

A SEVENFOLD METHOD  
OF STUDYING

The Epistles

TO THE

Seven Churches.

Paper read at the Women's Branch  
of the Prophecy Investigation Society,  
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# THE EPISTLES TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES.

AD. 100 200 300 400 500 600 700 800 900 1000 1100 1200 1300 1400 1500 1600 1700 1800 1900 2000

Ephesus.

Smyrna.

AD 164 AD 204  
Began persecution.

AD 196 Edius AD 186 Edict of Nerva  
Papal persecution. revoked.

Pergamos.

AD 316 Constantine.

Thyatira

AD 590 1st pope

AD 1517 Luther.

Sardis

AD 1519 Protest of Princes

Philadelphia

AD 1739 Wesley

Laodicea.

## A Sevenfold Method of Studying the Epistles to the Seven Churches.

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WE find from the later books of the New Testament that two great revelations were given by our ascended Lord to His people upon earth. Both were given to "prisoners of the Lord": the first to the Apostle Paul in the prison at Rome, the second to the Apostle John in his captivity in the island of Patmos. (How often have we been indebted to persecuted saints for fresh glimpses of His truth.) The one was the "revelation" of "the mystery," "that the Gentiles should be fellow-heirs, and of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ by the Gospel" (Eph. 3. 3, 6); the other was "the Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto Him, to show unto His servants things which must shortly come to pass" (Rev. 1. 1). The one, according to our Bibles, is addressed "to the saints which are at Ephesus"; the other "to the seven churches which are in Asia." But there is very good reason to believe that the Epistle which we know as the Epistle to the Ephesians was not addressed exclusively to them, but was also intended originally for the same group. It is thought that it was probably the letter to Laodicea referred to in Colossians 4. 16, for it is called by that name in a list of the Epistles made by Marcion in the year A.D. 140; and in some of the New Testament manuscripts, notably the Vaticanus and the Sinaiticus, the words "at Ephesus" are omitted, as though it were a circular letter, the names of the various churches being added as required. It is therefore very probable that these two great revelations were addressed to the same seven churches in

Asia of which Ephesus was the most prominent, and that they were representative of all the churches of this dispensation. The seven which we know were thus selected to be the recipients of the great apocalyptic visions, were in the chief cities in the Roman province of "Asia"—not scattered throughout the whole of Asia Minor, but all situated in the one important Roman "region" called Asia.

We naturally ask why they were so favoured instead of the churches at Jerusalem, Rome, or Corinth, or groups of churches in Galatia or Macedonia. We see from the Acts of the Apostles that the province of Asia was very specially favoured in the ministry of Paul. In Acts 19. 10 we read that he continued at Ephesus "by the space of two years, so that all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus"; and again (in ver. 22), when Timothy and Erastus went into Macedonia, "he himself stayed in Asia for a season." When he was about to leave them (chapter 20. 17-27) "he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church. And when they were come to him he said unto them, Ye know, from the first day that I came into Asia, after what manner I have been with you at all seasons . . . how I kept back nothing . . . for I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God." "By the space of three years" (ver. 31) he laboured amongst them.

The believers in this province were thus privileged to hear from the lips and from the pen of the great Apostle to the Gentiles, the very highest teaching concerning the distinguishing privileges of believers in this dispensation. This is sometimes spoken of as "Ephesian truth." Is there not a connection between this revelation of the mystery given to the Apostle Paul, and the revelation entrusted to the Apostle John for the same churches some thirty years later?\*

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\* The Epistle to the Ephesians was written A.D. 61 or 62, the Revelation, according to Irenaeus, "towards the end of Domitian's reign," i.e., A.D. 93 to 96.

We must not forget that the whole book of the Revelation was addressed to them, not merely the seven letters of chapters 2 and 3. In the closing chapter (ch. 22. 16), the Lord Jesus is still addressing them: "I Jesus have sent Mine angel to testify unto you these things in the churches"; and each of the seven letters was meant for the other six as well, for the sentence is repeated in each, "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches."

