

Chapter 3
Letters to The Seven Churches
(Rev. 2:1 - 3:22)

The Letter to Ephesus

2:1-3 “To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands: I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.”

It is Jesus who instructs John to write this letter to the church in Ephesus. Thus it is Jesus who is the real author of this letter; every word of this letter is His. John was merely the penman, writing the words which Jesus told him to write.

Ephesus was one of the major cities in Asia Minor, a flourishing and prosperous city; and in it was the temple of Diana, termed one of the seven wonders of the world. But it was by no means a model city. There was much idolatry in it, and prostitution was widely practiced.

It was in this wealthy, but pagan, city that the Apostle Paul, on one of his missionary journeys, founded a Christian congregation. Paul spent quite some time in Ephesus, and it must be said that his ministry there was greatly blessed. He had a great love for the Ephesian Christians; and they, in turn, dearly loved the apostle. When Paul left, Timothy became the pastor of this congregation and in later years the Apostle John also ministered to this church. Who the pastor was at the time that Revelation was written we do not know. Nor is it necessary that we know. Jesus simply directs John to address this letter to the angel, or pastor, of the church in Ephesus.

Then Jesus proceeds to identify Himself once again by saying: “These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands.”

In the previous chapter Jesus Himself explains that the seven stars are the seven angels, or messengers, or pastors of the seven congregations. The fact that Jesus has these pastors “in his right hand” may indicate, on the one hand, that they are

instruments in the hand of the Savior, and that they are used by Him to perform the duties of the pastoral office.

While there is an exceedingly great joy in serving the Lord in the office of the ministry, there is also a tremendous responsibility resting, as it were, on the pastor's shoulders. The Lord has made him responsible for the souls that have been entrusted to his care. What the Apostle Paul said in his farewell message to the elders of the church in Ephesus is applicable to all pastors: "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood" (Acts 20:28). We pray that all members of Christian congregations will realize the great responsibility included in the Office of the Holy Ministry and that every day they will remember their pastors in their prayers.

On the other hand, the fact that Jesus has these pastors "in his right hand" certainly indicates also that they enjoy His protection. In the daily performance of their God-given duties they can have the comforting assurance that Jesus will guard and keep them, and that no one shall be able to pluck them out of the hand of their Savior. They are under His special care and guidance.

The Lord Jesus is concerned also about His congregations. His walking "among the seven golden lampstands" ought to impress upon us once again that in an intimate manner He is present with His congregations. He observes everything; nothing can escape His omniscient eye. He observes what they are doing and how they are doing it. There may be times when He sees much that is amiss. But let's remember also that He walks in the midst of His churches to help them, to guard them, and to guide them, lest their light flicker and die.

For this church in Ephesus Jesus, first of all, has some words of commendation. He says: "I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance." As we have just stated, nothing is hidden from the omniscient Jesus. He was aware of their deeds of faith; He was aware of their hard labors of love; and He was aware of their patient endurance and perseverance, which was so evident in their sufferings and in the persecutions which they experienced because of their loyalty to Him and His saving Gospel. The Savior also was aware that in all the hardships which they endured for His name's sake and in all the labors which they performed, they had not grown weary.

Especially does our Lord commend the members of this Ephesian congregation for their vigilance and holy zeal, which would not tolerate wicked men and their false doctrines. It is quite evident that these "wicked men" referred to were the men who

falsely claimed to be apostles of Jesus Christ, We are told that the Ephesians tested these men, thus following the instructions which John had previously given in one of his Epistles: “Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1). And having tested these men, - no doubt, on the basis of Sacred Scripture - they found them to be false and exposed their deceit.

What a lesson for the church of today, especially in this ecumenical age in which we are living! The emphasis today seems to be on union for the sake of fellowship instead of union on the basis of God’s Word, Now, while it is not our intention to degrade the members of any particular church or denomination it nevertheless is our duty to point out and condemn false doctrines and false practices. That we must do! Yes, it is the duty of every congregation to examine and test the doctrines that are taught, to see whether they are of God, And if these doctrines are not founded upon the Word of God, they simply cannot be tolerated.

Nor can we have unionistic fellowship with those who tolerate and/or teach false doctrine. The admonition which Paul gave to the Christians in Rome is very much in place today: “I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people” (Rom. 16:17-18).

2:4-6 “Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. ”

Having spoken words of commendation and praise, Jesus now utters words of warning and sharp rebuke. He severely criticizes them for having forsaken their first love.

At the time that Revelation was written, the Christian congregation in Ephesus had been in existence for nearly half a century. In the course of the years, they evidently had begun to take too much for granted. God’s Law, - as far as they were concerned, - apparently had lost much of its meaning and purpose. Simultaneously, the precious Gospel of Christ, - as far as they were concerned, - apparently had lost much of its sweetness.

As a result, they no longer had that burning love and that fiery zeal for the Lord and the work of the Lord that had been so very evident in the early years of their existence as a Christian congregation. Oh, they were still active; they still did a lot of work; they still were concerned about purity of doctrine; they still were willing to endure hardships and persecutions. But one ingredient was missing: that first ardent and burning love. And without love, everything else loses its true value and fades away into insignificance. How beautifully and how forcefully this very truth is emphasized by the Apostle Paul in 1 Cor. 13, the great chapter on love!

What happened in the Ephesian congregation has been repeated many times since; and it still is happening today, especially in congregations that have been in existence for two or more generations. How easy it is to become more or less self-sufficient and to take God and His Word and His promises and His blessings for granted! How easy it is to slip into a kind of “mechanical” Christianity which, in turn, can lead to hypocrisy and ultimate spiritual death! Oh, there still may be much activity, many organizations and societies, many meetings, all kinds of programs, as well as a variety of plans that can be adopted to raise the funds necessary for carrying on the work of the church. But what is the motivation, the driving and compelling force, behind all this activity? Is it really a genuine and burning love for Christ and His cause?

Because that “first love” no longer was evident in the Ephesian congregation, Jesus exhorted the members of this parish to “remember the height” from which they had fallen. What a “mountain-top” experience their conversion had been! What love and joy, what peace and strength had abounded in their hearts and lives! From those heights they had fallen.

So the ever-loving and ever-seeking Savior exhorts them to repent and to bring forth the fruits of genuine repentance by doing the things they did at first. Yes, they must, by the power of God’s Holy Spirit, attempt to regain their first zeal; and they must labor as lovingly, and they must pray as earnestly, and they must watch as diligently as they did at the first.

Failure to repent would prove disastrous. Jesus says: “If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.” In other words, refusal to heed the admonition of Jesus would result in the light of the Gospel being taken from their midst; and they would cease to exist as a Christian congregation.

What a frightening thought! Yet this very thing has happened time and again.

Congregations that once stood firmly on God's Word became lax and indifferent; they permitted modernism, liberalism, and rationalism to reign in their midst; and today they are no longer in possession of the saving Gospel of Christ and can no longer be regarded as Christian congregations. God grant that our love for Christ and His Kingdom may never lose its fervor, but increase from day to day!

Having exhorted them to repent and return to their first love, Jesus speaks one more word of commendation to the Ephesian Christians, saying: "But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate."

The Nicolaitans were a sect who taught that since Christ had freed them from the curse of the Law, they now were at liberty to practice sensuality and immorality at will. Jesus says that He hates the practices of these Nicolaitans, and He praises the Ephesian Christians for likewise hating the immoral acts and deeds of these libertines.

The Lord Jesus cannot bear impurity and immorality in His church; and as His followers and disciples, we certainly cannot participate in the many shameful sexual sins that are so prevalent in our day, nor can we condone them. In this world of our day, which resembles the Sodom and Gomorrah of old, it is absolutely mandatory that we, the members of Christian congregations, flee all forms of fornication and, by the power of God's Holy Spirit, keep ourselves pure. 4

2:7 : He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God. "

Jesus now gives the admonition, - as He does also in the six succeeding letters, - that whoever has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches, implying thereby that the contents of these seven letters are intended for Christians of all generations and that they are given by inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus closes this letter with a precious promise: "To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God."

