

Message to the Churches
A Series on Divine Judgment: Part 5

Throughout the Old and New Testaments, when in reference to the eschatological future, the “Day of the Lord” (i.e. Day of Christ, Day of Judgment, etc) was a reference to the Second Coming of Christ or Jesus’ judgment on the Great White Throne. However, when one reads the book of Revelation, there is the sense that the “Day of the Lord” encompasses a period of time that is much larger than a twenty four hour day.

Revelation is so named, because it is the apostle John’s recording of Jesus Christ’s prophetic description of the future which will happen suddenly and soon.

The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants, the things which must soon take place; and He sent and communicated it by His angel to His bond-servant John, who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; **for the time is near.** (Rev 1:1-3)

And the apostle John indicates that he received this vision from Jesus Christ personally while “in the Spirit on the Lord’s Day,” which suggests that John was projected in some manner into the future to witness the events of the “Lord’s Day.” While the context of the passage associates the “Lord’s Day” to the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, some scholars see it as a reference to the first day of the week. However, grammatically, the Greek term for “Lord’s” (kyriakos) is an adjective which is not the form used when in reference to the first day of the week. It would seem more likely that John is referring to the “Day of the Lord” as the Second Coming and a period of divine judgment.

Behold, He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him; and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over Him. So it is to be. Amen. “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.” I, John, your brother and fellow partaker in the tribulation and kingdom and perseverance which are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. **I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s (kyriakos) day,** and I heard behind me a loud voice like the sound of a trumpet, saying, “Write in a book what you see, and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea.” (Rev 1:7-11)

With this in mind, it appears that the letters to the churches are not events associated with the coming judgment, but instead an evaluation of the churches’ spiritual state in preparation for Jesus’ return and Day of the Lord.

As with other prophets of God (Hos 1:1-11; 2 Cor 12:6-10), John’s circumstances influenced his writing of Revelation. With his banishment to the island of Patmos during the reign of Domitian, John personally experienced government action against Christianity. Furthermore, the churches he addressed in Revelation were all located in Roman Asia where the worship of the emperor was enthusiastically adopted.

The Imperial Cult, or worship of the emperor, began during the reign of Augustus as a means to divinely sanction the legitimacy of Roman rule, and deceased emperors who were deemed worthy by the senate were voted a state deity and held with the same regard as Rome’s official deities.

The next Roman Emperor Gaius (Caligula), grandson of Augustus, had himself elected as a living god and saw himself as part of Roman deity (i.e. Apollo, Mercury, Jupiter, etc.) and worthy of worship. Around 40 A.D., a proclamation decreed that a statue of Gaius be built within the walls of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem so that the Jews would worship him. Concerned with Jewish defiance, the decree was later rescinded.

Around 64 AD, the cruelty of Emperor Nero towards Christians occurred during John’s lifetime.

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A few emperors later, Domitian, the emperor during John's writing of Revelation, styled himself as a living god and demanded worship, but to a lesser degree than Gaius.

Jesus' description of a future of judgment begins with the letters to the seven churches. Although each letter addresses a specific church, its message is also intended for the other six churches (Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22), and they all share the same literary pattern: a) the addressee, b) a description of how Jesus identifies Himself, c) the expression of divine knowledge, d) commendation of the church's faithfulness, e) a verdict of the church's failures, f) a command for correction, and g) a promise of things in heaven for Believers.

Ephesus

Jesus' description of Himself: The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands (Rev 2:1).

Jesus explains that the "seven stars" are angels of the seven churches, and the "seven golden lampstands" are the seven churches. Throughout Revelation, the Greek term for angels, "aneloi," was used to refer to heavenly messengers. The seven lampstands may be reminiscent of the lampstand God directed Bezalel to make during the construction of the Tabernacle (Ex 37:17-24) and kept in the Holy Place.