There are some students of prophecy who teach that the Apocalypse is entirely Jewish, that the whole of it is intended in its primary interpretation for days to come, after the close of this dispensation; but to see the interesting and important connection between Ephesian truth and Apocalyptic vision is to dismiss this theory from our minds. The fact that the book of the Revelation was addressed to these seven churches in Asia refutes it. Not that I would suggest for a moment that the visions themselves, from chapter 4 to chapter 22, refer to the time of the church dispensation, but that the whole book is a remarkable illustration of the words of the prophet Amos (chap. 3. 7), "Surely the Lord God will do nothing, but He revealeth His secret unto His servants the prophets." The Lord is putting into practice His own words, "I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard of My Father I have made known unto you"; and God gave to Him the Revelation "to show unto His servants things which must shortly come to pass."

We may therefore conclude that the saints of this dispensation are not only privileged above all others with respect to their heavenly calling, but are also here taken into the secret counsels of the King, into the place of fellowship with their Head. What wonder, then, that there is a special blessing attached to the reading and hearing of this Book!

Another reason for the selection of the seven

churches of Asia would probably be their connection with the ministry of the Apostle John. They must have been well known to him. Tradition tells us that he lived in Ephesus, and that "Mary the mother of Jesus" made her home with him there. The island of Patmos was about forty miles from the mainland of Asia Minor, and the nearest coast was the province of Asia.

With reference to the periods to which the letters to the seven churches may apply, we learn an important principle from the Lord's own words. In the opening chapter of the "Revelation of Jesus Christ," for it is a revelation of Himself as well as of things to come, He describes Himself as "the Lord which is, and which was, and which is to come"; and what is true of the Incarnate Word, is true, in this respect as in so many others, of the written Word. Not only do some portions of it refer to the past, some to the present, and some to the future, but the same Scripture may have this threefold application. Just as the prism, which breaks up the beam of white light into the rainbow-coloured spectrum, is three-sided, so we do well to recognise this great principle of threefold Bible interpretation. We thus see that the portion of the Book which we are to consider this morning may refer to different periods—

1. The lifetime of the Apostle—its "was" character ;
2. The consecutive eras of the whole dispensation, a prophetic interpretation, including "was, is, and is to come";
3. The present time as to its practical teaching for all the churches—its "is" character; and it may even refer to
4. The future in another "is to come" application, in the days after the Lord's people of this dispensation have been gathered to meet the Lord in the air.

The Bibles will still be left, and it may be that many will be awakened; a believing remnant will be gathered out of Israel, and "a great mul-



titude which no man could number " will be the result of their testimony. Possibly these letters will then have a special significance, but of this we know nothing. It is in connection with their application to the first three of these periods that I wish to suggest a sevenfold method of studying these wonderful epistles, which were actually dictated by our Lord Jesus from the glory.

I.—*Local colouring.* First we may consider them in connection with their local colouring. They were addressed to actual cities existing in the days of the apostle.\* Recent discoveries prove that the Emperors of Rome often addressed letters to the cities of the Empire. Several such inscriptions are known, including fragments of six imperial letters to Ephesus, three to Smyrna, at least seven to Pergamos, and one that is possibly addressed to Sardis.

In the epistles to the seven churches we find many links with the discoveries of archæology and history which add a special meaning to the words.† The first of the seven was **Ephesus**, where stood one of the seven wonders of the world, the great temple of Diana, "whom all Asia and the world worshippeth." But there was another temple at Ephesus—"a holy temple in the Lord," and the epistle to the church in Ephesus is from Him who walketh in the midst of the "seven candlesticks" belonging to this temple.

The promise addressed to the overcomers in the church at **Smyrna** was strikingly appropriate: "Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life." It would have a special meaning to all the citizens, for there was one feature of the city in which they took the utmost pride. The "Crown of Smyrna" was a wonderful street encircling the hill of Pagos, and containing a ring of magnificent buildings.

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\* Ephesus, Pergamos, Sardis and Laodicea are to-day in ruins, but Smyrna, Thyatira and Philadelphia still remain.

† See *Exploring in New Testament Fields*, Pickering & Inglis, 1/6 net, from which several of these paragraphs are taken.

Apollonius, one of their philosophers, refers to it and advises them to think more highly of a crown of men than of a mere crown of buildings. The Lord Jesus, in His comforting words to the persecuted believers, promises them a crown more enduring than either—"a crown of life."

