

LETTERS  
to the  
SEVEN CHURCHES

a series of sermons on  
The Book of Revelation  
by  
Bruce Van Blair

## EPHESUS

The Book of Revelation is the last book in the Bible. For some, that means it is actually the last word on all important things – in fact, the last word on last things: final instructions on where we are, what is going on, and what is expected of us. Others say it is the last book because it was the last one some people wanted in the Bible. The eastern wing of the church disliked Revelation, and the western wing of the church disliked Hebrews. It was, in part, a “political deal” that these two books made it into the New Testament canon at all – we will accept yours if you will allow ours. In the late fourth century A.D., Cyril of Jerusalem still omitted The Revelation from the canon and forbade its use in public or private.

Martin Luther included Revelation in *his* Bible, but he thought it was theologically challenged and did not preach or teach from it. Zwingli, the great Swiss reformer, pronounced it “no biblical book.” There are twenty-seven books in the New Testament; Calvin wrote commentaries on twenty-six of them. About Revelation he remained completely silent. To this day, Catholic and Protestant lectionaries rarely choose passages from Revelation; Greek Orthodox lectionaries *never* do. Some of you, in the next few weeks, are doubtless going to wish that I had taken a hint from my betters.

Nevertheless, I have come to love the Book of Revelation. In Greek, “revelation” is pronounced *apocalypse* (disclosure). In exile on the Island of Patmos toward the end of the first century, a man named John received visions – a revelation of what was going on in the “real world,” the world bigger and more lasting than the Roman Empire. He was instructed to write down what he saw and to share it with his fellow Christians in Asia – what we would call western Turkey. We suspect that John was an early bishop in that area. Whether you like the book or not, The Revelation helped to inspire the early church with incredible hope, courage, and commitment. Its imagery – for better, or for terrible – has become part of the Christian heritage, even for those who have never read the book. It is still part of our canon Scripture. I think you ought to know the book, at best for your own inspiration. If not that, at least so you can defend yourself against what is often proclaimed in its name.

The second and third chapters of Revelation contain cryptic messages to seven churches in Asia Minor. In the first chapter, John “sees” that the seven churches are Christ’s lamps in the world. (“*You are the light of the world.*”) Seven stars are angels representing that same light in the heavenly realms. The ancients believed that nothing existed on earth which did not have its heavenly counterpart. Anything taking place down here had to take place in Heaven first. (“As above, so below.”) So John is writing to the angels of the seven churches, and each message will infuse the church above and below. That does not mean they have to listen, but they will hear the message and decide what they will do. I thought you might like to hear the messages to the seven churches and see if you recognize anything pertinent or useful.

John reminds us that Christ holds the seven stars in His right hand and walks among the seven lamps. They have golden lampstands because they belong to the King. It is strange that we need to be reminded after all these years, but every time I come upon this passage, it awakens me with a start. Christ is in our midst – walking among us – and caring about what we are doing, thinking, saying, deciding. The lamps are supposed to be shedding the light of Christ in the world. If they go out, the light will get dim indeed. If we love the light, anywhere the light is shining in this world is a reason for rejoicing. But reading all seven letters to the churches, it is clear that some of them are not doing very well. Maybe the Lord assigned an incompetent or inexperienced angel to them. Wouldn’t it be nice if we had such an excuse to fall back on? If things aren’t going well, it must be because we drew a bad angel! If there’s anything I can’t stand, it’s an ineffective, inefficient angel. God should have a better training program for them ...

No such luck. The lamps are throwing light according to the faith of each congregation. There is no way to cheat. You cannot fake faith. Oh, you can pretend faith, and fool a few people for a while perhaps. But you cannot fool the light. If it is fueled by faith, it shines forth brightly. If the faith is pretense or is fading away, the light fades with it. John knows that there is a heavenly form and purpose – and a guiding spirit – for what each earthly church is supposed to be and become. There is an individual purpose and plan for each congregation, just like there is for each individual person. We may think *we* build churches, or help them to grow, or work to make them effective. But that is only the first-level awareness. It is true, but it is only a small part of the truth. Christ holds in His hand a design and purpose for each congregation. If we are faithful,

we move toward that design and purpose. When faithless, we move away from it. But the destiny and the task of the churches are not slipshod, accidental, or as dependent upon human whim and mood as they often appear to us. I like this book! It reminds me of many things.

So John's vision does not reduce our responsibility, but it adds a lot of hope. We do not have to worry about running out of vision or purpose – if we stay faithful. We do not have to justify our existence, only discover our identity. And all of God's churches are not supposed to "look alike." Each congregation has a special identity, its own shape and destiny, and its own part to play in Christ's larger plan.

One thing may still seem puzzling to some of us: Not a single time in any of the seven letters does John mention the size of the church, the number of its members, the condition of the church school, the popularity of the youth groups – not even the size of the budget. He does not say anything about office equipment, a fire-alarm system, or the condition of the building and grounds. I do not conclude from this that such things are unimportant. I *do* conclude from this that all such things are secondary – part of the support system for the real mission and purpose. God help us to keep checking our agendas, and not confuse the support systems for the primary purpose.

Christ holds the seven stars in His right hand. The right hand is the hand of action. It is John's way of saying that the church is "the body of Christ" – the action of Christ in the world. As Jacques Ellul has written: "[I]f Jesus Christ is indeed *the Lord* of history, it is by his Church in history that this Lordship must appear." (*Apocalypse*, page 126, emphasis added.) That is, by the way, one of the major themes of The Revelation. It is also why Christians end up joining a church. Only, there is a discrepancy, as we all know to our sorrow, between the idealized form (the stars) and the reality of human endeavor and response. The lamps do not give light as high and true as the stars. But a lamp is still better than the dark.

There really were seven churches in Asia, and of course there were a lot more than seven. John means seven real churches, but he also uses the seven to represent *all* the churches. Seven churches represent the *whole* church, and together they are part of the one true church. The seven churches represent Christ in action in the real world – to bring all of creation into spiritual awareness and LIFE.

The lamps represent the churches themselves. The imagery comes from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount: *"You are the light of the world .... Light a lamp and put it on a lampstand [not under a bucket] .... Let your light so shine before men that they will give glory to your father in Heaven."* (Matthew 5:14-16) The churches are to glow with the light of the world (the presence of Christ), as the stars glow with the light of Heaven (God). John also reminds us that Christ walks among (in the midst of) the lamps. Never imagine, he says, that nobody knows or sees or cares what you are doing! What each church is doing – and how it is doing it – is of immense interest and concern to Christ. That is the message.

I do not very often argue with that concept consciously. I just have a hard time remembering it. In The Revelation, it is always the first word of Christ to each of the seven churches: "I know!" I know who you are. I know what is going on. I know how you are doing. I know you individually, and collectively. That is the message. I hope we can hear and remember it. Christ constantly walks among the lamps. His instructions are not guesses or stabs in the dark, or generalized theories from some armchair professor's textbook. "I know your deeds" – how it is going, what you are up against, how hard you try. How disconcerting. How reassuring!

Ephesus was the principal city in Asia. Population between two hundred fifty thousand and three hundred thousand. That's not Los Angeles, but it's not Podunk either, especially in the ancient world. Paul spent more time in Ephesus than in any other city of his missionary journeys. The temple of Diana (Artemis) in Ephesus was one of the Seven Wonders of the World. Traveling to Rome from anywhere in the east, by sea or by land, the chances were you would go through Ephesus. The church in Ephesus was, and for generations would remain, the most influential church in all Asia. No surprise, then, that Ephesus heads the list of the seven churches.

From now on, the question is: Does the letter to the church at Ephesus have anything to say to our church here? It has been many years since John wrote The Revelation. The world has changed a lot. The letter is addressed to a specific historical church during the last decade of the first century A.D. But at the same time, John's imagery makes it clear that the letters are addressed to all churches through all time. That means we have to discern for ourselves what portions of the seven letters may still be the Spirit speaking to us. We cannot automatically assume either the commendation or the condemnation of the letters. It will have to be a matter of "If the shoe fits ..."

All the same, it must have been both interesting and exciting to receive a letter claiming to be an evaluation from the Lord Himself on how your church was doing. Of course, John did it so that all the churches got to read each other's evaluations as well as their own. It doubtless caused quite a stir – many late-night conversations within and between the members of all the Asian churches.

We do not have such an evaluation addressed specifically to our own church. But I suspect we can get in on as much of the excitement as we are willing to handle. As I said, I will leave the shoe-fitting part pretty much up to you. But maybe I can help in places where the handwriting has become a bit dim and hard to decipher.

Ephesus receives some rather high praise. It is a very hard-working church. Its members do a lot of good deeds. Not only that, they are persevering. They “hang in.” On top of that, they do not fool around with loose morals. They teach a high ethical code, and insist that the members of the church adhere to it. The Nicolaitans are “libertines.” We shall run into them again. The church at Ephesus is tolerating none of that. Moreover, the congregation at Ephesus is not an easy mark for every preacher and self-appointed apostle who comes into town. I suspect Paul had much to do with that. The Ephesians have learned to measure all teachers and teachings by the yardstick of the Gospel. They will not be drawn back into the legalism of Jewish Law, nor will they allow their Christian liberty to slide into pagan idolatry or the loose morals of the Greco-Roman world.

What more could anybody ask for? Ephesus is a church of good works, sound doctrine, and patient endurance. That is a pretty remarkable record. Would the Spirit give such commendation to our own church? Only, the letter does not end there. *“However, I have this against you: The love you felt at first you have now lost.”*

I have to run my eyes over that pretty fast if I do not want to start crying. How much of the travail, depression, and sorrow of this planet can be summed up in that phrase? *“The love you felt at first you have now lost.”* Never mind *our* church for the moment. How many churches dot the landscape from one ocean to the other, and inside are well-meaning people who try hard, work hard, and keep showing up, but there is something missing? The form and the vestments and the calendars and the meetings are all there, but it is boring, lackluster – more duty than joy, more habit than passion. The church is supposed to be the bride of Christ,

but, God knows, in too many places the church acts more like an old-  
maid aunt who never expects to see the bridal chamber.

*“The love you felt at first you have now lost.”* This could be said of how many families? How many companies? How many dreams and vows and vocations around the world? “Institutions exist for the painless extinction of the ideas which gave them birth.” (An old Quaker saying.) No matter how hard we try, how well-organized we get, or how disciplined our efforts and behavior, if we lose our passion – our personal love for Jesus – the lamp burns lower and lower. It does not matter how we *think* it ought to be, what the seminaries teach, how many books we read, how many substitutes we try. If our passionate, personal love for Jesus fades, the light of the lamp fades with it.

Do you remember the words of an old song – “Young love, first love, filled with true devotion”? (“Young Love” by Sonny James.) That is no longer true at Ephesus. And it means that something exceedingly important is missing. In fact, it is so important that if the Ephesians do not get it back, all of their hard work, sound doctrine, and patient endurance will be for nothing. The lamp will go dark and be removed. That is what Revelation says. Without love, all their faith and effort will be for naught. *“If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love ....”* Yes indeed! Years earlier, Paul had written these very words when he was ministering in Ephesus. (I Corinthians 13:1) Now Ephesus is a great church in the eyes of the world. But the Spirit *knows*, and the Spirit says to them: “Get back to the heart – back to the core – of the Gospel, or the rest cannot survive or mean anything.”

Is it love for God, love for Jesus, or love for each other that is lacking in Ephesus? Not much of a question. They inevitably go together. Even if one seems to come first, the others will always follow. And if one is lacking, the others will eventually leak away. Ephesus has one virtue that few churches can handle. The virtue is needed, perhaps, but this one is a bear. Few have it without being ruined by it. The Ephesian church does not like wicked people, they hate Nicolaitans, and they test all teachers for false doctrine. In short, they have turned into heresy hunters. Inevitably, they have become suspicious, judgmental, critical of others and of each other. When that happens, pretty soon everybody gets more and more careful and cautious about what they say. Then the contest begins and grows: Who *says it* right, and best? Who *does it* right, and best? Who works the hardest, does the most good deeds, is the most spiritual?

Jealousy grows. Duty and obligation take over. The glow, the ardor, the sheer gratitude toward God, the caring for one another – the first love – are out the door and down the road, or lost somewhere back in the past. Love cannot breathe (or breed) in such an atmosphere.

It is the classic problem of all institutions and organizations. It is also the classic problem of all relationships. It is fun to “fall in love,” or find a new friend, or start a new project or a new church, or discover a new interest or a new purpose or a new group. But the spark fades, the first love wanes, the honeymoon is over. Churches turn into organizations. Lovers turn into householders. Enthusiasm turns into obligation. Inspiration turns into duty. Love turns into “law” – a system, a structure, a technique. And people start feeling trapped, start looking for excuses, start talking about “falling out of love.” Or about being tired (or re-tired), or about having too many other things to do.

What can people do when the first love goes? Pretending does no good. But is it hopeless? Is it just “the way of the world” – the inevitable cycle of life on the planet earth? Obviously John does not think so – and the Spirit speaking to the churches does not think so. The letter carries a formula for just such a problem. Do we notice? It is one of the world’s best-kept secrets, yet it is not supposed to be a secret! It is proclaimed in many places, but here it is in the fifth verse of this cryptic note to the church at Ephesus. It works on any authentic love that is growing cold: REMEMBER – REPENT – DO.

Some of you can remember back to a time when you would have given just about anything for one night alone with your present spouse. At least I sure can. I hope *you* can. Can you also remember back to the first experience you had with Christ – back to your first personal miracle – back to when Christ’s presence stopped being just an idea and became part of your reality? Can you remember back to some of the early promises you made to God – back to some of the new vision you had of what life could be like – back to some of the pictures you had of what you wanted to be like and live like, and what you wanted to accomplish? If you found it, saw it, experienced it once, it is still there within you somewhere. Memory can take you back to those times and places. You can see it and feel it – and find it again – if you give memory the time and permission it needs to bring it back to consciousness. If the first love is gone or going, the first thing to do is REMEMBER. Where did the love come from at first?

