



MESSAGES TO SEVEN CHURCHES

QUEST LESSON E-2

The Problem: Did Bible prophecy predict the state of God's church in every age? Did Jesus give instruction that would meet specific problems as they would arise in future generations? Some interpreters of Bible prophecy relate most of what the prophets wrote to conditions in the prophets' own day. Others see the greater part of prophecy as referring almost exclusively to the time immediately before the second coming of Jesus. Although it is clear that Jesus and the apostles gave counsel for the church of the first century, it is also true that they foresaw the circumstances of the church in every subsequent age.

Take, for example, the messages of the apostle John in the book of Revelation. These messages were given by Christ Himself, and they reveal the trials and difficulties that would be faced by the church in every period between John's day and the second coming of Jesus. John wrote of things that "must shortly come to pass" (Revelation 1:1). He indicated that "the time is at hand" (verse 3) for the fulfillment of the things that he had been shown in vision. Throughout the book of Revelation, John's view is always to the future with a special focus on the second advent of Christ.

John was a prisoner on the island of Patmos when he wrote the book of Revelation. He had been exiled by the Roman Emperor Domitian who ruled from A.D. 81 to 96. Somewhere between A.D. 92 and 95 John received his messages from Christ. He tells us that one Sabbath day he was sitting somewhere on the island of Patmos when he heard a great voice behind him, "as of a trumpet" (Revelation 1:10). Turning around to see who was speaking, John saw Jesus dressed like the High Priest in magnificent robes, holding seven stars in his right hand and walking around in the middle of seven golden candlesticks (verse 12-13).

John was overcome with awe and respect. He fell on the ground in fear. But Jesus spoke kindly to him. He said: "Fear not; I am the first and the last: I am he that liveth, and was dead; and behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and of death" (verses 17-18). This was the same Jesus with whom John had associated for three and a half years, the same Jesus who had healed the sick and delivered people from the power of the evil one. This was the same Jesus who had died on the cross for the sins of the whole world, who had risen again and had ascended to heaven to function as our Mediator in the heavenly sanctuary (Hebrews 8:1-2).

Jesus told John that He wanted him to write messages to the "seven churches which are in Asia" (verse 11). These seven churches situated in the Roman province of Asia (Asia Minor) were Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. They were situated along the Roman road that led out of Ephesus. The mail would be delivered to these churches in the same order in which they were listed in the book of Revelation.

But the messages to these seven churches were intended for all Christians in that era and in every succeeding era. Included in each message were the words, "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches" (Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). Every Christian was to listen to all seven messages and take to heart the counsel that Christ had given. All of these messages are for us today, just as much as for the people of John's day.

Moreover, it is fascinating that the messages to the seven churches apply in a very specific way to the church in seven periods from John's day to the second advent of Christ. Jesus told John to write "the things which shall be hereafter" (Revelation 1:19). As we shall discover in our study of the seven messages, each one has very special relevance to a particular period of the church. A study of Church History reveals that Jesus knew exactly what would happen to His church in every age, and each message was designed to encourage and instruct His people in their particular circumstances. The prophecy of the seven churches is an outline of Christian Church history from John's day till the second coming of Christ.

John saw Jesus walking around in the midst of seven golden candlesticks, carrying seven stars in his right hand. Then Jesus told him what these symbols meant: "The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches: and the seven candlesticks which thou sawest are the seven churches" (Revelation 1:20). Then each of the seven messages is addressed to "the angel of the church" (Revelation 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14). Who is the angel of the church? The Greek word translated angel is AGGELOS. It means "messenger, envoy, one who is sent." In Scripture it does not only refer to heavenly angels. Quite often it means a human messenger (Matthew 11:10; Luke 7:24; 9:52; James 2:25). The angels of the churches spoken of in Revelation chapters 1-3 are the ministers of the churches, the appointed spiritual leaders and teachers. Although the messages are addressed to them, it is quite clear that they are intended for the whole church. The ministry of the church has the responsibility of passing on to the people the instruction that Christ gives. The ministers are held in Christ's hand so that Satan will not be able to destroy the church. Christ loves and respects His chosen spiritual leaders, and He loves His people equally. As He walks around among the candlesticks, a sword is coming out of His mouth (Revelation 1:16). This sword symbolizes the Holy Spirit, whom Christ gives to His faithful people. Thus, their spiritual life is preserved and fostered and they are protected from the attacks of Satan.

