

# Lesson 10

## The Letters to the Church in Revelation

### 1. Introduction

#### A. What is the book of Revelation all about?

1. Most people would answer that question by saying that the book of Revelation is all about the end of the world. But when you begin to study the book you soon discover that there are some major problems with that view, some of which we will talk about in Lesson 12.
2. In reality, the book of Revelation is all about the church. The church is the focus of the entire book, as evidenced by the opening chapters of the book, which contain letters written by Jesus Christ himself to seven congregations of his church throughout Asia.

#### B. What if we received a letter from Jesus specifically directed to the Katy congregation?

1. But, of course, we have more than just a letter – we have an entire book!
2. Also, while these letters in Revelation 2-3 were directed to seven specific congregations, they contain warnings that are applicable to all congregations.
  - a) **Revelation 2:23** all the churches shall know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts.
3. In fact, since the number seven is used 54 times in this book to symbolically depict perfection or completeness, the choice to send letters to seven congregations may be a figurative way of addressing the book to all congregations.

### 2. The Letter to the Congregation in Ephesus (2:1-7)

#### A. The city of Ephesus has been called the “first and greatest metropolis of Asia.”

1. Ephesus had the greatest harbor in Asia, and it was the greatest and wealthiest city in Asia.
2. Ephesus was one of the few “free cities” in the Roman empire, which means that within its own limits it was self-governing. Ephesus could never have Roman troops garrisoned within it.

**B. Ephesus was the center of worship of Artemis or Diana.**

1. The Temple of Artemis in Ephesus was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.
2. Acts 19 tells us about Demetrius, who made silver shrines of Artemis and who saw his livelihood threatened by the spread of Christianity.
3. Ephesus also contained temples dedicated to Nero and Claudius. One commentator said that in Ephesus, pagan religion was at its strongest.

**C. Ephesus was also a center for crime and immorality.**

1. The Temple of Artemis was filled with hundreds of priestesses who were sacred prostitutes.
2. Heraclitus, the weeping philosopher, attributed his tears to the fact that no one could live in Ephesus without weeping at the immorality.

**D. Although Ephesus seemed very unpromising soil for the word of God, some of the church's greatest triumphs occurred there.**

1. Trench wrote: "Nowhere did the word of God find a kindlier soil, strike root more deeply or bear fairer fruits of faith and love."
2. Of the cities Paul visited on his missionary journeys, Paul stayed longer in Ephesus than in any other. (Acts 20:31 says he was there for three years.) Aquila, Priscilla, and Apollos were in Ephesus (Acts 18). Paul's great farewell address was delivered to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20.

**E. What had this congregation done that was right?**

1. They had worked hard, they had endured patiently, they did not bear evil men, they tested and exposed false teachers, and they had not grown weary.
2. With all of that going for them, what could possibly be wrong?

**F. Verse 4 tells us that the Ephesian congregation had a major problem.**

1. They had abandoned their first love.
  - a) It is interesting to note how Paul ended his letter to the Ephesians.

(1) **Ephesians 6:24** Grace *be* with all those who love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity.
  - b) That letter was written about 30 years before this second letter. At some point between the two letters the Ephesians had abandoned their first love.