In 1879 the great altar of Æsculapius was discovered at **Pergamos**. Many slabs were recovered on which were represented in high relief combats between gods and giants, between huge serpents and colossal figures. The curves of a great serpent outlined the steps of the staircase leading up to the summit of the altar, where the serpent-god, which is such a prominent object in the decorative scheme, was worshipped. There is probably a reference to this great altar in the words addressed to the church in Pergamos: "I know . . . where thou dwellest, even where Satan's seat is." But there is doubtless an allusion also to the historical fact that Pergamos was for several centuries the official capital of the province, and the chief seat of the Imperial cult. It had been the headquarters of paganism, and here Attalus II. handed over to Rome, in the person of Julius Cæsar, the title of Pontifex Maximus, which is still claimed by the Papal Pontiff.

Explorations in **Thyatira** have shown that it was a place celebrated for the number of its trade guilds. In the inscriptions which have been found, no less than ten of these guilds are mentioned—more than have been discovered in any other city in Asia Minor. It was a centre of commercial industry, and membership in one of these guilds conferred many privileges on masters and men. It may be that there is an allusion to this in the words of warning addressed to the church at Thyatira; for if Christian merchants or Christian artisans joined themselves in these pagan brotherhoods, they must have been in constant danger of being obliged to participate in idolatrous customs.

The history of **Sardis** adds great force to

the words of the Epistle. It was the scene of the defeat and final overthrow of Cræsus, the great Lydian king, in the year 546 B.C. Cræsus thought himself absolutely safe in his citadel. So strong was it, and so inaccessible, that he and his people had become over-confident, and had neglected to set a watch, though Cyrus was marching against him. The upper city was built on a lofty hill, and could only be approached, as they thought, by a well-fortified road. But there was one weak point on the north side. The rain had gradually washed away a cleft in the soft rock, and, discovering this, the Persians were able, one by one, to climb up the perpendicular cliff which had been left unguarded at this point; and, gaining the summit, they captured the city. The Lydian Empire, which had been the greatest power on earth before this time, was suddenly overthrown, through one night of carelessness.

When the warning voice of the ascended Lord came from the glory, bidding the church in Sardis "be watchful," their thoughts would at once go back to this well-known fact in the history of their city. No one in Sardis could fail to understand the allusion: "If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief" (as Cyrus came upon Cræsus); "and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee" (Rev. 3. 3). At the time that the letter was written the glory of Sardis had passed away. It had once proudly borne a great name, "The First Metropolis of Asia, of Lydia, and of the Greeks"; now, though it had a name to live, it was in reality "dead." Another event which had contributed to the downfall of Sardis was the great earthquake in A.D. 17.

The geographical position of **Philadelphia**, upon one of the greatest trade routes in the country, may be referred to in the words: "I have set before thee an open door." It was situated at the end of a long valley, leading from the sea-coast; while beyond there stretched out the

great plateau of central Asia Minor. The severe earthquake in A.D. 17 which destroyed Sardis was equally disastrous to Philadelphia; and Strabo tells how the inhabitants were for a long time so terrified that they preferred to live outside the walls in the open country, in huts and booths. Those who remained in the city took all the precautions they could against further shocks of earthquake, and did their best to strengthen and support the tottering walls. The promise to the overcomers in Philadelphia has a fresh meaning when we link it with this terrifying memory. "Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of My God" (in a building which will never be shaken by an earthquake), "and he shall go no more out"—he will never need to fly, for it stands for ever.

The Philadelphians were always in fear of earthquakes, for that of A.D. 17 was not the only one by which they had suffered. There is a great earthquake of tribulation coming to this world, but the promise is given to the faithful in Philadelphia, "Because thou hast kept the word of My patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth" (Rev. 3. 10).

After the great earthquake Philadelphia was rebuilt by the bounty of the Emperor, and probably it was in commemoration of this that the city was honoured by being allowed to assume the name *Neokaisereia*. It is not certain whether the new Cæsar, after whom it took this name, was Tiberius or Germanicus, but the city's "new name" has been found on coins of the period. Its adoption meant that the city was consecrated in a special way to the service and worship of the Emperor. It wrote upon itself the name of Cæsar, to whom it ascribed divine honours.

