

Central Study Hour – Lesson 12 “The Church Militant”

*SABBATH AFTERNOON

What does “the church militant” mean? This phrase makes it sound like the church is an army. In fact, we sing this in hymns, such as “Onward Christian Soldiers.” Hymns #608-619 in our hymnal are all about being a soldier of the cross. *Where in the Bible do we find this concept?* In the **Song of Solomon 6:10** we find God’s people, the church, in the imagery of a woman described as an army. In **Ephesians 6:13-17** Paul tells believers about the need to wear the armor of God. In the Old Testament, Israel literally fought enemy nations with an army. In the New Testament fighting becomes more figurative for resisting evil and sin. It’s a spiritual warfare that we sometimes refer to as “the great controversy.” We are the “church militant.” The 7 churches of Revelation are all about the church militant.

The book of Revelation was written to these 7 churches (**See Rev. 1:4-5, 10-11**), the church militant. At the time John wrote, a Christian congregation had been established in each of the seven cities named. These cities were located on interconnecting Roman highways in somewhat of a loop. They could easily be visited in the order in which they are listed in Revelation. But the question is *Was the book of Revelation just for these 7 churches or for all Christian churches past, present, and future?* It can be pointed out that everything in the Bible has application beyond its literal setting. When you see in **Rev. 1:12-13** that Jesus is standing among the seven lampstands in the heavenly sanctuary, it becomes apparent that the context is about His intercessory ministry for all humanity. **Verse 19** makes reference to the past, present, and future. And **verse 20** tells us that the seven lampstands represent the seven churches. Therefore, just as the letters apply to seven local churches at one time, it is also evident that they apply to the various conditions of the church at all times. It will also become clear that the 7 churches are symbolic of 7 time periods that span from the time of John to the end of time. Each one of the 7 letters will speak to us, but the last one especially so, since we live in the 7th time period.

SUNDAY: THE CHURCH AT EPHESUS

Setting: 1.) Ephesus was the most important city in the Roman province of Asia. Paul spent three years training workers and evangelizing the province. One of His epistles was written to the believers of Ephesus.

Read Rev. 2:1-3. *What were the Ephesians commended for in these verses?* Doctrinal purity: faithfully tested teachings, didn’t tolerate evil or false apostles. *Wouldn’t this be wise for any church in any time?*

Read Rev. 2:4-5. *What fault did Jesus find with His church in Ephesus?* Lost their first love! *What is Jesus’ counsel for them?* To repent and return to their first works. *What else is Ephesus commended for in verse 5?* Opposed the Nicolaitans; people teaching that commandment-keeping and high moral standards no longer mattered because of God’s grace.

Read Rev. 2:7. *What was promised to overcomers?* To eat from the tree of life!

History: Since Ephesus is the first church, it makes sense that it represents the New Testament era during the time of the Apostles. It was a time of zealous evangelism and purity of doctrine, but that zeal began to decline toward AD 100 with the death of the Apostles.

Discussion: *What happens to us, either individually or as a church, that could make us lose our first love for God?* (Answers vary: Might get too busy with other pursuits of life, devotional time gets crowded out, or the influence of others are possibilities). *How do we keep a passion for God and His truth within us year after year?* (We must be intentional. It won’t happen by itself. It’s all about choices – making God top priority.)

MONDAY: SMYRNA AND PERGAMUM

Setting: 2.) Smyrna was an important seaport 40 miles north of Ephesus on a beautiful inlet of the Aegean Sea. It's the only one of the 7 cities that exists today as a strong city. It's called Izmir, the third largest city in Turkey.

Read Rev. 2:8-11. *How can Smyrna be commended for being rich but said to be in poverty?* Rich in faith, but poor in possessions. *Was Smyrna faulted for anything?* No. *What did Smyrna have to face?* Persecution. *What advice or counsel was given?* Be faithful unto death. *What two rewards will be given for those who are faithful unto death and overcome?* Crown of life, escape from the 2nd death. *What is the significance of how Jesus is introduced in verse 8?* One who was dead and came to life would be encouraging to those facing martyrdom.

History: Note verse 10 mentions 10 days of tribulation. A day for a year means 10 years. The last persecution from the Roman Empire against Christians was exactly 10 years from AD 303-313. In AD 313 the Edict of Milan ended Christian persecution and gave them legal status in the Roman Empire. Smyrna fits the time period from AD 100-313.