What was it like then? Remembering gets us back to the awareness, and back to the source.

“Repent” means “to turn.” About-face. Go in a new direction. Once we remember the vision and love we once had, we turn toward it again. We cannot control everything, but we *do* decide which direction we will face. The second thing to do when the first love is gone or going is to REPENT. I am still amazed at how many people have a negative emotional reaction to the word “repent.” They “hear” or feel a lot of self-loathing. They do a lot of guilt-tripping. But repentance frees us from dead ends and wrong directions. Why do we not hear REFOCUS? Examine what you really care about, then reorder your priorities. If we turn back toward what first inspired us – if it was ever true and authentic in the first place – it will reinspire us, and often with a deeper and more profound enthusiasm than we ever had before. Do you love your wife as much today as you did the day you married her? If not, how sad. What a waste of time and life. All these years and you have not learned a thing. Sometimes truth, like a woman, will withdraw for a while just to see if we will come after it. And if we do, it is better, clearer, and stronger than ever.

Finally, DO! Do the things you did at first. First love is daring, risky, outlandish, often stupid – but seldom boring. It goes “all out.” I have known young lovers who would drive all night to spend two hours with their love, or risk bad grades in school or trouble with the boss to be with their love, or risk offending parents or friends to be with their love. And I have known some not-so-young lovers who would not turn off a television program to get a kiss, or put down a newspaper to give a compliment, or stop talking about problems long enough to express joy in being together on life’s strange and wondrous pilgrimage.

The same strange phenomenon can exist between the way we first loved Christ and the way we end up trying to serve Him years later. Doing things the way we used to, with the same exuberance and passion and abandon – without always caring about whether it will work out right or “succeed” or make us comfortable – also returns us to our former love. Love responds to *doing*. Who loves us most? Yes, and what does God in Christ *do* for us? Goes all the way to the Cross – all the way, all the time, no matter what it takes. Could there be a connection? Where does the fierce loyalty and caring of a mother’s love come from? Look at what she *does* for her child. Could there be a connection? What illustrations do you have of a strong and abiding love that “does” nothing? If you have a love

that is growing dim or cold and you want to bring it back, DO! Go into action. Do like you did at first.

When was the last time you took a chance – did a daring, risky, outlandish deed for Jesus Christ – just because you love Him and are full of the elation of His love and His Kingdom? If it has been more than a few weeks, the love is starting to grow cold. We do not have to do anything to *be* loved, but if we love and do nothing, how long can our side of the love survive? Love is incredibly powerful. It can endure almost anything – except neglect. Sometimes people come to me and tell me they have fallen out of love with somebody they once loved. People do not fall out of love; they starve it to death. They stop *doing*. (By the way, there *are* people caught in evil, and you have to stop showing your love to keep from spreading the damage. But that is a different problem. And you do not stop loving them. That is what makes it so heartbreaking.)

In any case, the Spirit is not content with the Ephesian church. “You hate what I hate,” the Spirit says, “but that is not good enough. Thanks for the effort, but my Kingdom cannot run on negative principles. You must return to the love we shared at first. You must love what I love – and love as I love. Hating what I hate doesn’t make it. Loving what I love is the only WAY that works.”

REMEMBER. REPENT. DO.

“If you do not,” says the Spirit, “I will remove the lamp altogether.” Ouch! Wow. Better to remove the lamp than to have a faith that works without love. Pretty crisp and harsh to say such a thing to the folk at Ephesus who are trying so hard.

The light bulb in our kitchen burned out the other day. It gave no more glow of light. It didn’t shine. It had been a *good* bulb. It lit our way for many a night. It didn’t break. It still had the same shape and form as always. It was still attached to the source of power. It just didn’t glow anymore. You know what I did? I removed it, threw it away, and replaced it with another bulb that gave forth light. I didn’t really mean to be unfair or unappreciative. But as Mariana said, “We needed the light.”

## SMYRNA

Some members of our congregation have been to Smyrna, I believe. It is the only one of the seven cities of Revelation still in existence on its original site. Today it is called Izmir.

Smyrna was located thirty-five miles north of Ephesus, on the shores of the Aegean Sea. Its famous harbor had a mouth so narrow that it could be closed off in time of war, thus protecting the city from attack by sea. The population in John's day was about two hundred thousand, making it the second most prominent city in Asia. (Well, there was some difference of opinion about that.) Smyrna was called "The Glory of Asia," and most of its citizens felt that was a deep truth, not just Chamber of Commerce propaganda. Though second to Ephesus in size, Smyrna considered itself first in glory, beauty, and prominence. There were reasons for that.

Smyrna, the birthplace of Homer, was indeed beautiful and prosperous. The sunsets were glorious. The harbor at Ephesus kept silting up, which eventually killed Ephesus – and thus preserved it to become one of the most outstanding archaeological sites in the world today. In John's day, this problem was already sending more and more of the shipping to Smyrna. It was not yet clear at the time of John's writing, but Ephesus would decline and Smyrna would become the foremost city in Asia.

As some of you may have noticed, John uses the introductory first chapter of Revelation to give various descriptive phrases in honor of Christ's identity and position: *"From him who is, who was, and who is to come .... From Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead and ruler of the kings of the earth .... His eyes flamed like fire; his feet were like burnished bronze .... In his right hand he held seven stars, and from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword .... I am the living One; I was dead and now I am alive for evermore, and I hold the keys of death and Hades."* There are more, but that is a pretty fair sample. John does not list them in some wooden fashion; he weaves them into his opening remarks. Then, as he addresses the seven churches individually, he picks one of these descriptive phrases to begin his message to each particular church. And the phrase he chooses will be the theme of his message to that church. He has the audacity to suggest, "The thing

about Jesus Christ – the part of His nature – that you need to focus on most is ...” and then he gives just one of the phrases for that congregation to take especially to heart.

So the first thing we watch for, the first thing we want to know, when we read one of the seven letters to the seven churches is: Which phrase will John use for this church – what will be the major theme of this letter? Do you remember from the Scripture reading the phrase he has chosen for Smyrna? *“These are the words of the first and the last, who was dead and came to life again.”* It echoes verses seventeen and eighteen in the first chapter: *“Do not be afraid. I am the first and the last, and I am the living one; I was dead and now I am alive for evermore.”*

What is this letter going to be about? Short-term gratification? Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die? Not very likely! More like: “Today we may die, but tomorrow we are raised to new life.” This is going to be about hope greater and more powerful than this world. This is going to be about following the Resurrected One. This is going to be about losing our fear, about being unafraid in this world, about not being terrorized by threats of failure or poverty or any form of death in this world. This is going to be about the triumph and victory of the Eternal Christ, and all who will follow Him into LIFE. Wouldn't that be your guess, if John has chosen this particular phrase to begin this particular letter? If that is your guess, you guessed right.

Smyrna was founded in 1200 B.C. That is two hundred years before King David, and back in the days of the judges of Israel. In the sixth century B.C., Alyattes, king of Lydia, conquered Smyrna and dispersed the inhabitants into tiny villages throughout the area, where they could be no threat to his rule. For almost four hundred years, Smyrna was in eclipse. Alexander the Great wanted to rebuild it, but the task fell to his successor, Lysimachus, who rebuilt the city around 300 B.C. on the slopes of Mount Pagus, about two miles south of its former site. It had wide and spacious streets. Its major street (called “the street of gold”) began at the harbor, curved around Mount Pagus, and ran on to the foothills away from the sea. At the harbor end stood the temple of Cybele. At the other end was a temple to Zeus. In between were temples to Apollo, Askelepios, Aphrodite. Mount Pagus rose five hundred feet above the harbor, commanding a marvelous view. The acropolis on top of Mount Pagus was considered the crown or garland – “the victor's wreath” – of Smyrna.

Smyrna boasted a grand stadium for athletic events, one of the best libraries in Asia, and the largest public theater in all Asia. In short, Smyrna was not quite as large as Ephesus, but she was superior in culture, class, style, and community spirit. (Would you rather live in Los Angeles, or Newport Beach? I better be careful ... )

Smyrna had been destroyed, yet she had come back to life. It was remarkable, and Smyrna ended up with the nickname “the city that was dead, yet lived.” John uses this theme, adds a few dimensions, and turns it into the central message to the congregation living there.

Smyrna was not only beautiful and prosperous, she was extremely patriotic. Three hundred years earlier (265-146 B.C.), when Rome was fighting for its life against the Carthaginian empire, Smyrna had sided with Rome. She was the first city in Asia to declare allegiance to Rome, and she built a temple to Roma, the goddess of Rome. That was in 195 B.C., almost one hundred years before Julius Caesar. In 26 A.D., when the whole world wanted to be friends with Rome, eleven cities competed for the privilege of erecting a temple in honor of Tiberius Caesar. Smyrna won the honors. Rome considered Smyrna the most noble and worthy of the cities of Asia. Cicero called Smyrna “the most faithful of our allies.” Roman nobility came to visit and vacation there. After 70 A.D., when Jerusalem was destroyed, Smyrna was a favorite place for Jewish settlement, and the Jewish community there was large and influential.

So the scene is set. Smyrna is beautiful, prosperous, highly patriotic, and of esteemed reputation. Its citizens are proud of their city, and they feel fortunate to live there. When John writes The Revelation, Smyrna is one of the choice places to live in the entire Roman Empire.

Among the seven letters to the seven churches, no church gets higher praise. No fault is found with the church at Smyrna. No warning is uttered. To Ephesus, the Spirit says, “Return to the way you used to be. Go back to your first love.” To Smyrna, the Spirit says, “Stay the way you are. You have only to remain faithful and you will receive the crown (or garland) of life.” A garland, by the way, far greater than the one for which Smyrna was famous.

We have, then, an ideal church in an ideal city. There is only one catch: They do not match at all! The congregation at Smyrna is rich in the spiritual realm and doing very well indeed – so far as the Lord is concerned. But they are in an exceedingly difficult place so far as the

world is concerned. Smyrna is a very unpleasant place for Christians. And we were just about to conclude that this is the obvious first choice for the church most like ours, where we can live in a lovely area, be rich and prosperous, have all the values and purposes of the community around us – and all the values and purposes of our Lord – all at the same time.

*“I know your afflictions and your poverty – yet you are rich!”* The Christians at Smyrna live in a beautiful and prosperous city, but they themselves are in dire straits. “Afflictions” would be better translated as “pressure.” *“I know the terrible pressure that you are under.”*

Rome had not been happy with Christians since 64 A.D., when Nero blamed the Christians for starting the great fire (though he himself had set it). And Smyrna was thoroughly and enthusiastically Roman. So there were economic sanctions: It was hard to get a job in Smyrna if you were a Christian. Many merchants would not sell to you. You were in danger of being arrested at any time as an enemy of the state. If you owned a shop or a business and became a Christian, angry citizens might plunder your shop or home or confiscate your property, and the authorities would just look the other way. If you complained, punishment was more likely to come down on you than on your persecutors.

*“I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.”* This is the first mention of Satan in the Book of Revelation. The Jewish community in Smyrna, as we mentioned, was large and well-established. Many of them were legal citizens of Smyrna. The church and the synagogue were at loggerheads at this time in history. Irate Jewish citizens would sometimes turn the names of Christians over to the authorities. Once such a complaint was made, the Christians would be arrested, punished, banished, or killed. John knew that no true Jew would do this. *“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.”* But every religion has adherents who do not live by the faith they claim. Like Paul before him, John dreamt of the day when Christians and Jews would be reconciled. This theme rings clearly throughout the Book of Revelation. But at this moment in history, the Jews had prominence and power enough to get Christians into terrible trouble if they chose to. John did not condemn Judaism; he said that the Jews who did this were not true Jews.

The legal charges that were being made against Christians were on six counts:

- Cannibalism – from a misunderstanding of the Lord’s Supper.
- Lust and immorality – from a misunderstanding of the Agape Feast (communion), and the affection between Christians.
- Breaking up homes – one Christian convert in a family was potentially a severe problem, and it has remained so down through history.
- Atheism – because Christians were speaking out against idolatry and other practices and beliefs common to accepted religions of the time.
- Treason – because Christians refused to acknowledge the Roman Emperor as a god.
- Incendiarism – because Nero had blamed the Christians for the great fire in Rome.

So the Christians at Smyrna are under great pressure, and sanctions against them make it very difficult to earn a livelihood. But John’s letter assures them that they are doing great. They should go on doing exactly as they have been doing. Things will get worse, of course, but they must not be afraid of the sufferings to come. They must remain faithful, even unto death. A wonderful, reassuring, and encouraging letter! I wonder if we would think so if we found ourselves in their situation. Probably so. Historically speaking, Revelation has always spoken most powerfully to people in trouble. Maybe you think that leaves us out. I do not.

John is not kidding, of course, and the Christians at Smyrna are not feeling sorry for themselves. Living for Christ is the greatest thing they have ever known or heard about. Though they look small and helpless on the outside, they see themselves as part of a Kingdom and a TRUTH far greater and more important than Smyrna or Rome. Indeed, they end up having a great impact on their city and, despite their circumstances and situation, more and more people join them. A few generations later, Smyrna will become a great Christian center in Asia.

W.R. Maltby reminds us that Christ promised three things to His followers:

They would be in constant trouble.  
They would be fearless.  
They would be absurdly happy.

Some of us keep wanting to pick two out of the three. But it is a total package. If we leave out one, we lose the other two.

The early Christians tried to be exemplary citizens. They were very seldom guilty of the crimes for which they died. But times had changed since Paul had advised a blanket cooperation with civil authorities. (Romans 13:1) There was a point they would not go beyond in claiming allegiance to the state or cooperation with the political powers of their time. Perhaps the structures and systems of our time are sufficiently redeemed to take modern Christians off this hook, but I confess to a certain uneasiness on this matter. I wonder if any of you sometimes feel it too. Do you ever wonder, as I wonder, if the Christian church has missed a turn somewhere back down the road, or maybe just talked itself into an easier, softer way? I know; people can get killed trying to change the world's ways. And they do not even have to go that far; they can get into terrible trouble just trying to take the Christian Life to heart. Being busy living the Christian Life, we do not always have time to go along with all the ways of the society around us. Is that not what happens whenever and wherever Christ's people are sincerely faithful? That is precisely what makes me uneasy. How much trouble – how much fear of poverty or threat of death – would it take to make us start softening our commitment and backing away from our allegiance to our Savior?

