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Recommended Citation

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SECTION II

STUDIES IN THE BOOK OF THE REVELATION

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Part II
"THE THINGS WHICH ARE"
Rev. 2:1-3:22

Chapter III

THE MESSAGES TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES

Rev. 2:1-3:22

We have found from our study thus far that the book of Revelations falls logically into three main divisions, as set forth in the statement of the risen Lord to John: "Write the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter" (1:19). Let us remember that this is the key-verse of the book. We have found also that the words, "*the things which thou hast seen,*" refer to the vision John saw of the Son of Man in His resurrection glory, standing in the midst of the seven golden lampstands; that "*the things which are,*" have to do with this present church age, as outlined in chapters two and three; and that "*the things which shall be hereafter*" are yet future events which will begin to run their course after the translation of the church, presented to us in chapters 4-22. Unless we grasp this outline-view of the entire book, we shall miss the key that opens its message before us.

We have devoted one lesson to the first of these three divisions of Revelation. Today we shall study chapters two and three, which form a unit, and set before us the second division, or "the things which are."

A FOREVIEW OF ALL CHURCH HISTORY

We have observed in our former lessons that these two chapters record the messages of the risen Christ to the seven churches in Asia: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea (1:11). We have seen that these local assemblies were chosen because the conditions existing within them aptly represented the seven periods

of church history, from Pentecost to the rapture. Thus we have, in these two chapters which we are to consider today, the history of the church on earth as our risen Lord saw it from the beginning.

We believe that we are now living near the end of this church age. Therefore, most of chapters two and three, practically all of which were prophecy in the days of the Apostle John, are now history; for nearly two thousand years have passed since "this prophecy" (1:3) was uttered by the risen Christ to His exiled apostle on the Isle of Patmos. This is not speculation or fanciful interpretation, for no summary of church history that has ever been written by man can compare with these divinely inspired words in accuracy or comprehensiveness. This is all the more remarkable when we remember that God wrote them before they came to pass. But so also is all prophecy; for "known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world" (Acts 15:18).

Let us read these two chapters, not so much to note the details just here as to observe the remarkable way in which they outline for us all church history, from the days of the apostles even until the end of this age, as described for us repeatedly in other portions of the Word of God:

1. The message to Ephesus—The apostolic church, 2:1-7.
2. The message to Smyrna—The persecuted church, 2:8-11.
3. The message to Pergamos—The church linked with the world, "where Satan's throne is," 2:12-17.
4. The message to Thyatira—The church in the Dark Ages, filled with corruption, 2:18-29.
5. The message to Sardis—The church of the Protestant Reformation, 3:1-6.
6. The message to Philadelphia—The missionary church within professing Christendom, 3:7-13.
7. The message to Laodicea—The apostate church, with the risen Lord on the outside, entering into the hearts of individuals who will "open the door" to Him, 3:14-22.

All those who "let the Saviour in" during this, our own time of apostasy will one day hear His voice, saying, "Come up hither." (See 4:1.) In that moment, "in the twinkling of an eye" (I Cor. 15:52), the dead in Christ shall rise, and "we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord" (I Thess. 4:15) shall be translated, forever to be with Him. Then will come to pass "the things which shall be hereafter," as revealed to John on Patmos many centuries ago. (See Rev. 4:1.)

It is important that we get this bird's-eye view of this present church age, as outlined in the second and third chapters of Revelation before we make an analytical study of this division of the book, in order to find the details concerning these seven periods of church history. And as we consider the significance of these seven messages as a whole, let us note also four facts that are characteristic of all seven:

1. The risen Lord Jesus begins each message with a reference to Himself, to some attribute of His Person or some phase of His work that aptly meets the particular need of that local church, symbolic of a specific period of all church history.
2. He closes each message with a promise "to him that overcometh."
3. He makes a special appeal or sounds a warning that fits the need of each local church—again, symbolic of the respective periods of church history.
4. He utters the same striking exhortation to all seven: "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches."

Do you not see already, my friend, how remarkably these seven messages gave to John a prophetic view of the whole church age, from Pentecost to the rapture? For unity, accuracy, and comprehensiveness, we repeat, they are as perfect as is all the Word of God. For their heart-searching truth, we need only read them over and over, to "hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches." And as we read let us ever remember that our risen Lord and Great High Priest is standing "in the midst" of His blood-bought church, interceding for her, cleansing from sin and empowering for service, even as her light shines in a sin-darkened world.

