

THE SEVEN FLICKERING FLAMES OF ASIA

Storm Clouds of Tribulation
Loom In The Near Future

Biblical Research Library

Roger E. Dickson

CONTENTS

The Flickering Flame – 3

Introduction – 4

1 – *Message To The Ephesian Disciples* – 12

2 – *Message To The Smyrna Disciples* – 21

3 – *Message To The Pergamum Disciples* – 29

4 – *Message To The Thyatira Disciples* – 36

5 – *Message To The Sardis Disciples* – 42

6 – *Message To The Philadelphia Disciples* – 53

7 – *Message To The Laodicea Disciples* – 61



Roger E. Dickson

rdickson@mweb.co.za

www.africainternational.org

www.blog.africainternational.org

Philadelphia, Western Cape, South Africa

Copyright 2015, Africa International Missions

Scripture quotations from *International King James Version*

Cover Theme: *FIRE STORM* (Sunset in the Kalahari, R.E.D.)

The Flickering Flame

Lamps are often mentioned in the Bible, but there is no description of their shape. The only means by which we can understand the shape of an ancient lamp is through archaeological discoveries of various lamps that were made during biblical times. Many different shapes of lamps have been discovered, most being formed out of either clay or brass. Some had the form of a saucer-like bowl with two sides lipped over for the placement of a wick. Some had the form of a flattened jar with two holes, one for filling with oil or fat, and the other for the wick. Some of these had a handle.

Lamps had a small supply of oil to feed the wick, and thus the burning life was only for two to four hours. This meant that there always had to be a supply of oil in order to fill the basin of the lamp.

Throughout the Bible the lamp is used metaphorically to signify many things. It is used to refer to the word of God (Ps 119:105), the guidance of God (2 Sm 22:29), the salvation of God (Is 62:1), and man's spirit (Pv 20:27). In Revelation, the lamp is used to symbolize the existence and influence of Christians in a particular city.



In the metaphorical use of the lamp to refer to the seven churches of Asia, or lampstand (some translations read, "candlestick"), two very important points are emphasized. The first is in reference to the influence of Christians in the communities in which they lived. When the lampstand was removed, so was the existence of the church, and thus the influence of Christians in the city.

The second reason the Holy Spirit used the lampstand as a metaphor was to teach the frail existence of the flame of influence the lampstand provided. The flame of the lampstand was open, and thus, there was no protection from any gust of wind, or even a small puff of breath. In fact, every night when the flame of the lampstand was extinguished in the house, it was puffed out by someone in the house. The flame was so fragile in its existence that even the children of the house were given the responsibility of snuffing out the lamp for the night.

And so it was with the influence of the disciples in the cities in which they lived. If they did not repent, they would be easily snuffed out by Jesus. In fact, some of the churches were so far gone, that their flame of influence was flickering, and thus, about to be snuffed out by Jesus.

THE SEVEN FLICKERING FLAMES OF ASIA

We are wondering why Jesus really chose the seven churches of Asia as the disciples to who He would direct some of the most stern judgments since His final message the scribes and Pharisees before the cross. Could it be that what was happening among some the disciples of these seven city regions were sinful beliefs and behavior they needed to correct if they were to survive the impending tribulation what was coming? The revelation was delivered through the hand of apostle John. We are sure copies were immediately made and circulated throughout the church. Christians had tasted some persecution at the hand of the psychopathic Nero. But what was to come was far more intense and comprehensive than Nero's burning of Christians to light up his garden in Rome. What was coming was international, encompassing the entirety of the Roman Empire. Was it that Jesus needed to inform the members of His universal body that they needed to clean up their act if they were to survive what was coming. Possibly so. What we experience in our adventure through these seven messages is strikingly familiar. Though the names have changed, and our application is dated over two thousands years later, we are often in the midst of apostasy of belief and behavior that is so similar to these messages. The relevance of the messages, therefore, may make some feel uncomfortable simply because they are so relevant today.

INTRODUCTION

We could probably have been sitting with some of the disciples in any one of the assemblies of the houses throughout the region of Ephesus. Or possibly, we may have been among the Christians in Smyrna or Sardis. At least in the Lord's message to the disciples in these cities, there is a message for each one of us. The message to the seven churches of Asia cuts to the heart of all our presumptuous religiosity we might harbor. It does this in order that we repent and restore Jesus to our daily living. One of the primary lessons that we learn from a study of the seven messages to the Chris-

tians in the cities is what Jesus expects of Christians who claim to be His disciples.

Date: The visions of Revelation probably occurred just before A.D. 70. This would make their revelation less than forty years after the joyous day of Pentecost in A.D. 30. Some would say that the visions were recorded the latter part of the first century. But we would disagree with this long held assumption. We would believe against all tradition in order to affirm that all the New Testament letters were written before the consummation of national Israel in A.D. 70. It is

traditionally assumed that the letter of Revelation was written around A.D. 96. But this late date does not seem to harmonize with God's work to terminate national Israel in A.D. 70. And then, we would also question why the Holy Spirit would wait so long to cap the New Testament at the end of the first century. We will argue for the conclusion that all revelation through Scripture, plus the work of the miraculous gifts of the Spirit, were finalized by the time God used the Roman Empire to turn the final page of His work through national Israel to bring the Redeemer into the world. A.D. 70 was, according to Daniel, the consummation of national Israel.

What is significant about the early date for the addresses to the seven churches is that apostasy can come very quickly. Only one decade is enough time to slide into apostasy from Christ and into the situation that we witness among some of the disciples of western Asia Minor. If Revelation were written at the conclusion of the first century, then we could add another twenty or so years to the spiritual condition of the disciples that Jesus addresses in Revelation 2 & 3. However, such a short time is hardly worth discussion in reference to apostasy that can occur in one generation. What is important to remember is that from the beginning of a beautiful story in Acts 19, to the proclamation of the judgments in Revelation concerning the spiritual fall of some among the seven churches of Asia, **we have a frightening short period of time.** It is so short, that within the lifetime of the average disciple, the

aged can look back in their lives and see if they have fallen.

It does not take generations to go into apostasy. One generation will do. And in the case of the seven churches of Asia, it seems that only one generation was sufficient to move so far away from Jesus that special visions had to come directly from Jesus to John, and then to the seven churches, in order to sort out some problems. At least, the visions were meant to inform the recipients of the message that they were in serious trouble of having their lampstand of influence extracted from the cities in which the disciples were located.

Roman Theocracy: As students of the political history, we must not forget that religion and government were often combined in ancient nations. Theocratic leaders ruled the people by demanding allegiance to the king or Caesar as they would give allegiance to their gods. Rome capitalized on this as narcissistic Caesars began to arise in the Empire. Nero was one of the first, demanding that people believe that he was some deity. The people were to call him "lord," not as a manner of respect, but as one who would be revered as a god.

The sentiment that was to be expressed to the Caesar, was not simply patriotism to a head of state, but worship of a god on earth. If allegiance to Caesar as lord was not expressed, then the denial of such was viewed as insurrection against the state. And so, Christians who believed that there was only one Lord, were in trouble.

With the beginning in Nero, there were about 150 years of different levels of Caesarian claim to deity that prevailed throughout the Roman Empire. During this period, Christians suffered the persecution of a theocratic state that demanded both political and religious loyalty. Christians were headed into this era of persecution at the time Jesus gave His messages to the seven churches. Therefore, Jesus and the Holy Spirit, through the messages and visions of Revelation, prepared Christians for the trials that were coming, which trials had already begun under Nero.

As we study through the historical background of the seven churches, one can see in the community of the churches, that there was a great deal of intimidation by the community. This religious intimidation to conform to the religious ways of the community would grow. The book of Revelation was written by John for the purpose of giving encouragement to these Christians of the tribulations that would shortly come to pass.

Leaders: If the visions of this book occurred before A.D. 70, then Paul's Miletus meeting in Acts 20 posses the opportunity for some speculation to better understand the timeline from his meeting in Acts to Jesus' messages to the seven churches in Revelation.

We begin with Paul in Troas where he arrived in the company of Sopater, Arisarchus and Secundus (At 20:4). It is significant to notice that with them was also Gaius who was from Derbe and Timothy from the Derbe/Lystra area of

Cilicia. But what is more interesting is that Tychicus and Trophimus are mentioned as being from Asia, possibly the region of the seven churches. The date of the Troas meeting was around A.D. 59, only a few short years before Jesus' revelation of the spiritual condition of the seven churches of Asia as it is explained in His address to the churches in the area.

From Troas, Paul and his companions headed south. He sent his companions on the Assos, where he determined to be reunited with them after he himself had walked alone the distance from Troas to Assos (At 20:15). From Assos the team sailed together to Mitylene, and then the next day on to Chios. The next day they arrived at Samos, and then went on to the small town of Miletus (At 20:15).

In Acts 20:16 the travel log of Luke becomes interesting. Luke records that Paul "*did not want to spend time in Asia*" (At 20:16). Luke does not say that Paul did not want to spend time in Ephesus. When Paul stayed two years in Ephesus on a previous journey, "all Asia" from Ephesus heard the word (At 10:9,10). Therefore, we would assume that "all Asia" at least refers to the area of the cities of the seven churches of Revelation, for all the cities were but a short distance from Ephesus. And speaking from our own personal experience, if it was known that Paul was coming, the disciples of "all Asia" would want to come and listen to him, for he was the "walking Bible." Surely the word had gotten out that Paul was coming. When those who are hungering for the word of God hear that a teacher is coming through, you

can assume the response. We have conducted seminars where brethren have walked up to five days, day and night, in order to attend.

Now consider the geographical location of the seven churches from Miletus, “*for from Miletus he [Paul] sent to Ephesus and called the presbyters of the church*” (At 20:17). Must we assume that these were only the presbyters of the city of Ephesus, or can we assume that the presbyters from the rest of the cities in the region had first assembled in Ephesus in anticipation of Paul’s arrival? Luke states “*Now when they [the presbyters] came to him ...*” (At 20:18), the meeting began. Now consider this. (This is something that may be difficult for us as automobile-bound brethren to understand.) The average person in the “non-automobile world” walked 25-30 kilometers a day. This means that Ephesus was about a day’s walk from Miletus. Smyrna was about a two-day walk. Pergamum about three days, or the leaders could have come from this port city by ship. Thyatira was about a four-day walk or about two days by ship. The furthestmost cities of Philadelphia, Laodicea and Colosse were no more than a three-day walk from Miletus. There were other minor towns in the area, including Magnesia, Cibyra and Apamea that were only a short distance from Miletus.

Since Paul did not want to become involved in having to say “no” to countless requests to come to their city, he asked that the meeting (seminar) be held in Miletus. If advance word had been sent ahead, then we would assume that

all the presbyters gathered to the homes of the brethren in Ephesus, and then waited for word of Paul’s arrival.

After all the presbyters who had assembled in Ephesus eventually arrived in Miletus, Paul introduced his message to them by reminding them, “*You know, from the first day that I came to Asia ...*” (At 20:18). And from that first day he spent three years with the church of Asia (At 20:31). Could it be that we have wrongly assumed that only the presbyters of the city of Ephesus were in this meeting? Was this an exclusive meeting where everyone else of the other nearby cities of Asia were excluded? Such seems highly unlikely. If the word got out to the other churches of Asia that Paul was coming by, we find it hard to believe that all who heard did not set out immediately for Ephesus. In fact, it would seem that Paul would have been quite snobbish if he had not let the presbyters of the other cities know that he was coming through.

Since Paul wanted to speak to the leaders of the church in the region of Asia, we would assume that the presbyters of the region initially gathered in Ephesus, and then waited for the messenger to come and tell them where the meeting was going to be.

We make this assumption based on the fact of the reality of the events that transpired. But also, we make our assumption in view of what Paul said in his message, specifically the statements in Acts 20:29,30. Since the meeting took place around A.D. 59, and the visions of Revelation took place less than ten years later, the “grievous wolves” had already

started to enter in among the seven churches of Asia. The Nicolaitans and Balaamites, and followers of Jezebel, were already arising among the disciples. They were drawing away disciples after themselves. And the sad thing about the warning was that Paul said that *“from your own selves will men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves”* (At 20:30). This was what was actually happening among some of the seven churches even as Paul spoke. And it is for this reason that we believe that Paul wanted a last word with all of them before going on to Jerusalem for his last visit.

It may have been that the reason Jesus had to make the judgmental addresses to the seven churches was because the leaders of some of the churches had gone after the perverse teachings of the Nicolaitans, Balaamites and Jezebel. It is a sad day in the history of the church when the leadership of the church forgets the commandments of the Lord, and then seeks to control religious groups to follow them and not the Lord. Every self-proclaimed prophet should sit up and take notice of these warnings of Jesus. If one claims “this is my church,” then he is a leader of an apostasy, and subsequently, will reap the condemnation that Jesus gives in His messages to the seven churches.

Ekklesia: Now in moving into the visions of judgment, there is at least one paramount historical fact that must be understood about the disciples in these seven city regions. When the statement

is made, “To the angel of the church of ...”, **we must not make the unfortunate mistake of thinking that there was only one assembly of the disciples in any particular city on 1st Street and Main.** Because the word “church” (ekklēsia) is used in the singular does not mean that there was only one assembly of the saints in each of the seven cities. If there were only one assembly in each of the seven cities, then we would have to conclude that in the years of the existence of the church in these cities, there was only minimal growth of the church. This would certainly be contrary to the nature of the early growth of the church in other areas. So we will not involve ourselves in such thinking, assuming that in the seven cities, as in all cities where the early church was located, the saints were meeting in the homes of the disciples throughout the region of the cities. This conclusion would be necessary because of the example of the growth of the church in Ephesus (At 19). There were simply no purpose-built church buildings in the early centuries of the existence of the church.

We must also keep in mind that there were no “city limits” of the first century cities. “City limits” is a modern-day border of demarcation in reference to the governance and public services of a city. Our understanding of the word “city” in the New Testament would best be interpreted to mean “city region.” There were, therefore, disciples living in all the regions around Ephesus, or Corinth, or Philadelphia. And in reference to the meeting of the saints in the

homes of the disciples, then there were house assemblies throughout each of the seven city regions.

When the word *ekklesia* (church) is used, therefore, reference is to the people of the city region, **not to the assemblies on Sunday**. Once we identify the church as the people, and not as the assembly of the people, then we are on our way to understanding correctly the organic function of the body of Christ throughout the first century world. This is especially true when we seek to understand the address of Jesus to the church (people) in each of the seven city regions. The problems that Jesus addressed were with the people, **not with the assemblies**. And because the people (the church) were scattered throughout a particular city region, then the address was to “the church (disciples) of” The exhortations of Revelation 2 & 3 were to people, not the assemblies of the people.

The fact that the disciples were scattered throughout these seven city regions helps us to understand better the messenger’s use of the world *ekklesia* (“church”) in reference to God’s people. Most important of all, we understand that the use of the word in this context is in reference to people, not assemblies. Therefore, the corporate assemblies of God’s people **do not** identify the existence of God’s people in any geographical region.

Add to this the content of the messages. Jesus **was not** seeking to correct some dysfunctions in the assemblies of the saints. In fact, nothing is said about assemblies in any of the seven messages.

All the exhortations of the messages focused on beliefs and behavior. And the fact that the exhortations were addressed to the collective of the disciples in each city region, affirms that no group of disciples within any of the city regions had a right to separate themselves from the rest of the disciples in that region. There were no autonomous assemblies of the disciples within any of the seven city regions. There were several assemblies of disciples who were meeting in numerous houses throughout the cities, but no one assembly in any house declared their independence from any other assembly of disciples in reference to the church (singular) of a particular city. There were no autonomous groups of disciples within any city who declared their autonomy from any other group.

The fact that Jesus did not address any divisive behavior among the disciples in any city, assumes that the practice of autonomous assemblies had not yet developed among the disciples at this time in the history of the church. The church was still functioning as one universal body.

Here is something for which to watch in these messages to all the Christians in any one particular city. In Pergamum, for example, there were “**those** who hold the teaching of Balaam” and “the teaching of the Nicolaitans” (Rv 2:14,15). Does this mean that if there was only one autonomous assembly within Pergamum, then the call for repentance on the part of “those” who taught these teachings was directed only to those of one assembly? Because the

members were meeting in several houses throughout the cities, did this mean that the shepherds, regardless of where they sat on Sunday, had the responsibility to deal with the teaching of the Balaamites and Nicolaitans wherever they sat on Sunday morning? According to the responsibilities of the shepherds of the cities (At 20:28), we would certainly believe that they did not neglect their responsibility to teach the word of God to everyone in each of the seven cities. Any member or shepherd within a city had the responsibility to correct the teaching of the Balaamites and Nicolaitans. If one sat on Sunday morning in an assembly where there were no Balaamites or Nicolaitans, then this did not relieve him of the responsibility of exhorting with the word of God these false teachers, wherever they were in the city. Now when we consider this historical setting, we should review our beliefs concerning assembly autonomy. Those who seek to start and maintain their own independent and exclusive assembly should think on these things. We need to remember that whenever one is baptized into Christ, God adds that person to His people. Where this baptized believer shows up on Sunday morning does not determine whether God has added him to His people (At 2:47).

Seven Cities: No one has any idea as to why Jesus personally addressed the Christians only in these seven particular cities. Some have supposed that this was a regular “mail route” of the early Roman Empire. However, it could have

been that Jesus simply picked out seven representative cities of disciples that represented the falling away from the truth that was indicative of many other churches in the first century, or at least would occur throughout the centuries to come. It seems that the address of Revelation 2 & 3 is the follow up of Paul’s prophecy to the elders of Asia, that “*from your own selves will men arise, speaking perverse things ...*” (At 20:30). If this assumption is true, then we would determine our definition of the “perverse things” by at least studying through the messages to the seven city regions. When we study the “perverse things” of these disciples, we may find ourselves either condoning “perverse things” or behaving perversely. This will especially be evident when we come to the sin of lukewarmness that is specifically targeted in the message to the disciples in Laodicea.

Teaching: Many good teachers have taught on the moral and doctrinal character of the seven churches of Asia. Within Jesus’ messages to these churches one will often find himself somewhere in one of the messages. We must not think, therefore, that the moral and doctrinal points of these messages that were revealed to the seven churches over two thousand years ago are not relevant for us today. These messages are significant for all disciples for all time, for we must believe that the Holy Spirit included this material in the New Testament in order to both discourage apostasy, but at the same time encourage the faithful with a

promise of eternal life. Since the messages were directed to those who had been Christians for some time, it was difficult to call to repentance those who have lived in a religious culture of sin for so long. This is the reason why the lampstand would inevitably be removed from some of these areas. Too many had lived for too long after the behavior of what was too far from true discipleship.

Of course, there are those who simply ignore the warnings, hoping for the “closing prayer” so that they can write off the relevance of the messages. Regardless of our lack of appreciation for these messages, we will assure you of one thing as we study through the sins of the seven flickering flames. We will often find ourselves somewhere among these disciples. And when we find ourselves facing direct judgment from Jesus, we will have to make a decision as to whether we will be His disciple, or run out the back door of the church house.

Call for repentance: But there is hope. Advance calls for repentance gave the disciples in the seven cities an opportunity to repent. If repentance came, then preservation of the influence of the body of Christ within the city regions would continue. The general pattern that Jesus followed in making His call for repentance began with a personal address that included a metaphorical description of who He was in reference to His universal body. This was followed by an initial commendation, and then, condemnation

and judgment if they continued in their wayward ways. In order to generate repentance, exhortations were made that were followed by warnings. As a last admonition to repent, Jesus made promises what they would enjoy if they repented.