Going back to Genesis, we read that in the middle of the Garden of Eden was the tree of life. We do not know much about this tree except what is written in Gen. 3:22-24: "And the Lord God said, 'The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever.' So the Lord God banished him from the Garden

of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.”

From this we conclude that the words of Jesus, - “I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God,” - are a promise of everlasting life. And this promise is given to all who through the power of faith overcome the devil, the world and their own sinful flesh. Observe, however, that Jesus says: “I will give the right to eat from the tree of life.” Eternal life will not be a reward of merit, but a free gift of His grace. redeemed by Christ, we Christians can look forward to the heavenly Paradise, where there shall be unending life and fulness of joy forevermore.

The Letter to Smyrna

2:8 “To the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again.”

Like Ephesus, so Smyrna, too, was a wealthy city and possessed a thriving seaport. It also had a large stadium and was a center of emperor worship.

In this letter Jesus describes Himself as “the First and the Last,” the great Eternal One, who is from everlasting to everlasting. This definitely is a divine attribute and identifies Him as the Son of God, true God together with the Father and the Holy Spirit. But He is also true man, “who died and came to life again.” Indeed, He is the God-Man, the crucified and risen Redeemer.

2:9 “I know your afflictions and your poverty - yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. ”

As the omniscient Lord, He was aware of the afflictions and tribulations which the members of this congregation had to endure. The hostile, unbelieving Jews slandered these Christians in Smyrna, falsely accused them before the Roman authorities, and thus caused them to lose their properties and earthly possessions. In addition to having their properties confiscated, these Christians very often also lost their jobs. As a result, they were extremely poor in earthly possessions and goods. 5

And yet, Jesus tells them, “You are rich.” We are reminded of the paradox in 2 Cor. 6:10: “Having nothing, and yet possessing everything.” They may not have had

much as far as earthly goods are concerned, but they had Jesus. And having Jesus, they possessed everything; yes, in Jesus they had all that they needed for time and for eternity.

What a forceful reminder to us Christians even today! Have we ever made an honest estimate of the true values in our life. The Apostle Paul did, and by inspiration of the Holy Spirit he wrote: “Whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ - the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead” (Phil. 3:7-11). Those were the true, indispensable values in Paul’s life. May they also be ours; for Jesus has said: “What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?” (Matt. 16:26).

Jesus was well aware of the evil deeds and words “of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.” These racial Jews were proud of their traditions, proud of their synagogue, proud of their ancestry. But they stubbornly refused to accept Jesus as the Son of God; they refused to acknowledge Him as their Savior and Redeemer. Consequently, Jesus says that they are not Jews in the true sense of the word; for God’s true Israel consists of all true believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. That is why Jesus calls these unbelieving Jews “a synagogue of Satan.” Jesus made a similar remark during the days of His earthly ministry. When the unbelieving Jews on a certain occasion claimed to be the children of Abraham and asserted that God was their Father, Jesus said to them: “If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now am here. I have not come on my own; but he sent me. Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say. You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:42-44).

“Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked” (Gal. 6:7). Not all who claim God as their Father are truly His children. Only they who in true faith have embraced Christ Jesus as their only Savior from sin, death and hell have a right to call God their “Father.” Scripture very emphatically asserts: “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves

with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Gal. 3:26-29).

2:10 "Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life."

The Lord Jesus does not promise the Christians in Smyrna an immediate relief from their tribulations. On the contrary, He tells them that they can expect further persecutions. He says: "I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days."

Although these persecutions came from the slandering Jews, who had aligned themselves with the Roman officials, yet Jesus says that the devil was the real instigator. The purpose of this imprisonment, as well as other forms of persecution, was "to test" these Christians. On our journey through life, it is important for us to remember that while God frequently permits the devil and his allies to tempt us to sin, yet God's purpose in permitting this is to test and to purify and to strengthen our faith.

Accordingly, Jesus tells the members of this congregation not to be afraid of what they were about to suffer. (And incidentally, the next decades brought many severe persecutions to the believers in this part of Asia Minor.) In this connection we are reminded of the words of St. Peter: "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you." (1 Peter 4:12). These trials and persecutions were to be expected.

Yet Jesus says: "Do not be afraid." God would be their Refuge and Strength, even as He also is our Refuge and Strength, so that with the Psalmist we can say at all times: "The Lord is my light and my salvation - whom shall I fear? The Lord is the Stronghold of my life - of whom shall I be afraid?" (Psalm 27:1).

The Lord gives two reasons why those persecuted Christians were not to be afraid. First of all, He says that these persecutions would endure only for ten days. The phrase "ten days" is not to be taken literally. Rather, it is symbolic, indicating a relatively short period of time, and one definitely limited by God, thus assuring them and also us that God will not permit His own to be tempted or tested beyond what they are able to bear (1 Cor. 10:13).

In the second place, Jesus encourages these Christians with the golden promise: “Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of Life.” Our Lord will not permit faithfulness in the face of trial and persecution to go unrewarded. He who remains Loyal to Jesus and His Gospel, - even though this involves going into death for His name's sake, - will be the recipient of the crown of life. As previously mentioned, Smyrna was famous also for its large stadium, where athletic contests were held and the victors were rewarded with a garland or wreath. So every Christian who emerges victorious from the hard struggle and battle and remains loyal to his Savior will be granted a crown of life - eternal life itself. Notice, however, that Jesus says this will be a gift. It will not be a reward of merit, but a reward of grace. In other words, it will not be something which we will have earned, but it will be a free gift of God's grace and love. This beautiful promise seems to echo what James had written in his Epistle: “Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.” (James 1:12).

2:11 “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.”

The believer will not be hurt by “the second death,” which is eternal death in hell, Let's put it this way: When an unbeliever dies, he goes through temporal death (the first death) into eternal damnation (the second death). However, the believer is not harmed at all by the second death. He goes through temporal death into eternal life. Whoever has an ear, let him hear, and let him take this message to heart; for this message, too, is given by inspiration of God's Holy Spirit.

The Letter To Pergamum

2:12 “To the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword.”

Pergamum, an important city in the ancient world, was flooded with idolatry and idolatrous practices. Numerous temples had been erected and dedicated to Roman gods. This city was also the center of emperor worship, - and, by the way, emperor worship in Pergamum was not optional; it was demanded. The other extremely popular religious cult in Pergamum was the cult that promoted the worship of Askelepias, the god of healing. In this stronghold of Satan, a Christian congregation had been founded; and it is to this congregation that the following letter is written.

In this letter Jesus identifies Himself as the One “who has the sharp, double-edged sword.” On the one hand, this sword symbolizes the penetrating power of the Word of God, which vehemently condemns all forms of idol-worship. On the other hand, this sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God, also symbolizes authority, reminding the Christians in this city that all temporal rulers and emperors are subject to the power and rule of Christ and that therefore it is mandatory to “obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29); Jesus stressed these same truths during the days of His earthly sojourn, saying: “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matt. 10:28).

2:13 “I know where you live - where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city – where Satan lives.”

Because Satan had been so successful and so influential in maintaining his heathenish cults in Pergamum, the city is termed by Jesus as the place “where Satan has his throne.” Jesus knew that it was not easy for the Christians to live in a city flooded with so much vice and filled with so many pressures and temptations.