2. They had lost their proper focus – perhaps their programs and their labors had become an end rather than a means to an end. Their actions were right, but their motivation was wrong.
3. Listen to what one denominational commentator had to say about this malady in the denominational world. I think his comments can serve as a warning to us as well.
  - a) It is one of the remarkable features of contemporary church life that so many are attempting to heal the church by tinkering with its structures, its services, its public face. This is clear evidence that modernity has successfully palmed off one of its greatest deceptions on us, convincing us that God himself is secondary to organization and image, that the church's health lies in its flow charts, its convenience, and its offerings rather than in its inner life, its spiritual authenticity, the toughness of its moral intentions, its understanding of what it means to have God's Word in this world.
  - b) The world's business and God's business are two different things. The fundamental problem in the evangelical world today is not inadequate technique, insufficient organization, or antiquated music, and those who want to squander the church's resources bandaging these scratches will do nothing to stanch the flow of blood that is spilling from its true wounds.
  - c) The fundamental problem in the evangelical world today is that God rests inconsequentially upon the church. His truth is too distant, his grace is too ordinary, his judgment is too benign, his gospel is too easy, and his Christ is too common.
4. And what would happen to the Ephesian congregation if the situation were not remedied?
  - a) Jesus says in verse 5 that he would come and remove their lampstand from its place.
  - b) This warning was directed to the entire group as contrasted with similar messages elsewhere in these letters directed to individuals (*e.g.*, blot their names out of the book of life in 3:5).
  - c) What this tells us is that it is possible for an entire congregation of the Lord's church to be plunged into such darkness that it ceases to be a congregation of the Lord's church. They may not change the sign outside the building that says "Church of Christ" – but what you find inside is no longer a church of Christ. Its lampstand has been removed from its place.

**G. Verse 6 is interesting. Jesus says that he hates the works of the Nicolaitans.**

1. When Jesus says he hates something, it should really get our attention. If Jesus hates it, then we must hate it as well – and if we don't, then it tells us we have a problem. Jesus commended the Ephesians in verse 6 because they also hated the false doctrine of the Nicolaitans.

2. The Nicolaitans were a sect that some surmise was started by Nicolas, one of the first deacons in Acts 6:5. Another theory is that the name is symbolic (as most likely is the name “Jezebel” that is used in a later letter). The Greek word “Nikolas” means “destroyer of the people.”
3. This group was known for their “loose thinking and their loose living.” The wolves mentioned by Paul in Acts 20 in his address to the Ephesian elders had arrived. And perhaps it was because of Paul’s warning that the Ephesian congregation was not taken in by these false teachers. They recognized and hated their false teachings.
4. To love the truth, we must hate what is false. If we do not hate what is false, then we cannot say that we love the truth. Jesus hated this false doctrine, and he commended this congregation for also hating that false doctrine. (We will see a congregation with a different attitude when we get to Pergamum.)

#### **H. What is the lesson to the church from Christ’s letter to Ephesus?**

1. Look at verse 4. This congregation had lost its focus. They were still doing the programs and the activities, but they had forgotten why they were doing the programs and the activities. They had left their first love.
2. The lesson for us today is that the church of Christ must always focus on Christ. He must always be our “first love.”
  - a) **1 Corinthians 13:3** And though I bestow all my goods to feed *the poor*, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.

### **3. The Letter to the Congregation in Smyrna (2:8-11)**

#### **A. Smyrna was the loveliest city in Asia.**

1. It was called the ornament of Asia, the crown of Asia, and the flower of Asia.
2. It stood at a crossroads and was a great trading city, and its harbor was Asia’s safest and most convenient.

#### **B. In a sense, Smyrna had also “died and come to life” as Jesus says of himself in verse 8.**

1. Smyrna was founded in 1000 BC as a Greek colony, but it was destroyed in 600 BC by the Lydians. It was rebuilt as a planned city around 200 BC.
2. Smyrna, like Ephesus, was a free city. It was self-governing and had no Roman troops.

3. The city had cast its lot with Rome long before Rome became the undisputed leader of the world. Smyrna had erected a temple to the goddess Roma as far back as 195 BC.
4. Having a temple to the emperor was a matter of great pride to the city of Smyrna, and a refusal by any citizen of the city to pay tribute in that temple was seen as a disgraceful lack of patriotism.

