

Revelation

Lesson #5

"What Is," the Seven Churches (Part 2)

(2: 18 – 3: 22)

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Review

The risen and glorified Christ commanded John to write a letter to each of seven churches in Asia Minor: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea. If, as tradition claims, our Apostle John is the leader of the church at Ephesus and the author of Revelation, then all six of the other churches are within John's geographical sphere of influence, and the letters are to serve as "cover letters" for the vision of Revelation 4-22 that John will transmit in writing to the churches.

In Lesson #4 we examined the first three of the seven churches and John's letters to them: Ephesus, Smyrna and Pergamum.

Preview



Bible of St. Paul outside the Walls
(illuminated manuscript, fol. 10r), 9th century.
Abbey of St. Paul outside the Walls, Rome.

In Lesson #5 we continue examining the letters to the seven churches, focusing on the final four: Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea.

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Thyatira

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Seleucus I Nicator (bronze).

Naples National Archaeological Museum, Naples.

[Copy found in Herculaneum of an original Greek statue.]

When Alexander the Great died in 323 B.C., his empire, which stretched from his homeland of Macedonia to India, was divided among his four generals, who then vied for absolute power. Seleucus I Nicator was at war with his rival, Lysimachus in 290 B.C. when he learned that his wife had given birth to a daughter. He renamed the ancient city of Pelopia in her honor—Thyatira, from the Greek word meaning “daughter.”

Thyatira sits on the boarder between Lydia and Mysia, 50 miles inland from the Mediterranean coast, on about the same latitude as Athens.

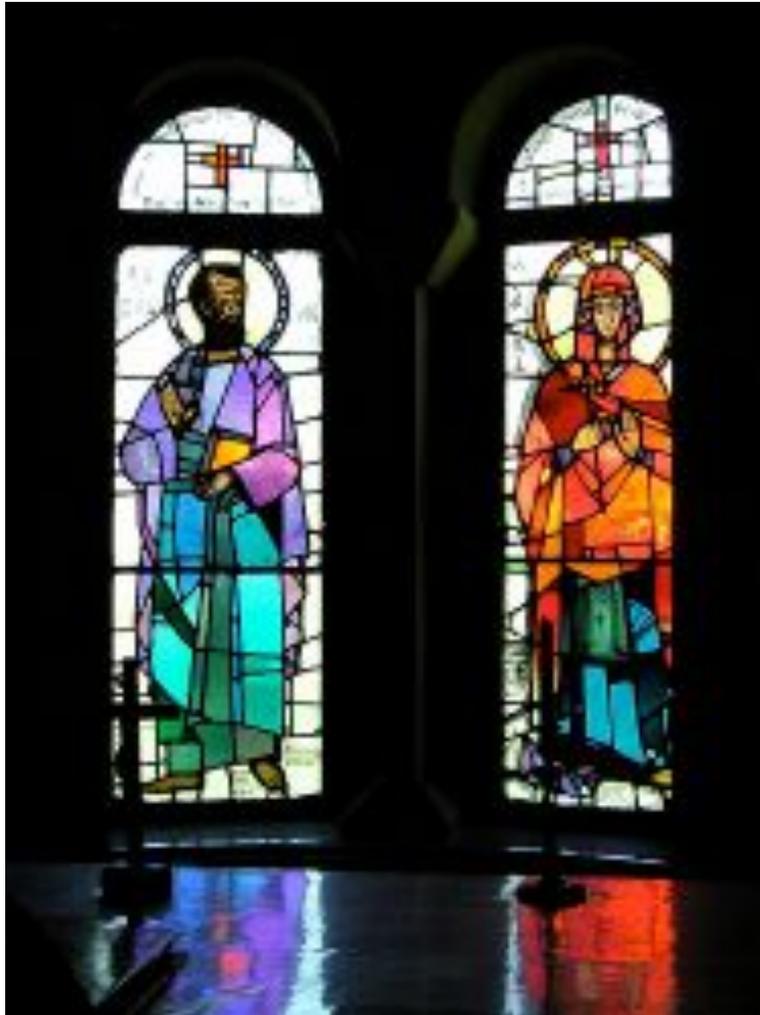
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In New Testament times, Thyatira was known as a center for cloth dyeing and it was the heart of the *indigo* trade. Indigo—the color of blue jeans—was made from an organic compound of plants and was quite rare and very expensive in the ancient world. It was one of many color dyes produced in Thyatira.

Among the archaeological remains of Thyatira are inscriptions relating to the guild of dyers, as well as inscriptions relating to wool-workers, linen workers, makers of outer garments, leather workers, tanners, and others. Thyatira was—what we would call—the center of the textile industry in Asia Minor.

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St. Paul and Lydia (stained glass) in the Greek Orthodox Baptistery, Philippi.

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas

Although Thyatira was founded by Seleucus I and later became a Roman city, in New Testament times there was a large settlement of mercantile Jews there.

When Paul travels to Philippi on his second missionary journey in A.D. 50, he meets Lydia “a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira” (Acts 16: 14), who is a “worshiper of God,” or “God-fearer.”

Since we know from Acts 16 that there was no synagogue in Philippi, Lydia probably came in contact with Judaism at her home in Thyatira.

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The Greek word for “purple cloth” is πορφυρόωλις [*por-fu-ro'-po-les*], meaning “purple” or “red” fabric, the colors worn by Roman military officers and the upper classes.

This “purple cloth” was produced in one of three ways. The highest quality purple dye was made from a mollusk called the *Tyrian murex*, which has a small bladder containing juice that when extracted is purified and made into varying grades of purple dye. Fabrics were then double-dyed for consistency, making them quite expensive.



Dr. C. holds a *Tyrian murex* in his hand!

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas

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On the road to Thyatira, the modern-day Turkish city of Akhisar.

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas

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A small park in the city of Akhisar contains the few archaeological remains of Thyatira.

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**In the park, Dr. C. teaches about Thyatira, Lydia's hometown,
and the 4th of the seven churches in Revelation.**

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas

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“To the angel of the church in Thyatira, write this:

The Son of God, whose eyes are like a fiery flame and whose feet are like polished brass, says this: ‘I know your works, your love, faith, service and endurance, and that your last works are greater than the first.

