

Session Two: Part A

Unveiling of Christ as Lord and Judge of His Church (Rev 2:1-3:22)

Lesson Introduction

In Lesson One, we learned that the Apostle John wrote Revelation while being held as a prisoner on the island of Patmos. The Lord prepared him for receiving a series of visions which he was instructed to write down on a scroll. This scroll was then to be sent to seven churches in Asia Minor, all of which were on a circuit road from Ephesus. In his initial vision, John saw the glorified Jesus Christ, symbolically portrayed. Christ was said to be in the midst of the seven golden lampstands, each lampstand representing one of the seven churches to whom he wrote. Christ was also in command of seven stars, each representing an angel associated with one of the churches. This was in preparation for the messages that the Lord wanted to give to these seven churches.

Lesson Two covers chapters 2-3 of Revelation. These two chapters contain the seven messages, one for each of the seven churches beginning with Ephesus and ending with Laodicea. These proceed in order as one would travel a circuitous route starting from Ephesus and concluding with Laodicea. Each message has a common structure in which Christ is introduced, His evaluation of the church is stated, exhortation is made for correcting any deficiencies, and finally motivating promises are given to those who faithfully endure and overcome the challenges.

Lesson Outline

Topic 1: Introduction to the Church Letters and Message to Ephesus (2:1-7)

Topic 2: Messages to Smyrna (2:8-11) and Pergamum (2:12-17)

Topic 3: Messages to Thyatira (2:18-29) and Sardis (3:1-6)

Topic 4: Messages to Philadelphia (3:7-13) and Laodicea (3:14-22)

Topic 1: Introduction to the Church Letters and Message to Ephesus (2:1-7)

According to Revelation 1:4, John addressed the book “to the seven churches that are in the province of Asia” (present-day western Turkey). In Revelation chapters two and three, the Lord Jesus has a message for each of these seven churches. These churches were certainly not the only ones in the province of Asia. They seem to have been chosen, because (1) they were located in close proximity to Ephesus where John is known to have lived and ministered; and (2) they were representative of churches elsewhere in the Roman Empire, having the same kind of commendable features as well as similar problems. The churches are also listed in the



order that one would encounter when travelling on a circuit journey, starting from Ephesus and proceeding northward.

Introduction to the Church Letters. Each of the seven messages have a similar structure, though with minor variations:

- An introduction to the church mentioning a characteristic of Christ
- An evaluation of the church
 - Commendation
 - Rebuke
- Exhortation to those in the church (and sometimes reassurance)
- Motivating promise(s) for the believer who “overcomes”

Although the evaluation of each church typically included a rebuke for sin or shortcomings, in the case of two churches (Smyrna and Philadelphia) no rebuke was given. Of particular interest in these messages to the churches are the concluding promises made for the believer who “overcomes.” What is involved in being an *overcomer*? At least four different views have been suggested:

1. The Loss of Salvation View

According to this view, those who fail to “overcome” can lose their salvation. Hence, advocates of this view do not hold to the eternal security of the believer. The problem with this view is that the Bible clearly teaches the eternal security of the believer.¹

2. The “Every Christian” View

According to this view, every Christian is an “overcomer” by virtue of his faith in Christ as Savior. This view relies on the use of the verb “overcome” in 1 John 5:4-5. The first problem with this view is that the verb “overcome” in 1 John 5:4-5 occurs in a different context, and we should not assume it has the same meaning in every context. A second problem is that in the messages to the seven churches, one’s works and perseverance are crucial for overcoming (in contrast to salvation from sin which is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone).

3. The Faithful-Obedience View

This view is similar to the preceding one (all Christians are overcomers) but clarifies that it those who are living faithful and obedient lives who are the true Christians. This is what distinguishes true Christians from those who merely profess to have a faith. While it is true that some people merely profess to have a faith (but in reality are not “born again” believers), the problem with this view is that the New Testament clearly teaches that some believers are living carnal lives, are walking in disobedience, and need to repent of sin in their lives—and may even be in danger of the Lord taking them home (note 1 Cor 3:1-4; 1 Cor 11:29-31; 1 Tim 1:19-20; 1 Jn 5:16-17).

4. The Eternal Rewards View

A fourth view understands the category of “overcomer” to speak—not of all Christians—but of those Christians who live faithful lives and persevere with Christ in the face of persecution. Although unfaithful Christians will not lose their salvation, they will miss out on the promises and rewards that will be given to those who overcome. This view has the most to commend it.

This last view ties in closely with the main purpose of the book, namely, to encourage and exhort believers to perseverance and faithfulness. This idea of endurance in the face of suffering and persecution is very evident in the messages to the seven churches (Rev 2:3, 9, 10, 13, 19; 3:8, 10, 11). Although this

is important for all believers in all ages, it will be especially relevant for those believers alive on earth in the time when the Antichrist rules and thousands are martyred for their faith in Christ. This theme of enduring persecution and remaining utterly loyal to Christ is very pronounced elsewhere in the book (Rev 6:9; 12:11; 13:10; 14:12; 16:15).

The link between enduring persecution, the challenge to overcome, and a conditional promise for those who do so is well illustrated in regard to the church of Thyatira: “The one who overcomes, and the one who keeps My deeds until the end, I WILL GIVE HIM AUTHORITY OVER THE NATIONS” (Rev 2:26; NASB2020). While it is true that some of the promises to overcomers are true for all Christians (e.g., Rev 2:11), verses like Revelation 2:26 indicate that overcoming is a conditional matter. There is yet another reason for taking the "overcomers" in a restrictive sense, namely, the time element that comes into play. For John, overcoming is not just a one-step process, but a bearing up over a period of time . . . remaining loyal during the time of hardship and stress. This is reflected in the comments "Be faithful until death" (Rev 2:10) and "hold fast until I come" (Rev 2:25). Each of these admonitions is immediately followed by the challenge "He who overcomes . . ." John's conception of the tribulation saints also reflects a display of loyalty that extends for some season of time: "But they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives so much that they were afraid to die" (Rev 12:11).

Of particular interest is how the promises made to overcomers relate to the second coming of Christ and events that follow. For instance, in Revelation 2:26-27—after the exhortation to “hold fast until I come”—Christ promises, “²⁶The one who overcomes, and the one who keeps My deeds until the end, I WILL GIVE HIM AUTHORITY OVER THE NATIONS; ²⁷AND HE SHALL RULE THEM WITH A ROD OF IRON, AS THE VESSELS OF THE POTTER ARE SHATTERED, as I also have received *authority* from My Father” (NASB2020). Then, in Revelation 3:21, He promises, “To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne” (NIV84). Although some of the promises made to overcomers would apply to all Christians (e.g., Rev 2:11, not being hurt by the second death), it seems clear that Christians who overcome will have a special role to play in the future kingdom of Christ. Christians who fail to "hold fast" and endure with Christ will be denied privileges when the Lord comes to sit on His glorious throne. True, they too will not face the "second death," but there is no promise for them that they will reign with Christ and be given authority to rule (cf. 2 Tim 2:12). This is one aspect of the doctrine of rewards, and apparently the consequences are serious (as also the book of Hebrews emphasizes!).

The message to the church at Ephesus. The city of Ephesus was not only an important seaport city of the Roman province of Asia but also played a key role in early Christianity. We know, for instance, that the Apostle Paul resided at Ephesus for well over two years during his third missionary journey, and had a significant teaching ministry there (Acts 19:8-10). Timothy was later assigned to remain at Ephesus to protect the church from false teachers (1 Tim 1:3). Later, the Apostle John resided at Ephesus and conducted his ministry from there.



The "Library" at Ephesus

The city was famous for the temple of Artemis that stood there. A Jewish community had resided in Ephesus from the third century B.C.



READING: Open your Bible and read Revelation 2:1-7.

Verse 1. An Introduction of Christ. The first message is addressed to the angel of the church at Ephesus who stood as the representative of God’s people in that locale. The message is initiated by reminding the reader of two important facts about Christ that were introduced in chapter one. First, He “has a firm grasp on the seven stars in his right hand” (recall Rev 1:16, 20). This reflects His authority and power over the angelic representatives of the churches. Second, Christ is the “one who walks among the seven golden lampstands.” (recall Rev 1:12, 20). Since the lampstands represent the churches, the point is that Christ is in their midst, actively engaged with them in their everyday experience of life. This also infers that He is close at hand to observe all that goes on.

Verses 2-4. Evaluation. Since the church at Ephesus had such a strong foundation, especially given the fact that the Apostle Paul had once resided and taught from there for over two years, we might expect that this church would be doctrinally sound. Indeed, the Lord Jesus did have things to commend them for. He was very aware of their works, their labor, and their steadfast endurance. The believers that made up the church of Ephesus had worked hard to serve their Lord, and they had endured through various challenges and opposition to their faith. To some degree they were faithful to what the Apostle Paul wrote the Corinthians, “Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord” (1 Cor 15:58; NASB95).