At first the old name continued to appear, but after a time the new name was used alone, but not for long: the old gradually came into use again, and at about A.D. 42-50 the new had

been entirely dropped. It was only a memory when the letters to the seven churches were written, and the Philadelphians were not proud of it. What a contrast was afforded in the promise: "I will write upon him the Name of My God, and the Name of the city of My God, which is New Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from My God: and I will write upon Him My new Name"—a Name of which he will never be ashamed.

**Laodicea** was a wealthy and prosperous city. At the time of another great earthquake (A.D. 60), when others required assistance from the Imperial treasury, it was able to recover itself without any assistance. It was, as regards Imperial help, "rich," and had "need of nothing." The city was celebrated for the manufacture of a soft black wool and for costly garments which were made from it. It was famous throughout the whole Roman Empire for its school of medicine; and the "Phrygian powder" mentioned by Aristotle and Galen, from which the celebrated eye-salve was made, came from Laodicea. Galen also mentions an ointment, prepared specially in this city, which was used for strengthening the ears.

In all these particulars, therefore, the characteristic features of Laodicea, and its history, had a definite bearing upon the solemn words addressed to the Laodicean church. Instead of the wealth that made them independent of the Imperial treasury, the Lord counselled them to seek the divine gold; instead of the luxurious garments which they manufactured for themselves, He would give them white robes; instead of the eye-salve which their famous oculists prescribed, and which could never remove their blindness, His eye-salve would make them see; and finally, the ears anointed by Himself would be able to hear the voice of Him who had been left outside.

II.—*The vision of the Lord in Revelation I.*  
It is important to study the seven epistles in con-

nection with the vision of the Lord in the opening chapter. Sentence after sentence is again made use of by Himself in the inscriptions of the letters. Thus He is described in the first chapter as having the seven stars in His hand, and walking in the midst of the candlesticks. To the angel of the church of Ephesus He writes : " These things saith He that holdeth the seven stars in His right hand, who walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks."

To Smyrna He proclaims Himself as " the first and the last, which was dead and is alive." These were His very words to John when he fell at His feet as one dead, and the Lord laid His right hand upon him and said, " Fear not."

And so with the other epistles. The inscription of the letter to Philadelphia is rather different from the expression in Rev. 1 which speaks of His having " the keys of hell and death." To the church He writes : " These things saith . . . He that hath the key of David, He that openeth and no man shutteth ; and shutteth and no man openeth." But this includes all doors.

There are two sentences in the description in the first chapter which the Lord does not make use of in the letters. He does not describe Himself as the One whose voice is " as the sound of many waters," nor as Him whose " countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength." The churches on earth do not thus hear His voice, nor can they yet see the glory of His countenance. We must wait for this until we see Him " as He is." John heard it when (in chap. 4. 1) the door was opened in heaven, and he heard the first voice which said, " Come up hither "; and when we receive the welcome summons we, too, shall hear the voice that is " as the sound of many waters," and shall see the countenance that is " as the sun shineth in his strength."

The description which the Lord gives of Himself in each letter is specially appropriate to His message and to the condition of the church He addresses. Thus He reminds the persecuted

believers in **Smyrna** that He "was dead and is alive." This is why He could say "Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer." He reveals Himself as Him "which hath the sharp sword with two edges" when He reproves the church at **Pergamos** for the evils that had crept in. He reminds **Thyatira** that His eyes are like a flame of fire and His feet like fine brass to judge the wickedness introduced by "that woman Jezebel." To **Sardis**, which has a name to live but is dead, He is the One who can give life, for He "hath the seven Spirits of God." To **Philadelphia**, before whom He has set "an open door," He is the One who has the key "that openeth and no man shutteth"; and to the lukewarm church of the **Laodiceans** He is "the faithful and true Witness." There is no mistake in His judgment, though it is so entirely opposed to their estimate of themselves. Many other lessons may be gathered from these wonderful descriptions of Himself, but these are only suggestions for a line of study.

III.—*The Chronological and Prophetic Outlook.\** It has often been pointed out that the Lord Himself divides the book of the Revelation into three divisions—"the things which thou hast seen, the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter" or "after these." The divisions doubtless refer to the vision in chapter 1—"the things which thou hast seen"; the letters to the seven churches, "the things which are"; and chapter 4. 1 (where the expression is repeated) to the end of the book, "the things which shall be after these." But at the same time there is in the letters to the seven churches the double character, the "is" and "is to come" meaning. They evidently form a prophetic outlook over the whole dispensation. They are included in the expression, "the words of this prophecy" (chapter 1. 3). They are the "things which must shortly come to pass." If they only

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\* See Diagram.

referred to the time then present in the actual churches, there would be no "mystery" of "the seven candlesticks which are the seven churches." This explains another reason why these seven were selected; they were marked in the days of the apostle by the special characteristics which would also mark periods of church history.