Yet I hold this against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, who teaches and misleads my servants to play the harlot and to eat food sacrificed to idols. I have given her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her harlotry. So I will cast her on a sickbed and plunge those who commit adultery with her into intense suffering unless they repent of her works . . .

I will also put her children to death. Thus shall all the churches come to know that I am the searcher of hearts and minds and that I will give each of you what your works deserve. But I say to the rest of you in Thyatira, who do not uphold this teaching and know nothing of the so-called deep secrets of Satan: on you I will place no further burden, except that you must hold fast to what you have until I come. To the victor, who keeps to my ways until the end, I will give authority over the nations. He will rule them with an iron rod. Like clay vessels will they be smashed, just as I received authority from my Father. And to him I will give the morning star. Whoever has ears ought to hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

(2: 18-29)

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Thyatira:

1. **Greeting**
2. Words of commendation
3. Words of condemnation
4. Admonition

“To the angel of the church in Thyatira, write this:

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- In A.D. 8 the Latin poet Ovid published *Fasti*, a 6-book poem in elegaic couplets, in which the poet interviews numerous Roman gods, who explain to him the origins and customs of various religious festivals, often noting the trade guilds associated with them.

- For a craftsman in Thyatira, membership in a trade guild was essential to both economic and social life, and trade guild members (both pagan and Christian) were expected to take part in the religious festivities associated with their guild.

- In his greeting the Lord calls himself the “Son of God,” and he draws attention to his eyes “like a fiery flame” and his feet “like polished brass,” stressing his divine authority over all any pagan gods.

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Thyatira:

1. Greeting
2. **Words of commendation**
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4. Admonition

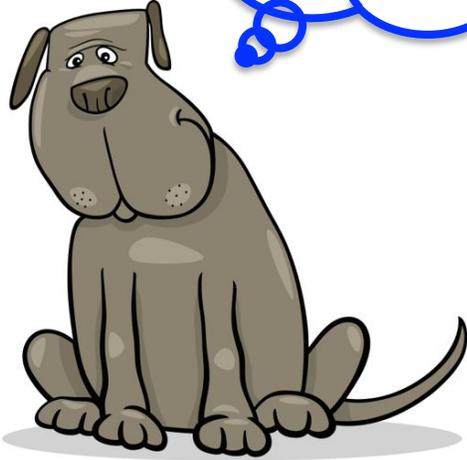
"To the angel of the church in Thyatira, write this:

The Son of God, whose eyes are like a fiery flame and whose feet are like polished brass, says this: **'I know your works, your 1) love, 2) faith, 3) service and 4) endurance, and that your last works are greater than the first.**

Yet I hold this against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, who teaches and misleads my servants to play the harlot and to eat food sacrificed to idols. I have given her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her harlotry. So I will cast her on a sickbed and plunge those who commit adultery with her into intense suffering unless they repent of her works . . .



“Love” and “faith” are praised in every book of the New Testament, and “hope” finds its expression in “endurance.” So, we have a subtle allusion to St. Paul’s Corinthian trio of “faith,” “hope,” and “love” right here!



And “service” is an expression of “love.”



Cool!

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(2: 20-23)

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Byam Shaw. *Jezebel* (oil on canvas), 1896.
RussellCotes Art Gallery & Museum, Bournemouth.
[Influenced by the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Shaw's "Jezebel" was originally nude, but he clothed her in order to sell the painting!]

- **“You tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, who teaches and misleads my servants.”** “Jezebel” is probably not the woman’s literal name, but an allusion to king Ahab’s wife, Jezebel (a vile, loathsome and despicable woman!), who aggressively promoted worship of the Canaanite god Baal during the time of Elijah and Elisha the prophets in 1 & 2 Kings.
- Thyatira’s “Jezebel” claims to speak on behalf of God, but she is simply another “deceiver” or “antichrist” who is leading people astray. From Revelation’s perspective, such teachers cannot be allowed to roam the community anymore than a ravenous wolf can be allowed to roam the village streets.
- The Lord promises a dreadful judgment on “Jezebel” and on any who follow her.

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(2: 24-29)

