

LESSON TEN

THE LETTERS TO THE CHURCHES

TEXT: Revelation Chapters Two and Three.

A. THE THINGS THAT ARE:

In Revelation 1:19 John was instructed to write:

1. The things which thou hast seen - Revelation Chapter One.
2. The things which are - Revelation Two and Three.
3. The things which shall be hereafter - Revelation Four to Twenty-two.

In chapter two and three we have recorded the letters to the seven churches of Asia. There were more than seven churches in Asia when John wrote in AD 96. For example, Colossae had an important church, which was not included in the seven.

The number seven is always a number of perfection and completion. We also know that there is only one church from her birth on the Day of Pentecost until her translation when Jesus returns. The seven churches of Asia are the "THINGS THAT ARE," representative of the church from John's day until the Second Coming of Jesus.

In the book of Revelation the church disappears from the earth at the close of chapter three and is not seen again until the nineteenth chapter.

B. THE SEVEN CHURCHES IN CHURCH HISTORY:

In church history the seven churches are representative of definite period in history:

1. Ephesus: - Church of the first century; from Pentecost to AD 96: the Apostolic Church.
2. Smyrna: - The suffering persecuted church of the 2nd and 3rd centuries, AD 96 to AD 312 when Constantine professed conversion.
3. Pergamos: - The Imperial church, AD 312 to AD 500.
4. Thyatira: - The Dark Ages, AD 500 to AD 1520 (the Reformation).
5. Sardis: - The church of the Protestant Reformation.
6. Philadelphia: - The church of revival, Brotherly Love, the true church which shall be raptured.
7. Laodicea: - The End Time church of Apostasy.

It should be noted that church history covers a time period of approximately two millennia. What the church lost in the Pergamos and Thyatira periods, God restores completely to Philadelphia. Also throughout history God has always had a few who kept His Word and not denied His name. He never left Himself without a witness.

C. THE GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATION OF THE SEVEN CHURCHES:

The seven churches were located in seven cities of Asia Minor. These cities were situated in a triangular manner. From Ephesus one goes north to Smyrna and to Pergamos about one hundred miles. Coming back in a southeast direction, one comes to Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and finally Laodicea, about one hundred miles east of Ephesus. Beginning at Ephesus, one can reach each city in proper order travelling in a clockwise manner.

1. EPHESUS: It was located at the mouth of the Cayster River. It was a busy trading post until its harbor began to fill up. In the first century it was a dying city leaning more and more to its trade of religious souvenirs and tourism because of the famous temple of Diana, the fertility goddess. In the first century Ephesus was the seat of this oriental cult. The Temple of Diana was one of the Seven Wonders of the World.
2. SMYRNA: It was situated on an excellent harbor and was a prosperous trading port. Smyrna was famous for science, medicine and its building. Polycarp, a bishop of Smyrna, had been a disciple of John. He was martyred in AD 155.
3. PERGAMOS: This was the capital of the area and the chief town of the province of Asia. It was the site of the first temple of the Caesar-cult. It was an ancient seat of culture and possessed a large library.
4. THYATIRA: This was a center of commerce. Lydia, who was converted in Philippi, was from Thyatira.
5. SARDIS: It was famous for arts and crafts. It was the first center in the area to mint gold and silver coins.
6. PHILADELPHIA: It was named after its founder Attalus II Philadelphus. It was a grape-growing district.
7. LAODICEA: It was a wealthy city and had great commercial prosperity. It was a leading banking center. It was rich enough that it refused earthquake relief from the Senate. It had a medical school and manufactured collyrium, a famous eye-salve.

D. PROMISES TO THE OVERCOMERS:

A profitable study may be made of the promises given to each of the seven churches. In each case the promise is to the "overcomer." The saint should always be thankful for trials and testing for this gives him the opportunity of becoming an overcomer. There is no way one can become an overcomer unless he has a trial.

1. EPHESUS: - "... will I give to eat of the tree of life which is in the midst of the paradise of God" (Revelation 2:7).
2. SMYRNA: - "... shall not be hurt of the second death" (2:11).
3. PERGAMOS: - "... will I give to eat of the hidden manna, and will give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name written" (2:17).
4. THYATIRA: - "... to him will I give power over the nations ... And I will give him the morning star" (2:26-28).
5. SARDIS: - "... shall be clothed in white raiment ... I will not blot out his name out of the book of life ... I will confess his name before my Father" (3:5).
6. PHILADELPHIA: - "... A pillar in the temple of my God ... I will write upon him the name of my God ... name of the New Jerusalem. I will write upon him my new name" (3:12).
7. LAODICEA: - "... will I grant to sit with me in my throne" (3:21).