Throughout each message, there is hope of preservation. But if there were no repentance, then the influence of Christ in the city regions would be terminated. However, though their Christianity would have digressed to formal religiosity, there would be no positive influence for Christ to the unbelievers. And when this happens, the church ceases to exist, regardless of assemblies. Since a loving life-style identifies the existence of the church in any region (Jn 13:34,35), then when loving behavior for Jesus ceases, then the church of Christ has terminated in a particular region.

We must keep this very important point in mind as we study through the messages. Jesus is not talking about repenting and restoring some ritualistic assembly. He is talking about repenting of sin that destroys one’s witness that he is a disciple of Jesus. The sins (“perverse things”) that were happening among the seven areas of disciples was not some erroneous system or ritual of assembly, but error in reference to moral behavior and beliefs. If some of the disciples among the cities did not repent of these things, then their influence for Jesus would be snuffed out. The flickering flame would be gone.

Chapter 1

Message To The Ephesian Disciples



It seems that Jesus started with the city of disciples that had the greatest opportunity of all the other cities. The prominence and location of this city meant that the disciples in Ephesus had a great impact throughout western Asia Minor, which impact, they were in danger of losing. The Christians in key urban centers as Ephesus must keep this in mind. What they do will often affect the existence of the church through a region, if not an entire nation.

Ephesus had been given the greater privilege of having the apostle Paul teach and work in the city for three years (At 20:31). Therefore, the Christians in this city had the greater responsibility to maintain the flame of their lamp because they had the greater privilege of the personal ministry of a Christ-sent apostle. This may be the reason why we know more about the work of the early Christians in this urban center than we do of any of the other cities that are addressed in Revelation 2 & 3.

A. Ephesus was a commercial and religious center.

Ephesus (meaning “desirable”) was a seaport city that was located on the Cayster River. The city was the largest port city of all Asia Minor, and thus roads directed trade to and through its port. It was a gateway port to the Mediterranean basin. It was also the gateway to west-

ern Asia Minor for political, religious and commercial influences. By the time Paul stepped foot in the city in Acts 19, the city was at least one thousand years old. Some have estimated that the population at the time of Paul’s first visit was over 250,000. Since the city was a seaport city, it was the center of trading from inland Asia Minor, which made the city very wealthy and important to Mediterranean commerce.

What was unique about Ephesus is that it housed the great temple of the local god Diana (Greek, Artemis). This temple was once considered one of the seven wonders of the world. From the time of the beginning of idol worship in the city, there were actually five temple structures that had been destroyed and rebuilt on the site where the temple of Diana stood at the time Paul was in Ephesus. The fourth temple that was built on the site burned the night Alexander the Great was born in October 365 B.C. Construction was started on the fifth temple in 350 B.C. It took 220 years to complete this temple. This temple was about 25,000 square meters in size upon completion. It was eventually burned in A.D. 263. After the destruction of this temple, there was never again a temple built on the site.

Housed within the temple at the time Paul was in Ephesus was a large stone that some historians believe was a meteorite. Because it appeared to be

multi-breasted, it became the idol of Diana, the goddess of fertility. The people were so fanatical about this idol, and the religion it represented, that when they recognized, upon his arrival at the temple, that Paul was a Jew, “*all with one voice for about the time of two hours cried out, ‘Great is Artemis [Diana] of the Ephesians’*” (At 19:34).

Because of the location of the city of Ephesus, the temple of Diana became a banking center where the people entrusted their money to the priests. By the time of Paul’s arrival, it was not only a center of worship, but a treasure house for the people, and a museum for many of the best pieces of art in the region. The temple was the heart and soul of the people of Ephesus. The fanaticism that was expressed against Paul upon his arrival in Ephesus in Acts 19 can be understood because of the people’s zeal for the idol worship that was associated with the temple of Diana. The message that Paul preached was against everything the temple represented among the Ephesians. The message of his preaching not only attacked the idol worship of the culture, it also attacked the idol business that was associated with the temple.

In the messages written to the seven churches, it is possible that Jesus used the influence of the cities as a metaphorical prophesy concerning the future decline of the influence of the disciples in the regions of the cities. Ephesus, for example, would have been an example to define the religious, commercial and cultural influence of the city throughout the region of Ephesus. The other cities,

in a similar way, were also influential in their regions. But the disciples’ positive influence for the truth was declining. The flames of their lamps were flickering. In some cases, they were reverting to the behavior of idol worship from which they were originally converted.

When the influence of Ephesus began to wane, so did the influence of the church throughout the region of Ephesus. When the disciples saw the demise of the influence of the church throughout their region, they would remember what Jesus said about the removal of their lamp. When the influence of all the seven cities eventually came to an end, so did the influence of the church in the region of the cities. The lampstand was taken away as the cities, and the church in the cities, disappeared from history. The lamps of the churches eventually ran out of oil, and subsequently, flickered out.

B. Ephesus was formerly a focal point of Asian evangelism.

By the time Paul arrived in Ephesus, idol worship had been commercialized. Idols of the religion of Diana were on sale at great profit (At 19:24). When a great conversion resulted from Paul’s preaching of the gospel, the people burned thousands of religious books that were worth a great deal of money (At 19:19). The people did not seek to synchronize their spiritualistic religious beliefs with the truth. On the contrary, they sought to eradicate pagan beliefs from their minds. Some historians believe that by the time of Paul’s third mission trip to

Ephesus, the worship of Diana was waning. The great conversion of idol worshipers through the preaching of the gospel certainly continued the demise of this religion. For this reason, the idol business was in serious trouble. And when men have commercialized religion, we can expect trouble when the truth endangers their profit.

It is certain that the preaching of the gospel to the city of Ephesus came long before Paul's arrival. There were surely Jewish citizens who returned before and after the Passover/Pentecost feast of Jerusalem in A.D. 30. Upon their return to Ephesus, they would have shared what they heard being preached throughout Palestine by both John and Jesus (At 2:9; See Is 2:1-4). This may explain the existence of a small group of about twelve disciples whom Paul found in the city who knew only the baptism of John (At 19:1-7). Since John's preaching took place six months before Jesus began His ministry, and before the Passover/Pentecost feast of Acts 1,2 took place in A.D. 30, then we could assume that these disciples Paul found had been meeting for approximately twenty-five years in their house before he showed up in Acts 19:1-7. Maybe such faithfulness will give us some idea of the religious soul of the Ephesians. They took their faith seriously.

As far as our knowledge of the formal establishment of the disciples in Ephesus, Acts places Paul, Aquila and Priscilla in the city after the trio left Corinth. Paul left Aquilla and Priscilla in the city, while he went on to Jerusalem (At 18:18-21). Apollos also

preached in the city and was initially contacted by Aquila and Priscilla when he was preaching in the Jewish synagogue of Ephesus (At 18:24-26). He too only knew the baptism of John.

The presence of these two Christians, Aquila and Priscilla, in the synagogue does indicate that they as Jewish Christians continued their outreach to the Jews. Their meeting in the synagogue illustrates that Christians should not shun the opportunity to be anywhere with any religious person who might want to hear. We do know that Aquila and Priscilla, with other disciples, maintained a low profile while they met in the Ephesus synagogue, for when Paul came, and was more distinct in his message, "*some [Jews] were hardened and did not believe, but spoke evil of the Way before the multitude*" (At 19:9).

What Aquila and Priscilla were doing was waiting for any opportunity to speak privately with anyone who came along, and such they did with Apollos (At 18:26). Instead of creating opposition publicly, Aquila and Priscilla worked privately. Paul, however, went public and specific. As a result, the unbelieving Jews of the synagogue desired that it was time for the Christians to move on. So Paul "*departed from them and separated the disciples [from the synagogue of Jews], reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus*" (At 19:9). From his ministry of teaching in the school of Tyrannus, "*all those who dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus*" (At 19:10). It was a classic example of God using opposition to move the evangelist on to a

more fruitful ministry. This may have been when the disciples began to meet in homes throughout the city.

After the mass conversion that took place during Paul's two-year stay in Ephesus, he traveled on, eventually ending up in a Roman prison around A.D. 61,62. From prison he wrote to the disciples in Ephesus. He made some significant statements in the text of Ephesians 3:14-19 in reference to their personal relationships with one another. He wrote that he prayed that the Father would grant them strength in order that they be "*rooted and grounded in love*" (Ep 3:17). He prayed that they might "*know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge*" (Ep 3:19). It seems from these exhortations in the letter that at the time he wrote to the Ephesian disciples, they were possibly having some trouble in reference to implementing the "love of Christ" in their lives. They were possibly falling from the love of Christ that would motivate them to reach out to the unbelievers as they did in the beginning in Acts 19. By the time of the exhortations of Revelation, they had lost their "first love." It seems that they maintained their love of one another, but lost the love that motivated works, specifically evangelistic works.

When we define what the "first love" was, it is necessary to reflect on what Paul wrote in the Ephesian letter. Bible students have differed on what the "first love" was. When comparing the Ephesians' initial response to the gospel in Acts 19, and the exhortations in the Ephesian letter, there are two possibili-

ties. First, the term "first love" may have been a relational love of the disciples for one another. Or second, it could refer to the love that was expressed by Paul in Galatians 5:6: "... *in Jesus*" it is "***faith working through love.***" This statement was made in the context of some of the Galatians disciples who were seeking to be legalistically justified before God through their meritorious works of law. Such works could not justify one before God, and thus, legal works are useless in reference to our salvation (Gl 2:16). It is our opinion that the Ephesians had lost their works that were motivated by faith and love, and thus were continuing their legal works whereby they, as some in Galatia, were seeking to take pride in their works in order to be justified before God.

Since Jesus exhorted them to do the first works (Rv 2:5), then they had to restore the first love in order to do the works that came from love, not legal religiosity to merit their salvation or validate themselves as the people of God. One of the first works was fervent evangelistic outreach, the works that were manifested in those first years of the existence of the church in Ephesus.

In the context of Revelation 2:1 in which the statement was made that they had lost their first love, the exhortation would define the loss of this first love to be somewhat different from the love that Christians are to have for one another. The phrase "first love" seems to refer more to evangelistic outreach, than love among the disciples. They had the "first love" when they first became disciples

during the Acts 19 event. When Paul wrote the Ephesian letter in A.D. 61,62, they seemed to have continued in their love for one another, for Paul said nothing in the Ephesian letter about their losing their love for one another. Neither did he say anything about losing their “first love.” But by the time of the exhortation of Revelation, the “first love” was gone. So by the time Jesus addressed them, we also wonder how they were actually doing concerning their love for one another. When disciples begin to lose their love for one another, then we know that their love for the lost is flickering out. There is no desire to be evangelistic when Christians do not love one another. No one of an unloving fellowship of disciples has the desire to being converts into an unloving fellowship.

C. Ephesus is admonished by Jesus.

Jesus is the One who is delivering the messages to the seven churches. There is a metaphorical description of Him in the address to each church. His address to each city church is sent through the medium of an “angel,” which Greek word can also be translated “messenger.”

In the introductory message to the Ephesus Christians, Jesus is pictured as the One who has ownership (“hold”) of the disciples in all the seven city regions. And as the One to whom Christians belong, He is among His people. The fact that Jesus is among His people assumes that no man should seek to rise up and take the place of Jesus in His ministry among His people. There is no need for

presumptuous men as Diotrephes to set aside the headship of Jesus in order to become the center of reference and controlling power for the disciples of Jesus. Jesus is the only needed head (Cl 1:18; Ep 1:22,23). Paul had warned the Ephesians that some elders would be so arrogant as to walk among the disciples, calling disciples after themselves (At 20:29,30). But Jesus’ reminder here is that He only is the One who walks among His disciples.

It is significant to note that Jesus did not send a message to the elders of any of the churches, nor to some apostle, or prominent preacher. As the head of His universal body with all authority (Mt 28:18), the picture that is painted with words in each introduction is that He is addressing the members of His body directly. There were no authorities on earth through whom He had to go in order to reach the members of His body. There is no need of a pope or some authority or synod of men on earth who should direct the affairs of God’s people. Jesus is capable of leading His people through the instructions of His written word alone. Since all authority resides with Jesus (Mt 28:18), who is the head of His universal body, then no universal institutional authority on earth is needed to take the place of Jesus’ direct authority of His body through His word. If any authorities would set themselves up on earth to rule the affairs of the body of Jesus, then the “all” authority of Jesus would be minimized. Authorities on earth always seek to set aside the authority of Jesus over His body through His word.

1. *They worked and labored:* Jesus' first statements to these disciples was, "*I know your works and your labor and your patience*" (Rv 2:2). They were still an active group of disciples throughout the region of Ephesus. Jesus did not want them to think that their labors were in vain, nor unnoticed. He knows the work of every active disciple, and thus He seeks to commend His people on the basis of their work (2 Co 5:10). The Holy Spirit had earlier written to them, "*For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works ...*" (Ep 2:10). They certainly continued that about which the Spirit reminded them through the Ephesian letter. However, if they could have been saved on the basis of their work, then there would be no problem. But in the context of reminding them that they were His workmanship, the Spirit also stated, "*For by grace you are saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God*" (Ep 2:8). Could it have been that they were legally trusting in their works, and thus, had forgotten that no amount of works could save them? Churches that are motivated by legal performance alone, and not grace, soon run out of steam. As will be noticed later, disciples can work themselves into spiritual death (Rv 3:1). At least the flame of these disciples was flickering, even though they were working.

2. *They resisted moral and doctrinal error:* Morally, the Ephesians were zealous to walk according to the standard of the word of God. They did not "*bear those who are evil*" (Rv 2:2). Neither

could they bear those who professed to be messengers (Gr.: "apostles") of the church, but were liars (Rv 2:2). There were those coming through their area who said that they had been sent out by other Christians, and thus were seeking to validate themselves as church-sent apostles. But the Ephesian disciples tested these self-proclaimed apostles and found that they were only masquerading themselves as church-sent apostles (See 2 Co 11:13-15; 1 Jn 4:1,6).

The Ephesian disciples had certainly remembered the exhortation of Paul when he met with the presbyters of the church from Asia a few years before on his third mission journey. During that visit, Paul warned all the churches that men would arise and call the disciples after themselves (See At 20:28-31). It seems that it was not long after Paul's admonition that the false apostles were circulating among the assemblies of the disciples.

It is significant in our times to notice the existence of these self-proclaimed apostles as those who were also among the early churches. In this context, Jesus calls these self-proclaimed apostles liars in that they said that they were sent out by other disciples. But they had not been sent out by others, **but by themselves**. Since the Greek word *apostolos* means "one who is sent," then no man can send himself, and then claim to be an apostle. **Apostles are sent by someone else** (See At 18:27; 2 Co 8:23; Ph 2:25). Even Paul was cautious about claiming to be an apostle of Christ. He thus validated his apostleship by remind-

ing the Corinthians that he had been personally called and personally sent out **directly by Jesus** (1 Co 15:9,10; 2 Co 10). He did not send himself.

When the self-sent apostles who came to Ephesus were tested with the word of God, the conclusion was that no other group of Christians had sent them because faithful Christians would not have sent out one who was teaching error. It is easy for a self-sent apostle to teach all sorts of error if he does not know his Bible. If he does not know the Bible, then he often sets himself up as his own authority. But when a church-sent apostle is tested by the word of God by a group of disciples (1 Jn 4:1), then it is less likely that such a person will be going about teaching error. Paul reminded the Corinthian disciples of self-sent false apostles who were circulating among the disciples. He wrote of such self-sent apostles, *“For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, masquerading themselves as apostles of Christ”* (2 Co 11:13).

It is easy for a self-proclaimed apostle to send himself in order to live off the church. This was the problem. And because it was a problem in the first century, Paul supported himself when he went forth as a Christ-sent apostle (At 18:1-3; 20:33-25). But to claim that one is sent out by the church when he has sent himself, is to be a liar. According to this text, all self-proclaimed apostles would be liars, for they have been sent out by no one other than themselves. If they claimed to have been personally called by Jesus, as Paul, then they need

to be reminded that Paul said he was an apostle who was born out of the time when Christ-sent apostles were personally called by Jesus (1 Co 15:8). Because of this untimely birth as an apostle, Paul said that he was not as the original twelve (1 Co 15:9). So where would this put all the modern-day self-proclaimed apostles? They would certainly not be as the untimely born Paul. And if they have not been sent out by the disciples, then neither are they “ones sent” (apostles).

Those who seek to go forth individually on their own, are encouraged to do so. But one should not claim to be sent out by the church if the church has not sent him. If one claims to be sent by the church when he was not, then he is masquerading as a church-sent apostle. They are as those in Corinth who were self-proclaimed apostles, for they were wanting to be somebody they were not.

3. They lost their first love: Contrary to many disciples in various regions of the world, Jesus commended the Ephesian disciples, for they had *“labored for My name’s sake and have not become weary”* (Rv 2:3). The Christians in Ephesus stood against that which was evil, hating the licentious evil taught by the cult of Nicolaitans (Rv 2:6). They were active and doctrinally able to test with the word of God those who came by and said that they were apostles sent out by other disciples (See 1 Co 12:10). They had not grown weary in their vigor to be cautious about maintaining their works. But something serious had gone wrong.

In verse 4 Jesus stated, *“... you have*

left your first love.” In order to understand that to which Paul refers in his use of the phrase “first love,” it might be good to reflect on the time when he wrote to them a personal letter from Rome in A.D. 61,62. In the letter he wrote,

Therefore, I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and love for all the saints, do not cease to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers (Ep 1:15,16).

It would seem unlikely that they had lost their love for one another and all the saints from the time of the writing of this statement in A.D. 61,62 to the time Jesus made the judgment of Revelation 2. In fact, Paul commended them in the letter for their reputation for loving one another and all the saints. Even if Revelation were written about thirty years later in A.D. 96, it seems unlikely that they would have fallen out of love with one another.

The “first love” that they had lost, was not a reference to their love for one another, but the love that is defined in verse 5 in Jesus’ call for their repentance. Jesus exhorted, “... *remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the first works*” When we recall the tremendous evangelistic conversion and explosion in Ephesus that was recorded in Acts 19, the “first love” would certainly have been their love for the lost, which love motivated them to work to save the lost. If they did not restore this love, then they, as an influence for our Lord in Ephesus, would flicker out of existence. This would be certain since the

lampstand was about to be removed. Since the lampstand would refer to their light of influence throughout the city, then when it was snuffed out, the affect of the Ephesian disciples in Ephesus would be gone. In this case, the usefulness of the body in Ephesus as a light to the lost would have terminated long before the disciples stopped their assemblies and legal works.

When disciples lose their local evangelistic outreach to the lost, they start believing that their mission is to themselves. This seemed to be the case in Ephesus with all the labor among themselves for which Jesus earlier commended them. But once the zeal to locally preach the gospel fades away among introverted disciples that are active among themselves, they will continue to meet in order to validate their existence, but their preaching of the gospel to the lost is long gone. Dead churches often have exciting assemblies for themselves, but there are no new converts among them who have recently obeyed the gospel. Active churches, as the Ephesian church, give the pretense of being alive, but they are dead if they have no local evangelistic outreach to the lost.

