We are continuing to look at the letters to seven specific churches in the province of Asia in what is now South-west Turkey. In our last study, we looked at the first three: Ephesus, Smyrna, and Pergamum. Today, we look at what Christ had to say to Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. The seven letters were given to the Apostle John by the Lord Jesus and were commendations and corrections to those specific churches at the time of the Revelation. They are also timeless lessons for each of us as individuals as well as to situations in twenty-first-century churches. We should have an ear to heaven and hear what the Spirit of God is saying to us (Revelation 2:29).

To the Church in Thyatira

18“To the angel of the church in Thyatira write: These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze. 19I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first. 20Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. 21I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling. 22So I will cast her on a bed of suffering, and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely, unless they repent of her ways. 23I will strike her children dead. Then all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds. 24Now I say to the rest of you in Thyatira, to you who do not hold to her teaching and have not learned Satan’s so-called deep secrets, ‘I will not impose any other burden on you, 25except to hold on to what you have until I come.’ 26To the one who is victorious and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations— 27that one ‘will rule them with an iron scepter and will dash them to pieces like pottery’—just as I have received authority from my Father. 28I will also give that one the morning star. 29Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches (Revelation 2:18-29).

Thyatira was in the middle of a valley on the road from the capital city of Pergamum, connecting Sardis and Philadelphia to Laodicea. Much commerce traveled through the town, and it had a good trade in woolen and clothing goods. Lydia, the seller of purple cloth, came from the city of Thyatira. Lydia was the first convert by the Apostle Paul in Europe when he came to Philippi (Acts 16:14). At the time of the Revelation of John the Apostle, there were many trade guilds in Thyatira so that if a tradesman was not a part of the trade guilds, he was restricted in doing business. The trade guilds often met in a temple to false gods and began their meetings with sacrifices and drink offerings and often becoming a drunken revelry. Many of the believers of Thyatira took no part in those meetings, but one among them taught that it was okay to compromise their values, viz. the woman named Jezebel.

The Lord’s letter to Thyatira affirmed the good He saw. He is the One who sees differently than a man sees. He who has blazing eyes of fire can pierce the depths of each man’s soul and know
our innermost thoughts and motivations. He also has feet like burnished bronze (v. 18), the kind of metal the Altar of Burnt Offering was made of before Solomon's temple, as well as the mirrors of the women of Israel.

The Lord affirmed the church on four particular qualities He saw, their love, faith, service, and perseverance. He also noticed that they were doing more than they were at first as their love for Him grew. However, then came the reproof. They were tolerating false teaching by a woman named Jezebel, which might not have been the correct name for the woman. By calling the woman Jezebel, the Lord may have been putting before the congregation His view of the woman’s distorted teaching. As the letter was read in the church, each would have known to whom He was speaking.

Jezebel was the daughter of King Ethbaal, the ruler of Sidon, in present-day Lebanon. She worshiped Baal, the storm god, and married the king of Israel, Ahab. Once queen in Israel, Jezebel proceeded to introduce 800 false prophets and served Baal by leading Israel into idol worship. She was infamous because of her manipulation, intimidation, and murder tactics. King Ahab became passive and submissive to Jezebel in his leadership of Israel. When godly people rose against her, she had them killed (1 Kings 18:4). This woman in Thyatira was holding herself out to be a prophet and misleading God's people into a compromise with the idolatry of the city as well as sexual immorality (vs. 20-22).

The verse, “Now I say to the rest of you in Thyatira" (v. 24), tells us that the letter was read to the congregation, and her sin was brought into the light and made manifest before the believers. She would have heard the Lord giving time and grace to repent, but there was also the warning that, if she did not repent, God would allow sickness to come, not only to her but also to those in the congregation involved with her in sin. These are strong words, but people who mess with Christ’s bride and take advantage of her lack of awareness of spiritual things will be judged. False teachers should not mess with God’s bride, the church. They should tie a millstone around their necks and throw themselves into the sea than to corrupt those young in the faith (Luke 17:2). His encouragement to His bride there at Thyatira was for them to hold on to their faith (v. 25).

What are some of the benefits of tolerance in our culture? What are the downsides of tolerance?

To the Church in Sardis

3 “To the angel of the church in Sardis write: These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. 2 Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God. 3 Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; hold it fast, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you. 4 Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. 5 The one who is victorious will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life, but will
The Lord pointed out that He knew the deeds of His church in Sardis, just as He knows our deeds. He spoke about their reputation, i.e., to those looking from outside the church, they looked like a lively church, but Christ knew their real spiritual condition was one of deadness.

What are the qualities of a dead church? How does a church become dead?

