

INTRODUCTION TO THE MESSAGES TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES

Seven churches are seven actual cities during John's time in the Roman province of Asia. The seven messages were not intended to be sent separately to the churches. They were composed as one letter and, as such, were sent with the rest of the book of Revelation to all seven churches. The message was intended for everyone at that time and also the message is for everyone in different eras.

I. The Format of the Messages

Each message has a common six-fold format with only minor differences.

1. Each of the messages opens with the address: **"To the messenger of the church in... write."** Every church is known by its name. Christ addresses the churches individually.
2. Every message begins with the phrase, **"Thus says."** This parallels "Thus says the Lord" in the OT prophetic books. This phrase is followed by a short **description of Jesus Christ**, the sender of the message. The characteristics used were relevant and particularly suited to the situation of each of the local churches and specific problems each church faced.
3. The description is followed by **Jesus' appraisal (evaluation) of the church**. The section begins with the formula **"I know."** Five of the seven churches Jesus addresses with the words "I know your works." The messages to Smyrna and Pergamum have "I know your afflictions" and "I know where you dwell." Here Christ analyzes the spiritual condition of each church.

He knows every church and every member of the church because he walks among these churches. He is ever present among these churches. Christ does not have too much praise for Sardis and Laodicea churches. Following after this are **words of criticism** concerned with the deficiency of the church. Smyrna and Philadelphia are exempt from this.
4. The appraisal is followed by **words of counsel**. After analyzing the spiritual condition of each church, Christ advises it to change its condition. The church is either called to repent or change its ways, or it encourages to remain firm and faithful.
5. After each church is urged to **"hear what the Spirit says to the churches."** **"The one who has an ear let him hear "** echoes the words of Jesus from the Gospels (Matt. 11:15; 13:9; Mark 4:9; Luke 8:8). The phrase suggests a wider audience than a single church.

As you can see the word church is in plural "churches", meaning that this particular message was addressed to other churches as well. What Christ says to those seven local churches in the first century is what the Holy Spirit says to the universal church and individual Christians everywhere and in every time.

6. Each message concludes with a word of **promise to the overcomer**. The fifth and sixth element are given in reverse order in the last four messages. The fulfillment of these promises is described in the last two chapters of the book (Rev. 21-22).

II. The Interpretation of the Seven Messages

Primary Interpretation: The seven messages were addressed to the actual churches in the Roman province of Asia. Christ visits every church to prepare it to meet the coming crisis. The seven churches of Revelation were selected to represent a larger number of churches in the Province of Asia and beyond. Seven symbolically stands for completeness. These messages are for everyone and they speak to all Christians in every generation and their contents hold implications for everyone who reads them.

Secondary Interpretation: There is some evidence in Revelation to suggest that the seven churches also represent seven successive periods in Christian history, running from John's day to the Second Coming.

Evidence # 1: The order of the churches fits the outline of the seven main periods in Christian history:

1. Ephesus - the apostolic church (first century AD).
2. Smyrna - the period of trouble and persecution of the church (2nd and 3rd century AD).
3. Pergamum - the period of compromise and the union of the church and state (4th and 5th Century AD).
4. Thyatira - the medieval period during the dark ages (6th to 14th century AD).
5. Sardis - the period of Reformation (15th to 18th century AD).
6. Philadelphia - the period of Protestant orthodoxy, when doctrine became more important than practice. The church of the missionary movements (late 18th and 19th century AD).
7. Laodicea - the period of infidelity and worldwide mission. The end-time church (middle of 19th century to Second Coming).

Evidence # 2: There is a verbal parallel between the message to the church in Laodicea (Rev. 3:17-18) and the final warning to God's people during the battle of Armageddon (Rev. 16:15): "Blessed is the one who watches and keeps his garments so that he does not walk naked and they see his shame." This suggests that Laodicea, the last in the sequential order of the seven churches, is related to the church of the last period of this world's history.

These messages are God's messages to His people at different points in history, addressing their particular circumstances and needs. Seven messages have significance for both the local and universal church as well as for individual Christians everywhere and in every time in the history of the church. They are intended for everyone "who has an ear" who is ready and willing to listen.

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1. Ephesus (Rev. 2:1-7)

Ephesus was located about sixty miles from Patmos. At that time Ephesus was the largest city and principal city of the Roman province of Asia. It was an important political, commercial, and pagan religious center. There were two temples in the city devoted to the emperor's worship. The city was the home of the goddess of fertility Artemis or Diana (Acts 19:27). The temple served as an asylum. If any man committed a crime, if he could reach the precincts of the temple before he was arrested, he was safe.

