

# 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 sees One whose eyes are like “torches of fire” and His feet “like burnished bronze” (*Dan. 10:6, NKJV*). Later at the end of time, 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?**

## 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" (*Rev. 3:8, 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 again and again 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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FRANCISCO HELDER BENICIO, *a lay Bible worker living in Fortaleza, Brazil.*



## The Lesson in Brief

▶ **Key Text:** *Revelation 3:20*

▶ **The Student Will:**

**Know:** Recognize that while the messages to the seven churches apply to the respective churches, and to the different periods of church history, they also apply to Christians in today's world.

**Feel:** Sense Christ's sympathetic assessment of our spiritual condition, both as individual believers and as church communities.

**Do:** Accept Christ's offer to be overcomers together with Him.

▶ **Learning Outline:**

**I. Know: Christ's Report Card: You Are Not Alone in the Struggle Against Evil.**

**A** How is Jesus described in each of the messages? And what do the messages tell us about how Christ meets our various needs?

**B** What are the indicators that the churches are struggling with an identity crisis?

**II. Feel: Christ Offers to Be With Us in Our Battles With Satan.**

**A** What should motivate us to accept Christ's candid assessment of our spiritual condition?

**B** What are the only means by which we can overcome the "synagogues" of Satan, as well as his other diabolical schemes?

**III. Do: Accepting Constructive Criticism Given in Love**

**A** If Jesus were to speak to you today (and He does) in the same way that He spoke to the seven churches, what might He say about your spiritual condition?

**B** How should we respond when a trusted friend offers feedback that depicts us in unfavorable light?

▶ **Summary:** The messages to the seven churches show that Christ is intimately connected with His church throughout history and has offered to dwell with us. Only then do we have hope of overcoming.

## Learning Cycle

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### ►STEP 1—Motivate

**Spotlight on Scripture:** *Revelation 3:20*

**Key Concept for Spiritual Growth:** Christ intends that church communities and the individuals in them should grow spiritually in relation to Him. Christ, the Physician, diagnoses each church’s true spiritual condition and prescribes what it is that each must do in its specific condition. Whatever spiritual reforms are necessary for each of us, we must all invite Christ, through faith, into our hearts so that He may live out His righteous life within us.

**Just for Teachers:** As you lead your class in the study of the messages to the seven churches, recognize that each of the messages also applies to individuals, as well as to local churches. Local churches or even entire denominations may experience unique sets of challenges and go through various phases of growth, just as individual members do. In whatever circumstance, Christ is right there in our midst, to guide, to correct, and to save.

**Opening Activity:** No human mind, no matter how brilliant and astute, can properly offer an accurate assessment of another person’s character (an assessment that we often call, or think of, as “judging”). However, Christ is well placed to assess our true spiritual condition. Invite class members to share thoughts, experiences, and ways in which they have reacted to constructive criticism, correction, and peer evaluation.

**Consider This:** David, after he was convicted of his sin with Bathsheba, declared, “Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. . . . Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me” (*Ps. 51:2, 10, NRSV*). Discuss this petition in light of the messages to the seven churches, calling for personal reformation.

### ►STEP 2—Explore

**Just for Teachers:** Christ’s messages to the seven churches are messages to us, as well. Our task is to recognize how those messages apply to us as individuals and as church communities.

## Bible Commentary

**I. I Know Your Works: Christ’s Report Card for Ephesus** (*Review Revelation 2:1–7 with your class.*)

The church at Ephesus is said to have practiced patient endurance amid difficulty; it cannot tolerate evildoers. The church has to contend with people claiming to be apostles. It is forced to test them against Scripture, and many are found to be false. The church has rightly rejected the false teachings of a group known as the Nicolaitans (*Rev. 2:6*). All these attributes and acts are commendable.

However, Jesus has a gentle rebuke for the church: “ ‘you have left your first love’ ” (*Rev. 2:4, NKJV*).

**Consider This:** What does it mean to abandon one’s first love?

## II. Christ the Chief Sufferer Understands When His Children Suffer (*Review Revelation 2:8–17 with your class.*)

To the church at Smyrna, Christ is introduced as the One who died and rose again (*Rev. 2:8*). This thought of Christ in His passion is what the church needed as it was about to be plunged into persecution. Some of the members would be thrown into prison and suffer affliction. The church is urged to be faithful until death (*Rev. 2:10*) if it expects to escape the second death (*Rev. 2:11*). And to Pergamum, Christ is the One who has a two-edged sword. This symbolizes the Word of God. The Word of God is the defense against heresy, which originates from Satan’s throne (*Rev. 2:13*).