Furthermore, the Ephesian Christians had stood firmly for the truth of Christianity. They were careful not to “tolerate evil.” In light of the remainder of verse two and other statements made in chapters 2–3 (see Rev 2:9, 20; 3:9), this probably has in mind people who might bring destructive harm to the church, either through false teachings or by disrupting the unity of the church. Hence, the Lord adds, “You have even put to the test those who refer to themselves as apostles (but are not).” In the early church, the status of being an “apostle” was a gift of the Holy Spirit conveyed upon only a few people who were given special authority during the period when the church did not yet have the completed New Testament (1 Cor 12:28; Eph 4:11). This would have included the original twelve disciples of the Lord (except for Judas) plus other key leaders like Paul, Barnabas, and James. Ephesians 2:20 refers to them as “the foundation” of the church, “Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone.” They had authority from the Lord Jesus to provide leadership in the early stages of growth (note Acts 1:2), to make important decisions (e.g., at the Jerusalem council, Acts 15:2, 6, 22), and to teach divine truth (Acts 2:42; 2 Tim 1:11; 2 Pet 3:2; Jude 17). Also, they were the primary instruments through whom the Lord performed miraculous signs (Acts 2:43; 5:12; 2 Cor 12:12). Yet, as Christianity spread throughout the Empire, it was inevitable—knowing how Satan works—that *counterfeit apostles* would arise. The Apostle Paul exposed their presence among the churches and the danger they represented:

¹³ For such people are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. ¹⁴ And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. ¹⁵ Therefore it is not surprising his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness, whose end will correspond to their actions (2 Cor 11:13-15).

The Christians at Ephesus were well aware of this, since Paul—in his farewell sermon to them—had duly warned them to be on the lookout for such false teachers:

²⁸ Watch out for yourselves and for all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God that he obtained with the blood of his own Son.²⁹ I know that after I am gone fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.³⁰ Even from among your own group men will arise, teaching perversions of the truth to draw the disciples away after them.³¹ Therefore be alert, remembering that night and day for three years I did not stop warning each one of you with tears (Acts 20:28-31).

Such a strong stance for Christ and for truth did not come without cost. But the Lord reminded them, “*you have persisted steadfastly, endured much for the sake of my name, and have not grown weary*” (Rev 2:3). The commendation given the church in verses 2-3 was followed by a brief but stinging rebuke: “*I have this against you: You have departed from your first love!*” (Rev 2:4). The church was doctrinally sound and carefully guarding the truth, but they were slipping in an important area, namely, their love for God and for people. They were outwardly busy for the Lord, but inwardly lacking a sincere love in response to God’s great love for them. In fact, love for God and for one another should have been their greatest concern and pursuit (Mark 12:28-31; John 13:34-35). At one time it had been, but slowly over the years it had begun to fade. As important as faithfulness was to God’s Word and diligence in serving Him, that must be balanced by a deep heartfelt love for the Lord and His grace that would overflow in loving others. Without the latter, the former would no doubt turn to lifeless religion done out of duty.

Verses 5-6. Exhortation. In light of their lack of love for the Lord and others, Christ exhorted them to remember from where they had fallen and to repent. He called them to “*Do the deeds you did at first,*” that is, deeds that stemmed from a heart that was grateful and energized by the love of God and the grace He had bestowed on them. Failure to do so might mean He would come to them and remove their lampstand from its place. Their church would no longer have God’s blessing upon it; they would no longer be a light shining for Him in a dark world. This exhortation to repentance was quickly followed by a word of reassurance. Jesus commended them for hating the deeds of the Nicolaitans. Apparently, this was a reference to a cult that accommodated itself to the pagan culture of that day, including idolatrous practices and possibly immoral activity (note Rev 2:14-15). It was obnoxious to the Lord, and the Ephesian Christians had also understood and rejected the evil it was propagating.

Verse 7. A Motivating Promise. In His earthly ministry, Jesus told His disciples, “Blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear” (Matt 13:16; NASB95). Not everyone understands when spiritual truths are presented (compare Isa 6:9-10). What Jesus had to say to the church at Ephesus is what the Spirit wanted said. Some would hear, understand, and obey. Some might not. Verse 7 gives the first promise for an “overcomer”: “*I will permit him to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God.*” Whatever difficulties and challenges that the Ephesian Christians were facing, the Lord directed their attention to God’s future consummation (Rev 21–22). The tree of life had originally been the experience of Adam and Eve before they were driven from the garden of Eden. Although its exact nature is not clear, it did apparently provide a means of living forever (Gen 3:22). But living forever as a fallen human being with a sin nature while cut off from God’s presence would not have been a good thing. In the future, however, there is a way back to the tree of life, and this image of the tree in God’s paradise points to a divine renewal of all God’s creation. Present realities—for Christians, often having to face a hostile world—will eventually give way to a wonderful new reality in which they will live in God’s presence and reign with Him forever and ever (Rev 22:1-5). Grasping this glorious promise and knowing the end game should help the Ephesian Christians to persevere as overcomers in the face of all opposition and hostility.

Topic 2: Messages to Smyrna (2:8-11) and Pergamum (2:12-17)

The message to the church at Smyrna. Located directly north of Ephesus lay the city of Smyrna (present-day Izmir). The city had originally been founded as a Greek settlement over 1000 years before Christ. It had an excellent harbor which made it an important trading port. Early in the 2nd century B.C., in an effort to secure help from Rome, the city created a cult of Rome and built a temple to Roma in 195 B.C. By 133 B.C., the region became the Roman province of Asia with Pergamum as its capital and Smyrna (being a major seaport) serving as a leading city of the province. A Jewish colony had also settled there. In A.D. 26 it was made the “temple warden” for a temple to the Roman emperor. The city was famous in early church history for its bishop, Polycarp, who resided there (martyred ca. A.D. 155). Irenaeus wrote of him:

Polycarp also was not only instructed by apostles, and conversed with many who had seen Christ, but was also, by apostles in Asia, appointed bishop of the Church in Smyrna . . . always taught the things which he had learned from the apostles, and which the Church has handed down, and which alone are true. To these things all the Asiatic Churches testify, as do also those men who have succeeded Polycarp.²



READING: Open your Bible and read Revelation 2:8-11.

Verse 8. Introduction to Christ. In writing to the church at Smyrna—a suffering church—the Lord Jesus reminded them that He is “*the first and the last*” (Isa 44:6; 48:12). He exists forever as the Lord God, and nothing can prevail against Him. This reminds the church whose side they are on. Furthermore, Jesus is “*the one who was dead, but came to life.*” For those whose suffering might entail martyrdom, this reminder of Jesus’ own death and resurrection would serve to assure them that death is not their final destiny. Believers in Christ have the promise of also being resurrected.

Verse 9. Evaluation. Being a Christian at Smyrna was not easy. They faced “tribulation,” and many lived in poverty (though they lived in a community that enjoyed the prosperity that the local seaport brought the city). Perhaps the financial and material hardships they suffered came upon them as a direct consequence of their faith in Christ and identification with what many would have considered a “suspect religion.” Despite such financial hardships, the Lord reminded them that they actually were “rich.” Inwardly, spiritually, and eternally, they were far better off than the other citizens of Smyrna who did not know Christ. They possessed the promise of eternal life and their faith entitled them to enter the kingdom of God (Luke 6:20; 1 Cor 3:21-23; 2 Cor 6:10; 8:2, 9; Jas 2:5).

The Christians at Smyrna suffered in another way: they were maligned and falsely accused by Jews who made up the local synagogue. Their “blasphemy” evidenced itself in the opposition their hurled against the Christians, ultimately a sacrilege against God and the true worship of Him. This opposition most likely consisted of false accusations made against them to the pagan officials of the city. In the first century, Christianity was seen by many outsiders as a kind of Jewish subsect. Perhaps the Jews of Smyrna—wanting to distance themselves from the Christians and thereby avoid any conflict such an

association might bring them—allied themselves with local pagan authorities in opposing the Christian presence there. Of course, there was also the long-standing jealousy at seeing the Christians proclaim Jesus as the true Messiah with the resulting conversion of Gentiles (Acts 13:43-45; 14:1-7; 17:13; 18:5-17; Gal 1:13-14, 23; 1 Thess 2:14-16). Such Jewish opposition drew the Lord's condemnation. They "*call themselves Jews and really are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.*" In saying this, Jesus was not denying their ethnicity as Jews. In Romans 9:6, the Apostle Paul had explained that "not all those who are descended from Israel are truly Israel" (cf. Rom 2:28-29). The true Israel consisted of those Jews, who like Paul, were part of the remnant who had come to believe that Jesus was indeed the Messiah (Phil 3:3). The point here is not that the church has replaced Israel as the people of God (Romans 11 dispels that notion). Rather, the believing remnant of Israel has been joined by many Gentiles in embracing Jesus as Messiah and Lord. Those Jews who have refused to believe in Jesus and are opposing the growth of the church are actually standing on the side of Satan. Hence, they are a synagogue of Satan.