Therefore Jesus commends these believers for adhering to Christ’s name in the midst of all this abominable idolatry and for remaining loyal in the confession of their faith. Even the martyrdom of Antipas, who was put to death in their city, did not result in a mass falling away on the part of the Christians; it did not cause them to deny their faith or to renounce the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Who this Antipas was, we do not know. Jesus calls him “my faithful witness;” and that is sufficient. A greater tribute could not be paid! In these closing days of the world’s history, when evil is rampant and sins of all kinds abound, may God also help us to be faithful witnesses, boldly and fearlessly testifying to the truth of the Gospel and holding high the banner of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ!

2:14-15 “Nevertheless, I have a few things against you. You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality. Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. ”

Though Jesus had a word of commendation for this congregation as a whole,

yet He had to rebuke its members sharply, because they were tolerating in their fellowship a group of people who held “to the teaching of Balaam.” 8

To understand what the teaching, or doctrine, of Balaam is, it will be necessary to review the accounts as they are recorded in Num. 22-25 and 31:8-16. To summarize briefly, Balak, the king of the Moabites, had hired Balaam, an unfaithful prophet of the Lord, to curse the children of Israel and thus prevent them from overrunning the land of Moab. Three times Balaam tried to curse the children of Israel; three times the Lord saw to it that Balaam was thwarted in his attempts. As a last recourse, Balaam induced Balak to place a stumbling block, or pitfall, before the Israelites by having the women of Moab lure the Israelites to sin against God by participating in the immorality and the idolatry which characterized the Moabite worship. That, briefly stated, is the “teaching of Balaam.” In the course of the years, adherents to the doctrine of Balaam included any and all who compromised with the idolatry and the immorality that accompanied pagan worship.

It seems that certain members in this church at Pergamum deliberately participated in the heathen sacrificial meals as well as in the sexual sins that were a part of the worship services of the heathen. What is so sad, is that these compromising members saw nothing wrong in following such a course; even more pathetic, however, is the fact that the congregation tolerated these erring members in its fellowship. In addition, the congregation also tolerated in its midst those who held to the teaching of the Nicolaitans, a sect that sought to seduce the local Christians by saying that their Christian freedom allowed them to participate in immorality and sexual sins.

Jesus rebukes this congregation because it had tolerated these errorists and had taken no action to exclude, or expel, them from its fellowship. What a lesson for the Church of today! Although the church has no power to inflict corporal punishment upon those who are guilty of heresy and immorality, yet it does have the power to exercise discipline against them and, if necessary, ultimately to exclude them from its fellowship. Failure to act accordingly is displeasing to our Lord.

2:16 “Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth,”

Because this congregation had failed to exercise Christian discipline upon the erring members in its midst, Jesus calls upon the entire congregation to repent. Failure to do so will bring upon it the judgment of the Lord. Jesus says that He will fight against these erring members with the sword of His mouth, that is, He will fight

against them with His Word. And what an extremely sharp and powerful weapon is the Word of God! The Psalmist writes: “He lifts his voice, the earth melts” (Ps. 46:6). Let all opponents of the Lord beware! “It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb. 10:31).

2:17 “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it.”

Having exhorted all hearers to heed what the Spirit says to the churches, Jesus gives some beautiful promises to those who overcome and remain steadfast. He says: “To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna.”

Manna was the bread which God provided for the Children of Israel during their wandering in the wilderness. In the days of His earthly ministry, Jesus identified Himself as the true bread from heaven, saying: “The Bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world ...I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never go thirsty” (John 6:33, 35). It is called “hidden manna,” perhaps, because it is hidden from the rest of the world. Only the believers are the recipients of Christ and all His blessings through Word and Sacrament. In heaven they shall enjoy His glory in all its fullness. That is something that the unbelievers do not experience. They really do not know the satisfaction that all believers receive through Christ, the Bread of Life.

Then Jesus continues by saying; “I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it.” In the ancient Greek courts, the jurors would use stones, or pebbles, in casting their ballots. A black stone cast into a container would be a vote for “Guilty;” and a white stone would be a vote for “Not guilty.” So when Jesus says, “I will give him a white stone” He in effect says: “I declare you not guilty; you are forgiven; you are acquitted.” “him a white stone,” He, in effect, says: “I declare you not guilty; you are forgiven; you are acquitted.”

The “new name” written on this stone implies that there is a change in the heart and life of a person who by faith has received the forgiveness of all his sins. Scripture says: “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” (2 Cor. 5:17). True believers become members of God’s family, - God’s adopted sons and daughters, - and they are heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ; and as such, they look forward to the joy and bliss in heaven. That is something that the unbelievers have not experienced. To have the certainty and the joy

of being a forgiven child of God, - that, in effect, is “having a new name,” - and that is an experience known only to him who has received it.

The Letter To Thyatira

2:18 “To the angel of the church in Thyatira write: These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze.”

Though not classed among the major cities in Asia Minor, Thyatira nevertheless was a prosperous city in which so-called trade guilds were extremely popular. Each trade and profession seems to have had its own guild; and each guild, in turn, had its own god. To hold a job, a person was expected to join a guild and participate in the activities of the guild, which were not only idolatrous, but often immoral as well. You can readily see what a problem this presented for the Christians in this city.

In this letter, Jesus identifies Himself as “the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze.”

The fact that His eyes are like blazing fire signifies His piercing and penetrating insight into all persons and things. He is the righteous, omniscient Judge, from whom nothing can be hidden, and whose enemies may well expect a terrible, but just, punishment. Whenever I think of the Son of God, having eyes like blazing fire, I am reminded of the words which Peter spoke to Jesus: “Lord, you know all things” (John 21:17). Yes, “Thou, God, seest me!” It is impossible to conceal anything from our Lord. He knows all and sees all. On our journey through life, it is important always to remember this solemn truth!

That His feet are “like burnished bronze” seems to indicate that, as He judges with perfect wisdom, so He acts with perfect strength and has everything under control. Those who resist Him and stubbornly rebel against Him had better beware. These feet of “burnished bronze” will ultimately crush them!

2:19 “I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first.”

Wherever and whenever it is possible, the Lord Jesus is always ready and willing to speak words of commendation to His faithful followers. So here, He commends the Christians in Thyatira for their works and services of love, as well as for their patient endurance in persecution, all of which were the fruits of their faith. In

these works of faith and love they had continued to make steady progress, so that they now were doing more than they did at first.

That is the way it should be. It should be the desire and ambition of Christians that their works and deeds of love become better and greater day by day, and best at last. That is in accord with Scripture. In Gal. 6:9-10 we are encouraged: “Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers,” And in 1 Thess. 4:1 St. Paul says: “Finally, brothers, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more.” That is the growth in sanctification that the Lord expects of us.

2:20-21 “Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling.”

In addition to the words of commendation, however, Jesus also had words of rebuke and caution for the members of this congregation. He says: “You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess.” In all likelihood, “Jezebel” was not the real name of this false prophetess, but was rather a name applied to her because in so many ways she resembled the historical Jezebel of old.

In the Old Testament, Jezebel, the wicked wife of King Ahab, seduced the children of Israel to worship the hideous idol Baal and to participate in the lewd and immoral acts associated with this form of idol-worship. In the light of that historical fact, we can see very readily why the name “Jezebel” was a fitting name for this false prophetess in Thyatira. She was a Jezebel because of the false doctrines she was disseminating and the immoral acts that she was advocating.

Foremost among the false teachings that she proclaimed was the idea that carnal desires could be overcome only by surrendering to the lusts of the flesh. In other words, if you want to overcome them, you must take part in them; to fight immorality, you must first of all experience it. Through the proclamation of such false teachings, this Jezebel succeeded in seducing some of the members of this Christian congregation into a life of idolatry and sexual vices, or, as Jesus states it in this letter: “By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols.” Indeed, some of the most terrible and shameful deeds of

darkness were committed with the explanation that this was Christianity in an advanced state.

The sad part of it was that all of this was tolerated by the congregation. The members were aware of this corruption in their midst, but they did nothing about it. This indifference on their part was very displeasing to our Lord.