**C. The Jews in Smyrna were very influential and numerous, and verse 9 tells us they were slandering the Christians there.**

1. We are willing to suffer for those who we love, and the congregation at Smyrna was willing to suffer for Jesus Christ.
2. As one commentator said: “It was a dangerous thing to be a Christian in Smyrna. There was no knowing what might happen to you.” Indeed, Jesus tells them that they could expect poverty, slander, prison, and death.
3. To receive a certificate to conduct business, you were required to burn incense on an altar to Caesar once a year. The Jews had received an exemption, but the Christians had not.
4. The persecution against the Christians was apparently being fanned into flames by the local Jewish population, who would throw the Christians out of the synagogue and then inform on them to the local authorities.

**D. Very strong language is used in verse 9 to describe these slandering Jews.**

1. **Revelation 2:9** / *know* the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but *are* a synagogue of Satan.
  - a) Synagogue of Satan? Who was the mean-spirited, divisive, unloving, hater who came up with that phrase? Oh. What do you know? It was Jesus. And this was not the first time he had used this description. Listen to what he said to the Jewish leaders in John 8.
  - b) **John 8:44** “You are of *your* father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and *does not* stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own *resources*, for he is a liar and the father of it.
2. It doesn’t sound much like Jesus thought the Jewish leaders were just on another path to God. But that message does not go over very well in today’s modern world. As an example, compare Jesus’ description with the following quote from a modern religious scholar:

- a) [Saying that] ‘We believe that we know God, and we are right; you believe that you know God, and you are totally wrong,’ ... is intolerable from merely human standards. It is doubly so from Christian ones. Any position that antagonizes and alienates rather than reconciles ... is unlovely, is un-Christian. ... I rather feel that the final doctrine on this matter may perhaps run along the lines of affirming that a Buddhist who is saved, or a Hindu or a Muslim or whoever, is saved because God is the kind of God whom Jesus Christ has revealed him to be.”
  - b) According to this fellow, Christ himself is un-Christ-like!
  - c) This author believes that the Muslims and the Buddhists are saved because “God is the kind of God whom Jesus Christ has revealed him to be.” But if I can be saved apart from the blood of Christ, then Christ died for no reason. If there is a path to God around Jesus Christ, then his death was not necessary. What would that tell us about the God revealed to us in scripture? What kind of God would he be if he sent his son to suffer and die needlessly?
3. There is one way to God, and only one way to God, and we do no one any favors when we teach or suggest otherwise.
- a) **1 John 2:22-23** Who is a liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? He is antichrist who denies the Father and the Son. <sup>23</sup> Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father either.
  - b) **1 Corinthians 3:11** For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.
  - c) **Acts 4:12** “Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”
  - d) **John 14:6** Jesus said to him, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.
- (1) And what does the world say in response to that? Rita Gross has written a book entitled “Buddhists Talk about Jesus.” She describes Jesus’ statement in John 14:6 as “dangerous, destructive, and degraded” and “one of the most immoral ideas that humans have ever created.”
  - (2) And she’s not finished. Here is what her book says about Christ’s miracles: “Most, and perhaps all, of the extraordinary feats performed by Jesus would be classified by Buddhists as common accomplishments ... requiring a certain degree of meditative competence, but no real degree of permanent spiritual maturity.”

- (3) That's a strong claim – particularly given the fact that Jesus is alive and Buddha is dead and buried!
  - (4) I have news for these Buddhists. Buddha can meditate all he wants to, but he's not coming out of that tomb until Jesus commands him to, and when he does come out of that tomb, Buddha will bend his knee and confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. That's true for Buddha, that's true for Mohammed, and that's true for every other false prophet who has ever walked on this earth.
  - (5) As an aside, the denominations have trouble refuting these arguments by the Buddhists and the Moslems because the denominations have been teaching for years that there are many paths to God.
4. As we have seen, the Bible proclaims peace between Jew and Gentile – but that peace exists in the church. It is in the church that the middle wall of partition has been broken down. For those outside of the church to come to the Father – whether they be Jew or Greek – they must find salvation in Jesus Christ. There is no other way. To say otherwise is to call Jesus Christ a liar. (John 14:6)
- a) Mel Gibson has recently produced a movie about the life of Christ. Some have expressed worry that the film will somehow suggest that the Jews were responsible for the death of Christ. Of course, if they weren't responsible, then who was? The Romans certainly did not wish to see Jesus dead, as Pilate himself stated at the time. That the Jews killed Jesus is a fact of history that cannot be changed by modern day denials.
  - b) Speaking to the Jews, Peter said:
    - (1) **Acts 2:23** Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death;
  - c) And again, speaking to the Jews, Peter said:
    - (1) **Acts 5:30** “The God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom you murdered by hanging on a tree.”
  - d) Did the Jews murder Jesus? Yes. But here we need to be very careful that we do not judge someone while having a beam in our own eye.
    - (1) We also had a hand in the death of Christ. How? Because of our sin. We crucified the Son of God by our sin. Hebrews 6:6 tells us that if some fall away and return to their former sins then they “crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame.”

