

Bible Study Revelation 2-3

Christ instructs John to write messages to seven specific churches in existence at the time. All seven of these churches – Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea – were in the Roman region of Asia Minor, in modern day Turkey.



More specifically, these messages were to the “angels” of each of these churches. The Greek original, “angelos” (ἄγγελος) means “messenger.” It is used 176 times in the New Testament, usually referring to the supernatural angels like Michael and Gabriel. This might mean that each of these churches had a “guardian angel” assigned to them.

However, that word can also refer to human messengers. For example, Christ said this about John the Baptist: *“For this is he of whom it is written: ‘Behold, I send My messenger (“angelos”) before Your face, who will prepare Your way before You...’”* (Matthew 11:10). This would mean the “angel” of each church is a human messenger or courier to deliver the message to priest over each church.

Often when we read the words of Christ, we focus deeply on his words of love, redemption, healing and comfort. This is to be expected because these are the themes of the entire Gospel, which means “Good News.” However, we must remember that Christ also rebuked, sometimes forcefully, even to His closest followers:

“But He turned and said to Peter, “Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men” (Matthew 16:23)

“And when His disciples James and John saw this, they said, “Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them, just as Elijah did?” But He turned and rebuked them, and said, “You do not know what manner of spirit you are of” (Luke 9:54-55).

“Later He appeared to the eleven as they sat at the table; and He rebuked their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they did not believe those who had seen Him after He had risen” (Mark 16:14).

We all dislike being rebuked, especially by a loved one, but we should never believe that rebuke means lack of love. Just the opposite. It should not surprise us that Christ sometimes addresses us harshly. The book of Proverbs says, *“My son, do not despise the Lord's discipline and do not resent his rebuke, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in”* (Proverbs 3:11-12).

Revelation chapters 2-3 should be read with this principle in mind. Each church Christ addresses receives a combination of commendation and criticism.

Ephesus

“The reforms of Caesar Augustus brought Ephesus to its most prosperous time, which lasted until the third century A.D. Most of the Ephesian ruins seen today such as the enormous amphitheater, the Library of Celsus, the public space (agora) and the aqueducts were built or rebuilt during Augustus's reign. During the reign of Tiberius, Ephesus flourished as a port city. A business district was opened around 43 B.C. to service the massive amounts of goods arriving or departing from the man-made harbor and from caravans traveling the ancient Royal Road. According to some sources, Ephesus was at the time second only to Rome as a cosmopolitan center of culture and commerce.” (<https://www.history.com/topics/ancient-greece/ephesus>)

“¹ To the angel of the church of Ephesus write...

(Commendation:) ² “I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars; ³ and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary.”

(Criticism:) “⁴ Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love. ⁵ Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent.”

(One last commendation:) “⁶ But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.”

Who were the “Nicolaitians” that Christ says He hates? The second century saint and scholar Irenaeus wrote a book “Against Heresies” and tells us more about them:

“The Nicolaitianes are the followers of that Nicolas who was one of the seven first ordained to the diaconate by the apostles. They lead lives of unrestrained indulgence.”

“⁵ And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch...” (Acts 6:5).

Smyrna

Smyrna was once one of the most illustrious of all ancient and Hellenistic-era Greek cities. One of the main centers of Greek settlement in western Anatolia, it once had a temple dedicated to Athena and was the residence of the epic poet Homer... Smyrna had first risen to prominence during the Archaic Period as one of the principal ancient Greek settlements in western Anatolia. The second flourishing of the city occurred when it reached the status of a metropolis during the Roman Empire” (<https://greekreporter.com/2022/07/06/history-ancient-greek-city-smyrna/>).

⁸ “And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write...

(Commendation:) ⁹ “I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich); and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. ¹⁰ Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.”

No Criticisms!

Pergamos

“Pergamon rose to prominence during the years of the Greek empire’s division following the death of Alexander the Great in 323 B.C... Due largely to its strategic position along land and sea trading routes and in part to the wealth of the Attalid kings who ruled the kingdom, the city enjoyed centuries of prosperity that continued when it passed peacefully to Rome’s control in 133 B.C... Antipas, a Christian bishop of Pergamon, was believed to have been martyred here at the end of the first century A.D., around the time when many scholars believe the Book of Revelation was composed. The execution of their bishop certainly would not have endeared the city to its Christian inhabitants, and the Biblical reference to the city is reflective of the general tension between Christian and pagan communities at the end of the first century A.D.” (<https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-sites-places/biblical-archaeology-sites/ancient-pergamon-2/>)

¹² “And to the angel of the church in Pergamos write,

(Commendation:) ¹³ “I know your works, and where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is. And you hold fast to My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days in which Antipas was My faithful martyr, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.”

The martyr Antipas mentioned here is a recognized saint in Orthodoxy. The Synaxarion says of him: “Saint Antipas was a contemporary of the holy Apostles, by whom he was made

Bishop of Pergamum. He contested during the reign of Domitian, when he was cast, as it is said, into a bronze bull that had been heated exceedingly... The faithful pray to this Saint for ailments of the teeth."

(Criticism:) *"¹⁴ But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality. ¹⁵ Thus you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate. ¹⁶ Repent, or else I will come to you quickly and will fight against them with the sword of My mouth."*

This mention of "Balaam" refers to an Old Testament Hebrew prophet. He was a genuine prophet who received true messages from God, but deceptively used his prophetic gift in dealing with the Balak, the king of Moab for personal gain (Numbers chapters 22-24). Balaam is mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament (2 Peter 2:15, Jude 1:11) as a prophetic traitor to God.

