

## The Church at War



### SABBATH—MARCH 12

**READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON:** Revelation 2:1–7; Hosea 2:13; Revelation 2:8–17; Revelation 2:18–Revelation 3:6; Isaiah 60:14; Revelation 3:14–22.

**MEMORY VERSE:** “ ‘Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If any of you hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with you. And you will eat with me’ ” (Revelation 3:20, NIV).

**JOHN WAS THE LAST OF THE TWELVE APOSTLES (TEACHERS AND LEADERS) TO DIE.** He wrote the Gospel and the letters that carry his name. But he also wrote Revelation, which helps much with our understanding of the great controversy (war between Christ and Satan). But, for now, we shall focus only on John's description of the seven churches. We shall look at them through the eyes of those who received them. This should help us to get as much from John's words as possible.

One thing that stands out is that Jesus personalizes His approach to each church. They all have different needs, and He meets them all.

One challenge is that these churches are shown to be struggling with who they are, just as we are today. Are their members clearly lining up with Jesus and His calling to them to witness to a dying world? Or are they on the fence, trying to look like Christians but then privately being more comfortable with the powers of darkness? We believe we are the last of these churches. But it will be clear that we face some of the same challenges that each of the seven churches faced throughout history.

## THE CHURCH AT EPHESUS (Revelation 2:1–7)



Jesus is pictured holding the seven stars and walking among the lampstands in Revelation. This shows a close connection between the churches and the throne of God in heaven.

In Revelation 2:1, Jesus is pictured holding the seven stars and walking among the lampstands as He speaks to the church at Ephesus. These symbols point to important ideas. The lampstands are the churches. The seven stars are angels responsible for taking care of the churches (Revelation 1:20). In other words, there is a close connection between the churches and the throne of God in heaven. The churches have a very important part to play in the great controversy.

**Read Revelation 2:1–7. In what ways can we find the great controversy going on in these verses?**

The message to Ephesus begins with a description of its character (strong and weak points). Jesus knows their strengths and weaknesses. He praises them for their activities, their patient faithfulness, and their impatience with false teachers in their midst (Revelation 2:2, 3, 6). The message clearly warns that false doctrine (teachings) should not be accepted in the church. It seems that the church at Ephesus has been chosen by God in the struggle against darkness. But it has suffered a counterattack by Satan. The attack came in the form of false apostles, followers of Nicolas. Perhaps Nicolas was one of the original seven deacons (Acts 6:5). But he had clearly started an offshoot movement. Whatever these false teachings were, Jesus hated them (Revelation 2:6).

The trouble with the Ephesian church was that it had left its “first love” (Revelation 2:4). This is the same kind of language that the Old Testament prophets used when they compared<sup>1</sup> the backsliding of Israel to a person chasing after unfaithful and forbidden lovers (for example, Hosea 2:13).

The situation may look hopeless. But Jesus specializes in saving hopeless situations. First of all, He encourages His people to remember from where they have fallen and to get back to what they were doing in the first place (Revelation 2:5). This is not a call to turn the clock back to the “good old days.” Instead, it is a case of using past experience to guide them into the future.

**“ ‘That you have left your first love’ ” (Revelation 2:4, NKJV). Why is that so easy to do? What happens to us, either individually or as a church, that could make our love for God grow cold? How do we keep our love for God strong and His truth burning within us year after year?**

## DEFINITIONS

1. compared—showing how two or more things are the same or different.

## SMYRNA AND PERGAMUM (Revelation 2:8–17)

To the church at Smyrna, Jesus is introduced as “ ‘the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life’ ” (Revelation 2:8, NKJV; read Revelation 1:18). To the church at Pergamum, Jesus is the one with the sharp two-edged sword coming out of His mouth (Revelation 1:16; Revelation 2:12). What is the meaning of the way Jesus is described for each of these two churches?

Read Revelation 2:8–17. The church members at Smyrna also are known for their hard work. But they do not have much to show for it, maybe as a result of a “synagogue [place of worship] of Satan” in their midst (Revelation 2:9). Likewise, the members at Pergamum seem to be holding on to their faith, even though “the throne of Satan” is among them (Revelation 2:13). So, the real battle of the great controversy is shown here, too.

The church at Smyrna is warned of tough times ahead, including prison and maybe even death (Revelation 2:10). In Pergamum, someone already had been killed for his faith (Revelation 2:13). It is important to note that the hard times have a time limit. For example, evil is not allowed to continue past a certain time period (Revelation 2:10).

But God has “a few things” against the church in Pergamum (Revelation 2:14–16). Clearly, they are accepting people in their midst who believe in “the doctrine of Balaam” and in “the doctrine of the Nicolaitans” (Revelation 2:14, 15, NKJV).

