

# lesson three

JANUARY 12–18

## God's People in Cities

“ “ ‘He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches’ ” ” (Revelation 3:22, NKJV).



No matter where we are in life or what corner of the globe we're in, God has a message tailor-made for us. Christ the Author of all knowledge has messages to each of the cities of Asia Minor that can also be messages to all Christians throughout history.

Rev. 3:19

## Introduction

# *Do I Want to Hear This?*

“I’m only telling you this because I care . . .”

I cannot count the number of times some version of these words attempted to cushion a critique or piece of advice that hurt me, sometimes shocked me, but often (begrudgingly) set me on a better path.

Let’s be honest, the only people who are safe to give you the kind of talking-to that involves those words are the ones you have a trusting relationship with. I have received it from my parents, from teachers who expected better, from doctors who recognize that correcting behavior early is better than paying later, and from my husband.

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### **He wanted them to experience everything that life could offer if they followed Him wholly.**

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How about you? Have you heard those words from someone you love and trust?

It should come as no surprise that Jesus used the same method when addressing the churches of John’s day. After all, this is the same Jesus who compared God’s relationship with His followers to many of the same relationships as above—our Father, the great physician, a teacher, a bridegroom. In Revelation 3:19, His message to Laodicea, Jesus says the words that we all recognize from our own lives: “I correct and punish those whom I love. So be eager to do right, and change your hearts and lives” (NCV).

The heavy themes in the book of Revelation are certainly not ideal for breezing through in a quick devotion. Christ’s messages to the churches are no exception. The accusations of misdeeds, sins, and immorality are met with threats of life and death without redemption. In comparison, the promises of victory and worthiness seem like distant goals.

It’s the simple words of love in the midst of the criticism, calculation of sins, and reprimands that shine a light on the true nature of Christ in these messages. He didn’t want the church to turn away from their lukewarm nature and worldly wealth for His own vanity or gain. He wanted them to experience everything that life could offer if they followed Him wholly. He wanted them to share in the kingdom by His side and share His throne! Just like a parent, a teacher, a doctor, a spouse, it’s love that makes Him to want better from them.

Do you want to know the very best part? He wants the same for us! Keep that in mind when you study Scripture—look for the messages that speak to you sharply or the words that set you off-balance. I challenge you to look at those passages again, knowing that Jesus corrects those He loves. Like me, you may then find the eagerness to do right that will truly change your heart and life.

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# Logos

## *Church Secrets From Under the Carpet*

Dan. 2:27, 28, 47;  
Matt. 13:35;  
Rev. 3:6; 22:16

### ***Secrets Revealed in the Old Testament (Dan. 2:27, 28, 47)***

We already know that the book of the Revelation of Jesus Christ is for the purpose of revealing who Jesus is and what He will be doing. In this regard, it functions the same as prophecy elsewhere. Both Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar proclaimed it. “The secret which the king has demanded, the wise men . . . cannot declare to the king. But there is a God in heaven who reveals secrets.” “Truly your God is the God of gods, the Lord of kings, and a revealer of secrets” (Dan. 2:27, 28, 47, NKJV). The book of Daniel was sealed until the end times.

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**The letters had to be very difficult  
for many in the churches to receive.**

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### ***Jesus Uncovered Secrets From the Foundation (Matt. 13:35)***

Jesus began to reveal some of God’s secrets when He spoke in parables. It was prophesied of Him, “I will open My mouth in parables; I will utter things kept secret from the foundation of the world” (Matt. 13:35, NKJV). He did so, He said, “because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven” (verse 11, NKJV). He also promised that “nothing is secret that will not be revealed, nor anything hidden that will not be known and come to light. Therefore take heed how you hear” (Luke 8:17, 18, NKJV). It is interesting that He warned caution in how we hear.

### ***Hearing Secrets Is Not Always Gossip (Rev. 3:6)***

Even though there were seven different messages to seven different churches, every message was intended for every church. Each one included the admonition, “ ‘He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches’ ” (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22, NKJV). They were to hear what was said not only to their own church but to all the churches. We, like they, have the blessing of being reminded in powerful end-time fashion just what snares are being laid for us by the evil one.