Let us turn now to the messages for the churches and see how they applied throughout history, and how they apply to us today.

Objectives

We shall take each of the seven messages in turn, showing the historical application and the significance for Christian believers today.

I. The Message to Ephesus

The counsel to the church of Ephesus has special relevance to the entire apostolic era. In the first century of the Christian era, after the death and resurrection of Jesus, circumstances existed that called for the counsel that Jesus had to give. Those circumstances have existed to some extent in every period of the church's history, and they exist today. Hence, the instruction is for us too!

The Word

1. What was the church commended for in the first period of Christian history? Revelation 2:2-3.
2. What special weaknesses did Christ identify in this early church? Revelation 2:4-6.
3. What promise did Jesus give to the one who would overcome sin and follow His counsel? Revelation 2:7.

Explanation: The name "Ephesus" means "desirable." Many of the epistles of the New Testament reveal the loyalty to Christ shown by the Christians of the first century. The apostolic era was a period of evangelistic outreach to the people of the Roman Empire, and even beyond. Only just a few years before Jesus had been on earth, and the zeal manifested by many of the early Christians, even to the point of dying for their faith, is a testimony to the power of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

But there were developing spiritual problems in the church. Some of the Christians who had been dedicated and enthusiastic about their faith in the early years had grown cold and spiritually lethargic. They had lost their first love. Moreover, there was a growing tolerance for a class of professed Christians known as Nicolaitans. These people are mentioned again in the message to Pergamos, so we will discuss them more fully later. Suffice it to say that they were hypocritical people, who were claiming to be faithful Christians but, in fact, were covetous, impure, and disloyal to Christ.

Jesus gave to the church of Ephesus, the representative of the entire apostolic era, a special promise for those who, by His grace, would overcome sin. They were to eat of the tree of life that is in paradise. The tree of life was originally in the Garden of Eden, the home of Adam and Eve (Genesis 2:9). As long as our first parents ate of that tree, they had immunity from degeneration and death. After they disobeyed God, they were excluded from the Garden of Eden, lest they should go on eating of the tree of life and become immortal sinners (Genesis 3:22). It is a law laid down by God that the penalty for sin is eternal death (Romans 6:23). Only the gift of Christ made possible our escape from that penalty. Now the tree

of life is in paradise (Revelation 22:2), which the apostle Paul identified as heaven (2 Corinthians 12:1-4). The one who, by Christ's power, overcomes sin will be taken to heaven with Jesus when He comes the second time (John 14:1-3). He will be given immortality (1 Corinthians 15:51-54) and will have eternal access to the tree of life.

Relevance: The message of Jesus to the church of Ephesus is as much for us as for that first era of church history. Have we lost our first love for Christ? Are we tolerating sin in our own lives and excusing sin in the church? Or are we being faithful and zealous in working for the salvation of other souls? Are we having victory over sin in our lives? Can Jesus regard us as overcomers? He provides all the necessary power, and He wants us to turn to Him every day for the gift of His Spirit. Then at the second advent we will be taken to paradise to be with Jesus for eternity.

II. The Message To Smyrna

The church of Smyrna represents the second period of Christian Church History. This was a period of great suffering for Christians because they were severely persecuted for their faith. The symbolism used in Christ's message to this church proves quite conclusively that He was speaking to the church in the post-apostolic period, not just to the local church in the city of Smyrna.