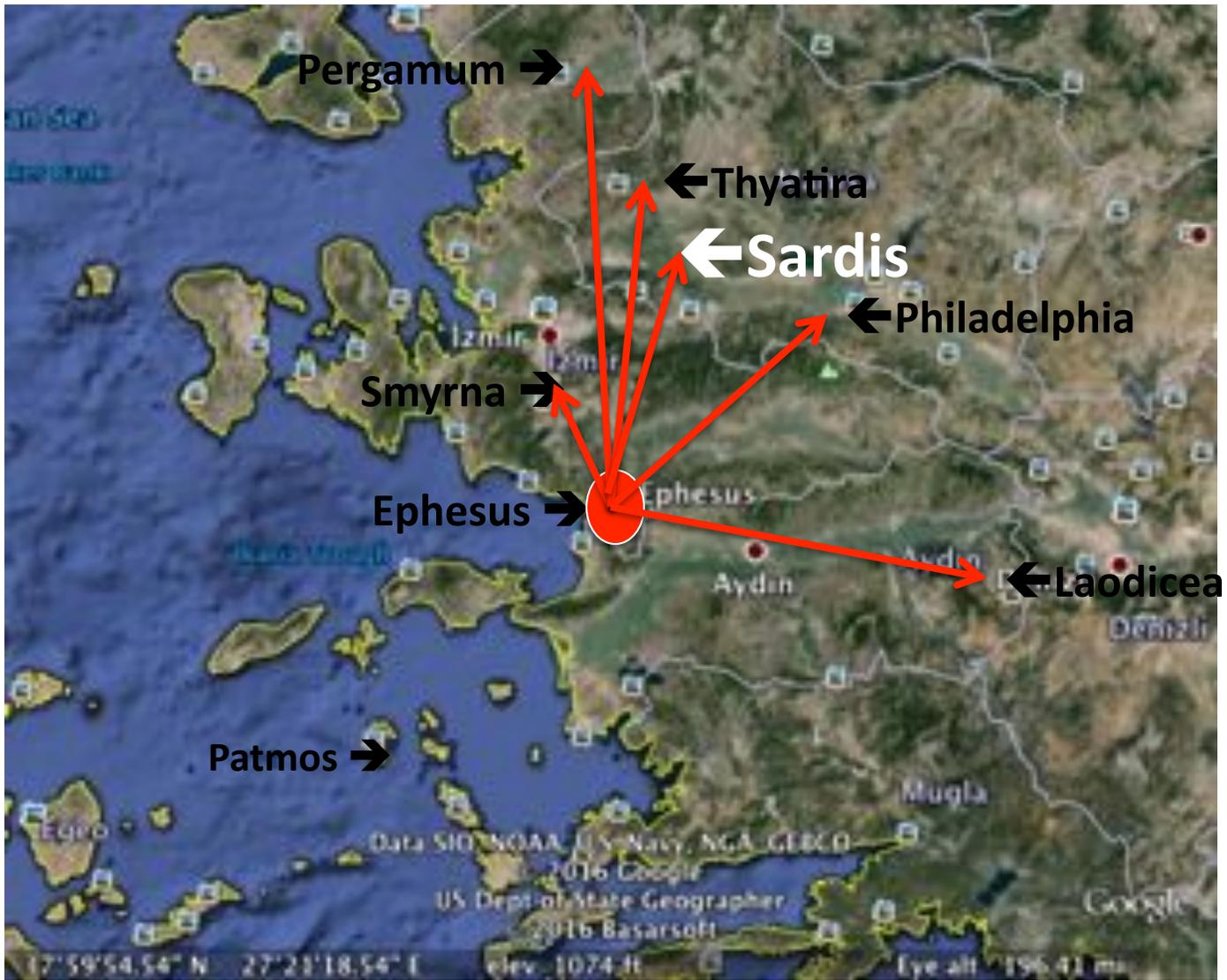
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- **“On you I will place no further burden, except that you must hold fast to what you have until I come.”** The Lord asks of those who do not follow “Jezebel’s teaching” that they remain steadfast, staying the course until the Lord returns—*which will be very soon.*
- **“To the victor, who keeps to my ways until the end, I will give authority over the nations.”** For those who do stay the course, they will share with Christ a place in the coming kingdom. We read in Revelation 20, that with Christ’s return, *“the souls of those who had been beheaded for their witness to Jesus and for the word of God . . . came to life and they reigned with Christ for a thousand years”* (22: 4).



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Sardis was the capital of the ancient kingdom of Lydia, one of the important cities of the Persian Empire, the seat of the Proconsul under the Roman Empire, and the metropolis of the province of Lydia in later Roman and Byzantine times.

Sardis is located in the Hermus Valley, about 45 miles northeast of Smyrna (modern-day Izmir), on what was the end station on the Persian Royal Road, which began at Persepolis, capital of Persia (Iran of today). Like the other cities in the book of Revelation, its position on the trade routes made it an important city and a commercial powerhouse.

Sardis was the center of the industrial arts in the ancient Lydian Kingdom, and it was famous for its manufacturing and intricate dyeing of woolen objects and carpets, much like Thyatira. Toward the end of the 1st century A.D.—at the time of Revelation—it was an extremely wealthy and prominent city.

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Sardis was destroyed by an earthquake in A.D. 17 and completely rebuilt using its own wealth to do so. The rebuilt city included a vast gymnasium/bath complex.

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas

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Notice the extraordinary detail and exquisite craftsmanship of the gymnasium.

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Across a vast expanse of lawn opposite the gymnasium, Sardis boasted one of the largest and finest synagogues in the Roman Empire, built in the middle of the 2nd century.

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The synagogue's intricate mosaic flooring attests to the wealth of the city and to its prosperous Jewish population.

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The synagogue consisted of a main congregational hall, plus many additional side rooms.

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At the foot of the Sardis acropolis sat the twin temples of Artemis (Diana). Built by the Emperor Antoninus Pius (A.D. 86-161), he dedicated this temple to his wife, Annia Faustina.

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas

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**“To the angel of the church in Sardis, write this:
‘The one who has the seven spirits of God and
the seven stars says this: ‘I know your works,
that you have the reputation of being alive, but
you are dead. Be watchful and strengthen what
is left, which is going to die, for I have not
found your works complete in the sight of my
God. Remember then what you accepted and
heard; keep it, and repent. If you are not
watchful, I will come like a thief, and you will
never know at what hour I will come upon
you . . .**

. . . However, you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their garments; they will walk with me dressed in white, because they are worthy. The victor will thus be dressed in white, and I will never erase his name from the book of life but will acknowledge his name in the presence of my Father and of his angels. Whoever has ears ought to hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’”

(3: 1-6)

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Sardis:

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Once again the greeting recalls aspects of the Lord noted in Revelation's prologue: the "seven spirits" (1: 4) of God and the "seven stars" (1: 16).



Sardis:

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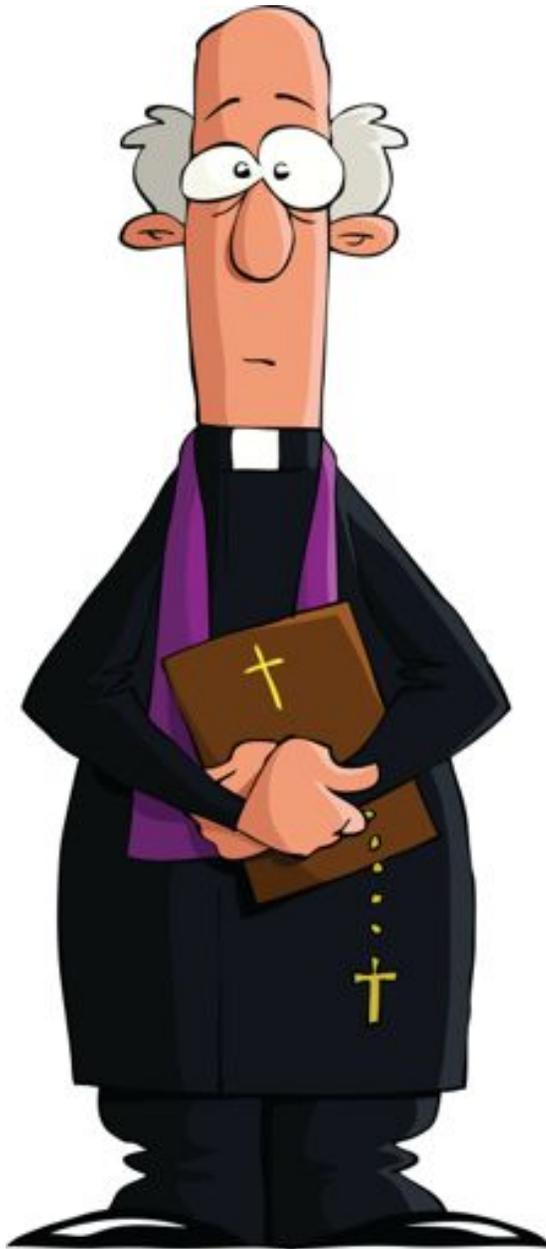