These disciples were dead because they lost the love that motivated them in the beginning when they were first converted. The statement “*unless you repent*” means that it was not well with these disciples (Rv 2:5). Though they were an active people among themselves, they were in need of repentance to restore their first love of reaching out to

others. They needed to change their direction of focus. Jesus' exhortation leads us to believe that churches that are active with themselves, but are not preaching the gospel to the lost, are in need of repentance.

D. Ephesus is given hope.

If they repented of their introversion, then there was hope for the future. *"To him who overcomes I will give to eat of the tree of life that is in the paradise of God"* (Rv 2:7). The word "overcome" would certainly be the right word to use in reference to repenting of losing our first love. Once the culture of apathy is established among the disciples in any area, it is a struggle to overcome the sin. It is a struggle to love again as one did when he first became a Christian. Restoring lost zeal is difficult, but not impossible. And from reading what Jesus said to these disciples, if we would be saved, and thus eat of the tree of life, restoring our first love is not an option.

The metaphor "tree of life" in this context finds its original meaning in Genesis 3:22. It was a literal tree, and the source of eternal existence (Gn 3:22-24). Reference in the context of Revelation is to the eternal life that one has if he continues as a repentant disciple who restores his first love. Those who are obedient until death will be able to have access to the tree of life (Rv 22:2,14,19). The Ephesian disciples were given the opportunity to repent from the walk of death in order to again be restored to eternal life, which life they lost when they

lost their first love. This promise is a reaffirmation of 1 John 1:7:

But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.

Apathetic churches can overcome. It is difficult, but this statement of promise means that they can. The Ephesian church started in Acts 19, which would have been in the early or middle 50s. When Paul wrote the letter of Ephesians in A.D. 61,62, he commended them for their love for one another and all the saints. By the time Revelation was written, however, they seemed to have continued in their love among themselves, but they had lost their love for lost souls. It does not take long for a church to die, especially when the members become consumed with good works for themselves.

Early numerical growth of disciples in any area is usually in the first ten years after the beginning of the church. After the initial spark of growth, the first converts settle down as they get older, and then reach a plateau of existence. They will continue on this plateau, baptizing some to replace those who fall away, die away, or just go away. But once the plateau of non-growth is established, and apathy sets in, those who come into the fellowship of disciples soon adopt the same culture of indifference. The church is thus doomed to slide eventually down the back side of the growth scale, and go into oblivion. Such was the case with

the Christians in Ephesus. They were on the back side of the plateau. The lampstand of influence was eventually extracted, and the disciples in Ephesus were no longer of any use for the mission of Jesus. Such seems to be the history of too many churches. They grow, plateau, and then within thirty to forty years, they are dead, if not gone.

Those disciples who realize that they are caught in the sin of evangelistic indifference need to remember the promise: *“To him who overcomes [his indif-*

ference] I will give to eat of the tree of life that is in the paradise of God” (Rv 2:7). The hope is that one can regenerate his enthusiasm for the lost. The “first love” can be reborn. We can overcome.

Jesus began this first message to the seven churches with an exhortation to listen to His warnings and instructions. They must heed His call for repentance. If those in Ephesus refused to hear, then puff. The flickering flame would be snuffed out.

Chapter 2

Message To The Smyrna Disciples



Only forty kilometers north of Ephesus, the city of Smyrna was the original seat of emperor worship in Asia of the Roman Empire. Long before the dominance of the Roman Empire in the eastern Mediterranean, Smyrna had manifested its allegiance to Rome. As a port city, it grew to prominence during the growth of the Roman Empire and was known for its beauty and magnificent public buildings.

Located within the city was a temple that was built to honor Emperor Tiberius, one of the Caesars of Rome. As a seat of the *Dea Roma* (the goddess of Rome), this religion preceded Roman emperor worship. By aligning itself with Rome, Smyrna handed over its faith to Rome when the emperors of Rome began to demand total state and religious allegiance throughout the Empire. In A.D. 26, Smyrna was the first city to make emperor worship mandatory. And because

Polycarp, an elder of the church in Smyrna, refused to recant his statements against state religion, he was subsequently martyred in Smyrna around A.D. 155.

One major sociological point that modern-day Bible interpreters usually miss is the nature of the society of the small cities in which Christians lived in the first century. If a city had a population of 20,000 to 30,000, everyone in the city knew what was going on with everyone else in the city. No one could live a hidden life, especially when the whole city was given over to pagan religiosity. As Christians sought to preach the gospel, everyone in a city knew who the Christians were.

Now add to this the fact that these small cities politically gave their allegiance to Rome in order to be protected by Rome. Allegiance to Rome eventually meant calling Caesar lord, which was

actually a confession of loyalty to Rome. Now if one could not conscientiously do this because he had only one Lord, then there were accusations of insurrection. And everyone in town knew those who would not give allegiance to Caesar by calling him lord. If one lived in a city of one million population or more, then he could possibly conceal his loyalty to Jesus only by meeting secretly in a house with fellow disciples. But other than Ephesus, the largest of the seven cities of Revelation, no disciple could conceal that he was a disciple of Jesus in the other cities. As the fervor of Roman religion grew, the pressure on Christians to bow down before Caesar intensified. And so, Rome eventually unleashed relentless persecution against Christians throughout the Empire because they were considered insurrectionists.

We would suppose that the gospel first came to Smyrna as a result of the outreach ministry of Paul through his teaching in the school of Tyrannus in Ephesus during the middle 50s (At 19:10). Because of its close proximity to Ephesus, we would assume that zealous young disciples of the church in Ephesus saw Smyrna as an early mission city, and thus, they focused on the city in preaching the gospel. Their preaching subsequently led to the baptism of disciples in the city some time during Paul's two years of teaching in the school of Tyrannus.

A. The comfort and encouragement:

The message to the disciples in

Smyrna by the resurrected Jesus begins with His acknowledgment of their faithfulness. *“I know your works and tribulation and poverty”* (Rv 2:9). In their work, it seems that everything was against them. According to the remainder of the book of Revelation, it may have been that they could neither get jobs nor retain jobs because they refused to recognize Caesar as lord (See Rv 13:16,17). As a result of their refusal, they were boycotted by pagan religionists who sought to manifest their allegiance to Rome by honoring Caesar as the only lord of the people.

1. Tribulation: It is believed that in his early years Polycarp was a disciple of the apostle John. In A.D. 155 the Roman Proconsul of Smyrna demanded of Polycarp, “Swear and I will set you at liberty; reproach Christ.” In his old age at the time, Polycarp responded, “Eighty and six years I have served Him, and He never did me injury. How then can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?” And so Polycarp was martyred for Christ in Smyrna by a local government official who did not have the sanction of the government of Rome to do so.

We are sure that Polycarp remembered the life of Jesus and His sufferings. He certainly remembered the prophesied state persecution that John said would soon come upon the Christians of the Roman Empire. In the years to come after Jesus' message, the Smyrna Christians needed to remember the words of the Hebrew writer: *“For since He Himself [Jesus] has suffered while being tempted,*

He is able to aid those who are tempted” (Hb 2:18). And so Jesus left an example of suffering for His disciples to follow.

*For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for you, **leaving you an example that you should follow His steps*** (1 Pt 2:21).

Therefore, when under tribulation, “*let us hold fast to our confession*” (Hb 4:14). It is certain that “*all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution*” (2 Tm 3:12). Nevertheless, “*if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this name*” (1 Pt 4:16). We must glorify God in our tribulation, for “*we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God*” (At 14:22). The Christians in Smyrna had undergone tribulation in the past, but it seems that it was going to get worse before it got better. This tribulation would be coming from state religionists throughout the Roman Empire. John reminded the disciples in all the seven cities that the tribulation was soon to begin (Rv 1:1; 22:6).

Jesus promised the Smyrna disciples that they would suffer “ten days” (Rv 2:10). The number “10” signified that which was complete, and thus, there would be an end to the tribulation that was coming. This is the “little while” of suffering by which the readers of Peter’s epistle were encouraged:

*In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a **little while**, if need be, **you have been distressed by many trials**, so that*

the proof of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is refined with fire, might be found to praise and honor and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ (1 Pt 1:6,7).

Someone once said, “A religion that has to be heated in winter, air-conditioned in summer, dampened in dry weather and dried in wet weather, will take one where the temperature cannot be controlled.” And indeed, a faith that is not worth dying for is not worth believing. Those to whom Peter wrote would have their faith tested as those in Smyrna. God would step back for a moment and allow Satan to refine as gold the faith of His children. It is for this reason that Christians can count it with all joy when they fall into different trials (Js 1:2). They know that their faith is being refined for greater things to come. Satan’s efforts to discourage Christians through trials sifts out the weak, but strengthens those who endure.

In this message of Jesus to the Christians in Smyrna, He was laying a foundation for the theme of the unique visions of encouragement that were to follow in the letter. There was a great persecution coming. Since John was in the area, being on the island of Patmos (Rv 1:9), those in Smyrna would suffer the beginning of what Rome would later unleash as state persecution against Christianity. This persecution would carry on for over 150 years, ending only when Galerius issued the Edict of Toleration in A.D. 311. Though the imminent persecution was coming upon these

Christians, John called on them to remember the encouragement of the visions of the book. No matter how bad it would get, they must remember the outcome of the persecution:

These will make war with the Lamb and the Lamb will overcome them, for He is Lord of lords and King of kings. And those who are with Him are called and chosen and faithful (Rv 17:14).

It goes without saying that the modern-day prognosticators of our times seek to steal away the encouragement of Revelation from these early disciples. They do so by making fanciful interpretations of Revelation that are supposed to be fulfilled in our times, things that they assume are in reference to the end of the world. If the encouragement that Jesus made to the disciples of Smyrna were actually meant for us today, **then He lied to the church in Smyrna, as well as to all the early Christians who were about to endure the wrath of Rome.** But it was as if John knew that there would come these false prophets, for in the very first verse of the book he reminded his readers, including the disciples in Smyrna, of “*things that must shortly come to pass*” (Rv 1:1). And “shortly” does not mean over two thousand years later. And as if one might forget by the end of the book that the fulfillment of the revelations would come to pass in the time of the first recipients of the letter, John closed the letter with the statement: “*And the Lord God of the spirits of the prophets sent His angel to show to His*

bondservants [in Smyrna, Ephesus, Philadelphia, etc.] the things that must shortly take place” (Rv 22:6). “Shortly” does not mean “short time of persecution,” for how can a century and a half of Roman state persecution be a short time of persecution? John was saying to his immediate readers that the trials they were personally about to endure were immediate. After the death of these immediate disciples, the state persecution of Rome against Christianity would carry on for over one hundred years. Those interpreters who believe that the “shortly” refers to the duration of persecution being brief, need to talk to those Christians who grew up in the catacombs of Rome and never saw the light of day because of the ongoing persecution of Christianity at the time. It is easy to make silly interpretations when one lives outside the immediate historical context.

It takes some awesome hermeneutical gymnastic of twisting Scriptures to contort the phrase “shortly take place” to mean a period of over two thousand years later. But such do the modern-day prophets who are so zealous to find some “sign of the times” in the book of Revelation in order to generate a following of those who are willing to be “*tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of teaching, by the trickery of men in cleverness to the deceitfulness of error*” (Ep 4:14).

2. Poverty: This is where disciples who consider themselves to be of the developing world sit up and listen to what Jesus has to say concerning the advantages of poverty. It seems that the Chris-

tians in Smyrna could identify with the poor saints in Macedonia, about whom Paul wrote,

*... we make known to you the grace of God that has been given to the churches of Macedonia, that in a great trial of affliction, the abundance of their joy and **their deep poverty**, abounded in the riches of their liberality (2 Co 8:1,2).*

As the Christians in Macedonia, the Christians in Smyrna did not allow their tribulation and poverty to detour them from pouring out through works their appreciation for the grace of God. They were as Paul who experienced the grace of God in his own life.

But by the grace of God I am what I am. And His grace toward me was not in vain, but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me (1 Co 15:10).

In our experience throughout the world we have found that poorer brethren are often more evangelistic than those who seek to consume the world upon their own lusts. Consumers have too many other things on their minds than what is most important in life. The poor have the advantage of not having their minds diverted to things and activities of this world, which things they cannot afford. Christians who have few things of this world on which to focus have more time to focus on those things that are not of this world. Disciples who do not have money to involve themselves in worldly

activities have time to involve themselves in the activities that lead to the preaching of the gospel. At least all church historians agree on one principle of church growth: The more prosperous a society becomes, the less the church growth within the society.

Jesus knows the state of being of those who have little. But He also expects the poor never to use their poverty as an excuse not to go to work for Him. One may certainly be poor in the possessions of the world, but he must keep in mind what Jesus said to the poor saints in Smyrna: *“But you are rich!”* (Rv 2:9). What the disciples in Smyrna may have thought concerning their poverty is that they forgot to consider the blessing of not having material blessings. Those who bemoan their low economic state of being must remember their high state of being in Christ.

In their work for the Lord, the Smyrna disciples learned well from what Jesus said on the sermon on the mount:

... do not be worried about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor for your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? (Mt 6:25; see 6:25-34).

The one who has put all his trust in God has learned the secret to the contented life. Jesus said that if one stores up goods to secure himself in this life, he will not be *“rich toward God”* (Lk 12:21). Those who are obsessed with the riches of this world need to remember that God has *“chosen the poor of this*

world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom that He has promised to those who love Him” (Jn 2:5). For this reason, we would follow Moses:

By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter, choosing rather to suffer mistreatment with the people of God than to temporarily enjoy the pleasures of sin (Hb 11:24,25).

4. **“The synagogue of Satan”:** It may be that the phrase “synagogue of Satan” is a play on words in this context. It is believed that the Jews persecuted Christians more in this city than the Romans. In fact, one tradition says that the Jews carried the wood to the fire to burn the body of the martyred Polycarp. Therefore, what should have been a synagogue of those who should have welcomed Jesus as the Messiah, was actually a synagogue of those who sought to destroy all that Jesus wanted to accomplish through His disciples in the region. While thinking that they were carrying out the will of God, the Jews were actually working for Satan.

The persecuting Jews of Smyrna illustrate those of all religious groups who believe they are pleasing their god by persecuting those who are the disciples of the incarnate God. But they are as Jesus said of the Jewish religious leaders who confronted Him,

You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning,

and does not abide in the truth because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature; for he is a liar, and his father (Jn 8:44).

It would certainly be a shocking thing to wake up one day and discover that all one’s religious zeal was actually moving one to work against the will of God. It took Saul three days to morph initially into Paul as he agonized over the fact that he was actually a part of a “synagogue of Satan” worshipers. It is hard to imagine that a religiously obsessed person as Saul would eventually have to confess, *“I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and injurious”* to God’s people (1 Tm 1:13). Few religious leaders who work against God in their misguided religiosity are able to make such a statement, feeling that they would embarrass themselves before those they have led in rebellion against God for so long. But Paul made the confession. It was as if he could not forgive himself when he wrote to Timothy: *“Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the worst”* (1 Tm 1:15).

We would suggest that everyone who would lift himself up to be a religious leader of the people of God take another look at what “Paul, the confessor” stated in 1 Timothy 1:13:

I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and injurious. But I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief.

This would not be a comfortable passage

for the arrogant religious leader who has discovered that he has been working against God. Paul's humble statement that he obtain the mercy of God was based on one major condition: *"I did it ignorantly in unbelief."* This one statement is profound in defining the character of a true leader of God's people. Paul confessed that his behavior was based on ignorance. He thought he was doing that which was true and right. He had always done the best he could with what he knew. How many religious leaders are there who are able, as Paul and Apollos (At 18:25,26), to confess up that they have been preaching error? When honest people learn more, they are willing to change and preach the new truth that they have learned. The mark of a true leader is his willingness to learn more truth, and when he learns more truth from study of the word of God, he believes and does what he learns. And because Paul counted pomp, position and prominence as rubbish to be discarded, he was in all good conscience before God (Ph 3:7,8).

How many religious zealots are there who claim to be working on behalf of their god by persecuting disciples as those Jews who were in Smyrna? Before one is too eager to condemn others to an eternal doom of destruction, he should first look to himself to see if he is not on the membership role at the local "synagogue of Satan." One can determine if his membership is with the "synagogue of Satan" by the level of harshness he has toward those who disagree with him on minor issues that are not fundamentals of the faith. We must

not forget that there are "churches of Satan" out there who are sending their members out with judgments to pronounce upon everyone who does not fit into their legal pattern of religiosity. Those who are quick to pronounce condemnation upon a fellow brother with whom they may disagree should check the membership role of the local "church of Satan." They might find their names there.

B. Promise:

This is the context from which one of the most popular verses of the Bible is taken concerning faithfulness.

1. Faithfulness: *"Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life"* (Rv 2:10). The phrase "unto death" is the same in the Greek text as in Revelation 12:11: *"And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony. And they did not love their lives to the death."* Therefore, in reflecting on 2:10, we could assume the meaning that Jesus' encouragement to the disciples in Smyrna was that they should be faithful **even if it meant death**. Polycarp certainly believed this, and thus would not recant his statements in the face of death. Sweet on the lips of every faithful disciple should be the words,

Blessed is the man who endures temptation, for when he is tried, he will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love Him (Js 1:12).

It was for this crown that Paul fought in order to finish his destiny. *“I have fought the good fight. I have finished my course. I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness ...”* (2 Tm 4:7,8). So the faithful can endure tribulation because they know that *“when the Chief Shepherd appears”* they *“will receive a crown of glory that does not fade away”* (1 Pt 5:4).

It should at least be as an idolatrous Greek sailor prayed to his deity, “Father Neptune, you may sink me if you will; you may save me if you will. But, whatever happens, I’ll keep my rudder true.” It is correct as someone said, “True nobility is forged on the anvil of experience and fashioned on the battlefield of life.”

Faithful Christians are engaged in a race, a race in which they must struggle to finish (Hb 12:1,2). Paul reminded the Corinthian saints, *“And every man who strives exercises self-control in all things. Now they [athletes] do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we an imperishable”* (1 Co 9:25). It is the faithful Christian who will be crowned. It will be those who have stayed in the battle who will appreciate the crown.

Blessed are those bondservants whom the lord, when he comes, will find watching. Truly I say to you that he will gird himself and have them sit down to eat, and will come and serve them (Lk 12:37).

2. Overcome: As was made to those in Ephesus, this promise of Jesus of reward for overcoming is made to the faithful in Smyrna: *“He who overcomes*

will not be hurt by the second death” (Rv 2:11). What is interesting in the Greek text here is that a double negative is used. In English a double negative is not good grammar, for it would signify an affirmative. But a double negative in Greek is like saying, “Will never, never be hurt” It is an absolute. And in the case of the promise to the disciples in Smyrna, there is no chance whatsoever that they will lose their souls if they remain faithful even if it means death.

One may experience physical death as a result of his faithfulness, but he will never experience separation from the eternal presence of God. He will not because he has obeyed the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus (See 2 Th 1:7-9). Some good poet of old captured the thought in the following words of an old poem he entitled, In His Steps:

“The road is too rough,” dear Lord, “I cried.
There are stones that hurt me so.”
And He said, “Dear child, I understand.
I walked it long ago.”

“But there is a cool, green path,” I said,
“Let me walk there for a time.”
“No, child,” He gently answered me,
“The green road does not climb.”