Most of these promises need little explanation. However, we shall explain the following:

1. HIDDEN MANNA: This is heavenly food that is hidden in God's Word. The overcomer will be able to have deep truths from the Word revealed to him.
2. WHITE STONE: In ancient trials the jurors would vote for acquittal by laying down a white stone. This white stone is a symbol of eternal acquittal.
3. MORNING STAR: Jesus declared Himself to be the bright and morning star (Revelation 22:16). This promise means that the overcomer would have the presence of Jesus Christ with him.

E. THE LETTER TO THE CHURCH OF EPHESUS (Revelation 2:1-7):

1. DESCRIPTION: The name "Ephesus" means "the desirable one." As the church was born, the Apostolic Church was the desired church. It was the early church with its first love burning for Christ. With zeal this church throughout the known world preached the gospel.
2. COMMENDATION: There was much that the Lord commended. *"I know thy works and thy labor, and thy patience."* This church faithfully served the Lord and did not grow weary in well doing (Galatians 6:9). Faithfulness and patience (steadfastness) are some of the greatest of Christian characteristics. These qualities were found in the Ephesian church.

This church was a separated church and would not tolerate evil. They did not accept just anyone as a minister, but first tried them to see whether they were true or genuine.

This church remained true to the name of Jesus. Here has always been the true test. The name of Jesus will always be under attack. The Ephesians preached the Name of Jesus and refused to compromise.

Finally, the Ephesians hated the deeds of the Nicolaitans. The word "nicolaitans" comes from the two Greek words: Niko - to conquer and Laos - the people. This was setting up a priestly order or clerical dictatorship over God's people. Jesus declared here that He hated this and commended the Ephesians for having the same attitude.

3. CONDEMNATION: Jesus condemned the Ephesian church because she had left her first love. However, this is something that has deliberately been left behind. It is a deliberate willful act of walking away from the love they had at the beginning.
4. ADMONITION: The act of leaving their first love is one of falling. They are admonished to repent and return to their first love. The danger of having their candlestick removed simply means they would be backslidden and eternally lost.

F. LETTER TO THE CHURCH OF SMYRNA (Revelation 2:8-11).

1. DESCRIPTION: "Smyrna" comes from the word "Myrrh." It was a fragrant spice but it had to be beaten and crushed before it gave forth its perfume. The Hebrew root word for Smyrna means, "bitter." It was bitter to the taste but only after it was crushed was the fragrance released. It was used in times of death for embalming.

In this letter to Smyrna we find the words being used: tribulation, poverty, suffer, prison.

This was the persecuted church of the 2nd and 3rd centuries. One historian has estimated that five million Christians were martyred during this time. Christians were thrown to hungry lions. Many were crucified; others were covered with tar and set on fire. Christians were boiled in oil and burned at the stake. Polycarp was martyred in Smyrna in AD 156. However, in spite of the persecutions, the church grew and reached its highest percentage to world population that it has ever seen.

The statement that it would have tribulation ten days (Revelation 2:10), is thought to have reference to the ten periods of persecution under Roman emperors from Nero to Diocletian.

2. COMMENDATION: The church is commended for its endurance under persecution. In spite of its poverty, Jesus said, *"Thou art rich."*
3. CONDEMNATION: There was no rebuke to this church.

4. ADMONITION:

- a. Fear not - They were exhorted not to be afraid of what they were to suffer.
- b. Be faithful unto death.

To these exhortations were given two blessings:

- i. They would be given a crown of life.
- ii. They would not be hurt of the second death.

This promised eternal life. The crown of life is the martyr's crown.

The Lord compares the church of Smyrna with the synagogue of Satan. Those who do not teach the truth of God's Word belong to the synagogue of Satan. These will not be martyred but the Lord knows them. Future judgment awaits them who blaspheme by claiming that which they do not possess. Tribulation, suffering and martyrdom clearly separate the real Christian from the false.

LESSON TEN

SELF HELP TEST

State which of the following is TRUE or FALSE:

1. There were more than seven churches who received a special message in Revelation two and three. _____
2. Ephesus was the church of the first century. _____
3. Thyatira was the church of the dark ages. _____
4. All the churches of Revelation were close to each other geographically. _____
5. Polycarp was from Pergamos. _____
6. Lydia was from Sardis. _____
7. Laodicea was a wealthy city. _____
8. "Ephesus" means "desirable one." _____
9. Ephesus kept their first love intact. _____
10. Smyrna was a persecuted church. _____