Viewing them as a whole, we see that they show a gradual but steady decline. The churches are on the downgrade from the very beginning; they do not depict the final triumph of the gospel, the conversion of the world or even its improvement. There is a decrease of spiritual power, and an increase of positive evil, a spread of heresy. Thus deeds which were hated in the Ephesus period become doctrines which are tolerated in Pergamos (Rev. 2. 6, 15). The enemies are kept outside at first, but are actually inside the later churches. As there was deterioration in the political sphere of the Times of the Gentiles, from the gold to the admixture of iron and clay, so in the spiritual sphere of this portion of the Times of the Gentiles, the gold of Ephesus becomes the iron and clay of Laodicea, and the gold is wanting.

The **Ephesus** period represents the late apostolic days, the days of John himself, when first love was beginning to cool. A generation had passed since Paul's letter to the Ephesians had been written, and already all the churches had begun to depart from the teaching they had received from him. "By the space of three years (he) ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears," but his warnings had not been heeded. He said in 2 Tim. 1. 15, "All they which are in Asia be turned away from me."

The **Smyrna** period is marked by tribulation. It stretches from the first great persecution to the days of seeming prosperity under Constantine. "Ye shall have tribulation ten days." This probably refers primarily to the ten persecutions under the pagan Roman emperors, between the



years A.D. 64 and A.D. 309. But we cannot divide these seven periods by a hard and fast line; for though, as to their beginnings, they succeed one another, they also overlap, and will all continue till the Lord comes. The Smyrna period had already set in during the lifetime of the Apostle John. He himself was suffering captivity and exile at the hands of Domitian. Wherever there has been a faithful testimony against the evils in the churches—against the evils in any of the seven—there has been persecution, and in as far as this has been the case the Smyrna period continues to the end. The fires of Smithfield, the *auto-da-fé's* of Seville, though chronologically in the Thyatira period, belong also to Smyrna. This great Papal persecution may be counted from the persecution of the Lollards in England and from the martyrdom of John Huss in A.D. 1416 to the wholesale bloodshed that followed the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1683. But when the Smyrna period began the persecution was from without; the later martyrdoms were in the name of the "church."

**Pergamos** is marked by mixture, a thing which always spoils God's work; and the period was characterised by association with the world. The mention of Balaam shows this, for having failed to bring the curse upon Israel in one way, he tried to bring it in another by tempting Israel to make alliances with Moab and Midian when he knew that God meant them to be separate. "The people shall dwell alone," he had said (Num. 23. 9). After the so-called conversion of Constantine about the year A.D. 316, there was a great change in the history of Christianity. Instead of the pagan world becoming Christianised, the Christian churches became paganised. It now became the correct thing to be a Christian.

Another characteristic of Balaam was that he worked for hire (Neh. 13. 2) and for reward (Jude 11). We read in Num. 22. 7 that "rewards of divination" were brought to him, and in 2 Peter 2. 15 that he "loved the wages of un-

righteousness." This was characteristic of the period. Church histories give a terrible picture of the contests that took place at the elections of bishops and other dignitaries. There was often bloodshed, and men who were merely nominal Christians fought for these remunerative posts.

Students of church history have tried to find references to the Nicolaitanes mentioned in verses 6 and 15, but it is now generally believed that the word is not used in connection with a sect, but with the rise of clericalism, and that it is derived from the two words *niko*, I conquer, and *laos*, the people. The tendency had first appeared in the Ephesus period, but in Pergamos it had become very marked. We cannot name any date for the close of the Pergamos period, for who would say that these conditions have ceased to exist?