I am not accusing any of you of having an easy life. I have been around long enough to know better than that. But the Way of Christ often *does* appear to be nebulous, easy, unfocused, and undemanding among many of Christ's named followers in our time. Thankfully, I do know many individual exceptions. But why is it so "individual"? Is it that we do not recognize a common enemy – like Rome? Or is it that we do not recognize a common Lord – like Jesus Christ?

As predicted, things did get worse for the Christians at Smyrna. I will tell only one story:

Once each year, every Roman citizen was required to burn a pinch of incense on the altar to the godhead of Caesar. Having done so, that person was free to worship any god in any way that he pleased. Having burned the incense, the person was given a certificate to guarantee that he had performed his religious duty. In all likelihood, that certificate was “the mark of the beast” that Revelation dramatizes later in the book. The certificate read as follows: “We the representatives of the Emperor, Serenos and Hermas, have seen you sacrificing.” And it gave the date. That was it. No big deal. Politically speaking, it was simply a loyalty oath. No problem. Religiously speaking, the Christians said, “NO WAY! We do not recognize Caesar as our god – never mind equal to Christ.” Sacred words had taken root and were now too strong within them: *“You shall have no other gods before me.” “You cannot serve two Masters.”*

The edict was enforced with varying degrees of enthusiasm in different regions and cities of the Empire. As you might guess, no city was more zealous than Smyrna in enforcing the edict. So the Christians in Smyrna were under serious pressure unless they conformed to the attitudes and atmosphere around them.

Years after Revelation was written, a man named Polycarp became the Christian bishop of Smyrna. One Sabbath Day after the games in the stadium were finished, a hue and cry went up against Polycarp. The crowd dragged him into the stadium. “This is the teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians, the destroyer of the gods – the one who teaches many to not offer sacrifice or worship.” What it all boiled down to, eventually, was this: “Polycarp, if you do not burn incense to the Emperor, we are going to burn *you!*”

Polycarp answered, “Eighty and six years have I served Christ, and He has never wronged me. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?”

So the crowd went out and gathered wood, built a big pyre, and put Polycarp on top of it. They waited to see if this would change his mind. “It is well,” said Polycarp. “I fear not the fire that burns for a season and after a while is quenched. Why do you delay? Come, do your will.”

So they lit the bonfires and, as the flames leapt high, Polycarp was heard to say, “I thank thee that thou hast graciously thought me worthy of this day and of this hour, that I may receive a portion in the number of witnesses, in the cup of thy Christ.” He knew, didn’t he? *“Those who are victorious cannot be harmed by the second death.”*

Being much younger when I first heard this story, I thought it a very hard and bad way to die. Since then it has occurred to me that many of us die in far worse and harder circumstances, and for far more foolish reasons. Are you – am I – afraid of poverty, persecution, death, or dying? Does “fear” control our behavior, our choices, our attitudes? Does “fear” keep us from living with all-out devotion for our Lord?

Chip loaned me a book the other day called *Grandfather* by Tom Brown, Jr. Tom’s grandfather was born in the 1880s – a Lipan Apache. The book tells some of the teachings his grandfather passed on to his grandsons, and how and where he got them. Chapter ten tells of his going into Death Valley in the summertime to see if he could become one with the desert. A few quotes:

“The goal of getting there, no matter where there was, became more important than the pain, even more important than death.” (page 178)

“His quest to find answers, his search for the truth, ultimately led him to the near edge of death. Even though he knew that he was going to ultimately die, he did not care, for all he wanted was to find what he was looking for. If the search cost him his life, then he would not have died in vain.” (page 179)

“Grandfather always believed that if his life quests were not worth giving up his life for, then the quest itself was not worthwhile. All too many people go through life dedicated to nothing that they would die for, and to him, that was not really living at all.... His seeking many times would lead him to the edge of death, but it was at this edge that the most profound lessons would be learned. Many times this was the only way they could be learned.” (page 182)

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Some of you may be interested in a couple of the Smyrna letter’s finer points:

- The persecution is to last ten days. John speaks the language of numbers, and ten is the number of political power. The persecution will be severe, and it will last while the political power of Rome has its day. But ten cannot last. That is part of the temporal meaning of ten – it will end. The power will fall and the persecution will end. You cannot fight the power of ten with physical force – it is too strong. But you *can* outlast

it. The power of ten is huge but temporary. Of course, when *we* have the power of ten, that is also temporary.

- The crown of life is really a victory wreath (*stephanos*, not *diadema*). The victory wreath is given to the athlete who wins the games. It does not make the athlete the king of the nation. Remember that the acropolis on Mount Pagus was known as “the victor’s wreath” of Smyrna? John’s letter is saying: “The victory wreath of LIFE that Christ gives us is far better than any honors the city of Smyrna has ever known or heard of.”

- For Ephesus, the main message was: “Return to your first love.” What is the major message to Smyrna? “Be faithful ’til death.” Go on doing what you are already doing. Hang in. *Persevere*. This is a word we never expect to hear. Over the years, I have learned that it is one of the most difficult answers we ever get to prayer. And it is the guidance we most easily miss. We know we are not perfect; we expect to be corrected; we long for excitement and new challenges. If the coach doesn’t tell us to do something new, we wonder if maybe he doesn’t know his business – and we are quite likely to go looking for a new coach.

Sometimes the Spirit says, “If you will just keep doing what you are doing – keep it steady, hang in – I can do marvelous things with the effort you are now making. You are on track, or close enough, and it just takes time for it to grow and develop. The newness is already embodied in your present efforts; it just needs time to take effect. Please do not keep digging up the seeds to see if they are growing. Keep doing what you are doing.”

But when God says, “Stay faithful – keep on keeping on,” we think we haven’t heard anything. It doesn’t rattle the brain waves with new visions. Conversion, by definition, means we were heading in the wrong direction. It may be devastating in some ways, but it is also very exciting to be born anew. Everything changes dramatically – values, loyalties, direction, allegiance, awareness, identity, purpose. So then what does God do for encores? Fifteen or twenty or thirty years later, all the new disciplines have become our WAY of Life. So we go to God and say, “How come You don’t talk to me anymore in the exciting, miracle-working ways You did in the old days? Have I been abandoned? Don’t You love me anymore?” And God says, “Keep doing what you are doing. Please – for a human, you are being very faithful. We are accomplishing more than you realize. Hang in. Stay faithful!” And because we haven’t heard anything new, we think that nothing has happened.

So how do we make it register when God says, “Keep doing what you are doing”? You have to be very quiet – and very practiced, patient, and unhurried – to hear and feel the deep encouragement of the message to “Keep on doing what you are already doing.” Go on supporting your family, loving your children, cherishing your spouse, putting in an honest day’s labor. “Stay faithful, and I will give you the crown of life.” Our usual reply is, “But where are the dragons? I want to slay dragons!” And sometimes we rush off to do something “important” – and ruin what God has been building and was about to bring to fruition.

Don’t just do something – stand there! Stay faithful. No grandstanding. Jesus is the hero. John is careful how he writes – be careful how you read. We do not *win* the crown of life. Who do you think we are?! This is a very big crown, and way beyond our powers. *Jesus* wins the crown – and gives it to us because He loves us. Jesus is the hero. We are the support team. We are in for the long haul – one day at a time. Let Him figure it out and bring it all together, in His own good time. If you are Smyrna, that is the message. It is beautiful, but most humans miss it or mess it up.

That is enough of Smyrna. Time to get back to our church. Only, it is interesting that Smyrna is the only church among the seven that is called “faithful.” Smyrna is rich in the Spirit. Smyrna receives the highest commendation from the Lord. And Smyrna is very possibly the last church among the seven that any of us would willingly choose to be part of. Or maybe not. What do you think?

## PERGAMUM

Follow the north-south road from Ephesus along the Aegean Sea for about forty miles, through Smyrna, until it turned northeast, away from the sea. Follow it on into the valley of Caicus, about fifteen miles inland, and you would come upon Pergamum, the third of John's seven cities. Like Saddleback, only there was just one peak and Pergamum was built on top of it.

We are imagining ourselves at the tail end of the first century A.D. Ephesus was the thriving metropolis of the present. Smyrna was the promise of the future. Pergamum was the past. Pergamum was old and strong and did not yet realize that her day was over, that her glory was in the past. Times had changed, and what had made Pergamum great was no longer necessary or relevant. The Roman legions had marched and fought until there were no enemies of size or power within a thousand miles – and a thousand miles was a very long way away, in the first century A.D. In the new and modern world of *Pax Romana*, a city could thrive by being close to good roads and water and by being well-situated for trade and commerce. Before the Roman Empire was well-established, a city had to be a fortress. Otherwise it was a sitting duck for any band of marauders that came along. Even fifteen or twenty well-armed men, trained to fight, could be big trouble if they came along when the town was minding its normal business. What if a hundred suddenly came over the hill? There were no great cities in the ancient world that were not great fortresses. They were built in places that nature had made defensible, and then humans built them into great fortresses. And if the city was to be truly great, it must have access to water, even under siege. Jerusalem was famous for its temple, but no temple would ever have been built there had it not been for the Gihon Spring. If there was no water, the prayers would not last long. And as many a king discovered, Jerusalem was one of the hardest cities to conquer in the entire Middle East.

Just so, Pergamum had become great in the old days when a city had to be able to stand alone against all comers. The Greek *Pergamum* means “citadel, fortress,” and Pergamum was more than able to live up to its name. Pergamum sat on top of a massive rock hill that rose a thousand feet above the valley, its walls crowning the already-formidable heights of the hill. If you sit on even just the broken-down lower walls of Pergamum

today, it is almost impossible to imagine anybody stupid enough to try to attack her.

Pergamum remembered the past – the heroes of the past, the battles of the past, the gods of the battles of the past. The great altar of Zeus in Pergamum depicted the gods of Greece in victorious combat against the giants of the earth (civilization over barbarism). It commemorated the victory of Attalus – the king of Pergamum long ago, and the first ruler in all Asia to refuse tribute to the plundering Gauls (250 B.C.). Pergamum looked back to Attalus as some of us look back to George Washington: founder of a new nation and a new way of life.

Back in the “olden days” – when men were men, and heroes strove for glory or death – Pergamum had been the most distinguished city of Asia. It was still the official capital of Asia when John wrote. The proconsul of the entire province lived there, and the courts and records and machinery of Roman rule were still based in Pergamum. But Pergamum could no longer compete with Ephesus or Smyrna in population, commerce, or economic importance. Soon (in another thirty-five years) Pergamum would lose its distinction as capital and center of the Roman government in the province. It would no longer be worth the extra effort – and half a day’s time – to march everything up and down the great hill, when a city could be just as safe at the foot of the hill as up on top behind the great walls. The whole region was already safe and well-protected by the vast network of Roman legions. So Pergamum remembered the past, gloried in its past glory, and pretended it was still necessary and important.

Aside from its great prestige and endless victories, Pergamum was proud of its library. It was the greatest library in all Asia. It boasted two hundred thousand scrolls, or books. One of the great libraries of the ancient world, it rivaled even Alexandria. Libraries were mysterious, powerful, and honored institutions in the ancient world. Hard for us to fully imagine. Librarians were the honored sages – the wise men of their time. A city might boast of its librarian almost as much as its king. This was before the days of paperbacks, if you can imagine ... unless, of course, you consider a scroll to be a paperback. It depends on what it is made of, I suppose. In any case, every “book” was hand-copied and immensely precious and expensive. I complain about having to spend twenty dollars for a paperback today that I could have bought for a dollar or two thirty years ago. But in the ancient world, a collection of fifteen books was a

huge fortune. Almost no individual had that many books. Knowledge and information were exceedingly precious commodities. In John's day, if you had as many scrolls as most of *you* have books, you were immensely wealthy. Why does it take ten men to form a synagogue? You have to pool resources in order to buy your first scroll – Torah.

Yes, I am leading up to a story. Egypt had developed papyrus, which is made from the pith of a bulrush. That was the paper of the ancient world. Papyrus became the writing material of all the ancient world and one of Egypt's most important export items. Egypt's best library, at Alexandria, was the most famous learning center in the entire ancient world. Its most famous librarian was Aristophanes. This was back when Pergamum was also great, around 260 B.C.

Well, Eumenes, king of Pergamum, tried to entice Aristophanes to come and be the librarian at Pergamum. Ptolemy II, king of Egypt at the time, moved Aristophanes and his office into prison just to make sure nobody could steal him and that he did not succumb to temptation. (They had a different approach to advancement and free enterprise in those days.) Then Ptolemy II made a mistake. To punish Pergamum for its impertinence, he banned the shipment of papyrus to Pergamum. That would teach them! Pretty soon the library at Pergamum would be out-of-date and of no account. No papyrus – no new books. The ancient world's notion of an oil embargo.

But it backfired. Eumenes offered huge rewards to anyone who could come up with a substitute for papyrus – anything suitable to write on. So Pergamum developed parchment, made from the skin of animals, and most folk soon concluded that it was far superior to papyrus. The word *parchment* means “the sheet of Pergamos.” And by the way, Eumenes is another name for Attalus.

Incidentally, the most famous and best-loved god of Pergamum was Aesculapius, the god of healing. Pergamum was the healing shrine – the Lourdes – of the ancient world. You can still see his symbol – a snake winding around a sacred staff – used as the standard symbol of medical associations worldwide. The title for Aesculapius was “Savior.” But Christians had a notion of who deserved that title even more.