The Word

4. What commendation did Christ give to the Christians in the period of Smyrna? Revelation 2:9.
5. For how long was this church to suffer persecution? Revelation 2:10.
6. What two promises were given to those who would be faithful? Revelation 2:10 (last part), 11.

Explanation: The name "Smyrna" means "myrrh". It was the gum of an Arabian tree which was burnt as an incense. In the post-apostolic era, from A.D. 100 to A.D. 313 Christians were subjected to great suffering. In terms of this world's goods they were, for the most part, very poor. They suffered periodic persecution at the hands of the Roman Emperors and at the hands of local opponents. The "Jews" of verse 9 are not literal Jews. The book of Revelation abounds with symbolism, the meaning of which can only be deduced by comparing Scripture with Scripture. The New Testament speaks of true Jews as those who have committed their lives to Jesus Christ. These are the true children of Abraham. Physical descent from Abraham, so the New Testament teaches, is not enough. God values faith and accepts faithful followers of Christ as Abraham's true spiritual descendants. (See Romans 2:28-29; Galatians 3:7, 29). Those who were claiming to be Jews but were not a reference to hypocritical professed Christians who were slandering their more faithful brothers and sisters in the church.

When Jesus predicted, "Ye shall have tribulation ten days" (Revelation 2:10) He was foreseeing the terrible Diocletian persecution that began in A.D. 303 and ended in A.D. 313. In symbolic prophecy, a day often stands for a year. That is true in the time prophecies of Daniel 7-9 and those of Revelation 12 and 13. The fact that Jesus warned the church of a ten-year period of persecution, which was dramatically fulfilled by the suffering initiated by Diocletian in 303 and ended by Constantine's Edict of Milan in 313, indicates very impressively that the messages to the churches were intended to apply to historical periods, not merely to the local churches in Asia Minor. Not until 313 were the Christians legally free to practice their faith. The Edict of Milan gave to Christianity full legal equality with any religion in the Roman world.

Jesus promised the faithful believers in this period "a crown of life" (Revelation 2:10). This is a symbol of eternal life with Christ to be finally bestowed at the second advent when all true believers will be made immortal and taken to heaven. (See 1 Corinthians 9:25; 2 Timothy 4:8; James 1:12; 1 Peter 5:4). The spiritual victor was to be protected from the second death. In the book of Revelation, the second death is presented as the eternal death that will be the portion of all those who have rejected Christ as Savior and Lord (Revelation 20:6, 14). Those who are raised in the first resurrection at the second coming of Jesus, and the believers who are taken to heaven without seeing death will never suffer the second death.

Relevance: There are many today who, like the believers in the period of Smyrna, are materially very poor, but spiritually very rich. They may have to suffer for their faith, but if they are faithful Jesus will give them eternal life with Him in glory. Are you willing to be faithful unto death (first death; Revelation 2:10), so that you will not be hurt by the second death?

III. The Message To Pergamum

Pergamum represents a proud church that is permeated with apostasy and worldliness. This is the period of Church History from A.D. 313 to the rise of the medieval Papacy (A.D. 538).

The Word

7. How did Christ commend the church in the period of Pergamum? Revelation 2:13.
8. What rebuke and warnings were given to Pergamum? Revelation 2:14-16.
9. What promises did Jesus give to the overcomer in Pergamum? Revelation 2:17.

Explanation: The name Pergamum means "citadel", "acropolis." This was a period of pride in cathedrals, and in new philosophical doctrines. In this period of church history (A.D. 313-538) there was progressive apostasy and divergence from pure apostolic Christianity. False doctrine crept into the church. Since persecution had largely ceased and the imperial government favored Christianity, it became popular to be a Christian. The world walked into the church. Satan was establishing his throne right in the midst of the professed Christian church. Antipas (verse 13) may have been an individual who resisted the trend, or he may be used here as a symbol of those who were persecuted for their opposition to the rising power of Caesaro-papism.