- By reversing the pattern of “words of commendation”/“words of condemnation,” John draws attention to the negative, to the condemnation, placing it front and center.

- “I know your works, that you have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead.” Unlike the previous churches, Sardis did not face persecution, nor did they suffer from false teachers. To all outward appearances they seemed to be prospering! Yet, says the Lord, the church in Sardis is spiritually dead [νεκρός (ne-kros’), “void of life,” “a corpse without a soul”].

- “I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God.” We are not told how the works are incomplete, only that they are. Perhaps they’re being done for the wrong reasons, for self-gratification or for public display.

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That's often a danger in wealthy, well-endowed parishes and communities. They have an expansive campus, beautiful buildings, state-of-the-art multimedia systems, fine furnishings, well-paid staff and programs for every age group and demographic.

But it's all for the wrong reasons. Like Narcissus, they have fallen in love with their own image.



**Caravaggio. *Narcissus* (oil on canvas), c. 1595.
Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Rome.**

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Sardis:

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. . . However, you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their garments; they will walk with me dressed in white, because they are worthy. The victor will thus be dressed in white, and I will never erase his name from the book of life but will acknowledge his name in the presence of my Father and of his angels.

Whoever has ears ought to hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’”

(3: 1-6)

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- **“You have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their garments.”** Although the church as a whole is spiritually dead, there are still a few people who remain faithful, deeply engaged with Christ and living out their faith in a life of personal piety and active love.



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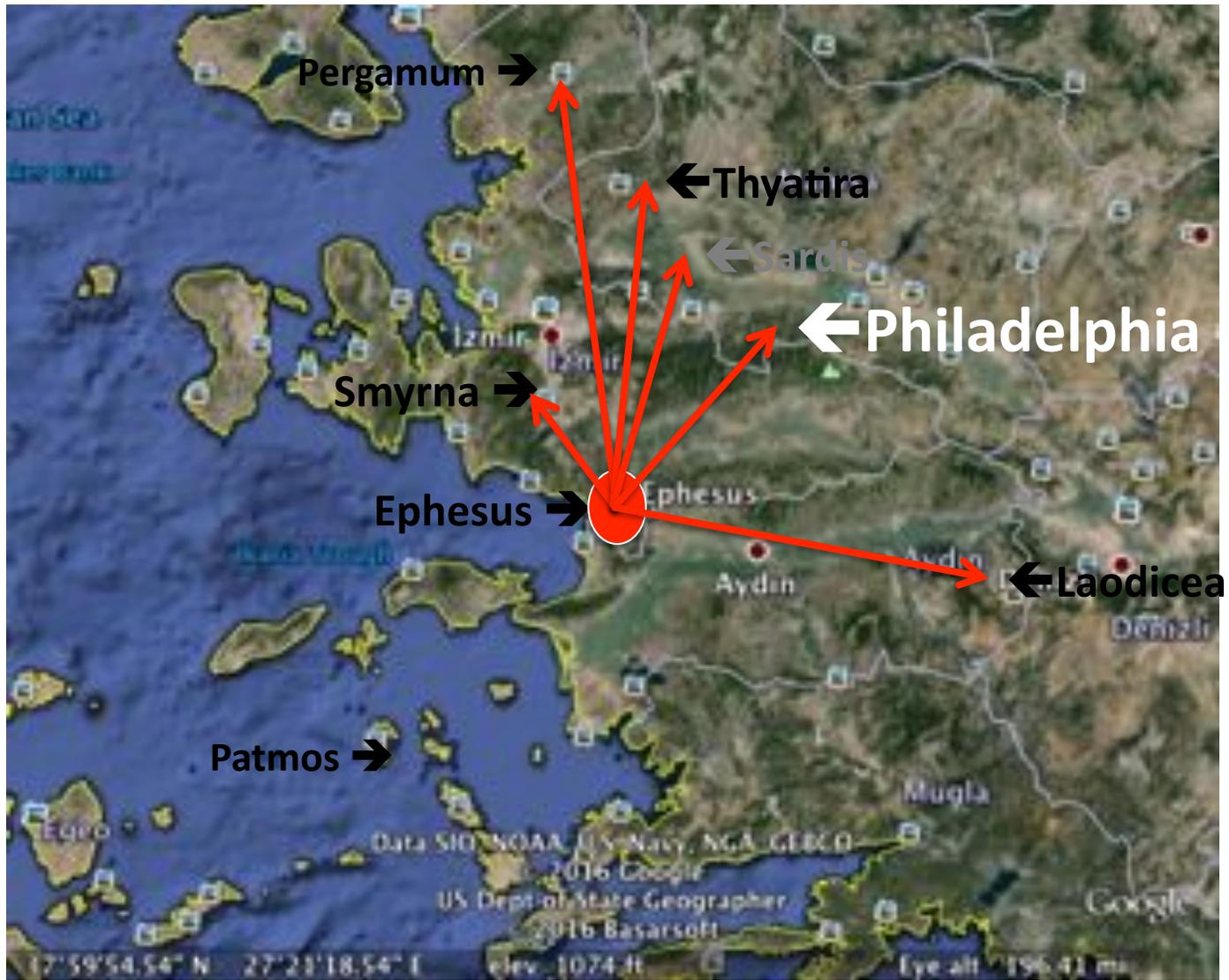


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Philadelphia

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King Eumenes II of Pergamum founded Philadelphia in 189 B.C. He named the city in honor of his brother, Attalus II, and by doing so earned the nickname “philadelphos,” or “brotherly love,” (from the Greek φιλέω [fe-le'-o], “love” or “friendship”; and ἀδελφός [a-del-fos'], “brother”). It was the first of many cities to be named Philadelphia, including Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, founded in 1682 by William Penn.