It just sounds like mild invective to us, but John is serious when he writes that Pergamum was where Satan was enthroned – where Satan had his home. It was worse than Smyrna. Roman rule and authority in

Asia were based in Pergamum, the ancient capital. The first temple of the Imperial Cult (emperor worship) in Asia had been built in Pergamum in 29 A.D. (in honor of Rome and Augustus Caesar). Most enemies of the state arrested in Asia would be sent to Pergamum. You might be arrested in Smyrna, but you would be sent to Pergamum for trial and, if found guilty, execution. The proconsul at Pergamum had authority – the power of life and death – over anyone in the realm, as symbolized by the Roman sword: a two-edged sword. Christians would die in many places, but if they were arrested in Asia, most of them would die in Pergamum.

The first to die was Antipas, an early Christian martyr. His name became officially linked with cases of Christians deserving death. Under the Emperor Diocletian (one hundred years after Antipas' death), Christian stonecutters from Rome, working in the quarries of Pannonia, refused to carve an image of Aesculapius and were put to death for being followers of Antipas of Pergamum. John refers to Antipas as well, whose case had become the established precedent for Roman law in cases against Christians. What Rome did not figure on was that Antipas would also become the precedent for Christians to refuse to worship the emperor as a god.

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*“These are the words of the One who has the sharp two-edged sword ....”* It suddenly becomes clear why John has chosen that particular phrase to begin his letter to the Christians at Pergamum. Roman steel is mighty indeed, and mighty scary. But Christ also carries a two-edged sword: The Word. The Word of God's love and mercy, and of an eternal Kingdom. And the sword of God's Word will spread and bring light, hope, redemption, and spiritual awakening. And in the end, Roman steel will be no match for it. At the time John wrote The Revelation, this must have seemed, even to many Christians, like sheer and silly wishful thinking. But it turned out to be history. Between 312 and 325 A.D., it was clear that the Roman Empire had fallen to the sword of Christ. But it was not a sword that spilled blood. As the Book of Hebrews proclaims, it is a sword that cuts to the heart and soul within – and converts.

Until then, however, the proconsul of the province of Asia has the two-edged sword of Rome. In his hands, it is the right of life or death over any individual. So John begins his letter to Pergamum by reminding the church of ONE who has an even greater sword, and more authority over

life and death than the entire Roman Empire could possibly imagine. This is not a new idea to Christians. “*Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul.*” (Matthew 10:28) There is no freedom for any of us as long as we fear physical death. Sometimes we forget. And when we do, we get frantic. Then we end up living under all kinds of pressures and for all kinds of purposes that we never intended to let be part of our living or our striving. You are baptized into death. You have accepted and experienced it. You have died with Christ. Death – and all its power plays – can no longer influence or control you. What marvelous freedom!

“*I know where you live, it is the place where Satan has his throne.*” The whole city of Pergamum looks like a great throne rising out of the valley. And John makes it clear that he is no Pollyanna. The church at Pergamum is living on top of its own death warrant. Roman authority is everywhere. “*I know where you live.*” Well, says John, let’s begin by getting our perspective straight: Which throne do we care about, and whose authority do we really trust and believe in?

Even more interesting to me, though maybe not as important, is the realization that John has now clearly linked the Roman Empire with Satan. Rome is the enemy! The military, political, and economic might that is the Roman Empire – and all of its systems and structures, though they control the world – in John’s view are all tools of Satan. No surprise to us perhaps, but in John’s day this was brash and bold. No beating around the bush, no equivocation. Rome is the enemy. Paul never thought of Rome as the enemy. He had died about thirty-five years earlier, still encouraging Christians to respect and obey Roman rule. The Revelation honors Paul’s teachings in many ways, but it breaks dramatically at this point. Maybe Rome used to be great and did a lot of good at one time, but now she thinks she is God, and her emperors think they can usurp the place of God, and so more and more evil flows from her. It had happened in Egypt and Babylon and Assyria. Now it had infected the Roman Empire: the God-complex – humans usurping the place of God. And human misery is the inevitable counterpart. The principle has been at least as much at work in the twentieth century as it ever was in the past. Do you think the principle will be repealed in the twenty-first century? In the words of Sancho Panza in *Man of la Mancha*: “Thank God I won’t be there to see.” The catch is, some people we care about will be.

The church will not try to fight Rome with physical force. It is not Christ’s way. But there can be no quarter. There can be no compromises,

no softening of the differences between them, no halfway truces. Here, at this point in history, the sword of the Gospel is against the sword of Rome. The battle lines are drawn. Only, for the Christians of John's day, these are not fighting words. These are dying words.

Smyrna and Pergamum are clearly the two toughest places for Christians to live. Smyrna because the citizens are such gung-ho Roman enthusiasts; Pergamum because that is where the courts of Rome sit and pass down sentence. Christians are complimented for holding fast to Christ's cause – for not denying their faith (probably for not burning incense to Caesar) – despite the danger and the fact that they live where the Roman government is based. Or, as John says, “where Satan's throne is.” But John (or the Spirit) is clearly worried about them. While most are being courageous and faithful, there are some among them who are teaching compromise: “Let's get along in the world we live in. Let's be realists. Surely God wants us to live. What's wrong with enjoying life a little?” And the Spirit is worried because those who are teaching such things are being tolerated. Ephesus is complimented for not allowing false teachers; at Pergamum, everybody has a right to their own opinion. There is always more than one pit to fall into. It is dangerous to begin playing games with compromise – at least with compromise that is, at its roots, unfaithful.

The story of Balaam and Balak to which John refers is found in the Book of Numbers, chapters 22-24 (and 31:8, 16). Balak was the king of Moab in the time of Moses. After Israel's successful campaigns against his neighbors (Sihon and Og), Balak became alarmed. He sent for Balaam, a famous oracle (holy man) who lived in Pethor on the Euphrates River. We hear then a fascinating story of a non-Jewish seer who rejected all of Balak's gifts and threats and continued to bless Israel and declare that she would be victorious, even predicting (24:17) the coming of David three hundred years into the future (a star). But later generations much maligned this Balaam, and they decided that he must have returned later to get money from Balak and, in exchange, advised him to instruct the Moabite women to entice the Israelite men into idolatry and other things, explaining that though he could not curse Israel, if the women could tempt them into sin, God would punish them himself – thus achieving Balak's hopes in a different way. If you cannot turn the Lord from his people, turn the people from their Lord.

Hard for us to identify with, perhaps, but Christians at the turn of the first century were having a very hard time deciding how to behave as faithful followers of Jesus in the midst of a pagan world. One of the hottest debates was about food and eating – what to eat, whom to eat with, and under what circumstances. Sharing food is always more than sharing food. People take in a lot more than food when they eat together. Meals have a way of expressing the meaning of a culture, and the faith behind that meaning. Temples, remember, were the meat markets as well as the kitchens and restaurants of the time. If you got meat from the Zeus Market (temple of Zeus) and took it home without any of the Zeus meaning in your mind or heart, then that was fine, according to Paul. But the lines were being drawn a lot tighter now. If friends invited you to dinner and they were eating the meal in full honor of Zeus, then what? And often “they” were *watching* now, to see if you were a traitor to the Emperor – that is, to see if you were a friend of the outlawed Christ. Perhaps we would all say, “So what? My religion is a private affair.” But by John’s day, many Christians were saying, “Not on your life!” There was this thing about *bearing witness* ...

One of the ways to soften persecution is to become friends with the society around you. Fear, suspicion, and persecution are not as likely against people you know by name, people you see at the same parties, people who belong to the same clubs or organizations, people you do business with. Some Christians were saying: Let’s not make things any worse than they have to be. Let’s not stand out or be more different than necessary. We have to blend in, if we expect to live and survive here. Let’s not be sticks-in-the-mud. Let’s not make people uncomfortable by making them think we feel superior or judgmental. Loosen up. Live and let live. Lots of pagans are nice people. Who are we to think we have some special truth? Tolerance, friends, tolerance! Isn’t tolerance next to love, like cleanliness is next to godliness?

The message to Pergamum is hard for us liberal Christians. For sixty years we have been concentrating on the sins of orthodoxy, without any awareness of the sins of heterodoxy. We hardly remember the word. All our focus has been on people left out, until there is nothing to be left out *of*. All our focus has been on how belief judges others, until it has become morally reprehensible to believe anything of a religious nature. Our whole culture is mightily concerned about being politically incorrect. But who cares about being spiritually incorrect? Pergamum is being warned that some among them are trying to reduce, minimize, and

smooth away all the hard and challenging realities of the Christian Life. If they do not wake up – if they let these teachings go unchallenged – they will lose it all. We can barely believe our ears. Who among us would dream of insisting that anybody ever *has* to believe anything? There is no “sword” – no WORD. The letter to Pergamum must be a dud among the seven.

But back to it: Most of the folk at Pergamum are faithful and courageous, but the Spirit is still worried. No one seems to be speaking against the tolerance faction, and does that mean the faction will convince more and more people into their way of thinking? You had better reorder your priorities, says the Spirit. The biblical word is REPENT. If you look just like the life going on all around you, maybe you *are* just like the life going on all around you. If the life going on around you is not dedicated to Christ and you are, you have a problem! Somehow, I suspect this issue did not dissolve back in 96 A.D. The letter says to the church at Pergamum, in no uncertain terms: “It is time to stop compromising with pagan ways. Do not worship idols (false goals), and do not behave in ways that maybe please your friends but do not honor your Lord.”

What do you think? Have these issues disappeared in our long march of progress? Is it still possible to find ourselves in a church like Pergamum? We have looked at three patterns; there are four more to go. What is the Spirit saying today to our church?

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The sermon has ended, but as usual we have a few “leftover” symbols to wonder about. The church at Smyrna was promised a victory wreath. They could not be touched by the second death – if they stayed faithful. What do the Pergamum Christians receive if they stay faithful? They get some of the hidden manna, and a white stone with a new name written on it. Why do I have the feeling you’re not terribly impressed or excited?

Legend had it that the prophet Jeremiah had hidden the manna in a cave on Mount Nebo and that he would bring it out when the Messiah came. (Others thought the manna was hidden in the Ark of the Covenant, in a cave somewhere on Mount Sinai.) John says that Pergamum Christians are being enticed to eat food offered to idols – to

join in the banquets of Pergamene society – but that if they stay faithful, they will be eating banquets with the Messiah (Jesus had often promised it, you recall), and that *that* food is better than any meal Pergamum has ever heard of, feeding body, mind, heart, and soul. Do not settle for the fast food at McPergamum’s! It may seem enticing and important at the moment, but in a few hours, it will all be over and gone.

A white stone, called a *tessera*, was often used as a voting ballot. You could put in a black stone for “No” or a white stone for “Yes.” But no black stone is mentioned here. A *tessera* was also used as a ticket – a proof of invitation, and permission to enter. That is the more likely meaning here: The white stone will get you into the Promised Land – into Heaven. Only, a new name will be written on it. In the ancient world, a *true* NAME carried with it the essence – the true identity – of a person. You did not let your real name be known except to the most trusted of friends. Your baptized name was known only to fellow believers. But John is saying that you do not even know your own true name yet. Only Christ does. You will find out who you really are – what God truly designed you for and made you for – and it will be far more than you ever dreamed of. And that name will be written on the white stone – your invitation to eternal life.

By the way, on top of the great hill of Pergamum stood the Augustan temple. Octavian had received a new name from the Roman Senate: Augustus – Augustus Caesar. “Augustus” – the august one – was a word used only by priests, and it had never been applied to a human being before. Most people thought Octavian was the greatest man who ever lived, and they would go on thinking so for generations to come. Among other things, he was called “King of kings, and Lord of lords.” He had received a new name to match his true identity. But John is saying, “His name will pale to insignificance beside the new name you will receive if you stay faithful to Christ.”

As always, John’s excitement and enthusiasm about the Lord and what the Lord is doing come bursting through, despite all the problems and persecutions and challenges of his present time. From his place of isolation on Patmos, I do not suppose he was thinking much about getting rich or famous in this world. But he sure was turned on about something. I rather hope all of us are getting turned on by it too.

## THYATIRA

Thyatira sat at the mouth of a long vale which joined the Caicus Valley with the Hermus Valley. The town was near the left bank of the Lycus River, and was about fifty miles inland from the Aegean Sea and about thirty-five miles beyond Pergamum. There were no noteworthy landmarks, no famous temples or libraries or theaters. The local deity, Tyrimnos, was a horseman carrying a battle-axe. I could find no information to indicate that he was important, unusual, or even interesting. Sometimes we are disrespectful of other religions by default. I wonder if any of your friends feel that way about yours? (Tyrimnos was probably a form of Apollo.)

Thyatira had been built by Seleurus I as a border town between his own kingdom (Lydia) and the old Pergamene kingdom. Thyatira was not defensible; it was an early-warning system between Sardis and Pergamum, the two great fortress capitals of the region. Any army marching east or west would take Thyatira and then use it as its own outpost and early-warning system. Under these circumstances, citizens of Thyatira were not likely to develop intense political loyalties. They had their own community subculture regardless of what flag was flying or which army was garrisoned in town at the moment. Consequently, there is no important history or heritage to be found in connection with Thyatira. It is the least distinguished and the least famous of the seven cities. The Elder Pliny comments, "Thyatira and other unimportant communities." *Inhonora civitas*: "A city of no first-rate dignity." Colin Hemer writes: "The longest and most difficult of the seven letters is addressed to the least known, least important, and least remarkable of the cities."

Of course, that is precisely what *is* remarkable. The letter goes to unimportant people, in an unimportant church, in an unimportant town. That in itself is a message. From the Spirit's point of view, there *are* no unimportant people or churches or towns. It is as important to be faithful in Thyatira as it is to be faithful in Ephesus, Smyrna, or Pergamum. Truly, nobody knows what the future holds, or which influence will be most important or crucial in the long run. The Spirit is just as interested and concerned about Thyatira as about Ephesus. Does Heaven care about earthly geography or reputation? The Spirit is just as eager for the folk in Thyatira to be faithful as for anybody else, anywhere.