Were it not for these reassuring truths, we might well become discouraged as this age of apostasy brings ever-increasing spiritual darkness. Seeing "the wheat and the tares" growing together, as it were, we should be in utter confusion, but for this prophecy concerning "the things which are."

I refer especially to the efforts of many in professing Christendom toward the union of all churches, regardless of creed—Unitarian or Trinitarian; Catholic or Protestant; orthodox or apostate. Priding themselves on their broad-mindedness so-called, they rob Christ of His deity and trample under foot the atoning blood of Calvary's cross. Some would unite Christians and Jews in one vast religious organization, regardless of their respective attitudes toward Jesus, the eternal Son of God.

Not long ago I received a questionnaire, asking *what doctrines I would give up for the sake of such a union*. How easily we might be led astray, deceived by a false "brotherhood," but for the prophecy God gave to John, saying these things would surely come to pass in the closing days of this dispensation of grace! Truly God wants a real union of all born-again souls, but that union can be realized only on the basis of the shed blood of Calvary's Lamb. Any other union is an abomination to our Holy God.

Now we are ready to consider these seven messages in detail. Let us read again the words sent to the church at Ephesus, as recorded in 2:1-7.

THE MESSAGE TO EPHEBUS—THE APOSTOLIC CHURCH

Rev. 2:1-7

To Ephesus, whose name means "desired," our Lord sent His first message. And to this church He addressed Himself as the One "that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand, who walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks" (2:1). No wonder the apostolic church was pleasing to the Lord! Conscious of His keeping power and mighty presence, these first Christians received more commendation than rebuke from their Great High Priest. Let us see the things for which He commended them:

"I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience"

(2:2). Similar words are found in verse three: "Thou . . . hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name's sake hast laboured, and hast not fainted." If you could have gone to the church at Ephesus, my friends, you would have found that it was a *working church*, that it was an organization in which were no drones, where every member was trying to make the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ known. Consequently, the Lord commended them.

Again, He said unto them, "I know . . . how thou canst not bear them which are evil" (2:2). They not only had faith; they had discipline also. If a member of the church was living a double life, he was not tolerated. If he professed the name of Christ, but conducted himself unbecomingly, the condemnation of the church came upon him. I think the church at Ephesus was not concerned so much with the *number* of members it secured as with the matter of securing holy members. It is a great pity that the church ever departed from this desire and began to place emphasis upon numbers, rather than upon the spiritual condition of those belonging to it. We seldom hear of church discipline in these days. In fact, it is a sad but true state of affairs, that it is difficult to get together a body of people who are really in a position to discipline others.

As we read further, we hear the words of the Lord to these Ephesian Christians: "Thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars" (2:2). The members of this church were sound in the faith. Evidently there had come among them some who had revealed themselves as "liars." They claimed to be apostles, but were not. Therefore, they are not received by the Ephesian church. Would that all false teachers were refused by the church today!

Yet again, the risen Lord continued His words of commendation: "Thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitanes, which I also hate" (2:6). Who were the Nicolaitanes? The two words "nikao," meaning "to conquer," and "laos," meaning "the people," or "the laity," form the root of the name "Nicolaitanes." The term was applied to those who originated the system which divided the church of Jesus Christ into two divisions—the clergy and the laity. When we come to the study of the situation existing in the churches of Pergamos and Thyatira, we shall find this system in full bloom.

with bishops, archbishops, and other religious dignitaries domineering over the people, and claiming a unique place in the body of Christ, to which they were not justly entitled. God says He "hates" "the deeds" and "the doctrine of the Nicolaitanes" (2:6, 15). So also did the church at Ephesus—the apostolic church! There were no such distinctions in the body of Christ in the beginning.

Thus we see that the risen Lord beheld many things in the church at Ephesus which were worthy of commendation. But those all-seeing eyes, which were "as a flame of fire," saw something else there which we should not have noticed perhaps. And in the midst of His commendation He paused to rebuke them. "Nevertheless," He said, "I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love" (2:4). Declension and backsliding, soon to become more and more pronounced, until it reaches the climax in utter apostasy, had already commenced. "Thou hast left thy first love." What is the first love? Paul expressed it for us when he wrote, saying "For to me to live is Christ." To seek His glory, not our own; to exalt Him, not ourselves; to please Him, not our own selfish desires—this is the "first love" of the child of God. To know Him, rather than to seek His gifts; to love Him, rather than find delight first in His gracious providences—this is the "first love" of the born-again soul. A man need not kill or drink or commit a crime in order to be a backslider. The man who allows his first fervent love for his Saviour to grow lukewarm is a backslider, as well as the man who grows colder still and goes farther away from God. Such a man needs to return to his first love, to be cleansed from the defilement of sin, and to renew his allegiance to God. My Christian friend, have you left your first love? Listen to the words of the risen Christ: "Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent" (2:5).