The letters had to be very difficult for many in the churches to receive. The realization that their secret sins were known by God to such a degree that He was dealing with them in this manner may have been frightening. Some would certainly have simply faded away, seeing that their lives were open books. Others would have taken the warnings to heart.

As we analyze the messages, we find that Jesus was able to meet the needs of each church, regardless of their situation. Surely, He can meet our needs today, as well. He tells us He wants us to be in heaven. We must not be satisfied with our self-made imaginary heaven. Allow Him to change even your goodness into His image in you.

The letters to the churches were written, first, to get everything out in the open. They would be placed in a situation where they would confess and surrender to Him or cling to their sins to the point of their own eternal peril. Second, they were to let the members of those historic churches know that God knew them intimately. He was aware of their failings and loved them deeply enough to seek their salvation.

The cultures of the churches were different from one another. Jesus pointed to His ability to meet their different struggles and situations. His self-introduction tells us about the particular characteristic He possesses to be able to resolve the issues we face. Jesus gives an appraisal of the church and then counsels the church how to get out of its predicaments. Finally, each message concludes with an appeal to hear the Spirit and with promises to the overcomers.

### ***For the Last Time, Listen (Rev. 22:16)***

To the people of each church, there is a lesson that God wants us to take personally. We are not to be satisfied with whatever goodness we feel we have or that others think we have. God knows better. He sees into our hearts and motives. Give up what is valuable to you, even what is good in the eyes of God that keeps you from coming higher because you count it to yourself as sufficient. Give it up that you may receive what is truly saving that only Jesus can give you.

The issues and solutions discussed were not necessarily intended to keep the people of these churches from suffering. They were given to let the people know that God was aware of their suffering, allowed it to continue, and promised salvation to those who would endure. This message is given in seven different ways. If we are listening, each of us can find at least one message directed specifically to ourselves. In Revelation 22:16 we have a final appeal from Jesus. He says, “‘I, Jesus, have sent My angel to testify to you these things in the churches’” (NKJV). We must listen to the messages to all the churches.

### ***REACT***

1. Look at yourself as God might look at you. Which of these church messages seems to be directed specifically to you? How will you use the prescription in that message to let Jesus prepare you for heaven?

2. Since so much was made of how we hear, analyze the way you hear what God is saying. Are you hearing it through the experience and culture of a local or national church? What should you do to be sure you have a personal connection with God?

**Testimony**  
*The Communicating  
 Christ*

Rev. 2:1

“The names of the seven churches are symbolic of the church in different periods of the Christian Era. The number 7 indicates completeness, and is symbolic of the fact that the messages extend to the end of time, while the symbols used reveal the condition of the church at different periods in the history of the world.

**“He will give them His brightness to reflect to the world.”**

“Christ is spoken of as walking in the midst of the golden candlesticks. Thus is symbolized His relation to the churches. He is in constant communication with His people. He knows their true state. He observes their order, their piety, their devotion. Although He is high priest and mediator in the sanctuary above, yet He is represented as walking up and down in the midst of His churches on the earth. With untiring wakefulness and unremitting vigilance, He watches to see whether the light of any of His sentinels is burning dim or going out. . . .

“Christ is represented as holding the seven stars in His right hand. This assures us that no church faithful to its trust need fear coming to nought, for not a star that has the protection of Omnipotence can be plucked out of the hand of Christ.

“These things saith He that holdeth the seven stars in His right hand.’ Revelation 2:1. These words are spoken to the teachers in the church—those entrusted by God with weighty responsibilities. The sweet influences that are to be abundant in the church are bound up with God’s ministers, who are to reveal the love of Christ. The stars of heaven are under His control. He fills them with light. He guides and directs their movements. If He did not do this, they would become fallen stars. So with His ministers. They are but instruments in His hands, and all the good they accomplish is done through His power. Through them His light is to shine forth. The Saviour is to be their efficiency. If they will look to Him as He looked to the Father they will be enabled to do His work. As they make God their dependence, He will give them His brightness to reflect to the world.”<sup>1</sup>

**REACT**

Which of the churches of Revelation is your spiritual walk most like today? What can you do to change the path you are walking?

1. Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 585–587.

Isa. 43:1, 2

## Evidence *Getting to Know You*

Located at the junction of a trade route, Ephesus was famous for the temple of Artemis (Diana). Paul visited this city during his second journey (Acts 18:19) and returned during his third journey and spent two years here. Aquila, Priscilla, and Apollos all ministered here (Acts 18:24–28). Believers began their Christian walk by burning all sorcery books, and the believers were blessed with responsible elders. (Acts 19:17, 19; 20:28)

Smyrna, a flourishing trade port, was located north of Ephesus. Smyrna (modern-day Izmir) was famous for culture, arts, and religion. Some of its residents, particularly Christians, suffered poverty and reproach (Rev. 2:9, 10).

Pergamum was located 40 miles (64 kilometers) north of Smyrna and 20 miles (32 kilometers) from the sea. The kingdom of Pergamon, during the Attalid dynasty, made Pergamum its capital.<sup>1</sup>

Thyatira, a small city located between Pergamos and Sardis, was famous for its purple dye.<sup>2</sup> Lydia, mentioned in Acts 16, was from this city.

Sardis, located 60 miles east of Smyrna, thought itself immune to invasion.<sup>3</sup> Overconfidence and lack of operational security weakened the city's ability to remain invasion-free.<sup>4</sup>

Philadelphia was built by Attalus II Philadelphus.<sup>5</sup> Situated on the Plains of Hermus and on part of Mount Tmolus, it is known today as Ala-Shehr.<sup>6</sup> Visitors today can see remains of walls, temples, and buildings.

Laodicea, located southeast of Philadelphia, was an important banking center of the region. It was known for garments of local black wool and the seat of a medical school with a specialty in ophthalmia, which is a condition of severe inflammation of the eyes.<sup>7</sup>

1. Wikipedia, s.v. "Bergama," last modified April 18, 2018, 19:16, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bergama>.

2. "5. Thyatira—The Tolerant Church," Bible.org, <https://bible.org/seriespage/5-thyatira-tolerant-church>.

3. "6. Sardis—The Dead Church," Bible.org, <https://bible.org/seriespage/6-sardis-dead-church>.

4. Crawford H. Greenewalt Jr., "Introduction," *The archaeological Exploration of Sardis*, <http://www.sardisexpedition.org/en/essays/latw-greenewalt-introduction>

5. Ramsay, "Chapter 27: The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia," 1904, *Philologos.org*, [https://philologos.org/\\_eb-Itsc/chap27.htm](https://philologos.org/_eb-Itsc/chap27.htm)

6. Wikisource.org, s.v. "Ala-Shehr," last modified January 24, 2015, 00:20, [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/1911\\_Encyclop%C3%A6dia\\_Britannica/Ala-Shehr](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/1911_Encyclop%C3%A6dia_Britannica/Ala-Shehr).

7. John Davis, *A Dictionary of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1917), pp. 441, 442.

**How-to**  
*Their Message—  
My Message*

**Matt. 10:22;  
Eph. 3:16, 17;  
Col. 3:17;  
Revelation 2; 3**

Each of the seven churches of Revelation possesses a message for us today. Although five of the seven churches received a rebuke, God also praised those groups for their early manifestations of faith. God wanted them to know they were not without hope if they made a change. So it is with us.

Ephesus forgot her first love and the fervor for sharing the gospel. Have you fallen into this same mind-set? Spending time in consistent Bible reading and prayer is the path to reestablishing your relationship and feeling the excitement you first experienced in your Christian walk.

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**If we are faithful, even in the face of death,  
we will receive life.**

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Jesus warned His followers that they would be hated because of their love for Him. If we follow the counsel given to Smyrna, we will not fear what we may suffer. If we are faithful, even in the face of death, we will receive life.

In the early days, Pergamos held firm to their belief in Jesus and didn't deny their faith. Encouraged to repent, they were promised to receive the hidden manna. What hidden manna is God waiting to provide in your life?

Thyatira exhibited love, faith, patience, and good works. Do you savor the ministry that you are given to share Jesus with others? Have you thought about the patience you exhibit and the good works you do?

