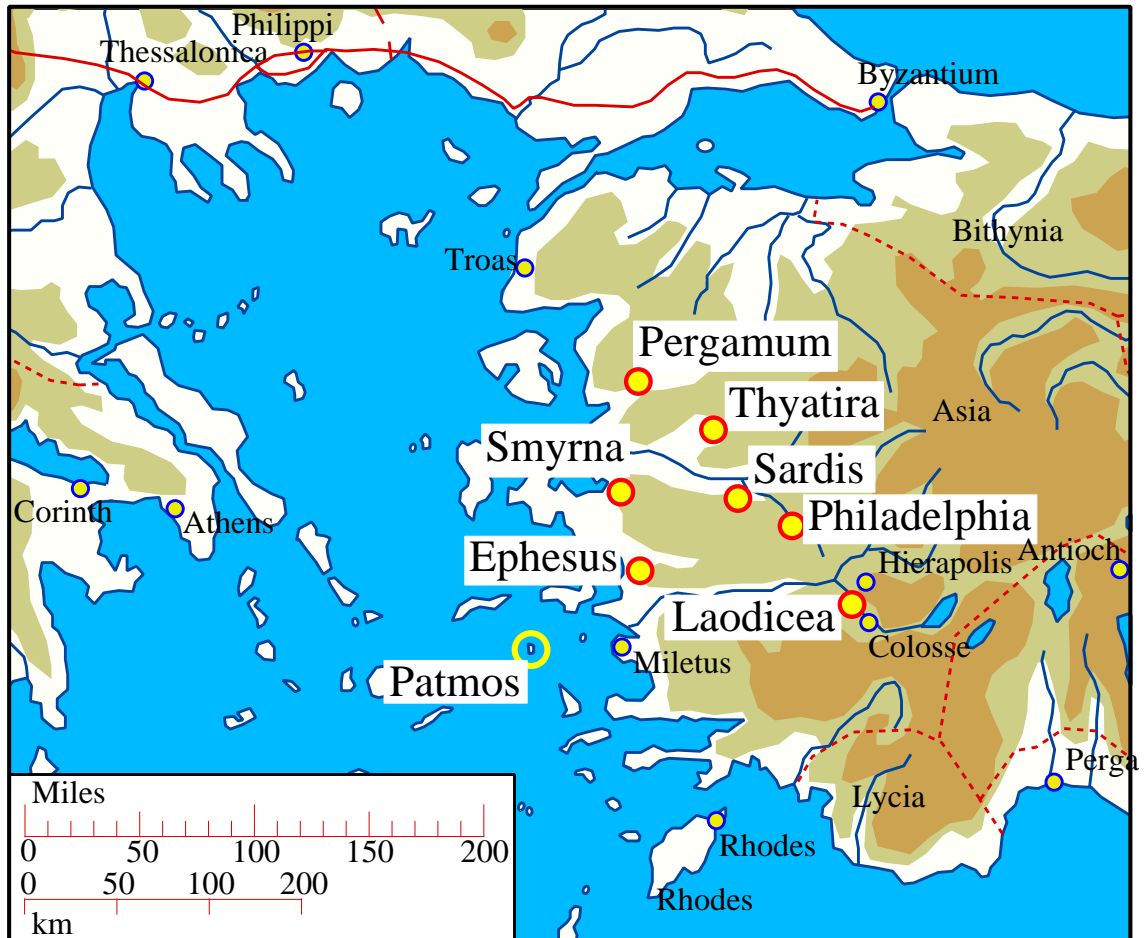


The Letters to The Seven Churches



A study of the Revelation, chapters 2 and 3

Version 1,0
2012

The letters to the Seven Churches

The Revelation contains a history of the world from the time of the Apostles to the Kingdom of God. However, it begins with an introduction which describes the way that the vision was given to John and provides a symbolic representation of Jesus Christ. It then continues with seven messages, each one to a different congregation in the Roman province of Asia. These letters are the subject of this paper.

The circumstances in which the Revelation was written are given in the first chapter of the book. First John writes where he was when he received the vision:-

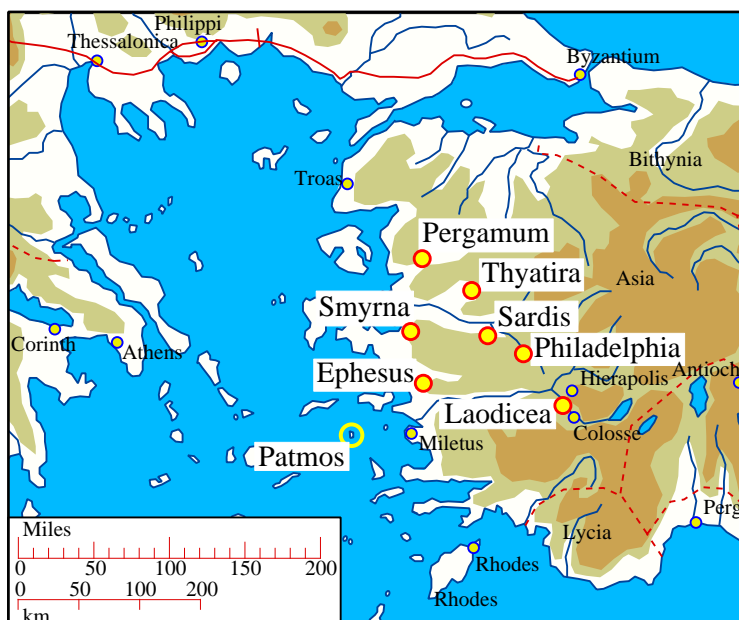
9 I, John, your brother and fellow partaker in the tribulation and kingdom and perseverance which are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos, because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

(NASB'77 Rev 1:9)

John was on Patmos at the time of writing the Revelation. The passage doesn't say what took John to Patmos, except that it was for the "Word of God and the testimony of Jesus". There is a fourth century tradition which says that John had been exiled to Patmos, but the text does not say this. The text could also (and more probably) mean that John was on Patmos to proclaim the Gospel.

Patmos is a small island about 35 miles from the coast of Asia Minor. It is quite small, but in the first century AD it had several small towns and there was quite possibly a Christian congregation there.

Then the first recipients of the vision are listed:-



10 I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like the sound of a trumpet,
11 saying, "Write in a book what you see, and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea."

(NASB'77 Rev 1:10-11)

This sequence is the order in which the letters appear in the text of chapter two. It follows the path in which a messenger might take when he delivered the letters to the various congregations. He might take a boat from Patmos, land at Ephesus and then take a Roman road from Ephesus through Smyrna to Pergamum. From there he could take another road which would bring him to Laodicea having passed through the other cities in the order that they appear in the Revelation.