Jesus says that He had already given this Jezebel time for repentance, but she was unwilling to repent. Repentance is necessary if a sinner is to escape perdition. Time and again do we hear the call in Scripture: “Repent!” How many there are, however, who like Jezebel, turn a deaf ear to this urgent plea! But beware! There is an old proverb which says: “The mills of God grind slowly, but they grind exceedingly fine.” Woe to the person who toys around with God’s patience and grace! Finally God will say: “This is it.” Then comes judgment. And that judgment can be very swift and very severe.

2:22-23 “So I will cast her on a bed of suffering, and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely, unless they repent of their ways. I will strike her children dead. Then all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds. ”

Since Jezebel refused to repent, she would have to endure punishment from the Lord. She would be punished with terrible sickness and suffering. Furthermore, unless they would repent, all who had committed adultery with her, all who had accepted and practiced her teachings of immorality, would likewise experience the power of the Lord’s wrath and would have to suffer intensely. Yes, says Jesus, “I will strike her children dead.” The term “children” can refer either to Jezebel’s offspring, or it can mean her followers; and the word “dead” can include both temporal and eternal death. At any rate, the immoral Jezebel and all who shared in her immorality and committed adultery with her would be afflicted with intense sickness and suffering which, in the absence of true repentance, would lead to temporal death and eternal damnation.

We might well note that even today terrible illnesses and venereal diseases usually follow in the wake of immoral deeds and sinful sexual acts. Especially in this present decade, we are witnessing perhaps the most severe consequences of immorality in the history of our modern civilization; and the prediction is that it is going to get much, much worse. I am speaking of the disease known as AIDS. People are demanding a remedy or cure; but at the same time, they refuse to give up their immorality and sexual promiscuity. Accordingly, they will have to suffer the

consequences.

The punishment which the Lord threatened to inflict on the adulterous and impenitent members in the church at Thyatira was to serve as a lesson and a warning to all congregations. Jesus says: “Then all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds.”

Still today Christ searches the hearts and minds. No sin can be hidden from Him. We only deceive ourselves if we think that we can fool God. He sees and knows all; and He will not tolerate sin or sinful practices. Emphatically does He remind us: “I will repay each of you according to your deeds.” In this connection, we recall the words in Gal. 6:7-8: “Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life.”

2:24-25 “Now I say to the rest of you in Thyatira, to you who do not hold to her teaching and have not learned Satan’s so-called deep secrets (I will not impose any other burden on you): Only hold on to what you have until I come. ”

Upon those in Thyatira who did not adopt the false teaching of Jezebel, even though they had failed to deal with this corruption in their midst, - and had not learned the so-called deep secrets of Satan, the Lord would not impose any other burden or law except this: “Hold on to what you have until I come.”

When Jesus says that they had “not learned Satan’s so-called deep secrets,” what does He mean? We believe that this refers to any and all religious teachings that are not founded upon the Word of God, but have really had their origin in hell. Here in Thyatira it may particularly have been the Satanic, hell-born doctrine that an individual must personally participate in sensuality and immorality in order to have a real understanding of these sins. Jezebel, who claimed that she was a prophetess, may have said that these teachings which she advocated were the “deep things of God,” when in reality they were “the depths of Satan.”

Therefore Jesus encouraged these Christians: “Hold on to what you have until I come.” They had the pure Gospel and all the blessings that come through acceptance of the Gospel: faith, love, patience, and the certain hope of eternal salvation. Now, says Jesus, “hold on to what you have.”

By God's grace we, too, enjoy these blessings of the Gospel. Let us not casually take them for granted, but let us truly realize and appreciate their immense value. Enemies there are who will seek to deprive us of those blessings; but by the power of God's Holy Spirit, let us to the end hold on to what we have!

2:26-29 “To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations - We will rule them with an iron scepter; he will dash them to pieces like pottery'- just as I have received authority from my Father, I will also give him the morning star. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. ”

To those who overcome the many and varied assaults of Satan, the world, and their own flesh, and who faithfully carry out the will of their Lord and Savior, Jesus imparts the promise: “I will give authority over the nations - just as I have received authority from my Father.”

In Psalm 2, which is known as a Messianic Psalm, we read: “Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession. You will rule them with an iron scepter; you will dash them to pieces like pottery” (Ps. 2:8-9). This promise was given by the heavenly Father to His only-begotten Son. As it was prophesied that Christ would have unlimited authority over the nations, so Christ now promises that He will make His faithful believers partakers of this power and glory. They will rule with Christ, as St. Paul also asserts: “If we endure, we will also reign with Him” (2 Tim. 2:12). What an honor! What a privilege! What a prospect! How this ought to cheer us and revive us on our journey through life!

Finally, Jesus says: “I will also give him the morning star.” While there is the possibility that the morning star represents the glory of eternity, the brightness of the everlasting life which some day shall be ours, yet we may also think of the morning star as being Christ Himself. In verse 16 of the last chapter of this book Jesus says: “I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star.” What more precious gift could Christ give to us than the gift of Himself!

The Letter To Sardis

3:1 “To the angel of the church in Sardis write: These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. ”

Situated rather comfortably on a high mountain, Sardis, a city of wealth and luxury, at one time had been one of the world's most renowned cities. We have no information pertaining to the founding of the congregation in this city; but we do know that when this letter was written, the congregation here was in a sad state of spiritual decay.

No doubt, that is why Jesus introduces Himself in this letter as the One "who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars." "The seven spirits of God" is a reference to the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from the Father and the Son and who is the Creator and Preserver of spiritual life in the hearts of individuals. "The seven stars," as we have heard previously, are the seven pastors of these seven congregations; and it is their solemn duty to proclaim the Word of God in its truth and purity. If we will bear in mind that conversion, as well as preservation in the saving faith, is solely the work of the Holy Spirit, and if we will bear in mind that the Holy Spirit performs His work through the Gospel, which is preached and proclaimed by men, then we see immediately why Jesus identifies Himself as the One "who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars." The work of the Holy Spirit and the proclamation of the Gospel are closely related. Thus, here in Sardis, the restoration of life to a dead church could be accomplished only by the Spirit of God through the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Although Jesus says to the members of this congregation, "I know your deeds," yet He has no word of commendation for them; for He says immediately: "You have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead."

Human eyes, perhaps, viewed this congregation as being extremely energetic and very much alive, - a real asset to the community and the city. Outwardly, its members appeared to have a real interest in their church and its activities. In brief, the reputation of this congregation seemed to be unblemished. But Jesus, who searches the hearts and minds, viewed this church at Sardis from a different perspective; and His evaluation was: "You are dead!"

They may still have had their worship, but for the most part it had degenerated into mere formalism; they may have "said" their prayers, but they didn't "pray" them; they may have been active in performing many and varied services, but the important ingredient of love was missing; they may have experienced a numerical growth in membership, but spiritual growth was at a stand-still. Thus, while they had the reputation of being alive, in reality they were at the point of death.

As Jesus views His many congregations today, do you suppose that He is always pleased at what He sees? Do you not suppose that quite often He sees areas that are tainted by mere formalism, dead orthodoxy, or even downright hypocrisy? We

wonder how often perhaps He is compelled to say in sadness: “These people honor me with their lips, but their heart is far from me” (Matt. 15.8). With trembling lips we stammer: “Lord, have mercy!” And with confident hope we make the prayer, which St. Paul offered for the Philippian congregation, our own for all Christian congregations of today: “And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ - to the glory and praise of God” (Phil. 1:9-11).

3:2 “Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God.”