Ephesus was famous for superstitious and magical arts (Acts 19:19). In Ephesus lived the famous philosopher, Heraclitus, known as "weeping philosopher." Ephesus was the most influential church at that time. It was founded by Aquila and Priscilla (Acts 18:18-19) and the young preacher Apollos (Acts 18:23-26).

V1. "The seven stars and the seven lampstands" are explained in Rev. 1:20. The seven stars are the angels (messengers) of the seven churches. The seven lampstands are the seven churches.

V2. "I know your works, and (namely), your labor and endurance." In Greek, the word *kai* ("and") functions here epexegetically and is usually translated as "namely" or "that is." It means that what follows will explain what has gone before in the text. So both "labor" and "endurance" are parallel to the previously mentioned "works."

"Labor." The Greek *kopos* means "hard work," or "labor to the point of weariness and exhaustion" (Rom. 16:12; 1 Cor. 15:10; Gal. 4:11; 1 Thess. 2:9).

"Evil ones...who call themselves apostles." This is a reference to the heretical groups called the Nicolaitans (Rev. 2:6). The church is doctrinally sound; it does not tolerate evil men and tests those who call themselves apostles – and they are not.

V3. The members of Ephesus are praised because they have **"not grown weary."** They bear up under all kinds of pressure for the sake of Christ's name.

V4. Christ gently rebukes the members of the church: **"But I have against you that you have left your first love."** This means that their "first love" for Christ and the gospel had been disappearing. The enthusiasm was gone and the members were starting to lose touch with God and love for one another. Religion in the church of Ephesus became legalistic and loveless.

V5. Christ makes a strong appeal with three great imperatives: Keep remembering...repent...do the first works. First, they had to **"keep remembering."** Remembering means more than simply recalling the past; it means bearing in mind and keeping afresh the past and applying it in the present.

"Repent." The entire church is called upon to repent, implying that the entire church has declined in love. Repentance denotes a radical change of the whole direction of life. It is a decisive break with the present situation. Remembering and repentance moves one to do the first works.

The “**first works**” are the outcome of the “first love.” A return to the first-love Christian experience always results in the first-works experience. The proof of repentance is a return to devotion characterized by ardent love for God and fellow believers.

“I will remove your lampstand from its place.” A lampstand is a symbol of the church as God's witnesses. This saying is parallel to the one in Mark 4:21-25 and Luke 8:16-18 where those who fail to shine their light will have their light-bearing role taken away from them.

V6. “Nicolaitans.” This is a group that followed the teachings of Nicolas of Antioch, one of the seven deacons of the early church (Acts 6:5), who ended up in heresy. As the citizens of the Roman province everyone was expected to participate in the religious festivals in the pagan temples and in the emperor's worship.

These activities included eating the food offered to idols and immoral activities. So the Christians were persecuted because they did not participate in these festivals. So, this group was teaching the theory of compromise. Nicolaitans taught that the Christians were freed from the Law and that they can do exactly what they like. They perverted the teachings of Paul and turned Christian liberty into Christian license.

V7. “Overcomers.” From Greek word “*nikao*” which means to be the victor, to overcome. It is used in Greek as a present participle, which implies continuous victory “keeps on overcoming.”

The overcomer in the church of Ephesus is given the promise that he or she will “**eat from the tree of life which is in the paradise of God**” (Rev. 22:14). This reference reminds one of the Garden of Eden with “the tree of life in the midst of the garden” (Gen. 2:9) in which man and woman were placed at creation. To eat from the tree of life was to live forever (Gen. 3:22).

2. Smyrna (Rev. 2:8-11)

Smyrna is modern Izmir. It was fifty-five miles north of Ephesus. Besides being another political, commercial, and religious center, Smyrna was noted for the science and medicine that flourished there. The city was proud of its famous stadium, library, and the largest public theatre in the province. It was a wealthy and very beautiful city. Smyrna had good relationship with Rome and claimed to be the first in the ancient world to build a temple in honor of “*dea Roma*” (goddess Roma).

V8. Jesus introduces himself as “**the first and last, the One who was dead and came to life.**” This introduction of Jesus is well suited to a suffering church passing through dire, constant persecution. Jesus begins his message to the Smyrneans by reminding them that He experienced the worst that life could bring; he died, but he was raised to life again.