Background: As a major trade center and second largest city in the world during the time of the apostles, Ephesus was known for the Temple of Artemis, considered one of the Seven Wonders of the World, and cult prostitution. It was also one of the first Asian centers to embrace the Imperial Cult, which was compulsory, and Domitian allowed Ephesus the title of "guardian of his temple."

Praise and Rebuke: I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot tolerate evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false; and you have perseverance and have endured for My name's sake, and have not grown weary. (Rev 2:2-3)

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

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

Observation:

What the church of Ephesus did well:

- 1) The church discerned who was evil and disallowed them in their fellowship.
- 2) The church discerned who were genuine apostles and expelled those who were false. A short time later, Ignatius wrote to the church commending them for not giving a home to heresy.
- 3) Despite the pressure and influence of cult prostitution and worship of Artemis and the Imperial cult of Domitian, the church persevered as Christians.
- 4) The church disapproved the practices of the Nicolaitans. While little is known about this cult, it is believed to be associated with some form of early Gnosticism.

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The problem exhibited by the church of Ephesus appears to be righteous behavior without the deep love and devotion for Jesus Christ. The Believers were reminded of their original fallen sinful condition (Rev 2:5); serving God is in the context of agape love (see the article: God is Love at www.Helpmewithbiblestudy.org/1God/CharacterLove.aspx) and, like salvation, is not accomplished by one's own efforts.

Jesus calls upon the church of Ephesus to reflect upon their earlier work with agape love against their current work without it and repent and make the correction.

Promise to Believers: To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God (Rev 2:7; 22:1-2).

Smyrna

Jesus' description of Himself: The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life (Rev 2:8). Later in Revelation, Jesus says, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end" (Rev 22:13).

As first and last of the Greek alphabet, alpha and omega symbolize Jesus' role as the Creator and Judge of all human life and history (the beginning and end of human history). And His sovereignty comes into view as the One who died and rose again.

Background: Forty miles north of Ephesus was Smyrna. As an important seaport, it was a wealthy city and known for its science and medical education. Like Ephesus, it was a center for the Imperial Cult. A disciple of the apostle John, Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna, was burned at the stake in 156 A.D. for refusing to worship the Roman emperor (see the article: The Encyclical Epistle of the Church at Smyrna, Concerning the Martyrdom of St. Polycarp at www.Helpmewithbiblestudy.org/7Humans/DeathPolycarpMartyrdom.aspx).

Praise (rebuke is absent!): I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. (Rev 2:9-10)

Observation:

The church of Smyrna was recognized for their endurance of persecution, extreme poverty and suffering from slander.

- 1) Aware of their persecution by presumably other religions and cults, Jesus Christ commends the church of Smyrna of their unwavering faithfulness.
- 2) Aware of their extreme material poverty, perhaps a reflection of the economic cost exacted by an antagonistic society, Jesus Christ informs the Believers of Smyrna that their faith has made them rich (Rev 22:12).
- 3) Aware of the slander against them by ethnic Jews, Jesus Christ makes known that the Jews are not the true children of Abraham and that the source of their suffering is from followers of Satan. The implication is that anyone not worshipping Jesus is worshipping Satan.

Without any word of relief, the church of Smyrna is exhorted to endure more until death, because they apparently could. Of the seven churches addressed in Revelation, only Smyrna and Philadelphia were fully praised without any rebuke.

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Promise to Believers: He who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death (Rev 2:11; 20:11-15).

Pergamum

Jesus' description of Himself: The One who has the sharp two-edged sword (Rev 2:12).

John sees the two edged sword as coming out of Jesus' mouth (Rev 1:16). It is a figure of speech for the Bible, which is the record of God's word, of Jesus' word and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. God's word defines sin and is the basis of judgment. This figure of speech is seen elsewhere in the Bible:

And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. (Eph 6:17)

For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. (Heb 4:12)

Background: Located sixty five miles north of Smyrna, Pergamum was the provincial capital of Roman Asia. Second only to the library of Alexandria, the library of Pergamum contained almost two hundred thousand volumes. Among the many pagan religions worshipped there, the worship of Dionysus (god of royal kings) and Asclepius (god of healing) were prominent as well as having three temples for the Imperial Cult.

