

# The Church Militant



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Rev. 2:1–7, Hos. 2:13, Rev. 2:8–17, Rev. 2:18–3:6, Isa. 60:14, Rev. 3:14–22.*

**Memory Text:** “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me” (*Revelation 3:20, NKJV*).

John was the last of the 12 apostles to die. As well as writing the Gospel and the Epistles that bear his name, he also wrote Revelation, which contributes much to our understanding of the great controversy. For now, though, we shall concentrate only on his description of the seven churches. We shall study them from the perspective of the original recipients, in order to enable us to glean as much from his words as possible.

One thing that stands out is that Jesus personalizes His approach to each church. They all have different needs, and He meets them all.

One challenge is that these churches are shown to be struggling with their identity, just as we are today. Are their members clearly lining up with Jesus and His calling to them toward witnessing to a dying world, or are they straddling both sides, trying to look like Christians but then privately being more comfortable with the powers of darkness? Though we see ourselves as the last of these churches, it will be clear that however different the circumstances, in many ways we face some of the same challenges that the churches faced through the ages.

\* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 19.

## The Church at Ephesus

In Revelation 2:1, Jesus is pictured holding the seven stars and walking among the lampstands as He addresses the church at Ephesus. These symbols point to significant realities. The lampstands are the churches, and the seven stars are angels tasked with caring for the churches (*Rev. 1:20*). In other words, there is a close connection between the churches and the throne of God in heaven. The churches have a crucial part to play in the great controversy.

**Read** Revelation 2:1–7. In what ways can we see the great controversy played out in these texts?

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The message to Ephesus begins with a description of its character. Jesus is fully aware of its strengths and weaknesses. He commends them for their activities, their patient perseverance, and their intolerance toward false teachers in their midst (*Rev. 2:2, 3, 6*), a clear warning that false doctrine should not be tolerated in the church. It seems that the church at Ephesus, originally enlisted by God in the struggle against darkness, has suffered a counterattack by Satan. It came in the form of false apostles, followers of Nicolas—perhaps one of the original seven deacons (*Acts 6:5*) but who had evidently formed a breakaway movement. Whatever their heresy, Jesus hated it (*Rev. 2:6*).

The trouble with the Ephesian church was that it had left its “first love” (*Rev. 2:4*). This is very similar to the language of the Old Testament prophets who likened the apostasy of Israel to a person chasing after illicit lovers (*for example, Hos. 2:13*).

The situation may look hopeless, but Jesus specializes in redeeming hopeless situations. First of all, He encourages His people to remember from where they have fallen and to get back to what they were doing in the first place (*Rev. 2:5*). This is not a call to turn the clock back to “the good old days”; rather, it is a case of using past experience to guide them into the future.

**“ ‘That you have left your first love’ ” (*Rev. 2:4, NKJV*). Why is that so easy to do? What happens to us, either individually or as a church, that could make our love for God grow cold? How do we keep a passion for God and His truth burning within us year after year?**

## Smyrna and Pergamum

To the church in Smyrna, Jesus is introduced as “‘the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life’” (*Rev. 2:8, NKJV*; see *Rev. 1:18*). To the church at Pergamum, Jesus is the one with the sharp two-edged sword held in His teeth (*Rev. 1:16, 2:12*).

**What** is the significance of the way Jesus is described for each of these two churches?

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Read Revelation 2:8–17. The church members at Smyrna are also known for their hard work; yet, they don’t have much to show for it, maybe as a result of a “synagogue of Satan” in their midst (*Rev. 2:9*). Similarly, the members at Pergamum seem to be clinging to their faith, even though “the throne of Satan” is among them (*Rev. 2:13*). Thus, the reality of the great controversy is seen here, as well.

The church at Smyrna is warned of tough times ahead, including prison and maybe even death (*Rev. 2:10*). In Pergamum someone already had been killed for his faith (*Rev. 2:13*). It is important to note that the hard times have a time limit; that is, evil is not allowed to continue beyond a certain point (*Rev. 2:10*).

Of concern is that God has “a few things” against the church in Pergamum (*Rev. 2:14–16*). Apparently they are tolerating people in their midst who “hold [to] the doctrine of Balaam” and to “the doctrine of the Nicolaitans” (*Rev. 2:14, 15, NKJV*).

“Nicolas and Balaam seem to be parallel terms; Nicolas is a compound Greek word (*nikaō* and *laos*) and means ‘the one who conquers the people.’ Balaam can be derived from two Hebrew words—*am* (‘people’) and *baal* (from *bela*, ‘to destroy’ or ‘to swallow’), meaning ‘destruction of people.’ ”—Ranko Stefanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ: Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 2002), p. 111. Jesus warns the whole church that if their heresy continues, He will come in person and fight against them with the sword in His mouth (*Rev. 2:16*).

Yet, even amid these warnings, Jesus gives both churches great encouragement (*Rev. 2:11, 17*).

