

# The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia

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There is a Spiritual conflict within every believer as he struggles to determine whether he will fully surrender to the inclinations of the “flesh” (the sinful nature) and return to a life of sin or whether he will fully yield to the Holy Spirit and continue in a life of holiness and righteousness. (Galatians 5:16; Romans 8:4-14). The battlefield is “within” the Christian himself, and the conflict will continue if he truly desires to reign with Christ Jesus (Rom. 7:7-25; Gal. 5:16-26; 2 Tim. 2:12; Rev. 12:11; also Eph. 6: 10-17).

In Romans seven, Apostle Paul appears to be walking in the flesh but by further study and prayer, we find Paul proves himself one of the greatest men of God ever to walk on earth. Go with me to Galatians 5:16-18, where he himself explains he gave testimony of his past—previous to his salvation experience—in Romans seven: (see Romans 7:5-25—Paul spoke in the past tense).

<sup>16</sup> This I say then, Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. <sup>17</sup> For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would (desire to do). <sup>18</sup> But if ye be led of the Spirit, ye are not under the law. (My italics).

In common English, Apostle Paul wrote, and taught this: “If we walk in the flesh, we are under the Law as I was before I began walking with Christ. When we walk in the flesh, we are no longer walking in His Spirit (See Romans 8). In other words, our flesh is the enemy of The Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit is the enemy of our flesh. They are fully against each other, attempting rule over the Christian. Satan desires us to follow him; Jesus wants us to follow Him by walking in His Spirit. Therefore, if the flesh wins, we cannot do the things we want to do *in Christ*. Paul is explaining to us—that if we walk in His Spirit, we are no longer under the Law.” This is the *doctrinal principle* Jesus used when He wrote to the seven Churches, the basis of His future Judgments.

<sup>10</sup>I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and heard behind me a great voice, as of a trumpet, <sup>11</sup>Saying, “**I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last: and, What thou seest, write in a book, and send it unto the seven churches which are in Asia; unto Ephesus, and unto Smyrna, and unto Pergamos, and unto Thyatira, and unto Sardis, and unto Philadelphia, and unto Laodicea.**”

At the introduction of the letters to the seven churches, identifying end-time *characteristics of Jesus* become relevant to the reader. Each of these characteristics is written in Chapter one, beginning with verse 4. There is only one exception—Laodicea seems to receive nothing that describes Christ Jesus.

- **The Church At Ephesus** (2:1-7)—*Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus write; These things saith He that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand and who “walks” in the midst of the seven golden lampstands* (Rev.1:13, 16a).

Our Lord patrols the churches with an intense awareness of all our thoughts, works, and activities. Thus, it is no surprise each letter begins with, “*I know thy works*” (2:2,9,13,19; 3:1,8,15). Works are the basis of true faith. He who has true faith has good works. He who has little faith likely has only “wood, hay and stubble.” I would question his godly integrity. All the churches have both commendation and complaint from Jesus, *with exceptions*: Smyrna and Philadelphia have no complaint and Laodicea has no commendation.

**Commendations:** The Ephesian Church had no tolerance for those who were evil; and those who were proven to be liars, calling themselves Apostles, but were not; they were commended for their patience,

works and labors without fainting or complaining. The Ephesians held hearings on those who claimed to be Apostles, but lied. They hated the deeds of the Nicolaitans—probably those who were carnal in deeds.

**Complaints:** Ephesus, you have left your first love. You have fallen. The specifics were not given; but considering the situation further, it's possible this church, in losing her first love, became lethargic and slothful.

**Warnings:** Ephesus was commanded to *repent* of her sins of omission and do her first works; or else God would come quickly and remove her candlestick out of its place, *except she repent*.

**Overcomers:** They who overcome may eat of the tree of life in the midst of the paradise of God. Jesus made no statement to Ephesus concerning the Rapture of His Church.

- **The Church At Smyrna** (2:8-11)—“*And unto the angel of the church in Smyrna write; These things saith the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive. I am alive for evermore, Amen.*” (1:18a).

Smyrna's works were in tribulation and poverty as described in a statement from Hebrews 10:34, which indicates their homes and property had been looted and pillaged; prisons were used mainly to detain the guilty until the time of execution. “Until death” (v. 10b) may indicate this possibility, which earns a crown of life. Though facing martyrdom, Jesus refrains from intervening. He does not remove the poverty nor does he vindicate his people in the face of those who hurled their indignant slander, nor does he overturn the vicious actions of the Devil who will instigate the imprisonment and even their deaths. Maybe sometimes we wonder, “Why do Christians *not* suffer persecution?”

**Commendations:** Though they were poor and persecuted, the Smyrna Church was praised by Christ for her manifestation of “good works”; for He did not consider them to be poor. He said, “*but thou art rich.*” He comforted them by also saying, “*Do not fear the things you suffer, but be faithful until death, and I will give you a Crown of Life.*”

**Overcomers:** Shall not be hurt by the second death; meaning the church at Smyrna is promised eternal life as overcomers. There is no mention of complaints or warnings for this church.