- (2) Since all men have sinned, all men had a hand in the murder of the Son of God. We should not deny our role in that event – and neither should the Jews deny their role.
5. Since there was a “synagogue of Satan” somewhere in the first century, might there be a “church of Satan” somewhere today?
- a) What if there were a religious group somewhere that called themselves a Christian church, and assume that they not only approved of homosexual conduct, but they elected as one of their leaders a practicing homosexual who had left his wife and children to move in with his gay lover. Then assume that after he was elected, a fellow church leader was quoted in the newspaper as saying that this leader’s “consecration would bring in new, youthful members” and that “We have here a wonderful evangelistic tool to strengthen the life of the church.” And then, finally, assume that after he was elected, the homosexual leader himself was quoted as saying “God has once again brought an Easter out of Good Friday.”
- b) If that group is not a church of Satan, then I submit that no group could ever be classified as such. A recent issue of *World Magazine* depicts the ordination of this gay bishop and shows a large group of robed clergy surrounding and placing their hands on the kneeling homosexual. A coven of witches would not be more Satanic!
- c) As an aside, it has been interesting to watch the interplay between the “liberals” and “conservatives” in this Episcopalian controversy. Apparently, the conservatives objected years ago when women were ordained as bishops – but they ultimately did nothing. The liberals thus, understandably, believe nothing will be ultimately be done about the ordination of gay bishops.

#### **E. What is the lesson to the church from Christ’s letter to Smyrna?**

1. Look at verse 9. The lesson for the church today is that Christ is not just a way – Christ is the way.
2. The modern world recoils at the idea that there is one and only one path to the Father – but we must never cease to proclaim it.

### **4. The Letter to the Congregation in Pergamum (2:12-17)**

#### **A. Historically, Pergamum was the most famous city in Asia.**

1. It had been a capital city for 400 years. First, it was the capital of the Seleucid kingdom that appeared after Alexander the Great. Next, it was the capital of the province of Asia formed by the Romans.

2. It was situated on a hilltop from which the Mediterranean Sea could be seen 15 miles away.

**B. Pergamum was a center of culture surpassing even Ephesus and Smyrna.**

1. It had a library that was second only to that in Alexandria. (200,000 volumes copied by hand!)
2. The word “parchment” is derived from “Pergamum.” In the third century BC, a Pergamene king attempted to lure away the librarian at Alexandria. The Egyptians imprisoned the librarian and banned the export of papyrus to Pergamum. Pergamum, in response, invented parchment (or vellum) from animal skins.

**C. Pergamum was also a great religious center.**

1. The city contained a great altar to Zeus that was set 800 feet up on the side of a hill. The altar looked very much like a large throne. This altar is most likely what is called “Satan’s throne” in verse 13. The city was also a center of Caesar worship.
2. Roman governors were divided into two groups – those with the right of the sword and those without. The governor of Pergamum had that right, which meant he could execute Christians for any reason. And yet Christ in verse 12 refers to himself as the one with the “sharp two-edged sword.”