“But I wish that there were friends with me,
Who would make my way there won.”
“Ah, yes,” He said, “Gethsemane,
Was hard to bear alone.”

And so I climbed the stone path,
Content at last to know,
That where my Master had not gone,
I would not have to go.

And strangely then I found new friends,
The burden grew less sore,
As I remember long ago,
He went that way before.

Jesus seeks that we hear Him in order to walk with Him down a path of tribulation. And in view of the promises that are set before us, we seek to hear and walk that path. So it is as John wrote, *“We are from God. He who knows God hears us. He who is not from God does not hear us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error”* (1 Jn 4:6). John was simply saying that we can know the disciples of Jesus who are on the path of tribulation. We can know by their zeal to study what he and the other writers of the New Testament were writing to the people of God. Jesus said, *“He who is of God hears God’s words”* (Jn 8:47). This certainly means that those who are

true disciples of Jesus are studying what God has to say. Good disciples are thus good Bible students. Both Jesus and John are saying that we can identify disciples of Jesus by those who are studying their Bibles. If one is not, then certainly he is not a disciple of the One who would lead him down a road of tribulation by the power of God’s word.

Those who are not studying the word of Jesus, are not listening. Jesus’ message is an exhortation that the disciples of Symrna listen to what He had to say. If they did not, then puff. The flickering flame in Symrna would be gone.

Chapter 3

Message To The Pergamum Disciples



Pergamum (KJV, Pergamos) was the capital of the province of Asia and was located in the Caicus Valley. It was the capital until 133 B.C. when the last of the Pergamum kings gave over the kingdom to Rome. This city subsequently became the first site for a temple to be build to the worship of Caesar. The temple was a commemoration to Rome and Augustus Caesar in 29 B.C. A second temple was later built and dedicated to Trajan.

Pergamum was a center for pagan worship. Worship of Asklepius and Zeus were principle gods that found their seat of worship in this city. The symbol of Asklepius was the serpent. This symbol was so prevalent that it was on Pergamum coinage. One coin pictured Caracalla

saluting a serpent. The Pergamum citizens were obsessed with the image of the serpent. Because politics and religion functioned jointly in Pergamum, the cult of the Nicolaitans flourished in this region. Because of this close relationship between politics and religion, there was a great deal of pressure on Christians to compromise their faith by giving allegiance to Caesar as lord. When they did not in the years that followed the Revelation message, great persecution ensued.

With the ancient library in Alexandria, Egypt, the city of Pergamum housed a comparable library in the ancient world. It was a library that was composed of books that were written on paper made from the Papyrus plant of the Nile River

in Egypt. Because Egypt maintained a monopoly on the production of papyrus writing material, parchment as a writing material made from leather, was eventually invented in Pergamum. We owe a great deal to this city because of the invention of parchment. Many great manuscripts of the Bible were preserved for us today because copies of the books of the Bible were written on parchment.

A. Word from the two-edged sword:

Since the phrase, “sharp two-edged sword” is a metaphor to refer to the word of God, then the power of Christ to attack the Balaamites and Nicolaitans was the word of God (See Ep 6:17; Hb 4:12). And indeed it would not be a happy situation to be at war with the Son of God through His word. If one finds himself in conflict with the “sharp two-edged sword,” then he knows that he has already lost the battle. When sincere Bible-loving people find themselves in conflict with the sword of the Spirit, they will immediately surrender upon learning a new truth. Those who do not are not sincere, but rebellious against all that God would teach through His word. In Pergamum, there were “Balaamites” and “Nicolaitans” whom the Son of God hated because of their teaching and immoral behavior. The picture that Jesus gives in His introduction to these disciples is that He is at war with His word against all who would teach error.

The lesson that is vividly clear from Jesus’ introduction to these disciples is that if one is going to deal with Jesus, he

will have to deal with His word. Jesus had stated during His ministry, “*If you continue in My word, then you are truly My disciples*” (Jn 8:31). With the sword of the Spirit, Jesus is “*against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in high places*” (Ep 6:12). If one is not engaged against these powers of error with the word of Jesus, **then he is not a disciple of Jesus.**

B. Words of tough times:

It is always reassuring that Jesus knows our labors. Not only this, but he recognizes our labors under hard circumstances, for where the disciples dwelt in Pergamum, it was not easy being a Christian. It could be said that they labored under great duress. It was as someone said, “It is not success that God rewards, but faithfulness in doing His will.” Another tried Christian correctly said,

A brick is made of clay;

So is a man.

A brick is square and plumb and true;

So a man ought to be.

A brick is useless until it has been through fire;

So is a man.

A brick is not showy as marble,
but is more useful;

Man is not made to be showy,
but to serve.

A brick fulfills its purpose only by becoming a
part of something greater than itself;

The same is true of a man.

When a man fulfills this description,
he has a right to be called a brick.

The poem reminds us of Ephesians 6:10:

“Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might.”

The better we understand the environment in which the early Christians lived in the seven cities, the better we will identify with their hardships. The social environment in which the Christians in Pergamum lived was very hostile to Christian faith. Rome became a political/religious state. Caesar was the lord, and all subjects of the Empire were to reverence him as lord. Those who did not were considered insurrectionists. Antipas was evidently one of the first Christians to suffer martyrdom because he would not bow down to a self-proclaimed deity of a political/religious state that demanded total allegiance. Regardless of the threat of death, Antipas would not live contrary to that which he believed. He was willing to trust that his Lord Jesus would carry him through into eternity. Since this world is only a momentary breath of existence for Christians, then those who make war against Christianity only transition members of the body on to their objective through martyrdom.

We have always thought the old preacher’s story of the man who walked across a canyon on a tight rope something that well illustrated many soft Christians of today. After the tightrope walker had completed his successful walk across the canyon, one overenthusiastic spectator was overjoyed, and said to the tightrope walker, “That was just unbelievable! It was amazing! Spectacular!” The tightrope walker replied, “Well, do you think I could do that with a man on my shoul-

ders?” The enthusiastic spectator answered, “You did it so well, I believe you could.” The tightrope walker said, “Well, get on!” Spectator, “Ah

After the spectator caught his breath, the he turned to the audience and asked, “Is there anyone out there who would like to ride across the canyon on the shoulders of the tightrope walker?” Jesus walked the tightrope. He asks for us to climb on His shoulders (See Rv 17:14).

The Greek word that is used in this text for martyr is *martus*. Some believe that this was the beginning of the use of this word for those who would be martyrs for their faith. But in the context, it was originally used to refer to a Christian who died for his faith. Every other faith has plagiarized the word, especially those of non-Christian religions whose adherents would die for their faiths.

The phrase “Satan dwells” identifies the religious environment in which the disciples lived in Pergamum. Jesus’ use of this phrase means that where Christianity does not dwell, Satan dwells. Satan, therefore, dwells among men through those who do not believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Any non-Christian environment would be a place where Satan dwells.

C. Words of condemnation:

Jesus’ words of judgment of the disciples in Pergamum would make one sit up straight in his seat (Rv 2:3,4). Some of the disciples were harboring those who taught two abominations in reference to belief and behavior.

1. *The teaching of Balaam:*

Balaam was a prophet of God until he was tempted with money to curse the coming Israelites (See Nm 22:7). This condemnation is based on the fact that he taught King Balak “*to cast a stumbling block before the children of Israel to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit fornication*” (Rv 2:14). Balaam received the price of a hireling preacher in order to preach that which was asked by those who supported him. Balaam sold his ministry to anyone who would pay him a salary. Barak wanted the curse of God to come upon the Israelites, so he went looking for a preacher who would teach that which would cause God to rain down judgment upon the people. When preachers are in the ministry for financial gain, they will preach what their supporters demand. And often, they will not preach truth that runs people away who have no interest in the truth (See 2 Tm 4:1-4). Could this be the same apostasy that was described by both Peter and Jude when they wrote of the sin of Balaam prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70? (See 2 Pt 2:15; Jd 11).

It is interesting that the serpent became an idol symbol of the pagan religionists of Pergamum. When Israel complained against God on their way to the land of promise, God sent serpents among the people to bite and kill the complainers (Nm 21:6-9). Moses made a bronze serpent and put it upon a pole. Everyone who looked on it lived (Nm 21:9). In the religious culture of Pergamum, however, anyone who would compromise with what the serpent stood for would spiritu-

ally die. Moses presented an opportunity to live with the symbol of the serpent. The false teachers presented the symbol as an opportunity to die. God will simply not allow His people to compromise their moral behavior through fornication, or His teachings through fellowship with idolatrous beliefs.

2. *The Teachings of the Nicolaitans:*

This is the second time this cult is noted in the messages of Jesus (Rv 2:6). The Nicolaitans were also in the city of Ephesus, which means that their teachings were scattered throughout the region of western Asia Minor. It is significant to note here that Jesus said that some “*hold the teaching.*” Jesus is very serious about what we believe, for it is erroneous beliefs that lead us to do those things that are contrary to moral behavior. And about this teaching, Jesus said, “*which thing I hate*” (Rv 2:15). Jesus hates certain teachings. He loves all men, but hates those teachings that corrupted good moral behavior.

From this exhortation we know why Christians study their Bibles with zeal. They do not want to be ignorantly believing a teaching that Jesus hates. If one would fear the judgment to come, then certainly he should check everything he believes with the words of Jesus, just in case he believes something that Jesus will eventually reveal that He hated. It is because of these two statements of Jesus in verses 6 and 15 that we study our Bibles. It is as a young granddaughter asked her grandmother why she read her Bible every day. The grandmother responded, “I’m just studying for the final.”

It is significant to note that the Greek word “hold” (*kpateiv*) that is used in 2:15 means “to hold fast.” In other words, the attitudes of those who believed the teaching of the Nicolaitans were so dogmatic that they would by no means give up the teaching. They were going to believe the teaching regardless of what scripture might be found to prove that the teaching was erroneous. It is for this reason that we might assume that the Nicolaitans promoted some teaching that led to immoral behavior. These disciples were caught up in something that had caught hold of their moral behavior. The faithful disciples could do nothing about it, since the “Nicolaitan disciples” were so dogmatic about their immoral behavior. We learn from their dogmatic spirit that error is not proven to be truth simply because one is dogmatic about his error.

C. Words of war:

When one holds a teaching that Jesus hates, then one should expect war. Jesus encouraged the faithful disciples who stood against the “Nicolaitan disciples” that **“I will fight against them with the sword of My mouth”** (Rv 2:16). The war would break out if the “Nicolaitan disciples” did not repent of their belief and behavior, for Jesus knew that if this infestation of sin was not eradicated from the fellowship of the faithful, it would force the removal of the flickering lampstand from Pergamum. It seems that Jesus lost this battle, for His conflict with sinful teachings is through the medium of faithful disciples who know and

can effectively use the sword of the Spirit (Ep 6:17). If the faithful disciples become ignorant of the word of Jesus, then they have lost the battle for Jesus. We must never forget what the Spirit said in another context to the saints in a city a few kilometers away from Pergamum:

Put on the whole armor of God so that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in high places (Ep 6:11,12).

This exhortation was given to the disciples over in Ephesus, for the Spirit knew that the teaching and behavior of the Nicolaitans was coming, if not already in Ephesus in A.D. 61,62 when Paul wrote the above message. It was an insidious teaching, against which the disciples needed special encouragement to stand against, both through letter and vision. But because the disciples dropped the sword of the Spirit through their ignorance of the word of God, they lost the battle for Jesus.

When disciples allow sinful behavior to remain within the fellowship of the body, the whole body is affected. Such was allowed to happen for a period of time among the disciples in Achaia (See 1 Co 5:1,2). There was fornication among the disciples. They had failed to purge out this leaven from among themselves. So Paul exercised his right as a Christ-sent apostle and said to all of them,

In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are assembled, and with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord (1 Co 5:4,5).

Paul had written to the Christians in Achaia that they not associate with anyone who was a fornicator (1 Co 5:11). His instruction was to “*put away the wicked person from among yourselves*” (1 Co 5:13). And such should Christians do in reference to any fornicator who would seek to remain in fellowship with the church. But in the case of the fellowship of the disciples throughout the city of Pergamum, they had a similar problem, but the problem had evidently become so common, that the faithful brethren had little influence over the matter. But in reference to moral sin among the fellowship of the disciples, it must always be as the Chinese proverb, “Master easy, servant slack.” Their Master in heaven was not being slack with His servants in the Pergamum church. Discipline was going to be enacted. If the faithful were not vigilant about these matters, the whole fellowship will be corrupted. And if the fellowship was corrupted, then puff.

D. Word of promise:

Again Jesus used the word “overcome” to define the fact that Christians are in a spiritual struggle against the spiritual host of wickedness. For those who

would overcome in this spiritual conflict, there were two promises given:

1. *The hidden manna:* During His earthly ministry, Jesus spoke of the manna that came down out of heaven to preserve Israel from death throughout their wilderness wanderings (Jn 6:27-32). He metaphorically applied the literal manna from heaven to Himself. “***For the bread of God is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world***” (Jn 6:33). During His ministry, the Jews to whom Jesus said these words did not understand. They could not get their minds off the literal and on the spiritual meaning of the metaphor. So Jesus explained further, “***I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me will never hunger. And He who believes in Me will never thirst***” (Jn 6:35). Because of the hardness of their hearts, the audience of religious leaders to whom Jesus spoke these words could not find in them the truth that Jesus was the “hidden manna” (bread) that came down out of heaven to give life.

We would take Jesus’ definition of the bread from heaven in John 6 to the context of Revelation 2:17. The bread of life is hidden only from those who have no hunger for it. When one has no hunger for Jesus, then certainly Jesus cannot bring eternal life into his existence, for he will not do what Jesus says is necessary to have life. Those who are bent on living the immoral life are not looking around for any words of condemnation concerning their life-style. And so, the manna of life will always be hidden

from those who seek to live after their own lusts.

2. The white stone: The Jewish disciples understood the symbolism of this metaphor perfectly. Stones in Jewish history represented different things. Because the stone in this context represented the object upon which was written a name, then the stone represented that name. On the breastplate of the high priest of Israel, there were twelve stones. Each stone represented one of the twelve tribes of Israel.

In this context it is a white stone. White represents holiness, glory and purity (See 1 Pt 2:5,9). The new name written on the stone would be explained further in the message to the disciples in Philadelphia:

*He who overcomes, I will make a pillar in the temple of My God I will write on him **the name of My God and the name of the city of My God, the new Jerusalem that comes down out of heaven from My God. And I will write on him My new name** (Rv 3:12).*

And then again the 144,000, which number is representative of the people of God in the Old Testament era and the people of God after the cross, are named before God. On these “*His name and His Father’s name*” are “*written on their foreheads*” (Rv 14:1). And finally, another explanation in reference to the finality of all things and the salvation of the saints: “*They will see His face, and His name will be on their foreheads*” (Rv 22:4).

In the message to the disciples in

Pergamum, Jesus simply begins the identity of the people of God that will be revealed through the book. Christians are identified by being named. The fact that the “*new name written that no one knows except he who receives it*” is not the nonsense of some who suppose that this is a “secret name.” In this case, it is Jesus who gives the name, not the one who receives it. We must understand this in the historical context of the persecution of Christians by those who claimed that they were religious before their pagan idol gods. These persecuting idolaters were doing the will of their god by persecuting those they believed were against their god. In the historical martyr of Antipas in Pergamum, those who martyred the faithful Christian were doing the will of their gods. They did not believe that Antipas was actually claimed (named) by the one true and living God in which he believed. His murderers believe that his God was a false god. They did not know this God because they had created a god after their own imagination. They were thus doing the will of their god by martyring the one who was named by the true God.

The One who has numbered the hairs of every Christian’s head (Mt 10:30), knows those He has named. The rest of the unbelieving world may not know the special relationship the baptized believer has with God, but the relationship is there and will result in eternal glory when they overcome.

Jesus was giving the disciples in Pergamum the opportunity to hear and obey His instructions. If they did not, then puff. The flickering flame would be gone.

Chapter 4

Message To The Thyatira Disciples



There is a lot said about the Christians in Thyatira, more than the Christians in any of the other six churches that were addressed by Jesus. However, there is no exciting history given about the city of Thyatira, as with the other cities. There is little mention of the city among the ancient scribes of history. Anatolian was the god of the city. He is pictured as a god mounted upon a valiant horse and armed for battle with a battle-ax.

The location of the city was strategic in reference to the movement of military forces along the road that passed from Pergamum to Laodicea, connecting the Hermus and Caicus valleys. Because of its location on a main road, Thyatira was a city of trade. In fact, ancient records suggest that the city had more trading businesses than any of the other cities that were addressed by Jesus. In the city there was manufacturing in dyes for clothing, garment factories, with pottery and brass businesses. In order to trade in the manufactured goods of the city one possibly had to be a member of one of the many guilds (unions) that were associated with a particular manufacturer. Some have suggested that the festivities of these guilds were social gatherings of drunken behavior. Jezebel, which is possibly used metaphorically after the name of King Ahab's wife, is probably used to reveal the temptation that drew the Christians into participating in these drunken parties (1 Kg 16:30,3; see Js 1:12-15).

Because the city was a center of manufacturing, it is not surprising, therefore, that Lydia, a seller of purple dye made from the madder root, was from this city. This woman was on a business trip when she encountered Paul, Silas, Timothy and Luke during a prayer meeting on a river bank outside Philippi (At 16:14).

What we would assume about the socioeconomic environment of the city would be that many of the citizens were employed. As employees of a particular factory in a small city, we would assume that there was a great deal of intimidation that workers conform to the social structure of a particular industry. At least this may explain why some of the Christians had given in to the immoral teachings and behavior of Jezebel in a small city where everyone knew everyone.

A. Description of the Christ:

In this metaphorical picture of the Jesus who walked in friendship with the disciples on the Galilean pathways, there is piercing judgment coming forth from the eyes of a Judge. He has "*eyes like a flame of fire*" (Rv 2:18). His eyes can pierce through our strongest defense to conceal our true self. Nothing can be hid from the One who will eventually judge all men.

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that everyone may

receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad (2 Co 5:10).

“*His feet are like fine brass*” of judgment against all those who would claim His name, but live contrary to their calling. The symbolism is of a judgment scene that will be revealed later in the book where ...

... books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged from the things that were written in the books, according to their works (Rv 20:12).

B. Commendation for good:

The Judge was not unaware of their works, love, service, faith and patience. Their love may have been that compelling love about which Paul wrote, “*For the love of Christ compels us ...*” (2 Co 5:14). And indeed, they seem to have emulated in their lives that which was characteristic in the actions of God toward man: “*We love because He first loved us*” (1 Jn 4:19).

1. *Impending judgment on national Israel:* The Christians had also been made aware of the coming judgment upon national Israel. We must not forget that as the early evangelists went forth, they informed all the Jewish disciples of the impending judgment that would come upon national Israel in their lifetime. It would be an event from which everyone, who knew the Old Testament prophecies,

would conclude that Jesus was reigning from heaven (See Mk 9:1). Such would be the fulfillment of the prophecy of Jesus in Matthew 24, thus again reconfirming the fact that He not only came for the salvation of the true Israel by faith, but also to consummate national Israel, the final consummation of which took place in A.D. 70.