Then follow the words which run like a refrain through chapters two and three: "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches." And last of all, to the church at Ephesus, there are these words of promise: "To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God" (2:7). Heaven,

eternal life, the presence of God forever—this is the goal of the sinner saved by grace!

THE MESSAGE TO SMYRNA—THE PERSECUTED CHURCH

Rev. 2:8-11

Death and destruction reigned during the period for which the church at Smyrna stands. The student of church history will recall that during that period of time—the first and second centuries, to A. D. 316—there transpired the martyr period, when literally thousands and thousands of men and women sealed their faith with their blood. In those days the Christians did not worship in great cathedrals, but they met in places like the catacombs of Rome. Nero and Diocletian, obsessed with a fiendish desire, tried by means of every conceivable invention to wipe the followers of Christ from off the face of the earth.

One of the first martyrs was Polycarp. He was the bishop of Smyrna, and his death was the forerunner of that of thousands. The friends of Polycarp persuaded him to take refuge on a farm, but his persecutors searched him out and arrested him. When they tried to get him to blaspheme the name of his Lord, with a courage born of faith in the Son of God, he answered them, "Eighty and six years have I served my Lord, and He has been my truest Friend. How then can I blaspheme Him who shed His blood to wash away my sins?" They tied him to a stake, and built a fire around him; but long before his suffering body was reduced to ashes, his triumphant soul was at home with his God!

Is it any wonder, then, that our Lord introduces Himself to the church which represents the period of the martyrs, by reminding them that He is "the first and the last," the One who "was dead, and is alive"?

He tells them, "I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty." It cost something to be a Christian in those days. When the risen Christ says, "I know thy poverty," He does not mean that He sees it from above. He does see it, of course; but because He was the Man of Sorrows, He knows it; He experienced it Himself as He walked the hot, dusty roads of Palestine.

He who was rich for our sakes became poor, that we through His poverty might be rich. (See II Cor. 8:9.) That is why He could say to the persecuted church, "I know thy . . . poverty (but thou art rich)," rich in spiritual blessings above measure.

With His all-seeing eye the risen Lord could see also "them which say they are Jews, and are not; but are of the synagogue of Satan" (2:9). Claiming to be followers of Moses, they were legalists, whose teaching God calls "blasphemy."

"Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer," the Lord added. "Behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life" (2:10).

Let us note the words, "Ye shall have tribulation ten days." There were exactly ten Roman edicts issued during the second and third centuries which had as their object the wiping out of every Christian. It cost something to be a Christian in those days. Many were put to death in the arena; some were forced to fight with the gladiators, torn to pieces by lions, or tied to ants nests after their bodies had been covered with honey. Others were tied to stakes around Nero's gardens, and at night the darkness was pierced by the flames which blazed from their martyred bodies, veritable human torches! Ah yes, it cost something to be a Christian then!

But the risen Christ was not unmindful of their faithfulness or of their sufferings. Listen once more to His words: "Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life." It was to the church at Smyrna that the Lord sent these words; and "Smyrna," the martyr-church, means "myrrh," one of the ingredients used for embalming the dead. Christ Himself, with His own nail-pierced hands, will place upon the heads of those "faithful unto death" a crown of life as a reward for their faithfulness. Satan may kill the physical body, but "he that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death," which is "the lake of fire" (2:11:20:14).

THE MESSAGE TO PERGAMOS—"THE CHURCH UNDER IMPERIAL FAVOR"

Rev. 2:12-17

We have already observed that the Lord Jesus addressed Himself to each of these seven churches in Asia according to the particular needs. To the church at Smyrna, where men were dying for their faith, He introduced Himself as the One who "was dead and is alive"; to the church at Pergamos, as "He which hath the sharp sword with two edges." Then He went on to say: "I know thy works, and where thou dwellest, even where Satan's seat is." And thus begins the message of the risen Christ to the church at Pergamos, which represented "the church under imperial favor, settled in the world," from the year 316 A. D.