The members of the church who practiced the sins of Balaam in this period are referred to as Nicolaitans (Greek of verses 14-15). Balaam's sins were covetousness, hypocrisy, idolatry, and immorality (See Numbers 22-24; 25:1-2; 31:8, 16; Jude 11). Although we are not told specifically why these hypocritical Christians were called Nicolaitans, we are given clear indications in Scripture of their lifestyle.

The three promises to the overcomer are very encouraging. The hidden manna is a symbol of Christ (Exodus 16:32-34; John 6:27-63). Fellowship with Christ for eternity is the joy of the overcoming Christian. A white stone was given by jurors in ancient court trials to indicate a vote for the accused to be acquitted. A black stone meant condemnation. Christ will give final eternal acquittal for His forgiven people in the pre-Advent investigative judgment (See Daniel 7:9-14; Matthew 22:11-14; Revelation 19:7-8). The new name is the symbol of a new character (Compare Isaiah 62:2; 65:15; 1 John 3:2). The faithful are made like Jesus in character because they are given His righteousness by the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:9-10).

Relevance: The danger today, as in the period represented by Pergamum, is that the Christian church will become a popular club where human pride and passion are freely ventilated. To claim the name of Christ while living like the world is to identify oneself with the Nicolaitans. Prosperity and worldly favor have always been a great danger to the spirituality of the church. It is the character of Jesus that we should seek, His approval, and the indwelling of His Spirit.

IV. The Message To Thyatira

The established Christian Church in the Middle Ages was doctrinally and spiritually polluted and perverse. Pagan philosophy and religion had become so intermingled with Christianity that the pure apostolic faith was largely lost sight of. This period, from the official rise of the papacy in A.D. 538, when Justinian recognized the Pope as head of all the eastern and western churches, to the Reformation of the sixteenth century (commencing in 1517), was a period of increasing spiritual darkness, intolerance of Christians by other professed Christians, and adherence to modes of belief that were totally foreign to anything taught by Jesus Christ.

The Word

10. What commendation did Christ have for faithful believers in this medieval period? Revelation 2:19.
11. How was the falsehood and impurity of the church represented in the message to Thyatira? Revelation 2:20-23.
12. What promises and reassurances did Christ give to the faithful minority in this period? Revelation 2:24-27.

Explanation: The name "Thyatira" means "sweet savor of labor," "sacrifice of contrition." There were some faithful ones in the Middle Ages who refused to bow to the doctrinal and moral perversions of the established church. They were often violently persecuted for their faith. Millions lost their lives because they refused to accept the dictates of a monarchical-type church government. Jezebel, the pagan wife of the apostate King Ahab, is a fitting symbol of the apostate established church in the Middle Ages. (Compare Revelation 17:1-6, 15-18). The true Christian overcomer was promised power over the nations because at the second coming of the Lord the unfaithful nations of the world will be destroyed (Revelation 19:11-16; 17:14). Then during the 1,000 years when God's people are in heaven, they will sit in judgment, examining the records of those who rejected Christ (See Revelation 20:1-4; 1 Corinthians 6:2-3). God's people are identified with Christ who is the true Ruler and Judge of the ungodly nations of the earth.

The overcomer is also given "the morning star" (Revelation 2:28). Jesus is the "bright morning star" (Revelation 22:16; compare 2 Peter 1:19). Nothing is more thrilling to the Christian believer than to be given eternal life with Christ.

Relevance: Jesus opposed human rulership in the Christian church (Mark 10:42-45). When man exalts himself to the level of Christ and claims to be able to declare doctrine, forgive sins, and condemn dissenters he destroys the very spirit of the Christian church. Only as we have mutual respect for one another's gifts and faithfully cherish the loving tolerance of Jesus can we have a church that measures up to the divine intention.

V. The Church Of Sardis

The post-Reformation church (mid-sixteenth century to the late eighteenth century) degenerated from the vital spirituality of the reformers to the stultifying formalism of eighteenth-century Protestantism. If it had not been for such great revivalists as John Wesley and George Whitefield, for example, eighteenth-century Englishmen might never have heard the pure message of salvation by faith in Christ.