Through faith, therefore, the disciples in Thyatira, as well as all Christians of the early church, waited patiently for the coming of Jesus “in time” (See Js 5:7,8). Jewish persecution would vanish away after the judgment, but state persecution was looming on the horizon. It is concerning this persecution that the book of Revelation prepares the minds of the disciples to endure.

2. *Commendation for their works:* In reference to their works, “*the last are greater than the first*” (Rv 2:19). The Ephesian Christians were called on to restore their first love, and thus, “*do the first works*” (Rv 2:4,5). The disciples in Thyatira grew in their works, and thus, there was no call for a restoration of the “first works.” They had not given up their identity as disciples, for they continued to grow in good works.

We would assume that the disciples in Thyatira manifested their appreciation for the grace of God more than those in Ephesus. At least Paul may have been able to write of the Thyatira Christians as he did of himself: “*And His grace toward me was not in vain, but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me (1 Co 15:10).*”

It seems that the works of the Ephesians became simply legal exercises in habitual churchianity. But with the Christians in Thyatira, there must have been something significant that energized them to grow in their works for the Lord. Because of the commendation for their growth in their works, we would assume that Jesus expects growth in our works. The key to growth in works is growth in our appreciation for the grace of God. If there are no works, then there is no appreciation.

C. Judgment:

We suppose that the Christians in any city had “*a few things*” about which Jesus would pronounce judgment. If growing in good works could erase sin, then surely such meritorious atonement failed in the case of these Christians. Though the Christians in Thyatira grew in works, they still had to take ownership of the few sinful things about which Jesus here identifies. Their good deeds did not atone for these sins.

1. Toleration of sinful beliefs and behavior: “*You tolerate that woman Jezebel*” (Rv 2:20). Jezebel was probably the most notorious woman of Old Testament history. Her name became a symbol of idolatry, immorality and shame (See 1 Kg 16:31; 18:4,13,19; 19:1,2). Jesus here uses her name metaphorically to pronounce judgment against some of the disciples in Thyatira who were tolerating such an evil way of life. Their toleration of the evil she taught and behaved

had great influence among the disciples. Jezebel’s influence for evil was producing the reputation that the church of our Lord was no different than the local pagan groups.

In order to be a participant in one of the trades or businesses of the city of Thyatira, one probably had to be a member of one of the guilds (unions) of a particular manufacturer. Those of a particular guild would meet for feasts of gluttony and immorality. The problem was that if one were not a member of one of the guilds, then he could not trade the merchandise of a particular manufacturer. This may explain why the woman Jezebel had such influence over those Christians who participated in the immoral parties. It may have been that her participation in such feasts convinced other Christians that such indulgence was acceptable for a Christian. She possibly represented a sect among the disciples, for in verse 24 there were those who did not “*have this teaching.*” Some in the church in Thyatira remained faithful to their moral standards by not participating in the immoral pagan feasts that were sanctioned by Jezebel.

There was a similar case among the Christians in Corinth, though not a sect that was influencing the body of Christ. The Corinthian Christians tolerated an individual who was living in fornication with his stepmother (1 Co 5:1-5). Paul said of that case that such was not even practiced among the unbelievers (1 Co 5:1). In the case of the fornicator in Corinth, whom the Corinthians tolerated, there seems to have been no influence in

teaching that came from the immoral individual. However, his influence for evil was in his life-style. Paul reminded the Corinthians that a little leaven leavens the whole lump (1 Co 5:6,7). But in the case of the fornicator who was being tolerated by the Christians in Thyatira, this woman was a self-proclaimed prophetess who was teaching others, and deceiving the servants of the Lord. The immoral person in Corinth may have been passive in promoting his sin, but Jezebel was proactive in spreading her teaching among the disciples. The disciples who had accepted the immoral life-style of Jezebel were encouraging others to participate in her sin.

It may have been that Jezebel was as Simon in Samaria (At 8:9-11). He amazed the people of the city with his practice of magic to the point that they proclaimed, “*This man is the great power of God*” (At 8:10). When Simon believed the gospel message that Philip was preaching, he too was baptized (At 8:13). But there was still wickedness in his heart. This was brought out when he offered to buy from Peter and John the power to impart the miraculous gifts (At 8:18,19). So Peter said to him, “... *repent of this your wickedness and pray the Lord that, if possible, the thought of your heart may be forgiven you*” (At 8:22). In baptism one’s soul is cleansed of sin (At 22:16), but one’s character is not miraculously transformed. This may have been the case with Jezebel among the disciples of Thyatira. She came into the fellowship of the disciples with a sinful behavior of which she had not repented.

2. Punishment of sinful beliefs and behavior: The case of Thyatira was similar to that of Simon. Jezebel possibly came into the fellowship of the flock of God, but brought with her the wickedness of her former religious and immoral life that was associated with pagan idolatry. Jesus had “*given her time to repent of her fornication,*” but the fact was that she did “*not want to repent*” (Rv 2:21). And now, her time had run out. We do not know exactly what the Christ-sent Peter said to Simon, but one thing is true, whatever he said it scared Simon stiff. He immediately and repentantly pleaded with Peter, “*Pray to the Lord for me so that none of these things that you have spoken come upon me*” (At 8:24).

In order to purify the church in her early beginnings, God would strike people blind through a Christ-sent apostle (At 13:10,11). Some were delivered to Satan for the destruction of the flesh (1 Co 5:5). Some were “*delivered to Satan so that they might learn not to blaspheme*” (1 Tm 1:20). And then some just dropped dead when they lied to the Holy Spirit (At 5:1-11). It was not a good thing to fall into the hands of a Christ-sent apostle who could unleash the power of physical punishment upon one who was causing injury to the body of Christ. And in the case of the body in Thyatira, Jesus would work directly from heaven upon Jezebel.

I will cast her into a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of her ways (Rv 2:22).

This is not all. “*And I will kill her children with death*” (Rv 2:23). Would God bring death upon the children of one whose children were possibly the result of her sin of adultery? This would not be the first time that He did. Ask David and Bathsheba (See 2 Sm 11,12).

“*And all the churches*” to whom Jesus was addressing this letter of Revelation would know that no one can hide sin. If one is harboring sinful ways in his heart, then he must remember that Jesus “*will give to each one of you according to your works*” (Rv 2:23). Simply stated in words that we can understand, when one is a disciple of Jesus, “he can run, but he cannot hide.” One can run on a trip across the country, but he must remember that if he involves himself in sin, Jesus will know. Those who feel that they are further away from Jesus when they are on a trip far away from fellow Christians, need to remember that Jesus “*searches the minds and hearts*” of every disciple wherever he is in this world (Rv 2:23; see Ps 44:21; Lk 16:15).

The Greek word for “minds” comes from the word that refers to kidneys. In the thinking of those of ancient times, reference was to the inner most feelings of the individual. The word “heart” referred to the intellect. Thus God searches the inner most feelings and intellect of every person of His creation. It is certainly important for every disciple to know this, for this realization helps us to take ownership of our faults. Confession flows from the one who realizes that the One to whom he confesses already knows

what is to be confessed. When we confess our sins to God, He knows that we are taking ownership for our most inner self. And if there is sin in there, He knows that we are owning up to and trying to deal with our sin.

(It is sometimes as the man who presented to the preacher his intelligent horse. The man carried on bragging about how intelligent the horse was. So he challenged the preacher, “Ask my horse a question.” So the preacher asked, “Horse, how many commandments did God give Moses on Mount Sinai?” The horse immediately stomped ten times on the ground. So the preacher asked, “Well, how many apostles did Jesus have?” The horse stomped twelve times on the ground. So the horse’s owner asked his horse, “Horse, how many hypocrites are there in this church for which the preacher preachers?” The horse then went into a dance.)

E. The promise:

Beginning with the “morning star,” we are encouraged by what Jesus here promised those who would overcome the teaching of Jezebel and her intimidation of the disciples to sin after her life-style (Rv 2:28). Jezebel was now meeting the One who had authority over all things for the sake of His faithful people (Ep 1:22).

The morning star “ruled the morning” horizon. The symbol is of royal splendor and dominion. The significance of the message here is in the simile “just as” in verse 27. The promise is that those who overcome will be given “*power over*

the nations” to “rule them with a rod of iron” (Rv 2:26,27). The phrase “just as I received from My Father” clearly explains that at the time of writing, Jesus had already received power over the nations in order to rule them with a rod of iron. **This ruling is not something that will begin in the future.** “Received” is past tense. Jesus is not coming again in order to rule over the nations. He is already reigning as King of kings and Lord of lords (1 Tm 6:15). When He does come again, He will return kingdom reign to the Father (1 Co 15:26-28).

When Jesus ascended to the right hand of God, He was given power over all things (See Dn 2:44; 7:13,14). He now reigns with all authority over all things (Mt 28:18). He is reigning over all things for the sake of the church. Paul wrote, “And He [the Father] put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church” (Ep 1:22). All means all. There is no more power in kingdom reign left for Jesus when He comes again. If He were to come and reign on this earth, then He would be dethroning Himself from His reign over all things that He now has in order to reign on a speck of blue dust among the galaxies. What sense would be in this?

Sometimes earthly thinking theologians have earthly and carnal interpretations of the Scriptures. For some to fulfill their carnal desires to reign over their fellow man, they seek a time wherein they can be kings on earth. Within the pages of the Qur’an, there is the world view that the entire world should be made to submit to Allah, and thus, become Islam.

But submission to Allah means submission to religious leaders who are to enforce the submission. The purpose of the submission is worldwide domination by certain men who would rule through the power of Sharia law and those who proclaim it. Some Christians repel at such a theology, but at the same time, they simply delay their own desires to reign as authorities to a supposed one thousand-year reign of Jesus on earth where He will supposedly and forcefully conquer all powers on earth and when He reigns, then it is assumed that He will set up Christians as authorities to reign on earth with Him. But such theologians need to read again the statement of Jesus that He made before to a Roman authority:

My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would fight so that I should not be delivered to the Jews. But as it is, My kingdom is not from here (Jn 18:36).

We have always wondered what part of the phrase “not of this world” is so difficult for some to understand? Jesus said that His disciples would not take up arms and fight against the Jews, neither the Roman Empire. Neither will there be some time in the future when they will engage in carnal warfare in order to establish some earthly kingdom. They will not, “for the kingdom of God is not meat and drink, **but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit**” (Rm 14:17).

For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the

powers, against the world forces of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in high places (Ep 6:12).

Since Jesus is now reigning over all things, then those who have given their allegiance to Him in obedience to the gospel, also reign with him.

For if by one man's offense death reigned through the one, much more they who receive abundance of grace and the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the one, Jesus Christ (Rm 5:17).

Christians now reign in the splendor of the Morning Star. They now reign over the nations with the power of the gospel, for there is no power on earth greater than the message of the cross. And as if we might question this power, Paul reminded the Corinthians,

For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but powerful through God for the pulling down of strongholds, casting down imaginations and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ (2 Co 10:4,5).

This is one powerful statement. If our spiritual weapons are this powerful, why would we ever think that we need an AK 47 to advance the supposed reign of Christ on earth?

The faithful Christians in Thyatira would be greatly encouraged by the words that will follow in the book of Revelation. They just need to remember that the forces of evil “*will make war with the Lamb and the Lamb will overcome them, for He is Lord of lords and King of kings*” (Rv 17:14). Jesus is at this time Lord and King over all things. Therefore, if it seems that everything is getting out of control, the faithful in Thyatira needed to remember that King Jesus had everything under control. We too trust that He is “*upholding all things by the word of His power*” (Hb 1:3).

Those in Thyatira who were trying to survive against the boycott of the trade unions and the influence of Jezebel, needed to take courage that they would overcome. They were not destined to spiritual ruin. They had a choice. If they made the right choice, the promise of Jesus was that they would be given the royalty of the Morning Star. If they listened to what Jesus had to say to the churches, then they would survive. If they did not listen, then puff.

Chapter 5

Message To The Sardis Disciples



Sardis was the former capital of the ancient kingdom of Lydia. The city became known for its great riches, particu-

lar wealth from the gold of the Pactolus River that flowed through the city. It was one of those cities that had a glorious

past, but at the time of the visions of Revelation, it had lost most of its former wealth and prestige.

The original ancient city was strongly fortified. It was a fortress citadel that towered above the Hermus Valley. It was surrounded by treacherous cliffs of loose rock. But the city lost its prowess under Croesus when Cyrus, king of Persia, besieged and took the city in 546 B.C. Historians believe that under the cover of darkness, the Persians took the city by scaling the cliffs that the residents of Sardis thought to be their defense against any invaders. Ironically, the same tactic was used again by Antiochus the Great when he took the city in 215 B.C.

By the time Jesus addressed this city in the context of the visions of Revelation, Sardis was under the control of the Roman Empire. Though the city was located on an important trade route of the Hermus Valley, it never regained its glory and riches of former years. It is interesting that in A.D. 26, the city sought to construct an imperial temple dedicated to Roman religion. But the request was denied by Rome, who favored Smyrna as the location of the temple.

It is significant that this once glorious city of ancient times, today lies in ruins. There is only a small Turkish village named Sart near the ruins of ancient Sardis. The once glorious city was fading into history as John penned the message of Jesus to the Christians of the area. Though the residents once dressed themselves in the luxury of white robes, all the former glamor was gone in a city that

was now economically waning away into history as the ink of John's letter was drying on papyrus.

A. Description of the Christ:

Jesus is now the One "*who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars*" (Rv 3:1). The meaning is control. He "has" the spirits and stars, and no one can take them from Him. Since He upholds all things by the word of His power (Hb 1:3), then we could correctly assume that Jesus had control of the future of the churches. And since He has all authority over all things (Mt 28:18), then every member of His universal organic body can relax. The fact that Jesus is in control means that nothing is out of control. We live in a divinely controlled world. Therefore, we must never conclude that the evil that is in the world is a signal that Jesus is not in control. All those disciples of the seven churches needed to remember this as they transition through the great tribulations that were coming.

In order to protect our free moral ability to choose, Jesus must allow both social and physical law to exist. If He did not, then the world would not be the best of all possible environments in which to prepare free-moral disciples for eternal dwelling. And if the world was free of all misfortune and evil, then we would have no desire to go to a better place. Therefore, because Jesus is in control, the disciples of Asia Minor, and all those throughout the Roman Empire, must remain faithful, even though it will seem that the whole world was against them.

B. Commendation for good works:

As everyone in the small town of Sardis knew everyone in town, so Jesus knows everything about the members of His body throughout the world. And in this case, the body members in Sardis were working, but something was indeed wrong with the performance of their works.

1. *The working dead:* The disciples in Sardis seem to have trusted in their works to the point that they believed their works to be meritorious in reference to their salvation. This is in the statement of judgment, “*you have a name that you live, but you are dead*” (Rv 3:1). Could it be that they took pride in the works that they were doing in the community, of which works the community glorified the good they were doing? But spiritually, and in reference to their relationship with Jesus, they were dead because they meritoriously trusted in their works?

Someone correctly said, “There are few things that are better organized than graveyards, but there is little life there.” The members of the body were organized in Sardis for good works, but it seems that the motive for their works produced deadness, not life. So we would throw up a yellow flag of caution before ourselves, lest we too be walking in the pride of our own activity, but dead in our spirituality. There will be no zombie disciples in heaven.

The disciples in Sardis may have become spiritually indifferent because they

had little persecution in the city. In fact, their works gave them a name in the community as a group of people who ministered to the people. They had a name among the unbelievers in the community. They were certainly following the instructions of Jesus: “*Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven*” (Mt 5:16).

Jesus’ statement of judgment to the church of Sardis, however, seems to conflict with His statement in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5. The problem was that the good works of the church of Sardis brought glory to themselves, the church, and not to God. Christians need to be very careful about doing good deeds in order to bring glory to the church, that is, to themselves as the church. If the church of Sardis teaches any eternal lesson, it is the lesson that churches should never seek glory for themselves. If they do, then their good works are a sign of their narcissistic deadness.

In the following exhortations of Jesus to the Christians in Sardis, we must keep in mind that the **majority** was the problem. The minority “few names” were still faithful. But the majority were dead. They had a name that they lived, but they were dead (Rv 3:1).

Deadness comes in many forms. Before we leave the “living dead” problem of the Sardis disciples, we must insert probable causes of deadness that will help us identify ourselves as being dead. When Christians meet and stare at one another Sunday after Sunday, but rarely

have in their midst anyone who is dripping wet from the waters of baptism, then we are dead. When during the public prayers that are voiced in the assembly, no plea is made to the Lord of harvest to send “reapers into the harvest” throughout the world, then we are dead (See Mt 9:38). When excitement is generated among the men to attend the men’s breakfast, but no encouragement is made to invite a friend, then we are dead. When we continually have lectureships to reaffirm our “old truths,” then we are dead. When mission seminars are conducted and only former missionaries show up, then we are dead. When the church bulletin is filled with news about ourselves, but no mention is made of the gospel being preached to the lost, then we are dead. When no visiting evangelists are allowed to address the church in order to remind us of our mission, then we are dead. When all the programs of the disciples are for the purpose of “getting the members to know one another,” then we are dead. Narcissistic religiosity is simply deadness playing itself out in church games. According to Jesus’ definition of the deadness of the Sardis church, the flame had already flickered, but only a “few names” realized that darkness was looming over their existence.

As residents of Africa we would alert the rest of the world concerning the church of America that has a name that it lives. But according to the church growth statistics over the last forty years, there is a decline in “church attendance” every year. It is the “Sardis syndrome” being continentally played out in a move-

ment that is running out of oil. There are, however, a “few names” still there. But our exhortation to the rest of the world is to get on with the work of Jesus to take the gospel into all the world. If we are looking for mission leadership from America, that lampstand is almost gone. As the flame flickers in America, we must burn bright in Africa, and India and China. The “Sardis syndrome” plays itself out over a century or two. In the American culture, it began in the early 1800s. It is now coming to an end as churches claim “to have a name that they live, but are truly dead” in reference to preaching the gospel to the world (Rv 3:1). We all remember the great mission force that came out of Europe. We also know how it died. America is on that same road. And if we might wonder why, then Jesus left a message for us with His evaluation of the Laodicea church that follows in Revelation 3:14-22.

2. Watch: “Watch” here may mean “wake up.” Those who are caught in the sleep of spiritual death **do not realize that they are spiritually dead.** Since they have created a “Christianity” after their own desires, they believe everything is fine. But according to the standards of the One after whom they call themselves, they are dead.

In the admonition to watch, Jesus may have been reflecting on the past history of Sardis. On two different occasions the city was conquered by armies that scaled the cliffs around the city. And in A.D. 12 the city was destroyed by an inexpedient earthquake. The citizens had trusted in their location, but the irony was

that their location on cliffs was what lured them into a sense of false security. The exhortation to “*be watchful*,” therefore, was certainly a reflection on their history, but also a reminder not to trust in the deception that one can hand over the security of his eternal destiny to a good name.

Christians must be alert. They must be aware of who they are and where they are going. They must not forget their purpose as the disciples of the first Missionary. Therefore, “*Awake you who sleep and arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light*” (Ep 5:14). Later in the letter, John would say to all the churches, “*Behold, I am coming as a thief. Blessed is he who watches and keeps his garments, lest he walk naked and they see his shame*” (Rv 16:15). The consequences of not being watchful would be as Jesus exhorted His disciples during His ministry:

Now know this, that if the master of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would not have allowed his house to be broken into (Lk 12:39).