V9. Jesus knows the “**affliction and poverty**” of the church in Smyrna. The members of the church are in dire peril. In Greek, **affliction** means a serious tribulation, under the pressure of a burden that crushes. This pressure comes from outside, namely, from the demands for emperor worship and the malignant slander of the Jews. Once a year every Roman citizen was obligated to burn incense on

the altar to the godhead of Caesar, and then was issued a certificate. The refuse to do that brought threats of death.

The members are also in extreme **poverty**. As the Greek text indicates, they possess nothing. Their poverty is undoubtedly the result of the persecution the church is going through. The Christians in Smyrna lived in one of the wealthiest cities, and yet they are extremely poor. Although poor in material things, however, they are rich in grace and faith.

“The slander of those who say that they are Jews.” Jewish population in Smyrna was very hostile toward Christians. In their bitterness, the Jews joined the pagans in hating and persecuting Christians. They slandered the Christians before the local government, making malicious accusations, thus stirring up the pagans against the Christians and inciting the authorities to persecute them. Christians were charged with being cannibals and disloyal to the government.

V10. “Stop fearing the things, which you are about to suffer!” This sounds rather like a gentle rebuke. Jesus is telling them: “Stop being afraid! I am in control.

Jesus counsels Smyrna again: **“Remain faithful to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.”** This church has already been faithful, and Jesus urges continued faithfulness. The reward for faithfulness is “the crown of life,” namely, the crown that consists of life.

“Ten days.” Some say that this is a prophetic period, so we have to interpret one day as one year according to Numbers 14:34 and Ezekiel 4:6. So we have ten years, from 303 to 313 AD. This is the time of persecution during the reign of Emperor Diocletian and Galerius.

Another explanation is that the number ten represents the smallest amount of something. “Ten days” was a normal expression for a relatively short period of time (Gen 24:55; 1Sam. 25:38; Dan. 1:12-15). The ten days represent a time of testing the faithfulness and the endurance of the community in Smyrna, like the ten days of testing for Daniel and his friends in Babylon.

“A crown of life.” The Greek word is *“stephanos”* which is the crown of victory, a garland of leaves and flowers. The other word in Greek for crown is *“diadema”* which means the royal crown. The crown of victory was given to the athletes who were victorious in the Olympic games. In Rev. 12:1 the victorious church wears *“stephanos”* the crowns of victory.

V11. “Second death.” In Revelation, the second death means the total extinction of the wicked. It stands in opposition to eternal life. The lake of fire is the second death (Rev. 20:6; Rev. 20:14; Rev. 21:8).

3. Pergamos (Rev. 2:12-17)

In John's days Pergamos was the capital city of the Roman province of Asia. It was located 40 miles northeast of Smyrna. In addition to its political importance the city was celebrated as the center of intellectual life in the whole Hellenistic world. It had the famous library of nearly 200,000 volumes, which was second only to the library in Alexandria. The city was also a great and important religious center. Pergamos was the first city to support the imperial cult and have a temple dedicated to the worship of Roman Emperor.

V12. Jesus identifies himself to the church in Pergamos as “**the One who has the sharp two-edged sword**” (Rev. 1:16). The word of God is the double-edged sword (Hebr. 4:12; Eph. 6:17).

V13. "The throne of Satan." The phrase possibly refers to the city as a stronghold of both pagan religious life and emperor worship. Pergamos was worshiping Zeus and Asclepius, represented by a serpent (an emblem retained by the modern medical profession). They regarded the serpent as an incarnation of the god himself and associated him with the term "Savior." Asclepius was the serpent-god of healing. People from all over the places came to Pergamos to be healed by the god Asclepius.

"Antipas, my faithful witness." This is a common Greek name. Refers most likely to a Christian in Pergamos who underwent martyrdom for his faith in Christ. Greek word "*martus*" means, "witness." He witnessed with his death.

V14. "Those who hold to the teachings of Balaam." This group is related to the group of Nicolaitans from Rev. 2:6. According to Numbers 31:16, Balaam was the instigator of idolatry and fornication among the Israelites (Numbers 25:1-6). Balaam in the NT is regarded as the predecessor of the corrupt teachers in the church. This group of people was encouraging their fellow Christians into religious and moral compromise.

V16. Jesus' counsel to the entire church in Pergamos is similar to that given to the Ephesians (2:5): “**Repent, therefore.**” If those advocating compromise do not repent, dreadful consequences will result.

Christ says that he will come to them “**quickly and will make war against them with the sword of his mouth.**” According to the author of Hebrews, the word of God is sharper than any two-edged sword and judges “the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb. 4:12).

