

# GOD WITH US

## Part 12: THE APOCALYPSE

### Message 1 – Revelation 1-3

#### The Glorified Lord Addresses His Churches

#### Introduction

Revelation is the only N.T. book of prophecy concerning the future and the 2<sup>nd</sup> coming of Christ. The first words of the book are: *The apocalypse of Jesus Christ*, meaning, *the unveiling (revealing) of Jesus Christ*. This book is about the return of Christ and His unveiling as the King of kings and Lord of lords, culminating in His visible return in chapter 19. The bulk of the book (chs.4-19) depict the judgments of God falling on the earth and its people as a result of their rejection of His appointed ruler, Jesus Christ. A great struggle ensues as the “kingdom of Satan” rises up to resist God’s claim upon the earth. Satan appoints his own “anti-Christ” to rule the world and his kingdom stands for a short time, but then is defeated at the 2<sup>nd</sup> coming of Christ. After Jesus’ return, there is a 1,000-year period of time where Satan is bound and Christ rules on earth with His people (ch.20). Following that, Satan is released and mounts one final rebellion before meeting his ultimate end. Finally, John sees the coming of the new heavens and new earth, where God dwells with His people forever (chs.21,22).

#### The Greeting: 1:1-7

***“The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants, the things which must shortly take place; and He sent and communicated it by His angel to His bond-servant John, who bore witness 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” (1:1-3).***

The future “unveiling” of Jesus Christ to the world was shown to John, so that he could communicate it to the world. A blessing is pronounced over those who take diligent heed to the things written in this book, contrasted with the closing curse pronounced over those who add to or take away from these words (22:18,19). A sense of reality and seriousness pervades the book from beginning to end. These events *will happen* and the *must inform how we live in anticipation* of this final chapter of the story.

While the words of Revelation were for the whole world to read, they were originally sent to the seven churches of Asia Minor, over whom John presided as bishop.

***“John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace, from Him who is and who was and who is to come; and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne; and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the first-born of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To Him who loves us, and released us from our sins by His blood, and He has made us to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father; to Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen. 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. Even so. Amen (1:4-7).***

All three persons of the trinity are included in the opening greeting: *Grace to you and peace, from Him who is and who was and who is to come* (the Father); *and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne* (the Spirit – 7 represents the fulness of the Spirit); *and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the first-born of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth* (the Son). The *Son of God, Jesus*, is given the most space in the greeting (all of verses 5-7). Clearly, Jesus Christ is the main person in the story that is to follow. The last verse (1:7) announces the message of the entire book – *Jesus is coming* – and echoes the closing words to the same effect (22:20 – *Yes, I am coming quickly*). John combines two O.T. prophecies concerning the Messiah – Daniel 7:13 and Zechariah 12:10, both written about 500 years before John. In both of those O.T. visions, the prophets saw God’s appointed Savior-King coming into the world to receive great glory and an everlasting kingdom. They also saw people from every nation bowing to the authority of this God-sent King. These are precisely the same things John will see in his vision of the future, only John is given a much more detailed picture.

### **The Vision of Jesus Christ: 1:8-20**

The apostle John was in exile on the island of Patmos when he was given a vision of the exalted Christ – a vision so glorious that it sent him to the ground in a state of shock. It happened as he was worshipping God alone on a Sunday:

***“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 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.' And I turned to see the voice that was speaking with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands; and in the middle of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed in a robe reaching to the feet, and girded across His breast with a golden girdle. And His head and His hair were white like white wool, like snow; and His eyes were like a flame of fire; and His feet were like burnished bronze, when it has been caused to glow in a furnace, and His voice was like the sound of many waters. And in His right hand He held seven stars; and out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword; and His face was like the sun shining in its strength. And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as a dead man. And He laid His right hand upon me, saying, 'Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades. Write therefore the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall take place after these things. As for the mystery of the seven stars which you saw in My right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches'" (1:8-20).*

The exalted Lord appears as a glorious King/Priest clothed in majesty, power and authority. He identifies Himself as *"the Alpha and Omega, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty (v.8) and "the first and the last, and the Living One" (v.17)*. His death, resurrection and ascension have granted Him authority over the realms of life and death. John, who was very close to the earthly Jesus, was shocked by this appearance of the unmasked glory of the exalted Christ.

### **Messages to the Seven Churches: 2:1 – 3:22**

The exalted Lord's first order of business was to address the current condition of His "lampstands," the seven local churches in the province of Asia Minor. They were His witnesses to the world, thus He was concerned with their condition and the quality of the light they are shining forth.

