

Sabbath School Today
With the 1888 Message Dynamic

The Book of Revelation
Lesson 3: Jesus' Messages to the Seven Churches

If you are traveling to a distant place, you are wise to take a map [or GPS]. You can read the names of the cities, rivers, or mountains that indicate where you are at any time. In this way you can know when you are coming near to your destination.

When, nearly 2000 years ago, the apostle Paul wrote his *first* letter to the church at Thessalonica, he wrote as though he believed the coming of the Lord was very near at that time. Actually, he wrote as an inspired prophet, like the Old Testament prophets who also described the Day of the Lord as very near in their time. It is like looking at a distant mountain on a sharp clear morning—it seems very close, while usually the haze in between tells you that it is many miles away.

Paul corrected this wrong impression by writing his *second* letter to the Thessalonians. He made it clear that the Lord would not come in the lifetime of those living at that time. The “map” indicated that many things must come before “that day” could arrive. In telling the Thessalonians what must happen before Jesus will come the second time, Paul refers to the prophecies of Daniel concerning the great “falling away” or apostasy of the Dark Ages.

From Paul’s day onwards, the journey on the “map” would be a long one, and many events must first come to pass before the Lord should return. The “falling away” took place several hundred years after the time of the apostles and continued throughout the Dark Ages up until our “time of the end.”

The prophetic “map” also unfolds itself before us in the Book of Revelation. The history of God’s church from the time of the apostles until the coming of the Lord is revealed in the story of the “seven churches” of Revelation 2 and 3. “Ephesus” is the early church of the apostles; “Smyrna” is the church of the early centuries that suffered bloody persecution at the hands of the Roman Empire; “Pergamos” is the church that enjoyed support and patronage between A.D. 300-500 from the professedly “Christian” empire; “Thyatira” is the church faithful to the Lord in the long Dark Ages.

In his message to Thyatira, Jesus gives the first hint that our journey on the “map” is getting towards “the time of the end.” He says: “Hold fast what you have *till I come*. ... I will give him the morning star” (Rev. 2:25, 28). The night was passing away—the morning would soon come!

“Sardis” is the church of the Reformation period that brought the Dark Ages to a close; “Philadelphia” is the church in the time when those who loved the Bible began to realize

that they were living in the “time of the end.” They witnessed the first visible “signs” of Christ’s coming. To them Jesus said, “Behold, *I come quickly*” (Rev. 3:11). The “map” is unfolding through the centuries. We can “see” that our long journey is drawing to its close. The events that Paul had mentioned to the Thessalonians had now taken place, and Christian people in many lands had begun to awaken as from a long sleep and to think about the second coming of Christ. These people were called “adventists.”

“Laodicea” is the last of the seven churches, and brings us to the end.

Does Revelation indicate that “the angel of the church of the Laodiceans” will ultimately fail and pass a point of no return? If so, he will be the first of the seven churches to do so. Always in the preceding six messages there were promises “to him who overcomes,” and in the end, each of those “angels” passed on the torch of truth to the succeeding generation, despite many failures and apostasies, and despite the fact that no one in past ages fully understood the truth as it was yet to be revealed.

The teaching of *The Great Controversy* is clear that God has always had a remnant throughout history who were faithful. This is the import of Revelation 12, where we read of the true church as “the woman [who] fled into the wilderness,” where she was fed. Thus the identity of the true church remained intact through all past ages.

This means that the preceding six messages to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, and Philadelphia, did not fail of their objective. None were intended to prepare a people for translation, and none did; but in each succeeding age each “angel” did heed its message and did preserve the church and its essential truth so that “the angel of the church of the Laodiceans” could at last build upon it. No way can a true Christian say that Christ’s ministry “who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands” (Rev. 2:1) has been a failure, or that it will ultimately become a failure. To say so would cast contempt upon His cross and His High Priestly ministry.

None of the preceding churches were invited to share Christ’s throne, but the “angel of the church of the Laodiceans” is so invited. But if the angel fails and is spewed out, the final promise must fail, and such ultimate failure would call into question the “overcoming” of all the previous six churches. The messages to the seven churches are a total unit, and the failure of the last dooms them all.

This is readily seen by the fact that all believers in Christ of previous generations who are now sleeping in their graves must remain prisoners there until Christ returns; and He cannot return until the problem of Laodicea is resolved. Thus the solemn truth is that the ultimate success of the entire plan of salvation depends upon its final hour, and that hour is the overcoming brought to view in Revelation 3:21.

It is not difficult to understand how the enemy of all righteousness wants to zero in on attacking and denying the possibility and certainty of that final victory.

It was in the history of 1888 that our Lord “knocked” as a Divine Lover seeking entrance at the door of His Bride-to-be. Jesus’ direct quotation from the Septuagint is an inspired commentary that says, “The Laodicean message must be understood in the light of the Song of Solomon.” If Christ is not omniscient (He says He does not know the time of His second coming—Mark 13:21), perhaps He did not foreknow the outcome of the 1888 appeal. Can we not appreciate His divine eagerness to take to Himself His Bride-to-be? Can we not sense how Christ “the Lover” hoped against hope that she would respond? But Ellen White said afterwards, “The disappointment of Christ is beyond description.” [1] The Song of Solomon tells what happened better than our own historians have told it.

Note how Ellen White clearly ties in the Song of Songs phraseology with the results of the 1888 message:

“The Christian life, which had before seemed to them [the youth] undesirable and full of inconsistencies, now appeared in its true light, in remarkable symmetry and beauty. He who had been to them as a root out of dry ground, without form or comeliness, became the ‘chiefest among ten thousand’ [Song of Songs 5:10] and the one altogether lovely.” [2]

It is a love story indeed—the most poignant ever penned. It breathes the same hope of ultimate reconciliation and reunion as does the Laodicean message.

Such hope is worth dying for, and worth living for. Whether our own poor little souls are at last saved and we get to Heaven to bask in our rewards—this is not at all important. What is important is that the deeply disappointed Lover and Bridegroom-to-be receive *His* reward, that *He* at last receive as His Bride a church which is capable of a true heart-appreciation of Him.

—*From the Writings of Robert J. Wieland*

Endnotes:

[1] Ellen G. White, *Review and Herald*, Dec. 15, 1904.

[2] *Ibid.*, Feb. 12, 1889.

Notes:

Pastor Paul Penno’s video of this lesson is on the Internet at:

<https://youtu.be/vto6GCL1ZLQ>

You may subscribe to the e-mail version of *Sabbath School Today* by sending a request to sabbathschooltoday@1888message.org