V17. "The hidden manna." According to the Jewish tradition, the Ark of the Covenant, in which a pot of manna was placed for a memorial (Ex. 16:32-34), was taken by Jeremiah at the destruction of Solomon's temple and hidden in a cleft in Mt. Sinai. It would stay there until the Messiah comes. The manna will be then recovered as the food for the Messianic kingdom. In the context of the situation of the church in Pergamos, the hidden manna symbolizes participation in the eating of the heavenly manna, in contrast to eating the food offered to pagan gods.

"A white stone." There are a few suggestions as to what the white stone would mean. In this context the white stone is the Greek word "*tessera*." This was the reward for the victor at the games. It had his name inscribed on it, and it entitled him to special honor and privileges, including admission to public festivals. The white stone gives the overcomer in the church in Pergamos admission to participate in the heavenly banquet (Rev. 19:7-9), the Supper of the Lamb.

Another suggestion is that the white stone is the ballot for pardoning a person who was accused of crime. Any person among the Greeks who was accused of crime against the state and was tried by the citizens, they balloted for his pardoning with a white stone, and for his condemnation with a black stone. This is a symbol of the justification of Christ and his final pardoning of our sins.

"A new name" in the Bible stands for a new relationship with God (Gen. 17:5; Isa. 62:2; Rev. 14:1). In the context of persecution and false accusations of the Pergamos church, the new name signifies a restoration of dignity of a "good name."

4. Thyatira (Rev. 2:18-29)

Thyatira was located forty miles southeast of Pergamos. It was the smallest and least important of the seven cities. Mostly poor people lived in this city. The city was known by its manufacturing of the royal purple and woolen goods. The city was not a political or religious center.

Thyatira was known for many trade unions. A merchant and a trader could not have a job and make any money unless he was a member of his trade union. The members were expected to attend the unions festivals in the pagan temples and share a common meal, which would consist of the food offered to the guild's god. If you didn't do that you could not be a member anymore. This was the people's lifeline.

V18. Jesus identifies himself as “**the One whose eyes are as a flame of fire, and his feet like burnished bronze.**” His description reminds us of the divine messenger in Daniel 10:6. The flaming eyes symbolize Christ’s penetrating ability to see the innermost part of human beings. The feet like burnished bronze signify his uncompromising stability.

V19. “**Your works, namely, your love and faith, that is your service and perseverance.**” The Greek conjunction *kai* (“and”) functions here epexegetically, meaning “namely” or “which is.” **Service** is the outcome of love (1 Thess. 1:3; Heb. 6:10), and **perseverance** the product of faith (Col. 1:23; 2 Thess. 1:4; Heb. 6:12). Thyatira is an improving church, for her **last works are greater than the former.**

V20. “**The women Jezebel.**” This may be a symbolic name of a prominent woman in the church who claimed to have the prophetic gift and exercised great authority. She is named Jezebel after the wife of the OT king, Ahab, who corrupted the faith in Israel by introducing the idolatrous worship to Baal and Astarte (1Kings 16:31-33). This woman encouraged people in Thyatira to compromise and to participate in the festivals of their guild. This was all done in the interest of business and commercial prosperity.

Jezebel in Thyatira calls “**herself a prophetess.**” She is portrayed as one who “**teaches and deceives my servants to commit fornication and eat things sacrificed to idols.**” The church in Thyatira allowed or tolerated its presence. The prophetess openly taught and promoted compromise with the world’s standards, and she did it with great success, for most of the congregation followed her seductive teaching. Only a minority remained faithful.

V21. Christ was not pleased with the compromising attitude of this woman and her followers. So he took some decisive steps. First, he “**gave her time that she might repent.**”

V22. Because she persistently refused to do so, God threatened to bring great affliction upon her and “**those who commit adultery with her**” (that is to say, her followers). In the Bible, unfaithfulness to God is often expressed in terms of adultery (Exod. 34:15–16; Deut. 31:16; Hos. 9:1; Matt. 12:39; Mark 8:38).

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V23. Therefore, as the final step, Jesus threatened to “**kill her children with the plague.**” This is a very serious threat, although the saying must be taken symbolically. This is evidently an allusion to King Ahab's seventy children who were slaughtered by Jehu (2 Kings 10:6-8).

“**And all the churches will know that I am the One who searches kidneys and hearts, and I will give to each of you according to your works.**” To search kidneys (the seat of emotions) and hearts (the seat of intelligence or the will) belongs only to God (Jer. 17:10; 1 Kings 8:39; Prov. 24:12). The Christians in Thyatira are under the scrutinizing eye of the only One who is able to penetrate the inmost thoughts, feelings, and governing motives. Nothing is hidden from Christ's penetrating gaze (Heb. 4:13).