The seven congregations were not the only congregations in Asia. The New Testament explicitly mentions congregations at Troas, Hierapolis and Colosse, and it is likely that there was a congregation at Miletus. There were probably other congregations in Asia of which we have no record. The seven congregations of the Revelation are therefore selected from a larger set of available congregations and we have no explanation of why.

It may be that John had become responsible for the care of these congregations while Paul was in prison, other Apostles being responsible for other congregations (although in this case one might expect that Hierapolis and Colosse would have been included with Laodicea). It has also been suggested that in some way the seven congregations are representative of all the congregations, seven being the number of completeness. Without further evidence we cannot know for certain.

Structure

The seven letters are written with a common structure, the various parts being introduced by certain key phrases which are the same in all the letters. This structure is almost invariant; there are a few small differences, but in general the letters are the same. The sections are:-

Key Phrases

- To the angel of the church in XXX write
- These things says <name>
- I know your works
- To him that overcomes
- He that has an ear, let him hear what the spirit says to the churches.

To the angel of the church in XXX write

All the letters begin with this phrase. The angel would be a human being; the word “angel” simply means “messenger”. Presumably the angel would be the secretary of the congregation, probably the “bishop”. It is important to remember that a first century bishop was very different from the later monarchical bishop of a diocese. He was probably elected, there might be several bishops in a single congregation and he would not have been seen as a revered figure. However, if one needed to contact a congregation there would be a bishop who would be able to ensure that ones communication came to the attention of the congregation as a whole and this is probably the person referred to in this section. The phrase here is an instruction to John to write the letter to the particular congregation mentioned.

These things says

The second element of the letter always begins “These things says” followed by a name or figurative description of Jesus. There is often a subtle connection between this description and what follows in the letter, although this is difficult to see in some of the letters.

I know your works

This phrase is a reminder that Jesus is looking on at their doings. For those churches where there are issues for the congregation to tackle this is a reminder that Jesus is aware of the ways in which they are falling short and an encouragement to the more faithful elements of the congregation.

Having begun with a reminder of the interest of Jesus the section then goes on to summarise the situation of the congregation, positive points first followed by its failings. This is usually followed by an exhortation which tells the members of the congregation what they should do. Where there are shortcomings in the congregation there is often a statement of what might happen if these problems are not put right.

To him that overcomes and He that has an ear...

These elements might come in either order. The phrase “To him that overcometh” is a reminder of the rewards that will follow the day of judgement. The reward is described afterwards in very symbolic terms.

The other element is “He that has an ear, let him hear what the spirit says to the churches”. This is a characteristic turn of phrase of Jesus which appears in all the synoptic gospels in the form “He that has ears to hear...” (eg. Mt 13:9), often at the end of a parable. The phrase emphasises

that the message is for anyone who will hear and not only for the immediate hearers (in this case the members of the seven churches). The phrase also tends to go with sayings that need a little thought to penetrate; it is an invitation to consider the words to which it refers carefully.

While the letters are structured in a common form and clearly contain material which is applicable to many christian congregations through the ages, including the present day, there are often local allusions which refer to the particular circumstances, local geography, history and customs of the towns to which the letters were written.

Ephesus

The first letter is written to the congregation at Ephesus. The congregation at Ephesus was founded by the Apostle Paul who lived there for over two years. The epistle of Paul to the Ephesians shows that there was considerable depth to this congregation and that the members could cope with ideas of considerable sophistication, but there is a tone of impending problems in the letter. The letter in the Revelation shows a development of these problems.

The letter to Ephesus begins in the usual way with the command to John to write to the angel of the church of Ephesus. The name of Jesus used in this section is “The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands” (Rev 2:1) The seven stars are mentioned in Rev 1:20 where they are described as the “angels of the seven churches” and the seven lampstands as “the seven churches”. Jesus is being depicted as the person who controls the destiny of the seven churches.

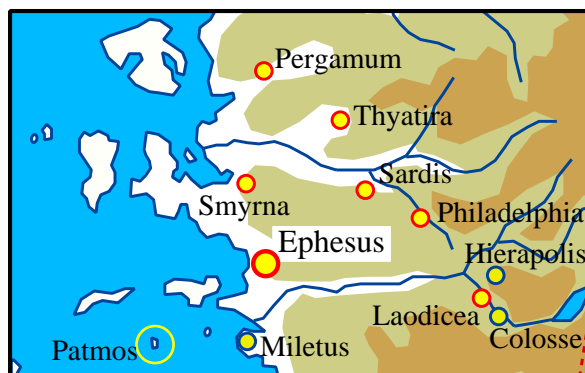
The fact that Jesus is depicted as the person who holds the seven churches in his hand is a lesson which is needed by the church at Ephesus, but it is one which could clearly profit many of the other congregations as well. The purpose of putting it in the first letter might be as a covering title for all the churches, but it may equally be specially intended for Ephesus alone.

The next section of the letter is “I know your works” and covers Rev 2:2-6. The first part of this (vv2 and 3) covers the good points and is fairly comprehensive. The congregation is commended for its works (ἔργα) deeds (κόπον) and its perseverance (ὑπομονήν), which imply actions, effort and continuation against difficulty respectively. The church in Ephesus was clearly working hard to proclaim the gospel and to maintain a Christian presence in its city.

There follows a list of five elements in the good works of the congregation at Ephesus:-

- It will not endure evil men and
- It has tested false apostles
- It has endured (ἐβιάσασας) which implies continuing against adversity

Ephesus



Ephesus was the largest and richest city in the richest province of the Roman Empire. It stood at the end of the silk road, where luxury goods from the east finally reached the Mediterranean. Silks and spices were traded there for gold, jewels and manufactured goods from the Roman Empire. Ephesus was not the capital of the province of Asia, which was officially Pergamum, but it was the largest, wealthiest and most influential city and effectively the political centre of the province.

Ephesus was also the home of the temple of the goddess Diana (Artemis) of Ephesus. This was one of the wonders of the ancient world and added to the influence of the city as pilgrims came to it and as the cult of Artemis spread to other parts of the Roman world. Statues of Artemis of Ephesus have been found as far afield as Egypt, Gaul, Spain and Syria.

The city was large for its time and built on a hillside overlooking a harbour. There were many well-built houses with a view over the shipping and the Aegean sea.