The **Thyatira** period is characterised by one great personality, "that woman Jezebel, which calleth herself a prophetess." Jezebel was a heathen queen with whom the king of Israel allied himself. She introduced paganism into Israel as never before, she persecuted and slew those who were true to Jehovah, and insisted on regulating the religion of the country, and thus brought famine upon the land. She would brook no opposition, and pretended to be a prophetess. She is a wonderful picture in type of the papacy, and we may therefore place at the commencement of the period the date of the first pope, A.D. 590. But there were overcomers even in Thyatira, and all through the centuries the Lord had His own, even in the Romish Church. As we sing the hymns of Bernard of Clairvaux we forget that the writer was a papist. The Reformers themselves sprang out of the papacy, and some of them never entirely severed their connection with it. Some students place the Reformation at the beginning of the Sardis period, but it seems better to include it in Thyatira. The Lord said, "I know thy works, the last to be more than the first." May not these words refer to the

Reformers—to Wycliffe in the 14th century, to John Huss in the 15th, and to Luther and the other great Reformers in the 16th? A.D. 1517 was the date on which Luther nailed his theses to church gates at Wurtemberg.

When **Sardis** came upon the scene the first brightness had passed away, for the promise of the Reformation had not been fulfilled. It all too soon developed into a lifeless protestantism, a political rather than a spiritual power. In 1529 the princes of Germany held their great meeting at Spires, and the followers of Luther entered their famous "protest."

There is a reference to the Lord's return in the epistles to Thyatira, Sardis, and Philadelphia, so we may be quite sure that all these periods continue to the end. The papacy of Thyatira and the protestantism of Sardis still characterise the days in which we are living; and we have a terrible illustration of what Sardis leads to in the condition of Germany to-day; for the state religion of that country is Lutheran or Protestant.

But there is a brighter side to the picture. **Philadelphia**, the church of "brotherly love," is also an aspect of present-day Christianity. It represents the days of revival and missionary enterprise that characterised the last century. It was in the middle of the 18th century that the great Methodist revival began under the preaching of the Wesleys and Whitfield. John Wesley was converted in 1737, and since that time there have been several gracious revivals. The 19th century saw the rise and development of all the great Missionary and Bible Societies, and thus the churches discovered the "open door" of service which God has set before them.

When did the **Laodicean** period begin? We cannot name a date, but the "voice of the people" and the characteristics of this rich but needy church are all too prevalent in the popular Christian religion of our day. It is to this church that the Lord says, "As many as I love I rebuke

and chasten ; be zealous, therefore, and repent." Can He find anything to love in such a church? Yes, and because of this He chastens. Surely this terrible war is the Lord's voice to the professing church of the Laodiceans to-day.

There is one other line of thought in connection with the chronological outlook to which I should like to call attention, viz., the relationship between these church periods. The churches, and the eras of church history which they represent, are not independent of one another, but are largely responsible for the conditions that exist in the others. If **Ephesus** had not left her first love the **Pergamos** mixture between the church and the world would never have taken place. The very persecutions of the **Smyrna** period may have been partly due to this declension also. "The time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God," was one reason assigned by the Apostle Peter for the fiery trial of apostolic days. Historians tell us how repeatedly, between the times of persecution, the early Christians began to mix themselves with paganism, and again and again they were purified by the fires of persecution.

Then we can also see how the **Pergamos** condition made the corruption of Thyatira possible. Just as the alliance with Jezebel and her assumption of power would never have taken place had not Israel turned away from God, so the rise of papacy was only possible after Christendom had become paganised. The overcomers in **Thyatira** were the means in God's hands of bringing about the Reformation, but it was the breaking down of its bright promise that led to the unspiritual and political protestantism of **Sardis**. In as far as the Reformation failed, Sardis became dead. But the overcomers in Sardis who had not defiled their garments were in their turn the means in God's goodness of bringing about the **Philadelphian** condition. The revivals of the 18th and 19th centuries were revivals from Sardis deadness. And has there

been no connection between Philadelphia and **Laodicea**? The enemy always endeavours to spoil God's work, and as he tried to render the Reformation abortive, so he has succeeded in large measure in spoiling each revival in turn. The great movements which at first were mighty powers have in many cases lost their spirituality and developed into the Laodicean state of things—the wealthy religious communities, satisfied with themselves, but in God's sight wanting in everything, and having left Him outside.