Setting: 3.) Pergamum was the capital city of the Roman province of Asia, north of Smyrna on a mountain.

Read or note highlights from Rev. 2:12-17. *Commendation or praise?* They held fast to the name of Christ and did not deny the faith. *Fault?* Accepted the doctrine of Balaam and the Nicolaitans, and had problems with idolatry and immorality. *Counsel?* Repent. *What is the significance of how Jesus is introduced in verse 12?* The sword is the word of God which is the antidote for false doctrine problems that permeate Pergamum.

Discussion: *What does Rev. 2:14-15 tell us about the idea that doctrine does not matter? Why does it matter?* Because wrong beliefs can undermine individual trust in God (example: eternal burning hell) and/or set people up for deception and end up opposing truth (example: secret rapture prevents believing that the antichrist is here now which makes it hard to accept the three angels' messages).

History: Pergamum is the compromised church for the period from AD 313 to 538, when the papal system was established. The apostasy through so much false doctrine that came into Christianity fits this era well.

*TUESDAY: THYATIRA AND SARDIS

Setting: 4.) Thyatira lay inland between two valleys east of Pergamum. It was known for "purple" or red dye.

Read or highlight Rev. 2:18-26. *For what was Thyatira commended?* Works of love, service, faith, and patience. *What fault was found?* Jezebel was allowed along with sexual immorality and idolatry. *What does Jezebel represent?* The time of Jezebel was one of great apostasy in Old Testament Israel. Jezebel caused Israel to follow Baal-worship, which included sun-worship. John is using Jezebel as a metaphor for the pagan sun worship and all its trappings that dominated Christianity during the Dark Ages. *What bad things were noted to happen to Thyatira in verses 21-23?* Sickness, tribulation, and death. The millions that perished in the Bubonic plague and Black Death epidemics of the Dark Ages fit this as well. *What counsel was given?* Repent, hold fast what you have. *What will be the reward for overcomers?* Power over nations. Verse 28 offers the morning star. Rev. 22:16 identifies the morning star as Jesus.

History: Thyatira clearly fits with the apostasy of the medieval church beginning with papal supremacy established in AD 538 up until the Protestant Reformation in the early 1500's.

Setting: 5.) Sardis was on a very steep rock mountain 1,000 feet above the valley. It would have been an impregnable fortress if the occupants hadn't been overconfident. Cyrus conquered Sardis in 547 BC by having one good climber scale the high rock wall of the mountain and open the city gates from the inside, while everyone was sound asleep. In 218 BC Antiochus the Great conquered the city again, in the same way! Again the inhabitants were sleeping.

Read Rev. 3:1-2. *Do these words fit the history of the city? Is saying you are dead similar to saying you are asleep?* Note: Where verse 2 says "Be watchful", the Greek means to stay awake or to wake up. Some translations actually say "Wake up."

Read Rev. 3:3-6. *What counsel is given to Sardis? Stay awake, remember what you received, hold fast, and repent. What praise was given to Sardis? A few are faithful. What is the reward for the overcomer? To be clothed in white garments and have one's name retained in the book of life.*

History: The Protestant Reformation was an act of the Lord. However, it really only had strength for a short time before the people settled for the forms of truth without the power. There was a reputation for being alive, when they became spiritually dead or asleep like the people in the city of Sardis past. Later reformers found the Protestant churches largely devoid of spiritual influence on society. Christianity became stagnant. This fits the history of the church from the reformation of the early 1500s to the mid 1700s.

Discussion: Sardis was told to "Hold fast and repent." *What do we have to hold fast to? Jesus and the word of truth. Of what do you need to repent? Have you been stagnant at all? Has our church?*

WEDNESDAY: THE CHURCH AT PHILADELPHIA

Setting: 6.) Philadelphia means "Brotherly Love." King Attalus II named the city in honor of his older brother.