- **To Ephesus: 2:1-7.** Ephesus was the leading city in the region, and the church there was the central location from which the other churches in the region were planted. What happened in Ephesus was very determinative for the whole area, thus, this church was addressed first.

***“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. But I have this against you, that you have left your first love” (2:2-4).***

Ephesus was strong in deeds, doctrine and discipline; but these people had *lost their first love for Jesus*. He admonished them to *return to their first love* or else He would bring the life of that church to an end.

***“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” (2:5).***

Maintaining correct ideas about Jesus is critical, as we learned from the study of 1John. Yet, our relationship with Jesus is not primarily about correct ideas, rather, it is about LOVE – His love for us and our love for Him in return. What better way to rekindle your love for Jesus than to think back to the way you responded to and related with Him in the early days of your relationship with Him. How did you feel toward Jesus when you first became a Christian? What things did you do to respond to His love? Reading His Word; talking to Him in prayer; telling others about Him; seeking to know His plan and walk in His ways; putting away other ‘gods’ and sinful habits . . . How can you do those same kinds of things today so as to rekindle your ‘first love’ for Jesus?

- **To Smyrna: 2:8-11.** The modern city of Izmir is the only one of these seven ancient cities still in existence. In John’s day, Smyrna was in competition with Ephesus to be recognized as the chief city of Asia Minor. It was also a center for emperor worship, which was probably why the Christians there were enduring unusually harsh persecution (from local Jews who were loyal to the emperor). The Lord *knew of their trials* and warned that a more intense but short period of persecution was coming, resulting in imprisonment and even death for some. He admonished them to not fear, rather, to endure this test so that they would be granted the reward of the crown of life.

***“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. He who has an ear,***

***let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death” (2:9-11).***

History has preserved for us the story of the martyrdom of Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna. You can do a search for “the death of Polycarp” and read the testimony he gave as he was dying. This one account will give you an insight into how many of the Christians of Smyrna lived and died for their faith in the late first and early second centuries.

*The words “do not fear” occur 57 times in the Bible, beginning with God’s words to Abraham in Genesis 15:1, and ending with this reference in Revelation 2:10. The basis for not fearing is our knowledge that God is a shield to His children in every generation. He is the “first and the last, the One who was dead but who has come to life” (Rev.2:8). He is sovereign in every time and place. Nothing touches us that does not first pass through the filter of His will for us. Thus, we do not need to constantly fear what people might do to us. We can rest with confidence, even in life’s trials, knowing that He is in control and will reward us in the end with the crown of life. Are you resting in Him amidst your earthly trials?*

**- To Pergamum: 2:12-17.** Reading this section, we are struck by the fact that Jesus twice says that Satan has a stronghold in Pergamum.

***“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” (2:13).***

Perhaps the dual mention of Satan’s presence was referring to the massive temple of Zeus, with its huge forty-foot-high altar on a ledge of rock overlooking the city (which looked something like a throne). But the city also was home to temples for Athena, the patron goddess of Asia, and Dionysus, the god of the royal kings, and Asklepios, the god of healing. Along with such religious diversity, the city also was home to the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest library in the ancient world, with some 200,000 volumes. Whatever the source, we know that the Christians in this city faced immense challenges to their faith. We are told of a man named Antipas, who was martyred for his devotion to Jesus. Yet, in spite of the faithfulness of a few, there was a tendency among the many to lose their grip on truth.

***“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” (2:14-16).***

The story of how the pagan prophet Balaam seduced the people of Israel into idolatry and sexual sin is found in Numbers 22-24. Something similar was happening in Pergamum. The teachings of Nicolas were causing the people to dabble in idol worship along with the sexual immorality that accompanied the worship of many of the pagan gods and goddesses. In the pagan temples, male and female prostitutes were part of the official priestly core. 1Corinthians dealt with similar pagan religious practices creeping into the church. Paul even points to the same incident with Balaam to warn the church of the danger of being led into religious and moral compromise (see 1Cor.10:1-13).

Jesus called the church at Pergamum to repent of their compromises. The “sword of His mouth” refers to the Word of God, which is our guide for our beliefs and our conduct as the people of God. Everything we believe or practice must align with the Word of truth.