The Word

13. What was wrong with the church in this period? Revelation 3:1-3.
14. Who were commended in Sardis? Why? Revelation 3:4.
15. What wonderful assurance was given to the victorious Christian in this period? Revelation 3:5.

Explanation: The meaning of the name "Sardis" is "that which remains" or "the escape of the remnant." Although most in the period of Sardis were not born-again Christians, there were a few who were. Christ made it very plain that He wanted their works to be perfect (verse 2). Perfect works are those that are wrought by faith (Romans 14:23). God knows that everything done by fallen human beings will be tinged with human imperfection. But that does not mean that all our works are sin. Born-again Christians do works that are acceptable to God (1 John 2:29; 3:7). This is what Jesus meant by perfect works. As long as He lives within by the Holy Spirit, the works of the believer are acceptable to heaven (Galatians 2:20). The born-again Christian is clothed with the righteousness of Christ, given to him by the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:9-10). These are the white garments spoken of in Revelation 3:5. Such a Spirit-filled believer has his name retained in the book of life in the pre-advent judgment. (Compare Daniel 12:1-2; 7:9-14). Others who have lost their born-again relationship with Christ, and whose works are not dictated by faith, have their names taken out of the book of life in the pre-advent judgment.

Relevance: To be judged worthy to have our names kept in the book of life, and so to have eternal life with Christ, we need a renewal of our relationship with Him every day. The saints are clothed with white robes (Revelation 19:7-8). They are daily recipients of righteousness by the Holy Spirit. In that sense, Jesus lives in their hearts (John 14:16-18), and no power on earth or in hell can destroy their faith. The message to Sardis is a message of victory over sin by a heart relationship with Jesus Christ. Only those enjoying that relationship, with its consequent victory, will have eternal fellowship with the Lord.

VI. The Message To Philadelphia

After the French Revolution in the late eighteenth century, there was a great missionary outreach in various parts of the world. New study of the Scriptures led many interpreters in Europe and America to the conclusion that the coming of the Lord was near. The true Gospel, which had been veiled in some countries for centuries, was preached with new fervor and effectiveness. Thousands of people responded by accepting Christ as Lord and Savior.

The Word

16. What did Jesus say He had set before believers in the period represented by Philadelphia? Revelation 3:7-8 (first part).
17. What commendation and reassurance did the Lord give to this church? Revelation 3:8-11.
18. What promises were given to the overcomer in this period? Revelation 3:12.

Explanation: The name "Philadelphia" means "brotherly love." This was a period in which Christians showed great concern for others. The open door (Revelation 3:8) has two applications: (1) to the continuing mediatorial ministry of Jesus in the heavenly sanctuary, by which the sins of believers could be forgiven; (2) the beginning of the pre-advent investigative judgment which occurred at the end of the period of Philadelphia (1844). Daniel 7:9-14; 8:14 speak of this judgment in heaven as an examination of the books of record in heaven, associated with the spiritual purification of God's people on earth. (Compare Daniel 12:1; Revelation 19:7-8). In 1844 the exclusively mediatorial, Holy Place ministry of Christ, our High Priest, was replaced by Most Holy Place ministry, involving both mediation and judgment. 1844 marked the beginning of the antitypical Day of Atonement. The 10th day of the 7th month, the Jewish Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16) symbolized the great pre-advent judgment day, from 1844 to the close of probation just prior to the second coming of Jesus. Just as the earthly High Priest on the Day of Atonement passed through the door from the Holy to the Most Holy Apartments of the sanctuary (or temple), so at the end of the Philadelphia period Christ began His heavenly Most Holy Place judgment ministry, during which the decision is made whose names can be retained in the book of life and whose removed.