- It has had perseverance (ὑπομονήν) which has similar connotations but more extreme.
- It has “endured” for the sake of the name of Jesus. This implies minor persecutions and the effort that would be required to proclaim the gospel in a situation such as this. In spite of this the congregation has continued to do its work for Christ.

Ephesus has an honourable past, but the main problem is that the works done are past things and not present. They are things which the congregation at Ephesus had been doing but the implication is that they are not continuing in the same way or one would have expected these verbs to be in the present tense. This is borne out by v4.

The congregation at Ephesus has lost its original love. Many commentators suggest that this simply means that the Ephesian Christians are unloving, but this doesn't fit the text.

If the congregation at Ephesus was simply unloving then one would not expect any reference to their *first* love. This word is πρώτην - “*protos*” with the correct

Greek ending. It is the basis of all other loves, not simply the earliest love. The first love of the church can only be a love of Jesus, or of God, or of the Gospel - the three are so close as to be essentially indistinguishable in this context. It seems that Ephesus has lost its enthusiasm for the Gospel. They have not become so weary that they have given up, which is what the Greek translated “fainted” or “grown weary” implies. Nevertheless they are losing the imperative to continue to proclaim Christ Jesus.

The exhortation of the message to Ephesus comes from this problem. Verse 5 tells the Ephesians that they must *remember*, they must *repent* and they must again *do the deeds they did at first*. They need to change their course of action and get back to the way that they worked for Christ at the first. This, incidentally is another pointer to what has gone wrong at Ephesus: the love they have lost is what impelled their “first works”. Repentance, of course, is a matter not only of realising that the current course is wrong and regretting it but also of practical action in changing the direction of one's life. It is not merely a matter of emotion, but one of commitment and of action.

The congregation is exhorted to return to its first works, labour, patience and preservation of the message of the Gospel. There is a threat that if this is not done then Jesus will remove their lampstand. The lampstand, of course, represents the congregation, so the threat is to remove the congregation at Ephesus from being a member of the list of faithful churches. The word “quickly” appears in the AV (“I will come to thee quickly”) but it is only in the Byzantine text. Almost all ancient manuscripts omit it and it is considered to be an obvious insertion. The reference is not to the return of Jesus.

6 ‘Yet this you do have,
that you hate the deeds
of the Nicolaitans,
which I also hate.
(NASB'77 Rev 2:6)

There is a point in favour of the church at Ephesus in v6; the congregation finds the Nicolaitans abhorrent. The word translated hate is the Greek μισεῖς, μισῶ. (*miso* with appropriate endings). This is a strong word. It implies that Jesus detests the Nicolaitans and that he acts against them. It is not merely that he doesn't like them very much.

4 ‘But I have this against you, that you have left your first love.
5 ‘Remember therefore from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you, and will remove your lampstand out of its place—unless you repent.
(NASB'77 Rev 2:4–5)

The Nicolaitans are difficult to place. They appear again at Pergamum (v15) where we find that their teaching is unacceptable to God and that they may have some connection to the Balaamites who seem to have taught a compromise with paganism. The nature of the beliefs of this group will be discussed in the section on the letter to the congregation in Pergamum.

7 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the Paradise of God.'
(NASB'77 Rev 2:7)

The section here is the final picture of a hope for the members of the congregation at Ephesus, but because of the phrase "He who has an ear, let him hear" it is also a general picture for everyone who reads the Revelation.

The reward to him that overcomes is to be allowed to eat from the tree of life. Some commentaries claim that this is a picture in opposition to the emblem of Ephesus, which is said to be a date palm. A search through various coin catalogues and archaeological finds books produced no evidence of any such emblem; the two emblems of Ephesus appear to be a bee and a stag. The tree of life was in the Garden of Eden; mankind was expelled from the garden to prevent him from eating of the tree of life and thus becoming immortal. The reward here is eternal life, given by God through Jesus Christ.

The reward is only, however, for him that overcomes. This implies that there are, within the congregation of Christ at Ephesus, those who are not overcoming the world. The exhortation is to work to overcome so that one can receive the reward.

To summarise, the congregation at Ephesus had had a good record having worked hard for the Gospel and the name of Jesus Christ and had kept going in spite of the effort required. However, it had lost its enthusiasm for the Gospel and was beginning to falter, but was still managing to tick over and still kept apart from the Nicolaitans. Jesus requires that it repent of its current course and returns to its original enthusiasm and work; the penalty is that if this does not occur the congregation at Ephesus will cease to be counted among the faithful churches.

Smyrna

The letter to Smyrna is short, only four verses long. Jesus describes himself as "The first and the last, who was dead and is alive" (v8). This is a significant title in that it fits the rest of the letter, which is written to a congregation which has been suffering a serious persecution.

9 'I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.'
(NASB'77 Rev 2:9)

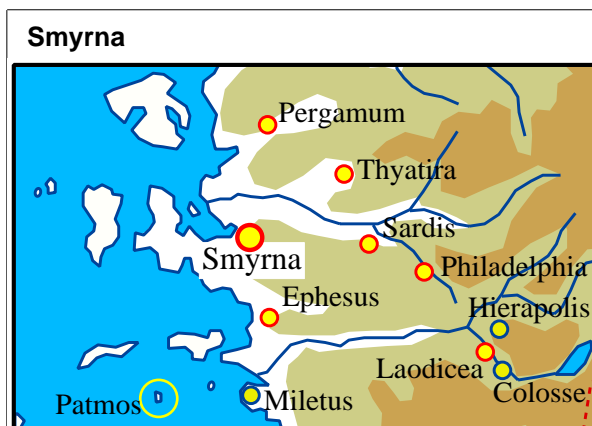
The word translated as "tribulation" in v9 is the Greek word "θλίψις" (*thlipsis*). This refers to a constant stream of minor oppressions rather than a

The Nicolaitans

There are only two references to the Nicolaitans in the New Testament and it is unclear from these alone who is intended. Commentators in general leave the identity of the Nicolaitans as a mystery, but there is one candidate group which bears a closer inspection.

In New Testament times there were a number of philosophies which attempted to bridge between Judaism and Greek philosophy. Among these were the disciples of Nicolaus of Damascus, a teacher who applied Platonic Philosophy to Judaism and was very influential in the court of Herod the Great. He lived and taught on into the first century AD. It is feasible that the followers of this teacher were the Nicolaitans.

They later became acceptable to the Constantinian Church; their teaching is in part accepted in mainstream Christianity.



Smyrna was on the site of the modern Turkish city of Izmir. Until the 1920s this was a mediaeval town with a mixed Jewish and Christian population but the city was destroyed and its population massacred in 1922.