Verse 10. Exhortation. More suffering was about to come upon the church at Smyrna, and so Christ called them to courage and faithfulness. Specifically, He said to them, "*Do not be afraid of the things you are about to suffer.*" Such a challenge called for godly courage to face the spiritual and emotional battle about to come. Some of the Smyrna Christians were about to be locked up in a dingy Roman prison, no doubt brought on by the complaints and accusations of the local Jewish community. Though local officials would do the arresting and incarceration of the Christians, this ultimately derived from Satan's own hatred for them. Such an experience would be a specific test of faith. The wording of the sentence ("*the devil is about to have some of you thrown into prison so you may be tested*") implies that the "testing" would be for all, not just the ones actually thrown in prison. Apparently this testing was to be short lived ("ten days"), but it served to help the church discern how far they were willing to go in their allegiance to Christ. He concluded the exhortation with these words, "*Remain faithful even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown that is life itself.*" Physical death was a possibility; would they be up for the test? Such a calling probably brought a recollection of Jesus' words to His disciples to take up their cross and follow Him (Mark 8:35-37). In light of the mention of death in verse ten and a comment about "the second death" in verse eleven, the "crown of life" that He spoke of was probably the reward of resurrection and eternal life (James 1:12). If they were to be martyred for their faith, theirs was the comfort of knowing the eternal destiny that awaited them. Physical death was only a temporary gate to pass through to a life far better and glorious, not a cessation of existence.

Verse 11. A Motivating Promise. For overcomers at Smyrna, the Lord Jesus promised them that they would "*in no way be harmed by the second death.*" The "second death" is explained in Revelation 20:6, 14 and 21:8. Simply put, this is the destiny of hell for those who have rejected God's offer of salvation in Jesus Christ. These unbelievers will miss out on the resurrection that believers in Christ experience at the time of His return in glory. Instead, they will be resurrected after the millennium to appear before God and be judged according to their deeds. Revelation 20:14 and 21:8 indicate that they will then be consigned to the lake of fire that burns with fire and brimstone. For such ones, their physical death was their first death. But their second death of the lake of fire is a more severe death, for it will mean separation from God and eternal torment for all eternity. Overcomers in Christ may suffer for their faith—perhaps even be martyred—but even if they experience a "first death" (physically), they can be assured they will never have to experience the "second death" of the lake of fire that many of their persecutors will have to.

The message to the church at Pergamum. Pergamum was the northernmost of the seven churches, located on a high elevation about 26 km from the coastline on the north side of the river Caicus (see map introducing Smyrna). This was a noteworthy city in ancient times, and a number of archaeological remains can still be seen such as the acropolis and amphitheater. In the 2nd century B.C., king Eumenes II built the famous Pergamum Altar there (now housed in a museum in Berlin). Pictured on the left.



READING: Open your Bible and read Revelation 2:12-17.

Verse 12. Introduction to Christ. The Lord Jesus is introduced to the church at Pergamum as “*the one who has the sharp double-edged sword.*” This echoes what was said in Revelation 1:16 of the sword that came from His mouth. This is obviously not a literal sword but rather refers to the powerful authority with which He speaks and enacts judgment, either unto the churches or to His enemies (cf. Rev 19:15, 21).

Verses 13-15. Evaluation. When Christ said, “*I know where you live—where Satan’s throne is,*” He was acknowledging that the church at Pergamum dwelt at a center of strong demonic activity. The city had several temples dedicated to Greco-Roman worship. This included a temple to Athena, an altar to Zeus, and temples to Dionysus and to Demeter situated on the Acropolis on the hilltop. In addition to these, soon after Augustus consolidated his power in 31 B.C., the province’s first temple dedicated to the Roman emperor cult was built in Pergamum. The words “Satan’s throne” may simply be a general reference to all these satanic influences at Pergamum.

Such a culture would have been extremely difficult for Christians to live and operate in. Refusal to participate in the various pagan activities would have put them at a great disadvantage, loss of social status, and financial peril. Refusal to honor the Roman emperor cult could have even brought risk of life. Nevertheless, most of the Christians at Pergamum held fast to the name of Christ and did not deny their faith in Him. This loyalty to Christ was greatly put to the test at a time when one of their number, Antipas, was martyred for his faith in Christ. Even then, the church stood fast. In the Lord’s eyes, Antipas was His “faithful witness.” What he did mirrored Christ’s own faithfulness to God until death

(Rev 1:5; 3:14). He served as an example for many other believers to emulate, especially for those in the coming period of tribulation (note Rev 1:2, 9; 6:9; 12:11, 17; 17:6; 19:10; 20:4).

Despite this commendation of their faith “where Satan dwells,” not all who had participated in the Pergamum church had been true to God’s Word. “Some” (not all) were guilty of false teaching, and the church erred in not cracking down on those guilty of this. Christ likened their erroneous teachings to that of “*Balaam, who instructed Balak to put a stumbling block before the people of Israel so they would eat food sacrificed to idols and commit sexual immorality.*” Balaam was the false prophet in the Old Testament who was hired by the Moabite king, Balak, to bring God’s curse upon the Hebrews who had come out of Egypt (the story is told in Numbers 22–24). Despite Balaam’s attempts to do so, God intervened and used him to pronounce blessing on God’s people, Israel. Though he failed at cursing Israel, Balaam conveyed to Balak a plan for how the Midianites of Moab could bring God’s judgment upon the Hebrews—by enticing them to sin. They tricked the Hebrews into joining them in their festivities that included sacrifices made to the pagan gods and in which some of the Hebrews also committed immorality with Midianite women (Num 25:1-9). As a result, God sent a plague in which 24,000 perished. Vengeance was later taken when war was made upon the Midianites, and Balaam was killed with the sword (Num 31:7-8). What was happening at Pergamum was not the exact same thing, but it was likened unto this “teaching of Balaam,” because some Christians in Pergamum were being influenced toward sin and apostasy. Thus, the “teaching of Balaam” was a *metaphor* for luring others into spiritual infidelity (though not necessarily involving sexual immorality), just as Balaam put “a stumbling block” (a cause for sinning—Matt 16:23) before the Hebrew people.

What clearly was taking place at Pergamum was the promotion of the teaching of the Nicolaitans (Rev 2:15), mentioned earlier in Revelation 2:6. Unfortunately, no details of this false doctrine are specified.³ Since it is patterned after the “teaching of Balaam,” it may have involved compromise with the centers of pagan worship located there. One possibility is that it involved the eating of “meat offered to idols” (note Rev 2:20 and compare 1 Cor 8:1-13 and Acts 15:20, 20; 21:25). However, there is no certainty of that. In any case, the church was guilty of tolerating a false teaching in their midst that was drawing some toward spiritual infidelity.

Verse 16. Exhortation. Christ called the church to “*repent.*” They needed to recognize that toleration of the teaching of the Nicolaitans was unacceptable and detrimental to the spiritual health of the church. This meant they needed to take action and exercise church discipline on those guilty of involvement. Failure to do so would result in divine action by Christ Himself. He would come quickly and “*make war against those people with the sword*” of His mouth. All He would need to do would be to pronounce judgment, and they would incur His wrath. It was grace that Christ was giving the church an opportunity to settle this matter without Him having to exercise further judgment.

Verse 17. A Motivating Promise. For the ones who “overcome” at Pergamum, the Lord promised them two things: (1) hidden manna; and (2) a white stone. Manna, of course, was the heavenly sent food provided for the Hebrews during their sojourn in the wilderness (Exod 16:4, 14-36; Num 11:6-7). Describing this manna as “hidden” implies God’s provision stored up for the final days, anticipating His ultimate and complete provision they will be given in the paradise of God (recall the promise of eating of the tree of life in Rev 2:7). Apparently the “white stone” is a precious kind of stone. This could be an allusion to the practice mentioned in Exodus 28:9-12 of engraving names on stones. In any case, the motif of God giving new names to people is well-attested in Scripture. For example, in Genesis 17:5, Abram’s name (meaning “exalted father”) was changed to Abraham (“father of a multitude”). In Hebrew thought, a “name” meant more than a label; it signified one’s character and reputation . . . what they were

known for. Likewise, the one who overcomes will be given a new name by the Lord that will apparently have special meaning for the one who receives it. This may reflect the new role they will have in the messianic kingdom.

Topic 3: Messages to Thyatira (2:18-29) and Sardis (3:1-6)

In Topic 3, we will look at the messages of Christ to Thyatira and Sardis, both inland cities of Asia Minor in what had once been the kingdom of Lydia. These became part of the Roman province of Asia about 133 B.C.

The message to the church at Thyatira. Thyatira (modern day Akhisar, Turkey) was strategically located at the intersection of important roads which made it a busy trade center. It was famous for its dyeing facilities and was a center of the purple cloth trade. When the apostle Paul came to Philippi in Macedonia, one of the first to respond to the gospel was a woman named Lydia, a seller of purple fabrics, originally from the city of Thyatira (Acts 16:13-15).



READING: Open your Bible and read Revelation 2:18-29.

Verse 18. Introduction to Christ. The message to the church of Thyatira begins with an identification of Jesus as “*the Son of God.*” On the one hand, this puts Him in direct conflict with the worship of the Roman emperor as *divi filius* (“son of a god”). Since the time of Augustus, this had been a title conferred on many emperors. On the other hand, identifying Jesus as “the Son of God” aligns Him with such Old Testament passages as Psalm 2:7-9 which had promised the messianic king-Son of being given the nations as His inheritance over which to rule—a thought that will be resumed later in the passage (Rev 2:26-27). He is further described as having “*eyes like a fiery flame and whose feet are like polished bronze,*” attributes already ascribed to Him in Revelation 1:14-15.