The real pulse of Thyatiran life, however, was not political but economic. The life of Thyatira was in her trade guilds. There were more trade guilds in Thyatira than in any other Asian city. They were the power behind the scene, and the real heartbeat of the city. There were woolworkers, linenworkers, outer-garment makers, leatherworkers, tanners, potters, bakers, slave dealers, bronzesmiths. Each was a guild, a union, a social organization in its own right. Each had its own gods, initiation rites, feasts, and inner organization. If you were not a soldier and you wanted to make it at Thyatira, you needed to belong to one of the trade guilds. We remember that when Paul was in Philippi (in Macedonia), he met a woman from Thyatira. *“One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods ...”* (Acts 16:14) We presume she was wealthy, since purple goods were enormously expensive.

The Christians at Thyatira were probably not as severely pressured by the cult of emperor worship as they were in some other cities in Asia. The Emperor was worshipped in Thyatira as Apollo incarnate, so the danger was still real, but Thyatirans were not as zealous as Smyrnans or as official as Pergamenes. But to make a living, they needed to belong to one of the trade guilds. And to belong to a guild meant participating in the pagan rites and social gatherings of that guild. You have noticed that theological problems in the early church were not theoretical. They were practical, real-life issues: How should we live? What should we do? What kind of behavior bears witness to Christ? What kind of activity tears down Christ’s authority and purpose?

Well, back to the letter. Because little is known of the details of life at Thyatira, the many allusions John makes are harder to trace than in the other letters. In the main, the letter is highly complimentary. “I know all your ways – love, faithfulness, good service, fortitude – and of late, you have done even better than at first.” I am sure we can all identify with that. Oops, sorry ... it’s supposed to be *your* job to decide where the shoe fits. Anyway, Thyatiran Christians get the award for “Most Improved Players.”

The church at Thyatira is an active, hard-working group of people who put their faith into practice. John’s one concern centers around a leading figure in the congregation: a woman who claims to be a prophetess – a person of exceptional spiritual interests and gifts. Apparently she has set herself up as the special spiritual guide of the

congregation and, by the intensity of John's opposition, we gather that her influence is considerable. Not everybody is accepting everything she teaches, but neither is she formally opposed. Because of the allusion to Jezebel – Israel's most wicked queen – some scholars have supposed that she is the wife of the leading elder of the congregation. Interesting, but only a wild guess.

It may be that this woman is teaching sexual freedom as part of the spiritual path. We know there were Gnostic groups in the second and third centuries which believed that the spiritual was important and that the physical was completely irrelevant. Some Gnostic groups drew strange conclusions from this careless theology. Down through the ages, we have seen the church struggle with the aberrations: be celibate, or be licentious. Sexuality is the Creator's design, but it is beautiful in a long-term, committed relationship of trust and love called "marriage." It causes enormous heartache in casual liaisons, no matter how we try to pretend otherwise – and even before we mention the children. But hardly any generation goes by without some group or guru trying to make a case for the godliness of promiscuity. The Gospel frees us from the Law ... therefore, follow the guidance of your sexual urges. Somehow that does not sound like turning will and life over to the authority of the Holy Spirit, but some people keep trying to make them sound synonymous. Mayhem follows. I am not talking about mistakes, blunders, and sins. Christians are supposed to know what to do about those: Confess, repent, claim forgiveness and grace, and start over. There is always new life in Christ Jesus. But if we corrupt the goals, say that the curses are blessings, and set up the alienation patterns as our models *on purpose*, how will we ever come to true love or reconciliation?

John is angry, or is expressing the Spirit's anger. You can feel it in the letter. This woman is a danger, and if the congregation does not wake up – if they allow her theories and persuasions to go unchallenged – a lot of people are going to end up messed up. Whether on purpose or not, she is teaching evil. "The two shall become ... whomever you happen to feel like fooling around with at the moment." So John is saying: What are you thinking?! This is not going to work out well for her or anybody who listens to her. John writes this in about 90 A.D. Why are we still having trouble getting and keeping it clear? Jezebel is not the church's friend. Not all the threats and dangers are from outside the church; some of the worst are from *inside* the church. "*I am the searcher of men's hearts and minds.*" (2:23) Emperors running around pretending they are God is a

serious threat from the outside. But if within the church we do not know our rightful King, that is an even more serious threat.

Of course, the Old Testament prophets frequently used licentiousness as an analogy for idolatry. People who played around with other gods or pagan rites, they said, were treating God like an unfaithful wife treats her husband. Maybe Jezebel here is merely encouraging idolatry, telling people not to worry about burning incense to Caesar or eating the meat offered to idols. “It’s okay to be part of the trade guilds, and to participate in their pagan worship feasts. Don’t be exclusive. Jesus is only one among many saviors – not the *only* Savior. Love your neighbors – be friendly and accepting. After all, God knows you need to be successful to support your families. Lighten up!” Of course, if the Thyatiran Christians believe this, it will do them even more damage than licentiousness. Spiritual damage is always worse than physical damage. But we are here today, so reading The Revelation must have reached them. Maybe it will reach us too.

The prophetess at Thyatira is also claiming to teach people deep spiritual truths, when in fact she is leading people into satanic mysteries and idolatry. You know how it goes: “Jesus Christ is only for beginners. Now let me introduce you to some really important spiritual truth and power.” Human beings love mystery, and they long to learn hidden truth that will give them special discernment and power – and if possible, help them feel superior and give them some advantage over muggles or gringos or pagans, or whatever our name is for the outsiders. A heresy (from the Christian perspective) is anything which teaches that the love of Christ is insufficient by itself to save us – to lead us into LIFE. That it is not enough to know Jesus Christ – not enough to follow Him and turn will and life over to the guidance of His Holy Spirit – you must also ... and here you may add in whatever you like. What are some of the things we add in today? You must also: hate gays, or love gays; use inclusive language; vote for my candidate; be politically correct; have a successful career; give money to worthy causes. Of course, most famous heresies claim to know several dimensions and layers of esoteric knowledge beyond knowing Jesus Christ.

John is warning the Thyatirans that it is necessary for Christians to recognize and avoid heresy when they run into it. I suspect it never crossed John’s mind that the church would one day be powerful enough to persecute others with its opinions in much the same way as the

Roman Empire was persecuting the church in John's time. Masonry, for instance, has frequently been called a heresy by various wings of the Christian church. You think that doesn't hurt, in our culture and time? It is sheer careless and ignorant slander. "*You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.*" Just because humans want knowledge and explore physics, chemistry, psychology, art, or any other field of human endeavor and knowing *does not* mean they are heretics. *Only if you are a Christian in the first place* and then claim that there is knowledge or mystery beyond the love of Christ that is necessary to salvation – only *then* are you a heretic.

"It is not enough to be a Christian, you must also obey the Law of Moses." That is called the Jewish heresy. "It is not enough to be a Christian, you must also be rich and successful." That is the American heresy. Even the study of Scripture can turn into a Gnostic heresy cult, where knowing the Bible becomes more important than knowing God.

But, John says, the "children of Jezebel" will not survive. History bears this out. The cults come and go; spiritual fads impress people for only a few years. Jesus Christ outlives them all. A hundred years from now, people will not be talking much about the Moonies or the Beatles – have you noticed? In my last church, when I went for the first time to the high school youth group, the adult advisor was actually telling the kids that John Lennon was more important to our culture than Jesus. That advisor was a nice man and he meant well, but he had no perspective. A hundred years from now, a lot of things that we think are critical and terribly important today will be forgotten. But people will still be drawn to the Cross of Jesus Christ. And of course they will also be talking about whatever cults and fads are current in their own time. But those too will fade and pass. The greatest fad of all, in John's time, was allegiance to the Roman Emperor.

"A church that marries the spirit of this age will become a widow in the next." Or so it has been said. You can only get a limited number of people to be interested in preserving displays of life from a former time. It is not just *people* who leave the church; sometimes *the church* stops being the church. The Holy Spirit gets bored with our agendas and walks out. After that, people begin to get bored too. If the people keep helping and supporting each other, sometimes the Spirit circles back to see if there is a chance to bring the whole thing back to life again – that is, to LIFE in Christ Jesus.

I took a course in seminary that was never offered. One of those “flukes” you don’t pay much attention to at the time, until years later you look back and say, “Aha, that’s what ruined me.” Anyway, I needed money and took a job setting up the new tape library of sermons for Ed Lynn, the homiletics professor. Hour after hour, week after week, month after month, it was my job to tape the lending copies of our growing library of sermons, and to make new copies if they got worn or lost. Talk about bored! I have preached a few sermons of my own since then, and I know how easy it is to preach boring sermons. Safer too – nobody writes you nasty letters or tries to lynch you or get you fired just because they are bored. There were some wonderful exceptions, to be sure. I came to a tape of George MacLeod one day – a sermon from Second Corinthians, “*God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself*” (5:19) – and I have not recovered yet.

But most of the sermons, from supposedly our best preachers, said very little. By the time you got through the stories and illustrations, it was mostly pablum: “Be nice. Stay out of trouble. It’s good to help people. Let’s try to make it a better world.” The good preachers told interesting anecdotes; the others just droned it out. John would have had apoplexy. Jesus would have gone looking for some sinners who wanted more from life. It was truly boring! I thought I was studying to become a minister, but most of these sermons were *surely* not reflecting what Jesus lived and died to invite us into. People should defy the Roman Empire and put their lives on the line ... so their children could smile and have nice table manners?

The trouble with heresies is not that they are unintelligent, or evil in and of themselves. Heresy merely invites us to put our faith in things that cannot save us – like knowledge, money, sex, secret theories. Heresy is a spiritual flat tire – it leaves you stranded, sometimes far from home, in a bad storm. The trouble with putting faith in the wrong place is that it lets us down, sometimes when we are in desperate need. I think the worst heresy of all is the church telling people that God does not have many challenges or demands to lay on us: that Christ will never disrupt our lives, ask for any sacrifices, change our priorities, do anything to inconvenience us; that Christianity is safe and comfortable, and we don’t really have to do anything to help build Christ’s Kingdom in our own time; that there is no particular plan or purpose for our own lives, except getting comfortable and doing our own thing. It is the worst heresy of all, and the most deadly. We would be better off out committing adultery or robbing,

lying to, and cheating our neighbors than sitting around safe and comfortable in our “Christianity” without any true desire or intention to serve Christ and His Kingdom – without expressing genuine gratitude for the love, mercy, and grace we have been shown.

When the chips are down and the records are all in, we are saved by God’s sheer, undeserved love and mercy, not by anything we know or believe or have accomplished. If we can walk on water, heal cancer with thought waves, and guide others through times of inner turmoil – even *that* is not going to save us, and it does not make us superior enough to overcome death or sin or depression. If you can do such things under Christ, most certainly you *ought* to do them! But that is not the core of Christianity. That is not what Christianity is about.

And yet, if you are frightened of heresy and do not comprehend what Christianity is really about, pretty soon there is nothing left to talk about except “Be nice. Do good deeds. And stay out of trouble.” Instead of tracking Christ into the endless dimensions and adventures of LIFE – following Him into our own personal vocations and destinies – the church starts boring itself to death.

Christianity is full of mystery. Every genuine prayer is an attempt to make contact with a Being so many dimensions beyond us that one clear glimpse of this Being’s reality would fry all our circuits. We only hope and trust that this Numinous One is gentle and caring enough to deal with us without destroying us. Jesus claims this is so, and with fear and trembling we stumble into The Presence, hoping He knows what He’s talking about. Merely avoiding heresy is not a solution to heresy. We are not close enough to the real truth to be locking anything down that tight. Staying close to Jesus Christ and, with humble wonder and trust, going on into any area He leads us into is never safe – and never boring. But being too frightened to be a spiritual pilgrim and explorer is one of the greatest heresies of all. Then truly, fear has become bigger than faith in Jesus Christ.

In Thyatira, a woman is leading people into mysteries and idolatries. She is claiming to be somebody special, a super-spiritual being herself. That is one sure sign of heresy. All people are super-spiritual beings, or none of us were created by God. But none of us made ourselves, and none of us have fulfilled our potential enough to rest on any laurels. We each walk our own pilgrimage with Christ. No other person can do that for us. Secondly, she is claiming to take people *beyond* Christ. There is

no such place! Where do we think He has *not* been? But there are lots of places we can go without trusting or inviting Christ's presence. Not a very smart move, if we plan to go very far.

No New Testament writer has delved more deeply into spiritual mysteries and meanings than John. He is writing this Revelation from conscious awareness on a spiritual plane so advanced that it would make most modern Christians gasp and shudder. So they quote John to scare other Christians out of exploring the very realms that are John's own reason for living. Is that not infuriating? John is not telling the people of Thyatira to close down their spiritual journeys. But John is an old man. He has seen a lot. He knows that this woman's fancy theories and fascinating promises all dead-end thirty feet up the road she is suggesting. He does not want his Thyatiran friends to trade the vast reaches of Christ's Kingdom for useless, temporal trash. But of course you're right – he should not have let himself become so adamant and angry.

Nevertheless, we get a surprise. The Christians at Thyatira who remain faithful will be given authority over the nations. In Greek, they will “shepherd” the nations – they will teach and guide them in the future with the authority of Christ, which will not fall or fail. Apparently John believes that the Christians at Thyatira are indeed spiritually awake and alive, and that they will increasingly have much to offer and to share – if they just don't get sidetracked, or narrow-minded, or forgetful of the real source of all truth and mystery. A church that is alive and awake to the spiritual dimensions is, of course, more likely to attract a self-appointed prophetess who will try to corrupt the journey. John is terribly eager that this woman not ruin what is growing at Thyatira.

The faithful Thyatirans will also receive the morning star. Do we still imagine that John is against the esoteric? John himself knows many “mysteries.” Most of you have sung the hymn about “He is the bright and morning star.” “Venus” is one of the early church's nicknames for Christ. And it is more specific than that: the morning star is symbol of Christ in the role of the Revealer of New Truth – Christ as Truth, and Truth-Bringer.