Satan had found out that he could not destroy the church by making martyrs of men. That but increased their loyalty to Christ. So he tried a new tactic, that of introducing the world into the church. This policy always means a lessening of the spiritual life. About this time there came to the throne of the Roman Empire a heathen named Constantine. He knew nothing about Christianity. There is a legend to the effect that Constantine saw, in a dream, a fiery cross burning in the heavens, and heard a voice saying, "By this sign conquer." Finding that the cross was the symbol of the church, he professed to become a Christian.

Constantine was never truly converted. He was still a heathen, and was the instrument in the hands of the devil to bring about an unholy alliance with the world. His professed conversion was a great tragedy. In the British Museum there is a coin that was put out in the days of Constantine, on one side of which are the Christian emblems, and on the other the emblems of the old heathen gods. Constantine took the name of "Pontifex Maximus," which means "the high priest" of all the heathen world.

He issued an edict, ordering that all persecution of Christians should cease and that the heathen temples should be converted into Christian churches. For his own selfish ends he favored Christianity, which by this time had millions of

adherents. When Constantine came to the throne, with the eye of a politician, he saw that it was to his advantage to favor rather than fight these multitudes. But alas, from that time on, the poor deluded leaders of the church ceased to look for the coming of the Lord. They concluded that Constantine's kingdom must be the "kingdom of God" that was to be upon earth, and the union of church and state became an accomplished fact. So we see the church at Pergamos dwelling "even where Satan's throne is."

Yet, strange to say, even though they dwelt "where Satan's seat is," the Lord could say of them: "Thou holdest fast my name, and hast not denied my faith, even in those days wherein Antipas was my faithful martyr, who was slain among you."

During that period—the third and fourth centuries—the doctrine of Arius came into the church, the doctrine which we know today as Unitarianism. Thus you see, my friend, that the cults and heresy in professing Christendom represent no new thing. Even in these early centuries of the Christian era there arose a man by the name of Arius, who preached that Christ was not the eternal Son of God, nor of the same substance as the Father. He declared that the Son of God was merely a created being. In other words, the Arian creed is what Pastor Russell and others like him teach. So hundreds of the church dignitaries came together. Arius on the one hand declared that his doctrine was correct, while Athanasius on the other hand held to the great orthodox belief, that Jesus Christ was God. The controversy was settled in favor of Athanasius. What an inspiring thing it is to read of men like Polycarp and Athanasius! When one of the Arians said to Athanasius, "The whole world is against you," he answered, "Well, I am against the world!"

The Son of God commended the church at Pergamos, as we have seen; but again His eyes "as a flame of fire" detected the things which were wrong. "I have a few things against thee," He said. First of all, they had in the church those who held "the doctrine of Balaam," but that was not all. "So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitanes, which thing I hate."

We found the first mention of the Nicolaitanes in the message to the church at Ephesus; but, unlike Pergamos, the church at Ephesus hated the deeds of that class. At Per-

gamos there had sprung up those who domineered over the flock, leaders who claimed a place of supremacy in the body of Christ. They became princes of the earth, and elected one who took upon himself the very name that Constantine assumed, "the high priest" of the heathen world.

"Thou has there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam." What was the doctrine of Balaam? It is to Numbers 22:1-25:3 that we must turn for an explanation. You will remember that Balak, king of Moab, wanted the children of Israel cursed. This was while God's chosen people were on their way from Egypt to Canaan. Balak was afraid to make contact with them himself; therefore, he sent for Balaam. Who he was, we do not know; but he was evidently a prophet. He accepted the offer which Balak made to him, and promised to curse the children of Israel. However, when he started to carry out his part of the bargain, he found that he could not do it. An angel stopped him. Balaam wanted to go back, but the angel of the Lord said to him, "Go with the men: but only the word that I shall speak unto thee, that thou shalt speak." When Balaam came to the place where he was to curse the children of Israel, God restrained him; and instead of curses, there came forth wonderful prophecies of blessing.

Balak was disgusted; but he tried again, taking Balaam to another mountain, and to yet another. The result was the same. That, however, was not the end of the story; for we read in Numbers 25:1-9 that God meted out judgment on the children of Israel, because they had committed "whoredom with the daughters of Moab" according to "the counsel of Balaam" (Num. 25:1, 31:16). This was the unholy alliance between Moab and Israel which was brought about at the suggestion of Balaam. He could not curse Israel with his tongue, but he knew that God did not want His people to have any sort of union with the heathen nations round about. Therefore, he conceived of a way in which Balak could have his desire gratified. The testimony of the children of Israel was no longer that of a separated people. Their punishment was sure—over twenty thousand were wiped out. (See Num. 25:9.) This is exactly what took place during the reign of Constantine, a union of the church and the Christ-rejecting world.