V24. Jesus called those who remained faithful in Thyatira “**the remaining ones.**” This phrase is used in the book of Revelation in a special sense with reference to God's faithful end-time people (12:17).

These remaining ones are those “**who have not known the deep things of Satan.**” The verb “to know” in the Bible means more than intellectual knowledge; it denotes the knowledge that comes through experience, from an intimate relationship (Gen. 4:1; 19:5, 8). This refers to the misleading teachings of Nicolaitans and those who hold to the teachings of Balaam.

V25. Jesus promises that he will “**not lay on you another burden, except, hold what you have until I come.**” Another burden refers clearly to the instruction given by the apostles at the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:28–29).

V26. The overcomers in Thyatira, those who remain loyal to Christ, are given a twofold promise. First, they will be given “**authority over the nations.**” This imagery is taken from Psalm 2:8–9. Jesus has been given the authority to rule over the nations (Rev. 12:5; 19:15; cf. Matt. 28:18; Rev. 12:10). To the church in Thyatira, he gave the promise that the day is coming when the faithful and loyal remnant will share in the authority of Jesus; they will rule with him (cf. Rev. 1:6; 3:21).

V28. A second promise is given: “**And I will give him the morning star.**” In Revelation 22:16, Jesus calls himself “the Bright Morning Star.” All of this reminds us of Balaam's prophecy: “A star shall come forth from Jacob, and a scepter shall rise from Israel” (Num. 24:17).

The promise of the morning star is the promise of Christ himself. Not only will the conquerors be with Christ and rule with him, but they will have a special and close relationship with him; they will never lose him and will be with him forever.

REVELATION 3

5. Sardis (Rev. 3:1-6)

Sardis lays thirty miles southeast of Thyatira. It was founded in 12th century B.C. Some six centuries before Revelation was written, Sardis was one of the greatest cities in the ancient world. It had been the capital of the kingdom of Lydia, ruled by the wealthy Croesus. He was one of the richest men in Ancient world. The city was built on a plateau of crumbling rock rising 1500 feet above the plain. The walls of the elevation on which the city was built were almost perpendicular, and the city was inaccessible except by one narrow passage, which was steep and easily fortified and guarded.

Sardis was considered an impregnable fortress. In A.D. 1402 Tamerlane destroyed the city, and it was never rebuilt. The patron deity of the city was the goddess Cybele. This goddess (equating Greek Artemis) was believed to possess the special power of restoring the dead to life.

V1. To the church in Sardis, Jesus introduces himself as “**the One who has the seven Spirits of God and seven stars.**” This description of the glorified Christ is appropriate to the particular situation of the church. The Sardians are a spiritually dying church. Jesus comes to them with the fullness of his awakening Spirit; only the Holy Spirit can revitalize a dying church (Rom. 8:11).

The “**sevens stars**” symbolize “the angels” of the churches, namely, the leaders (Rev. 1:20). Christ has the destiny of the church in his hands; he knows everything about them, and they need to heed his warning.

From its outset, the tone of this message is alarming. The church in Sardis receives no commendation from Christ, but only a rebuke: “**I know your works, that you have a name that you live, and you are dead.**” The Christians in Sardis are not blamed for any specific sin or heresy, but for being lifeless. The church has a great reputation (“name”) for being alive and active, but it is spiritually dead.

Those who claim to be spiritually alive while in reality are dead are those who “hold to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power” (2 Tim. 3:5). Christians living in Sardis had absorbed the character of the city’s conditions. No life or spirit was there.

V2. "Keep watching." This advice to the church is very appropriate in light of the historical background of the city. Sardis was built on a hill so steep that it was considered a natural citadel. The location of the city made the citizens overconfident. As a result, the city walls were carelessly guarded.

The city was captured twice by surprise, first by Cyrus the Persian (549 B.C.), and later by Antiochus (218 B.C.). On both occasions, enemy troops climbed the cliff by night and found that the Sardians had set no guard. The city was captured and destroyed because of the overconfidence of the people and the failure of the guards to watch. It seems that this carelessness has crept into the church. That is why we have the warning, "keep watching." Christ invites the church to learn the lessons from history. We need to wake up from our spiritual sleep (Eph. 5:14).

Christ says that he has “**not found their works fulfilled before my God**” – their works have not measured up to God’s standard. Most believers have evidently come to a compromise with their pagan environment. Their loyalty to Christ is in the past, and they are in a condition of spiritual lethargy and death, thus being Christians in name only.