*Antipas was faithful to resist Satan’s attack at the “front door” of outright persecution. But this group of believers was falling prey to Satan’s attack at the “back door” of deceptive seduction. Maintaining orthodoxy (right doctrine) is important; but so is maintaining orthopraxy (right practice). How about you? Are you as concerned for right behavior as you are about right beliefs? Are you thinking as much about your Christian duties as you are about your Christian doctrines?*

**- To Thyatira: 2:18-29.** The smallest of the cities received the longest of the letters – which proves that the size of the church is not what matters to the Lord. Unlike other cities, Thyatira’s challenge did not come from some lofty Greco-Roman religion, some world-famous library, or some emperor-worship cult; rather, from the life of the working class who were involved in the labor unions. The various trade guilds in that day were typically associated with the worship of a particular deity, accompanied by devotion to the festivals and activities that went with that particular god or goddess. In Thyatira, the church’s purity was being challenged by the involvement of its members in these trade guilds, leading to moral and spiritual compromise.

***“I know your deeds, and your love and faith and service and perseverance, and that your deeds of late are greater than at first. 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” (2:19-21).***

“Jezebel” was probably a symbolic name for a female teacher in Thyatira who was introducing idolatrous practices and immorality (based on the O.T. female character Jezebel, who acted similarly in Israel). This church was full of activity and service; but was falling prey to the moral compromise introduced by this woman, perhaps in connection with the trade guilds mentioned above. The Lord of the churches warns that He will judge not only Jezebel, but also her children (those who follow in her teachings and practices.)

***“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. 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 (2:22-28).***

Those who followed Jesus and resisted the teachings of Jezebel were promised a share in the rule and authority of Jesus over the nations.

*Think about how you live and act when you are in an environment that is not directed by Christian values (eg. at work, on a team, at school, at the gym, with a group of friends, on a committee, etc.). Which direction is the influence flowing? Are you having a ‘salt and light’ kind of influence on the people in that environment as you stand firm and live out your faith in Jesus? Are people able to see that you “march to a different drumbeat?” Or, are the people in that setting shaping you by their values and practices, causing you to compromise your Christian principles?*

**- To Sardis: 3:1-6.** Sardis had a reputation as a “once great city.” 600 years before it was the capital of the kingdom of Lydia during the reign of King Croesus. But the city twice fell to foreign powers when the watchmen on the walls did not remain awake. The Lord’s admonition to stay “awake” would have caught their attention, as would his

warning: *“If therefore you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come upon you.”* There was also a famous royal burial ground near Sardis, the valley of “a thousand mounds.” Perhaps this came to mind when Jesus rebuked the church for being “dead.” Here was a church that was resting on its reputation, rather than remaining fully active in the present. Jesus saw their activity and knew they *“had a name,”* but He also saw that their spiritual lives were nearly dead.

***“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. Remember therefore what you have received and heard; and keep it, and repent. If therefore you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come upon 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. He who overcomes shall 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. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (3:2-6).***

Sardis was the “once-upon-a-time great city.” The church of Sardis was the “once-great-church.” Today there are churches that, in bygone years, were once great in their devotion to Christ. Their reputation in the community was powerful and tangible. They were making a difference in their world. They were growing and seeing many lives changed. New churches were being birthed and new leaders being sent out. But then time passed and the place that was once very alive is now on life support. This is why it is so critical for churches to always be thinking about the NEXT generation, not just the present one. How can we raise up godly young leaders, and empower them to lead us? How can we reach out to the next generation of those who do not yet follow Jesus? How can we increase the percentage of our congregation that is under 35? How can we make the ministries we offer relevant to the next generation, without compromising the message of Christ? How can we grow and expand, rather than stagnate and contract? The church that is not thinking about the future will, in a matter of years, become the church of yesterday . . . the Sardis of our times.

Note: The “book of life” is referred to throughout Revelation (3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:12,15; 21:27), becoming the focus of attention at the final judgment of all humanity. One’s name must be in the book of life in order to enter the eternal city. It was common in ancient cities to have



a citizen registry – a list of people who were regarded to be citizens, not just visitors or transients passing through. When people had moved away from a city, or found to be unworthy citizens, their names would be erased from the city registry. When Jesus refers to someone's name being blotted out from the book of life He was not saying that people can lose their salvation (an idea that would contradict much clear teaching elsewhere in the N.T.). Rather, He was using a metaphor to say that there are real citizens of heaven and there are pretend citizens. In the end, only the true children of God will enter the eternal city. (See Matthew 7:21-23 where Jesus expresses this idea quite clearly.)