The evils in Laodicea are practically the outcome of the evils in most of the other churches. The loss of first love of Ephesus, the worldliness of Pergamos, the corruption of Thyatira, and the deadness of Sardis have resulted in the popular Christless religion which we see on all sides. As I have already suggested, one of the developments of Sardis, as exemplified in the dead Lutheranism of Germany, with all its "higher criticism," led to this terrible war, and is being used to-day in the chastening of the church of the Laodiceans in the various nations.

Surely there is a solemn need for humbling and confession, confession not merely of one phase of evil, but of all that has brought it about. When the righteous seed in the days of Nehemiah, like Daniel, set themselves to confess the sins of their people, they went back to the very beginning, and confessed even the sins of wilderness days. If we were to follow their example we should confess with deep humiliation the sins of the past two thousand years of privilege as well as the present sins.

IV.—*The parables of the 13th of Matthew.* In connection with the prophetic outline it is interesting to put side by side with the seven epistles the parables in Matthew 13, for they also may be taken chronologically to represent characteristics of the whole dispensation.

In all the seven epistles we find one expression, "He that hath an ear let him hear." This occurs often in connection with the parables in

the Gospels. Mr. Daniel Crawford tells us that in Central Africa the natives make use of a similar expression when they wish to call attention to the fact that they are speaking in symbolic or parabolic language.

In the epistle to **Ephesus** there is an expression which reminds us of the parable of the sower. The Lord says, "Thou hast borne and hast patience." The good ground hearers bring forth fruit with patience. In **Smyrna** there crept into the church those who said they were Jews and were not—probably Judaising teachers who, like the tares, were not really the good seed, but had been sown by the enemy. In the epistle to **Pergamos** there is much to remind us of the next parable, for they describe the same era in church history. The mustard seed had become so abnormally large that the birds of the air were able to come and lodge in the branches. So the Lord says, "I know thy works and where thou dwellest, even where Satan's seat is." "The birds of the air" in the parable represented the evil one, and in the Pergamos period he was able to shelter in the branches of the tree.

The link between the fourth epistle and the fourth parable is very marked. The woman who hides the leaven in the three measures of meal till the whole is leavened reminds us at once of "that woman Jezebel" in the church at **Thyatira**. This is just what she has done. In the church at **Sardis**, amid all the failure, there is something that pleases the heart of the Lord. "Thou hast a few names in Sardis which have not defiled their garments. They shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy." They were like the treasure hid in the field. In the same way we may place side by side with the epistle to **Philadelphia** the little parable of the pearl of great price; for the Lord says, "I will make them to come and worship before thy feet and to know that I have loved thee." They were exceedingly precious to His heart, and this will, by and by, be seen by all.

In the parable of the draw-net, good and bad fish were gathered together ; but they were divided at last, and the bad were cast away. The Lord threatens that He will spue out of His mouth the luke-warm church of the **Laodiceans**.

V.—*Practical teaching for ourselves, individually and collectively.* The fifth method of viewing these epistles is, I hope, very familiar to us all, for it is intensely important to study them prayerfully in the light of the practical teaching which we may find so abundantly in them, both for ourselves individually, and for gatherings of God's people. Time will not allow of more than a mention of this. We must remember that the Lord Jesus still walks amongst the candlesticks or lampstands. It was the office of the high priest of old to trim the lamps every morning and to light them every evening. He still warns us, if we have left our first love, to remember, to repent, to return, and to repeat the first works. He still says, "I know," "I know," "I know." He tells one of the churches that He knows their sufferings; to others He says that He knows their service; to another that He knows where they dwell, He knows all about their situation. And so to-day, just as He knew Peter's address at Joppa, and Paul's address in Damascus, He knows all about us, where we live, whether our service is hard, our difficulties great, our enemies many.

Then how clearly we are shown from these letters what are the things which really matter. He looks for love, patience, steadfastness, purity, a sense of His holiness, loyalty to His Name and to His Word ; He hates lukewarmness and error, and is displeased at any compromise with evil.

VI.—*The promises to the overcomers and past dispensations.* We have in these chapters not only the antitype of the Aaronic high priest, in the One who walks amid the lampstands, but of the Melchisedek priesthood also, in Him who blesses the overcomers. In the seven promises to the overcomers there is an evident progression,

for the Old Testament references begin at the very beginning of Genesis, illustrating the wonderful unity of the Book. The *first* one is a promise of access to the tree of life which is in the midst of the paradise of God. This takes us back in thought to the garden of Eden, when at the fall man was driven out. Now he is welcomed back and allowed to eat of the tree of life.