**D. Pergamum was locked in a battle between truth and error.**

1. As one commentator reminds us: “Christ is deeply concerned about the preservation and propagation of the truth. This whole letter is devoted to that theme. ... Jesus came into the world to bear witness to the truth. He loves the truth. He speaks the truth. He is the truth. How can we be indifferent to it?”

**E. The Pergamum congregation had some within it who held to the doctrine of Balaam and the doctrine of the Nicolaitans.**

1. It is worthwhile noting that what was hated in Ephesus was being tolerated in Pergamum.
2. Many commentators believe that the teaching of Balaam and the teaching of the Nicolaitans were one and the same. It is generally identified with the group mentioned in Jude 1:4, 11 and alluded to in Romans 6:1.
  - a) **Jude 1:4** For certain men have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into lewdness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ. ... <sup>11</sup>Woe unto them! for they have gone in

the way of Cain, and ran greedily after the error of Balaam for reward, and perished in the gainsaying of Core.

b) **Romans 6:1** What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?

3. We have already discussed the Nicolaitans. But why also the reference here to Balaam? In Numbers 25, the Israelites played the harlot with the daughters of Moab, who then caused the Israelites to turn to false gods. Later in Numbers 31:16 we learn that these women along with the Moabite king Balak acted under the influence of Balaam.
4. One commentator wrote that “pagan women and pagan food were his weapons against the rigid Mosaic code.” Balaam is a prototype of all corrupt teachers who betray believers into a fatal compromise with the world.
5. As you study the entire book of Revelation, you discover that a major theme of that book is a warning against compromise with the world.

#### **F. What is the lesson to the church from Christ’s letter to Pergamum?**

1. Look at verse 15. The lesson for us today is that Jesus cares very deeply about the doctrine that is taught and proclaimed by his church.
2. Jesus tells us in verse 15 that he hates this false doctrine that was being tolerated in Pergamum. The servant is not greater than his master. (John 15:20) If Jesus hates this false doctrine, then so must his church. We must not tolerate that which our Master hates.

### **5. The Letter to the Congregation in Thyatira (2:18-29)**

#### **A. The least important city got the longest letter.**

1. What little importance Thyatira had came from its location. It was on a road connecting Pergamum, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Smyrna. This location made Thyatira a great commercial town. It was also strategically important because it was a gateway to Pergamum, the capital of the province.
2. The city had no particular religious significance. It was not a center of persecution of the church.

#### **B. Thyatira was a center of trade for dye and wool.**

1. Lydia, the seller of purple in Acts 16:14, came from Thyatira.
2. The city had a large number of trade guilds. These guilds held meals in the temples, where meat that had been offered to idols was served. Those at the

meals often engaged in drunkenness and immorality. The Christians refused to participate and thus suffered commercially.

3. Here we have a very important lesson for modern business men and women. It is often tempting to follow a crowd to do evil when that crowd offers a great deal of “client development.” We must remain true to our Lord, even if doing so causes us to suffer commercially.

### **C. Thyatira had what Ephesus lacked.**

1. Verse 19 tells us that Thyatira rivaled Ephesus in busy Christian service, but it also tells us that Thyatira had the love that the Ephesians were lacking.
2. In fact, Jesus tells them that their latest works exceeded their first works, which means that while Ephesus was backsliding, Thyatira was growing and maturing.
3. And yet verse 20 tells us that they had a serious problem. There was a malignant cancer growing in the body and they were permitting it to continue unchecked.
  - a) Verse 19 tells us that they had been patient. Verse 20 tells us that perhaps they had been too patient!
  - b) The Ephesians could not bear false prophets, and yet they lacked love. Thyatira had love, but they tolerated false prophets. We must seek both love and truth, or we will eventually end up having neither.

