Background Information

Ephesus: The City of Change

Ephesus was colonized by the Greeks no earlier than 1200 BC and was located near the Aegean Sea, providing a major harbor and caravan gateway for trade to all of Asia Minor and beyond. By the first century, Ephesus was already an established city, predominant in the Roman province of Asia Minor and home to the Roman governor. Besides becoming a city of great wealth, it was noted for the Celsus library, established in the second century. The Ephesians worshiped Diana, the Roman goddess of nature and fertility, identified with the Greek goddess Artemis. At the present day, Ephesus has all the appearance of an inland city, caused by natural changes in the coastline. Paul founded the church at Ephesus.

Smyrna: The City of Life

Smyrna, a thriving seaport city now called Izmir, is about 35 miles (56 km) north of Ephesus. Founded as a Greek colony more than 1,000 years before Christ, it paralleled Ephesus in wealth, beauty and commerce. Proud of being the city of the poet Homer, it was filled with the pagan temples of Apollo, Asclepia, Aphrodite, Cybele, Emperor Tiberius, and Zeus. Although it was a free city, it gave full allegiance to the Roman Empire which ordered Polycarp, the Bishop of Smyrna, to be burned at the stake in Rome. The temple of Athena, dating back to the seventh century BC, was the most important building of that period. It was famous for its superb school of medicine. Although the origin of the city is not mentioned in the Bible, the church in Smyrna was probably founded by believers from Ephesus.

Pergamum: The City of Authority

Pergamum, founded no later than 399 BC, became the capital city of the Roman province in Asia giving the traveler the impression of a royal city, the home of authority. Located about 60 miles (97 km) north of Smyrna and 15 miles (24 km) from the Aegean Sea, Pergamum was a center of learning, medicine, and religious books. The library, rivaling the Alexandrian library, drew many princes, priests, and scholars. Noted for marble carving, it excelled the other six cities in architectural beauty. They worshiped Zeus Olympus, the savior-god; Athena, patron goddess of Athens; the Roman Emperor, as god; Dionysus, god of vegetation; and Asclepius, god of healing. The animal cult worship of the god-Serpent and the god-Bull were also practiced. Some scholars believe that Gaius, addressed by John in the book of 3 John, was the first Bishop of Pergamum.

Thyatira: Weakness Made Strong

Thyatira, a small town about 35 miles (56 km) southeast of Pergamum, was founded by the general Seleucid Nicator under Alexander the Great in about 300 BC. Military garrisons greatly strengthened the city which was noted for commerce and guilds such as tanners, coppersmiths, potters, and purple dyers. Objects of worship included the emperor, the Thyatiran war hero, Tyrimnos, and trade guild gods, for example, bronzesmiths worshiped the goddess of war, Pallas Athena. How the church was established is unknown, but "Lydia, a seller of purple, of the city of Thyatira," came to the Lord under Paul's ministry in Philippi (Acts 16:14–15).

Sardis: The City of Death

The city of Sardis was founded in about 1200 BC and became the capital of the Lydian kingdom located 30 miles southeast of Thyatira. It stood on a lofty plateau above the Hermus valley. Sardis was twice defeated, once by King Cyrus of Persia (359 BC), and again by Antiochus III of Syria (218 BC). The wealth of the Lydian kings arose from trade and the commerce with the East. An impressive acropolis housed a temple dedicated to the goddess Artemis. Goddesses Artemis and Cybele were commemorated on local coins. Two hundred years after Christ's birth, Sardis lay in decay. Today Sardis is a small village called Sart. When and how the church there was started are unknown.

Philadelphia: The Missionary City

The city of Philadelphia, founded by King Attalus of Pergamum (140 BC), was located in the Hermus River valley about 28 miles (45 km) southeast of Sardis. An earthquake destroyed the city in AD 17; however, it was rebuilt by Emperor Tiberius. Famous for its grape industry, Philadelphia was also noted for textiles and leather goods. It became a strong fortress city and was called the "Gateway to the East." Although Dionysis was the major pagan god, people also worshiped sun and serpent gods. Philadelphia, the last of the Byzantine cities, was finally captured by the Turks in 1390. Christians lived there until the early 1900s. When and how the church was established there is not known, but it prospered for many centuries.

Laodicea: The City of Compromise

The city of Laodicea was located on a fertile plain overlooking the Lycus River about 50 miles (80 km) southeast of Philadelphia. Laodicea, which became the capital of ancient Phrygia, was established by Antiochus II (261–246 BC) and named in honor of his sister-wife Laodice before their divorce in 253 BC. Located on a major trade route running from Ephesus to Syria, Laodicea accumulated great wealth. It was known for banking and the manufacture of expensive cloth made from soft black wool. Its medical school became famous for the development of an ear salve made of spice and Phrygian powder. Zeus Azeus and Men Karou were the main Phrygian gods. Cicero lived in Laodicea in 50 BC. Laodicea was so wealthy that when a massive earthquake destroyed the city in AD 60, it refused aid from Rome and rebuilt at its own expense. Most scholars believe that Epaphras started the church there (Col. 1:7; 4:12–13). Paul was aware of their spiritual struggles (Col. 2:1).

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To the Church	Your Strengths	Your Faults	Instruction	Promise
Loveless **Ephesus** Rev. 2:1–7	Hard work Patient endurance Reject evil Persevere	You have forsaken your first love.	Repent and do the works as you did at first.	You will eat from the tree of life.
Suffering **Smyrna** Rev. 2:8–11	Endure your suffering and poverty, yet you are rich.	None	Remain faithful even when facing prison, persecution, or death.	I will give you the crown of life. You will not be hurt by the second death.
Worldly **Pergamum** Rev. 2:12–17	Loyalty to Christ. Refuse to deny him.	Tolerates cults, heresies, idolatry, and immorality.	Repent.	Hidden manna and a stone with a new name on it.
Wrong Doctrine **Thyatira** Rev. 2:18–29	Deeds, love, faith, service. Patient endurance. Constant improvement.	Tolerates cult idolatry and immorality.	Judgment coming. Repent. Hold fast until I come.	I will give you authority over the nations and gift of the morning star.
Spiritually Dead **Sardis** Rev. 3:1–6	Some have kept the faith.	Church is dead.	Wake up, repent. Turn to Jesus again. Strengthen what little remains.	Faithful will walk with Jesus and not be blotted out of the book of life.
Spiritually Alive **Philadelphia** Rev. 3:7–13	Kept my word. Have not denied my name.	None	I have placed before you an open door. I will keep you from the hour of trial.	I will make you a pillar in the temple of my God.
Complacent **Laodicea** Rev. 3:14–22	None	Neither hot nor cold. You rely on riches but don't realize your wretched condition.	Turn from indifference and repent.	I will invite those who overcome to sit with me on my throne.

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