In our daily life, it may happen quite often that we are engaged in a type of work which requires constant repetition, - doing the same thing over and over; and this monotony at times may cause us to become drowsy and even to fall asleep. The same is true, spiritually speaking. As we have stated previously, it is easy to become formalistic, or "mechanical." Without intending to become repetitious, permit me to elaborate on just one example. I have nothing against a liturgy or order of worship. However, if the same order is used repeatedly for any length of time, isn't it true that very easily (and sometimes very quickly) we can get into “a rut,” a routine, so that we simply are going through this in a mechanical sort of way, and are not really worshiping God at all? And what is true of the worship service, applies also to all other church-related activities and labors, especially the duty of maintaining constant vigilance against false doctrine. It is so easy to fall into a spiritual slumber!

Since a large portion of the membership in Sardis had more or less succumbed to dead formalism and had become drowsily indifferent, the Savior comes with the earnest admonition: “Wake up!” “Watch!” “Be alert!” There was still a small portion of true Christianity left in the congregation, - but even this was at the point of death. Hence the exhortation: “Strengthen what remains and is about to die.” The situation was grave; there was no time to be lost. It was perhaps now or never!

And Jesus gives the reason for it all when He says: “For I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God.” “Not complete,” - not satisfactory, - that was the indictment! In the eyes of the community, their deeds may have been praiseworthy; but since those deeds were not fruits of a living faith, and since they were not motivated by love and the power of Christ's Gospel, they were incomplete in the sight of God. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews has stated it very directly: “Without faith it is impossible to please God” (Heb. 11:6).

3:3 “Remember therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent, But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.”

“Remember, therefore!” The Savior urges them to turn back the pages of time and to recall how in their early beginnings they had eagerly received and heard the wonderful message of the Gospel. This message they were now once again to “obey;” that is, they were to accept it, believe it, keep it, follow it. And they were to do so in a spirit of genuine repentance, which implied a complete turning away from the indifference and sluggishness in which they had been involved.

Refusal to do so would result in judgment coming upon them; for Jesus says: “But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.” This is not necessarily a reference to the second coming of Christ at the end of the world, but it is a preliminary judgment that would come upon this particular congregation in Sardis. If the slumbering and indifferent members of this church would not heed the Savior’s call to “wake up,” if they would not repent and “obey the Gospel of our Lord Jesus” (2 Thess. 1:8), then He would come to them in a judgment, which would be a most dreadful and terrifying experience for them. Furthermore, Jesus tells them that His coming would be both unexpected and unpredictable.

As the members in Sardis were not to put off repentance, neither should we! Since we do not know the day or hour of Christ’s second coming, also known as the day of judgment, it surely is wise to be prepared at all times. You are familiar with the Parable of the Ten Virgins, related by Jesus and recorded in Matt. 25:1-13. “Five of them were foolish and five were wise. The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps.” When the bridegroom came, the wise virgins were ready and entered with him to the wedding banquet; but the foolish virgins, who were totally unprepared, were denied admission. At the close of this parable, Jesus relates a message that surely ought to be heeded by each and every one of us: “Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour” (Matt. 25:13).

In this connection, we recall also the very appropriate words written in 1 Thess. 5:1-6: “Now, brothers, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, ‘Peace and safety,’ destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. But you, brothers, are not

in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled.”

3:4 “Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy.”

Like an oasis in a barren desert, so here in the church at Sardis was a small, but faithful, remnant, - the few who had not polluted themselves with the sins that prevailed in their congregation. It is significant to note that the Lord Jesus knew them; their names were precious in His sight.

What a comforting truth that is for us on our journey through life! often times we may be inclined to ask: “Are we to believe that God is concerned about us as individuals?” The answer is an emphatic “YES.” In comparison to the world’s population, the true and faithful believers in Christ may indeed be the minority: but the Lord says: “See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands” (Is. 49:16).

And of them Jesus says: “They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy.” White is the color of purity. Having accepted Christ Jesus in true faith, the believers are no longer clothed in the filthy garments of their own righteousness, but are resplendent in the spotless garment of Jesus’ righteousness, - that righteousness which Jesus purchased for them with His tremendous sacrifice on Calvary’s cross. Being thus clothed and adorned, they will walk with Jesus and be with Jesus in the heavenly kingdom throughout eternity. What an honor!

When the Savior says, “for they are worthy,” He does not imply that the believers have earned or deserved this great honor; for no one deserves anything from God except temporal and eternal punishment. This blessing and all other spiritual blessings belong to the believers, not because of any works of righteousness which they have performed, but only and solely because of what Christ has done for them. Let us never lose sight of this important truth! “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no one can boast” (Eph. 2:8).

3:5-6 “He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels, He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

Everyone who overcomes the vicious attacks of the devil, the world and his own sinful flesh will, like all faithful believers, be clothed in white raiment, - the garment of Christ's perfect righteousness; and he has the Savior's solemn pledge that his name will not be erased from the Book of Life, but that it will remain therein.

There can be no doubt that this is a figurative way of expressing the doctrine of election, - the doctrine that all true believers in the Lord Jesus Christ are certain to have eternal life, because from eternity God has elected or chosen them to be His own. In the days of His ministry on earth, our Lord expressed this same comforting truth in these plain words: "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand" (John 10:27-28). No, their names will never be deleted from the Book of Life.

On the contrary, Jesus says that He will acknowledge their names before His Father and the angels; yes, Jesus will acknowledge the faithful as His own. He had made similar promises during His earthly sojourn. In Matt. 10:32 we hear Jesus saying: "Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven;" and in Luke 12:8 we have these recorded words of Jesus: "I tell you, whoever acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man will also acknowledge him before the angels of God."

Whoever has an ear, let him hear and take to heart this important message of the Spirit of God!

The Letter To Philadelphia

3:7 "To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open."

Philadelphia, the youngest of the seven cities in this group, was located in an area that evidently was frequented by earthquakes. It seems to have been a rather peaceful city and was known especially for its efforts in spreading the Greek language and culture.

In His letter to the congregation in this city, Jesus describes Himself as being "holy and true." Not only is He perfectly and absolutely sinless, but He is also true and genuine. There is nothing spurious about Him. He is indeed what Simon

Peter called Him, namely, “the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:16).

Jesus further identifies Himself as the One “who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open.” To have a proper understanding of these words, it will be necessary to turn to Isaiah 22. There God says to Shebna, who had been in charge of the palace and the royal treasures in Jerusalem, but who had proved himself a disgrace to his master’s house: “I will depose you from your office, and you will be ousted from your position. In that day I will summon my servant Eliakim, son of Hilkiyah. I will clothe him with your robe and fasten your sash around him, and hand your authority over to him. He will be a father to those who live in Jerusalem and to the house of Judah. I will place on his shoulder the key to the house of David; what he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open” (Is. 22:19-22).

The last words of the passage just quoted, which originally referred to Eliakim, Jesus here applies to Himself. Just as Eliakim had the key to the royal treasuries and as such had the authority to open or to shut, that is, either to distribute or to withhold these material treasures, so Jesus, holding the key, has the authority either to grant or to withhold the spiritual treasures from the heavenly storehouse.

And what are these great spiritual treasures or blessings? The most important are mentioned in the familiar phrase: “Forgiveness of sins, life, and eternal salvation.” “For where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation.” Jesus gives the assurance to every person, who by faith has received the forgiveness of sins, that the door to the kingdom of heaven is open; and no power on earth or in hell can shut it. That’s a tremendous comfort! But to every person who rejects Christ and His forgiveness, the door to the kingdom of heaven is shut: and no man can open it. That’s a solemn warning!

We recall that earlier in Revelation Jesus made a somewhat similar statement when He said, “And I hold the keys of death and Hades” (Rev. 1:18), thereby implying that He has unlimited power to save from death and hell, but He also has unlimited power to consign to death and hell. No matter how we view it, it is always an “either/or,” - either Jesus the loving Savior, or Jesus the stern Judge; either pardon, or punishment; either life, or death; either heaven, or hell; either the open door, or the closed door. Pray God that the door to the storehouse of heavenly treasures may always be open to us!