During the time represented by the Ephesian church,

Christians were living a separated life. There was no such thing as union of church and state; but when we come to the period represented by the church at Pergamos, we find that the very nation which had tried to wipe them out had entered into a union with them. Bishops became rulers; the princes of state became the princes of the church; and there was an unholy union between the professing church and the pagans. God had said, "Come out from among them." And He said to the church at Pergamos, "Repent; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth."

May God give us all grace to separate ourselves from anything that antagonizes His will! "To him that overcometh" His promise is sure: "To him . . . will I give to eat of the hidden manna, and will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it" (2:17).

THE MESSAGE TO THYATIRA—THE CHURCH IN THE DARK AGES, FILLED WITH CORRUPTION

Rev. 2:18-29

The union of the church and the world led to "the period of the Romish corruption." Secular history rightly calls it "the Dark Ages," the time when the papacy developed to the fullest extent thus far, a time of spiritual wickedness and gross darkness. No wonder the Lord addressed Himself to the church at Thyatira as "the Son of God, who hath his eyes like unto a flame of fire, and his feet . . . like fine brass." Fire purifies, and brass in the Word of God speaks of judgment. The corruption which had set in with the fourth century increased "till 'the depths of Satan' were reached" (2:24).

To the Roman Catholic Church, which holds that the ear of our Lord, as the Son of Mary, may be reached through her prayers, He called Himself "the Son of God." He is not occupied now with the whirling planets; He is not occupied with His great universe; His ear is bent low to hear our cry. We do not need anyone to get His attention, not even His

mother. We can go directly into His presence, and address Him as our Lord.

But even to Thyatira, which means "continual sacrifice," and represents the papacy with all her corruption, especially, in this connection, with the "continual sacrifice" of the mass, the Lord commended that which deserved His approval: "I know thy works," He said, "and charity, and service, and faith, and thy patience, and thy works; and the last to be more than the first." Before the Reformation period, the only hospitals were the monasteries, and those who looked after the sick were the monks and nuns. Many of those faithful servants of the Lord gave their lives for their fellowman. The early schools and libraries were connected with these religious houses. So we find our Lord, before He begins to point out the shortcomings and serious faults of Thyatira, commending her works.

But again those "eyes like unto a flame of fire" see the faults which existed side by side with the good points; and the Lord proceeds to set before the church the errors into which they had fallen. First of all, He says: "Thou sufferest that woman Jezebel, which calleth herself a prophetess, to teach and to seduce my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed unto idols."

No person in all history so aptly represents the papacy as Jezebel. You will remember that she was a heathen, married to Ahab, the king of Israel. She perverted and corrupted the religion of Jehovah, introducing into Israel the religion of Baal, that religion which began with Babel, introducing the mysteries of Babel into the worship of Jehovah. Therefore, Jezebel is an excellent type of the Romish system with her spiritual fornication and idolatry. We have not time now to go into the mystery religion which Jezebel introduced into the worship of Jehovah, except to say that it began with Nimrod, whose main business seemed to be to turn the people aside from the worship of God. The mystery religion which he started spread over the world into Italy, Greece, and Egypt. One of the principal doctrines of that religion was introduced by the wife of Nimrod, teaching that her son, whose name was Tammuz, was without a human father. She became known as the Queen of the Heavens, and was worshipped. If we had time, we could go further into the history of that strange worship which has come down to us,

embodied into the forms and ceremonies of the Roman Catholic Church. We shall go into it more fully later on in these studies. Here, however, suffice it to say that Jezebel introduced it into the worship of Jehovah, and the papacy has introduced it into Christianity in the form of virtual worship of the Virgin Mary. For hundreds of years, the papacy has been adding doctrines to the Word of God. Let me mention briefly some of these:

The immaculate conception of Mary. They declare that Mary was born sinless. There is no scriptural ground for such a doctrine. When Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, pronounced a blessing upon Mary and upon the Son to be born of her, Mary said, "My spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour" (Luke 1:47). Only the sinful need a Saviour, and Mary acknowledged her need.

The doctrine of the ascension of Mary. They declare that she did not die, but that she ascended and was made Queen of the Heavens.