Are events in your life taking a toll? Is this weakening your faith? Adopt the counsel to Sardis and be watchful and strengthen what little remains. Look forward to the time when you will be dressed in white raiment.

Philadelphia possessed love—a reflection of God's character. Our love for others allows us to reveal the true character of God to those who may not know Him.

Laodicea did not receive any commendation. God noted they were spiritually poor, blind, and naked. Even with such a condemnation, God gave them hopeful counsel. By repenting and accepting God's redeeming power, we are justified by faith. No matter how far we wander from God, He waits for us to come to Him and accept His gift.

Adopt the best traits of the seven churches, and stand side-by-side with Jesus as you eat from the tree of life while wearing the golden crown made especially for you.

**REACT**

Which of the seven churches do you feel most represents your spiritual walk today? What counsel given do you need to implement in your life?

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*Randolph Farley, Cottonwood, Kansas, USA*

Isa. 40:28;  
Gal. 6:9

## Opinion *Second-Chance God*

Have you ever felt that the focus on the seven churches in Revelation was purely negative? Yet the gospel is in the verses that outline the spiritual failings of these churches.

Ephesus wandered away from its first love, but before that it was patient, hated the deeds of false teachers, and did not give up. Pergamum held firm in their belief in Jesus and for a time did not deny the faith. Thyatira possessed love, faith, patience, and good works. In Sardis, undefiled believers were strong in their faith. The Laodiceans received no commendation at all. Too caught up in their world, it appears they did not even realize they were spiritually poor, blind, and naked. The believers in Smyrna and Philadelphia faced persecution and witnessed to others. Although they did not receive a reproof, they were counseled to remain faithful unto death and to hold fast to their faith.

### **He doesn't give up on us because He loves us.**

Five of the seven churches received reproofs for becoming distracted from what they were called to do—share the story of Jesus and remain faithful to Him. God did not cast them off entirely. He provided them with counsel for how they could return to Him. With that return comes a promise of a renewed relationship that can be eternal if the believers so choose.

The churches were counseled to repent, remain faithful even if it meant death, hold fast to their faith, continue to be watchful, and be zealous. The promised rewards of a crown of life, white raiment, names written in the book of life, and to sit with Christ on His throne and eat with Him should make repentance and faithfulness attractive.

Have you become weary in your walk with Christ and distracted by the world's constant clamoring for your attention? Have you lost the first love you experienced when you accepted Jesus into your heart and life? Are you facing ridicule by family and friends for your beliefs? Remember, there are those who have gone before and have faced these same things.

The world we live in is becoming increasingly evil. It may seem as if the devil is winning on all sides. But we must remember that the war has been won, even though it seems like the heavens may fall. Our spiritual strength is based on our relationship with Christ.

The churches receiving reproof allowed themselves to be pulled away from their focus on Christ. They were given a chance to return. That's good news! The God we serve is one of second, third, and fourth chances, and more. He doesn't give up on us because He loves us.

# Exploration

## *There Will Be a Day*

Rev. 3:22

### CONCLUDE

The book of Revelation is fascinating. While Jesus focused on writing letters to each of the seven churches, the letters were also meant for us. How can letters that are thousands of years old be meant for us who live now? Today, each church around the globe has its own difficulties and trials. Some churches suffer from persecution. Others have difficulties with staying afloat financially. There are those that are no longer reaching out to their community.

Whatever your church is going through, there is hope. As cliché as it may seem, it is important to remember that Jesus does offer us a life with Him if we continue to be faithful even when the going gets tough.

### CONSIDER

- Listening to the song “There Will Be a Day” by Jeremy Camp. Focus on the hope that we have for that great day.
- Writing a prayer about God’s promises for those who are faithful and who read His Word during the end time.
- Using a website such as BibleGateway.org to find four Bible verses that talk about listening to God’s Word during trials. Write these out by hand and review them during your personal devotional time.
- Sharing with a friend how God has met your needs like He did for the seven churches.
- Setting aside time daily to read about each of the seven churches. Reflect on how Jesus has been working in your own church.
- Writing a poem about what how to watch for Christ’s return.

### CONNECT

Revelation 1:3; 3:3, 22.