3:8 “I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have

kept my word and have not denied my name. ”

“I have placed before you an open door.” There are those who feel that “the open door” refers to the opportunity to do mission work. The Apostle Paul quite often used the symbol of the open door in that manner. For example, he writes: “But I will stay on at Ephesus until Pentecost, because a great door for effective work has opened to me” (1 Cor. 16:8-9). Again he writes: “When I went to Troas to preach the Gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me.... ” (2 Cor. 2:12). And to the Colossians this same Apostle wrote: “Pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ” (Col. 4:3). In view of such and similar passages, we cannot preclude the interpretation that “the open door” signifies an opportunity to do mission work.

However, the context seems to favor the interpretation that the open door is the door to the kingdom. The Christians in Philadelphia, as well as all believers in Christ, are assured of forgiveness, life, and eternal salvation. Thus the door to heaven is open to them: and no one will be able to shut the door, that is, no one will be able to deny these treasures of Jesus to the believers.

“I know your deeds,” the Savior tells these Christians; and having quickly reminded them again of the open door which He had placed before them, He continues by saying: “I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name.” A look at the original text leads us to prefer the following translation: “I know that you have little strength and you have kept my word and you have not denied my name.” Thus we have here three commendations which our Lord gives to the members of this congregation.

First He says: “You have little strength.” We take this as a positive statement, a “plus,” a word of commendation. While the congregation in Sardis was weak, yes, even at the point of death, yet this congregation in Philadelphia showed some strength.

By nature, we all are “spiritually blind, dead, and enemies of God,” and as such, we have no spiritual strength whatsoever. However, through the gracious operation of the Holy Spirit we have been made spiritually alive. And having created within our hearts a true and living faith, the Holy Spirit has also supplied us with strength, - strength from the never-failing storehouse of Christ’s power and grace, - strength with which to fight and successfully overcome our enemies, - strength with which to resist the temptations of the world and of our own flesh and blood, - strength to render acceptable service in the kingdom of Christ, - strength to make sacrifices for

Him and His cause, - strength to endure hardships and undergo sufferings and bear afflictions for the sake of

Christ. God grant us such strength! Yes, God grant that as the shadows are lengthening and the great day of the world's history is rapidly drawing to a close, you and I may find ourselves saying more and more with the Apostle Paul: "I can do everything through him who gives me strength" (Phil. 4:13).

In the second word of commendation, Jesus tells the members in Philadelphia: "You have kept my word." These members knew what the Word of the Lord meant to them; they had felt the power of this Word in their hearts and lives; and they had experienced the comfort, the peace, and the hope emanating from that Word of the Lord. Consequently, with the strength which Christ supplied and by the power of the Holy Spirit, they held fast to that Word, not only receiving it in true faith, but also living their lives in accord with it.

Let us not fail to emulate their example of faithfulness to the Word! There was a time during our Lord's life here on earth when many of His disciples turned back and no longer followed Him. Jesus asked the Twelve: "You do not want to leave, too, do you?" (John 6:67). "Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life!'" (John 6:68). We pray that Peter's answer will at all times be our heartfelt resolve and conviction.

Furthermore, let us also be bold in confessing the name of our blessed Savior. The members in Philadelphia received Jesus' commendation: "You have not denied my name." Since they had not denied that they knew Jesus, we feel that we are safe in assuming that they had openly confessed Jesus and their faith in Him. That is a matter of utmost importance, for you will recall that Jesus once said: "Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven" (Matt. 10:32-33). In this connection, we are also reminded of Rom. 10:8-10, where we read: "'The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart,' that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: That if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved."

3:9 "I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars - I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you. "

Hopefully, you will recall what was said about “the synagogue of Satan” when we considered Christ’s letter to the church in Smyrna. Here in Philadelphia, also, were racial Jews who were proud of their ancestry. They claimed to be the children of Abraham and asserted that God was their Father. However, by their refusal to accept Jesus as the Son of God and their one and only Savior, they had departed from the true Old Testament religion, which repeatedly spoke of Jesus and identified Him as the promised Messiah. Therefore Jesus emphatically states that they were not Jews in the true sense of the word. Rather, they were liars; for God’s real Israel consists of all true believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. It is for this reason that Jesus labeled these unbelieving and lying Jews as being members of the “synagogue of Satan.”

Yet, Jesus says that He will make these very Jews, who were of the synagogue of Satan, to come and fall down at the feet of these Christians in Philadelphia and acknowledge that these Christians were the objects of Christ’s love. This does not necessarily imply the conversion of these Jews, although we certainly pray for their conversion. Jesus does not say that He will make these Jews fall down before God and worship Him, but that He would make them fall down at the feet of these Christians. As stated previously, these Jews had boasted that they were God’s chosen people, and as such, were the objects of God’s special love. Now, however, these same Jews would be forced to acknowledge that the true believers in Christ, the very people they had persecuted, are truly God’s special people, - a people dearly loved by the Lord Jesus.

Our Savior cannot be defeated, and the very gates of hell cannot prevail against His Church. Although the members of Christ’s Church often are ridiculed and persecuted, although they and their beloved Master often are maligned and falsely accused, yet the time will come when these very enemies will be forced to acknowledge that Jesus is indeed the Son of God and that the followers of Jesus are the ones who truly are blessed. For this reason we should not become discouraged or pessimistic as we journey through life. Rather, let us at all times be reminded of God’s unspeakable love for us in Christ Jesus, and let us never forget whose we are and whom we serve. With St. Paul we can say with Christian boldness: “If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Rom. 8:31).

3:10 “Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth. ”

A literal, and perhaps better, translation of the first part of this verse would be: “Because you have kept my word of patience....” Christ’s word contains many

beautiful Gospel promises, comforting us in sorrows and tribulations, giving us strength in times of persecution, upholding us in moments of weakness, and assuring us that the sufferings of the present cannot be compared to the glory which some day shall be ours. These and many other promises enable us to endure all the trials of life with patience. The Christians in Philadelphia held completely to Christ's word. Thus it should be. Jesus once said: "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31-32).

Since the Christians in Philadelphia had kept Jesus' word, Jesus now, purely by His grace, gives them the promise: "I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth."

There have been different interpretations of "the hour of trial" to which Jesus refers. Some say that this is a reference to the great tribulation mentioned in Matt. 24:21, which Jesus said would precede the destruction of Jerusalem; but the siege of Jerusalem occurred some twenty years before Revelation was written. Others say that this trial refers to the local persecution of the Christians in and around Philadelphia; but Jesus says that this hour of trial shall come "upon the whole world." Still others maintain that this refers to the great tribulation that will follow "the Rapture" (when all Christians will have been removed from the earth); but, while Jesus does promise to keep His believers from harm, He does not say that prior to the great tribulation He will take His believers out of this world. Recall what Jesus said to the heavenly Father in His High-priestly prayer: "My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one" (John 17:15). In the light of all these considerations, we conclude that "the hour of trial" is a reference to the great tribulations that will occur prior to the end of the world.

This period of trial will "come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth." The expression "those who live on the earth" occurs quite frequently in Revelation; and each time it refers to the non-Christians, the unbelievers. Thus, while this "hour of trial" will come upon the whole world, it is intended to test the ungodly. The true believers, however, have the promise of Jesus that He will protect His own from all harm.

On our journey through life, it certainly is a source of immeasurable comfort to us to know that we have Jesus with us, not only to guide and to lead us, but also to guard and protect us. In His care and under His watchful eye, there is absolutely nothing that "will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:39).

3:11 “I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown.”

Jesus says, “I am coming soon;” and since nearly 2000 years have come and gone since these words were spoken and written, we may be inclined to ask: “What is the meaning of the word ‘soon?’” From our point of view, this may seem to be a long time; but from the perspective of God, in whose sight a thousand years are like a day that has just gone by, Christ’s return will be soon indeed.