The infallibility of the pope. This doctrine was added less than one hundred years ago, and therefore cannot be apostolic in authority. Add to these the unscriptural teaching concerning purgatory, the priesthood, the mass and such doctrines; and you begin to see why the Lord's condemnation rested upon Thyatira, the church which represented the whole system.

You will recall how Jezebel persecuted the true prophets of God. (See I Kings 18:1-21:29.) In that also she was a true type of the system which reached out over Europe during the period covered by the years between A. D. 500 and 1500, and persecuted Christians. God says, "I gave her space to repent . . . and she repented not" (2:21). Rome is the same today as she was five hundred years ago. She does not change. God gave her a chance to repent in the days of Luther. Luther did not start out with the idea of bringing about a Reformation. His purpose was to bring about a change within the church. He saw, from his study of God's Word, just how the church had gone away from the truth of God. He went to Rome, intending to do all he could to awaken the leaders of the church, in an effort to bring the church back to God's Word. But instead of repenting, they excommunicated him, and sought not only to put him to death, but also to destroy all who left the fold of Romanism.

We owe our privilege of studying the Word of God and worshipping according to the dictates of our conscience to Luther and to those brave spirits who, like him, were ready to die for their faith. And yet, strange to say, there are actually Protestants in the world today who are talking about a union with the system which tried to stamp out those who believed in the "freedom to worship God" according to their own conscience! Remember this—if the Protestant Church ever goes back into the arms of the Roman Catholic Church, she will have to leave her faith behind her, for Rome never changes. "I gave her space to repent," says the Son of God, ". . . and she repented not."

Because she repented not, the Lord Jesus added the searching words recorded by John in Rev. 2:22, 23: "Behold, 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." Who are the children of the papacy? They are those Protestants who "have a name to live" but have never been regenerated by the Spirit of God. In the day when all true believers will be caught up "to meet the Lord in the air" all who do not know God are going to be left to go through the great tribulation.

"But unto you," our Lord encourages the faithful ones, "unto you I say, and unto the rest in Thyatira, as many as have not this doctrine, and which have not known the depths of Satan, as they speak, I will put upon you none other burden. But that which ye have already hold fast till I come" (2:24, 25).

There were those in Thyatira who walked the pathway of separation; they were not led away by strange doctrines. And so it was in the period which Thyatira represents. Luther and others like him separated themselves from the Roman Catholic System, and dared death itself to walk in the pathway which was pointed out to them in the Word of God. To such as these the risen Lord held out "that blessed hope" of His coming again as "the bright and morning star," to take the true church unto Himself before the great tribulation begins to run its course. To them He says, "Hold fast till I come," and promises the millennial blessing, in that they will be "joint-heirs" with Him as He rules over the nations of the earth. Always God has "a faithful remnant" who "have not bowed the knee to Baal."

THE MESSAGE TO SARDIS—THE CHURCH OF THE
PROTESTANT REFORMATION

Rev. 3:1-6

To the church at Sardis our Lord sent this message, "Thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead." What did He mean by that statement? What happened just after the Protestant Reformation? You will recall from your study of church history that, when the reformers went out to preach, their watchword was: "The just shall live by faith." They were called "Protestants," because they *protested* against the existing evils and corruption in the church. They threatened to wipe everything represented by Thyatira from the face of the earth. But, strange to say, the Reformation suddenly came to a close. Why? Because the devil got the "Protest-ants" back into the old rut from which the early reformers had delivered them. The name they had was one which meant something, but spiritually they were dead. "Thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead."

After the Reformation, the church went back to ordinances, and form and ceremony took the place of regeneration. I think those stalwart men of God would turn over in their graves if they knew the spiritual condition of many of the churches which bear their names! When a two hundred and fifty-thousand-dollar church is equipped with rooms for card parties, smoking rooms, and dance halls, how could one expect conversions? Just recently I was shown over such a church. Such an organization finds no place for the Christ of the cross and the Christ of the empty tomb.

So Sardis, whose name means "escaping," represents the period of reaction, when great men were used of God to bring about reform and "escape" from the evils of the papacy. But it also represents the time when the Reformation, which began so well, developed into a dead and lifeless thing, burdened with human systems, which caused the church to get back into the old rut.

Therefore, the timely warning of 3:2, 3 from the risen Lord to the church at Sardis needs to be heeded in our own day of cold ritualism in much of professing Christendom:

"Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God. 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."

But even in this church of lifeless ceremony there were those of the ever-present faithful remnant. Of them the Lord Jesus said: "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. 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" (3:4, 5). Having washed their garments white in the blood of Calvary's Lamb, they belonged to the multitude of the redeemed. Such as these will not be overtaken by the return of Christ "as a thief in the night"; they will be ready for His coming.