### **D. The threat against the church in Thyatira came from within.**

1. There was always a temptation to put business interests ahead of Christ’s interests, and apparently there was a group within the church led by a false prophetess referred to as Jezebel that wanted to compromise with the trade guilds by participating in their immorality and idolatry.
2. The confession that Caesar is lord was often required before one could buy or sell. Some, no doubt, would compromise and make this confession for business reasons. Historians tells us that the slogan of those who compromised was “A man must live.” You can imagine the rationalizations that must have gone on with some.
3. And yet the text implies that these compromisers saw themselves as deeply spiritual people.
  - a) The “deep things of Satan” in verse 24 is thought by many to refer to those who felt they had a duty to experience every kind of sin. Their goal was to wallow in sin yet keep their soul unaffected. And they could accomplish this feat, no doubt, because of their deep, deep spirituality.

- b) Jesus told them in verse 24 that were deep alright, but they were experiencing the deep things of Satan. Their spiritual depth was really spiritual death.
4. And what would happen today with this Jezebel who called herself a Christian while wallowing in sin? Today in many so-called religious circles the cry would be “Tolerate her?? What’s to tolerate? Let’s make her a bishop!”
- a) Do you notice the outward display of deep spirituality among those who promote the homosexual agenda in the denominational world? That is the same attitude that Jesus is referring to in this letter.
  - b) These people think they are spiritually deep, but in reality they are spiritually dead. They have cast God behind their backs.
  - c) **Ezekiel 23:35** “Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: ‘Because you have forgotten Me and cast Me behind your back, Therefore you shall bear the *penalty of your lewdness and your harlotry.*”
  - d) **Luke 16:15** And he said unto them, Ye are they which justify yourselves before men; but God knoweth your hearts: for that which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God.
5. Jesus’ judgment of this Jezebel is described in verses 22-23. The children in verse 23 are most likely her disciples. (Isaiah 57:3-8 uses the term in a similar way.)
6. The world may see tolerance as the greatest virtue, but God does not see it that way.
- a) We must never tolerate sin or those who teach others to sin. If we do, then we fall under the condemnation of verse 20.
  - b) As Alexander Chase said, “the peak of tolerance is most readily achieved by those who are not burdened with convictions.”

#### **E. What is the lesson to the church from Christ’s letter to Thyatira?**

1. Look at verse 20. The lesson for the church today is that we must not be tolerant with regard to departures from the word of God.
2. The world may see tolerance as the greatest virtue, but Jesus does not share the world’s opinion. His first criticism of this congregation was that they tolerated a false prophetess.

3. We, of course, should be very tolerant on matters of opinion as discussed in Romans 14, but on matters of the faith, we must never be tolerant of departures.

## **6. The Letter to the Congregation in Sardis (3:1-6)**

### **A. Sardis was really two cities.**

1. The original city stood 1500 feet up on a hill in a position that was almost impregnable. Later, the city spread to the foot of the hill as well. Thus, Sardis was really two cities – one on the hill and one at the foot of the hill.
2. Sardis was also an extremely wealthy city.
3. The city had been destroyed by an earthquake in AD 17, but was rebuilt by Tiberius.

### **B. The congregation in Sardis had a reputation.**

1. It had a reputation among men of being alive. No doubt it was considered very progressive and contemporary. It was most likely very well regarded in the community. It may have been very fashionable to be a member of the congregation in Sardis.
2. But where men saw a thriving church, God saw an empty shell.
3. In verse 2 Jesus told them that their works were not right in the sight of God. And if your works are not right in the sight of God, it does not matter how your works look in the sight of man. In fact, when the world has nothing but good things to say about you, it should be a warning that you have become a little too much like the world.
  - a) **Luke 6:26** Woe to you when all men speak well of you, For so did their fathers to the false prophets.