- **The Church At Pergamos** (2:12-17)—“*And to the angel to the church at Pergamos, write; These things saith He which hath the sharp sword with two edges;*” (1:16);

**Commendations:** As with all the churches except Sardis and Laodicea, the Lord begins with a word of commendation. It is worthy to note that Jesus is concerned with the preservation of *truth*, the principal theme of this letter. He says, “You held fast My name—probably a reference to public witness for Christ (cf. the use of this verb in Heb. 4:14; 10:23)—and did not deny My faith” (v. 13). The latter phrase is literally, “faith *in* me.” This church was deeply devoted to Jesus.

**Complaints:** They held on to the doctrine of “Balaam, who taught Balac to cast a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication.” They also took in the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which God hated. In spite of these “false prophets”, the fundamental truths noted in the “commendations” must never be compromised.

**Warnings:** Jesus warns the church in Pergamos “Repent; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight against you *with the sword of My mouth*. Note here how the introduction to this church compares with “the sharp sword with two edges”. Seems Jesus applies his characteristics according to the specific church (see Rev. 2:12).

- **The Church At Thyatira** (2:18-29)—“*And to the angel in Thyatira write; These things saith the Son of God, who hath His eyes like unto a flame of fire, and His feet are like fine brass.*” (1:15a—feet of judgment).

**Commendations:** This is an encouraging word of commendation. Among the “works” given are: *love, faith, Service, and perseverance*. These later “works” were greater than at first” (v. 19b). In other words, the church in Thyatira was a growing church, not so much in terms of size as in Christ-like qualities. They had learned the Christian life is one of growth, progress, development, and spiritual increase. Merely maintaining the moral status quo, whether individually or corporately, is inadequate. Thus whereas Ephesus was backsliding, Thyatira was moving forward.

**Complaints:** Thyatira allowed the false prophetess, Jezebel, into the church to seduce others, to commit fornication and to eat things sacrificed unto idols. After ordering her to **repent** for her fornication, she did not **repent**. “To the rest in Thyatira who have not sinned with her, I will put upon you no other burden.”

**Warnings:** “and I gave her space to repent of her fornication; and she repented not.” (2:21). “...I will cast her into a bed, and them that commit adultery with her into great tribulation, except they repent of their deeds. And I will kill her children with death; and all the churches shall know that I am He which searcheth the reins and hearts: and I will give unto everyone of you according to your works” (2:21-24).

**Overcomers:** “He that overcomes, and keeps My works unto the end, to him will I give power over the nations; And he shall rule them with a rod of iron; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers: even as I received of My Father. And I will give him the morning star.”

## **The Jezebel Spirit of Thyatira<sup>1</sup>**

Make no mistake, the Jezebel who lived in Thyatira undoubtedly appealed to her prophetic gift (and “anointing”) to excuse her sexual immorality. She was using her power to manipulate others into sensuality and idolatry.

You may wonder why anyone would yield to such obviously unbiblical counsel, no matter how “gifted” the individual might be. It’s not that difficult to understand. Some of you may be unaware of how mesmerizing and enticing the prospect of supernatural activity can be. When someone witnesses what one believes is a genuine supernatural or miraculous event, otherwise normal theological defense mechanisms often fail to operate. Discernment is cast aside, lest it be viewed as a critical spirit or the response of a cynic. No one wants to be perceived as stiff-necked and resistant to the voice of God or the manifestation of his power. So, it is hard for some to resist and challenge the “ministry” of a recognized (or “alleged”) prophet in the church.

The “spirit” of “Jezebel” was not unique to the church in Thyatira. It is alive and well in the body of Christ today. One need only read the latest headlines. It is an insidious, yet subtle, spirit. It is destructive, yet enticing. It typically gains momentum among those who are so fearful of quenching the Spirit (1 Thess. 5:19) that they fail to rein in the flesh.

The solution is not to repudiate the prophetic altogether, or any other spiritual gift for that matter. Rather, we must become good Bereans, “examining the Scriptures daily” (Acts 17:11) to see if these things are of God or not. In sum, we would do well to heed Paul’s counsel: “Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil” (1 Thess. 5:21-22). From Sam Storms; Enjoying God Ministries.

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<sup>1</sup>**Biblical & Theological Resources;** Enjoying God Ministries (4 paragraphs above); Dr. Sam Storms.

- **The Church At Sardis** (3:1-6)—“And unto the angel of the church in Sardis write: These things saith He that hath the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars;” (1:4b, 16).

Our Lord’s instruction begins with the exhortation, “*be watchful and strengthen the things that remain which are about to die.*” Such words leave room for hope, for they indicate that, although death is near, the possibility for renewal remains. There is an ember, so to speak, which is quickly cooling off, but may yet be fanned into flames of life if only the appropriate action is taken. Such action is given in three commands:

*First, remember* – Just as Jesus exhorted the Ephesians (2:5), so also at Sardis. Past history should challenge them (us) to present endeavor. Recall the blessings of divine grace and be strengthened. *Second, hold fast* (“*keep it*”) - Cf. 2:24b-25. You don’t need anything new; simply hold firmly to what you’ve already received. *Third, repent* – Stop sinning! Start obeying!