Philadelphia was in the administrative district of Sardis, and hence, in its shadow, never achieving the fame, glory and wealth of its neighbor.



Toward the center of Alešehir, the site of ancient Philadelphia, the remains of the early 7th-century basilica of St. John bare silent witness to its Christian past.

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas

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Only sparse, unexcavated ruins remain of biblical Philadelphia.

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas

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To the angel of the church in Philadelphia, write this:
“The holy one, the true, who holds the key of David, who opens and no one shall close, who closes and no one shall open, says this: ‘I know your works (behold, I have left an open door before you, which no one can close). You have limited strength, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. Behold, I will make those of the assembly of Satan who claim to be Jews but are not, but are lying, behold I will make them come and fall prostrate at your feet, and they will realize that I love you. Because you have kept my message of endurance, I will keep you safe in the time of trial that is going to come to the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth. I am coming quickly. Hold fast to what you have so that no one may take your crown . . .

The victor I will make into a pillar in the temple of my God, and he will never leave it again. On him I will inscribe the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from my God, as well as my new name.”

(3: 7-12)

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Philadelphia:

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- **“The holy one, the true, who holds the key of David, who opens and no one shall close, who closes and no one shall open.”** The “holy one” [ἅγιος, ha-gee’-os], the “true” [ἀληθινός, a-la-thee-nos’]. “The Holy One of Israel” is a common reference to God in the Hebrew scriptures, and here Jesus identifies with the Father, recalling Jesus saying in John’s gospel, *“The Father and I are one”* (10: 30).

- The “key of David” reaches back to Isaiah in reference to Eliakim replacing Shebna as King Hezekiah’s palace administrator: *“I will place the key of the House of David on his shoulder”* (22: 22). The allusion affirms that David’s authority rests on Jesus, the promised Messiah, David’s heir.

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- Living in the shadow of Sardis, with its prosperous economy, political clout and large, wealthy Jewish community, Philadelphia lacked the resources they needed to fulfill the opportunities the Lord had placed before them. He had opened the door, but they were hesitant to step through it.
- In addition, the church at Philadelphia was the target of Jewish persecution. Again, we have Christ referring to “those of the assembly of Satan,” people who call themselves Jews, but are not; rather, they have fallen far from God’s covenant.
- Jesus offers words of support, and the promise that he will keep them safe until his imminent return.

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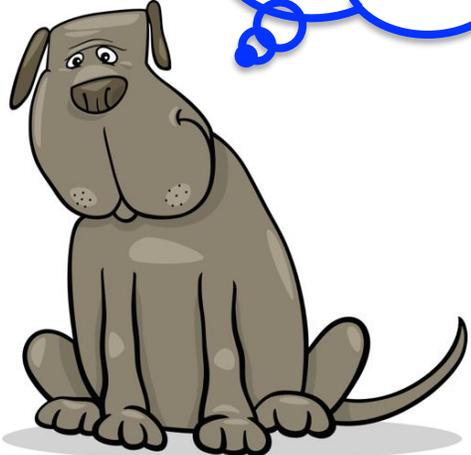


Philadelphia:

1. Greeting
2. Words of commendation
3. **Words of condemnation**
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Like Smyrna, Jesus has no words of condemnation for Philadelphia. They're not a martyr church, but they genuinely love the Lord, and they are trying very hard with limited resources, all the while being persecuted.



Jesus appreciates it when we try hard!