Verses 19-23. Evaluation. For the most part, the church was to be commended. Jesus called attention to their deeds, as well as their “*love, faith, service, and steadfast endurance.*” Such Christian virtues are often given praise elsewhere in the New Testament. The final one listed (steadfast endurance) is given particular emphasis throughout Revelation in light of the opposition that the readers were facing and which those in the final Tribulation will face (Rev 1:9; 2:2-3; 13:10; 14:12). That their “*more recent deeds are greater than*” their earlier ones was a good indication that the church was moving in a healthy direction (and unlike the church of Ephesus, Jesus commended them for their love).

Despite the commendable things Christ found in the church of Thyatira, there was one particular problem that was seriously undermining the welfare of the church. There was a certain woman in their midst who claimed to be a prophetess. Obviously she was a fraud and tool of Satan, because that is why Christ was reprimanding the church for tolerating her in their midst. Although referred to as “Jezebel,” that would not have been her real name. Like the reference to Balaam in Revelation 2:14, calling her “Jezebel” likened her to an evil character of the Old Testament, namely, the wife of King Ahab of Israel.

Jezebel of the Old Testament, although not a prophetess, had a notorious influence on Israel toward idolatry. Along with her husband, she promoted the worship of Baal and Asherah in the kingdom while opposing the true prophets of the Lord like Elijah (1 Kgs 16:31-32; 18:4; 19:1-3; 21:7-26; 2 Kgs 9:7, 22). By the teaching of this false prophetess at Thyatira, she was deceiving some of God's bondservants (the true believers) "to commit sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols." Thyatira, like most cities in the Greco-Roman world, had multiple pagan temples where food offerings were made. Apparently, her teaching was promoting some sort of syncretistic participation with such activities. The reference to "sexual immorality" (Greek *porneia*) may have been literal (as it most often is in the New Testament, for example, 1 Thess 4:3), or this could have been a metaphorical way of referring to *spiritual infidelity* (in a way similar to how the word is used in regard to "the great city" in Rev 14:8; 17:2). In any case, she was deceiving and leading others astray. Apparently some younger and immature believers in the church had been beguiled by what had been promoted as "knowledge of deep things" (deep spiritual secrets), as her teachings are referred to in Revelation 2:24. In reality, they were not some special esoteric spiritual knowledge at all; rather, they were "deep secrets of Satan" straight from the pit of hell.

In saying, "I have given her time to repent" (Rev 2:21), this implies she must have already been confronted by leaders in the church. Any such warnings had gone unheeded; she was not willing to repent. Therefore, the Lord was about to take things to the next level, putting her under divine judgment with physical sickness (being thrown into a sickbed is an idiom for falling sick). Those believers at Thyatira who had participated in her spiritual "adultery" also faced the Lord's judgment if they—like her—refused to repent. They had not gone unnoticed, because Jesus was the one with "eyes like a fiery flame." They faced the prospect of "great tribulation" (some type of difficult physical suffering or need; cf. Acts 7:11) and being smitten with a deadly disease. [This should not be confused with *the Great Tribulation* set to occur in the final days, as in Matt 24:21 and Rev 7:14]. Physical death as a discipline by the Lord is attested elsewhere in the New Testament, but is reserved for very serious matters that only the Lord Himself is capable of knowing when it is appropriate (Acts 5:1-5; 1 Cor 11:27-32; 1 Jn 5:16-17). The Lord's discipline on the unrepentant at Thyatira—whatever form it might take and however harsh it might be—was meant to be a lesson for all. It was so "all the churches will know that I am the one who searches minds and hearts. I will repay each one of you what your deeds deserve" (Rev 2:23).

Verses 24-25. Exhortation. Jesus went on to address "the rest of you in Thyatira" who had not gone along with the teachings of the false prophetess, telling them, "I do not put any additional burden on you." As mentioned in verse 19, Jesus found a lot in them to commend. It was only their toleration of "Jezebel" in their midst that the Lord had seen fit to rebuke. So, He simply told them, "hold on to what you have until I come."

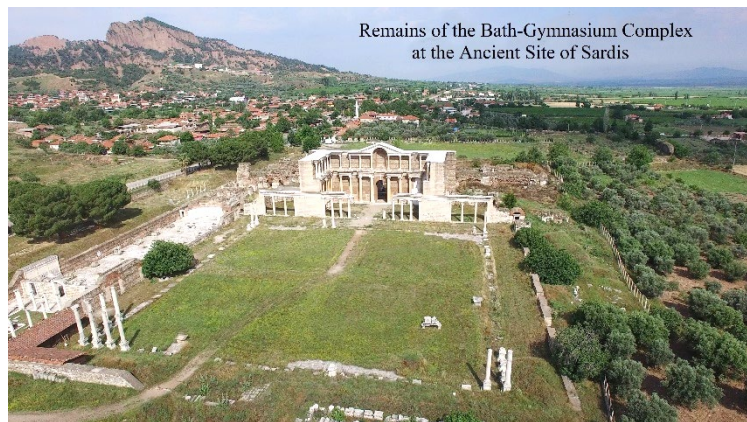
This whole passage is instructive for how church discipline should work (cf. Matt 18:15-17; Gal 6:1-2). When there is sin or false teaching in the church, spiritual leaders should first confront the guilty one (gently but clearly) and call for repentance. Some measure of time should then be given for repentance. If repentance is not forthcoming, mild discipline should be administered. If, after more time, the guilty party is still unrepentant, a harsher form of discipline—possibly even removing them from the church—should be taken. Overall, there needs to be a balance of concern for the individual (hopefully seeing them restored and helped to maturity) as well as concern for the congregation (preserving the purity of the church). Overlooking such offenses in the church (tolerating sin) means that the leaders of the church are being derelict in their duties and are putting the whole church in danger of spiritual drift.

Verses 26-29. Motivating Promises. The previous comment about "holding fast until I come" carried over to the reward promises. These verses, more than any of the previous promises to overcomers, indicate that an "overcomer" is not merely a Christian. He is a Christian who is faithful in keeping Christ's deeds until the end. The promised reward for such a Christian is that of being given

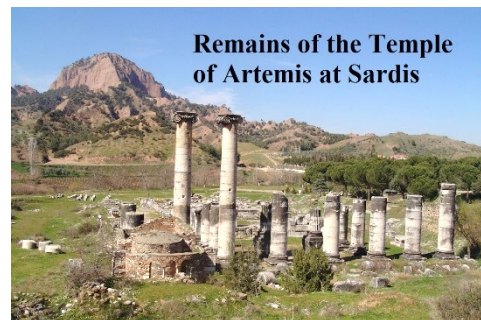
“*authority over the nations.*” This and the following verse are an allusion to Psalm 2:8-9. According to that passage, God will give the “Son” the nations as His inheritance. He will rule over them. With His resurrection and ascension, Christ Jesus has already been given all authority (Matt 28:18; Eph 1:20-23). Presently, He is using that authority to build His church, but in the future (at His second coming) all the nations will be submitted to Him as His kingdom is established on earth. In that kingdom, Christians who had been faithful in this age will be granted the privilege to rule with Him (Rev 5:10; 22:5; cf. 1 Cor 6:2). That is, they will be given some level of delegated authority for the optimal functioning of the kingdom. This privilege, however, is not for all but for those who endured with Him, that is, they were faithful and even endured sufferings for His sake (2 Tim 2:12). Although martyrdom is not a prerequisite for this honor, those martyred in the future Tribulation will certainly have this privilege (Rev 20:4-6).

Christ also promised the faithful ones at Thyatira that He would give them “*the morning star.*” According to Revelation 22:16, Jesus is “the bright morning star.” It is not clear as to what the promise of being given the morning star refers to. The reference to it in Revelation 22:16 immediately follows mention of Jesus being the fulfillment of the Davidic kingdom promise. So, this promise seems to be related to His second coming and some special privilege they will have at that time.

The message to the church at Sardis. Sardis was an inland city, about 72 km east of Smyrna (Izmir), situated in the middle of the fertile Hermus valley at the foot of Mount Tmolus. The ancient site is located by the present-day village of Sart (see map above for Thyatira). It had once been the capital of the ancient kingdom of Lydia. Later, Sardis became the seat of a proconsul under the Roman Empire. A Jewish synagogue once stood there as did a large temple to Artemis (see picture).



Remains of the Bath-Gymnasium Complex
at the Ancient Site of Sardis



Remains of the Temple
of Artemis at Sardis



READING: Open your Bible and read Revelation 3:1-6.

Verse 1a. Introduction to Christ. The fact that Jesus has “*the seven Spirits of God*” (the Holy Spirit; see comments at Rev 1:4) indicates that He works in conjunction with and by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit knows the hearts of all God’s people and is also available to empower them. As Jesus told the church at Ephesus (Rev 2:1), He has “*the seven stars*” (i.e., He has command over the angels to the churches).