Smyrna was a port which traded in luxury goods from the Silk Road. It was thus wealthy, although not quite on the scale of Ephesus. The imposing agora has been excavated; it is unusual in that it has a crypt. It seems to have had a large Jewish population although the synagogue has not been excavated.

single instance of severe persecution. In 2 Corinthians there are similar background troubles in Corinth. The people who were carrying out the persecution were the local Jews, who probably thought of the Christian congregation as a dangerous aberration of Judaism.

However, this régime of light persecution was to change. The word translated devil in v10 is “διάβολος” (*diabolos*) which means “false accuser”. The false accuser, who may or may not be part of the original persecutors, is about to have some of them thrown into prison for their faith. Others will suffer an even more severe penalty, as one can see from the words “be faithful unto death”. These are words which the Smyrnans probably hoped never to hear. Nevertheless, the persecution is to have a limited duration, which the passage describes as “ten days”. This may be symbolic of a longer period of time, but nevertheless one would expect it to be a short period with a definite end.

10 ‘Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast 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.

(NASB’77 Rev 2:10)

The reward of keeping faith is consistent with the title of Jesus at the start of the message. Jesus “was dead and is alive” and the Smyrnans are given the promise that if they are “faithful to death” then they will be given “the crown of life”. Not only that, but the faithful will not be hurt by the second death.

To summarise, at Smyrna the church was faithful to the word of the Gospel, but had suffered some persecutions at the hands of a Jewish faction known in the Revelation as “The Synagogue of Satan”. Matters were to become worse for a while, but the persecutions were to reach some kind of end. In the mean time those at Smyrna were not to fear their affliction but to hold onto their faith and were promised a crown of life if they could do this.

The Synagogue of Satan

This is the description of the group that was afflicting the congregation at Smyrna. It was clearly a Jewish group (as opposed to a purely Roman one) and there are similarities between this group of persecutors and groups of persecutors in other cities. All together four cities had Jewish groups who showed severe opposition to the Gospel of Christ Jesus.

Ephesus: “...the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.” (ch 2:9) This is clearly a Jewish group. It is probable that the church considered itself a true heir to the promises of Abraham and as such saw Jews as a group who had failed to keep to God’s covenant.

Pergamum: “I know where you live, where Satan’s throne is...” (ch 2:13) The leader of this faction seems to have had his headquarters in Pergamum. Many commentators assume that this persecutor is pagan in nature, particularly as there were many opulent pagan altars in Pergamum, but the context implies that this is a Jewish group.

Thyatira: “those who have not known the deep things of Satan, as they are called...” (ch 2:24). Brethren at Thyatira had been tempted to join the synagogue of Satan but had rejected its influence.

Philadelphia: “I will cause those of the Synagogue of Satan, who say that they are Jews and are not... to come and bow down at your feet” (ch 3:9). This is a promise that in the future - presumably on or after the day of judgement, the Synagogue of Satan will be made to bow at the feet of those that they had persecuted.

It is significant that the persecutions come from a Jewish and not a Roman source. After Nero’s judgement of 64AD Christians would be persecuted by Romans; Jewish persecution would be minor by comparison and after 70AD would be impractical as the Jews themselves were under strain from the Roman authorities. This suggests an early date for the Book of the Revelation.

Pergamum

The congregation at Pergamum was also suffering persecution but was in a much worse state than that at Smyrna because it was internally weak and was undermining the Gospel. The headquarters of the “Synagogue of Satan” was in Pergamum and the persecution was severe.

13 ‘I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is; and you hold fast My name, and did not deny My faith, even in the days of Antipas, My witness, My faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.
(NASB’77 Rev 2:13)

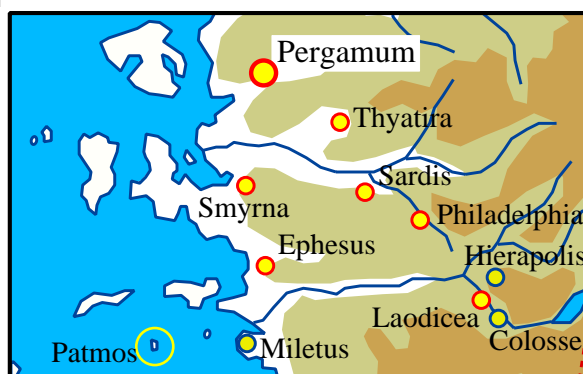
One of the brethren at Pergamum, Antipas by name, had already died, killed as a result of his faith. Antipas was a martyr, a witness to the faith, and he was killed. The implication is that the Synagogue of Satan had had something to do with this but it is not clear exactly what. This must have placed the congregation at Pergamum into a state of fear, but in spite of this they had not denied Christ.

14 ‘But I have a few things against you, because you have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit acts of immorality.
15 ‘Thus you also have some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans.
(NASB’77 Rev 2:14,15)

The problem for the congregation at Pergamum is that the Nicolaitans and the Balaamites have a foothold there and seem ready to overturn their faith, converting it into some semi-pagan cult. Jesus warns that if they cannot overcome this he will become their opponent. The sword of his mouth fits the description of Jesus at the start of the letter (v12), where Jesus is described as having a “sharp, two-edged sword”. The two edges might refer to an edge turned outwards to proclaim the Gospel and one turned inwards to fight error within the congregation. Whether this is correct or not, the two-edged sword is a fearsome weapon. The description of this sword as “the sword of [Jesus’] mouth” presumably implies that it is a sword of words. Jesus will produce prophecies against the Balaamites, which would be of great embarrassment to the congregation at Pergamum.

To summarise, Pergamum was an active congregation who had proclaimed the Gospel and had withstood persecution from the local Jewish group, even to the point where one of them had been killed for his faith. However, they were falling short of the Gospel in that they were adopting pagan practices and Greek philosophy into their teaching and had active groups within the congregation who were threatening to undermine the whole of the Gospel. Jesus warns that if the church at Pergamum doesn’t deal with these paganising groups that he would intervene with the “Sword of his mouth”.

Pergamum



The city of Pergamum was the historical capital of the Attalid Kingdom which was wealthy and had poured resources into its construction. The Acropolis of Pergamum was especially splendid, with closely packed temples of great magnificence and lavish theatres. Among these wonderful constructions was an altar to Zeus, with elaborate carvings and an Asklepiion, a sanctuary where sick people looked for healing.

In spite of all this there were problems in Pergamum. Among the brethren in Pergamum are those who hold the doctrines of the Balaamites and the Nicolaitans. The implication is that these are different groups, but they seem to be similar in their outlook. Possibly the Balaamites are purely Gentile while the Nicolaitans have some Jewish connection.