So the Thyatirans, if they stay faithful, will become just what they most care about and hope to be: the teachers and revealers of spiritual truth. No doubt this “Jezebel,” from her own perspective, is trying to do it faster and better. John is not against mystery, exploration, scary spiritual

dimensions, or getting in over our heads. He just wants the Thyatirans to stick with Christ. Keep close to the One who knows what He is doing.

The bronzesmiths of Thyatira are probably the most powerful trade guild in the city. John's mention of feet of burnished bronze probably has implications we can no longer trace. On the other hand, "the eyes like a flame of fire" is not at all obscure. "*The searcher of men's hearts and minds.*" (2:23 REB) The flashing fire of His eyes at the beginning, the searching spirit in the middle, and the gift of the morning star at the end of the letter all carry the central theme and message: You are doing well, learning fast, and soon you will have much to teach and share. Only, do not be taken in by those who think they have gone beyond Christ. There is only one Spirit that we finally and truly trust. There is only ONE we wish to follow.

## SARDIS

Last week we came through Thyatira, a city of little political or historical significance. It stood on the vale between the Caicus Valley and the Hermus Valley. Moving on southeast through the Hermus Valley for thirty miles, we come to Sardis, the most famous of the ancient cities of Asia Minor (with the possible exception of Troy).

It should be obvious by now that John is drawing a huge circle in Asia with his seven cities. “The seven that make one” represent all the churches in Asia – and indeed, all churches everywhere. Nevertheless, they were also real-life, individual congregations at the time. And they each struggled with life-and-death issues of faith and survival in their own surroundings. In more than a symbolic way, the fate and effectiveness of the Christian Gospel in Asia depended upon how these congregations lived, decided, and kept faithful to Jesus Christ.

In the range of mountains bordering the Hermus Valley, there was a mountain named Tmolus. A narrow ridge of rock jutted out from Mount Tmolus like a huge ocean pier. The top of the ridge towered fifteen hundred feet above the valley floor. From the south side of this ridge, a steep and narrow road had been built which ran down to the valley. That was the only access to Sardis, the city built on top of this gigantic rock ridge. Except for this one narrow road, the cliffs were sheer. The Pactolus River ran down Mount Tmolus to join the Hermus River in the valley. You get the picture: A constant supply of fresh water. An impregnable fortress supplied by nature. And on top of that, men built walls and battlements and then the buildings of their city. Ten good men could defend Sardis from an army of thousands, and seven of them could be taking a nap. No siege tactics would work. Sardis was one of the greatest fortress cities of the ancient world.

Aside from water, the Pactolus River carried another item important to Sardis: Gold dust. Lots of it. In ancient times, the city was immensely wealthy. Some of you remember from childhood the stories of the fabled wealth of King Croesus. He was king of Lydia and ruled from guess where? Sardis. He was the first person in Asia to mint coins (560 B.C.). And some of you remember King Midas (of Phrygia), who asked a boon from the gods that everything he touched would turn to gold. After getting hungry

because his food kept turning into gold, and after losing all his important relationships because he kept turning people into gold (ah, such a fable – the ancients were not without wisdom), Midas went back to beg the gods for release from his sad boon. He was told to go bathe in the Pactolus River. Ever afterward, the Pactolus rolled over golden sands.

The ancient Greeks (Ionians) tried many times to capture Sardis. No matter who tried, how many they sent, or what the scheme for success was, nobody had any luck. Finally they realized that it had nothing to do with courage, determination, tactics, equipment, or skill; it simply was not possible. Whoever ruled Sardis, ruled the Kingdom of Lydia, the center of Asia Minor. If you could not take Sardis, you could not control the territory – and nobody could take Sardis. So we are talking about one of the greatest cities of the ancient world (founded almost as far back as Moses). Five roads converged in the valley below the city. They headed to and from any place in Asia. Sardis was the center of the wool industry. Sardis was also the center for the worship of Cybele (later identified with Artemis), the ancient mother-goddess of Asia. Cybele was said to have the power to bring the dead back to life. It was a wild, frenzied, hysterical cult with rites based on the mystery of life and rebirth, and symbolized by sexual reproduction. There were also hot springs on the mountain, and Sardis was a health and healing resort. But even among pagans, Sardis was notorious for loose living, luxury, pleasure-seeking, and general decadence. There are cities in other parts of the world that still have such a reputation, but not in our enlightened country, thank goodness. (Las Vegas, Reno, Miami, Provincetown. Is Atlantic City too old now? I even hear rumors about places closer to home, but I'm sure there is no truth to them.) As in our day, lots of folk in Sardis thought that being called a center for loose living, decadence, and pleasure-seeking was a high compliment indeed. (Who wants to go have a "Heaven of a good time"?)

John's letter, as usual, will play off of some of the setting and history of Sardis. Sardis became prominent about the time of Ulysses. For six hundred years, it stood as the unconquerable queen of the territory. But in 549 B.C., Cyrus, the king of Persia, captured it in one night. The Greeks could not believe it! News of the event stunned the ancient world. If Sardis could fall, nothing was safe; *anything* could happen.

The story is that Heroeades, one of Cyrus' soldiers, saw a Lydian soldier high up on the walls of Sardis accidentally drop his helmet down the cliff. It caught partway down, and the soldier climbed down to retrieve

it. Heroeades studied the cliffs and realized that there was a way to climb up to the place where the soldier had rescued his helmet. But from down below, it did not look possible to get from that point on up to the top. Only, now he had seen the Lydian soldier do it. That night, Heroeades led a select band of climbers up the cliff and found the battlements completely unguarded – not a single sentry. There was no threat, so nobody was watching. Sardis fell, from sheer carelessness and overconfidence. One child with a rock or two could have saved the city. But nobody was watching. The event made a deep impression on the ancient world for a while – but not deep enough in Sardis.

In 216 B.C. – can you believe it? – the very same thing happened again! Some of us are slow learners. Or maybe it's just hard to remember a lesson for three hundred and thirty-three years. Anyway, Antiochus the Great besieged the city in that year. He remembered the story of Heroeades. Lagoras, one of his soldiers, led fifteen men up the impossible cliffs to open the gates from within. Again there was nobody on watch. Remember John's letter: *"If you are sure you will stand, beware lest you fall."* The letter rings with it: "Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die!"

When Jesus was about twenty-one years old (17 A.D.), a great earthquake destroyed twelve Asian cities. Sardis was hit the hardest of all. Pliny called it the greatest disaster in human memory. The Emperor Tiberius promised to give the people of Sardis ten million *sesterces* (coins), and he canceled all taxation for a period of five years so that Sardis could be rebuilt. It was an amazing act of wise statesmanship and generosity on the part of Tiberius. But by the time of Revelation, seventy-five years later, the Roman Empire had changed a lot and Sardis was no longer prominent or important. As with Pergamum, the military position of Sardis had become an anachronism. Who wanted to climb all the way up into that great citadel, when Rome had extinguished the threat of invading armies down below? On top of that, the gold from the Pactolus River had dried up. Soon the city would too. Like many other cities in Asia, Sardis had competed for the privilege of building the central temple for emperor worship in the province. Sardis argued its case on the basis of its glorious past; Smyrna argued on the basis of what it could contribute to the future of the Empire. Do I need to tell you who won?

Among the seven letters, none is as harsh and scathing as the letter to Sardis. Ephesus is faithful, efficient, stalwart – but not very

warm or loving. Smyrna is beautiful, a spiritual wonder – but also terribly poor and persecuted. Pergamum is trying, but trying to have it both ways – trying to be faithful while still being successful and acceptable in a pagan society. Thyatira is full of promise, if it doesn't go off-course into sexual license or ungrounded mysteries and idolatries – but Thyatira is learning fast and wins the “Most Improved Player” award. Clearly the church at Sardis wins the booby-prize. The church at Sardis, so far as John's letter is concerned, does not even deserve to be called a church.

Some think John is still hopeful that the church will repent. Doubtless he would very much like that to happen. But he does not seem to have much hope for it. He seems, rather, to be encouraging a few individuals to stay faithful even though the church where they live has completely deserted the cause. I have a few friends who have found themselves in that exact position. Very difficult.

In any case, there is not a single compliment for the church at Sardis. *“I have not found any work of yours completed in the eyes of my God.”* One is reminded of the seed that falls on rocky ground. (Matthew 13:20-21; Mark 4:16-17) One of the most impressive buildings in Sardis is a new temple built in honor of Artemis. Its design is marvelous and its twelve pillars are magnificent. It would be a marvelous temple indeed – only, the city has never gotten around to finishing it. This has become one of the city's chief embarrassments. When Sardis makes its bid to build the temple for the Emperor, of course people say, “You haven't even finished the last one you started!” The church at Sardis seems to have the same lack of follow-through.

Sardis has a reputation for being a healing center, and it boasts about the power of Cybele (and Artemis) to bring the dead to life. The truth is otherwise. The reputation is a lie, says John. And the church is just like the city – claiming to be a source of life, when in fact it is itself already dead. Materially speaking, the city is still wealthy and has many prosperous citizens. But that will not last long with the city itself in decline. It is a facade – an empty show. And according to the letter, the church at Sardis has all the same characteristics. Spiritually there is no power left. It is all outer show, with no inner reality to back it up.

Smyrna is dead, and yet alive. Sardis looks alive, but is in fact dead. The letter is short and far from sweet. There is not much to talk about. There are no big problems for the church at Sardis. How nice. They have

the peace of lethargy and uncaring – of easy-living and lost purpose – the peace of spiritual death.

The church at Sardis is not threatened with poverty, nor is it struggling with emperor worship or heresy. It is not struggling with *anything*. You have to be trying to *accomplish* something to have any real problems. There is not enough faith left in Sardis to illumine a heresy, or enough belief or commitment left to get anybody into trouble with the society around them. No temptation threatens those already fallen and content to stay that way. The Christians at Sardis have so merged with their surroundings that there are no issues left – and so, no Gospel or Kingdom of God left either. “A perfect model of inoffensive Christianity,” according to G.B. Caird (*The Revelation of St. John the Divine*).

“Wake up!” screams the letter. “Or I shall come upon you like a thief.” (Like Lagoras, or Heroeades.) Clearly John is referring to some of Jesus’ sayings, but he is also referring to Sardis’ greatest shame – twice captured because nobody was awake and watching. The question is: Can the church at Sardis still wake up, or is it already too late? Is it already captured, already fallen – too far gone to care anymore about Christ or the Kingdom or its true purpose?

All Roman citizens wore pure white togas on holidays, at religious ceremonies, and on days of triumph. *Candida urbs* = city in white. Of course, it was harder to keep clothes white before the days of all the television commercials. Nevertheless, white was a symbol of purity, festivity, and victory. Soiled clothes disqualified the worshipper and dishonored the god. Eventually, white garments became a Christian symbol of the “spiritual body” that would be received at the time of resurrection – a symbol of a person’s spiritual condition. (John speaks of white garments many times throughout *The Revelation*.) In the ancient baptismal rite of the church, a convert laid aside his old garments, was immersed in the water, and came out of the water to receive a new white garment as symbol of a New Life.

Remembering that Sardis was the center of the wool industry, John’s remarks about soiled and polluted garments is worse than sarcastic, and even rather crude. Passionate sorrow often comes out as anger. Nevertheless, there are a few individuals in Sardis who still remain faithful. They will walk in white and be robed in white, and their names will never be stricken from “The Book of Life.” One of the striking

messages in the letter to Sardis is this reassurance to the individual Christian. If you live in a faithless town, or even in a faithless, corrupt, or spiritually dead church, still your own witness and faithful life are important and precious to the Lord. Even if you do not have sufficient influence to awaken the church or to affect the town, nonetheless a white robe is a white robe. From John's perspective, you cannot own anything more important.

The reverse may not be true, though it is widely proclaimed and accepted in our day. If you live in a place where there are faithful churches and you do not participate in any of them, do you still get a white garment? Such a weird notion would never have occurred to John, and probably would never have occurred to any of the Christians of his day. It's funny how many people it seems to occur to in our day.

The imagery of The Book of Life is old and familiar from long before John. Nevertheless, every Roman city kept a registry of citizens. When a person died or was convicted of a criminal offense, his name was stricken from the registry. In the case of a criminal, he lost all rights and privileges of citizenship. John, of course, is alluding to a much more important registry of citizenship in "God's City" – a registry from which names will never be stricken.

The letter opens: *"The words of the One who holds the seven spirits of God, and the seven stars."* This is an attempt to remind the church at Sardis who holds true authority. The seven spirits are also in God's right hand, symbolizing God's action. It is as if Christ were saying to the Sardis Christians: "I am in action and at work in the world. I am on the move and have much to accomplish. So where are YOU?!" The answer is pretty clear. They are asleep, spiritually dead, lost in their own affairs and pleasures, soiling their garments, and missing out on every important purpose and truth in life.

So what do you do if you live in Sardis? You go on being faithful and bearing your witness in any way you can, to the best of your ability. And maybe someday they will build a new town and a new church five miles east of Sardis, down in the valley, where humbler and more down-to-earth folk can live and work and serve. Then maybe you can move and find new friends who really want to be part of Christ and His church. And that is exactly what happened.

So which of the churches is most like a church you know of around here? It is not fair yet, is it? We still need to visit Philadelphia and Laodicea. But the question is coming. Inevitably and unavoidably, the question is coming. And that is reason enough to pray ...

### PRAYER

Well, Lord, You probably take no comfort in it, but it is sometimes a trifle comforting for us to remember that the early Christians did not always do things exactly right either. And sometimes, looking back, with time and history to give it perspective, it is hard to see why they did not repent more easily and joyfully, and do things better than they did. It all makes so much sense ... looking back. How we love, at times, to talk disapprovingly about the Inquisition and the Crusades and the witch hunts and all the things we think were inexcusably dumb and wrong. It makes us feel so superior, in sort of a hollow way.