Verse 1b. Evaluation. As with the other churches, Jesus knows their deeds, but His assessment of the church was negative. He acknowledges, “*you have a name that you are alive,*” a reference to their reputation, perhaps how they were perceived in the past. In any case, as for their present status, Jesus rebuked them with the words, “*but you are dead,*” signifying by this the spiritual condition of the church. Just as the church at Ephesus had lost its first love, so the church at Sardis had lost most of its spiritual

vitality. The mention of Christ having the Holy Spirit in the first part of the verse is a hint that the church could be revived if the Spirit were allowed to take over. One commentator writes,

Just outside their city was a famous necropolis, or cemetery, with the graves of long-dead kings. The assembly at Sardis represented that cemetery more than a living church. If they wanted to live, they had to turn from their false deeds to the life-giving Spirit.⁴

Although the text does not provide details of why they might be characterized as a "dead church," typically history has shown that this often comes as a result of a church that (1) turns away from the faithful preaching of God's Word; (2) lacks a commitment to prayer; and (3) loses its vision of caring for those who are lost and fails to proclaim the gospel.

Verses 2-4. Exhortation. Sardis may have reached a point where they could rightly be called a "dead church," but it was not too late for things to change. Hence, Jesus told them, "*Wake up then, and strengthen what remains that was about to die, because I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God.*" Their commitment to Christ was waning, and they had allowed themselves to be satisfied by things of lesser value. Their deeds—their activities, conduct, and Christian love—needed desperate attention. Little still remained, and what did was about to die altogether. Christ challenged them, "*Therefore, remember what you received and heard, and obey it, and repent.*" What they had "received and heard" refers to the initial instruction in the Christian life they had been given. This would have included biblical teaching in general, as well as ethical instruction in how to walk with the Lord by faith and in reliance upon the Holy Spirit. They had not been faithful in obeying such instruction and had drifted from it. The proper thing for them to do, then, was to "repent"—to change their mind about how they had been living and return to a life of faithful obedience.

The call to wake up, correct things and repent in verses 2-3 is followed in the latter part of verse 3 by a warning. Failure to do so will mean Christ bringing judgment on the church: "*I will come like a thief, and you will never know at what hour I will come against you.*" The warning of coming like a thief hearkens back to the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 24:42-44 of the Olivet Discourse (cf. 1 Thess 5:2-4; 2 Pet 3:10; Rev 16:15). The disciples were warned to be ready at all times for the second coming of Christ, for His coming would be like a thief who gives no warning. One must be prepared at all times. In the case of the church at Sardis, the reference to His coming is a warning of the near future, not explicitly the Lord's second coming. Just as Christ warned the church at Ephesus that He might remove their lampstand, so the church at Sardis is warned of the Lord's near judgment in the present time. Yet the warning serves to *anticipate* the situation of those in the Great Tribulation whom the Lord exhorts, "Behold, I am coming like a thief. Blessed is the one who stays awake and keeps his clothes" (Rev 16:15). In both cases, the point is that preparing oneself spiritually should not be delayed!

The exhortation section of the message to Sardis ends with a word of encouragement for the minority faithful in the church . . . the few "*who have not stained their clothes.*" Christ promises them, "*they will walk with me dressed in white, because they are worthy.*" The imagery of bright/clean/white clothing is found frequently in Revelation (Rev 3:18; 4:4; 6:11; 7:9, 13; 19:8, 14; 22:14. Cf. Rev 16:15, implied; and Rev 15:6 of angels). Essentially, this means they have endured hardship while remaining faithful and keeping a good testimony before others. "Worthy" does not mean *sinless perfection*; rather, it means that someone is deserving of something, whether good for bad (e.g., a laborer is worthy of his wages, Lk 10:7). The point of verse four is that their present faithfulness will one day be exchanged for a life in which they enjoy eternal rewards and fellowship with Christ in the resurrection.

Verses 5-6. Motivating Promises. The previous promise to the faithful of walking with Christ in white leads naturally in verse five to a promise for the "overcomer": "*He who overcomes will thus be clothed in white garments.*" He has refused to soil his garments on earth, as it were, meaning that he has

refused to accommodate his Christian walk to pagan expectations and demands. For this, he will enjoy a more glorious attire in the resurrection. A second promise is the assurance in knowing that Christ “*will never erase his name from the book of life.*” To the contrary, Christ will “*declare his name before*” the Father and the angels (cf. Matt 10:32; Lk 12:8).⁵ He will be publicly honored in the courts of heaven! The “book of life” in verse 5 contains a list of the names of the righteous of all time. Their names were recorded in this heavenly book before the foundation of the world (Rev 13:8; cf. Dan 12:1; Phil 4:3; Rev 17:8; 20:12, 15; 21:27). These are the ones who were justified by faith and granted forgiveness based on the shed blood of Christ for them. In the Great Tribulation, they will refuse to worship the “beast” or receive his mark. They will spend eternity with God and have the right to enter the New Jerusalem, whereas those whose names are excluded from the book of life will be thrown into the lake of fire (Rev 20:15). Essentially, this “book” is a heavenly record of all those who have eternal life. The promise to the overcomer is in being assured that his name will not be removed from this book. This does not imply that some might have their names erased (so as to lose their salvation). [Verses such as John 5:24, 10:28; and Rom 8:38-39 assure us that Christians cannot lose their salvation]. Because being an overcomer can mean martyrdom—the loss of one’s physical life—as a result of remaining loyal to Christ, it is important that they be assured of what they can never lose, namely, their eternal life.

Topic 4: Messages to Philadelphia (3:7-13) and Laodicea (3:14-22)

The last two of the seven churches of Revelation are Philadelphia and Laodicea, shown on the map.

The message to the church at Philadelphia.

Philadelphia (modern Alaşehir) was established about 189 B.C. by the king of Pergamum and became part of the Roman province of Asia about 129 B.C. The city was situated at the foot of Mount Tmolus on the eastern end of a broad valley alongside the Cogamis River, a tributary of the Hermus. Both Sardis and Philadelphia were leveled by an earthquake in A.D. 17. As with most cities of the province, numerous deities were worshiped, but the patron deity was Dionysus, the god of wine. When Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna, was martyred in 155 A.D., eleven Christians from Philadelphia were martyred along with him.



READING: Open your Bible and read Revelation 3:7-13.

Verse 7. Introduction to Christ. Three things are said of Christ in the opening introduction. First, He is “*the Holy One,*” which affirms His deity. This was an Old Testament title for God (Isa 40:25; 43:15), a shortened form for the fuller title, “*the Holy One of Israel*” (Isa 43:3; 45:11; 60:9; 2 Kgs 19:22). In the gospels, Jesus is sometimes referred to as “*the Holy One of God*” (Mk 1:24; Lk 4:34; Jn 6:69). Second, He is “*the True One.*” The description of “*true*” is often used of God (Jn 7:28; 17:3; 1 Jn 5:20). In His earthly ministry, Jesus declared, “*I am the way, and the truth, and the life.*” In His return in glory, He is said to come riding on a white horse and is called “*Faithful and True*” (Rev 19:11). Third, Jesus is

said to hold “*the key of David, who opens doors no one can shut, and shuts doors no one can open.*” This is an allusion to Isaiah 22:22 where a similar pronouncement was made of an official in Hezekiah’s court by the name of Eliakim. He was the “steward,” the chief palace administrator under the king. Having the key of David implied that he had authority to act as King Hezekiah’s representative. He also controlled who had access to the king. Yet the authority entrusted to the mere human Eliakim is now elevated in the hands of Christ who has absolute divine sovereignty.

Verses 8-10. Evaluation. The church at Philadelphia shared something in common with that at Smyrna—no rebuke or fault was pointed out, even though Christ knew their “deeds.” As an extension of the description just made of Christ, He reminded those at Philadelphia that even though they had but a “little power” (status and influence) in the pagan society in which they lived, He had put in front of them “*an open door that no one can shut.*” But what does the “open door” refer to? Some see this as an opportunity for fruitful ministry (1 Cor 16:9; 2 Cor 2:12; Col 4:3). However, others prefer to see this, not as ministry opportunity, but as the “door” to the kingdom. That is, Jesus has the keys to the kingdom, and only through Him can one have access to the kingdom of God. He controls who gets in and who does not. This latter view seems preferable. First, it is more in keeping with the allusion to Isa 22:22 (Eliakim, who controlled who had access to King Hezekiah). Second, it is more in keeping with the remainder of verse 8 and with verse 9, that is, the implied rejection by those of “the synagogue of Satan.” The Christians at Philadelphia had obeyed Christ’s word and had not denied His name. In John 8:51, “keeping Christ’s word” meant believing in the gospel message and so gaining eternal life. However, more often the concept means remaining faithful to Jesus’ instructions and commands (John 14:23, 24; 15:20; 17:6). The point of Revelation 3:8, then, is that those at Philadelphia had turned in faith to Christ, remained obedient, and had not denied His name (in the face of hostility). They were persevering! In contrast to these stood those Jews at Philadelphia who denied Jesus as being Lord and Christ. In God’s eyes, they may have been ethnically Jewish, but they were not true Jews. [See Rom 9:6 and the comments at Rev 2:9]. Rather, they were a “*synagogue of Satan,*” because they were of their father, the devil, the father of lies (John 8:44). They were guilty of rejecting God’s Son and believing instead the lies of Satan. But Jesus—the One who said, “no one comes to the Father but through Me” (Jn 14:6)—had the “keys of David” and was the decider of who entered the kingdom and who did not. No one could shut the door of access to Christ’s kingdom that had been given to the Christians of Philadelphia. The Philadelphian Christians would enter; the Jews of Philadelphia who rejected Jesus would not. Instead, Christ would make them “*come and bow down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you.*” This was Old Testament imagery reflective of how God would reverse the fortunes of those faithful to Him (Isa 43:4; 45:14; 49:23; 60:14).