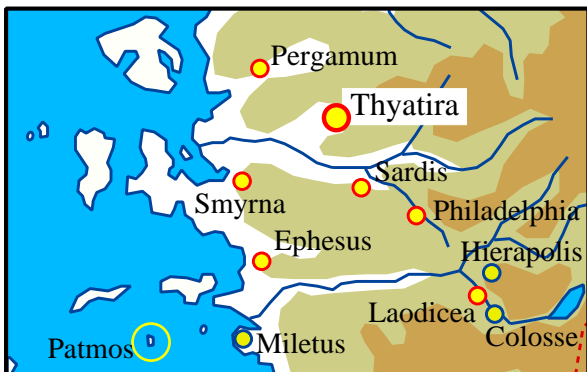
16 ‘Repent therefore; or else I am coming to you quickly, and I will make war against them with the sword of My mouth.
(NASB’77 Rev 2:16)

The Balaamites

Balaam was a prophet hired by Balak to overturn the Children of Israel in their march to the promised land (Numbers 22-24). Balak was constrained by God to bless the Children of Israel, but he was killed by the Israelites under Joshua (Joshua 13:22), so it seems that he continued to work against the Israelites after this. Many commentators believe that Balaam was the architect of an attempt to overturn the faith of Israel by inviting the Israelites to join in the worship of Baal-Peor, worship which seems to have included sexual immorality with Moabite women (Numbers 25). This would fit in well with the picture of the Balaamites in Revelation 2. The Balaamites are only mentioned in the one verse in the Revelation (Rev 2:14) but they also appear in 2 Peter and in Jude.

In 2 Peter the Balaamites are described as “having eyes full of adultery, who cannot cease from sin”. Jude :8 describes the Balaamites (who are named in v11) as “dreamers who defile the flesh, reject authority and despise angels”. The Revelation picks out that the Balaamites taught the eating of the sacrifices of pagan gods, which indicates a participation in the rituals of pagan religion, and to commit immorality, which was also a feature of pagan life (see, for example, Romans 1:22 ff). The Balaamites thus appear to be a group which taught a major compromise with the pagan beliefs around, including a participation in their ritual.

Thyatira



Thyatira was a trading city on the borders of Lydia and Myrissa. It had been successful. There are numerous inscriptions from various traders, more than have so far been found in any other city of the period. Inscriptions record the efforts of dyers, producers of cloth in wool and linen, garment makers, leather-workers, tanners, potters, bakers, slave-merchants and bronzesmiths.

Thyatira was specially known for its purple dye. This differed from the imperial purple and was made from the madder plant which grew well in the area. The Gospel was probably brought to Thyatira from Philippi by Lydia or her associates (cf Acts 6:14).

Thyatira

The letter to Thyatira is the longest of the seven letters, but has many points in common with many of the other letters. Thyatira itself was probably a congregation founded by a group from Philippi; we know that one of the founding members of the congregation in Philippi was a trader in purple dye from Thyatira. However, Thyatira was a congregation in severe trouble.

18 “And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: The Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet are like burnished bronze, says this: (NASB’77 Rev 2:18)

The description of Jesus here contains a title which is not present in the prologue to the Revelation (chapter 1), which makes it unusual. This is the phrase “Son of God”. This emphasises the authority of Jesus, and matches the picture of Jesus with eyes of fire and feet of bronze. The authority of Jesus is particularly important here because of the problems that have arisen within the congregation at Thyatira.

19 ‘I know your deeds, and your love and faith and service and perseverance, and that your deeds of late are greater than at first. (NASB’77 Rev 2:19)

The good points of Thyatira are substantial. They exhibit love, faith service and perseverance. Their works are notable, and these works are increasing. However, these good points are entirely outweighed by the failure of the congregation.

The problem is that the Thyatirans allow a woman who is described as Jezebel to use it as a power-base. Jezebel, of course, was the name of the wife of the wicked king Ahab of Israel (1 Kings 16:28 - 22:40). Ahab was a weak man and Jezebel led him astray (see 1 Kings 16:31). Jezebel was a strong-willed woman who introduced the worship of the gods of the Phoenicians, and especially of Sidon, to Israel; she also committed violent acts against the innocent.

20 ‘But I have this against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and she teaches and leads my bond-servants astray, so that they commit acts of immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols.
21 ‘And I gave her time to repent; and she does not want to repent of her immorality. (NASB’77 Rev 2:20–21)

Apparently the Jezebel of Thyatira was similar. She introduced pagan worship into the congregation and degraded its morals. She called herself a prophetess, but her message doesn't come from God. God has given her a chance to repent, which implies that she knew that she was not carrying a message from God, but in spite of this she continued to operate.

There is still an opportunity for her followers to repent, and possibly for Jezebel herself to repent also. The promised punishment of Jezebel is a little unusual; she is to be thrown into a bed. This reads as though she is to be sent to bed like a naughty girl, but it may be that the bed is intended as a sick-bed or even a death-bed.

22 'Behold, I will cast her upon a bed of sickness, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of her deeds.
23 'And I will kill her children with pestilence; and all the churches will know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts; and I will give to each one of you according to your deeds.
(NASB'77 Rev 2:22-23)

Those led astray by her will be killed. The Greek text describes this as being "killed with death"; some commentators believe that the word "death" really implies a fatal disease. However, the seriousness of the punishment is in no doubt; those who follow the way of Jezebel will die, and the implication is that for them death is the end. The phrase that follows indicates judgement. As the teaching of Jezebel is as much about immorality and joining in with pagan sacrifices the teaching and the deeds of Jezebel are parallel; accepting one means accepting the other. To follow Jezebel's teachings is to bring death and judgement.

24 'But I say to you, the rest who are in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not known the deep things of Satan, as they call them—I place no other burden on you.
25 'Nevertheless what you have, hold fast until I come.

(NASB'77 Rev 2:24-25)

The imperative section of the letter is unusual in two ways. First, it is addressed to only part of the congregation, those who are not of the "Children of Jezebel" - in other words those who do not follow her teachings. These brethren have the requirement of holding fast to the Gospel until the return of Jesus.

The reward of those that overcome is introduced with a quotation from Psalm 2:8,9. The words in the Psalm clearly refer to the Son of God, the Messiah, who is raised by God to rule the world for him. In the absolute sense, of course, it is only the Messiah who will overcome, but those who are in Christ can overcome with him through faith. The promise is that having lived with him they will also reign with him. This is indicated by the phrase "as I also have authority from my Father". The morning star is a title of Jesus found in Rev 22:16.

