

Q: What would happen if they didn't? Verse 3b

"I will come as a thief." How does a thief come? The emphasis is not so much on the coming being swift as *unexpected*. The church thought it was okay. It didn't expect the Lord to come and judge it.

Note: Not everyone in Sardis was like this. What does recognize about some in verse 4? A few people had "not soiled their clothes." What does that mean? Unsoiled clothes are *pure*. This indicates that the problem of the majority in Sardis was that they'd been contaminated by the society around them. They'd lost their distinctness. Oh, they still called themselves "Christian" but they lived no differently than the unregenerate.

IV. A Concluding Promise ("To him who overcomes I will give...")

Q: What kind of promise did Jesus give?

Discuss: We could change the name "Sardis" and this letter would be appropriate for many twenty-first century churches in America. How so? Please notice there is hope for such churches--if what happens?

The Letter to the Church in Philadelphia

This church was quite different from the previous one. The city of Philadelphia supported the pagan cult of Dionysus, but the main problem confronting the church was from the Jews rather than the pagans (Ladd, 58).

I. Description of Jesus

Q: What does the key of David represent in verse 7? "The key of David is the key to David's house--the messianic kingdom (Ladd, 59)."

II. Words of commendation ("I know...")

Q: What did Jesus say He knew about this church? Verse 8

--I know your deeds

--I know you have little strength but have kept my word

Notice those words "little strength." They seem to indicate this church was small, poor, and uninfluential. That's significant. Not all churches are the same. Not all churches have the same potential for ministry impact.)

Discuss: When a person moves to a different town, a common frustration for a Christian is finding another church. "It's not like the church I just left!" is a common complaint. How could you use the letters to the seven churches to help this person think more biblically about the challenge of finding a new church?

Q: What did Jesus say He would do to the opposition of the church in verse 9?

Q: What promise did Jesus give to the church in verse 10? The statement, "I will keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world," is critical. The Greek can mean either "keep you from undergoing" or "keep you through" (see *NIV Study Bible*). It indicates that the Savior will keep His church either "from" or "through" the coming period of severe testing in the Tribulation period.

Note: Differences of opinion concerning texts like this one lead to differences of conviction concerning end time positions such as the Pre-Tribulational and Post-Tribulational view of the rapture.

III. Words of critique/challenge ("But...")

Q: Of what did Jesus assure the church in verse 11?

Q: What did he challenge the church to do?

Q: What does "take your crown" mean?

IV. A Concluding Promise ("To him who overcomes I will give...")

Q: What promise is offered in verse 12? What does it mean to be a "pillar in the temple of my God?"

The Letter to the Church in Laodicea

Laodicea was situated at the intersection of three important roads. Thus, it became a prominent center of banking and industry. Its wealth is illustrated by what happened in A.D. 60-61. An earthquake hit it and other Asian cities. Though it suffered severe damage, Laodicea was able to finance its own rebuilding and did not need (as did other cities) substantial subsidies from the imperial treasury (Ladd, 64).

Apparently, this church was founded by Epaphras of Colossae (Col. 1:7; 4:12). Paul was acquainted with the church and wrote a letter to it from Rome (Col. 4:16).

The church was prosperous and in excellent condition--that is, from external appearances. The letter makes no mention of persecution either from the Romans or the Jews, or of any false teachers within the church.

I. Description of Jesus

Q: How does the Lord introduce Himself in verse 14? He's the "Amen." He's the One who is true and who speaks truth. He doesn't tickle ears, nor is He ever brutally honest. But He always speaks the truth in love. What He's about to say is going to hurt, but the pain is necessary...

II. Words of commendation ("I know...")

There was no commendation, only...

III. Words of critique/challenge ("But...")

Q: What was the first thing Jesus said about this church in verse 15? He knew they were lukewarm. This church was like the one in Sardis, only worse. In Sardis there remained a nucleus that retained a vital faith. Not so, apparently, in Laodicea.

Discuss: How would you describe the main problem in this church?

Ladd suggests (64), "The entire Laodicean church was permeated by complacency. It is probable that many of the church members were active participants in the affluent society, and that this very economic affluence had exercised a deadly influence on the spiritual life of the church."

Note: Jesus doesn't confront the Laodiceans for tolerating false teaching. Nor does He challenge them about compromise or immorality. Again, on the surface the church looked just fine.

The situation was serious. To put it bluntly, the church members were indifferent and complacent. They had no zeal. They were neither hot nor cold.

Q: What made the situation even worse, according to verse 17? The church claimed to be okay. But their claims indicate they were self-deceived.

Discuss: How does lukewarmness evidence itself?

Q: What counsel did the Lord give this church in verses 18-19?

Key: Please notice you don't "slide back into" a right relationship with God. You must admit the seriousness of your condition and repent.

Q: Is there hope? Yes! What offer does Jesus make in verse 20?

IV. A Concluding Promise ("To him who overcomes I will give...")

Q: What reward is offered in verse 21?

Some Concluding Observations:

1. The Lord doesn't evaluate a church based on outward appearance. A church can be active and yet dead.

Discuss: How can you tell if such is the case?

2. No two churches are exactly alike. No two bad churches are bad in the same way, and no two good churches are identical.

Discuss: How is this principle illustrated in the letters to the seven churches?

3. In each of the letters the Lord uses the promise of rewards to motivate His people. He says, "If you will...I will..."

Discuss: How would you use this fact to respond to someone who says that *duty* is enough reason to want to please the Lord?

A summary chart of the final three letters...

The Letters to the Churches (in Revelation 3)

Church	Description of Jesus	Commendation ("I know")	Critique/Challenge	Promise ("To him who overcomes")
Sardis (3:1-6)	--holds the seven spirits and seven stars	--Your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but are dead	--Wake up! --Strengthen what remains! --Remember, obey, repent --If you don't, I'll come like a thief --Good: You have a few people...	--Dressed in white --Never blot out name from Book of Life --Will acknowledge his name before the Father and His angels
Philadelphia (3:7-13)	--Holy & True --Holds the key of David	--I know your deeds --I know you have little strength but have kept my word --I will keep you from the hour of trial	--Hold on to what you have	--I will make you a pillar in the temple of God --I will write on him the name of God, and the new name
Laodicea (3:14-22)	--the Amen --the faithful and true witness --the Ruler of God's creation	--I know your deeds --You are neither hot nor cold --I am going to spit you out of my mouth --You are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked	--Buy gold from me --Get white clothes from me --Get salve from me --Be earnest and repent	--Open the door and I will come in --I will give the right to sit with me on my throne