The *second* promise speaks of deliverance from the second death. The overcomers will be safe from this as Noah in the ark was safe from the flood.

The *third* promise evidently refers to wilderness days, for there is a mention of the hidden manna and inscribed stones, reminding of the manna hidden in the ark in the Tabernacle, the only manna which did not become corrupt by keeping, and of the stones in the breast-plate and upon the shoulders of the high priest, and the tables of the law inscribed by God Himself. And this is the church which is connected with Balaam and Balak, Israel's enemies during the wilderness wanderings.

The *fourth* promise, to the overcomers in the time of Jezebel, is of kingly power over the nations, and points to the dispensation of the kings of Israel.

The connection between the later epistles and the dispensations is not so clear, and they are differently viewed by students. The *last three* may be linked respectively to the dispensation of the prophets, separate from the world confessing the truth in an apostate age ; to the dispensation of the Son, when the foundation for His own temple was laid ; and, finally, to the last days when His overcoming servants will be caught up from the scenes of earth to the throne in heaven.

VII.—*Praise and blame, a foreshadowing of the judgment-seat.* If we study these epistles as a foreshadowing of the judgment-seat of Christ, we may learn many lessons as to the principles by which the Lord will judge the lives of His people, when their service will be tested to see



"of what sort it is" (1 Cor. 3. 13). If in that day His people "suffer loss," it will be because they lost something first here, and we see this illustrated in several of the churches. Two of them, Smyrna and Philadelphia, are "without blame before Him"; but the others needed rebuke. The Lord always begins by praising what He can. "I know thy works," He says, *but*—the service is spoiled by something. There is no such "but" in His letters to Smyrna and Philadelphia.

In **Ephesus** there was the loss of incentive. They had left their first love, so instead of praising them as the Thessalonians, in the days when they first turned to God from idols, were praised for their "work of faith," their "labour of love," and "their patience of hope," the Lord could only speak of their "work," their "labour," and their "patience." The incentive was gone, the faith, love, and patience were wanting. In **Pergamos** there was a loss of loyalty, in **Thyatira** a loss of purity, in **Sardis** a loss of spiritual life and power—plenty of work, but unfinished work; in **Laodicea** there was loss of warmth, of vitality, they were luke-warm, and a loss of sight, for they were blind.

We see also the things which the Lord really prizes in His people, the things which will win reward from Him in that day. It is the "sort" of work, not the "size" of it, which He will consider, the love, patience, steadfastness, purity, loyalty to His Name and to His Word.

The promises to the overcomers in most cases have to do with future association with Himself. The highest reward for faithfulness here will probably be nearness of service to Him hereafter.

We may notice also that there is a connection between the character of the service and the reward. It will correspond with the life, and will consist of a fulness of that of which a foretaste has already been enjoyed. Those who have not fainted midst the general declension shall be

given to eat of the tree of life. Their not fainting had been due to the divine sustenance which they had received; this will be continued in larger measure. They had not forsaken their first love—that love will be satisfied at last.

Those faithful unto death will not be hurt by the second death. It is like our Lord's injunction in the Gospel, "Be not afraid of them that kill the body and after that have no more that they can do. . . . Fear Him which after He hath killed hath power to cast into hell. Yea, I say unto you, Fear Him" (Luke 12. 4, 5).

Those who dwell where Satan's seat is shall be given the hidden manna from beneath the mercy-seat. Living near Satan's throne, the wickedest place of all, but having access to God's throne in the Holiest of All.

Those who have suffered under the rule of Ahab and Jezebel shall rule with the rod of iron in association with the King of kings.

The Lord says of those who have kept their garments white, "They shall walk with Me in white . . . the same shall be clothed in white raiment." Here we see very clearly the continuity of the life begun below with that enjoyed in His immediate presence.

"I have set before thee an open door" is said to the church in Philadelphia. Those who have gone through this open door of service, or who have looked through the open door in anticipation of the Lord's return (for both meanings may, I think, be taken; compare chapter 4. 1), they shall be made pillars in the house of God and shall go no more out.

And lastly, those who have admitted Him to a seat at their table (chapter 3. 20, 21) will be rewarded by being given a seat on His throne.

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