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

But I have a few things against you, because you have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit acts of immorality. So you also have some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Therefore repent; or else I am coming to you quickly, and I will make war against them with the sword of My mouth. (Rev 2:14-16)

Observation:

The church of Pergamum was commended for:

- 1) Despite the powerful idolatrous culture of Pergamum and the murder of faithful Believer Antipas, the church of Pergamum was noted for their loyal faithfulness to Jesus Christ.

The problem exhibited by the church of Pergamum appears to be the existence of false teachers within their congregation, one group that promoted the teaching of Balaam and another who promoted the Nicolaitans. These false teachers subverted the teachings of Jesus' godly morals and holiness.

Balaam, the pagan prophet who counseled the Moabite king Balak, caused Israel to sin (Num 31:16) by enticing them to cohabit and intermarry with pagan women and worship their idol (Num 25:1-2). 24,000 Israelites were judged for their submission to Balaam's temptation (Num 25:7-9).

The Nicolaitans, believed to be a form of early Gnosticism, likely promoted similar sexual immorality within the context of prevailing pagan worship.

Divine wars involve death, and Jesus calls upon the church of Pergamum to repent or face judgment for permitting teachings that contradict His.

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Promise to Believers: To him who overcomes, to him I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it (Rev 2:17).

The reference to “hidden manna” is difficult to understand, and it is not entirely clear if the “hidden manna” is a reference to Jesus Himself (John 6:48-58). Likewise the “white stone” is an enigma and the closest reference of a name being written on stone is on a pillar (Rev 3:12).

Thyatira

Jesus’ description of Himself: The Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet are like burnished bronze (Rev 2:18).

John describes Jesus’ eyes “like a flame of fire” and His feet “were like burnished bronze, when it has been made to glow in a furnace” (Rev 1:14-15). Daniel used a similar description for a heavenly figure (Dan 10:5-6). Perhaps significant is the presence of a bronze working trade guild that existed in Thyatira.

Background: Located forty five miles east of Pergamum, Thyatira was notable as a city of commerce utilizing the natural resources of the area and its associated trade guilds. Lydia, a seller of purple fabrics, was from here (Acts 16:14).

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

But I have this against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and she teaches and leads My bond-servants astray so that they commit acts of immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols. I gave her time to repent, and she does not want to repent of her immorality. Behold, I will throw her on a bed of sickness, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of her deeds. And I will kill her children with pestilence, and all the churches will know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts; and I will give to each one of you according to your deeds. But I say to you, the rest who are in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not known the deep things of Satan, as they call them—I place no other burden on you. Nevertheless what you have, hold fast until I come. (Rev 2:20-25)

Observation:

The church of Thyatira was commended for:

- 1) The work accomplished by the church of Thyatira was recognized for their motivation of love and faith and perseverance when persecuted. And their work for Jesus Christ was progressively getting better with time.

The problem exhibited by the church of Thyatira appears to be tolerating a prophetess within their congregation who led some into immoral behavior and idolatry. Her evil influence was like Jezebel the wife of king Ahab (874-853 B.C.). Jezebel was known for her wicked subversion by bringing in the worship of Baal (1 Ki 16:31-33), attempting to destroy all of the prophets of God (1 Ki 18:4), and influencing others to do evil (1 Ki 21:5-22; 2 Ki 9:22). Jesus Christ calls upon the church of Thyatira to repent and reject this prophetess and her followers (unless they repent). Jesus Christ’s condemnation is strongest towards the prophetess and her followers: repent or experience fatal judgment.

Promise to Believers: He who overcomes, and he who keeps My deeds until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations; and he shall rule them with a rod of iron, as the vessels of the potter are broken to pieces, as I also have received authority from My Father; and I will give him the morning star (Rev 2:26-28; 3:21; 20:6).