Because the Christians at Philadelphia had **kept** Christ’s “*admonition to endure steadfastly,*” Christ had a special promise for the church (Rev 3:10). He promised to **keep** them “*from the hour of testing that is about to come on the whole world to test those who live on the earth.*” [Notice the word-play on “kept/keep” in this verse]. The “hour of testing” refers to that future period of time in which the series of judgments by God described in chapters 6–19 are poured out (the seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments). The expression “those who live on the earth” is used repeatedly in the book of Revelation for the unbelievers who refuse to repent, who side with the Antichrist and take his mark, and who persecute those who belong to the Lamb of God (Rev 6:10; 8:13; 11:10; 13:8, 12, 14; 17:2, 8). The purpose of these divine judgments is not to punish the Christians of that time but rather to “test” and humble “those who live on the earth,” giving them an opportunity to repent before it is too late. During this time period, multitudes of Christian will be martyred for their faith in Christ (Rev 6:9-10; 7:9-17). The promise to keep them from this hour of testing is not to protect them physically from the persecution of the Antichrist and those in league with him but rather to protect them spiritually. No matter what happens to Christians of this time, Christ will “keep” them. That is, He will *keep* them *safe* from the spiritual harm

of the coming tribulation period and any threats against their faith. Because of their faith in Christ, they are eternally secure. This verse, then, is about protection, not removal. Hence, it cannot be used to defend the idea of the rapture taking place before the Tribulation. [See the Appendix on Rev 3:10 for a more detailed discussion].

Verse 11. Exhortation. Before any word of exhortation, Christ declared to them, “*I am coming soon.*” This is a reference to His second coming in power and glory, since these are the same words used to speak of His return in Revelation 22:7, 12, 20. Like the statements in Revelation 1:1,3, the descriptive “soon” is from God’s perspective, not man’s. In light of that truth—knowing they always need to be prepared for His return—the Lord told them, “*Hold on to what you have so that no one can take away your crown.*” The word used here for “crown” (*stéphanos*) was not that of a ruler’s crown but that of a victor in a contest. In the New Testament, crowns are promised as a reward to the believer who has been faithful to the Lord and for one’s service (see 1 Cor 9:25; 2 Tim 4:8; Jas 1:12; 1 Pet 5:4). The promise of rewards for faithfulness is mentioned often in the New Testament (e.g., Matt 5:12; Lk 6:23, 35; 1 Cor 3:8, 14; 2 Jn 8; Rev 11:18; 22:12). The point in this verse is that they first need to finish well, lest they forfeit their crown.

Verses 12-13. Motivating Promises. The final two verses focus on promises for those who “overcome.” Christ promises to “*make him a pillar in the temple*” of God. Revelation 21:22 indicates that in the eternal state there is no physical temple, but rather the Lord God and the Lamb are its temple. But there is a community of God’s people that enjoy this “temple.” The idea of a “pillar” is that of being a notable leader (as in Gal 2:9). So, the point here seems to be that in contrast to their present state in which life is uncertain and they struggle and have to persevere, they can look forward to a secure future and an esteemed role in the community of God’s people.

A second promise pertains to having three important things written on the overcomer: “*the name of My God, and the name of the city of My God, the new Jerusalem, . . . and My new name.*” This denotes the overcomer’s privileged relationship with God, his eternal destiny, and his citizenship in the kingdom of God in close relationship with Christ Himself (cf. Rev 14:1). The “new Jerusalem” is the city in the new heavens and new earth (Rev 21-22). “My new name” may refer to a name of Christ not presently known (see Rev 19:12-13) but which the overcomer will one day have inscribed upon him, forever identifying him with the Lord Jesus Christ in the new Jerusalem.

The message to the church at Laodicea. Laodicea—situated today near the modern city of Denizli, Turkey—was an ancient city built in the Lycus valley which became part of the Roman Province of Phrygia about 129 B.C. It was located only 17 km west of Colossae. Despite an earthquake that destroyed the city about A.D. 60, it quickly rebounded. Situated on a major trade route as a banking center, it became a wealthy city with its own medical school. They developed a compound for curing eye diseases called “Phrygian powder” which brought it more fame and money. It was also famous for a soft, black wool that it produced. Not having its own water supply, it



Ancient Ruins at Laodicea

had to pipe in water via an aqueduct from 10 km away. Earlier in its history, Antiochus the Great had transported 2000 Jewish families to Phrygia from Babylonia, many of whom settled in Laodicea, becoming citizens there. Very early, Laodicea became an important seat of Christianity. According to one writer, “It is likely that the three sister churches (Laodicea, Hierapolis, Colosse) were established at the same time by Epaphras, who founded the Colossian church (Col. 1:7) as well as evangelized Laodicea and Hierapolis (Col. 4:13) during Paul’s three-year ministry in Ephesus (Acts 19).”⁶



READING: Open your Bible and read Revelation 3:14-22.

Verse 14. Introduction to Christ. The message to the church at Laodicea begins with a trifold acknowledgment of Christ’s identity. First, He is “*the Amen*” which may be an allusion to Isaiah 65:16 (literally, “the God of amen”). The fundamental meaning of the word is to be or make firm (hence, secure). The word was used in the OT to “confirm” or “verify” a prayer or hymn. Calling Jesus “the Amen” signifies that what He has to say is reliable, as He speaks with divine authority. Second, Jesus is “the faithful and true witness,” which recalls Revelation 1:5 and 3:7. He is the model to all Christians of persevering faithfulness and truth. The third title could be translated either “the originator of God’s creation” (so NET Bible) or “the ruler of God’s creation” (so NIV2011), since the Greek word (*archē*) can mean either. Both renderings are true and affirmed elsewhere. Since the words “faithful witness” connect back to Revelation 1:5 where the same verse declared that He is “the ruler (*árchōn*) of the kings of the earth,” some would use this to argue for the translation “the ruler of God’s creation.” Other commentators, however, think John may have had in mind the use of the same word that he used in John 1:1, “In the beginning (*en archē*) was the Word” (cf. Col 1:15-16). If so, then the point is more that He is the source or origin of all creation. This makes good sense, since Revelation 3:14 is about His role in regard to creation, and John 1:3 goes on to state that “all things came into being through Him.” What He is the originator of, He also is in control of. Mentioning this may be a reminder to the Laodiceans that their wealth is not due to their own creation.

Verses 15-18. Evaluation. The church may not be “dead,” as Sardis was, but the evaluation is essentially negative. In verses 15-16, the church is likened to lukewarm water. Laodicea did not have its own water supply and had to rely on water piped in by aqueduct. About 10 km to the north was Hierapolis, famed for its hot springs. About 16 km to the east lay Colossae, known for its cold, pure drinking water. Water that was piped to Laodicea was neither hot nor cold, but was lukewarm with a heavy mineral taste. In short, it was distasteful and anything but refreshing. The analogy was clear: the condition of the water reflected the spiritual state of the church. Spiritually, it was unappealing and did not reflect the vitality that a worshipping assembly ought to have had.

The church of Laodicea was rather self-deceived. They thought they were alright, since life was not so bad for them (compared to the other churches surveyed). Their attitude was one of self-reliance that lacked dependency on the Lord and His provision for them, for they said, “*I am rich and have acquired great wealth, and need nothing.*” They would not have been able to say, “Lord, I desperately need you.” This is a sad reality, for they were living the Christian life in their own strength and by their own wits rather than by an utter reliance upon the Lord, His grace, and His power in their lives. Despite what they thought of themselves, the Lord’s opinion was that they were “*wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked.*” They did not even realize how bad off they were and how far astray they had gone from true spirituality.

The three final descriptions (“poor, blind and naked”) from verse 17 are now taken up and turned into a threefold piece of advice. The city—and presumably some of the Laodicean Christians—was wealthy, but Christ advised them to pursue the true riches: “*take my advice and buy gold from me refined by fire.*”

Spiritual rewards are much more profitable than material rewards. True “wealth” comes as a result of exercising faith, especially in times of trials and suffering (1 Pet 1:7). The city was famous for its production of glossy black wool with which to make nice clothing, but the clothing they prided themselves in was as nothing in God’s eyes. Christ advised them to seek “*white clothing*.” The theme of wearing white garments or robes is prevalent in Revelation (see Rev 3:4, 5; 6:11; 7:9, 13; 16:15; 19:8, 14). Just as God once clothed Adam and Eve to conceal their nakedness as they departed the garden (Gen 3:21), so God will welcome faithful Christians with eternal attire when they go to be with Him (especially those who suffered martyrdom). This seems to be both an honor and reward for their faithfulness as well as a reflection of their righteous acts (Rev 19:8). Christ’s third advice was for their spiritual blindness. They should obtain from Him “*eye salve to put on your eyes so you can see!*” The city of Laodicea had a medical school that was famous for the production of an eye salve called “Phrygian powder” that was used to treat eye ailments. Alluding to that practice, Christ advised them to receive from Him a heavenly “eye salve.” To get this, they first needed to “see” their spiritual blindness, repent of that, and then allow the Lord Jesus to give them spiritual eyes with which to see things clearly. Then they would be able to evaluate everything in light of the Word of God and the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit (cf. John 9:39).