THE MESSAGE TO PHILADELPHIA—THE MISSIONARY
CHURCH WITHIN PROFESSING CHRISTENDOM

Rev. 3:7-13

The church at Philadelphia, whose name means "brotherly love," represents the missionary period. To it Christ says, "I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it." Therefore, it is very significant that He addresses Himself to this church as the One who "hath the key of David." Quoting from Isaiah 22:22, He refers to Eliakim (Isa. 22:20), who was a type of Christ. The Lord Jesus is the Prince of the House of David, upon whom "all the glory of his Father's house" is hung (Isa. 22:24). He it is who is the central theme of all divine revelation; and He it is who opens and closes doors for service for His messengers of the cross.

"Behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it," we hear Him say (Rev. 3:8). It is only a little more than one hundred years ago that the great missionary movement began with William Carey. Before that, the heathen nations were without a missionary among them.

When people were concerned about them, the elders of the church argued, "When God wants to convert the heathen, He will do it without any assistance from you." During the last hundred years, however, we have seen a great movement in the way of missionary endeavor, and missionary societies like the China Inland Mission, the Africa Inland Mission, and many others are the fruit of the going forth of Carey. God said, "I have set before thee an open door," and today the heathen are asking for more missionaries than the church has supplied. "The fields are white unto harvest" in very truth.

Following these words of promise, the Lord sounds a warning to false teachers, then adds some of the most reassuring words to be found in all the Scriptures: "Because thou hast 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."

I believe our Lord here has reference to the great tribulation period, from which the church will be delivered. "Thou hast a little strength, and hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name." The feeble few, walking in the pathway of separation, keeping His Word, and not denying His name, will be caught up with the Lord, and thus escape the "hour of temptation, which shall come." As we read on in this closing book of the Bible, we learn something of the sorrow and anguish and suffering that will come upon the earth during the dark tribulation period. And as we read, we thank our God that He will take us to be with Himself before these things begin to come to pass.

Then turning back to His message to the church at Philadelphia, we find yet another promise of His sure return to usher in millennial blessing, even unto all eternity:

"Behold, I come quickly: hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown. Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my 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" (3:11, 12).

THE MESSAGE TO LAODICEA—THE APOSTATE CHURCH

Rev. 3:14-22

The word "Laodicea" means "the voice of the people," and the message to the church of Laodicea speaks to us of the time when the voice of the people will be listened to, and not the voice of God; of the time when the church will be controlled by men, instead of by the Spirit of God. To the church at Laodicea, the Son of God calls Himself the "Amen, the faithful and true witness," the Author of "the creation of God." Man's words will pass away, but the Word of our God shall abide forever; and the Creator of the universe was the Lord Jesus, no matter how many apostate teachers may deny His eternal deity!

Moreover, He looks upon the secret thoughts of the heart; and to the professing church at the end of this age. He says: "I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth" (3:15, 16).

You know what lukewarm water tastes like—a sickening combination of hot and cold water. It stands symbolically for the mixture of religion and worldliness, which is actually nauseating to the Lord Jesus Christ. How serious, then, is His statement: "I would thou wert either cold or hot!" God would rather have us be out-and-out worldlings than merely nominal Christians, "neither cold nor hot." And the fate of every man who does not have a living faith in the shed blood of Christ will be that of the Laodicean church: he will be "spued out" of the mouth of the Son of God.

The sad thing is that, in our own day, apostate Christendom is blind, self-satisfied, trusting in earthly riches rather than "His riches in glory by Christ Jesus."

There was never a time in the history of the church when the leaders were as satisfied with themselves as they are in our own generation. Why are the great denominations not putting forth evangelistic efforts? Because they feel no need to do so. But what did Christ say to the wealthy, lukewarm Laodicean church?

"Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked: I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eyesalve, that thou mayest see" (3:17, 18).

The professing church today is one of the richest organizations in the world. If a church edifice does not cost half a million dollars, many feel that is not worth building! We are certainly living in a day when the church is saying, "I am rich, and increased in goods, and have need of nothing."

And this great, rich church is carrying on movements for the betterment of humanity, but what kind of movements are they? Reformation movements which are ignoring the Gospel, "which is the power of God unto salvation." It behooves every member of the professing church who does not know the Lord Jesus as a personal Saviour from sin to go to Calvary's cross. There and there alone can the sinner's "filthy rags" of self-righteousness be washed white in the blood of the Lamb of God. There and there alone can he see with the eye of faith the only Saviour and Lord.