**Commendations:** “Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me in white; for they are worthy.

**Complaints:** Sardis believes she is well alive, but God said she is dead (vs.3:1).

**Warnings:** Sardis must be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain: their works were not perfect before God (3:2). “Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and **repent**. If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee” (3:3).

**Overcomers:** “He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before My Father, and before His angels. (3:5).

- **The Church At Philadelphia** (3:7-13)—“And unto the angel of the church in Philadelphia write; These things saith He that is holy, He that is true, He that hath the key of David, he that openeth, and no one shutteth; and shutteth, and no one openeth; (1:18).

One could make a strong case that the letters to Smyrna and Philadelphia are the most important ones of the seven, for in neither of them do we find one word of complaint. Both receive *unqualified praise*.

We have a four-fold description of Jesus, again taken from the visionary portrait of him in chapter 1: **First, he is called The Holy One**—An unmistakable title for Yahweh in the OT (Isa. 40:25) here applied to Jesus. See also Rev. 6:10 where “holy”, along with “true,” is an attribute of deity. **Second, he is called The True One**—To the Greek mind this would mean “genuine,” that which is real and thus corresponds to reality. To the Hebrew mind it means “faithful” and “trustworthy,” deserving of our confidence, dependable, reliable, consistent and steadfast. See Ps. 146:5-6; Ex. 34:6; Deut. 7:9; 2 Tim. 2:13; Num. 23:19; Lam. 3:22-23. **Third, he is The One who has the Key of David**— He has the undisputed authority to admit or exclude from the New Jerusalem. The idea is that Jesus has the key to the Davidic or messianic kingdom, a reference to Isaiah 22:22 and the role of Eliakim, who was given authority to control who was admitted and who was excluded from the king’s presence. Jesus is the one who determines who shall enter the Davidic kingdom. **Fourth, he is The One who opens and no one shuts, the One who shuts and no one opens** – When he opens to his followers the door of the kingdom, no one can shut them out; and when he shuts the door on those who oppose his cause, none can reverse the decision.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> **Ibid.** (One Paragraph).

**Commendations:** 1) Jesus has set “an open door, and no man can shut it: for thou hast a little strength, and hast kept My word, and hast not denied My name. Behold, I will make them of the synagogue of Satan, which say they are Jews, and are not, but do lie; behold, I will make them to come and worship before thy feet, and to know that I have loved thee. 2) **Because you have kept the word of My patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth.** No other church was given this promise of the pre-tribulation Rapture!

**Warnings:** Philadelphia must hold fast to what they have, that no man take their crowns.

**Overcomers:** “I will make him a pillar in the temple of His God, and he shall go no more out: and I will write upon him the Name of My God, and the name of the city of My God, which is new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from My God: and I will write upon him My new name.” (3:12, 13).

- **The Church At Laodicea** (3:14-22)—“And unto the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write; These things saith the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God;” This is the *only instance in the seven letters* where the description of Jesus *is not* taken from the visionary portrait of chapter 1. In describing himself as “The Amen” Jesus is probably alluding to Isaiah 65:16, the only time this title is used of God. The church in Laodicea is rebuked for the barren nature of its works, indicative of its stagnant spiritual condition. The church boasted that it was healthy and prosperous. She boasted that she had acquired her wealth by her own efforts. No doubt part of her problem was the inability to distinguish between material and spiritual prosperity. The church that is prosperous materially and outwardly can easily fall into the self-deception that her outward prosperity is the measure of her spiritual prosperity. . . . [The church] is in reality like a blind beggar, destitute, clad in rags” (66).

There seems to be a deliberate contrast drawn between Smyrna and Laodicea. Smyrna suffered from material poverty but was regarded by Jesus as spiritually wealthy. Laodicea, on the other hand, was materially wealthy but spiritually poor. Thus, *despite their banks, they were beggars! Despite their famous eye-salve, they were blind! Despite their prosperous clothing factories, they were naked!*

**Commendations:** None.

#### **Complaints:**

- 1) The Laodicean church was neither cold or hot, but lukewarm.
- 2) The Laodicean church claimed great wealth with need of nothing;
- 3) They did not know how wretched, miserable, poor, blind and naked they were.

**Warnings:** Christ Jesus counseled the Laodicean Church to:

- 1) Buy from Christ gold tried in the fire, that they be rich:
- 2) And white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed,
- 3) And that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear;
- 4) And anoint thine eyes with eye-salve, that thou mayest see.”
- 5) God rebukes and chastens those He loves, therefore repent

**Overcomers:** These will sit with Christ on His throne, even as Christ overcame and is sitting with His Father in His throne.

**“Behold, I stand at the door, and: if any man hear My voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with Me.”** (Revelation 3:21).