“Nicolas and Balaam seem to be parallel terms; Nicolas is a compound Greek word (*nikaō* and *laos*), which means ‘the one who conquers the people.’ Balaam comes from two Hebrew words—*am* (‘people’) and *baal* (from *bela*, ‘to destroy’ or ‘to swallow’), meaning ‘destruction of people.’ ” —Adapted from Ranko Stefanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ: Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Berrien Springs, Michigan: Andrews University Press, 2002), page 111. Jesus warns the whole church that if their false teaching continues, He will come in person and fight against them with the sword in His mouth (Revelation 2:16).

Yet even among these warnings, Jesus gives both churches great encouragement (Revelation 2:11, 17).

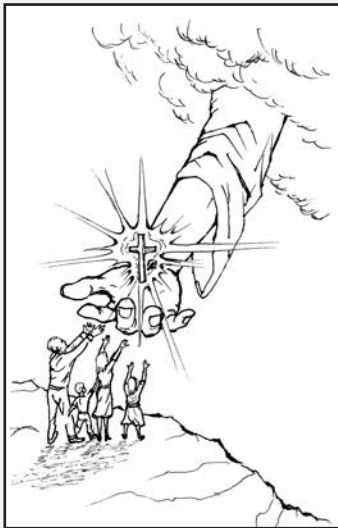
**Read Revelation 2:14, 15. What do these verses tell us about how important doctrine is? Why is it important?**



**Jesus warns the church in Pergamum that if their false teaching continues, He will fight against them with the sword in His mouth.**

## THYATIRA AND SARDIS (Revelation 2:18–Revelation 3:6)

**Read Revelation 2:18–Revelation 3:6. What are some of the issues going on in these churches? And in what ways are we, as a church and as individuals, struggling with the same things? How is the great controversy shown in these struggles?**



**Jesus promises to give Thyatira the “morning star,” which is Himself.**

The introduction of Jesus to the church at Thyatira (Revelation 2:18) tells of a confusing time that is growing more difficult for the people of God. The metaphors (word-pictures) of fiery eyes and feet of polished brass or bronze appear in Revelation 1:14, 15. But they are also found in Daniel 10, where Daniel meets One whose eyes are like “torches of fire” and His feet “like burnished bronze” (Daniel 10:6, NKJV). Later at the end of time, Christ will arise and rescue His people. When the situation is darkest for God’s people, God will directly step in to deliver those whose names are found written in the book of life (Daniel 12:1).

Jesus is introduced in much the same way to the church in Sardis, as the One who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars (Revelation 3:1; Revelation 5:6). Here again is a Savior who is both busy behind the scenes and using the powers of heaven to make sure His church is safe.

The description of the churches in Thyatira and Sardis causes some concern. In Thyatira, things are improving (Revelation 2:19), but the people have been like Israel at the time of Queen Jezebel. In the same way, the people in Sardis are spiritually dead (Revelation 3:1).

Even with all these problems, Jesus encourages the churches. He recognizes many in Thyatira who “‘have not known the depths’ ” of Satan’s secrets and encourages them to “‘hold on to what you have until I come’ ” (Revelation 2:24, 25, NIV). There are also “‘a few’ ” in Sardis “‘who have not soiled their clothes’ ” (Revelation 3:4, NIV).

It is to these faithful ones that Jesus promises special blessing. He promises to give Thyatira the “morning star” (Revelation 2:28), which He later makes known as Himself (Revelation 22:16). And to Sardis He promises a sure place in heaven and that He will confess their names “‘before my Father and his angels’ ” (Revelation 3:5, NIV).

**“Hold fast and repent [turn from sin].” What do you have to hold fast to? And what do you need to repent of? How are these two ideas powerfully related to each other?**

**THE CHURCH AT PHILADELPHIA (Revelation 3:7)**

**Read Revelation 3:7. What are the ways that Jesus is introduced to this church? What do these descriptions tell us about Him?**

The church is praised for keeping Christ's word and for not denying His name, even though their strength may seem to be quite weak (Revelation 3:8). Jesus makes an interesting promise that members of Satan's church will soon come and pay or give respect to the Philadelphians (Revelation 3:9). This idea is taken from Isaiah 60:14, describing the attackers of God's people bowing down before God's people after all the rough treatment that they had given to the people of God. From this, we may understand that Satan's followers had been making life difficult for the early Christians. As we have found, some of the churches in the past struggled with those who were teaching error and causing problems. This is one of the ways that Satan works against the churches. But it seems that Philadelphia is the one who finally rids the church of evil.