- **To Philadelphia: 3:7-13.** 300 years earlier, Philadelphia was founded in order to be a “missionary city” for the dispersion of Greek culture and literature throughout the world. It was regarded as a “doorway” for the advancement of ideas. How fitting, then, that Jesus Christ comes to the church of Philadelphia and tells them that He has set before them “*an open door which no one can shut.*” This church was being given a unique opportunity to be the doorway for the message of Christ to go out to the world.

***“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, says this: “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” (3:7,8).***

The reminder that Jesus holds the key of David (key of the kingdom) would have encouraged the Christians in Philadelphia. Nothing in their circumstances was beyond His control. They may have felt like a small, powerless minority, yet they needed to be reminded that the King of kings was on their side, and no agenda on earth can thwart His plan. The success of their mission did not depend on their own power, rather, on the power of Christ that would be manifested through them as they remained faithful to Him. Yes, there would be opposition; but Jesus would cause the opposition to fall at the feet of His people so that all would know that Jesus loved His bride (the church).

***“Behold, I will cause those of the synagogue of Satan, who say that they are Jews, and are not, but lie – behold, I will make them to come and bow down at your feet, and to 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 upon the earth. I am coming quickly; hold fast what you have, in order that no one take your crown. 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 upon 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. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (3:9-13).***

A healthy church is always looking for the “open doors” of opportunity that God is placing before His people. It is not up to us to create open doors, or to force doors open; rather, it is up to us to ask God to clearly show us His open doors. It is ONLY those doors that we, His people, should walk through with full faith that no matter what awaits us on the other side of the door, we will be used by God for His purposes and protected by Him in ways that correspond to His plans. What is true for the church as a whole is also true for us as individuals. What “open doors” has God placed before you? Are you asking Him for those doors? Are you ready to walk through them when He shows you what/where they are?

- **To Laodicea: 3:14-22.** Laodicea was known for several things. First, it was a very wealthy city. Second, their garment industry produced a special tunic and special fabrics. Third, it was a medical center producing a special eye ointment. Fourth, the city was known for its *lack* of fresh water. The city received water through an aqueduct that ran from a spring some five miles away. By the time the water reached town it was lukewarm. Jesus uses these familiar images to deliver a rather stinging rebuke to the Laodicean church. They were not very wealthy, in His estimation. They were spiritually quite naked. Their spiritual eyes needed healing; and their overall temperature, like their water supply, was lukewarm. In love, Jesus called this church to see its condition as He saw it and to make the necessary changes.

***“I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I would 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, that you may become rich, and white garments, that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and eye salve to anoint your eyes, that you may see. Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; be zealous therefore, 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. 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. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” (3:15-22).***

It is striking to see how wrongly the Laodicean Christians estimated their spiritual condition. They were blind to the desperation of their own mediocrity. They had three positive evaluations of their own condition: rich, wealthy, needing nothing. Jesus had five negative evaluations of their condition: wretched, miserable, poor, blind and naked. They had slid into a stupor of self-deception concerning their relationship to God. They were lukewarm and they don't even know it. He calls them to *“be zealous.”* He is commanding them to *turn up the heat on their spiritual lives.*

It is a striking display of *the sincerity of Christ's love* that while at the beginning of this letter He was so repulsed by their condition that He was ready to vomit them from His mouth, by the end of it He offered them an invitation to *dine with Him in sweet fellowship!* Jesus wanted very much for them to walk in sweet fellowship with Him. The opportunity was theirs, if they would take it. But He would not force the dinner invitation upon them. As always, He knocks; but we must open the door and respond to His ever-gracious initiation.

*Mediocre, half-hearted living is not an acceptable way to respond to Him who died for us! Extravagant love calls for an extravagant response. How might Jesus be inviting you to walk in closer fellowship with Him? How is He “knocking on the door” asking to dine with you? And how are you responding to His invitation to closer fellowship? Is there some change that needs to be made in your schedule, to make more time for your relationship with Him? Is there something that needs to be removed from your life, to reflect your single-minded devotion to Him? Is there some opportunity that He has repeatedly placed before you that you have been hesitating on? Remember, all throughout life, Jesus stands at the door and knocks, seeking entrance into the central place in our lives.*

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Which of Jesus' messages to the churches most challenged you?
2. How does the picture of the glorified Lord (ch.1) shape your view and understanding of Jesus?
3. If Jesus gave a short message to you, today, about your relationship with Him, what do you think He would say to you? To our church?