26 'And he who overcomes, and he who keeps My deeds until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations;
27 and he shall rule them with a rod of iron, as the vessels of the potter are broken to pieces, as I also have received authority from my Father;
28 and I will give him the morning star.
(NASB'77 Rev 2:26-28)

The situation at Thyatira can be summarised as follows.

Thyatira was a congregation which had shown great promise but had compromised with paganism and had hence been corrupted by an apostate woman who is referred to as Jezebel. The majority of the congregation appears to be following Jezebel's teaching, or at any rate tolerating it. Those who are not of the party of Jezebel are told to hold on until the return of Jesus and are promised a great reward at judgement.

Sardis

The message for Sardis covers six verses and is one of the more depressing of the messages of the Seven Letters. It refers to a congregation sunk in complacency who appear to be about to lose their place in the Kingdom of God through sheer idleness.

- 1 “AND to the angel of the church in Sardis write: He who has the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars, says this: ‘ I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.
(NASB’77 Rev 3:1)

The seven stars are explained in Rev 1:20; they are the seven congregations of Asia. The seven spirits of God may be the angels of the congregations, who would be the recipients of the seven letters.

There is little preliminary here. Instead of a list of the good points of the congregation the message goes immediately to the failing of Sardis. They are a dead congregation.

Five out of seven of the letters contain a list of good points before the congregation is exhorted on its failings. The exceptions are Laodicea and Sardis.

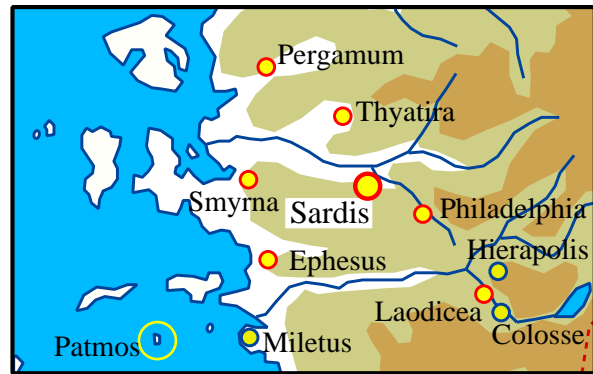
The congregation at Sardis had a good reputation. It was known by other congregations, and possibly even by itself, as a sound congregation which understood the Gospel and was doing the will of God, even as a lively congregation. In fact it was a dead church. There must have been some kind of activity or the congregation would not have had the reputation of being lively, but nothing of consequence was going on. The activities, such as they were, had become old and stale, either completely internal and aimed only at themselves or simply going through the motions.

That is the full condemnation. It contains only ten or eleven words in English (depending on the translation in use - it is eight words in Greek), but it could hardly have been more devastating. The condemnation is a picture of a congregation which believes that it is doing well, but which is, in fact, an almost complete write-off.

- 2 ‘Wake up, and strengthen the things that remain, which were about to die; for I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of My God.
3 ‘Remember therefore what you have received and heard; and keep it, and repent...
(NASB’77 Rev 3:2–3a)

The exhortation is in vv2-3a. The idea of strengthening the things that remain is often seriously misunderstood. It doesn’t involve simply sitting in a huddle and watching one another for signs of error; that would be the opposite of what is intended in this passage.

Sardis



Sardis was another wealthy city with an illustrious past. It had been the capital city of Lydia and of the empire of Croesus and Gyges. The region around Sardis was lush and fertile, minerals could be extracted in the nearby mountains and a trade route passed nearby, all of which made for comfort and prosperity. Gold was available in large quantities from the nearby river Pactolus; the goldsmiths of Sardis were able to guarantee the quality of their gold by means of the “touchstone” and their gold pieces, stamped with the king’s head and an assay mark made up the first coins.

Sardis was the centre of the cult of Cybele, the mystery religion of the mother goddess, but by New Testament times the worship of Artemis was even more important to the city.

The end of the Lydian empire came when the army of Croesus was besieged there by Cyrus the Persian. The Lydians occupied a seemingly impregnable fortress which seemingly could only be attacked on one side. The Lydians only guarded that side, but the Persians noted a path up another side, crept up it by night and captured the citadel. The Lydians had not kept watch and woke to find their city in flames. As this had happened once before, when the Assyrians had captured the city by a similar means one would have expected the Lydians to be prepared, but watchfulness was apparently not a major feature of the Lydian character.

- It is the *works* of Sardis that are lacking and not their understanding of the Gospel.
- The congregation is told to remember *how* they have received, not *what* they have received. Some modern versions find this such an unusual reading that they alter the text, but *how* is what the text really says. The conclusion of this is that it was the example of those who brought them the Gospel that they are to emulate, not the teaching that was included in it. In other words, they are told to imitate these people in proclaiming the Real Gospel.

It is a commonplace that if one wishes to strengthen one's body one must exercise it. Similarly, if one wishes to strengthen ones faith, this also is a matter of exercise.

The other exhortation in this short passage is the exhortation to watch. The word "watch" is the single word associated most frequently with the idea of the return of Jesus in the New Testament. The idea behind the word is more than simply looking out for the return of Jesus, and more than simply remaining awake. The idea behind it is of the watchman, the sentry or the lookout; the church is to act as a sentry for mankind, to watch for the return of Jesus and to warn the rest of humanity. There is thus a requirement that the church should stay on the alert, keeping a lookout. This is what the congregation in Sardis had failed to do.

The congregation at sardis was in no way alert. They were sleep-walking their way through the days without taking any note of what was going on in the world around them. The picture in the Revelation was of a congregation which is not merely asleep but comatose, slipping away into death, dreaming all the time of past greatness.

Just as the watchmen of Sardis in at the start of the Persian empire failed to watch and so allowed the Persians to overcome the garrison and burn the city, so the members of the congregation were not on the alert. The ruin of the congregation at Sardis was creeping up on them just as the Persian soldiers crept up on the city of Sardis in the sixth century BC.

There are five imperatives in the exhortation that goes with this message:-

- Be alert - Be watchful. The members of the congregation at Sardis are to react to what is around them, to become active and purposeful, and to witness to the Gospel.
- Strengthen the things which remain. They must not carry on with the same apathetic lack of action but must return to a much stronger witness.
- Remember *how* they received the Gospel. To strengthen something it must be exercised. Action is needed.
- Hold fast. Don't let go of the Gospel.
- Repent. This is the ordinary word for repentance. It doesn't simply mean to feel sorry about what is past, but requires a change of course so that one doesn't simply repeat the same errors.

In the Authorised Version (KJV)

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

3 Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent.