### **C. Jesus had a message for Sardis. He told them in verse 2 to “Wake up and watch!”**

1. This message had some historical significance to the city of Sardis. Cyrus of Persia has once besieged the city and had offered a reward to anyone who could find a way to enter the city. A soldier, who had seen a Sardian soldier climb partially down the hill to retrieve a lost helmet, led a group up the hill following the same fault line at night. They discovered the battlements completely unguarded, and they took the city.
2. The city slipped into obscurity under Persian rule and later surrendered to Alexander, under whom it became a center of Greek culture. But history repeated itself, when Antiochus besieged the city after Alexander’s death and

took the city using the same trick that had been used by Cyrus. Again, Sardis fell because there was no one there to watch.

3. It is to these people that Jesus says “Wake up and watch!” His promise in verse 3 to come as thief also causes one to recall the city’s history.

#### **D. What is the lesson to the church from Christ’s letter to Sardis?**

1. Look at verse 2. The lesson for the church today is that we must remain watchful.
2. As soon as we say that such and such would never happen to us, Satan sees his opportunity. We have just announced to him a part of our defenses where we have no guards, and he will seek to take advantage of that weakness.
3. **1 Corinthians 10:12** Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.

## **7. The Letter to the Congregation in Philadelphia (3:7-13)**

#### **A. Philadelphia was the youngest of the seven cities.**

1. The city was founded by colonists from Pergamum sometime from 159 to 138 BC to be a missionary city of Greek culture to the Lydia. And it worked! By AD 19, the Lydians had forgotten their own language and were all but Greek.
2. For a time, the city was constantly beset by earthquakes and tremors, and most of the people lived outside the city in huts. Jesus tells them in verse 12 that they would go out no more.
3. The name of the city was changed to Neocaesarea and later to Flavia, but neither name lasted and Philadelphia was eventually restored. Jesus tells them in verse 12 that they would receive a new name.

#### **B. In verse 8, Jesus says that an open door had been set before this congregation.**

1. In the Bible, an “open door” is an opportunity for service and evangelism.
  - a) **1 Corinthians 16:9** For a great and effective door has opened to me, and *there are* many adversaries.
  - b) **Colossians 4:3** meanwhile praying also for us, that God would open to us a door for the word
  - c) **2 Corinthians 2:12** Furthermore, when I came to Troas to *preach* Christ’s gospel, and a door was opened to me by the Lord,

2. Verse 8 tells us that they were very weak and verse 9 tells us they faced fierce opposition – and yet Jesus himself had opened a door for them – and he expected them to go through it!

**C. The church was weak in influence compared to its Jewish opposition.**

1. The synagogue of Satan is mentioned again in verse 9.
2. We need to understand that Satan is real and he is actively working against us.
3. Satan is mentioned six times in these two chapters. That alone should tell us something important. Jesus knows that Satan is real and that Satan is active. Jesus recognizes that his church is facing a vicious adversary, and he is giving us a warning.
4. **2 Corinthians 2:11** lest Satan should take advantage of us; for we are not ignorant of his devices.

**D. The New Jerusalem in verse 12 is the church.**

1. In place of the old city of Jerusalem where the people of God once dwelled, there was now a new Jerusalem where the people of God dwelled – and that New Jerusalem is the church.
2. Notice that the New Jerusalem comes down out of Heaven from God. As Daniel told us in Daniel 2, Jesus tells us here that the church is not a product of man. It was established by God.

**E. What is the lesson to the church from Christ's letter to Philadelphia?**

1. Look at verse 8. The lesson for the church today is that we need to look for open doors for service and evangelism. We need to pray for such opportunities, and then we need to take advantage of those opportunities when our prayers are answered.

**8. The Letter to the Congregation in Laodicea (3:14-22)**

**A. Laodicea was the only congregation about which Jesus had nothing good to say.**

1. Doesn't it tell us a lot about our Savior that he saved this letter for last? He had nothing good to say, and so he was not in any hurry to get to them. He wanted to have something good to say about them!
  - a) Some teachers love to give failing grades, and others hate to do so. Jesus is in the second category.

b) **Ezekiel 33:11** Say unto them, As I live, saith the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel?