The church at Sardis was like many throughout the world today. Many people looking from the outside would see them as a lively congregation. They might have had good worship with the gifts of the Spirit in operation, but the church was just going through the motions—their heart for the things that God cared about was non-existent. Just as the five foolish virgins lacking in oil were locked out of the wedding banquet with the Lord’s saying, "I don't know you" (Matthew 25:12), this church just played the part of believers; they were hypocrites—stage actors on the scene of life. The church was not going through persecution because it had become like the world. The enemy of God does not bother the church that does not oppose him. When a group of people or a church is asleep to the things of God, it would be foolish for the enemy to awaken them. Satan’s strategy is to let them sleep. The Lord looked on, and His view was that their deeds were unfinished (v. 2) and lacking in the fullness that pleased Him.

I have now walked with the Lord for forty-two years and been a part of many different kinds of churches on three continents of the world: in Charismatic churches, Evangelical churches, Pentecostal churches, and Baptist-leaning churches. I love the church, e.g., old and young, gifts of the Spirit, and churches that do not practice the gifts. As I am now older and wiser, I ask myself, “What are the things that show forth the life of God in a church? What does God see or not see when He finds a church with deeds unfinished or falling short?”

Can I offer my opinion? Is He seeing a body of people holding forth the light of the life of God in Christ? Is Christ an emphasis among the believers? Are people growing in their discipleship and being taught the Word of God and having it explained? Are people being added to the church and excited at what they have found? It is a fact of life that only those who are mature give birth to others. Adult sheep make lambs, and when lambs come to delivery, they are taken care of by the mature sheep. If a body of believers is not reproducing, then deeds are unfinished with the Holy Spirit not given His place in the congregation. The Lord said to them to wake up and strengthen what they still had, which was slowly dying (v. 2).

To the Church in Philadelphia

"To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. 4I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. 5I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars—I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you. 6Since you have kept my command
to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth. 11 I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. 12 The one who is victorious I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will they leave it. I will write on them the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on them my new name. 13 Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches (Revelation 3:7-13).

When an earthquake demolished the city of Philadelphia in AD 17, because of after tremors, many of the population went to surrounding areas fearing the same thing would happen again. Those who remained received rebuilding help, as did Sardis, from the emperor Tiberias Caesar. The name of the town was changed to Neocaesarea in honor of the support, but the city remained small. To receive help from others and to walk in humility is to crush the pride that seeks to elevate itself in the human heart.

More than eighty years later, when the Lord called attention to the church at Philadelphia, He had no criticism for the church; instead, He affirmed them by telling them that He saw their deeds and that they had endured patiently, even though they had little strength (v. 8). They had kept God’s Word and not denied His name. For their faithfulness to Him, He promised that each victorious individual would have the name of their God written on them, along with residence in the city of God, the new Jerusalem (v. 12).

The Lord said that He is the One who holds the key of David, perhaps an allusion to a prophecy by Isaiah, “I will place on his shoulder the key to the house of David; what he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open” (Isaiah 22:22). This prophecy speaks of an heir to the line of David, who will be given all sovereign power and authority over the earth. His keys open all doors that seem shut. This power and authority are given to the church to exercise under Christ’s leadership and direction. The city of Philadelphia was a border town of Lydia, Mysia, and Phrygia; beyond were people outside of Roman and Greek culture, i.e., Barbarians. It could be that, because Christ found nothing wrong in the church, it might be the reason that He set before them an open door. What kind of open door was He giving them? It could be an open door to take the Gospel to those cities not yet won for Christ. First, those opposing them from the local synagogue, i.e., expressing the will of Satan to destroy the body of believers, would be defeated (v. 9).

How does Christ destroy opposition? For Saul, the man who became the Apostle Paul, his heart was changed from opposing the believers to one of working with them. I believe that his conversion came as a result of believers suffering under the Jewish persecution and crying out to the Lord in prayer. Time and again in the Scriptures, when believers cry out to the Lord in prayer, He moves in power to deliver and save His people. Think of Israel in Egypt; God came to help them when they cried out to the Lord (Exodus 2:23, Judges 3:9, 4:3, 6:7). Jesus said to the church that He had placed before them an open door. I take that to mean that from there, Christ would raise up godly men and women who would take the Gospel east and northwards. Even though they had little strength, they had the kind of endurance and love of the Word of God that God could use. The Lord doesn’t need big churches to carry on His work; the reduction of the
army of Gideon to 300 was a good lesson (Judges 7:2-8). When God gets the glory, even a small body of believers will have open doors given to them. Philadelphia was only a small church. He was looking for faithfulness to endure the tests He allowed them to experience (v. 10). Because they endured the attacks from the synagogue, He said He would keep them:

Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth (Revelation 3:10).