In the light of His impending return, the exhortation which Jesus gives to the Christians in Philadelphia and also to us is very appropriate: “Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown.”

And what do we and all true Christians have? Oh, we are rich beyond degree! Just think of all the spiritual blessings which have been given to us and which we now enjoy, - God’s Word in its truth and purity, our saving faith in the Triune God, the complete pardon of all our sins, our exalted position as the adopted sons and daughters of God, the assurance of eternal life in the Father’s house of many mansions, - and so we could go on indefinitely. What an abundance of spiritual blessings we have as a result of God’s great love and grace! Now let’s hold on to what we have! To lose the crown is to lose the life eternal!

It is not an easy struggle. The enemies we face are vicious and powerful. Foremost among them is the devil who “prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (1 Pet. 5:8). Then, let us not underestimate the power of the world and our own sinful flesh. How easily we can be lulled into carelessness and indifference, how easily we can be lured into heresy and false security! “So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall! (1 Cor. 10:12). Christians must realize that it is possible to lose the crown. Therefore, we must hold on to what we have. With the aid of God’s Holy Spirit, let us do just that!

3:12-13 “Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on him my new name. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. ”

What a glorious future is in store for every faithful Christian who “holds on,” and who “overcomes” and emerges victorious! Jesus says that He will make him “a

pillar in the temple of my God.” A pillar remains where it is, - a symbol of security and strength. This means that a believer’s place in heaven is permanent; he will be forever in the presence of God. Never again will he leave the heavenly abode.

The faithful believer will also have a threefold name written on him: the name of God the Father, the name of the heavenly Jerusalem, and the new name of Christ. Since the writing of one’s name on anything denotes ownership, what does the threefold name mean for the Christian? It means that the believer, by faith in Christ Jesus, will be forever in the hands of God, belonging to God; it means that he will be forever a citizen of the heavenly Jerusalem, the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God; and finally, it means that the Christian will share in the new name of Christ. Having gained the victory over sin, death and the devil, we are told that God the Father exalted Jesus “and gave Him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:9-11). Now He is King of kings and Lord of lords; and all who faithfully confess the name of Jesus Christ will share in the glory of that new name and will live and reign with Christ throughout eternity.

Whoever has an ear, let him hear and heed well this message of the Holy Spirit. The prize is worth it! But remember, it is a reward of grace, not of merit.

The Letter To Laodicea

9:14 “To the angel of the church in Laodicea write: These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God’s creation.”

Laodicea, the city of the wealthy, was known not only as a great banking center, but it also boasted a medical school and a gymnasium furnished with baths. Its people were people of luxury and were accustomed, more or less, to lives of ease.

From a reference made in Col. 4:12-16, we are inclined to conclude that the congregation in this city perhaps was founded by one or more of Paul’s co-workers. There is the possibility that it could have been Epaphras. At any rate, the Apostle Paul had an interest in this congregation and was acquainted personally with some of its members.

In addressing this congregation, Jesus describes Himself as “the Amen,” “the faithful and true witness,” and “the ruler of God’s creation.” The word “Amen” implies absolute truthfulness; and when we say “absolute,” we mean that the

truthfulness of Jesus cannot be questioned or debated. He is “the Amen,” truth personified, the “truthful One,” as He also emphasized in the days of His earthly sojourn when He said: “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6).

Jesus further identifies Himself as “the faithful and true witness.” His testimony cannot be doubted, but is perfectly true. Therefore it ought to be received with eager and believing hearts. We expect of witnesses, - in fact, we demand of witnesses, - that they tell the facts as they have seen or heard them, and that they do not withhold the truth. However, we know that many earthly witnesses give false testimony and thus become guilty of perjury. Jesus, on the other hand, is a “genuine witness;” there definitely is nothing spurious about Him or His testimony. In the Gospel according to St. John we are told: “No one has ever seen God; but God the One and Only, who is at the Father’s side, has made him known” (John 1:18).

Finally, Jesus calls Himself “the ruler of God’s creation.” The Greek word employed here can mean either “ruler” or “beginning.” Grammatically speaking, therefore, the phrase could read “the ruler of the creation of God,” or it could read “the beginning of the creation of God.” Jehovah’s Witnesses have chosen to accept the latter translation to prove that Jesus was created by God. Such a translation, however, definitely robs Jesus of His deity, and is completely contrary to the clear teachings of Sacred Scripture. We call your attention to the opening verses of St. John’s Gospel where it is said of Jesus, the Word: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made” (John 1:1-3). And in Col. 1:16 it is said of Christ: “For by him all things were created.” In the light of these and many other clear passages of Scripture, we are compelled to accept the translation that Jesus is “the ruler of God’s creation,” - He is the active source of the creation; yes, He is the Almighty One, the Creator and Ruler of all things. He is true God, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit!

3:15-16 “I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm – neither hot nor cold - I am about to spit you out of my mouth.”

People often are known and characterized by their deeds. Hence, Jesus says to the members of this congregation in Laodicea: “I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot.”

The members of this congregation were not “cold;” for those in the state of coldness do not even profess to be Christians. In all fairness, it must be said that those who are “cold” at least are not hypocrites; for hypocrites are people who pretend to be Christians when they are not. Those in the state of coldness openly declare that they care nothing for the Christian Church, and they absolutely refuse to have anything to do with the Christian religion. The unconverted who are untouched by the Gospel, the manifest and outspoken unbeliever, the infidels who openly deny and ridicule the Bible, people in whose hearts there glows not even a spark of love for the Savior, - they are the cold. Certainly, the members of the Laodicean church could not be placed into this class.

But neither were they “hot.” The people who are “hot” are those who believe the Gospel message with all their heart and mind and soul, - all those who sincerely love Jesus and His Word and His Church, - all those who constantly seek to do all that they possibly can for the dear Savior and His blessed kingdom. These people likewise are not hypocrites, professing to be Christians when in reality they are not. Those who are “hot” mean what they profess. They are sincere disciples of Jesus, - people who are willing to endure whatever scorn and ridicule the world heaps upon them because of their faith in Christ, - people who enthusiastically say with all their heart, “I love the house where you live, O Lord, the place where your glory dwells” (Psalm 26:8), - people who devoutly exclaim, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20), - people who look to the cross on Calvary’s hill and with heartfelt gratitude confess, “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21), - those are the people who are “hot.” But, sad to say, neither could the members of the Laodicean church be placed into this category.

Instead, Jesus says to them: “You are lukewarm - neither hot nor cold.” Jesus adds that He wished they were one or the other. At least then there would be no hypocrisy. But now, being neither hot nor cold, they were only lukewarm, They called themselves Christians; they had been baptized; they had made a verbal profession of their faith and had become members of the congregation. But that was about all. Their hearts were void of any true love for Jesus; they had an attitude of indifference with regard to spiritual matters; and they showed no real zeal and enthusiasm for doing the Lord’s work. A self-satisfied and complacent set of hypocrites, - that is what they amounted to in the sight of the Lord.

This nauseous condition filled the Lord Jesus with utter disgust. If you desire a cup of hot tea, you want it hot. If you desire a glass of iced tea, you want it cold. You

do not want tea that is neither hot nor cold, but only lukewarm. Drinking such lukewarm tea sometimes can produce a sick feeling in one's stomach. Something similar to this, perhaps, is what Jesus had in mind when He said to these Laodicean members: "So, because you are lukewarm - neither hot nor cold - I am about to spit you out of my mouth."

Yet, even for this lukewarm church, the day of grace had not ended. Observe that Jesus says: "I am about to spit you out of my mouth." He had not as yet utterly rejected them. There still was time and opportunity for repentance; the door to the kingdom still was open. Praise be to God for His patience and long-suffering!

3:17-18 "You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing. 'But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see."