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Sardis

Jesus' description of Himself: He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars (Rev 3:1).

While Jesus explains the “seven stars” are the angels of the seven churches (Rev 1:20), there is little explanation of the “seven Spirits of God.”

Revelation 4:5 locates the “seven Spirits of God” as **being before the throne of God** as “seven lamps of fire.”

Out from the throne come flashes of lightning and sounds and peals of thunder. And there were seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God; (Rev 4:5)

Revelation 5:6 locates the “seven Spirits of God” **on the person of Jesus Christ** as “seven eyes.”

And I saw between the throne (with the four living creatures) and the elders a Lamb standing, as if slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God, sent out into all the earth. (Rev 5:6)

Most scholars understand the “seven Spirits of God” to be a reference to the Holy Spirit, and they see the prophet Isaiah describing the seven aspects of the Holy Spirit: 1) the Spirit of the Lord, 2) of wisdom, 3) of understanding, 4) of counsel, 5) of strength, 6) of knowledge and 7) of the fear of the Lord.

The Spirit of the Lord will rest on Him,
The spirit of wisdom and understanding,
The spirit of counsel and strength,
The spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. (Isa 11:2)

Background: Thirty miles southeast of Thyatira, the city of Sardis took advantage of its topography and became a militarily strategic city whose acropolis provided command of the important trade route passing through. Pagan worship flourished, and although incomplete, its Temple of Artemis was equal in size to the lauded temple in Ephesus. Sardis' wealth and luxurious living contributed to its moral decline and by the 5th century A.D. its citizens were mourned for their lethargy and dullness.

Rebuke (praise is absent!): I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead. Wake up, and strengthen the things that remain, which were about to die; for I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of My God. So remember what you have received and heard; and keep it, and repent. Therefore if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you. But you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their garments; and they will walk with Me in white, for they are worthy. (Rev 3:1-4)

Observation:

The problem exhibited by the church of Sardis appears to be a spiritually dead church. Jesus Christ's declaration, “but you are dead,” sets up the imperative to “wake up and strengthen the things that remain.” Scholars believe that Christ's encouragement to “remember what you have received and heard,” is a reference to the gospel and the teachings of the apostles. The call to repent is to recognize their sin of not holding fast to God's word as the few who have remained faithful. With little mention of the church of Sardis' deeds and their diagnosis of being dead, it implies that there was little distinction between their Christian life amidst the surrounding pagan culture.

Promise to Believers: He who overcomes will thus be clothed in white garments; and I will not erase his name from the book of life, and I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels (Rev 3:5).

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Philadelphia

Jesus' description of Himself: He who is holy, who is true, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, and who shuts and no one opens (Rev 3:1).

Describing Himself as sinless and as one whose actions correspond in historical reality with His words, Jesus' possession of the "key of David" is a significant indication that He is the fulfillment of God's covenant with David (2 Sam 7:8-17).

The "key of the house of David" is first mentioned in Isaiah 22:22, and the phrase was used in the figurative sense to mean "the covenant keeping authority." In this passage, Jerusalem was under threat by Sennacherib, and the palace administrator Shebna was involved with negotiating with Sennacherib's representatives (2 Ki 18:17-19:2). Judged for his attitude and action behind his elaborate tomb (Isa 22:15-20), Shebna is removed, and God appoints Eliakim who will be "a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the house of Judah" (Isa 22:21). Eliakim's authority is established with the figurative phrase, "then I will set the key of the house of David on his shoulder, when he opens no one will shut, when he shuts no one will open (Isa 22:22).

Jesus' possession of the "key of David" draws a line straight back to David Himself and asserts His kingly right and authority.

And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end. (Luke 1:31-33)

Background: Philadelphia, located twenty five miles southeast of Sardis, was situated on an important trade route that ran straight to Rome. Like other cities of Roman Asia, the religious environment included the Greek pagan culture and the Imperial Cult.