There's a lot of controversy about this verse, for some say it speaks of the time of tribulation yet ahead for believers in the twenty-first century, but why would Jesus promise something to those in the first century that He had no intention of fulfilling? Some suggest that God will keep His faithful believers from enduring a time of tribulation by rapturing them out before it started, but there is a difference between the tribulation and the time of God’s wrath. Yes, God will keep us from the time of His wrath by the catching up (rapture) of believers (1 Thessalonians 4:17), before the wrath of God comes. Still, like many of the believers of John the Apostle's day, we will have to experience persecution and tribulation [thlipsis-heavy crushing pressure].

There are several possible interpretations of the word keep. How will the Lord keep us? It could be that, just as Israel was protected amid the ten plagues of Egypt, we may have to endure the difficulties of that time, but God will keep and preserve His people, even though some will be martyred. Of course, the Lord might also be speaking of the catching up of the saints. Paul, the Apostle, wrote that Christ would come from heaven to rescue believers not from the tribulation and trouble of that time, but “from the wrath to come” (1 Thessalonians 1:10).

What doors seem shut to you that you would like God to open?

To the Church in Laodicea

14“'To the angel of the church in Laodicea write: These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God’s creation. 15'I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! 16So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth. 17You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. 18I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see. 19Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent. 20Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me. 21To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I was victorious and sat down with my Father on his throne. 22Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (Revelation 3:14-22).

We come now to the seventh church that Jesus told John to write a message. Laodicea was a church possibly founded by Epaphras (Colossians 4:12-13) situated forty-five miles southeast of
Philadelphia and a hundred miles east of Ephesus. The great Roman road heading eastward from Ephesus ran right through this city, making it a center of trade, banking, and communication. A six-mile-long aqueduct supplied the city with water, but it came to them lukewarm. The Lord had nothing encouraging to say to them, only strong words of correction, basically saying that their behavior made Him nauseous and wanting to vomit.

What was so offensive to the Lord? More than likely, it was their self-sufficiency and indifference toward Christ’s message of the Gospel. Perhaps, it stemmed from the same earthquake that struck the area in AD 17, for this city refused help from Caesar, wanting instead to rebuild the city with their own resources. Today, many have this same attitude of wanting no support from those who offer, choosing instead to stand on their own two feet and not rely on others. This attitude is modern paganism, i.e., that of self-expression and self-reliance. The Laodicea attitude was one of “I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing” (v. 17). However, the Lord saw them as wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked (v. 17). What an indictment!

These kinds of people do not feel their need for God; they think they can do quite well on their own. There are churches today that propagate this false religion of being all that you can be by utilizing the power of self. Instead of reliance on God and His resources, ungodly men are planning on rebuilding humanity to escape their physical weakness. This evil plan is utilizing new technology to create a new human species with the human brain connected to a central hub of knowledge via a brain interface. This new form of technology is commonly called Transhumanism and abbreviated as H+ and will be used to enhance human intellect and physiology and significantly to overcome human weakness. Satan made this promise in the beginning, “You shall be as gods” (Genesis 3:5), all apart from walking in dependence on God.

Even though the Lord saw them in this condition, in verse twenty, we see the loving-kindness of God as the Savior comes to us and knocks on the door of our hearts, refusing to give up on those far from Him. When people are blind, they cannot even see the door whereon Christ is knocking. We need the servants of God to lead us by the hand to the doorway. Can you today think of this writer as one leading you in your blindness to the door so that you can hear the One whose heart longs for you? There is no one like Christ, for who has ever heard of a God who goes in search of the ones He loves? All religions are humanmade philosophies of man doing his best to climb to God by his own energy. Christianity is the Creator God coming down to us in the person of His Son to make the way for us. He is the Great Shepherd of the sheep searching for the lost of His flock (Matthew 18:12-14).

Verse twenty tells us that He will not force His way upon us but graciously waits for us to open the door at His knocking and sit down to a meal with us. It is a picture from the book of Song of Solomon, where the Lover stands at the door of the house of His beloved and asks to come in (Song of Solomon 5:2). The greatest picture of intimacy was to sit and eat together face to face. “If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me” (v. 20). In New Testament times, there were three meals a day, breakfast was akratisma, little more than bread. There was ariston, a picnic snack by the sidewalk or wherever one happened to be at the time, and lastly, there was deipnon, the evening meal, the main meal of
the day where people lingered over it at the end of their days work.¹ Christ used this word to call the Laodiceans and us to Himself. How gracious is our God to want to linger with us and enjoy our intimate fellowship, just like He did with Abraham (Genesis 18:1-8) and Moses (Exodus 24:9-11).

The Lord's counsel to the Laodiceans was for them to buy eye salve from Him and have their eyes opened from their blindness (v. 18). We also in the twenty-first century should ask of God for His eye salve to open our eyes to the depths of deception slowly and incrementally descending on us. If you find yourself today tempted to trade eternity with God for riches, fame, self-sufficiency, and technological enhancement—don’t do it! Turn your heart to the living God and ask for Christ to deliver you of this world’s traps. Ask the Lord to come into your life and rule and reign over you.

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