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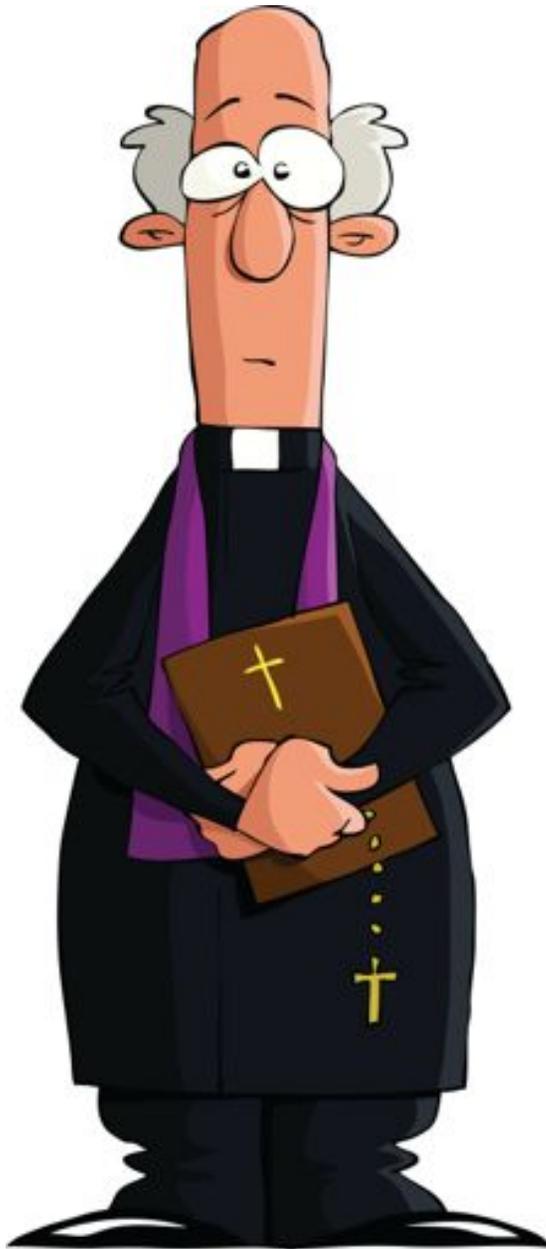
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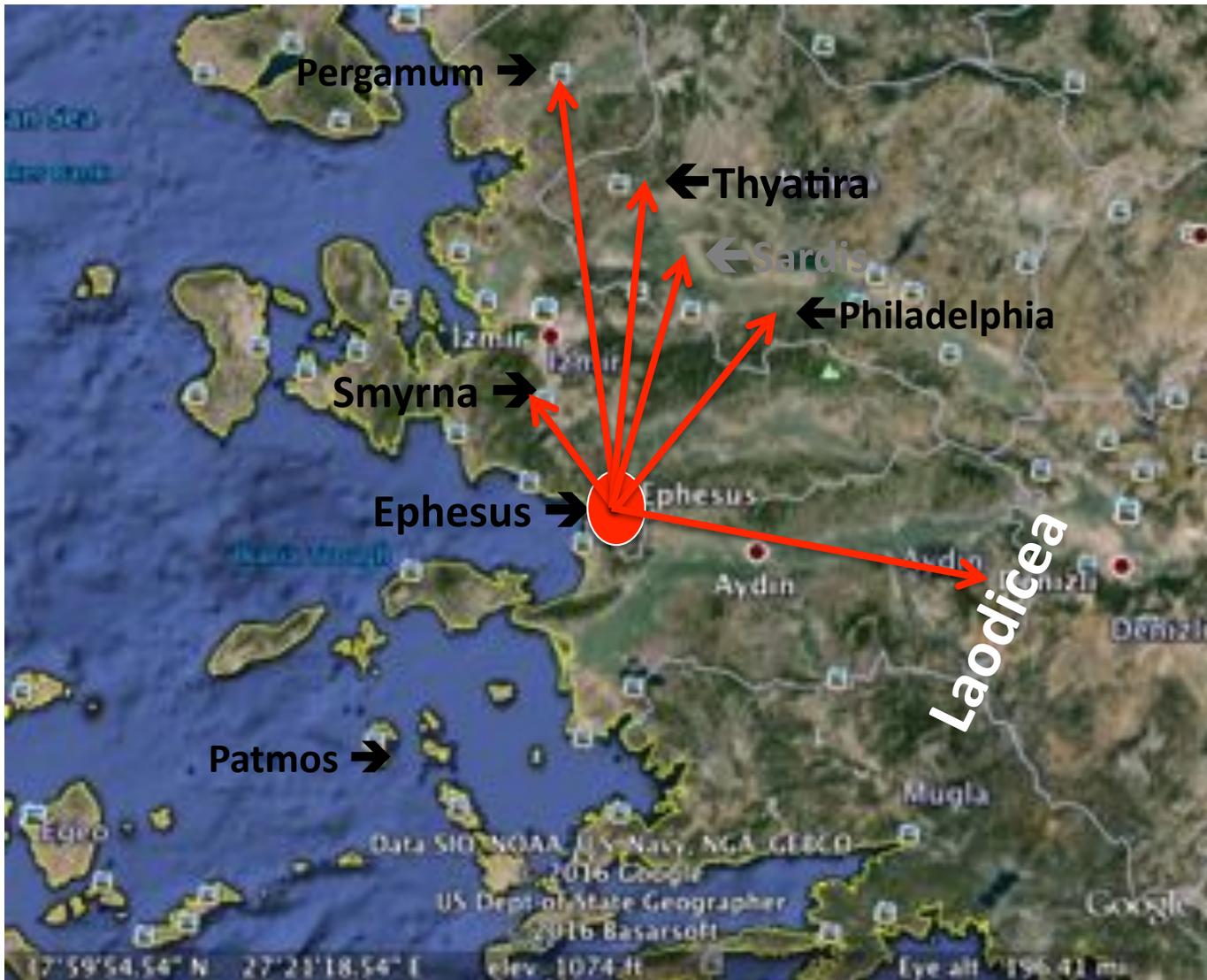


The reward for Philadelphia's love and steadfastness will be great: a secure place in the New Jerusalem (which we'll see in Revelation 21-22) and a knowledge of Jesus' "new name"; that is, in knowing him in his fullness as the risen and glorified Christ, in union with God the Father and the Holy Spirit, for all of eternity. And that's a pretty nice place to be!



Laodicea

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Originally called the “City of Zeus,” Laodicea was rebuilt and renamed by the Greek ruler Antiochus II (261 – 253 B.C.) in honor of his wife, Laodice.

Antiochus resettled 2,000 Jewish families from Babylon in Laodicea, establishing a large and flourishing Jewish community.

Laodicea is about 100 miles east of Ephesus on a major Roman trade route. Under the Romans, Laodicea quickly became an important center of trade, known especially for its high-quality black wool.

Rome granted Laodicea the title of a “free city,” and it was the chief city of a Roman *coventus*, a league of 24 cities in the region.



Laodicea is perched on the long spur of a hill overlooking a 6-mile wide valley through which runs the Lycus River. Hierapolis (the “City of the Sun”) is on the opposite side of the valley.

The water in the area is typically lukewarm and highly calcified. The remains of a large aqueduct contain thick encrustation, as do the underground sewage pipes, which are sometimes entirely choked up.

Hierapolis, on the other side of the valley also bears witness to the lukewarm, highly calcified water.



The Cardo, the “Main Street” of Laodicea, with its marble paving and columns, evidence of the city’s great prosperity.

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas

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Laodicea is in the midst of a massive archaeological project which has unearthed a stadium, baths, gymnasium, several temples, two theaters and a Senate building.

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas

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“Temple A,” as yet an unidentified temple along the Cardo.

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas

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Dr. C. teaching Revelation 3: 14-22 along the Cardo in Laodicea.

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Laodicea's theater, facing Hierapolis (Pamukkale of today).

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Calcified terracotta sewage piping from Laodicea.

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas

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Across the valley in Hierapolis (Pamukkale), we play in the warm, calcified pools.

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The tepid pools of Hierapolis (Pamukkale) cascade over the cliffs, with the valley and Laodicea in the background.

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas

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Down the cliffs, the warm, calcified water hardens, looking like snow!

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas

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“To the angel of the church in Laodicea, write this:

The Amen, the faithful and true witness, the source of God’s creation, says this: ‘I know your works; I know that you are neither cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. For you say, ‘I am rich and affluent and have no need of anything,’ and yet do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. I advise you to buy from me gold refined by fire so that you may be rich, and white garments to put on so that your shameful nakedness may not be exposed, and buy ointment to smear on your eyes so that you may see. Those whom I love, I reprove and chastise. Be earnest, therefore, and repent . . .

“Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, [then] I will enter his house and dine with him, and he with me. I will give the victor the right to sit with me on my throne, as I myself first won the victory and sit with my father on his throne.

Whoever has ears ought to hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

(3: 14-22)

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Laodicea:

1. **Greeting**
2. Words of commendation
3. Words of condemnation
4. Admonition

“To the angel of the church in Laodicea, write this:

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- **“The Amen, the faithful and true witness, the source of God’s creation.”** “Amen” [ἀμήν, a-main’] is transliterated from the Hebrew, typically in response to something read or said: “so be it.” It is also used of God as being the end or fulfillment of all that is, for example: *“Know, then that the Lord, your God, is God: the faithful [Amen] . . .”* (Deuteronomy 7: 9). It is used here of Christ in the very same way.

- The **“source of God’s creation”** [ἀρχή, ar-che’] is the “origin” [as in *archaeology*, the study of beginnings), and it recalls the prologue of John’s gospel: *“He was in the world, and the world came to be through him”* (1: 10), as well as Colossians 1: 17-18—*“[Christ] is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the beginning”*



Laodicea:

1. Greeting
2. **Words of commendation**
3. Words of condemnation
4. Admonition



Oh, no! Like Sardis Jesus has nothing good to say about Laodicea—no commendation!



Laodicea:

1. Greeting
2. Words of commendation
3. **Words of condemnation**
4. Admonition

"To the angel of the church in Laodicea, write this:

The Amen, the faithful and true witness, the source of God's creation, says this: **'I know your works; I know that you are neither cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth.** For you say, 'I am rich and affluent and have no need of anything,' and yet do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. I advise you to buy from me gold refined by fire so that you may be rich, and white garments to put on so that your shameful nakedness may not be exposed, and buy ointment to smear on your eyes so that you may see. Those whom I love, I reprove and chastise. Be earnest, therefore, and repent . . .



- “I know that you are neither cold or hot . . . [so] I will spit you out of my mouth.” This is vivid imagery, reflecting the characteristic lukewarm, calcified water of both Laodicea and Hierapolis. When Jesus says, “I will spit you out of my mouth” the work “spit” is ἐμέω [e-may’-o], literally “vomit.”

**In other words, Jesus says to the church in Laodicea:
“You make me want to puke!”**



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Like Sardis, the church at Laodicea is wealthy and complacent, neither hot nor cold. The church has become little more than a social club of do-gooders, part-time Christians who congratulate themselves on what fine people they are.

Of all Jesus' words of condemnation spoken to the churches in Revelation, these are the most damning.

If the church were cold, not caring one way or the other about Christ, he could work with them; if the church were on fire—even if the fire were burning in the wrong direction—he could work with them. But this lukewarm complacency makes Jesus sick!

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William Holman Hunt (1827-1910), a member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, painted *The Light of the World* (1851-1853), an allegory illustrating Revelation 3: 20—“Behold, I stand at the door and knock.”

Hunt said: “I painted the picture with what I thought, unworthy though I was, to be by divine command, and not simply as a good subject. The door in the painting has no handle, and can therefore be opened only from the inside, representing ‘the obstinately shut mind.’”¹

The original oil on canvas hangs in a side room off the chapel at Keble College, Oxford; a life-size version was hung at St. Paul’s Cathedral, London; and a third, smaller version, painted between 1851 and 1856, is on display at the Manchester City Art Gallery.

¹ **W.H. Hunt. *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*. (London: Macmillan, 1905), p. 350.**

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Laodicea:

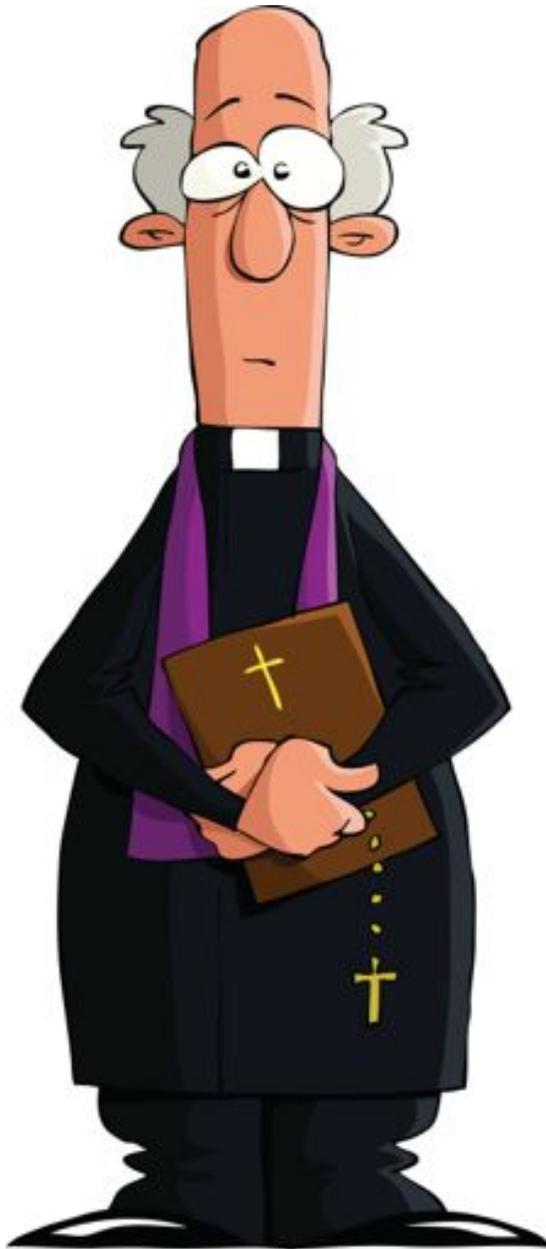
1. Greeting
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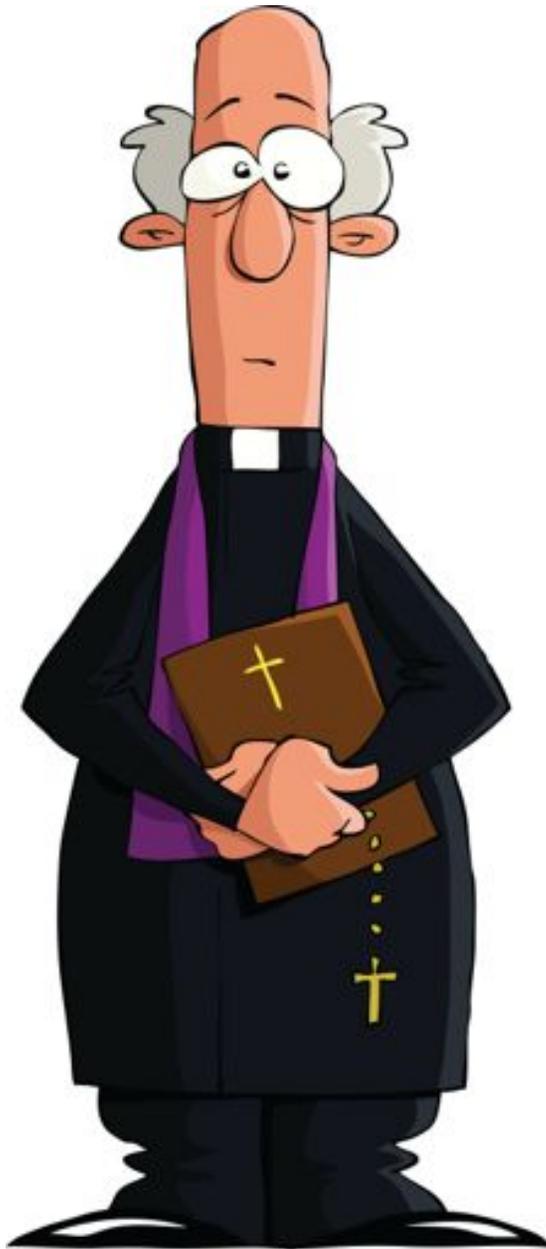
(3: 14-22)