(KJV Rev 3:2-3a)

The King James translation here gives a better picture of the meaning of the text than the version used in the previous box.

If therefore you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come upon you.

(NASB'77 Rev 3:3b)

The second part of v3 is a promise of judgement. It reads like something more immediate than the judgement of the last day. In either case it seems unlikely that the congregation at Sardis will pass muster when the judgment occurs.

4 'But you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their garments; and they will walk with Me in white; for they are worthy.
 5 'He who overcomes shall thus be clothed in white garments; and I will not erase his name from the book of life, and I will confess his name before My Father, and before His angels.
 (NASB'77 Rev 3:4-5)

While the majority of the congregation at Sardis have fallen into stupor, there are still a few faithful members who remain active. The picture here is a contrast between those with [spiritually] dirty clothes and those who have got their hands dirty with work, but who Jesus will clothe in white. The implication is that those who are apathetic will have their names erased from the book of life, while those who work

actively for the Gospel will have their names confessed by Jesus before God on the day of judgement. Even those with defiled garments can be clothed in white if they repent. Those who continue to dream of past greatness but take no action will be blotted out of the book of life.

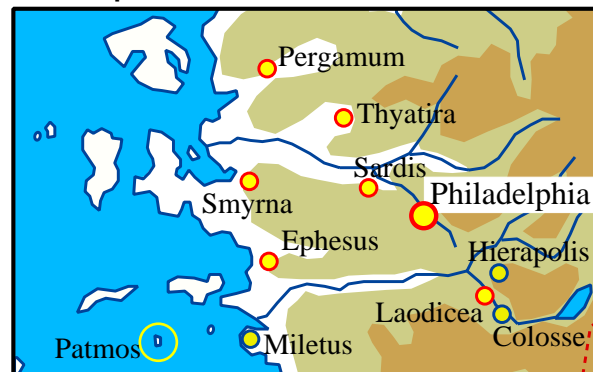
Philadelphia

The congregation in Philadelphia were having a difficult time but in spite of this they were managing to maintain a witness to the Gospel of Christ Jesus.

7 "And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: He who is holy, who is true, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, and who shuts and no one opens, says this:
 (NASB'77 Rev 3:7)

The title of Jesus in this letter is enigmatic. The key of David is mentioned in Isaiah 22:22 where it refers to the office given to Eliakim son of Hilkiyah, the new prime minister of Judah under Hezekiah the king. The passage in Isaiah is sufficiently close to Rev 3:7 for one to be certain that it is an intentional quotation. The obvious picture is of Jesus as being the head of the Kingdom of God under God his Father.

Philadelphia



Philadelphia was a city in a fertile plain, moderately prosperous but of no special note. It was given its name to celebrate the faithfulness of Attalus, brother of the King of Pergamum; given the opportunity to seize power in a bloodless coup Attalus refused to do so, thus proving himself to be his brother's friend, the meaning of the word "Philadelphia".

There are no significant archaeological remains at Philadelphia, which is buried under a modern Turkish town.

The key controls access. It is not clear whether this is access to the Kingdom of God at judgement or access to God. Either could be the case. However, in ch 4:1 the open door is one which brings access to God. This idea is repeated several times in the Revelation and it seems more likely that this is what is intended.

8 'I know your deeds. Behold, I have put before you an open door which no one can shut, because you have a little power, and have kept My word, and have not denied My name.
 (NASB'77 Rev 3:8)

The letter begins with a word of encouragement. In the usual sequence the letter would summarise the positive points of the congregation and commend them but in the case of Philadelphia this comes later.

The picture of the open door is consistent with the title of Jesus from v7. The congregation at Philadelphia has

a glowing commendation. They may have only a little strength but they have remained faithful in spite of this.

The congregation at Philadelphia appears to have suffered persecution at the hands of the "Synagogue of Satan". This group is based in Pergamum but is clearly influential in Philadelphia as well. One can therefore expect that the oppression felt by the members of the congregation in Pergamum was more severe than a little social pressure, but in spite of this the members have not denied Christ Jesus.

The encouragement from Jesus is that this will not last. One day the members of the Synagogue of Satan will be made to bow at the feet of the members of the congregation in Philadelphia. This would probably be at the day of Judgement; there is no evidence that it ever happened in historical times.

9 'Behold, I will cause those of the synagogue of Satan, who say that they are Jews, and are not, but lie—behold, I will make them to come and bow down at your feet, and to know that I have loved you.
10 'Because you have kept the word of My perseverance, I also will keep you from the hour of testing, that hour which is about to come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell upon the earth.
(NASB'77 Rev 3:9–10)

The members of the congregation in Philadelphia will, however, avoid the judgement entirely. The promise of an enduring place in the Kingdom of God is absolute; this speaks volumes for the faith of the members of the congregation in Philadelphia. Nevertheless, v11 does require that they hold on to their faith to receive the reward.

12 'He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he will not go out from it anymore; and I will write upon 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 My new name.
(NASB'77 Rev 3:12)

The section on the reward of the members of the congregation at Philadelphia is instructive in what it tells us about Christ Jesus. In this one verse (v12) there are four references to God as the God of Jesus Christ. It is absolutely clear from this passage that Jesus has a God, and that this is our God.

Laodicea

The final letter is to the congregation at Laodicea. This is another dismal case of a poorly performing congregation which is in danger of destruction at the hand of Jesus for its lack of faith.

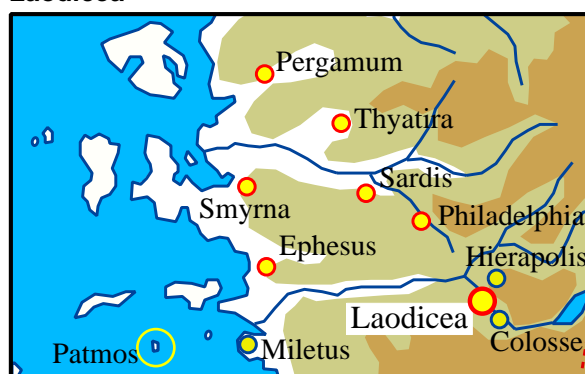
14 "And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God, says this:
(NASB'77 Rev 3:14)

Jesus refers to himself here as the faithful witness and as the foundation of the creation of God. There is a possibility that Jesus role as the foundation of the creation is a reference to the new creation, an idea in which the new order brought about by the death and resurrection of Jesus is seen as a new world. However, it is not clear which of the two is intended.