Verses 19-20. Exhortation. The opening words of Revelation 3:19 (“*All those I love, I rebuke and discipline*”) echo Proverbs 3:12, “For whom the LORD loves He reproves, even as a father corrects the son in whom he delights” (NASB95). Because the Laodiceans to whom He wrote were true believers, the words of rebuke and admonition Christ uttered flowed from a fatherly love for them. He did not say what He did out of spite but because He desired what was best for them. Therefore, He exhorted them to “*be earnest and repent!*” Discipline—though done in love—could be easily avoided by rightly responding.

Understanding verse 19 (that Christ is speaking to Christians at Laodicea) is important for understanding what He goes on to say in verse 20. The metaphor is one of Christ standing at the door and knocking, waiting to see if there are Christians at Laodicea who are going to repent of the way they have been living. If they are receptive (they “hear His voice”—that is, they repent—and they open the door to Him), then Christ will enter the building to have fellowship with that person. [The imagery is not one of entering a person’s heart but entering a place where the person is].⁷ To “*share a meal with him*” signifies having fellowship together. So, this is not an evangelistic invitation (as it is sometimes used) but a call for carnal Christians to respond to Christ’s exhortation in verse 19 to “be zealous and repent.”

Verses 21-22. Motivating Promises. As a motivation to respond to His exhortation, Jesus promises, “*He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne*” (NASB95). This is the final and climactic promise to overcomers. It also anticipates the heavenly throne scene of chapters 4–5 in which Jesus emerges as the honored king to be worshiped and who is worthy to open the sealed scroll (see especially Rev 5:9-10, 13). Jesus Himself serves as the model for overcomers. He persevered in the face of opposition and suffering (even death), but was honored by being resurrected and caused to ascend to “sit at the right hand” of God the Father. From that position, He presently rules and exercises authority to build His church. The promise to overcomers will, like most of the preceding promises to the seven churches, be fulfilled in the eschaton following Christ’s second coming. They will be the ones to rule with Christ in His messianic kingdom (1 Cor 6:2; 2 Tim 2:12). Also recall Revelation 2:26-27 where Christ had spoken in a similar way to the overcomers at Thyatira. The supreme examples of this are those coming out of the Great Tribulation who were martyred on account of their perseverance and faithfulness to Christ (Rev 20:4). Christ had once given a similar prophetic promise to the twelve disciples (Matt 19:28; Lk 22:19), but now we see the honor of ruling with Christ in the kingdom age being extended to others as well, namely, those who persevere as overcomers.

Appendix B

Revelation 3:10 – The Promise to be Kept from the Hour of Testing

Introduction

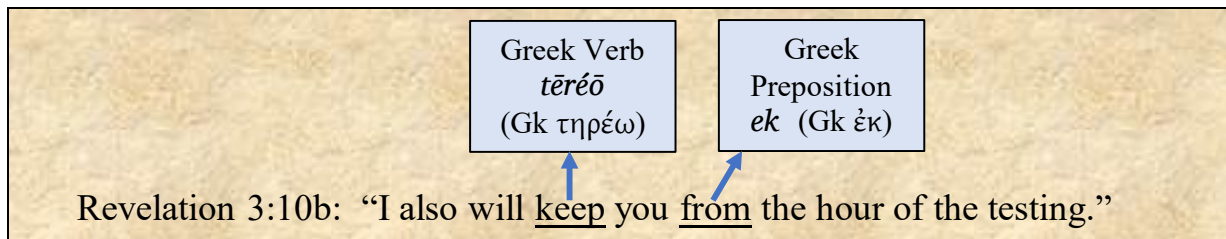
In the letters to the seven churches, Jesus gave no rebuke for the church at Philadelphia. Instead, He commended them for keeping His word and not denying His name, even in the face of resentment and opposition from Jews of the local synagogue. In Jesus’ eyes, they were nothing more than a “synagogue of Satan,” since they had bought into the lies of the devil and rejected Jesus as Messiah and Lord. The church at Philadelphia, on the other hand, had persevered in remaining loyal to the Lord Jesus. Because of this, Jesus gave them the following promise:

Because you have kept My word of perseverance, I also will keep you from the hour of the testing, that *hour* which is about to come upon the whole world, to test those who live on the earth (Rev 3:10; NASB2020).

Some have used this verse to support their view that the rapture of the church (1 Thess 4:13-18; 1 Cor 15:50-57) must be *pretribulational*, that is, occurring before the final seven years that precede Christ’s second coming. A closer examination, however, does not support that conclusion.

The Greek Text of the Phrase and the Lexical Meaning of “Keep”

The crucial phrase in question is the latter part of Revelation 3:10: “I also will keep you from the hour of the testing.”¹



The Greek word translated “keep” is *tērēō* (Gk τηρέω), a common verb occurring 70x in the New Testament and 37x in the LXX. The word has a variety of meanings and usage:

1. to “obey, observe commandments” - John 8:51, 55; 14:15; 17:6
This meaning is very common in Johannine literature, especially Revelation.
2. to “do something, observe a practice” - Matt 23:3; John 9:16
3. to “put away or hold in reserve for a later time” - John 2:10; 12:7; 1 Pet 1:4; 2 Pet 2:4, 9, 17; 3:7; Jude 13.
4. to “watch over, guard, preserve”
 - a. physically: Acts 16:23; 24:23; 25:4, 21
 - b. spiritually: Matt 27:36; 1 Thes 5:23; John 17:11, 12; 1 John 5:18; Jude 1

¹ The Greek text reads: *κἀγὼ σε τηρήσω ἐκ τῆς ὥρας τοῦ πειρασμοῦ.*

- guard oneself spiritually - 1 Tim 5:22; Jas 1:27
5. to “confine” in a place - Acts 12:5
 6. to “hold back, retain” - 1 Cor 7:37 (oneself – 2 Cor 11:9)

A survey of the NT use of the verb reveals that the fundamental notion of *tērēō* is that of being protective of something . . . by watching over, guarding, or being faithful to keep or do something. However, it never means to protect by removal from a sphere of danger. BDAG, the standard Greek lexicon agrees with this conclusion when it places the use of Rev 3:10 under its category 2d: “**of being protective** . . . *keep* τινὰ ἔκ τινος *someone from someone or someth.* J 17:15; Rv 3:10b (cp. Pr 7:5 τηρεῖν τινα ἀπό τινος).” Hence, the primary Greek NT lexicon also sees this verse as pertaining to protection, not removal.

In the case of Revelation 3:10, this verb is followed by a prepositional phrase “from the hour” initiated by the preposition *ek* (Gk ἐκ), meaning “from.” More commonly, the verb *tērēō* takes a direct object, and only in a few instances is it accompanied by a prepositional phrase (John 17:12, 15; Acts 12:5; 1 Pet 1:4; Jas 1:27; 2 Pet 2:4, 9; 3:7; Jude 6). The particular combination of *tērēō ek* (τηρέω ἐκ) is quite rare, occurring only one other time in the New Testament, namely, John 17:15.² How the phrase is used in John 17:15 ought to influence how we understand its use in Rev 3:10 (see #3 below).

Observations

1. The promise of keeping them from the hour has a *cause* behind it: “*Because* you have kept My word of perseverance.” This is the reason Christ is making them a promise. The word “perseverance” (Gk *hypomonē*, ὑπομονή) means—in the context of Revelation—to remain faithful to Christ as one endures through tribulation, hostility, or persecution (recall Rev 1:9). It was a trait that Christ commended in other churches (Rev 2:2, 3, 19; cf. 13:10; 14:12). Yet the “rapture” is an event for all Christians, irrespective of the level of their faithfulness.

Some have attempted to argue that the initial causal clause in verse 10a should be connected with verse 9 instead of verse 10b. If that were true, then the promise of “keeping” them would not be dependent upon their having first kept His word of perseverance. But this argument is not valid. Verse 10 involves a *wordplay*. The Christians of Philadelphia have “kept” His word/instruction to persevere, and so He will “keep” them. The word *tērēō* (Gk τηρέω) is used in both cases. To repunctuate the sentence so as to have verse 10a go with verse 9 would be to miss the point of the wordplay. For this reason, every translation that this author is familiar with retains verse 10a with 10b (so NASB95, NASB2020, NIV84, NIV2011, NKJV, NRSV, NET, NLT, and Arabic VanDyke).

2. This passage is devoid of *rapture terminology*. For instance, the word used in 1 Thes 4:17 for being “caught up” (Gk *harpázō*, ἀρπάζω) is not used here, nor is the word for being “changed”

² This combination does not occur in the Greek LXX (see one instance in Josephus, *Antiquities* 5.1.13, “set apart as first fruits,” (τηρεῖν ἐκ τῆς πρῶτον). Although *tērēō ek* does not occur in the LXX, a similar phrase (*tērēō apo*) does occur in Prov 7:5: “to keep you from an adulteress.” The Hebrew text is: לְשׁמֹרֶךָ מֵאִשָּׁה זָרָה, and this is translated in the LXX by τηρήσῃ ἀπὸ γυναικὸς ἀλλοτρίας.