**Read Revelation 3:10. How did the Philadelphian church continue to be faithful? How did Jesus promise to limit its troubles? What does that mean for us today?**

It seems clear that the Philadelphian church had passed through times as equally tough as the past churches. But their attitude seems to have been different. This is the first church that Jesus does not point out a failing that they need to work on. Their faith and their cooperation with God have been praised by the Savior, again with their " 'little strength' " (Revelation 3:8, NKJV).

The promises to the overcomer from this church include being made a pillar in God's temple (Revelation 3:12). With the new names they are given, they are fully recognized as belonging to God, maybe because they had already been faithful and loyal to God in all parts of their lives in the past.

**If you were suddenly in heaven, right now, how well would you fit in?**

## THE CHURCH AT LAODICEA (Revelation 3:14–22)

Laodicea also gets some descriptions of Jesus: “ ‘the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness,’ ” and “ ‘the Beginning of the creation of God’ ” (Revelation 3:14, NKJV). These descriptions are important parts of Christ as God. The “Amen” comes from Isaiah 65:16, where the word *Amen* means “the God of truth.” It also is connected with the covenant (promise). Jesus is the great covenant-keeping God, the God who keeps His promises of salvation and renewal. Jesus is also the Faithful Witness who testifies (witnesses) to His people about what God is really like (Revelation 1:5; Revelation 22:16; John 1:18; John 14:8–10). He is also the Creator (Colossians 1:16, 17).

**Read Revelation 3:14–22. What is Jesus telling this church to do? What do these words mean to us today?**

After these first verses tell who Jesus really is, it is necessary to make clear who this church really is. In other words, we can really only know ourselves if we know God first. The people of this church have been fooling themselves to the point that what they think about themselves is the opposite of what they really are (Revelation 3:17). Jesus then begs them to take the necessary steps in order to have the clear vision to see things as they really are and to be changed as they need to be changed (Revelation 3:18).

If they do not follow God’s pleadings, they will receive God’s judgment—in two parts. First, it may be necessary for a little old-fashioned parental discipline (Revelation 3:19). Next, there is God spewing (vomiting) them from His mouth, like a mouthful of very dirty water (Revelation 3:16).

To this church that is so close to being thrown out from the presence of God, the greatest promises are given. Jesus wants to have a meal with them (Revelation 3:20)—something reserved only for close friends. Then He promises them the opportunity to sit with Him on His throne (Revelation 3:21).

It is interesting to study the seven churches and find that God’s people are growing cold and moving away from Him. How does this happen? It seems that even though Jesus won our salvation at the cross, some people are still stubbornly hanging on to evil and to the powers of darkness. There is no question that as we look through the history of these churches, we can find the great controversy shown clearly there. And so it will continue until the second coming of Jesus.



**Jesus promises the church of Laodicea the opportunity to sit with Him on His throne.**

**ADDITIONAL THOUGHT:** Thursday’s study touched on Christ as God. Why is that so important? Ellen G. White wrote, “God’s divine law is as holy as God Himself. So only one equal with God could make payment for the breaking of this law. None but Christ could save fallen man from the curse of the law. None but Christ could bring him again into unity [oneness] with Heaven. Christ would take upon Himself the guilt and shame of sin. Sin is so terrible to a holy God that it must separate the Father and His Son. Christ would reach to the depths of suffering to rescue lost man.”—Adapted from *God’s Amazing Grace [Forgiveness; Mercy]*, page 42. It is simple. The law is as holy as God. So, only a Person who is as holy as God could make payment for the breaking of the law. Angels are sinless, but they are not as holy as their Creator. How could anything created be as holy as the One who created it? No wonder, then, that the Holy Bible teaches that Christ is God Himself. The sacrifice of Christ centers around the holiness of God’s law. It was because of the law, or because of the breaking of the law, that Jesus would have to die to save us. The terrible condition of sin can be understood best in the greatest sacrifice needed to pay for it. How serious the sacrifice is speaks to the holiness of the law itself. If the law is so holy that only a divine sacrifice could pay for it, then we have all the proof we need of just how holy the law is.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1 In class, discuss your answer to Wednesday’s question. What do your answers suggest to you about the condition you are in?
- 2 “As I have lately looked around to find the humble followers of the meek and lowly Jesus, my mind has been greatly tested. “Many who claim to be looking for the speedy coming of Christ are becoming more and more like this world. They try hard to get the praise of those around them more than the praise of God. They are cold and formal, like the church that they have since been separated from. The words preached to the Laodicean Church describe their present condition perfectly.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Review and Herald*, June 10, 1852. These words were written more than one hundred fifty years ago. But what do they mean to us, even today? What does this tell us about the false idea that the early years of the church were somehow the “good old days”?