The church in the period of Philadelphia was a pure, zealous church, faithful in lifestyle and earnest in outreach to the world. This is why Jesus commended the members so warmly.

The overcomer was promised that he would be "a pillar in the temple of God" (Revelation 3:12). This metaphor means that the believer will be one of God's established saints for eternity. (Compare 1 Timothy 3:15; Galatians 2:9). The name of God written upon the overcomer means that he has received the gift of the character of God by the Holy Spirit. When the end-time believers are sealed they have the name of God written upon them, in the sense that His righteousness is bestowed upon them. (See Acts 3:16; Revelation 7:3; 14:1; 22:4). The name of the New Jerusalem written upon the overcomer indicates that his destination is heaven. The New Jerusalem is a symbol of the new covenant experience of righteousness by faith in Christ (Galatians 4:26). Jerusalem is to be the eternal home of the saved, continually enjoying holiness by faith in Jesus. (See Revelation 21:2, 9-10).

Christ's name written upon the overcomer, like the name of God, symbolizes that the believer has received the character of Jesus, by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon him (Titus 3:5-7).

Relevance: The message to Philadelphia is wonderfully relevant to our situation today. There is a great need in our world for Christians who, like the believers in the period of Philadelphia, will lovingly, and earnestly reach out to win the hearts of people everywhere to Christ. The door of mercy still stands open, forgiveness and acceptance with God are readily available, and people need to hear the message of Christ's soon coming to finally deliver those who respond to His love.

VII. The Church Of Laodicea

The last-day church is depicted as Laodicea. The word "Laodicea" means literally "a righteous people." It may also mean "judging the people." This is the time of the pre-advent investigative judgment commencing in 1844 and ending when the heavenly verdict is finally declared at the close of probation (Revelation 22:11).

The Word

19. What stern rebuke is given to the last-day church? Revelation 3:18-19.
20. What special counsel is given to the church in this period? Revelation 3:18-19.
21. What promises and reassurances are given to those who respond to the love of Christ in this end-time period of history? Revelation 3:20-21.

Explanation: God is disgusted with the lukewarm unconcern of professed believers in this final period of history. Just before Jesus comes the message of love and salvation through Christ is to go to the entire world (Matthew 24:14). But many believers are so involved in their own enterprises that the saving work of Christ takes second or third place in their lifestyle.

The "gold tried in the fire" (verse 18) is faith that works by love. (See Galatians 5:6; 1 Peter 1:7-9, 18-19; James 2:2-5). The "white raiment" symbolizes the righteousness of Jesus given by the Holy Spirit. (See Revelation 19:7-8; Romans 8:9-10). The "eyesalve" is that spiritual insight by which we can discern between right and wrong, truth and error. This is imparted as we receive the Holy Spirit's interpretation of the word of God. (See Psalm 119:11, 18, 105; Ephesians 1:18; 3:16-19).

The wonderful assurance is that Jesus will come and dwell within our hearts by the Holy Spirit if we invite Him (Revelation 3:20). Verse 21 makes it very certain that, by His grace, we can overcome sin as He did. It is this victory in Christ that qualifies us for vindication in the pre-advent judgment and for a place with Christ in His heavenly Kingdom. (Compare Revelation 20:4).

Relevance: There is great victory over sin available to those who accept Christ's counsel to the Laodiceans. You can have the constant fellowship of Jesus in this life and the assurance of a part in His Kingdom for eternity.

Will you open the door of your heart now and allow Jesus to come in as your indwelling Guest?

Review Questions

1. True or False
 - a. The prophecy of the seven churches only had significance in the first century of the Christian era.
 - b. The message to every church applies just as much to us today.
 - c. We are living today in the period represented by Laodicea.
 - d. Christ's rebuke is evidence of His love.
2. Discuss: Since overcoming sin is mentioned so many times in the messages to the seven churches, we can conclude that at every stage of history Christ wanted His people to spiritual victory. The message to Laodicea indicates that this is still the goal that God sets before us.