In reference to the coming of Jesus, either “in time,” or at the “end of time,” Christians must always be prepared. Jesus will come as a thief, which means that there is no possible way to determine when He is coming. The word “watch” simply means to be prepared at all times. The word “thief” means that we simply do not know when He will come. The point is that we should not become so involved in the affairs of this world that we are lured into complacency concern-

ing the coming judgment of Jesus.

Jesus’ exhortation in this context is similar to that which He gave to His disciples in reference to the imminent destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, which took place about forty years after the following statement:

But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven nor the Son, but My Father only (Mt 24:36).

It does not take a great deal of interpretation to understand correctly what Jesus meant when He used the word “watch.” In the context of the statement above, Bible interpreters need to keep reading Matthew’s record in chapter 24 of Jesus’s statement. In verse 43 Jesus explained that if the head of the house knew when the thief was coming, “*he would have watched and would not have allowed his house to be broken into* (Mt 24:43).

The exhortation to “watch” assumes that we do not know the time of the “coming of the Lord” in time, or at the end of time. “Watch” means that it is useless to speculate concerning times and seasons in reference to the coming of the Lord. All the senseless predictions concerning the imminent final coming of the Lord are simply the nonsense of prognosticators who seek a following through their challenged understanding of the Bible. What their predictions of a specific date of Jesus’ coming does, is encourage people to live in sin until the day before the supposed coming.

The New Testament does not

teach the imminent final coming of Christ. The word “imminent” means immediate. In other words, **no New Testament writer wrote that Jesus was coming in His final coming within the lifetime of the first century Christians.** If the Holy Spirit inspired the New Testament writers to write such, then He wrote to deceive the people into believing something that was false. We know it would have been false because here we are today, over two thousand years later. Now if the Holy Spirit did not inspire the early writers to lead the immediate recipients of the New Testament letters to believe that Jesus was coming in their lifetime, **then the New Testament does not teach such today.** Therefore, if anyone would use the New Testament to calculate some supposed final coming of Jesus, **then we know that that person is truly a false prophet.** The next time we hear of someone using the book of Revelation to prognosticate some imminent final coming of Jesus, then we know that person is speaking nonsense. If we are eager to belief such self-proclaimed prophets, then we are immature children. At least this is what Paul said in the following statement concerning the reason why we study our Bibles:

Then we will no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of teaching, by the trickery of men in cleverness to the deceitfulness of error (Ep 4:14).

3. Known for works: Too often, the good worker will trust in his works,

thinking that he is accumulating points in heaven that will tip the scales toward his salvation. Deep inside, many people think that they can do good works in order to offset sin. But this cannot happen. No amount of good deeds can atone for one sin. The theology of works for sin cannot be true, for we would never know how many works we must do in order to atone for our sins. Therefore, since works cannot atone for sin, then we must rely on that about which Paul wrote, “... *knowing that a man is not justified by works of law, but by the faith of Christ Jesus ...*” (Gl 2:16). We must look to Jesus and the grace that He offers from the cross (Ti 2:11). Even if one has a good name he must be on his knees in thanksgiving for the cross.

Because no man can keep law perfectly, then by “*works of law no flesh will be justified*” (Gl 2:16). So if we cannot keep law perfectly because we all sin (Rm 3:23), and no good work can atone for sin, then on what basis will any Christian be saved? There is only one simple answer: “*For by grace you are saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God*” (Ep 2:8). Could those in Sardis have forgotten this point?

4. Imperfect works: Were the good works of the disciples in Sardis driven by an appreciation for grace, or were they continued in order to maintain the good name for the church in the community? If they trusted in their good name because of the good works, then they were in trouble. The problem with a good name among those who are of the world is that

it is the world patting one on the back. When one feels pats, therefore, it is often good to turn around and see who is doing the patting.

Jesus judged, *“I have not found your works completed before My God”* (Rv 3:2). The Greek word for “completed” means “brought to a full.” It may have been that they did not complete what they started. Their good intentions never realized finality. It may have been that they were caught up in the activity, but forgot the purpose for which they were striving as disciples. Whatever the case, their works were not found to have completed that for which our good works are to accomplish in our spiritual mental attitude. If our good works digress into promoting a good name before the world, then we could be in fellowship with the church of Sardis.

C. Exhortations:

There is more than one exhortation to the disciples in Sardis. Each one explains an area of spirituality on which they must concentrate if they are going to prevent the flickering flame of their lamp from being snuffed out.

1. *“Things ... ready to die”*: We are not told the things that were ready to die. But the implication is that they as a body of Christ were dying. The flame was flickering. Dead churches that trust in their works, are the walking dead in reference to their influence for Jesus in their areas. Spiritual strengthening is in order for legalistic workers to be restored to Jesus.

The legalist realizes that there is an emptiness to his efforts, for he is working for merit and not in appreciation of grace. Sooner or later, the meritorious disciple works himself into frustration, and then dies if he is not willing to step outside his box of legal theology. He burns out on his own zeal to accumulated what he believed were points upon which he could base his salvation. He is thus dead while he works, and will come to the second death if he does not return to the grace of God that was revealed on the cross (Ti 2:11). Simply defined, legalism is one depending on his own performance for his salvation, whereas, grace means that one must depend entirely on God, and in doing so, work in appreciation of God’s grace.

2. *“Remember”*: Remember how it was when you first came forth from the tomb of water with Jesus? If one’s zeal at that time was more than his zeal in the present, then it is time to do what Jesus said, *“Remember how you had received and heard. Hold fast and repent”* (Rv 3:3). They had fallen from their spiritual zeal for the Lord. The exhortation is that they hold fast to what they had, and return to the zeal they had when they were new Christians.

This is especially a problem as disciples grow older. They lose their zeal. They start to lay back and trust in past deeds. They seek to die on couches. They need to remember that the Greek word “remember” in this text is present imperative in tense. In other words, Jesus was giving a mandate that they “keep on remembering” in order to keep on doing.

There is no time now for rest. We must save our rest for heaven. We are certain that this exhortation from Jesus was not directed only to the youth among the Sardis disciples. The old must always remember the ministry of the eighty-some-year old Anna at the time of the birth of Jesus. She was not at home in a rocking chair, but at the temple where she was into the ministry of prayer and fasting (Lk 2:36,37).

There is no greater written commentary on the problem that faced the disciples in Sardis than that which was written to those of the Hebrew audience who also had been Christians for some time. They, too, had allowed complacency to creep into their lives. Every disciple who has been in the faith for some time, must carefully read through the following exhortation from the Holy Spirit:

But remember the former days in which, after you were enlightened, you endured a great conflict of sufferings, partly while you were made a spectacle both by reproaches and tribulations, and partly while you became companions with those who were so treated. For you had compassion on me in my chains, and took joyfully the seizure of your goods, knowing that you have for yourselves in heaven a better and enduring possession. Therefore, do not cast away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise (Hb 10:32-36)

3. “Repent”: Repent means that

they were wrong where they were. Repent means that they were once right, but now had gone wrong. They had fallen. Those who have lost their zeal for Jesus need to repent. Disciples who have laid down their desires to manifest their appreciation for the grace of God need to repent. Those who are trusting in their past works as a meritorious treasure by which they will buy their way into eternal glory, need to repent. One must ask himself if he is a “stony ground disciple.”

*Now these are the ones who are sown on stony ground, who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with gladness. **But they have no root in themselves, and so endure only for a while.** Afterward, when affliction or persecution arise because of the word, **they immediately fall away** (Mk 4:16,17).*

Jesus’ warning is that if they did not repent, “I will come on you as a thief and you will not know what hour I will come on you” (Rv 3:3). Jesus can come in time as a thief on those who are not prepared for Him. Such was the case in His coming in time on the unbelieving Jews who did not accept Him as the Son of God. Listen to Paul’s warning that he personally taught the disciples in Thessalonica:

*For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night. For when they say, “Peace and safety,” **then sudden destruction comes upon them as birth pains upon a woman with child.** And they will not escape (1 Th 5:2,3; see 2 Pt 3:10).*

D. Commendation of the few:

Now here is something that should make all of us straighten up and pay attention. It is the phrase, “*a few names*” (Rv 3:4). So we are all personally thinking, “Am I in that ‘few names’?” Jesus identifies the “few names” who are His. These can be assured that they are in good standing with Him.

1. “***Few names ... who have not defiled their garments***”: This statement is made on the background of a city that formerly prided itself in social aristocracy. Fine clothing was a signal of high social standing, and thus, those who wanted to be of high social standing dressed themselves accordingly. But a garment that was stained would never be accepted. It would manifest to all that one was not what he or she pretended to be. In Sardis, the majority of the disciples, in contrast to “the few names,” had stained their souls with spiritual death. They were not in “high social standing” with Jesus.

The church in Sardis had now digressed to the point that the norm was spiritual lethargy. “The few names” remained faithful, but they remained faithful among the majority who had given up their total allegiance to Jesus. When the majority of the disciples in any region have identified the “Christianity” of their area to be lukewarm, then it is difficult for the group as a whole to repent. And, it is extremely difficult for those Christians who are on fire for the Lord to survive among those who have fallen into the sin of apathy. The walking dead

soon devour the living.

Nevertheless, “the few names” must remember that Jesus knows who they are. The “few names” need to remember the Holy Spirit’s exhortation:

Nevertheless, the firm foundation of God stands, having this seal. “The Lord knows those who are His.” And, “let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity” (2 Tm 2:19).

This was both the promise and call for repentance that Jesus makes personally in Revelation to those who have soiled their garments. The faithful few needed to remember that Jesus knew who they were. But the unfaithful many also needed to know that Jesus also knew who they were, and that they were in danger of being puffed out.

2. “***They are worthy***”: If “the few names” are worthy, then the unfaithful majority is not worthy. Grace covers a lot of sin, but in this case, those who do not repent of their deadness, do not stand worthy before God. Grace will not cover spiritual lethargy. Grace will not clean a stained garment that is willingly worn.

By the time John wrote what he saw in the vision of chapter 7, it seems that a sifting was about to take place among the seven churches of Asia. The tribulations to come were going to clean up the church. Only those who purified themselves through the blood of the Lamb would make it through the tribulation.

And one of the elders answered, saying to me, “Who are these who are dressed

*in white robes, and from where did they come?” Then I said to him, “Sir, you know.” And he said to me, “**These are those coming out of the great tribulation. And they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb** (Rv 7:13,14).*

These were those of a “*pure and undefiled religion before God*” (Js 1:27). In order to remain white in the blood of the Lamb, there was a condition. John explained,

But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin (1 Jn 1:7).

If there is no “walking,” then there is no cleansing by the blood. The call of Jesus to the majority of the church of Sardis was that they start walking in the light. They needed to return to obedience. Only the blood of Jesus will make one worthy. And one can access that blood only by an obedient walk in the light of Jesus’ word. For the righteous who walk in the light, they must never forget where they are in the fold of God’s people. They are safe, not on the basis of meritorious works, but on the basis of grace.

E. An endearing promise:

The “few names” must never forget the promise of God. They must remember, “**I will not blot his name from the book of life**” (Rv 3:5). It is within the assurance of this promise that the

faithful few can find solitude, as Isaiah did concerning the promises of God:

I will greatly rejoice in the Lord. My soul will be joyful in my God, for He has clothed me with the garments of salvation. He has covered me with the robe of righteousness as a bridegroom decks himself with ornaments and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels (Is 61:10).

In the finality of all things, we yearn to hear the words of Jesus: “*Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world*” (Mt 25:34). And then, Jesus promises, “*I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels*” (Rv 3:5). This is what we want to hear. And for the “few names” in Sardis who had not defiled their garments with apathy, it seems almost superfluous for Jesus to say, “*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches*” (Rv 3:6). The “few names” want to hear Jesus. It is those caught in the religious quagmire of indifference who need to be exhorted to hear. We know now that the statement to listen was made directly to those who had defiled their garments. It was a call for their repentance. But for the “few names” who had not defiled their garments, the fact that their garments were not stained indicated that they were listening very, very closely to everything that Jesus, through the apostles, had said (See Jn 14:26:16:13). Jesus promised, “*If you continue in My word, then you are truly My disciples*” (Jn 8:31). The “few names” were continu-

ing in the word of Jesus.

Those who remained faithful in Sardis were promised “*I will not blot his name from the book of life*” (Rv 3:5). The two sisters in Christ, Euodia and Syntyche, were written in the book of life (Ph 4:3). The “book of life” was a Roman register of the citizens of a particular city. It was a register of the living citizens, and thus, when one died, his name was taken off the register. The book of life was used metaphorically by Jesus to reassure the faithful disciples that they were safe. The promise to the faithful Christian is that his name is written in the book of life. When he dies, his name in the book of life is the guarantee that he will transition into eternal glory. At the final judgment, if one’s name is not found in the book of life, then Revelation 20:15 will transpire: “*And whoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire.*”

The metaphor of the book of life is significant in reference to understand that if one is saved through his obedience to the gospel, then his name can still be blotted out of the book of life at any time he might become unfaithful. The fact that one’s name can be blotted out of the book of life is totally contrary to the teaching of some who say that once one is saved, then he is always saved regardless of his behavior. We must keep in mind that the Revelation 20:15 passage states that **one’s name must be there at the time of the final judgment**. But the Revelation 3:5 teaches that one’s name can be blotted out of the book of life **before** he gets to the final judgment. It is crucial,

therefore, that once one is saved at the washing of the waters of baptism (At 22:16), then he must remain faithful in ministry in order to remain among “the few names.”

“*The Lord knows how to deliver the godly,*” but He also knows how “*to reserve the unrighteous under punishment for the day of judgment*” (2 Pt 2:9). There were some in Sardis who had “*escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,*” but they were “*again entangled*” in the affairs of the world (2 Pt 2:20). Their garments became stained with sin. Peter wrote of such Christians, “*It has happened to them according to the true proverb, ‘A dog returns to his own vomit,’ and ‘a sow that was washed, to her wallowing in the mire’*” (2 Pt 2:22).

If one would deceive himself into thinking that once he is saved through the grace of God, that this grace gives him a license to stain his garment, then he should seriously consider the fact that there will be no stained garments in heaven. We must always be cautious. “*For certain men have crept in [the fellowship of the church] unnoticed ... ungodly men who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness ...*” (Jd 4). Lest we fall from this grace, we must commit ourselves “*to Him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy ...*” (Jd 24). Those in Sardis whose garments were stained were in danger of being erased from the book of life, and thus, snuffed out.

Chapter 6

Message To The Philadelphia Disciples



The name of this city is certainly unique. Many cities throughout the world can find the origin of their name in this text of scripture. The reason the name has been used to name so many other cities throughout the world is in the fact of what the name means. The name is composed of two Greek words, meaning “bother lover,” or “brotherly love.”

Philadelphia was probably founded by King Eumenes of Pergamum sometime in the second century B.C. His brother, Attalus II (159 - 138 B.C.), was very loyal to him, and thus, the city was given the name, Philadelphus.

The area where the city rested was subject to a great deal of earthquakes. In A.D. 17 a severe earthquake completely destroyed the city. Because of reoccurring earthquakes that prevailed throughout the area after the A.D. 17, the residents of the city set up dwellings outside the collapsed city ruins. With a grant from Tiberius in Rome, the city was later given the new name, Neocaesarea in appreciation for the relief grant from Rome to rebuild the city. Under Caesar Vespasian, the city was given another name, Flavia. But when Jesus addressed the city in Revelation, He addressed the city as Philadelphia, the original name that the local residents certainly continued because of the history from which this name was derived. They wanted to be known historically as a people of brotherly love.

The culture that the name Philadelphia developed after the relationship of Attalus II with his brother, seems to have been perpetuated throughout the history of the residents. The citizens sought to live up to the name of the city, and for this reason, there is no condemnation of the disciples of Philadelphia. As the culture of the Philadelphia residents influenced the character of the church as a whole, so through the church was reflected the exhortation of Peter to his audience: “*Love the brotherhood*” (1 Pt 2:17). The church also sought to live according to the name that had been with the city for over 200 years.

A. Description of the Christ:

What better way to express the loyalty of Christ to His people than to use the loyalty of Attalus II to his brother. So this address comes from the One “*who is holy and true*” (Rv 3:7). Jesus set Himself apart (“holy”) from the eternal God in order to provide redemption for His creation (Ph 2:5-11). And thus, He is true to those who join with Him on the cross, in the grave and resurrection (Rm 6:3-6). The word we would use to explain the behavior of Christians is reciprocity. Jesus first gave Himself for us, and now, we have reciprocated by giving ourselves to Him (Gl 2:20). We love because He first loved us (1 Jn 4:19). And since we have reciprocated His love and sacrifice,

He will stay true to His promises that He has given to us.

In order for us to find assurance in His promises, we are informed that He “*has the key of David*” (Rv 3:7). “Key” is metaphorical of “authority.” And for those of His Jewish audience, Jesus here reminds them that He received this key in fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah:

Then the key of the house of David I will lay upon his shoulder so that he will open and none will shut. And he will shut and none will open (Is 22:22).

It is significant to understand that the tense of the verb “has” in 3:7 is past tense. At the time the message was given, Jesus already had David’s key of authority. It was not something yet to come in the future, but was in the possession of Jesus as John wrote these words. There would be no encouragement for the local recipients of the letter if the key of authority were something that was yet in the future. As disciples of Jesus, we have great confidence because we know that Jesus has been given all authority over all things (Mt 28:18). The Father has placed Him in authority above all authorities on earth for the sake of His people (Ep 1:20-23).

And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, so that in all things He might have the preeminence (Cl 1:18).

If one would assert that Jesus will

in the future assume some reign on this earth, then he must also believe that Jesus must give up the authority He now has in order to reign on a small particle of dust in one galaxy of the many throughout the universe. There is something discouraging about such a theology. Those who teach such have a hard time understanding the encouragement that Jesus here gives to the Philadelphia disciples. The encouragement was that at the time the message was stated by Jesus in the context of their history, He had already received the authority of David that was prophesied in Isaiah 22:22.

The authority of David has now gone galactic in Jesus, the Son of God. It was never prophesied that Jesus would reign over some parcel of land here on earth as King David did over Israel in Palestine. Those who think Jesus’ reign would be exactly as that of David, have certainly missed the extent to which the metaphor “key of David” was to signify the reign of the Messiah. We must remember that in the use of metaphor, something spiritual and **greater** is being signified. Jesus’ reign was to be far greater than the reign of David. It was prophesied that the Messiah would reign over the world from a heavenly throne (See Dn 2:44; 7:13,14). However, this reign of Jesus as the Messiah now extends far beyond this world, and certainly far beyond the extent of David’s reign. It is as the Holy Spirit stated, that He “*has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, angels and authorities and powers having been made subject to Him*” (1 Pt 3:22). And now, He is “*upholding*

all things by the word of His power" (Hb 1:3).

B. Commendation from the Christ:

If we were among any of the disciples of the seven churches, we would want to be among the disciples in Philadelphia. There is no condemnation of any teaching or behavior of these disciples. The culture of their fellowship certainly reflected the name of the city.

1. **An open door:** One historical note on the founding of this city is revealed in the opportunity that Jesus set before them: "*I have set before you an open door and no one can shut it*" (Rv 3:8). The original purpose for the founding of the city in 140 B.C. was to make the city **a center for the spread of the Greek language and culture throughout the region**. The city was located in a wide vale that opened into the Hermus Valley. The city subsequently became an outpost opportunity for the preaching of the gospel beyond the region of Philadelphia. This was the open door that no one could shut.