At other times, we are astounded to realize what our Christian forebears lived through – and how faithfully they lived and worked and decided and sacrificed – to bring news of Your love and purpose to all the people who eventually brought it to us. We are not so quick to compare ourselves then, or to feel superior. Lord, be merciful, and teach us also how to serve You in humility and devotion.

And so we wonder: Are You still sad for what happened in Sardis? Did John's letter get through in ways we do not know about, to people we have never heard of? It certainly *seems* sad, from everything we know. A whole church coming to life, swearing love and allegiance to You, and then letting it fade away, sift through their fingers, dwindle into nothing. The only things left: a memory, a bitter word, a sardonic, twisted smile – to die laughing but without any mirth. Sardis is sardonic. We do not want to be like Sardis.

Lord, please: when the question is asked, do not let us be like Sardis. Amen.

## PHILADELPHIA

Do you remember our mentioning King Eumenes when we were talking about the letter to Pergamum? Egypt had cut off the supply of papyrus to Pergamum because Eumenes had tried to entice Aristophanes to come from Alexandria and be the librarian at Pergamum. Anyway, that is why parchment, “the sheet of Pergamos,” was developed. And Pergamum continued to house one of the greatest libraries of the ancient world.

In this story, there are perhaps lessons about initiative and responding to problems with creative new solutions, and perhaps something about not trying to steal other people’s librarians in the first place. Personal history and world history are dotted with illustrations of people holding on to the past and shriveling up – or moving into the challenge and changes of life with new approaches. Are we merely studying history, or are we trying to learn from it?

Later (one hundred and ten years later, in 150 B.C.), Eumenes II became king of Pergamum. Politically speaking, Greece was in its twilight period and Rome was gathering power. (Third Punic War: Carthage was destroyed in 150-146 B.C.; Corinth was destroyed in 146 B.C.) But in terms of culture and ideas and religion, Hellenism was still sweeping the world. All old ideas and all local gods were being reinterpreted in the Greek mold. Eumenes II ruled an old Pergamene Empire, but he thought of himself as an enlightened Hellenist. The excitement of the world was turning to the Greek Way, and part of the concept of the Greek Way was the notion that all separate cultures and religions could come together in Hellenism and thus provide a basis for world peace.

Naturally, many people fought to preserve the old ways against the encroaching Hellenism. Not everybody in the Pergamene Empire was pleased with Eumenes and his zeal for Hellenistic ways. It was no great surprise, then, when word came back that enemies had followed Eumenes when he went to visit Greece and that he had been assassinated there. His younger brother, Attalus II, was crowned king in Pergamum.

Months later, however, Eumenes returned to Pergamum alive and well. Obviously the reports of his assassination had been greatly exaggerated. The enemies of Eumenes had been shrewd and cautious. Why go to a lot of trouble and danger? So they had faked the reports of the assassination, made sure nobody could trace them to their source, and

got Attalus firmly established on the throne. They figured that when Eumenes returned, nature would take its course and that would be the end of Eumenes. Nobody gives up a throne, right? Why take risks when a few well-placed lies can do the job? Satan's oldest ploy.

To everyone's amazement, and to some people's regret, Attalus immediately and joyfully welcomed his brother home and turned the throne back over to him – lock, stock, and backrest.

For years afterward, Roman representatives tried from time to time to persuade Attalus to lead a rebellion and take the throne for himself. He had much popularity, and Rome promised to back and support him with weapons and soldiers. In fact, Rome promised that with its aid, he would become king of all Asia.

But Attalus, so far as anybody knows, never seriously considered any of these offers or temptations. Eumenes had a long and influential reign. His only serious rival was a brother who loved and supported him with unshakable loyalty. So the kingdom stayed strong and unified. The factions that might have plagued or unseated Eumenes instead turned loyal because of his brother. Throughout his life, Attalus remained true and loyal to Eumenes. It won for him the nickname "Philadelphus" – lover of his brother. It was an unusual phenomenon, B.C. or A.D. Rome conquered and built its empire as much by intrigue and splitting its neighbor empires from within, as it did by straight military might. But while these brothers lived, Rome was unable to do that in Pergamum.

Someday, when I get time, I'm going to do a study of the world's great brothers. Lots of people have studied the Cain and Abel types, but I don't know of a good study of the Moses and Aaron pattern. Perhaps it has never been done because of insufficient material. Brotherly love, though a familiar phrase, is not a particularly frequent reality.

Anyway, Attalus became like a "Secretary of State" for his brother. At the request of Eumenes, Attalus spent his time spreading the Greek Way throughout the kingdom, trying to persuade neighboring kingdoms to consider and adopt Greek ideals, that there might be peace throughout the world.

Ten years later (140 B.C.), Eumenes founded a city on the border of his kingdom. It was built to be a kind of missionary outpost to the wilds of Phrygia. It was to be a "Peace Center" – an open door to the Phrygians, and a base from which to spread Hellenistic ideas and culture. It was

named “Philadelphia” in honor of Attalus. Later it was nicknamed “Little Athens” because it so represented everything Greek, with its many temples, games, and theaters.

Philadelphia, then, was the newest of the seven cities on John’s list. It had no long history. It was not the center of great battles. It was not yet a great city. Twenty-eight miles southeast of Sardis, Philadelphia sat on a small hill in the vale of Cogamis, a tributary to the Hermus Valley. Three thousand feet above sea level, Philadelphia was on the edge of a great plain called “katakekaumene” – the burnt land. It was a volcanic plain and extremely fertile. Economically, Philadelphia was prosperous, and it was destined for far greater prominence and prosperity. With vineyards lush and rich, the “katakekaumene” became famous for producing some of the world’s best wine. Contrary to some later opinions, that was not why they called it “the city of brotherly love.”

People in our area probably are not interested in such things, but volcanoes and earthquakes are sometimes related. Moreover, such areas seem to go through dormant periods and then reactivate. Philadelphia, it turned out, was built very close to a great fault line. You remember from last week that in 17 A.D., Sardis was devastated by an earthquake. The same earthquake hit Philadelphia. In this case also, Tiberius canceled taxation for five years and gave a large contribution toward the rebuilding of Philadelphia. But Philadelphia was closer to the center of the fault line and, for years afterward, earthquakes and aftershocks were a constant menace. (Strabo recounts that from 17 to 20 A.D., shocks hit almost daily.)

Without huge stone blocks and a whole army of laborers, there were no materials or technology to build buildings that could resist such shaking. Walls and buildings of normal stones, stacked on each other, came tumbling down. So, running out of town each time an earthquake hit became a way of life in Philadelphia. Many citizens set up tents and camped outside of town, waiting for earthquake season to pass. By the time of the Revelation letter, the area had quieted down again. But Philadelphians still lived in fear of a major earthquake – the “day of trial,” they called it. Many thought the city should be abandoned, and considered its citizens foolish to go on living there. But the vineyards were marvelous and the Philadelphians loved their city. In actual fact, earthquake season *was* over, for a while at least, and Philadelphia went on to become the most famous, faithful, and important of all the seven cities – the last center of Christendom in Asia.

Two other details that may have a bearing on John's letter:

1.) The citizens of Philadelphia were so grateful to Tiberius for his help that they renamed their city "Neocaesarea." Fortunately, the name only stuck for about twenty years and then reverted back to its original. It says something, nevertheless, about loyalty to the emperor, and the attitude in Philadelphia toward Christians unwilling to burn incense to the emperor.

2.) About the only thing they could do, in the first century A.D., to make buildings stronger against earthquakes was to build more pillars for support. It did not work very well, but it was the best they could do. Maybe with enough pillars, it would not all shake down, or at least not all at the same time. For years, the Philadelphians were doing everything they could to buttress and support their buildings, especially to save their temples. It became the custom to name a new pillar in honor of some citizen who had given special service to the community. Some of you may remember the phrase "a pillar of the church." Now you know where that phrase comes from. (Also from Galatians 2:9.)

That illumines the end of the letter: "*He who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God.*" It sounds cold and unlovely to modern ears. Who wants to be turned into a pillar? Only, it does not mean "make him into a pillar." It means make a pillar *for* him – make a pillar *in his honor*. And "*He shall never leave it.*" This does not mean that a person is unable to leave. It means no more running out of town to avoid falling buildings. The spiritual temple John cares about will be safe and secure, and it will never fall or shake down on the people's heads. We are getting familiar with John's love of new names to symbolize new understanding, new identity, new reality. He goes wild this time. The name will incorporate the name of God, the name of the city, and Christ's new name – total newness, total spiritual understanding ... and *far* surpassing the importance of Tiberius, and Rome itself. And this time the new name will stick! Not like the new name "Neocaesarea," which lasted for only a few years.

Philadelphia receives unmitigated praise. Among the seven churches, only poor, persecuted Smyrna and weak, powerless Philadelphia receive unmixed praise and appreciation. What do you make of that? Both congregations are under serious fire not only from their pagan surroundings but also from the influence of a powerful Jewish synagogue in the community. Both letters try to strengthen the churches against the claims

of Jewish contenders that Christianity is a false and blasphemous religion. “*These are the words of the holy one, the true one*” – that is, the genuine Messiah. In time, promises the letter to Philadelphia, it will become clear that the Lord loves His church, though there is not much outward evidence of it in Philadelphia when John writes this letter.

How we long for vindication! It is a desire full of hazards and danger, but it is still one of the great themes and motives of life. Someday, somebody should know what we were trying to accomplish, how much we cared, how hard we tried, what we went through trying to be faithful. We long for a day of vindication – a day when the real picture will come clear – and we will no longer look so stupid, or be chided by associates, or be misunderstood or lied about ... even by some of the very people we cared about the most. But who knows when, if ever – and it is not likely in this world, right? Well, it depends on which part of our living we happen to be thinking about at the moment. In any case, John is happy with the Philadelphians because they “hang in” regardless. So he gives strong encouragement and appreciation. Maybe we can take some encouragement and appreciation from him too.

\* \* \*

Christ has the key of David. He possesses the power to open or shut the gates of Heaven. By this time, Jews who have converted to Christianity have been shut out of the synagogue. That is part of the backdrop. Philadelphia had been built as an open door to Phrygia – a missionary city. That is doubtless also behind John’s choice of images. Only, access to God’s Kingdom is far more important. And while it is an important part of John’s message that Christ is able to open or shut the gates, the message is that the doors *are* open and *nothing* can shut them. Christ has the authority to open or shut the gates, but He chooses to throw them open.

Perhaps in Philadelphia, many people have been turning to the Christian Faith. At least John sees them as the church of the open door – probably with more depth to it than that phrase has usually carried in recent times. Mind you, the *Philadelphians* have not opened the door. Only Christ can do that. But they have acknowledged and cooperated with Christ, and that is sufficient. A bit of ancient wisdom we are forever forgetting.

## PHILADELPHIA

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Of all the seven letters, I hope the one to Philadelphia will become your favorite, and be the one you identify with most and feel the most kinship with. I know; I said it was *your* choice – and it is. But did I say I couldn't have any hope?

\* \* \*

A few side comments. I do not wish to make a lot out of them; just some interesting things to muse about. John praises two churches far beyond the others – Smyrna and Philadelphia. Ephesus was clearly the greatest city in Asia in Paul's day. We would expect it to be the most prominent church as Christianity spread and became prominent. But Ephesus was moved to a new location, as the letter suggested it would be. The new site did not solve its problems for long (the river still kept silting up), and Ephesus never regained its prominence. But I suppose we do not have time for such details about each of the cities. Let me say simply that John's portrait of the seven cities, and the character of the churches he portrays, holds an uncanny general accuracy for about a thousand years.

Smyrna and Philadelphia were to become the most distinguished "Christian cities" in Asia during the coming millennium. And they were the most faithful Christian centers under Turkish/Muslim rule. When Islam swept across Asia Minor, Philadelphia, far from the most easily defended site, stood as the last bastion of Christianity in all Asia. (And where was Sardis? Sardis that nobody could conquer? Still asleep, and uncaring. Where was Pergamum, the great citadel that no one could storm?)

Actually, Philadelphia, though besieged many times by the Muslims, never did fall from weakness or lack of courage. She was betrayed by *the Christians* in Byzantium (Constantinople/Istanbul), who were jealous of Philadelphia's prestige and honor. The city of brotherly love was finally betrayed by Christian brothers. (How comforting it would be to believe in Hell ... )

That really hurts. It speaks, but it hurts. "*Let no one rob you of your crown.*" Thirteen hundred years later, the brotherhood of the faith betrayed the city of brotherly love. "*A man's foes shall be those of his own household,*" said Jesus. Nobody hurts the church as much from the outside as the church hurts itself from the inside. Still, a thousand years of sterling witness and loyalty and faithfulness is not a bad record for any city – or church.

Fascinating, isn't it, that it is the Book of Revelation that reminds us: Cities and towns, like churches and individuals, have a character, a destiny, a unique individuality of their own. Each has its own part to play, and much depends upon how we each play our part within it. So there it is: Seven letters to seven churches. One more, and it will be your turn to discern what the Spirit is saying to our church, and to each one of us. But whatever you decide, and however it comes out, we are still, these many years later, sharing the communion meal of our Lord.

## LAODICEA

Forty-three miles southeast of Philadelphia (and only one hundred miles from Ephesus), Laodicea closes the circle of the seven cities of Revelation. Laodicea was the gateway between the inland kingdom of Phrygia and the descent from the mountains down the Maeander River to Ephesus and Miletus. The Lycus Valley was in a cleft between two mountain ridges – the one to the south rising eight thousand feet; the one to the north, five thousand feet. Laodicea was built by Antiochus II in 250 B.C. to command and defend this important gateway to inland Turkey and all points east. He named the city after his wife, Laodice. (If you run out of candy and roses, there's another idea for you.)

The Lycus Glen (*lycus* means “wolf”) was a double glen. Laodicea was built on the lower glen; Colossae was ten miles east on the upper glen. Six miles north of Laodicea was Hieropolis, with its hot springs and gleaming white calcareous terraces – like at Mammoth Springs in Yellowstone. Today, Hieropolis draws more tourists than either Colossae or Laodicea, and it is now called Pamukkale – “Cotton Castle” – because of the white bluffs created by the hot springs.