Praise (rebuke is absent!): I know your deeds. Behold, I have put before you an open door which no one can shut, because you have a little power, and have kept My word, and have not denied My name. Behold, I will cause those of the synagogue of Satan, who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie—I will make them come and bow down at your feet, and make them know that I have loved you. Because you have kept the word of My perseverance, I also will keep you from the hour of testing, that hour which is about to come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth. I am coming quickly; hold fast what you have, so that no one will take your crown. (Rev 3:8-11)

Observation:

The church of Philadelphia was recognized for being faithful in keeping Jesus Christ's word and not denying Him despite the pressure of their cultural environment. Scholars debate what the "open door" means, and most see it as a reference to God's kingdom – the church of Philadelphia had an open door to the kingdom of God. Like the praise of Smyrna, the phrase "the synagogue of Satan" was a reference to Jews who denied the Messiah. After the war of 70 A.D., many Jews in the Roman Empire distanced themselves from sects that promoted the Messiah and kingdom. Roman authorities, unofficially exempting Jews from worshipping the Emperor, viewed Christians with suspicion. In this light, Jesus Christ reminds Christians of their Jewishness and, for their perseverance, the church of Philadelphia will be exempt from the coming "hour of testing."

Promise to Believers: He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he will not go out from it anymore; and I will write on him the name of My God, and the name of the city of My God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God, and My new name (Rev 3:12).

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Laodicea

Jesus' description of Himself: The Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God (Rev 3:14).

Jesus' final description of Himself is one who is the sure and faithful testimony of the reality of God the Father and who was present at the beginning of Creation.

Background: Forty five miles southwest of Philadelphia was Laodicea. Located on the major trade route from Ephesus, the wealthy city was a financial banking center. Significant to the background of Laodicea was the existence of a six mile long aqueduct that brought water, which, as a consequence of transit, was always warm - neither hot nor cold upon arrival, and the presence of a renown medical school that produced a special ointment that cured certain eye problems.

Rebuke (praise is absent!): I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I wish that you were cold or hot. So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth. Because you say, "I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing," and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked, I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire so that you may become rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness will not be revealed; and eye salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see. Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; therefore be zealous and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me. (Rev 3:15-20)

Observation:

Ignorant of their spiritual poverty and need for the Savior, the church of Laodicea was criticized for their compromising faith life (or lack of). The pursuit of wealth supplanted their pursuit of holiness, which Jesus Christ encouraged the church to correct. Speaking in their terms, Jesus Christ exhorts the church or Laodicea to repent and invest in Him ("buy from Me gold") and buy His ointment ("eye salve to anoint your eyes") and build their lives upon the foundation of Christ (1 Cor 3:11-15). The church of Laodicea apparently had many members who thought were Believers but were in fact not.

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

Just before his message to the seven churches, the apostle John writes, "Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near." (Rev 1:3) As the apostle John describes Jesus' assessment of the seven churches, do you see your church here?

A church that promotes sound doctrine, discerns and removes false teachers, but serves without agape love. (Ephesus)

A church, whose members are quite poor, experience slander for their faith yet strong enough to endure and persevere under the circumstances. (Smyrna)

A church that has sound doctrine, but does not enforce a doctrinal standard, has teachers who embrace society's sexual norms and advocate that all religions are good. (Pergamum)

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A church, motivated by love and faith, places an emphasis on and does good work, but allows teachers that teach a different gospel and unfounded biblical doctrine; there are other ways to salvation. (Thyatira)

A church, teaching little about the gospel, preaches with a focus on Christian living echoing cultural values and with little basis on the Bible. (Sardis)

A church, faithful and evangelistic, is unapologetic for God's word despite prevailing cultural pressures. (Philadelphia)

A church, whose members are wealthy and prosperous, chooses to teach Christian values that are consistent with society's values and with an emphasis on the examples found in the life of Jesus; it avoids discussion about man's sin and Jesus' death of atonement. (Laodicea)

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