The members in Laodicea boasted of their great riches and prided themselves in the fact that they did not need anything. Whether these words refer to their material wealth or to their supposed spiritual wealth, we cannot say. Perhaps they refer to both.

On the one hand, we know that Laodicea was an extremely prosperous city and that its inhabitants enjoyed great wealth. Surely, the members of the Laodicean congregation also shared in this wealth; and perhaps they felt that their money could purchase whatever they desired, and that consequently, they were in need of nothing. Worst of all, it may have caused them to feel spiritually self-sufficient. We know from history and experience that material wealth ail too often has caused people to forget God and to neglect the needs of the soul.

On the other hand, the boast of the Laodicean members that they were rich could refer also to their supposed spiritual wealth. They may have felt that they possessed an abundance of spiritual knowledge and that they stood in need of nothing. Priding themselves in their outward morality, they may have entertained the thought that since they were active in the community and had the reputation of being respectable and decent people, they deserved God's blessing and were entitled to a place in heaven. Their self-sufficiency caused them to lose sight of their need of God's grace and forgiveness, just as there are many in the church today who apparently are perfectly content with their empty moralism and their barren rationalism.

In either case, it is evident that this congregation displayed an attitude of indifference and self-satisfaction. Therefore our Lord, in His eagerness to seek and to save, reminds these Laodiceans of their true condition, telling them: “You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.” And having given them this honest evaluation of their spiritual condition, the loving Savior also tells them how their problems could be solved and how their great spiritual needs could be satisfied.

He says: “I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see.” However, all these wonderful things mentioned by Jesus are priceless and cannot be purchased with any amount of gold and silver. Why, then, does Jesus say: “I counsel you to buy from me....?” We have a similar invitation in Isaiah 55:1, where we read: “Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.” Buy for nothing! That is the strange, wonderful Gospel buying. It is all free! What boundless love and mercy on the part of God! And thus it must be, because we have nothing with which to buy; and also, because the things we are counseled to buy are priceless.

Since Laodicea was a prominent banking center and also had a mint within the confines of the city, Jesus, by way of contrast perhaps, is motivated first of all to say to the members of this congregation: “I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich.” Before proceeding any further, we would like to call your attention to these words in 1 Peter 1:6-7: “In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith - of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire - may be proved genuine....” In the light of these words, we feel that the refined gold which Jesus counsels the Laodiceans to buy from Him is pure, sound, genuine faith, - something which they so desperately needed.

And indeed, blessed and wealthy beyond degree is every person who possesses the true and saving faith in Christ! For by faith in Christ he has the assurance of sins forgiven, of peace with God, of deliverance from death and the devil, and of eternal life in the hereafter, However, this faith, - far more precious than gold, - can come only from God. It cannot be purchased with any amount of material wealth; nor can we obtain it by our own reason and strength. It is God the Holy Spirit who through Word and Sacrament creates this faith in our hearts and who, through these Means of Grace, also sustains and preserves us in this saving faith unto our end.

Furthermore, in Laodicea exclusive garments were manufactured and sold, - beautiful, costly, raven-black garments, which were world-renowned. But in spite of the fact that the Laodiceans manufactured and possessed and sold these precious garments, Jesus tells them that they were naked, -spiritually naked. No man-made clothing, no gorgeous robe, however precious and costly, can serve as a covering for sin. If the members of the Laodicean church were to be fit for the society of heaven, they must heed the advice of Jesus: “I counsel you to buy from me... white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness.”

There is only one robe that can cover our sins, there is only one robe that can cover our “shameful nakedness,” and that is the precious, white robe of Jesus’ blood and righteousness, - that robe which was procured for us and all sinners through the blood and death of the Son of God on Calvary’s darkened hill. White is the symbol of holiness and purity; and only when we by faith are clothed in that pure and spotless garment can we hope to stand before the throne of our God.

Finally, there was a medical school in Laodicea where an eye salve had been developed for weak and diseased eyes. However, this well-known salve could not help these lukewarm members, who were on the brink of slipping back into spiritual darkness and blindness, - the state, or condition, in which every person by nature finds himself. Therefore, Jesus counsels them to buy from Him that eye salve which alone can heal people of their spiritual blindness. This salve is the spiritual illumination of the Holy Spirit, who through the Gospel opens our eyes to behold the beauty of our salvation in Christ Jesus. When men and women give heed to the preaching of God’s Word, then the Holy Spirit enters their hearts; and through His gracious operation, He leads them to see with the eyes of faith all the blessings which Jesus has procured for them, and at the same time He causes their cold hearts to become warm with true love for the Savior, May the Holy Spirit always dispel all traces of spiritual darkness from our eyes!

3:19-20 “Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.”

The words which the Lord in this letter addressed to the congregation in Laodicea were exceptionally harsh, but they were prompted by genuine love. He could not overlook their lukewarm attitude, nor could He condone their sinful ways. Accordingly, He reminds them: “Those whom I love, I rebuke and discipline.”

Many similar passages could be quoted from Scripture. In Job 5:17 we read: “Blessed is the man whom God corrects; so do not despise the discipline of the Almighty.” In Prov. 3:11-12 we have this exhortation: “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.” The Apostle Paul remarks: “When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world” (1 Cor. 11:32). And in Heb. 12:7-10 we are told: “Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness.”

From these and other passages, two points become very evident: (1) The Lord’s discipline is always administered in love; and (2) His discipline is always designed to benefit us. Thus, He not only says to the Laodiceans, “Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline,” but He also adds the exhortation: “So be earnest and repent.” “Be earnest,” - take this matter seriously! “And repent,” - repent at once and once for all of your indifference and lukewarmness!

We now come to a very familiar and heart-warming scene. The Savior says: “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.” It is the sinner’s hour of grace. The sinner’s Friend stands at the door and knocks. The thought is simply overwhelming!

The Gospel calls for the heart to open the door. However, we want to emphasize that there is no synergism taught here. By nature man does not have the power and ability to respond and open the door. Scripture teaches that by nature man is spiritually dead and therefore can do nothing toward his conversion and salvation. The power which makes it possible for man to respond lies in the Gospel invitation and the work of the Holy Spirit, and not in the natural will of man.

Permit an illustration. When Jesus stood at the tomb of Lazarus and issued the command, “Lazarus, come out!,” Lazarus came forth. Do you for one moment suppose that Lazarus came out of that grave by his own power, or that perhaps he cooperated in restoring life to his physically dead and decaying body? Definitely not! The Word of Jesus, “Come out,” carried with it the power of the Lord to respond. So

also spiritually. The Gospel invitation to open the door is a word of Almighty God, and inherent in that Word of God is the power to open the door and admit the Savior into our heart and life.

Blessed is every person into whose heart and life the Savior has been admitted. Jesus says: “If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.” The picture of dining together describes the wonderful fellowship between Christ and the believer, which begins here in time and will continue throughout eternity. The Lord Jesus is anxious to share with the believer all the blessings of His love. During His earthly ministry, Jesus gave His disciples a similar invitation and promise when He said to them: “If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him” (John 14:23). 26

3:21-22 “To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne, He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. ”

To him who is victorious in the battle against sin and Satan, Christ will give the privilege to sit with Him on His throne, - a figurative way of promising the believer that he will reign with Christ. St. Paul states it thus: “If we endure, we will also reign with Him” (2 Tim. 2:12). This is the climax of what our being made a kingdom means. We shall take part in the glory and triumph of Christ.

Christ ascended to heaven and sat down at the right hand of majesty and power. When a believer passes through temporal death, he will have the privilege of sitting on the throne in company with Christ. Yes, he will enjoy the most intimate and blessed fellowship with the Savior throughout eternity. No human tongue is able to describe this exaltation. But remember, Jesus says, “I will give” this right, this privilege. It will be a pure gift of His grace. He who has an ear, let him take this message to heart.