Read Rev. 3:7-8. *What praise does this church receive? You have kept my word and not denied my name. What is the significance of Jesus having the key of David and setting before them an open door? The key of David naturally was a symbol of power in David's kingdom. It determined who could get in. In this passage Jesus is holding the key, and He is standing among the seven lampstands in the Holy Place of the Sanctuary in heaven. Jesus holds the key of access to the kingdom of heaven. Setting before them an open door means more people can get in. Therefore, Philadelphia is a church of evangelism and missionary accomplishment. In addition, since Christ is in the first compartment of the heavenly sanctuary, His key must open the way in the second compartment, the Most Holy Place. Therefore, Philadelphia is the church that discovers Christ's final ministry for humanity. This church announces that "the hour of His judgment has come" (Rev. 14:7).*

Read or highlight Rev. 3:9-13. *What additional praise is given in verse 10? Kept my command to persevere. What counsel is given? Hold fast. What fault is found? None. What reward is promised in verse 10? To be kept from the hour of temptation/trial that will come upon the world. Does that sound like they will be spared from facing the end-time of trouble? Yes. What will be the reward of the overcomer? (See verse 12).*

History: The Philadelphia church fits the time of the Great Awakening in America and Wesleyan Revival in England (1740's – 1760's), the Protestant Missionary Movement (1790's – 1800's), the unsealing of the book of Daniel, the Advent Awakening, and the Millerite Movement (1798 – 1840's), the discovery of the judgment and the three angels' messages (mid 1840's). The 6th time period is from the mid 1700's to the mid 1800's.

Discussion or for thought: *If you were suddenly in heaven, right now, how well would you fit in? Would you actually be happy in a place without the things that are important in your life now? What about your entertainment choices? Could you give them up for heaven? Do you now?*

THURSDAY: THE CHURCH AT LAODICEA

Setting: 7.) Laodicea was a city of wealth, commerce, and banking. It had a medical school famous for its eye ointment. It was a resort town with bubbling hot springs located nearby. People still bathe in these springs today. One of Laodicea's challenges was that by the time water was piped into the city from the hot springs it had become lukewarm. It was sickening to drink upon arrival.

Read Rev. 3:14-17. *What fault is found with the church at Laodicea? They are lukewarm, wretched, poor, blind and naked, spiritually, while wealthy in possessions. But what is Laodicea's opinion of itself? Rich and needing nothing. What were they warned would happen? God might have to spit them out. 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. How is it possible to have such a different view of oneself from the way God sees one? How can people fool themselves like this? How do we know that we haven't?*

Read Rev. 3:18-21. This counsel and the hope here is worth a whole sermon. *What's the gold tried in the fire? Faith that's been tested by trial. What's the white garment? The righteousness of Christ woven into our lives.*

What's the eye salve needed for seeing? Discernment from the Holy Spirit for seeing the truth. In verse 19 we are called to repent. In verse 20 Jesus invites us to open the door and let Him in. In verse 21 overcomers are granted to sit with God on His throne. That's simply amazing!

History: The Laodicean church represents the mid 1800's to our time. It means a people judged, so it fits the people who live during the judgment hour message and have become blasé or lukewarm about it. See the quotation from Ellen White within Discussion Question #2 on Friday's page for a positive application of Laodicea to Sabbath-keeping Adventists by 1852.

Discussion: *Even though the above quotation was written over 150 years ago, why do its words apply so well to us today?*

Close: *How are we to relate to the problems in our church? Can we expect the church to be perfect?*

"He [God] has a church, but it is the church militant, not the church triumphant. We are sorry that there are defective members, that there are tares amid the wheat.... 'Let both grow together until the harvest;' then the angels will gather out the tares." *Testimonies to Ministers*, p. 45.

"As Jesus views the state of His professed followers today, He sees base ingratitude, hollow formalism, hypocritical insincerity, pharisaical pride and apostasy." *Testimonies for The Church*, Volume 5, p. 72.

"The church militant is not the church triumphant. Those who are carnally minded will be found in the church....It may be that in the church there are those who are cold, proud, haughty, and unchristian....There are many that are warm-hearted, who are self-denying, self-sacrificing, who would, were it required, lay down their lives to save souls. Jesus saw the bad and the good in church relationship, and said, 'Let both grow together until the harvest.'" *Fundamentals of Christian Education*, pages 294-295.

"The church militant is not now the church triumphant; but God loves His church." TM, pages 21-22.

"The church, enfeebled and defective, needing to be reproved, warned, and counseled, is the only object upon earth upon which Christ bestows His supreme regard." TM, p. 49.

"The work is soon to close. The members of the church militant who have proved faithful will become the church triumphant." *Evangelism*, p. 707.