

The author has a good knowledge of the setting and tradition of each city, and a specific message for the church in each of them. Three of the churches are warned against false teachers, referred to as Nicolaitans. Although little is said about their vices, they are linked with Balaam (Numbers 22–25) and Jezebel (1 Kings 21 and 2 Kings 9:30–37) and accused of advocating sexual licence and eating food sacrificed to idols. Even so, the general picture is of peaceful and well-established groups that are in danger of complacency and succumbing to the temptations of their religious and social environment.

1 Ephesus (2:1–7): In the letter to the Christians at Ephesus, Jesus

- a. *praises* them for their endurance, for bearing up under persecution, and for testing the orthodoxy of their teachers;
- b. *reproaches* them for losing their first love; and
- c. *promises* them that they will eat of the tree of life in the heavenly paradise.

Ephesus, with a population of about 250,000, was the most important city in Asia. It was the hub for a series of roads to significant areas of Asia Minor. The imperial cult was established there about 29 B.C. when a temple was built for the worship of the goddess Roma and the deified Julius Caesar. Within the city was an amphitheater that seated 50,000 people. Ephesus was the capital for the imperial cult at the time of Domitian.

2 Smyrna (2:8–11): In the letter to the Christians at Smyrna, Jesus

- a. *praises* them for standing firm despite tribulation, poverty, and slander;
- b. *offers* no reproaches; and
- c. *promises* them the crown of life and preservation from the second death.

Smyrna, the “flower of Asia” and a magnificent trade city (with a harbor to the west), was rebuilt about 200 B.C. according to plans and designs attributed to Alexander the Great. In 195 B.C., its citizens built a temple to the goddess Roma. In A.D. 26, they were granted the right to build a temple to the divine Tiberius and the Roman Senate—a privilege denied to all other Asian cities at that time.

3 Pergamum (2:12–17): In the letter to the Christians at Pergamum, Jesus

- a. *praises* them for remaining true to Him and standing firm in the faith;
- b. *reproaches* them for tolerating false teachers; and
- c. *promises* them eternal life under the figures of hidden manna and a white stone with a new name on it.

Pergamum was not as famous in the business world as were Ephesus and Smyrna. However, Pliny praised it as the most famous city in Asia. Its library housed about 200,000 scrolls and was second in size only to that in Alexandria. (The writers and librarians in Pergamum invented parchment.) It was the principal locality for Caesar worship in the province of Asia. On the slopes of a hill overlooking Pergamum were temples to Zeus, Athena, and Asklepios. Asklepios, the god of healing, brought thousands to the city each year; he was referred to as “the savior,” and his emblem was a serpent. An immense white marble altar (now in the Pergamum museum in Berlin), dedicated to Zeus, was part of the temple complex. The Roman governor stationed there was permitted to use the sword to inflict capital punishment to enforce the “Caesar is lord” law.

4 Thyatira (2:18–29): In the letter to the Christians at Thyatira, Jesus

- a. *praises* them for their faith and love, and their growth in service;
- b. *reproaches* them for heeding false teachers, practicing immorality, and eating food offered to idols; and
- c. *promises* them that they will share His Messianic rule.

Thyatira served as a military outpost for Pergamum. It had no proper acropolis, no famous cult, no gods of note, and was not an official center for Caesar worship. However, there were many workers' guilds within its walls: bakers, potters, brass-workers, tanners, leather-workers, wool and flax processors, clothiers, and dyers. When guild members met, they shared a banquet that often resulted in drunkenness and sexual immorality. Sometimes the meat served at a banquet had been sacrificed on pagan altars. Workers who refused to take part in these banquets faced social ostracism and financial peril.

5 **Sardis** (3:1–6): In the letter to the Christians at Sardis, Jesus

- a. offers *no praise*;
- b. *reproaches* them for their spiritual deadness; and
- c. *promises* the faithful among them that they will be clothed in white, that their names will stand in the Book of Life, and that He will confess their names before the Father and His angels.

Sardis had once been a symbol of great wealth, splendor, and power. At the time when Revelation was written, it was no longer that. It was not a government center, nor the base for any special industry. No special gods were worshiped within its walls. However, it remained a large and prosperous city.

6 **Philadelphia** (3:7–13): In the letter to the Christians at Philadelphia, Jesus

- a. *praises* them for having remained loyal to Him and for keeping His Word;
- b. offers *no reproaches*; and
- c. *promises* them that they will be pillars in the Temple of God and that He will write new names on them.

Philadelphia was founded with the express purpose of being an open door for Greek culture to the regions of Lydia and Phrygia. It was located in a region that was subject to severe earthquakes. Because of the dangers posed by collapsing buildings and falling objects, the city's residents lived in constant fear and were always ready to flee to safety outside the city's walls.

7 **Laodicea** (3:14–22): In the letter to the Christians at Laodicea, Jesus

- a. offers *no praise*;
- b. *reproaches* them for being lukewarm, complacent, and self-satisfied; and
- c. *promises* them that He will share table with them and they will sit on His throne.

Laodicea, founded in the middle of the third century B.C., was located at the crossroads of commerce and trading ventures from east to west and north to south. It was named after its founder, Laodice, the wife of the Seleucid king, Antiochus II. It served as a banking center, as a manufacturing center for woolen outer garments, and as a center for the manufacture and export of eye and ear ointments. It was situated on the Lycus River. Across the river and to the north were mineral springs whose waters flowed over white lime-encrusted cliffs.

To comfort and encourage Christians facing or suffering persecution, John held before them a vision of the glory that would finally be theirs. He also assured them that their persecutors would eventually reap their just reward. It would have been easy for John's readers to conclude that a day of reckoning awaited the evildoers, and that only a glorious future awaited them. The Seven Letters reminded John's readers that they, too, must constantly examine themselves lest they become blind to their own sins and weaknesses. The abuses referred to applied to all seven churches, even as they apply to the church in every generation. Similarly, the rewards promised to one church were available to all, even as they are available to all Christians to the end of time.