V3. “Keep remembering.” To remember only, however, is not enough, for remembering means more than simply recalling the past. Remembering means keeping afresh the past and applying it to the present.

Jesus next calls the Sardians to a decisive break from their present condition with an exhortation: “**Repent!**” Like the prodigal son in Jesus’ parable (Luke 15:17–19), the Christians in Sardis must bring to mind their previous status and make a decisive turnaround from their present condition.

“If therefore you do not watch, I will come as a thief; you will in no way know at what hour I will come upon you.” If the church does not watch, Jesus will visit them unexpectedly with judgment. Just as a thief comes when least expected, so Jesus will come to them. Jesus said that his coming would be like a thief in the night (Matt. 24:42–44; Mark 13:35–37).

V4. “Defiled their garments.” This phrase refers to those people who did not compromise with the pagan environment. To defile means to make it dirty, to stain it with sin.

They are, therefore, given a promise that “**they will walk with me in white, because they are worthy.**” The fulfillment of this promise is described in Rev. 7:9–17 and 19:7–8 where John sees God’s saved people before the throne in the kingdom dressed in white garments of righteousness.

V5. The overcomers in the church of Sardis are given a threefold promise. First, they “**will be clothed in white garments.**” who have “washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (Rev. 7:14) will be found worthy to be clothed in those white garments (Rev. 6:11).

Second, Christ “**will not erase his name from the book of life.**” In the Bible, the blotting out of somebody’s name from the book of life means death (Exod. 32:32–33; Ps. 69:28). In the book of Revelation, only those whose names remain in the book of life shall live in God’s kingdom on the new earth (21:27); those who are blotted out will be cast into the lake of fire (20:15).

The final promise to the overcomer is that Christ “**will confess his name before the Father and before his angels.**” Those who keep their garments undefiled and acknowledge Jesus in this present life will be acknowledged by Jesus when he comes again. This also sounds as intercession language, where Jesus is our High Priest (advocate) who intercedes for us during the judgment.

6. Philadelphia (Rev. 3:7-13)

Philadelphia was the youngest of seven cities. It was located twenty-five miles southeast of Sardis. It was a strong fortress city. It was founded by king Attalus II (159-138 B.C.), whose love for his brother gave him the name Philedelphus. The city was named after him and it became Philadelphia, which from Greek means "brotherly love." It was a prosperous city on the imperial post road.

Today the city exists by the name "Alasehir" on the same site as the old city. The city was located on a broad hill, between two valleys. One of the valleys offered a natural gateway - an "open door"

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– through the mountains eastward, contributing considerably to the commercial success and cultural influence of the city.

V7. To the church in Philadelphia Jesus introduces himself with three great titles: “**the holy One, the true One, the One who has the key of David, who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens.**” In the Old Testament, the phrase “**the holy One**” refers to God, denoting his divine essence. (Isa. 6:3; 57:15). The phrase is also a designation of Jesus in the New Testament (Mark 1:24; John 6:69; 1 John 2:20). Here, the exalted Christ shares the essence of the divine nature.

He is also “**the true One**” (3:14; 19:11). Jesus is real; he is the true God, faithful to all the promises given to his faithful people.

Finally, Jesus introduces himself as “**the One who has the key of David,**” which symbolizes his full authority. What he opens, nobody shuts. Isaiah 22:22 presents a picture of Eliakim, the faithful chief steward of the king who was given authority over the royal palace and the royal storehouse. In the New Testament, Christ is given all authority (Matt. 28:18). In the message to the church in Philadelphia, Jesus is the one who has received full authority and has access to the heavenly storehouse.

V8. "An open door." This is a metaphor for the opportunity of preaching the gospel. In Col. 4:3 Paul says: "God may open up to us a door for the world, so that we may speak forth the mystery of Christ." In Acts 14:27 Paul spoke how God "opened the door of faith to the Gentiles." When God opens the door, no one is able to stop Christians in their service for God.

The city's strategic location made it the gateway to the East. Being on the imperial post road, Philadelphia was indeed given an open door for spreading Greek ideas throughout the region. Just as the way became open for the Philadelphians to spread Greek ideas, the church in that city was given a “great missionary opportunity” to carry the gospel message to the world.