**Read Revelation 2:14, 15. What do these verses tell us about the idea that doctrine does not matter? Why does it matter, and in important ways too?**

## Thyatira and Sardis

**Read** Revelation 2:18–3:6. What are some of the issues going on in these churches, and in what ways are we, as a church and as individuals, struggling with the same things? How is the great controversy revealed in these struggles?

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The introduction of Jesus to the church at Thyatira (*Rev. 2:18*) reveals an increasingly trying and perplexing time for the people of God. The metaphors of fiery eyes and feet of polished brass or bronze not only appear in Revelation 1:14, 15 but are also found originally in Daniel 10, where Daniel meets One whose eyes are like “torches of fire” and His feet “like burnished bronze” (*Dan. 10:6, NKJV*). Later at the time of the end, Christ will arise and rescue His people. When the situation is darkest for God’s people, God Himself will directly step in to deliver those whose names are found written in the book of life (*Dan. 12:1*).

Jesus is introduced similarly to the church in Sardis, as the One who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars (*Rev. 3:1, 5:6*). Here again is a Savior who is both actively involved behind the scenes and enlisting the powers of heaven to ensure the safety of His church.

The description of these two churches is of deep concern. In Thyatira, although things are improving (*Rev. 2:19*), they have been like Israel at the time of Queen Jezebel. Similarly, in Sardis, the people are spiritually dead (*Rev. 3:1*).

Despite all these issues, Jesus encourages the churches. He acknowledges many in Thyatira “‘who have not known the depths of Satan’ ” and encourages them to “‘hold fast . . . till I come’ ” (*Rev. 2:24, 25, NKJV*). There are also “a few” in Sardis “who have not defiled their garments” (*Rev. 3:4, NKJV*).

It is to these faithful ones that Jesus promises special blessing. He promises to give Thyatira the “morning star” (*Rev. 2:28*), which He later identifies as Himself (*Rev. 22:16*), and to Sardis He promises an assured place in heaven and that He will confess their names “before My Father and before His angels” (*Rev. 3:5, NKJV*).

**“Hold fast and repent.” What do you have to hold fast to, and what do you need to repent of? How are these two ideas powerfully related to each other?**

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## The Church at Philadelphia

**Read** Revelation 3:7. What are the ways that Jesus is introduced to this church? What do these descriptions tell us about Him?

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The church is commended for keeping Christ's word and for not denying His name, even though their strength appears to be quite weak (*Rev. 3:8*). Jesus makes an intriguing promise that members of the synagogue of Satan will soon come and pay homage to the Philadelphians (*Rev. 3:9*). This is taken from Isaiah 60:14, describing the oppressors of God's people prostrating themselves in submission, in direct contrast to all the harsh treatment that they had previously given to God's people. From this we may understand that the synagogue of Satan had been making life difficult for the early Christians. As we have seen, some of the previous churches struggled with those who were teaching error and causing problems—one of the ways that Satan works against the churches. Philadelphia, it seems, is the one who finally rids the church of this source of evil.

**Read** Revelation 3:10. How do you understand the perseverance of the Philadelphian church? How did Jesus promise to limit their trial? What does that mean for us today?

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It seems apparent that the Philadelphian church had passed through times as equally tough as the previous churches, but their attitude seems to have been different. This is the first church that Jesus doesn't specifically point out a failing that they need to work on. Their faith and their cooperation with God has been noticed and appreciated by the Savior, again despite their "little strength" (*vs. 8, NKJV*).

The promises to the overcomer from this church include being made a pillar in God's temple so that they no longer need to float in and out (*Rev. 3:12*). With the new names they are given, they are fully identified as belonging to God, maybe because they had already been identifying with God in all aspects of their lives previously.

**If you were suddenly in heaven, right now, how well would you fit in?**

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## The Church at Laodicea

Laodicea also gets some descriptions of Jesus: “ ‘the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness,’ ” and “ ‘the Beginning of the creation of God’ ” (*Rev. 3:14, NKJV*). These descriptions are key aspects of the divinity of Christ. The “Amen” is a reference to Isaiah 65:16, where the word *Amen* is translated “the God of truth” and is linked to the covenant. Jesus is the great covenant-keeping God, the God who keeps His promises of salvation and restoration. Jesus is also the Faithful Witness who testifies to His people about what God is really like (*Rev. 1:5, 22:16, John 1:18, 14:8–10*). He is also the Creator (*Col. 1:16, 17*).

**Read Revelation 3:14–22. What is Jesus telling this church to do? What do these words mean to us today?**

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After these first texts tell who Jesus really is, it is necessary to clarify who this church really is. In other words, we can really only know ourselves if we know God first. The people at this church have been fooling themselves to the point that what they think about themselves is the opposite of what they really are (*Rev. 3:17*). Jesus then pleads with them to take the necessary steps in order to have the clarity of vision needed to see things as they really are and, also, to be changed as they need to be changed (*Rev. 3:18*).