But because the church-at-large refuses the way of the cross in this day of apostasy, the Lord Jesus is standing on the outside, knocking for entrance. Listen to His words:

"Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: 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" (3:20).

Often in evangelistic meetings we use that text to present to unregenerated men a picture of our Lord, seeking admittance into the hearts of unregenerated men. But let us note that, true though that picture is, yet here God does not make that statement to an unsaved individual. He is talking to the professing church. The end of the age will see the Son of God on the outside of the very church that bears His name. He will still be received by individuals in the faithful remnant, but the great mass of professing Christendom will deny His deity, His atoning work on the cross, His bodily resur-

rection—all the fundamentals of the faith "once for all delivered unto the saints."

In view of all this, how we love to linger over His Words of assurance: "If any man will hear my voice, and open the door, I will come into him, and will sup with him, and he with me." The faithful remnant may even see persecution before the true church is translated, but the risen Christ will "sup with him."

All this seems to indicate that, as the age draws to a close, the period of great revivals will be over. There will be no more such turnings to God in large numbers as when God moved the people through Wesley, Whitfield, and Moody. "If any man hear my voice . . ." The appeal in the last days will be to individuals. Even now it is hard to get men to accept the Lord. What will it be as the final stage of apostasy is approached?

It is my conviction that we are in the Laodicean period which is lukewarm, neither hot nor cold. There are churches in this city with members numbering as high as 3,000, and yet their pastors admit that they cannot get even a "corporal's guard" out to a prayer meeting. A man told me a few days ago that there are 4,000 people on their church roll; and yet they had only fifty out on Sunday evening, and thirty-five at prayer meeting! Where are those absent members? Only God knows. What will happen to them? He tells us: "So, then, because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth."

Our Lord told us when He was on earth that the wheat and the tares should grow together until the end of the age. Therefore, we are not discouraged, even in the face of ever-deepening apostasy. And His words of promise spur us on to increased vigilance and faith: "To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my father in his throne" (3:21).

The last time I was in Australia, I was riding with a friend in a car. We passed a big farm, surrounded by barbed wire. He said, "This is the greatest potato land in all the world."

"In all the world?" I asked. "Why do you say that?"

He replied, "Come with me, and I will show you something. It is just about time for the harvest."

We got out of the car, and walked into the field. The plants were drooping; their leaves were withered.

"Now watch," said my friend.

He reached down, got hold of one of the plants, and began to pull. Up it came, up, up, until finally the ground gave way, and out came the plant. I looked, and saw potatoes hanging to the roots, but there were a lot of things besides potatoes. Pieces of mud, sticks, and stones, all clung together with the potatoes. My friend gave the plant a good shake. The potatoes hung on; but the mud, the sticks, the stones, everything which was not a part of the potato vine itself dropped off.

That little incident is a striking illustration of what will happen one of these days, when the Son of God shall come to catch away His church. When He reaches down to lift out His own, those who are united to the vine will not be shaken loose; but those who cling there solely because of profession, a profession which is not based on a living faith in the Son of God, shall remain on earth, to be swept into that terrible time that will begin with the translation of the church.

Till that time, wheat and tares will "both grow together until the harvest." The luke-warmness of the professing church will wax worse and worse; divine patience will be exhausted; then it is that He will call His own. The voice which bade John "come up hither" (Rev. 4:1) will bid the true church "come up." My friend, if you are to be among those who shall be caught up to meet the Lord in the air, you must have something more than a mere profession here and now. "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved" (Acts 16:31).

If you have faith, even though it is like unto a grain of mustard seed, and believe that Jesus Christ died and rose again for your justification, you will be among that rejoicing throng that will rise to "meet the Lord in the air."

These are the messages of the living Christ to "the seven churches which are in Asia," typical of the seven periods of all church history, from Pentecost to the rapture. All except the message to Ephesus were prophecy in the days of the Apostle John. Today there seems no doubt that we are living in the Laodicean period of "the things which are." Soon we shall hear the "Come up hither" of our risen and interceding Lord. Then "the things which shall be hereafter" will speedily run their course—and these are the "things" with which the remaining chapters of Revelation have to do.

My friend, if you do not know the Bridegroom's voice, listen to His knocking at the door of your heart. Open to

Him, share His fellowship now and throughout the endless ages.

"He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches."