This church is faithful to God's word and Christ. “**It kept my word, and did not deny my name.**” It has not fallen into compromise or apostasy. Although faithful with an open door of opportunities set before them by Christ, however, this church has a significant weakness: it is not driven by a dynamic force for God, for it has but “**little strength.**”

V9. When God opens the door of opportunity for the preaching of the gospel, the enemy's forces are always there to shut that door. Jesus accused the scribes and Pharisees of shutting people out of the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 23:13; Luke 11:52). This is evidently what happened in Philadelphia. This church confronted the same problem as did the church in Smyrna with those “**who say that they are Jews**” but in reality, are of the “**synagogue of Satan**” (3:9; 2:9).

But Jesus gives this church the assurance that he loves them despite their weakness, and that he is already dealing with their opponents. The day is coming when their enemies, who are doing Satan's work, will be humiliated and will admit that God loves the Philadelphian church.

V10. Because the Philadelphians “**have kept the word of my endurance,**” Jesus gives them the assurance that he will be with them and protect them in the eschatological hour of trial: “**I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is about to come on those who dwell on the earth.**” The

phrase “**those who dwell on the earth**” consistently refers to the wicked (6:10; 8:13; 11:10; 13:8, 14; 14:6; 17:8). This “**hour of trial**” clearly refers to God’s judgment against the enemies of God and his people, which will be poured out prior to the Second Coming as portrayed in Revelation 16.

The question is whether Christ promises to keep his faithful people from or during that time of trial. In his intercessory prayer Jesus prayed: “I do not ask Thee to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one” (John 17:15). This text suggests that God’s faithful people will not be removed from the earth when the judgments of God are poured out; Christ promises to be with them and protect them during that hour of trial (Dan. 12:1).

Some people suggest that the Greek preposition “*ek*” (“from”) should be translated as “out of.” In Revelation 3:10 “*ek*” is used as a preposition of time, qualifying the word “hour”, and in this case “out of” is not a reasonable translation. When “*ek*” is used in a temporal sense, the prepositional phrase it is used in indicates a point or period in time from which the verb or adjective it qualifies applies, or a period of time during which the verb or adjective it qualifies applies to.

The verb in Rev. 3:10 is “I will keep”, “*ek*” is translated “from”, and the time period is “the hour of trial”. The understanding then is that God will keep us, from the beginning of the hour of trial onwards. This verse does not say that God will remove the church before the tribulation comes on the world, but rather that he will keep us through it.

V11. The church is counseled to “**hold what you have, that no one take your crown.**” We find in the Bible people who lost their place to someone else because they were found unworthy of the task God had given them. Esau lost his place to Jacob (Gen. 25:34; 27:36); Reuben lost his place to Judah (Gen. 49:4, 8); Saul lost his place to David (1 Sam. 16:1, 13); Judas lost his place to Matthias (Acts 1:25). It is a real tragedy when God opens a door and gives a person a task, then finds that he or she renounces the call. He then removes that person and gives the task to somebody else.

V12. The promise to the overcomer is “**to be a pillar in the temple of my God.**” A pillar is fixed in the temple as support. The metaphor of being a pillar in the temple conveys the idea of stability and permanence. The faithful overcomers are promised eternal security in Christ, for they “**will never go out of it.**”

These overcomers receive another promise: “**I will write upon him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem which descends out of heaven from my God, and my new name.**” The fulfillment of this promise is described in Revelation 21:2 and 10. Those who have the name of God belong to God and are under his protection (Rev. 22:4).

In addition, the name of the New Jerusalem will be written upon the faithful. According to Ezekiel, the name of the new city would be: “The LORD is there” (48:35). This is a promise to people that they will experience the everlasting presence of God (Rev. 21:3).

7. Laodicea (Rev. 3:14-22)

Laodicea was forty-five miles southeast of Philadelphia. The city was one of the greatest commercial and financial centers of the Ancient world. Laodicea was very wealthy and proud of it. In 60 AD after a great earthquake devastated the city, the citizens of the city were so rich that they

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refused the imperial help and rebuilt the city using their own resources. Most of the city's wealth came from the clothing manufacturing industry and banking transactions. Laodicea was famous for its medical school, which had a reputation throughout the ancient world for its treatment for eye diseases by the means of the eye salve made from "Phrygian powder" mixed with oil.

V14. Jesus identifies himself with three titles. First, Jesus is the “**Amen.**” The word “amen” comes to us from Hebrew via Greek and basically means “in truth.” It was used “to affirm and to guarantee a statement as absolutely true and trustworthy. Next, Jesus is depicted as “**the faithful and true witness.**” He is the witness that we can fully rely on.

Finally, Jesus is “**the beginning of God’s creation.**” The Greek word "*arche*" can have a variety of meanings: beginning (in point of time), origin, source, or ruler. The same word is used in Colossians 1:18. The translation of the word is either as "source" and "origin", or "ruler" would agree with the context.

