

# PART 3: THE LETTERS TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES

## CHAPTERS 2-3

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### MAIN IDEA

Chapters 2-3 are written to seven churches in ancient Asia (modern Turkey). To each of these churches are given, a) a description of their main spiritual characteristics, b) a word of praise where appropriate, and c) a warning when needed.

### BACKGROUND

**Ephesus:** The city was very wealthy because of its favorable seaport location in the province of Asia and the most important trade center west of Tarsus. Worshipers of Diana also brought much business to Ephesus (Acts 19:23-27). The city was a well-known banking center because of its great vault in the Temple of Diana which was considered to be the safest one in ancient Asia. These factors no doubt made Ephesus a very busy city.

**Smyrna:** The Christians in Smyrna were poor and severely persecuted. Poor, because

they were plundered and deprived of their right to work. For the most part they possessed little of this earth's goods.<sup>1</sup> Christians were given a choice, worship Caesar as Lord or be put to death. They answered "Jesus Christ is Lord, and none other!" As a result many Christians were imprisoned.

**Pergamum**: This city was the center of four cults, Zeus, Dionysus, Asclepius, and Athena, and it rivaled Ephesus in its worship of idols. The city's chief god was Asclepius (also called Aesculapius by the Romans), whose symbol was a serpent, and who was considered the god of healing. People came to Pergamum from all over the world to seek healing from this god.<sup>2</sup>

**Thyatira**: The woman "Jezebel" was a prophetess who enticed Christians to commit sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols (Rev. 2:20). John probably called this woman "Jezebel" because of her similarity to Ahab's idolatrous and wicked queen.<sup>3</sup>

**Sardis**: During its days as a Roman city, Sardis became an important Christian center. However, the church at Sardis was evidently affected by the complacency of the city and its reliance on past glory. The city was a "has been." It had been great many years before John's time and grew to be so large that it outgrew its mountainous home and expanded to the valley below.

**Philadelphia**: Jesus commends this church for their deeds. These are the same words spoken to the church in Ephesus (2:2), which was rebuked because of their wrong motives. However, the church in Philadelphia must have therefore performed these deeds with all the right motives, including a deep love for God. The context refers to *open doors* suggesting that their deeds were centered on reaching others for Christ.

**Laodicea**: Banking and the manufacture of black wool clothing made Laodicea a very rich town. Laodicea's water supply was channeled from hot springs some distance away. By the time it reached Laodicea it was tepid. The church was like its water – lukewarm.<sup>4</sup> The believers didn't stand for anything and became very idle. Wealth, luxury, and ease can make people feel confident, satisfied and complacent. By neglecting to do anything for Christ, the church had become hardened and self-satisfied, it became spiritually indifferent.

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<sup>1</sup> Cohen, Gary G and Salem Kirban. *Revelation Visualized*. Huntingdon Valley, PA: Salem Kirban, Inc., 1971, p. 79.

<sup>2</sup> Life Application Bible. *Life Application Bible: New International Version*. Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers and Zondervan Publishing House, 1988, 1989, 1990, 1991; p. 2302.

<sup>3</sup> Nelsen's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary. *Nelsen's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1986, 1995, p. 679.

<sup>4</sup> Alexander, David and Pat Alexander. *Eerdmans' Handbook to the Bible*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1973, p. 650.

## COMMENTS

Church	Main Characteristic	Praise	Warning
Ephesus 2:1-7	They had lost their first love for God.	They persevered through very difficult times. They did not tolerate false teachings.	If this church did not repent, it would lose its effectiveness.
Smyrna 2:8-11	They endured great persecution.	They remained faithful in the face of great affliction.	None.
Pergamum 2:12-17	They were a faithful church but tolerated false teachers.	They boldly proclaimed Christ as the only Lord while facing great danger and opposition.	Expel the false teachings otherwise Christ would fight them with the sword of His mouth.
Thyatira 2:18-29	They let a powerful false prophetess, named Jezebel, rule over it.	They were meeting the goals of a church, to love from a pure heart, with a good conscience, and a sincere faith.	If they didn't abolish Jezebel and her practices, they would suffer in the same way that she will.
Sardis 3:1-6	A church which was spiritually dead.	A few people in Sardis were still spiritually alive.	Wake up, strengthen what little is still alive before it too dies.
Philadelphia 3:7-13	A faithful witnessing church.	Jesus commends this church for their deeds.	None.
Laodicea 3:14-22	They neither supported nor denied the truth about Christ. They were lukewarm.	None.	Christ says he is about to spit them out of his mouth because of their indifference (lukewarm).

## SUMMARY

- The church at Ephesus represents the danger of losing our first love, that fresh ardor and devotion to Christ.
- The church at Smyrna represents the danger of fear of suffering.
- The church at Pergamos illustrates the constant danger of doctrinal compromise.
- The church at Thyatira is a monument to the danger of moral compromise.
- The church at Sardis is a warning against the danger of spiritual deadness, of orthodoxy without life.
- The church at Philadelphia is exhorted to keep enduring with patience.
- The church at Laodicea is the crowning indictment, a warning against the danger of luke-warmness, of self-sufficiency, of being unconscious of desperate spiritual need.<sup>5</sup>

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Do you think Jesus was being too harsh with the church at Ephesus? Why, or why not?
2. What steps can churches today take to enable their members to recognize false teachings?
3. Which churches received no warning from Jesus and why? How can their example inspire you personally to live for Jesus?
4. What conditions can cause a church to become “lukewarm” like the church at Laodicea?
5. How can this study of the seven churches apply to your own life?

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<sup>5</sup> Walvoord, John, *“The Revelation of Jesus Christ,”* Moody Press, 1966.