You know Paul's letter to the Colossians, and another to Philemon. At least most of you have copies lying around your house somewhere. “*For I want you to know how greatly I strive for you, and for those at Laodicea,*” wrote Paul to the Colossians (2:1). He had sent three letters together with the runaway slave, Onesimus, and his very good friend Tychicus. Philemon, the master from whom Onesimus had run away, was a member of the church at Colossae. Paul's letter to Philemon begged for Onesimus to be freed. Paul asked that those in the Colossian church share their letter with the church at Laodicea and, likewise, that they read the letter Paul had written to the Laodiceans. Doubtless Paul wrote many letters that have not been preserved, but one we know of specifically is this letter to Laodicea that none of us have ever seen. Maybe we get hints about why the Laodiceans did not care enough to preserve Paul's letter when we hear the cryptic message to the Laodiceans in Revelation. Somebody lost it in the pile of junk on their desk ... or perhaps they didn't think it was very important ... or maybe Paul was a little too harsh, so they threw it away. How interesting it would be if we could see what Paul's concerns and opinions were about the church at Laodicea thirty or forty years before the scathing indictment we read in Revelation. Anyway, these three cities were within sight of each other. At the time of the writing of Revelation, Laodicea was the most important of the three.

When Antiochus II founded the city, he settled it with Syrians and Jews from Babylon. The Jewish community was large and influential (estimated to be about seventy-five thousand adult men in 43 A.D.). There is no mention of trouble, however, between the Jews and the Christians at Laodicea. In fact, there does not seem to be any trouble at Laodicea period. It had been a “melting pot” of many races, cultures, and religions from its beginning. The Laodiceans had learned to live in harmony and compromise. *We* would salute them. John does not salute them. He thinks they are insipid and disgusting. I am getting ahead of my story, perhaps, but many have suggested that John was just a raving fanatic who could not tolerate normal, healthy people. Indeed, from the first to the twenty-first centuries, there is a gap of language, culture, setting, and perspective. Whatever we conclude about that, however, it is very clear that John thinks the Laodiceans have melted their faith in the melting pot along with everything else. Whatever light they had once known has become “the night in which all cats are gray.” (T.S. Eliot)

Laodicea was built on an almost square plateau several hundred feet high. It might have become a famous fortress city, except for lack of water. If they had built the city closer to the river, the position would have been indefensible. As it was, they built two miles south of the Lycus River in a strong, defensible position, but the city’s water supply had to be brought from springs six miles to the south by way of a stone aqueduct. Though in the opposite direction from Hieropolis, the water still came from hot springs. You get the picture? The water that came into Laodicea was tepid. Every time somebody came to visit, they thought it was all wonderful – until they took a drink of water. And under siege, it was a simple thing for an enemy to cut off the water supply by wrecking the aqueduct and then just waiting. That happened many times in the city’s history. Under the protection of Rome, however, Laodicea had become a wealthy city of trade and commerce, and it had become the banking center for the entire region.

As we have come to expect, some very specific attitudes and situations are reflected in John’s letter. Tepid water, for instance. But aside from that, Laodicea was rich and prosperous and full of pride. The city had an easygoing confidence in its importance and in its ability to handle whatever came along. The earthquake of 17 A.D. destroyed much of Laodicea, as it had devastated Sardis and destroyed Philadelphia. In this crisis also, Tiberius had been generous in helping to rebuild the city. When again, in 60 A.D., Laodicea was devastated by an earthquake, she refused the help Rome offered. It was not anger toward Rome; quite the

reverse. The citizens simply said, “We have plenty of money and resources of our own – please don’t trouble yourself.” (Tacitus, the Roman historian, commented: “Laodicea rose from the ruins by the strength of her own resources, and with no help from us.”) There may be an interesting story here about self-sufficiency versus government welfare, but we will leave it for the historians.

What made Laodicea so economically strong? Aside from the obvious blessings of being the major city of a region, being on a major trade route, and sitting between two fertile valleys, Laodicea had some specific advantages. It was the seat of one of the most famous medical schools of ancient times. Aside from hot springs and the usual healing cults that go with them, Laodicea made a special ointment for ears, and it made and exported an eye remedy (Phrygian Powder) that was world-famous.

Even more important economically, Laodicea raised a special breed of dark-wooled sheep. From this wool they made glossy, dark-purple garments that were, beyond dispute, the softest and most elegant attire of their kind in the known world. An outer tunic made from this wool (called a *trimita*) was the most coveted wearing apparel in the Roman Empire. The breeding secret for raising this kind of sheep belonged to one of the religious trade guilds. The secret was so closely guarded, in fact, that the secret has been lost. To this day, the modern world has no wool to match the excellence of that which came from ancient Laodicea. At least so I am told.

So a few important monopolies on top of a basically sound foundation meant that Laodicea was sitting pretty. Having the capital, she went on to become a center of banking and monetary exchange. Financially and materially speaking, things went very well indeed in Laodicea. And the high point of the city’s fame and pride centered around three things: wealth, good eyesight, and beautiful garments. (Material prosperity, health, and luxury.)

Listen again to what John writes, and watch the laser beam: “*You say, ‘How rich I am! And how well I have done! I have everything I want.’ In fact, though you do not know it, you are the most pitiful wretch: poor, blind, and naked. [Is he pushing any buttons?] So I advise you to buy from me [Christ] gold [purity] refined in the fire, to make you truly rich, and white clothes to put on to hide the shame of your [spiritual] nakedness, and ointment for your eyes so that you may see [what is truly important].*”

John is not being very nice! The Laodicean Christians, he says in Christ’s name, are desperately in need of refined gold from Christ – that

is, they lack true spiritual wealth and value. Instead of their famous dark-woolen garments, they need white garments (purity and truth) to cover their nakedness. And instead of their famous eye medicine, they need an ointment that will heal the blindness of their materialism and pride, which do not see or know the Christ or the Kingdom of God. The Laodiceans think they have it made – that they have it all. But from John’s perspective (and Christ’s), they are the most wretched congregation among the seven. And mostly it is *because* they think they have it all – and are content and spiritually lazy (“slothful” was the old word), and are no longer striving to grow, be faithful, or increase their spiritual worth and service.

Are we talking about Laodicea, or Corona del Mar? You can “fit the shoe” if you want to, but be careful. Because of Corona del Mar’s outer reputation, it would be easy to assume that I was intending potshots at Corona del Mar from behind the safety of John’s letters. There are some parallels, no doubt, from which none of us can entirely escape. But essentially I do not identify us with this seventh letter. There are exceptions, of course, but the Corona del Mar I know and deal with is not like its outer reputation – it is not at all like Laodicea. I want us to be clear about this. You may have a different opinion, of course. But speaking for myself, I do not experience Corona del Mar – certainly not the people of this church – as lukewarm, spiritually bored, too self-satisfied to learn or grow, or too prideful or small-minded to care what Christ might want from us or where Christ might be trying to lead us.

Lots of people take easy potshots at the well-to-do. But Jesus had many wealthy friends. The Bible has no problem with wealth, only with how we use it and to whom we are dedicated. Most of you know very well that I would preach against wealth if I really thought that was part of the message of the Gospel. People who give away money to prove themselves religious or holy are just as hung up on materialism as the greedy. Love and gratitude make us generous, and we cannot help but want to serve our Lord and bring increase and honor to His name and to His church. But we cannot trade the material for the spiritual – we cannot buy the spiritual with the material. Those who try to *buy* God’s favor star in some of the most scornful stories of the Bible. Most of you know, and I hope in this church we will never forget, that Covenant Sunday is not about fear or favor. It is about gratitude and devotion. We give in love and praise – or we keep it for a better day.

*“The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness.”* “Amen” is a difficult word to deal with. It means “So be it” or “Let it happen.” As used here, of Christ, it implies the One who speaks and it comes to be. In the

Gospels, Jesus sometimes begins a teaching with “Verily, verily” or “Truly, truly I say unto you.” The word being translated here is “amen.” “Amen, amen I say unto you ...” – “In the truth that will come to be, I say unto you ...” In John’s letter, remember, Christ IS The Amen: The Completer: The One who will bring it to be: The One who will finish it.

Christ is no beggar. Depend on it. Whatever does not match Christ’s truth and WAY will someday cease to be. We can depend on that too. And when we begin to know and believe it, that changes the way we see life, and the way we interpret everything that is going on here – including the way we try to participate in life itself.

But the Laodicean church has clearly ceased to bear witness to Christ or to the new order of life that Christ is bringing into being. The church at Laodicea is content to live in material prosperity – content to have compromised and adjusted its lifestyle and its beliefs to get along with everything and everyone. Reducing the message of salvation and eternal life in a lost and broken world to “people-pleasing” is not John’s idea of faithfulness or bearing witness to God’s truth. The letter begins by reminding the church that Christ is a faithful and true witness to God’s Kingdom, while they, on the other hand, have forsaken and deserted His cause. And the letter ends by reminding the Laodiceans that Christ is victorious (regardless of and despite all His ordeals), and that they will have no place with Him if they do not repent. (There was an old hymn we used to sing when I was a boy: “If you don’t bear the cross, then you can’t wear the crown.” I still hear the Marshallese congregation singing it from time to time. I think they might be from Smyrna.) John is not in the least interested in whether or not the church is *relevant* to the world of his time. He does not care if it is relevant to Rome, or the temple of Zeus, or Apollo, or even the emperor. He is concerned about the church being relevant to Christ, and to Christ’s time and purposes.

Many people have been intrigued by the anger of John toward this lukewarm congregation. The Laodiceans are not charged with any specific evil. They are not cold – they are not the indifferent enemies of Christ. Neither are they hot antagonists or zealots – *zestos* means “right at the boiling point.” They have no fire of enthusiasm, or dramatic conviction or purpose. They just sort of take it all in stride, like most of us would like to be able to do. “Be cool,” we used to say. Christ does not have much problem with His friends and, strangely enough, He loves and often admires His enemies. They often turn into His best friends. In both cases, there is passion and caring – something to work with – a chance to increase or to convert. So you can go on working with a Peter, and you can convert

a Paul – and either way, there is dynamism and drama and lots happening. But what can you do with the “neutral,” the mild, the uninspired and uninspirable – the insipid, the flaccid, the vapid? “*I will spew you out of my mouth.*” It sounds rather harsh, but in fact this is a very gentle translation for *vomitar*: You make me sick! **The church is the body of Christ.** How would you like to be told that you are the part of the body that makes Christ throw up? No, John is not being very nice. The Golden Mean may be the Greek Way, but it is not the Christian Way. We care too much! And we follow a Lord and Master who cares too much.

The last section of our passage may be the end of the letter to Laodicea, or it may be an epilogue to all seven churches: “*All whom I love I reprove and discipline.*” Interesting, I think, that the word used for “love” is not *agapan* – not *agape* – the high, unconquerable benevolence of the Almighty. It is *phileo* – the warmest and most tender affection. “All whom I personally cherish and care about as friends – those who are really close to me – I reprove and discipline.” (I wonder if there is a sermon in there somewhere. But I leave that to your meditations.) In John’s view of things, it is a *very* bad sign to discover that God is not asking or expecting very much from us. Jerome, one of the famous early church fathers, said, “The greatest anger of God is when God withdraws his anger.”

The greater the leader – and the higher the vision – the greater the burden that is laid on the followers. How long does it take us to figure out that JOY and HOPE do not come with being lukewarm – with being safe and secure and comfortable all the time? And who wants to be left out of building a kingdom, if that kingdom is true and real? Through John’s faith, we see again that each Christian and each church is part of a movement – a vast and crucial campaign on the part of Christ to redeem ALL the children on earth. And not just in a few minor ways or in a couple of areas, but to make ALL THINGS NEW!

The love of Christ is outrageous – exceedingly different. So is the kind of living and loving we are being called into. To be part of and faithful to this movement is the only important thing in life. There is no compromising with it. It requires everything – or nothing. To act in any manner that does not honor and show allegiance to this movement, and to the Christ who leads it, is every Christian’s and every church’s constant and watchful concern. To “bear witness to Jesus Christ” is likewise every Christian’s and every church’s highest desire, and the only true freedom there is in this world. And of course, it has the potential to get us all killed. I remind you that *martyrios* – to be a martyr – simply means “to bear witness.” Getting killed for it is just one of the possible side effects.

In that light, The Revelation keeps saying: If you are not in trouble, something is wrong. But do not fear faithful trouble. The turmoil of the great changeover – from physical power and domination, to the Lamb’s Kingdom coming – will embroil us all. But the coming Kingdom of Christ is all that truly matters, and it will be the only reality in the end. That message, I suppose, we can never get too clear or hear too often.

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And so we come to the favorite scene in all of the seven letters: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock ....” Laodicea, for all practical purposes, has excommunicated Christ. He is out of their attention, out of their hearts and minds, out of their living and their choices, out of their lives. Jesus is ever and always the most likely member of any church to get excommunicated (excluded from communion).

Despite it all, no matter how many times He has been disowned, ignored, locked out ... yet He stands knocking – unwilling to coerce – waiting for the light to break, a change of heart, a door to reopen. And when the door is opened, He comes in to eat ... to reinstate the communion meal ... to restore relationships ... to reestablish the love-force. Despite all the use and abuse this passage has received, it is indeed a beautiful parable.

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And so, we have taken a tour of the seven cities to whom John has written. Hearing their stories, in some ways we hear our own. I leave you to ponder which of the seven is most like our own church. Some of you will be wise enough to see bits of us in all of them, but which bits? And together we are left, as all who read The Revelation are left, to decide how we will bear our own witness in our own day and time.

I cannot resist: Some of you have a lot of prejudice against the zealous. You are terribly afraid that you might get fanatical if you aren’t careful. I’m not sure why you are worried about it. The message to Laodicea is: REPENT! Become zealous and walk in a New WAY. *Be zestos!* Get hot! In many, many ways, that is a good summary of the entire Revelation of John.