V15. Jesus’ appraisal of the church in Laodicea begins with a very serious charge: “**I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I would that you were cold or hot.**”

V16. This is followed by a very serious threat: “**Thus, because you are lukewarm and neither cold or hot, I am about to vomit you out of my mouth.**”

This imagery was derived from the water supply of the city. Laodicea was supplied with water from the hot springs of Hierapolis, which was approximately six miles from Laodicea. By the time the water reached Laodicea, it had become lukewarm and, although good enough to bathe in, was distasteful to drink.

Christ does not like this condition of the church. The lukewarm condition denotes a compromise. The Laodiceans are divided between Christ and the world. This condition indicates that they have fallen into the status of indifference and self-sufficiency. Christ detests a divided loyalty and service: “No man can serve two masters” (Matt. 6:24; Luke 16:13).

V17. The city of Laodicea prided itself on its material wealth, clothing trade, and popular eye salve. This spirit evidently crept into the church; the Laodicean Christians were putting their trust in their own wealth. Yet they may have regarded it as a blessing from God, thus being deceived as to their true spiritual condition.

The Laodiceans think that they are rich, while in reality are poor in their spiritual pride. “**You do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked.**”

"Wretched" means oppressed with a burden. The wealth they carried was a spiritual burden for them. Jesus said that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God (Matt. 19:23-24). **"Miserable"** means pitiful. **"Poor"**, the Greek word means "extremely poor", "poor like a bagger." Despite their wealth they are spiritually poor.

"Blind" means to lack vision or light. In contrast to the eye salve that was made there in Laodicea to heal people, they were spiritually blind. They are blind to their own condition and think themselves the opposite of what they really are.

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"**Naked.**" Nakedness in the ancient world was regarded as being under judgment and severe humiliation (Isa. 20:4; Ezek. 16:37-39; Rev. 17:16). To put a garment on the naked person was to cover his shame. The spiritual nakedness of the church is exposed.

V18. The fact that Christ is about to spew the lukewarm Laodiceans out of his mouth indicates that they still have an opportunity to repent. Jesus' counsel to the church corresponds to the Laodiceans' self-deceptive condition. The fact that the Laodiceans are urged "**to buy**" suggests that they have to give something in exchange for what they can receive. They have an evident need to give up their pride and self-sufficiency.

First, Jesus counsels them "**to buy from me gold refined in fire that you may be rich.**" Because we are poor we need gold, which is faith tested in the fire (1Peter 1:7). A person may have wealth, but wealth cannot buy and secure happiness and spirituality.

Christ further admonishes the church to buy from him "**white garments**" in order to cover "**the shame of your nakedness.**" Because we are naked we need to buy white garments, which are symbol of salvation and right standing before God in the book of Revelation (cf. Rev. 3:4-5; 6:11; 7:9, 13-14). The bright and clean robes are "the righteous deeds of the saints" (Rev. 19:8).

What this church needs above all, however, is "**eye salve to anoint their eyes,**" so that they may see and understand their true spiritual condition. This is evidently what the church in Laodicea needs the most. Only when their eyes are opened will the Laodiceans be able to see that they are not what they claim to be. What the Laodiceans need is the discerning and working influence of the Holy Spirit in their lives (Eph. 1:17-18).

V19. "**As many as I love, I discipline and reprove; therefore, be zealous and repent.**" This is a direct allusion to Prov. 3:12. Christ loves the Laodiceans, and in his love he disciplines and corrects them (1 Cor. 11:32).

V20. Christ's love for the Laodiceans is best illustrated in the impressive picture of Christ standing at the door: "**Behold, I am standing at the door and knocking; if somebody hears my voice and opens the door, I will enter in to him and eat supper with him and he with me.**" In the Near East the sharing of a common meal indicates the forming of a strong bond of affection and companionship. As such it became a common symbol of the intimacy to be enjoyed in the coming messianic kingdom.

Jesus is standing before the door of the human heart and asking to be invited in for a meal of mutual and intimate love. He does not break in. The lukewarm and halfhearted Laodiceans must make their own choice because it may soon be too late.

V21. Jesus makes a promise to the overcomer in the church in Laodicea: "**I will grant to sit with me on my throne, as I also overcame and sat with my Father on his throne.**" In the ancient Near East the throne "was more like a couch than a single seat." God's faithful people have been promised a share with Jesus on his throne. They are already elevated in the heavenly places (Rev. 1:6; 5:9-10).