When Christians who are strategically located realize the opportunity that is given to them because of their location, they should seize the opportunity of the open door for the preaching of the gospel beyond their region. Those who are in strategic locations, but fail to see the opportunity for mission outreach beyond themselves, are short sighted, if not introverted. They are not taking advantage of the open door that Jesus sets be-

fore them.

Paul was very perceptive to find open-door opportunities that were made possible by God. When he and Barnabas returned from the first mission journey, they "*gathered the church together*" and "*reported all that God had done with them and how He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles*" (At 14:27). God opens the doors. Christians must pray to perceive those doors. When in Ephesus, Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "*But I will tarry in Ephesus until Pentecost. For a great and effective door has opened to me ...*" (1 Co 16:8,9). Could this very open door have been the opportunity for Paul from Ephesus to reach cities as Philadelphia? It could have been an open door that led to the salvation of the saints in Philadelphia, and thus, Jesus was using their past experience of their receiving of the gospel in order to motivate them to do likewise for others. While in Ephesus on a mission journey Paul taught in the school of Tyrannus for two years, "*so that all those who dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks*" (At 19:10). Could there have been a similar open door for the Philadelphia saints to do the same from where they were located?

It is the responsibility of leaders to be perceptive to doors of opportunity for evangelism. God opens these doors. And the fact that He does assumes that His people should take the opportunity to enter in order to preach the gospel. If we do not, then we are negligent in our duties as His children. This may have been the problem with the loss of the "first

love” by the Ephesians and the deadness of the Sardis disciples. Ephesus was the gateway to all Asia Minor. God opened a door there once for Paul, but it seems that the Ephesians refused to continue the legacy of using their key location as an opportunity to continue to preach the gospel to the world. When Paul was in Troas on his last mission journey, and on his way to Corinth, he wrote ahead, “*Now when I came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ, and a door was opened to me by the Lord ...*” (2 Co 2:12). Must we assume that this open door was only for the city of Troas? If we use Ephesus as an example, the open door was not simply for the city of Troas, but for those who lived beyond Troas. Every city of disciples must see how God is using them as an open door to reach beyond their city limits.

It is the responsibility of the disciples to find doors that are opened by God. And if a door is not opened, then it is the responsibility of the saints to pray that God open it. Open doors assume that they were first closed. And if closed, then we must trust that the One who opens doors will do so on behalf of the gospel. While in prison, Paul asked some Christians, “... *continue praying for us so that God may open to us a door for the word, to speak the mystery of Christ ...*” (Cl 4:3).

So we must ask ourselves, “When was the last time we prayed that God open some doors for us in order to preach the word?” If that prayer has not been on our lips for some time, then we can judge for ourselves that we have lost our

first love. Some Christians are sometimes as those who were explained by a preacher, “When opportunity does knock, by some uncanny quirk, it often goes unrecognized, it so resembles work.” It seems that the opportunity to preach the gospel has to be advertised to some before they can perceive God working through open doors. We must pray for perception because the open door for preaching the word is often off its hinges in some places of the world and waiting for someone to enter. Unfortunately, and unlike those in Philadelphia, some people do not want to make the prayer for an open door because they feel that God will tap them on the shoulder to enter.

It would be good to listen to the public prayers of an assembly of disciples. If one never hears a public prayer for God to open doors for preaching the gospel, then we know that we are sitting among many dead disciples. If so, then we must heed the exhortation of Jesus to the Ephesians. We must restore our first love (Rv 3:1).

C. The promise of the Christ:

Jesus makes four promises to the Christians in Philadelphia, promises that would encourage them to continue their outreach through the open door that He would not allow anyone to shut.

1. “*I will make those of the synagogue of Satan ... come and fall down before your feet.*” This is a significant statement in reference to the date of writing of the book. On the day of Pentecost

in A.D. 30, prophecy was fulfilled through the apostles' speaking in languages (At 2:1-4). The fulfillment of this prophecy was God's initial stamp of approval on the apostles through the languages that He was now working through the spiritual Israel, the ekklesia (church) of Christians.

Paul explained this "stamp of approval" by the use of languages when he wrote to the Corinthians. In quoting Isaiah 28:11,12, Paul argued that "*languages are for a sign, not to those who believe, but for unbelievers*" (1 Co 14:21,22). The languages that were miraculously spoken by Christians signalled to the unbelieving Jews that God was now working through those who believed that Jesus was the Messiah and Son of God.

In the parable of the Tares, Jesus spoke of a time after His ministry when "*the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father*" (Mt 13:43). That time came on the cross in A.D. 30 with the termination of the Old Testament law of national Israel (Cl 2:14). Termination of the state of national Israel came in the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Jesus explained to the Philadelphia saints that when national Israel was fully consummated in the fulfillment of Jesus' prophecy of Matthew 24, it would be then that many of the formerly unbelieving Jews would "*fall down before your feet*" (Rv 3:9). Jewish persecution would cease (Rv 2:9). This would be the time about which Paul wrote,

For I do not want, brethren, that you should be ignorant of this mystery, lest you should be wise in your own minds, that blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in (Rm 11:25).

God initially signalled to the Jewish nation in A.D. 30 by the apostles' speaking in languages that He accepted as His people those who believed in Jesus (At 2:1-4). He then signalled to the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem with the speaking in languages that He accepted the Gentiles (At 10,11). After this, the Jewish Christians went with force into the Gentile world through Paul and other evangelists. This happened for about thirty years after the cross, that is, "*until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.*" After this "fullness of the Gentiles had come," then "*all Israel will be saved*" (Rm 11:26). All Israel does not mean every single Jew, but only those who would accept Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God. These would be those Jews, as the Gentiles, who "*were disposed unto eternal life*" (At 13:48). This number would be all of Israel who would obey the gospel.

Now to the Philadelphia disciples, this time was close. Therefore, some of those Jews who were persistent to claim to be God's people (the synagogue of Satan), would eventually see the true people of God shine forth under the kingdom reign of Jesus. A.D. 70 would be the time when over one million unbelieving sojourning Jews to Jerusalem would

be massacred in the destruction of the city in A.D. 70. The Roman Caesar Vespasian waited until the Passover/Pentecost feast, and then the Roman army made war with Israel, which war eventually led to the destruction of Jerusalem. The 80,000 or more Jews who survived the war in Jerusalem were sold into captivity throughout the Roman Empire. It was a time when formerly unbelieving Jews figuratively bowed down before Christians as the Gentile Cornelius literally bowed down before the Jewish Peter (At 10:25,26). But this time, it would be the formerly unbelieving Jews who would finally confess that Jesus was the Messiah and figuratively bow down before Gentile Christians.

We would assume that the Christians in Philadelphia believed the prophecy of Matthew 24. But we would also assume that they had not yet experienced the fall of Jerusalem, for there was still opposition from the “synagogue of Satan.” But this opposition would soon be terminated, since many of the zealot Jews of the synagogue may have been killed in the A.D. 70 destruction when they traveled to Jerusalem for the annual Passover/Pentecost feast.

Through the fulfillment of the prophecies concerning the destruction of Jerusalem, Jesus said that He would make the unbelieving Jews “*know that I have loved you*” (Rv 3:9). What would be significant to assume is that some surviving Jews who escaped the A.D. 70 war and possibly returned to Philadelphia, were warmly received by the Philadelphia Christians upon their repentance and obe-

dience to the gospel. Such would not be uncommon behavior among true Christians, for Philip the evangelist later received Saul, now Paul, who had aided in the stoning of one of his best friends in Jerusalem many years before (See At 7:58; 8:1; 21:8). There is certainly power in the words that Jesus uttered from the cross, “*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing*” (Lk 23:34).

2. “***I also will keep you from the hour of trial that will come on the whole world***” (Rv 3:10). There was a reward coming for the Philadelphia saints “*because you have kept the word of My perseverance ...*” (Rv 3:10). The reward was that they would be kept “*from the hour of trial that will come on the whole world*”

Keeping the word of Jesus has its rewards in the time of trial. This promise reminds us of 1 Peter 4:16: “*Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this name.*” The Philadelphia disciples knew that “*all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution*” (2 Tm 3:12; see Mt 5:10-12). The following words would be precious to the saints in Philadelphia as they passed through the coming trials:

Blessed is the man who endures temptation, for when he is tried, he will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love Him (Js 1:12).

The early Christians knew that before they could reach the promised land, they

had to pass through the wilderness of tribulation. They knew that if one would seek to live the godly life, then there would be the trials of this life that godliness inherently engenders. But it is as someone said, "Trial is the structural steel that goes into the building of character." So Peter would remind the Philadelphia disciples,

*In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been distressed by many trials, so that the proof of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is refined with fire, **might be found to praise and honor and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ** (1 Pt 1:6,7; see Js 1:2,3).*

The phrase "whole world" in Revelation 3:10 must be interpreted with the dictionary of Luke 2:1. Caesar Augustus of the Roman Empire decreed that "*a census be taken of **all the world.***" This certainly did not pertain to every person on earth. The terminology was taken from the Roman dictionary, in that the Roman's thought that they reigned over the "whole world." But we would ignore their arrogance by realizing that the census of Augustus was only of the citizens of the Roman Empire. And so we bring this definition into the context of Revelation 3:10 as Jesus' meaning in the context. The "hour of trial" was coming when Rome would unleash its persecution against Christians throughout the Empire. This would be Jesus' message of introduction to the encouragement of

the visions that would begin in chapter 4 and continue throughout the book.

It seems that Jesus has in the context of His message to the Philadelphia saints turned from the destruction of Jerusalem that would take care of the limited Jewish persecution of the church, and moved on to the state persecution that would take place throughout the Roman Empire. The Empire would set itself against Christianity. A limited persecution of Christians had already begun with the personal vendetta of Nero against Christians during the 60s. But under Caesar Domitian (81-96), there would begin a state persecution for the next 150 years until Galerius eventually issued the Edict of Toleration in A.D. 311. But for some reason, this persecution did not come upon the disciples in Philadelphia, at least this seems to be the promise of Jesus in His message to these Christians. The city of Philadelphia may have been a small sanctuary for Christians throughout the Empire while Rome launched its fury against Christianity in other areas.

"*I am coming quickly*" cannot be a promise of coming at the end of time. This was a coming "in time." Jesus would not have deceived the Philadelphia Christians into believing that He was coming in His final coming in their lifetime. Such a promise would have robbed them of the immediate comfort they needed. As James encouraged his readers around A.D. 66,67 to be patient for the "coming of the Lord" in His destruction of Jerusalem (Js 5:7,8), so here the promise may be to the Philadelphia Christians that there would be an end of

Roman persecution, which end eventually came in A.D. 311. We are not told specifically in this address what the relief would be from the trials from which they would be delivered. The immediate disciples were simply promised that there would be relief from their hard times.

3. “I will make [him] a pillar in the temple of My God ” (Rv 3:12). The city of Philadelphia was devastated with an initial earthquake that levelled the pillars of the main buildings in A.D. 17. Subsequent earthquakes that took place in the years that followed finished the total destruction of all the buildings in the city. But in the promise of Jesus, the faithful would be made pillars that would never fall.

When someone in Roman society accomplished a good deed for the society, a pillar in a public building was often made and named after the person, as we today would name a street after someone. Jesus is saying that because the Christians in Philadelphia were remaining faithful, they would be “named pillars” in the house of God. They could be assured, however, that these named pillars would never lie in ruins as they witnessed every day the pillars of the old city laying on the ground in ruins.

4. “I will write on him the name of My God and the name of the city of My God.” The Greek word for “overcome” in 3:12 is a present participle. The action of the verb is continuous action in the present. Therefore, they were overcoming in their daily discipleship. Living the life of a disciple for the saints in Philadelphia was a daily struggle.

When the A.D. 17 earthquake came, people in mass fled the city for their lives. But when one is a pillar in the temple of God, he need not flee. On the contrary, he is the occasion for people to flee to him for protection and comfort (1 Pt 3:15). “*The new Jerusalem*” comes down from God in heaven. This is the church of the Lord. As people come into Christ, the church is pictured as coming down from its origin, that is God. So when one is obedient to the gospel, then he would be accepting the name about which Peter wrote, the name “Christian” (1 Pt 4:16). It would be to this name, and the refuge of the city of God, that people would seek refuge in times of trial.

After the destruction of the city of Philadelphia in A.D. 17, Caesar Tiberius appropriated funds for the rebuilding of the city. The name of the city was subsequently changed to honor him, but the name never stuck. When God names His people, the name can never be changed. Some in Corinth tried to change the name of their allegiance by calling themselves after the name of some man. Paul wrote that some say, “I am of Paul,” or “I am of Apollos,” or “I am of Cephas” (1 Co 1:12). Paul admonished the disciples in Corinth for this divisive and disrespectful practice. He admonished, “*Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?*” (1 Co 1:13).

The fact is that we wear the name of Christ because He was crucified for us, and we were baptized into His name. If Christ had not been crucified, then religious people could wear any name they

choose. If one has not been baptized in the name of Christ, then again, it does not matter what name one would wear. But since all Christians have been baptized into the One who was crucified for them, then they are called “Christian” after Christ, of whom they are because they have been baptized into Him under the authority of His name (At 2:38; Rm 6:3).

D. Warning:

Jesus warned, “*Hold fast what you have so that no one take your crown*” (Rv 3:11). The Greek word (*krotein*) for “hold fast” means to “hold on to tightly.” If they hold on to that which they have, then they will not lose their crown. The exhortation to “hold fast” assumes that one can let go, and thus, lose his crown. It is not that one is saved by the grace of God, and then cannot lose his crown. The very fact that Jesus here exhorts the disciples to hold on to that which they have (their salvation), assumes that they will lose it if they let go.

The exhortation to the Philadelphia disciples is similar to that given by Jude, but with an added responsibility on the part of Jesus. “*Now to Him who is able*

to keep you from falling and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy ...” (Jd 24). Combined with the Revelation 3:11 exhortation, the individual disciple has the responsibility to keep himself saved, but he is helped by Him before whom he will be saved in eternity. The link that connects the two exhortations is Paul’s statement in Ephesians 3:20: “*Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think according to the power that works in us*” Outside us, Jesus is working all things together for good (Rm 8:28). Inside us, we are struggling against the lust of the flesh in order that we not lose our salvation. There are things for which we are responsible in order to guarantee our salvation. “*Therefore, brethren, be all the more diligent to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never stumble*” (2 Pt 1:10; see 2 Pt 2:20-22). Since one can stumble, then we seek to watch and be faithful, for we remember Jesus’ promise to the Ephesians, “*Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life*” (Rv 2:10). Flickering lamps need to give all diligence to add oil.

Chapter 7

Message To The Laodicea Disciples



Laodicea was founded by the Seleucid King Antiochus II in the third century B.C. It was named after his wife, Laodice (261-256 B.C.). The riches of the city came from its location, for it was situated on one of the great Asian trade

routes. It was a very prosperous city, and thus, a banking center for many traders who passed through the city. After the great earthquake of A.D. 60, the banking firms were so wealthy that they financed the rebuilding of the city. In the rebuild-

ing of the city, the banks even refused to receive funding from Nero. As a result of its wealth, it developed a culture of aristocracy and a social class that was based on wealth. There was a spirit of self-sufficiency among the residents since they trusted in their great wealth. Probably no other church of the seven that Jesus addressed, better represents the business and social environment of the modern urban church.

The Lycus Valley was pasture land for a black sheep that produced a glossy black wool, from which stylish coats and carpets were made. The city became known for this wool and the garments of the black wool industry. There was also a medical school in the city, as well as an industry for the manufacture of collyrium, a well-known eye salve of the times.

The unfortunate thing about Laodicea's location was that there was no sufficient local water supply within the city. Water was thus channeled to the city from hot springs some distance south of the city. But because of the heat of the water at its source, it arrived in the city lukewarm, and thus, it still had to be cooled in order to be consumed.

Since the society was one of business and banking, there was a spirit of compromise within the culture that was necessary for business. As in today's urban centers, a great deal of time had to be spent in being successful in one's business. In some cases, cities are so large together that surviving within them as a Christian is challenging. In the case of Laodicea, the competitive business cul-

ture of the city led the Christians into a spiritual indifference that labelled them to be the "lukewarm church." As a result of their little focus on spiritual things, the disciples of the area manifested indifference in reference to their faith. The result was the eventual disappearance of the church from the area. The disappearance of the church was as the history of the city. The ancient city of Laodicea was eventually abandoned.

A. Description of the Christ:

Jesus' introduction of Himself to the lukewarm Laodicean disciples is meant to remind them of who He is. If they would recall the One after whom they were originally called, then they should be shocked into remembering that this is not "sweet Jesus, meek and mild." This was their Creator, the One before whom all men will eventually give account for the works done in the body, whether good or bad (2 Co 5:10). This is the One who will eventually make the final pronouncement to the apathetic, "*Depart from Me you cursed into everlasting fire that is prepared for the devil and his angels*" (Mt 25:41). These spiritually indifferent disciples needed to be shocked out of their lukewarmness and into the reality that King Jesus is not playing religious games.

1. Jesus is the revealed "truth." Isaiah identified God as "*the God of truth*" (Is 65:16). It was indeed appropriate, therefore, for Jesus to make the statement during His ministry, "*I am the*

way, **the truth**, and **the life**” (Jn 14:6). “Jesus said to those Jews who believed in Him ... you will know **the truth**, and **the truth** will make you free” (Jn 8:31,32). What He was saying was that they would know Him, and it would be Him who would set them free.

Contrary to the thinking of many, Jesus was not talking about a body of doctrine that they would know. Knowing “the Truth” must be interpreted in the context of what John wrote at the very beginning of his dissertation to explain who Jesus was:

*In the beginning was **the Word**, and **the Word** was with God, and **the Word** was God.... And **the Word** was made flesh and dwelt among us* (Jn 1:1,14).

Throughout His ministry, it was the work of Jesus to explain that He was “the Truth,” “the Word” that was revealed to man. Jesus was the revelation of “the God of truth.” To know “the Truth” was to know “the Word.” And to know the Word, was to know a personality, not an outline of doctrine on a piece of paper.

When Jesus said, “*He who has seen Me has seen the Father*” (Jn 14:9), He was saying that in person He was the revelation of the true God of heaven. It is for this reason, therefore, **that any religionist who does not recognize Jesus as the Word (the Truth) who reveals the true God, has simply created a god after his own imagination.** When Jesus addressed the Laodicean disciples, He claimed to be the true revelation of the God of heaven (Rv 3:14). In order to

deliver the Laodicean Christians out of the stupor of their lukewarmness, they had to again realize that the One they claimed to follow was the revelation of the God of all things. Their lukewarmness resulted from their “lukewarm” understanding of who Jesus really was.

The Hebrew word for the Greek word that is translated “Amen” means “truth.” It is a Hebrew word that was not literally translated into the Greek Septuagint, and then into English. When the Jews heard the cry, “Amen,” they understood that what an individual was saying was, “Truth.” In the same sense, the English word “Amen” should convey the same meaning when one says “Amen” to a statement with which one agrees to be “truth.” Jesus is the Truth who will set us free and keep us free. If we lose sight of who He is, then our flame will flicker out.