But undergoing persecution does not in and of itself immunize the church against false teachings. There are among their own kind those who place stumbling blocks on the path of other believers. How sad that a church would go through persecution only for Christ to turn against it. This reminds us of Matthew 7:21–23, where many will claim to have performed wonderful things in the name of Christ only for Christ to declare that He never knew them.

**Consider This:** How is it possible for a person who served the Lord to be lost in the end?

## III. More False Teachings Threaten the Survival of the Nascent Church (*Review Revelation 2:18–3:6 with your class.*)

To Thyatira, Christ is introduced as the Son of God, One whose eyes are like a flame of fire (*Rev. 2:18*) and the One who searches minds and hearts (*Rev. 2:23*). Therefore, Christ knows Thyatira’s “love, faith, service, and patient endurance” (*Rev. 2:19, NRSV*).

The problem in Thyatira is that the church is too cozy with Jezebel, the false prophet and fornicator (*Rev. 2:20*), which seems to refer to a group of false teachers. As a result, some of the members have been

swept away by this doctrine of “the deep things of Satan” (*Rev. 2:24, NRSV*).

As for Sardis, the church is as good as dead (*Rev. 3:1*). The church has all but forgotten what it had “received and heard,” much less obeyed it (*Rev. 3:3*). Fortunately, there are a few in Sardis who have not “soiled their clothes” (*Rev. 3:4, NRSV*). Clearly, how else may the struggles faced by these churches—from false teachings and lethargy to spiritual dearth and bewilderment by “the deep things of Satan”—be explained other than the effects of the great controversy?

**Consider This:** Christ says that He knows their works (*Rev. 2:19, 3:1*). What works are being referred to here? What did the believers need to do in order for their works to be “perfect in the sight of my God” (*Rev. 3:2, NRSV*)?

#### IV. An “Open Door” and “Standing at the Door” (*Review Revelation 3:7–22 with your class.*)

The Philadelphian church is commended for keeping God’s Word (*Rev. 3:8*), in spite of its limited ability. It is assured of God’s love (*Rev. 3:9*) and promised that, if it conquers, it will bear the name of Christ (*Rev. 3:12*). Bearing someone’s name suggests intimate connection with that person, much like a child bears the name of his or her parents. It is not lost on readers that this is the only church that does not receive a negative assessment from Christ.

To the Laodiceans, on the other hand, Christ, the Faithful Witness, offers a stinging rebuke for its self-contentment. The church is oblivious to its utter depravity and blinded by its own self-importance. However, the message is given in love, as a parent to his wayward child (*Rev. 3:19*). Christ hopes that the Laodiceans will repent. Each promise that has reverberated throughout the messages to the seven churches continues to hold true for the Laodiceans as well: whoever conquers will sit with Christ on His throne, as He overcame and is seated with the Father on His throne (*Rev. 3:20, 21*). The language of conquest in these messages bespeaks the raging controversy between Christ and Satan.

**Consider This:** Is the message to the church of Laodicea the only one of the seven messages that is applicable to Seventh-day Adventists? Why, or why not?

### ►STEP 3—Apply

**Just for Teachers:** The messages to the seven churches comprise an invitation to spiritual self-assessment. They call for believers to examine

**themselves in the light of God’s Word. At their heart, the messages call for spiritual revival and reformation.**

**Thought Questions:**

❶ What does the infiltration of the Ephesian church by false teachers tell us about the great controversy? What does it reveal to us about our own susceptibility to deception?

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❷ According to Revelation 2:14, 15, why does doctrine matter?

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❸ What does the call to open the door and let Christ in mean to you?

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**Activity:** How would you react if a friend were to offer you a candid spiritual assessment of yourself, one that you know is true? What would you do? Remember what David did when confronted with his sin of adultery with Bathsheba (*2 Sam. 12:1–13, Ps. 51:1–14*).

**►STEP 4—Create**

**Just for Teachers:** **Opening yourself to Christ is the overarching theme of the messages to the seven churches. Encourage class members to invite Christ to abide in them by faith.**

**Activity:** Invite the congregation to suggest a hymn that brings out the theme of opening one’s heart to Christ. In the interest of time, it might be best for the teacher to select one in advance, informed by this week’s study. Invite the class to hum or sing in low tones, and invite a volunteer to pray at the conclusion.