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As we've noted, the seven churches in Asia Minor all fall within our Apostle John's geographic sphere of influence. In each letter the risen and glorified Christ critiques each church, pointing out their strengths and weaknesses, while encouraging and admonishing them.

Beyond that, each letter serves as a "cover letter" for Revelation 4-22, Christ's "unveiling" of end-time events that will happen soon.



Each letter speaks to the current state of each church at the end of the 1st century. But the sequence of the seven churches may also reflect the history of the church, from its apostolic beginnings until today:

Ephesus—the apostolic church, Pentecost A.D. 32-63, the church at the time of the Apostles.

Smyrna—the martyr church, A.D. 64-313, from Nero's persecution until the Edict of Milan.

Pergamum—The emerging church, A.D. 313-590, the official religion of the Roman Empire.

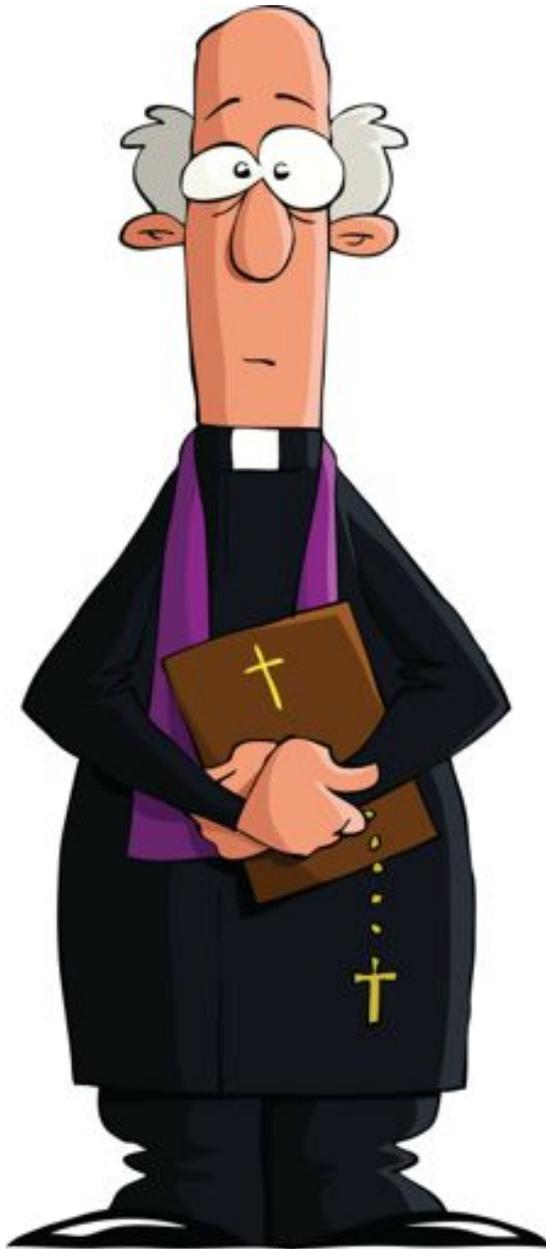
Thyatira—the church of the Middle Ages, A.D. 590-1517, the church as a world political and economic power.

Sardis—the reformed church, A.D. 1517-1800, the church of the Reformation and counter-Reformation.

Philadelphia—the revived church A.D. 1800-1960, the great age of the missionary church.

Laodicea—today's church, 1960-present, the lukewarm, self-congratulatory church of a post-Christian era.

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From a different perspective, we might well understand that all of today's parishes and Christian congregations can fit into one of the seven categories represented by the seven churches of Revelation, from those whose faith and works are stellar, to those many Christian communities in the Middle East who are martyr churches, to those who have accommodated themselves to the dominant secular culture, to those who are so tepid as to be irrelevant.

Questions for discussion and thought

1. Some in the church at Thyatira follow the teaching of “Jezebel.” Who is she, and what is her teaching?
2. In what sense does the church at Sardis have the reputation of “being alive,” while it is actually “dead”?
3. Why does Christ have no words of condemnation for the church at Philadelphia ?
4. What is the problem with the church at Laodicea?
5. Which of Revelation’s seven churches is most like your own parish or congregation?

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