Thyatira

"1st century Thyatira was primarily a pagan city, similar to others in the Roman Empire... Thyatira did have a community of Jews, and while many of the Jews may have syncretized to paganism in a manner reminiscent of Israel during the time of Jezebel, it is more likely that the letter to Thyatira uses the name "Jezebel" as an illustration for the evil practices that the prophetess is teaching to members of the church" (<https://drivethruhistory.com/thyatira/>)

¹⁸ "And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write,

(Criticism:) *"I know your works, love, service, faith, and your patience; and as for your works, the last are more than the first. ²⁰ Nevertheless I have a few things against you, because you all those ¹that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, to teach and seduce My servants to commit sexual immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols. ²¹ And I gave her time to repent of her sexual immorality, and she did not repent. ²² Indeed I will cast her into a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of their deeds. ²³ I will kill her children with death, and all the churches shall know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts. And I will give to each one of you according to your works.*

(Commendation:) *²⁴ "Now to you I say, and to the rest in Thyatira, as many as do not have this doctrine, who have not known the depths of Satan, as they say, I will put on you no other burden. ²⁵ But hold fast what you have till I come."*

"That woman Jezebel" is a reference to an evil Old Testament queen of Israel with that name. She and her equally evil husband King Ahab led the Israelites into worship of foreign gods (I Kings 18:19–19:3). Their names have gone down in history as synonymous with apostasy and wickedness.

Sardis

“Sardis occupied a strategic location and drew on the fertile agricultural land of the plain, the timber and mineral resources of the mountains, the natural defenses of its impregnable citadel, fresh water from streams, springs, and lakes, trade from the coast to the interior, and gold from some of the richest sources in antiquity... Under Roman rule, Sardis continued to flourish, although it never gained the stature it had had under the Lydians. It housed magnificent colonnaded avenues, monumental imperial baths, important temples of the Imperial cult, and an arms factory. It is during this period that the citizens of the city built the largest synagogue known in the ancient world”

[\(https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/5829/\)](https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/5829/)

¹“And to the angel of the church in Sardis write,

(Criticism:) “I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.

² Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God. ³ Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent. Therefore, if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you.”

(Commendation:) “⁴You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy. ⁵ He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels.”

Philadelphia

“Philadelphia is the city about which least is currently known due to the limited amount of archaeological remains recovered from the site. [It was] near the Cogamus River and Mount Tmolus, was situated on the imperial military route west to Rome, while to the east the highway led all the way to Susa from Sardis... During the 1st century, Philadelphia was under the jurisdiction of Sardis, meaning it was a city of lesser importance in comparison to major centers such as Sardis, Ephesus, and Pergamum.”

[\(https://drivethruhistory.com/philadelphia/\)](https://drivethruhistory.com/philadelphia/)

⁷ “And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write,

(Commendation:) “⁸ “I know your works. See, I have set before you an open door, and no one can shut it; for you have a little strength, have kept My word, and have not denied My name.

⁹ Indeed I will make those of the synagogue of Satan, who say they are Jews and are not, but lie—indeed I will make them come and worship before your feet, and to know that I have loved you. ¹⁰ Because you have kept My command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth.

¹¹ Behold, I am coming quickly! Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown.

¹² He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no

more. I will write on him the name of My God and the name of the city of My God, the New Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God. And I will write on him My new name.

No Criticisms!

Laodicea

“Laodicea was a wealthy city during the Roman period. Not only was Laodicea located on major trade routes that connected it to important cities like Ephesus, Smyrna and Sardis, but also it was a center of textile production and banking. Perhaps not surprisingly, the church of Laodicea is noted as being wealthy in the Bible”

(<https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-sites-places/biblical-archaeology-sites/church-of-laodicea-in-the-bible-and-archaeology/>)

¹⁴ “And to the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write,

No Commendations!

(Criticism:) *¹⁵ “I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. ¹⁶ So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth. ¹⁷ Because you say, ‘I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing’—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked—¹⁸ I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see. ¹⁹ As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore, be zealous and repent. ²⁰ Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me. ²¹ To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne”.*

Note that each address to these churches begins with the words, “I know your works.” It was based on their works, not just their belief in true things, that they received their commendations and criticisms. This is exactly how God will evaluate us and the world at Judgement Day.

“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad” (2 Corinthians 5:10).

“And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds” (Revelation 20:12).

“Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation” (John 5:28-29).

We have seen before that the book of Revelation encompasses three time periods: the time in which it was written, and the age of the Church, and the End Times. Chapters 2 and 3 clearly address the era in which it was written, but it has important applications for the age of the Church, in which we live. The strengths and weaknesses of these churches are certainly present in churches today, including Orthodox ones.

Below is a summary of the Seven Churches named in Revelation 2-3, their strengths and their weakness. Which of these traits do you see in churches today? Which of these traits do you see in modern Christianity?

Church	Commendations	Criticisms
Ephesus	<i>“I know your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil.”</i>	<i>“you left your first love... Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works...”</i>
Smyrna	<i>“I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich) ...and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death,</i>	
Pergamos	<i>“And you hold fast to My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days in which Antipas was My faithful martyr...”</i>	<i>“...you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam...Repent, or else I will come to you quickly...”</i>
Thyatira	<i>“works, love, service, faith, and your patience...”</i>	<i>“...you allow that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, to teach and seduce My servants to commit sexual immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols.”</i>
Sardis	<i>“You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments”</i>	<i>“...you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead... repent... watch”</i>
Philadelphia	<i>“for you have a little strength, have kept My word, and have not denied My name...”</i>	
Laodicea		<i>“..you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. ¹⁶ So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth. ¹⁷ Because you say, ‘I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing’—and do not</i>

		<i>know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked..."</i>
--	--	--