2. The city was founded in 250 BC by Antiochus and named after his wife. It was positioned on the most important road in Asia, which connected Ephesus to Syria. This road made the city a great commercial and strategic center.

## **B. Laodicea was proud and felt that it had need of nothing.**

1. When the city was destroyed by an earthquake in AD 61, the people refused Roman help and rebuilt the city on their own.
2. It was one of the wealthiest cities in the world and was a center of banking and finance – yet Jesus told them they were poor.
3. The city was a center of clothing manufacture and was famous for its soft, violet-black, glossy wool – yet Jesus told them they were naked.
4. The city was a medical center and housed a medical school that was famous for its ointment for the eyes and ears – and yet Jesus told them they were blind.
5. This congregation was proud and contented – and Jesus did not have a single good thing to say about them.
6. Those in Smyrna were destitute, and Jesus told them in 2:9 that they were rich. These people in Laodicea were rich, and yet Jesus tells them that they are destitute. How often is the truth just the opposite of what men believe?

a) **Proverbs 13:7** There is that maketh himself rich, yet *hath* nothing: *there is* that maketh himself poor, yet *hath* great riches.

7. One commentator writes: “Perhaps none of the seven letters is more appropriate to the 20th century church than this. It describes vividly the respectable, sentimental, nominal, skin-deep religiosity that is so widespread among us today. Our Christianity is flabby and anemic. We appear to have taken a lukewarm bath of religion.”
8. Verse 20 pictures Jesus as standing at the door of his own church and knocking. He wanted to be let back in to his own church!

## **C. Verses 15-16 tell us that Jesus prefers hot or cold to lukewarm!**

1. We might be tempted to think that a cold Christian would be worse than a lukewarm Christian, but not according to Jesus. At least the cold Christian has made a decision – it was the wrong decision, but at least he has acted.

The cold Christian has left the church. But not so with the lukewarm Christian. They hang around and cause all sorts of trouble.

2. We can look to the denominational world for an example of lukewarmness. In the recent vote to ordain a gay bishop in the Episcopalian religious group, some voted yes and some voted no. But did you notice that there were also two abstentions? I have more respect for those that voted yes!

#### **D. Listen to what the Scottish theologian George MacDonald had to say about the Laodiceans.**

1. You must note that in this last message to the Laodiceans, he has not a word of praise for them-not a word of praise. Almost all the rest have some praise given them, but there is not a word of praise for these halfhearted Laodiceans. They want to go comfortably on, and not to be troubled much, and they will get into heaven as they please, in some sleepy way or other.
2. He speaks very plainly what He thinks of them, and He shows very clearly how His thought about them ran counter altogether to their own judgment of themselves. "Oh, we are all right! We accept this and that doctrine; we believe so-and-so; we are all right." Or, on the other hand: "We have broken free from the traditions of the elders; we have got a better way, and so we are all right." Are you doing the things that Jesus Christ tells you? If not, you are all wrong. Your ideas, your opinions, your systems, let them be as correct as astronomy, and you are no better, but probably much the worse for them.

#### **E. What is the lesson to the church from Christ's letter to Laodicea?**

1. Look at verse 15. The lesson for the church today is that Christ will not have us if we care nothing for him or for his church. He would rather us be actively opposed to him than for us to say we are on his side and yet live a life of total indifference to his will.
2. His message to this congregation was to get off the fence! Make a decision one way or the other! Act!

## **9. Conclusion**

#### **A. Each of these letters begins with the same phrase: "I know".**

1. We understand that Jesus is the head of the church, but sometimes we act like he is a distant monarch. These letters paint a very different portrait of our king.
2. Jesus is intimately concerned about his church. Indeed, the Bible describes church as the body of Christ and as the bride of Christ. Jesus knows what is going on in his church, and he cares very deeply about what is going on in his church – and that should be a great source of comfort for us today when the church seems to be in such turmoil all around the world. Does Jesus care? Yes, he cares. I know he cares. Jesus knows what is happening in his church.