2. Jesus was the origin of creation. Jesus is “*the ruler of the creation of God*” (Rv 3:14). In other words, when creation began, it was the Son of the Godhead who began and completed all creation.

For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him (Cl 1:16).

Because He was the Creator, Jesus was the one who had all the rights of a first-born son. “*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation*”

(Cl 1:15). He was not a creation of God, but was one with God. He was the origin of all that now exists. And since He created us, He took ownership of our existence through incarnation. He emptied Himself of being on a equality with the Godhead in order to come for us (Ph 2:5-11).

We must leave a note here for those interpreters who have somehow twisted the Revelation 3:14 statement into some fantasy that Jesus was a created being of God. This interpretation was based on a weak translation of Revelation 3:14. Some versions translated the verse in a manner that somewhat indicated that Jesus was “the beginning” of the creation of God. This translation gave the impression that Jesus was first created, and then the rest of the material world was created.

If Jesus were a created being, then Paul’s statement of 1 Timothy 2:5 means nothing: “*For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.*” If Jesus were a creation as any man, then there would be no mediatorship between created man of the material world and God who is spirit (Jn 4:24). He would be no greater than any other man who was created, and thus, He could not function as a mediator between that which is spirit and that which is material. That which is material cannot mediate on its own behalf. If man, who is material and mortal, could mediate on his own behalf, then why would we need Jesus, if He too were only mortal and material? If a material and mortal mediator would do, then any other good mortal and

material created man would do, maybe Abraham, or Isaiah, or Paul. But to create from dust a mediator between Deity and dust is simply the manifestation of biblically challenged interpreters.

B. Pronouncement of judgment:

The condemnation of the disciples in Laodicea is harsh. The severity of the judgment portrays a fellowship of Christians who seem to be past repentance, though a plea is made by Jesus to “*be zealous and repent*” (Rv 3:19). Whether the stark rebuke of this message generated repentance, we do not know. What is important to understand is that Jesus picked out these disciples as an opportunity to manifest His condemnation of lukewarmness that so often affects so many members of the body. As we study through His message to these disciples, we must be on our knees in prayer to perceive, if perhaps, we too are of those to whom the message is directed.

It is as if Jesus were speaking to the normal metropolitan church today that is composed of those who have been lured into a world of materialism. Laodicea would be the example of the urban church that has laid itself in the tomb of mediocrity, but at the same time, claims to be the representation of the body of Christ in the community. This is a message that is seldom heard from the pulpits of pastoral prophets of urban churches. Even those churches that take pride in being doctrinal soundness will seldom turn to this message to the Laodicean Christians as a point of reference to define true dis-

ipleship. After all, if we can take pride in our doctrine, then what need is there to check our behavior with a faith that should be working through love. If our contribution is up, then why would we say anything to discourage the rich contributors. A great deal of pride in one's doctrine will often lead one to overlook a great deal of lukewarmness.

1. ***"You are lukewarm"***: It is true that the more wealthy one becomes, the more he is likely to fall into the sin of apathy in reference to spiritual matters. Since one's focus and energy must be placed on the world in order to generate the wealth of the world, then one's focus and energy are directed to the things of the world. They are thus directed away from Christ. For this reason Jesus stated,

No man can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth (Mt 6:24).

The lethargic Laodicea church is proof of this truth. Split loyalty will not work if one seeks to be a dedicated disciple. It is as Jesus said, ***"He who is not with Me is against Me. And he who does not gather with Me, scatters"*** (Lk 11:23). If one is not totally committed to Jesus, then he reserves some commitment for something of this world. "Half hearted" is never a term that can be used in reference to a disciple of Jesus. Jesus deserves more than half a heart. Our Bibles still say, ***"You will love the Lord your God***

with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind" (Mt 22:37).

The water that came from the mineral springs south of Laodicea served as the appropriate metaphor for disciples who had been stricken with the sin of lukewarmness. As one would spew forth the lukewarm mineral waters that were channelled into the city, so Jesus will do the same with the lukewarm Christian who is "channelled" to the final judgment. It is as someone said, "Lukewarm water will not take a steam locomotive to its destination, and neither will a lukewarm Christian reach his desired destination."

The curse of lukewarmness is that one fails to perform for Jesus. One can create a religiosity that conforms to a lifestyle of mediocrity. God warned Israel that if the Israelites did not keep His word, the land would spew them out (See Lv 18:27,28; 20:22). The same could be said of those who are lukewarm in the body of Christ. They will be spewed out if they were not obedient. How this would happen in the lives of the disciples of Laodicea would be an illustration of what Paul said of some Christians who were wood, hay and straw.

Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one's work will be manifested, for the day will declare it because it will be revealed by fire. And the fire will test each man's work to determine what quality it is (1 Co 3:12,13).

The fire of persecution was about to burn

away those disciples of Laodicea who were wood, hay and straw. It would refine those of gold, silver and precious stones. The persecution that was coming would snuff out the lukewarm disciples of Laodicea. The lukewarm would not endure the storm of tribulation that was bearing down on Christianity.

It often takes the fire of persecution to determine if one is a lukewarm disciple. If in the heat of persecution a disciple would fall from Jesus, then he knows that he was a “wood” disciple. If in the heat of trials, a disciple says, “Hey, I’m gone,” then he was a “hay” disciple. And if in the heat of the battle for faith a disciple withdraws, then he was a “straw” disciple.

When a culture of lukewarmness is established among a group of disciples, “Christianity” is redefined by the apathy of the members. And once this happens, it is very difficult to reverse this spiritual death. If a new convert would come into such a group, those who are sick with the sin of lukewarmness will intimidate such a one to identify with the culture of apathy of the majority. The curse of apathetic churchianity is in the fact that those who are caught in the culture do not believe that they are in danger of being spewed out. Lukewarmness has a tendency to make one comfortable and not conducive to repentance. If one believes that lukewarm disciples will be brought into eternal glory by grace, then he should study again what Jesus was about to do with the lukewarm disciples of Laodicea.

2. “I am rich”: Since wealth has a tendency to stymie spiritual growth, Jesus

wants us to know that this is what has happened among the Christians of Laodicea. Though riches do not always detour the spiritual growth of the wealthy, wealth is a particular danger for which the rich must be cautious. They must always remember the good advice of the wealthy Christian who said, “It is easy for a good man to make money, but hard for money to make a good man.” The reason this is true is because of what the Holy Spirit said. **“But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and many foolish and harmful lusts that drown men in ruin and destruction”** (1 Tm 6:9). The Laodicean disciples were drowning in ruin and destruction.

The problem with wealth is that it often leads one to obsess that which will not exist beyond wealth. **“For the love of money is the root of all evils, by which some coveting after have strayed from the faith and pierced themselves with many sorrows”** (1 Tm 6:10). And such seems to be the spiritual situation of the disciples in Laodicea. They took so much pride in their riches that their proud attitudes reaped this strong condemnation from the One they presumed to follow. They had forgotten what a wise person once said, “We grow rich, not by depositing money in a savings account, but by depositing the word of God in our hearts.” We must never forget, therefore, what someone wisely said, “A man is rich according to what he is, not according to what he has.”

It seems that the Laodicean disciples had forgotten the words of Jesus that He spoke during His earthly minis-

try: ***“Take heed and beware of all covetousness, for a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of the things that he possesses”*** (Lk 12:15). Henry Ward Beecher wrote, “In this world, it is not what we take up, but what we give up, that makes us rich.” Beecher must have read Jesus. Or maybe he read the Holy Spirit through Solomon: *“A good name is rather to be chosen than great riches, and loving favor rather than silver and gold”* (Pv 22:1).

In the case of the Laodicean Christians, it seems that they had forgotten the concept of Proverbs 22:2: *“The rich and poor meet together. **The Lord is the maker of them all.**”* In the eyes of God, there is no difference between the rich and poor. Though among men we would seek to exalt the rich above the poor, in looking down from God’s perspective, we are all still little men. The rich need to remember, “The poorest of all men is he who has nothing but money.” It was as if James were writing specifically to the rich Christians of Laodicea in the following words:

Come now you rich, weep and howl for your miseries that are coming upon you. Your riches are corrupted and your garments are moth eaten. Your gold and silver are corroded. And their corrosion will be a witness against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have heaped treasure together for the last days (Js 5:1-3). You have lived in pleasure on the earth and lived in a self-indulgent life. You have nourished your hearts as in a day of slaughter (Js 5:5).

No better commentary statement could have been written against the rich of Laodicea. We must keep in mind that these were Christians about whom both Jesus and James spoke. These were not those of the world. Riches had so corrupted the spirit of the Laodicean Christians that they were deserving of the harsh condemnation that came from both Jesus and James. They were deserving of such because Jesus loved them, and thus, wanted them to repent in order that they reign with Him in heavenly places. But at the time of writing, they were simply happy with reigning on earth through the pomp and prestige of their riches.

The judgment of Jesus is harsh in the statement: ***“But you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked”*** (Rv 3:17). This is the character that riches will produce. This is the outcome of greed. This is the description of Christians who have made money their god. Paul simply said to the rich, *“Put to death your members that are on the earth ... covetousness, **which is idolatry**”* (Cl 3:5).

The road to repentance for a church of Laodiceans is difficult. They must put to death their idol god of riches. It is not that they must give themselves into poverty, but that they use their riches to the glory of God. This is behind the instructions of Paul in 1 Timothy 6:17-19. If one would find himself sitting among the *“wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked,”* then here is what the Holy Spirit would instruct:

*Charge those who are rich in this world **that they not be high-minded or trust in***

the uncertainty of riches, but in the living God who richly gives us all things to enjoy. Teach that they do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to share, laying up in store for themselves a good foundation for the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life.

Every rich person must consider his riches according to the meaning of what Jesus said in answer to the one who stated, “*I will pull down my barns and build larger ones*”:

“You fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be that you have provided?” So is he who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God (Lk 12:18-21).

The rich must always be cautious about this truth: “***For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also***” (Lk 12:34). The Christians in Laodicea had become somewhat proud of their riches. They seem to be of the same attitude as the Ephraimites of Israel who puffed themselves up because of their riches. Hosea stated that they proclaimed the arrogant statement, “*Surely I have become rich. I have found for myself wealth. In all my labors they will find no iniquity in me that would be sin*” (Hs 12:8). This would be the proclamation of the rich disciples in Laodicea. But Jesus defined their sin to be their depraved character. Their character was “*wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked*” (Rv 3:17). They should have been crying out

as Paul, “*Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from the body of this death?*” (Rm 7:24). But their pride would not allow them to make such a confession because they trusted in wealth.

We must notice that neither in Jesus’ call for repentance on the part of the rich Laodiceans, nor in any message of the Holy Spirit through the writers of the New Testament, that rich Christians must give themselves into poverty. The only call is that the rich Christians be willing to share (1 Tm 6:17,18). Some have been blessed with the gift to make money. Others have not. Christianity is not as communism, that is, we all must be financially equal. The problem with political communism is that everyone becomes poor, except for the rich ruling class.

The advantage of a rich brother who loves Jesus is that the church has the great opportunity of sending the gospel into all the world. The rich also have the opportunity to help others. Therefore, when we see the house of a rich man, we should be thinking that he should have built a bigger house. If he had built a bigger house, then the fathers of children who built the house would have received more money in wages to feed their children. They too could have built bigger houses for their children. We must dispel with this jealousy of rich brethren who are willing and generous to share by providing opportunities for employment. Their sharing is not in giving handouts. Their sharing is in providing the opportunity for fathers to have a job in order that they

feed their children and pay their schools fees. We must never forget that hand-outs often destroy self-esteem, but handing out opportunities to working hands builds nations.

3. “I counsel you”: When one is selfishly blinded by his wealth, then he should listen carefully to this counsel of Jesus (Rv 3:18). The city took pride in its great banking that served many who traveled through the area. But Jesus said that instead of trusting in their banking system, they should “*buy from Me gold refined in the fire*” so that they would be spiritually rich (Rv 3:18). They should buy from Jesus white garments, instead of taking pride in the garments that they purchased from the local trade stores that were made of the fine black wool of the area. The garments from the trade stores would give the outer appearance of someone of status, but their being clothed in Jesus would give the presentation of a godly nature. They needed to remember that when they came out of the grave of baptism, that they “*put on the new man which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness*” (Ep 4:24). They had dressed themselves with Christ (Gl 3:27).

Unfortunately, the Laodiceans allowed their spiritual clothing to be replaced with material clothing of the world, and thus, they revealed their naked spirituality. And in reference to the eye salve of the city, such would momentarily solve the problem of itching eyes. But the spiritual eye salve that Jesus provided would quench their itching spirit from following after the things of this

world. The eye salve of Jesus would give them relief to stop lusting after wealth. It would give them the opportunity to see the world as it is. They would also be able to see God (Mt 5:8). It would give them the opportunity to see their true self, that they were “*wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked*” (Rv 3:17).

C. Exhortation to repent:

“*As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten*” (Rv 3:19). We find a commentary of this exhortation in Hebrews 12:

My son, do not despise the disciplining of the Lord, nor faint when you are rebuked by Him. For whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and scourges every son whom He receives (Hb 12:5,6; see Pv 3:11,12).

There is only one way to avoid the chastisement of the Lord. Jesus explains, “*Therefore, be zealous and repent*” (Rv 3:19). When one realizes that the Lord chastises those He loves, he must understand that the chastisement comes as a result of our falling from our faithfulness to Him. Therefore, in order not to be chastised, one should give all diligence to remain faithful. We should be a people who are “*zealous of good works*” (Ti 2:14) in order that we not be led into the apathy that is produced by riches. The Laodiceans allowed the easiness of their life-style to infect the culture of their faith. They became complacent in their coins and lax in their love for Christ. It

was not that money is evil. When one loves money more than good works in response to the love of God through the cross, then he is spiritually in trouble. It is for this reason that personal good works are a measuring gage as to how much one loves the Lord.

D. Plea for spiritual restoration:

We know that one can repent from the life-style of lukewarmness because of the call of Jesus for repentance. The fact of the plea is evidence that they could restore zeal for Jesus and focus on those things that are above. They needed to read again the letter that the Holy Spirit sent to the Christians in Colosse in A.D. 61,62, which by this time, had been circulated among the seven churches, for the city of Colosse was not far from any of the seven cities.

If you then were raised with Christ, seek those things that are above, where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth (Cl 3:1,2).

When He wrote the letter to the Colossians, the Holy Spirit knew the direction of lukewarmness to which the Christians in Laodicea and other churches were going. The Colossian letter was the forewarning of admonition from God. The direct address of judgment of Jesus to the Laodiceans in Revelation was the call for their repentance, for they had eagerly run after the lure of riches. Jesus' address was a direct warning because they did

not read well the exhortation of the Holy Spirit in the Colossian letter. Instead of having Bible class studies of Colossians, they were waiting for the "closing prayer" in order to leave God and run after money.

1. "I stand at the door and knock":
The plea of verse 20 is not to unbelievers. The plea is to Christians who were "*wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked*" in their prosperity. This is not an evangelistic plea. It is a plea to Christians who have died in their lukewarmness, and were about to be spewed out by Jesus. This is a plea to the lukewarm sinners in the church, not to sinners of the world.

Jesus is at the door of opportunity for the lukewarm Christian. The word "knock" is a present participle, and thus, Jesus is continuously knocking. The metaphor is pointed because Jesus continually pleads with His disciples to repent when they fall into the sin of lukewarmness. The lukewarm disciple knows that he is not zealous with good works toward God, and thus he continually feels the knock of Jesus on his heart. His conscience tells him that his life-style of lukewarmness is not pleasing to the One who gave up being on an equality with God in order to redeem him (Ph 2:5-9).

The present participle action teaches that repentance from apathy is difficult. The knock is continuous action because apathetic disciples must work themselves out of a religious culture of lukewarmness in which they be-

came very comfortable. All the time Jesus is knocking on one's conscience, one must be struggling to repent of lukewarm churchianity.

2. ***"If anyone hears"***: Now we know why Jesus concluded each address to the seven churches with the statement, *"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches"* (Rv 3:22). The word "hear" means repent and obey. If one would hear the commandments of Jesus, then he would repent and obey. Discipleship is more than knowledge. One can know the outline of commandments, but do nothing. It is legalist hypocrisy if one claims to be a disciple of Jesus, and yet, remains lukewarm.

The Laodicean disciples had fallen into the religiosity of knowing all the outlines of doctrine, but their behavior was stagnant. They were comfortable sitting in assemblies on Sunday and taking in all the knowledge of the teacher. But their performance after the "closing prayer" was far from adequate. Such is the curse of riches. It is easy to pay someone to get the job done instead of getting one's own hands dirty in the filth of humanity. Lest they stain their white garments with the dirt of duty, the rich Laodiceans would be comfortable to just hire some clergyman to do the job for them.

The rich cannot fool the Holy Spirit on this matter. Through Paul, the Spirit instructed Timothy to tell the rich that they be rich in good works (1 Tm 6:18). This means hands-on activity for Jesus. No disciple can work at a distance from the needs of others. Money can never

become a buffer between servant and need. If we think it can, then we need to take another look at the dirty towel in the hands of our Creator after He finished washing the dirty feet of His disciples (See Jn 13:1-17).

3. ***"To him who overcomes"***: Those who would overcome the stifling curse of prosperity would gain the privilege of sitting down beside the Lord of the world (Rv 3:21). What a powerful promise. When Jesus sat down at the right hand of the Father, all the universe became the domain of His kingdom reign (See Dn 7:13,14; Ep 1:20-22; Ph 2:5-11). At the time John was recording these words, Jesus was right there at the right hand of God, reigning over all things. Now the sweet promise of Jesus to the Laodicean disciples is if they can overcome the curse of riches that often produces the sin of lukewarm activity for Jesus, they too could sit right there with Jesus.

This was not a promise that would be fulfilled centuries later. The power of the appeal of the promise was that it could happen in their lifetime. We can, as Paul taught, *"reign in life through the one, Jesus Christ"* (Rm 5:17). *"If we suffer, we will also reign with Him"* (2 Tm 2:12). And suffer, the Laodiceans would in the coming years. This last personal message to the members of His one organic body was a plea of Jesus that they open the door of their hearts to Him. He knew their future. He knew that they were going into a century and a half of torturous turmoil before they would emerge on the other side of truly "dark ages." If any disciple was to survive the

ages to come, then he had to allow Jesus to come in and sit down with him in his heart. And by sitting in their hearts, they would sit with Him in a heavenly reign over all those who would bring harm against them. Any Christian would be able to overcome because he or she would be right there beside Jesus, the King of kings and Lord of lords.

*These will make war with the Lamb and the Lamb will overcome them, for He is Lord of lords and King of kings. **And those who are with Him are called and chosen and faithful** (Rv 17:14).*

Those who open their Bibles and listen to Jesus will remain shining lamps of light in their communities. Their good works will generate glory of God (Mt

5:16). Instead of being a flickering flame on the verge of being snuffed out by Jesus, they will draw all men to them. Their drawing power is the nature of who they are in their community. One of the most powerful ways to win others to Jesus is to shine one's brilliant light before the world. It is then that the exhortation of Peter will come true in one's life:

But sanctify Christ as Lord God in your hearts and be ready always to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, yet with meekness and fear (1 Pt 3:15).

Flickering flames need to repent in order to become flaming lights for Jesus.