15 'I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I would that you were cold or hot.
16 'So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth.
(NASB'77 Rev 3:15–16)

The point that this is making about the members of the congregation at Laodicea is that they were completely apathetic. Unlike the members at Philadelphia, who were giving an all-out witness to the Gospel, or the members of the congregation at Thyatira, who were opposing the Gospel and working without cease to undermine it, the members at Laodicea were lukewarm. They assented to the Gospel but did nothing about it.

Laodicea



Laodicea was founded by the Seleucid king Antiochus II who named it after his wife. It was sited at a strategic cross-roads between the main route from the East to Ephesus (the final section of the Silk Road) and the north/south road from Atalia to Pergamum. It was sited in rich countryside and was famous for the lustrous black wool which was used to make a luxury cloth and for a wide variety of herbal medicines and ointments. It was so wealthy that when it was wrecked by an earthquake in 17AD it was able to turn down the offer of imperial aid and pay for its own rebuilding.

The one problem with the site of Laodicea was the lack of a suitable nearby source of drinking water. The local river Lycus was muddy at Laodicea and undrinkable. The solution was to bring in water from hot springs to the south. The hot water was carried by aqueduct. It cooled to a lukewarm temperature in transit and deposited minerals which furred up the piping.

Like their own drinking water they were neither cold enough to be refreshing nor hot enough to warm one up in cold weather. Like the pipes of their water supply the congregation at Laodicea was clogged up! The first response of a stranger, riding hot and tired into Laodicea and taking a drink at the fountain was probably to spit the water out in disgust. This, says Jesus, is his response to the lukewarm nature of the congregation.

17 'Because you say, "I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing," and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked,

18 I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire, that you may become rich, and white garments, that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and eye salve to anoint your eyes, that you may see.

(NASB'77 Rev 3:17-18)

Laodicea was a wealthy commercial centre with a healthy trade in medicine and luxury textiles. The congregation at Laodicea had adopted this culture and thought of itself as self-sufficient and in need of nothing. In reality its performance was woeful; the congregation at Laodicea was completely spiritually lacking in every way.

The imperative of Jesus is different from the imperatives of most other congregations. It takes the

form of advice rather than of a command. The advice matches all the weaknesses of the city:-

- The city was rich and had no need of more money. The congregation was spiritually poor and is advised to buy gold refined by fire. In Zechariah 13:9 there is a picture of the faithful remnant of Israel as gold tried by fire; this picture is taken up again in 1 Peter 1:7 where the faithful followers of Christ Jesus are to be tried by the coming persecution of Nero as having their faith refined by fire which will result in their honourable salvation in the day of judgement. The point for the Laodiceans is that they will need to engage in struggle to be worthy disciples of Jesus.
- The city made and sold luxury textiles made from soft black wool. The congregation has left itself naked by its inaction and is advised to buy itself white garments. White garments are used elsewhere in the Revelation as a symbol of purity from the world.
- The city made and sold medicine, among which was an ointment for eyes. The congregation was blind to the way of God and is advised to buy eye ointment to cure this blindness and see what was true. This, of course, would expose them to their own sight so that they would see their own failings as much as anything else.

The congregation at Laodicea had received no discipline from God so far. They had had no struggle to live the Gospel and apparently were able to undertake a low-level witness without any problems. The verse implies that this means they did not experience the love of God.

19 'Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; be zealous therefore, and repent.
(NASB'77 Rev 3:19)

The letter to the Laodiceans also differs from the other letters is that it does not contain a set of imperatives followed by a reward. Instead there is a comment on discipline and its link to suffering and a second appeal. Verse 20 has been taken as an invitation to the unconverted to join themselves to Christ Jesus. The context, of course, is that it is written to the congregation at Laodicea, people who were already followers of Christ Jesus, who already formed a congregation of the church of Christ Jesus, and who were in danger of being without use to Christ Jesus. They had learned the Gospel and there is nothing to suggest that they had departed from its teachings. They had simply turned inwards and by their apathy they had shut out Christ Jesus.

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 will dine with him, and he with Me.
(NASB'77 Rev 3:20)

The exhortation here is to the members of the congregation at Laodicea to renew their conversion. They needed once again to allow Christ Jesus to be a member of the congregation.

The Revelation - Letters to the Seven Churches

21 'He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.
(NASB'77 Rev 3:21)

The final promise is that there is still hope for renewal for the congregation at Laodicea. Those who overcome will sit with Christ Jesus when he rules in his Kingdom.

However, this follows the example of Christ Jesus. Jesus only overcame in the end because he suffered death on the cross. He had to overcome fatigue, rejection, suffering, and in the end death. The ease of Laodicea is not the way to the Kingdom of God.

Summary

Chapters 2 and 3 of the Revelation contain a picture of seven churches. The situations of these churches is described as it was at the time. One can summarise the states of each of these congregations in a single sentence:-

Congregation	Summary	
Ephesus	Had given a good witness in the past but was now beginning to grow weary and to falter in its witness	Weary
Smyrna	Oppressed by the "Synagogue of Satan" for their faith. They were to suffer persecution in the future.	Oppressed
Pergamum	Had witnessed to the Gospel in the past but was now compromising with pagan groups and groups mixing Judaism with Greek philosophy.	Compromising
Thyatira	Had a track record of good works but was led astray by a false teacher (Jezebel)	Corrupt
Sardis	Was complacent and living on past reputation	Complacent
Philadelphia	Had only a little strength remaining but gave a serious witness to the Gospel	Enduring
Laodicea	Believed itself comfortable but was totally inactive.	Apathetic

The right hand column contains an attempt to summarise the status of the congregation in a single word. The only difficulty here is Ephesus, where the word chosen is apparently excluded by Rev 2:3 which says that the congregation has not grown weary. This seems to have been a picture of the past of the congregation; in the past they had continued in spite of problems, but now they are tiring and beginning to lose enthusiasm. The nearest word to this seems to be "weary".

The congregation which is given the highest commendation is Philadelphia with Smyrna a close second. These are the two congregations which have withstood affliction in their witness to the Gospel and have continued to proclaim the real Gospel without watering it down or introducing ideas from Greek Philosophy or paganism.

The congregation which is given the greatest condemnation is Laodicea, self-satisfied and luke-warm. This complacency and inaction is seen as worse than the adoption of paganism and false teaching which is found at, for example, Thyatira.

The Challenge

The challenge is to look at where one's own experience lies on the scale of the congregations of the Revelation. Is one's experience of the great heights of Philadelphia or down with the Laodiceans, or somewhere between? How does this go for one's own personal life, or for the whole congregation, or for the whole denomination of which one is a member? What can we do to improve matters?