The alternative is divine judgment—in two phases. First, it may be necessary for a little old-fashioned parental discipline (*Rev. 3:19*); next, there is the possibility of God “spewing them” from His mouth, like a mouthful of putrid water (*Rev. 3:16*).

To this church that is so close to being cast out from the presence of God, the greatest promises are given. Jesus wants to linger over a meal with them (*Rev. 3:20*)—something reserved only for close friends. Then He promises them the opportunity to sit with Him on His throne (*Rev. 3:21*).

It is interesting to trace through the seven churches the developing phenomenon of God’s people growing cold and moving away from Him. How does this happen? It seems that although the battle has been won, some people are still persistently hanging on to evil and to the powers of darkness. There’s no question that as we look through the history of these churches, we can see the great controversy being made manifest and being expressed there. And thus, it will continue until the second coming of Jesus.

**Further Thought:** Thursday’s study touched on the divinity of Christ. Why is that so important? Ellen G. White wrote: “Since the divine law is as sacred as God Himself, only one equal with God could make atonement for its transgression. None but Christ could redeem fallen man from the curse of the law, and bring him again into harmony with Heaven. Christ would take upon Himself the guilt and shame of sin—sin so offensive to a holy God that it must separate the Father and His Son. Christ would reach to the depths of misery to rescue the ruined race.”—*God’s Amazing Grace*, p. 42. It’s simple logic: the law is as sacred as God; so, only a Being as sacred as God could make atonement for transgression of the law. Angels, though sinless, are not as sacred as their Creator, for how could anything created be as sacred as who created it? No wonder, then, that over and over Scripture teaches that Christ is God Himself. The sacrifice of Christ, in a sense, centers around the sacredness of God’s law. It was because of the law, or, more precisely, because of the transgression of the law, that Jesus—if we were to be saved—would have to die for us. Indeed, the severity of sin can be seen best in the infinite sacrifice needed to atone for it; that severity itself speaks to the very sacredness of the law itself. If the law is so holy that only the sacrifice of God Himself could answer its claims, then we have all the proof we need of just how exalted the law is.

### Discussion Questions:

- ① In class, discuss your answer to Wednesday’s question. What are the implications of your answers?
- ② “As I have of late looked around to find the humble followers of the meek and lowly Jesus, my mind has been much exercised. “Many who profess to be looking for the speedy coming of Christ, are becoming conformed to this world, and seek more earnestly the applause of those around them, than the approbation of God. They are cold and formal, like the nominal church that they but a short time since separated from. The words addressed to the Laodicean Church, describe their present condition perfectly.” —Ellen G. White, *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, June 10, 1852. Though these words were written more than one hundred fifty years ago, why do they apply so well to us, even today? What does this tell us about the myth of the early times of the church somehow being “the good old days”?

## From Broken Promises to New Life: Part 2

Francisco knew that many of the people at his mother's church knew of his past life. He was embarrassed to be seen. That Sabbath, the pastor spoke about the prodigal son. Following the sermon Francisco responded to the call to give his life to God. He knew that the only way to gain victory over Satan was to let Jesus fight his battles for him.

Francisco couldn't sleep, and his body craved the drugs, but he refused to give in. When the craving threatened to overpower him, he locked himself in his mother's house and sang praises to God and read his Bible until the craving passed.

Francisco drew great strength from fellowship with his new Christian friends, and he attended every church service he could. His former drinking friends teased him when they saw him walking to church carrying a Bible. Francisco began walking several blocks out of the way to avoid them. Then he told God, "For years I carried a liquor bottle without shame. Why am I ashamed to be seen carrying a Bible?" After that he walked by his friends, carrying his Bible. When they teased him, he said, "I realize my need for God; someday you will realize it too."

Francisco studied the Bible with a church member, and as its truths became more precious to him, he wanted to share his new love for God with Neide. He sent a message to tell her that he had become a Christian and asked if she would like to study the Bible too. Neide refused to believe him. But when she saw him later, she realized he had changed, so she agreed to study the Bible.

Francisco still loved Neide and asked her to marry him. She agreed, and soon after their baptism they were married. Francisco worked hard, purchased a small piece of land, and built a little one-room house.

He began searching for people in his neighborhood with whom he could study the Bible. Many of his neighbors had seen the change in Francisco's life and wanted to know more. Two months later his first convert was baptized.

The district pastor recognized Francisco's dedication and invited him to work full-time as a lay Bible worker. Since his first baptism several years ago, Francisco's zeal for Christ and his powerful testimony have led 1,000 people to Christ and helped establish six new Adventist churches. Sometimes he studies the Bible with up to 60 persons a day in small group settings.

He once asked his friends to pray for the owner of a dance hall, and a week later Francisco invited the owner to take Bible studies. The owner agreed, and eventually he was baptized. Now the dance club is a church.

The neighborhood in which Francisco and Neide live is filled with drugs and danger. But Francisco feels that God has called him to reach these people in a way most people cannot. And from the looks of it, he is.

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