(*allássō*, ἀλλάσσω) as in 1 Cor 15:51 or the word for being “taken” (*paralambánō*, παραλαμβάνω) in Matt 24:40. Neither is mention made in this passage of angels, trumpets, clouds, the Lord descending from heaven, the dead being raised, the voice of the archangel, or meeting the Lord in the air—as in other passages where the rapture is in view. In short, there is no explicit mention of the rapture in Rev 3:10 nor are terms used here typical of rapture passages. Although the absence of such language does not in and of itself disprove the possibility of rapture, yet there is no reason to think that the promise of “keeping” them would be achieved by removing them from the face of the earth by rapture.

3. Since the combination of *tērēō ek* (τηρέω ἐκ)—to “keep from”—is only used in one other place in the NT (namely, John 17:15), it would seem reasonable to examine that passage for possible clues as to the meaning it has in Rev 3:10. Here is the verse:

I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but that you **keep them safe** from the evil one (NET Bible).

Very obviously, removal from the sphere or locale of danger is not involved. What Jesus prays for is being kept (safe) from Satan. This verse is part of what is called the Lord’s “high priestly prayer” for His disciples. In John 17:3, Jesus spoke of having given them eternal life. In praying to the Father, Jesus remarked that his disciples had “kept God’s word” (Jn 17:6). Since Jesus was about to depart the world, He prayed to the Father (using the verb *tērēō*), “**keep them** in Your name” (Jn 17:11). Then he noted, “When I was with them I **kept them safe** (verb *tērēō*) and watched over them in your name that you have given me. Not one of them was lost except the one destined for destruction.” When John 17:15 is closely studied in its context, the point is clear that Jesus “kept” the disciples *spiritually safe* in the sense that He gave them eternal life (except for Judas) and watched over them. Later, most of the original disciples were martyred, but Satan was never able to take away the eternal life that Jesus had given them.

Conclusion

The promise made to the Christians of Philadelphia was not that they (or others) would be raptured prior to the final seven-year period preceding Christ’s return. Christ’s promise to them was given in response to His word about endurance for the sake of His name (cf. Rev 2:3). Because they had *kept* His word about perseverance, He promised in return that He would *keep* them. By this clever wordplay on “keep,” Jesus—with a slight twist of meaning—made the point that He would safeguard them from “the hour of testing” that was about to come upon and test “those who dwell upon the earth.” The “hour of testing” (most would agree) refers to the series of judgments spelled out in chapters 6–19.³ The expression “those who dwell upon the earth” is consistently used elsewhere in Revelation for the unbelievers who refuse to repent, who side with the Antichrist and take his mark, and who persecute those who belong to the Lamb of God (Rev 6:10; 8:13; 11:10; 13:8, 12, 14; 17:2, 8). One purpose of “the hour of testing” is to *test* the unsaved earth-dwellers, not the Christians who will be on earth at that time. That is, God will pour out divine judgments on the unsaved earth-dwellers in an effort to turn them back from the path they are on

³ Grant R. Osborne writes, “The consensus view is that it refers to the final end-time trials that precede the eschaton. This is differentiated from the local ‘ten-day tribulation’ of Smyrna (2:10) by its involvement of ‘the whole world’ . . . and so connotes a worldwide conflagration, the messianic judgments of the rest of the book (*Revelation*, 193).

and to bring them to a point of repentance (they are given opportunity!). Those who persist in their opposition to Him and continue to side with the evil one (who only deceives them) will in the end fail to gain eternal life, and will instead have to stand before God at the Great White Throne judgment to be sentenced to an eternal destiny in the lake of fire. Revelation 13:8 sums up their condition:

All who dwell on the earth will worship him [the Antichrist], *everyone* whose name has not been written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who has been slain (NASB95).

In light of the final clause of Rev 3:10, these "enduring believers" are kept/protected in the sense that they are not deluded by the spiritual deception fostered by Satan upon the unbelieving "earth-dwellers" who are led to believe in the Antichrist (and who consequently worship him and are made drunk with the wine of "Babylon's" immorality—Rev 17:2).

In contrast to the unsaved *earth-dwellers* will be those who belong to the Lamb because they trusted in Him and in His shed blood for them. The Christians of Philadelphia were reflecting the same heart commitment to the Lord and endurance for Christ as will the saints in the Great Tribulation. Since no one knows when the Day of the Lord will commence, the Christians of Philadelphia had the assurance that if this were to begin in their lifetime, the Lord Jesus would “keep them.” The idea, in keeping with the lexical meaning of the word and its parallel use in John 17:15, is that of being protected in some sense . . . but not by *removal* from the scene. This would certainly include spiritual protection from any threats to their faith. They may or may not be martyred, but in any event, they would be *spiritually safeguarded* by Christ.⁴ Neither Satan nor the Antichrist could ultimately harm them, spiritually that is, because they had been given eternal life. In this regard, the promise to the church at Philadelphia is similar to His words to those at Smyrna. Though they were about to experience a local tribulation—one that would even be life-threatening—they could have the comfort of Christ’s promise to them: “Remain faithful even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown that is life itself” (Rev 2:10).

The conclusion, then, is that the promise to those at Philadelphia was one of “protection.” That is, Christ would *keep them safe* from the spiritual harm of the coming tribulation period and any threats against their faith.⁵ Whether included in this would be physical protection from judgments that God will pour out (as distinct from the hatred and persecution of Satan) is difficult to say.⁶ The bottom line is that this verse cannot be used to support the theory of a pretribulational rapture of the church.

⁴ G. K. Beale, commenting on the similarity of Rev 3:10 to John 17:15, states, “. . . both Johannine texts speak of protection from the harm of falling away from the faith, that is, protection from trials that induce unbelief The trials mentioned throughout the letters and the visionary chapters that follow argue that both saints and unbelievers experience the same trials, but for the former trials refine faith, whereas for the latter trials only harden” (*The Book of Revelation*, 291).

⁵ Related verses might be John 10:27-29; Luke 22:31-32; and 1 John 5:18.

⁶ Osborne points out, “There is a great difference, however, between the wrath of God and the wrath of the dragon. Throughout the NT, persecution is seen as the believers’ lot, indeed their great privilege (e.g., Mark 10:29-30; John 15:18–16:4; Phil 3:10; Col. 1:24; 1 Pet. 3:13-14). In Revelation martyrdom is seen as a victory over Satan, not a defeat (6:9-11; 7:14-17; 12:11) (*Revelation*, 194). Osborne does go on to conclude that the protection will be from the wrath of God against unbelievers, not from the wrath of Satan.

ENDNOTES

¹ Wilkin writes, “The problem with the loss-of-salvation view is that it clearly contradicts a host of passages. Jesus taught that believers ‘will never perish’ (John 10:28), ‘shall not come into judgment’ (John 5:24), and ‘have [already] passed from death into life’ (John 5:24). The apostle Paul told the believers at Rome that ‘neither death nor life . . . nor things present nor things to come . . . shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord’ (Rom 8:38-39). To the believers at Ephesus he wrote, ‘For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast’ (Eph 2:8-9)” (Bob Wilkin, “I Will Not Blot Out His Name,” in *The Grace Evangelical Society News* 10:2 [Mar-Apr 1995]: 1).

² Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, III.3.4 and III.4.3.

³ Some of the early church fathers connected the Nicolaitans of Revelation 2:6,15 with late second-century gnostic groups. They also held the position that they derived from Nicolas of Acts 6:5. Hippolytus, for instance, stated that Nicolas “departed from correct doctrine, and was in the habit of inculcating indifference of both life and food. And when the disciples (of Nicolaus) continued to offer insult to the Holy Spirit, John reproved them in the Apocalypse as fornicators and eaters of things offered unto idols” (*Haer.* 7.24). Cf. Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.26.3; 3.11.1; Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 2.20; 3.4; and Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.29. Yet scholars today question the relationship between Nicolas of Acts 6:5 with the Nicolaitans (this was a common name in ancient times).

⁴ Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, 174.

⁵ The statement in Rev 3:5 that Christ will not erase his name from the book of life involves a figure of speech known as *litotes*. This is a figure of speech and form of verbal irony in which understatement is used to emphasize a point by stating a negative to further affirm a positive. Support that we have a litotes here is seen in the immediately following statement in which the positive is indicated: “and I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels” (NASB95).

⁶ Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, 202.

⁷ The crucial words in Revelation 3:20 are “I will come in to him.” The Greek verb translated “come in” is *eiseleusomai* (future tense of the verb *eiserchomai*). The verb is used 194x in the New Testament. It commonly speaks of entering a structure (a room, a house, a building) or another city or country. In 7 cases, it is used with the word “to” (Gk *pros*) as in Rev 3:20. In these cases, it always has the sense of entering a house (Acts 16:40) or of coming before another person’s presence (Mark 15:43). This combination never means *entering someone’s heart*. For this reason, the NET Bible translated the final part of Rev 3:20, “I will come into his home and share a meal with him, and he with me.”