

**The Facebook Commentary on Revelation**  
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**Revelation Chapter 2**

**Rev 2 (Introduction)–**

Chapter 2 is the first of two chapters in which Jesus presents a message to each of seven churches in Asia Minor. We will begin by noting some general characteristics of these seven churches that can help us in our interpretation.

First, these letters seem to be in a chiastic structure (an A-B-A pyramid-style outline). Two of the seven churches are described in completely positive terms, Smyrna and Philadelphia (the second and sixth churches). Two other churches seem to be losing their way, Pergamos and Sardis. These just happen to be the third and fifth in the series. The first and last churches, Ephesus and Laodicea, seem to have similar problems. So it is not surprising that the church in the middle, Thyatira, seems to have two phases, one negative and the other positive, and what is written about Thyatira is twice as long as the messages to the other six churches. The triple pairs with a double-length center message gives the strong impression of a chiasm beginning with Ephesus and ending with Laodicea.

The chiastic structure of the seven churches reminds the ancient reader of the seven-branched lampstand in the Old Testament sanctuaries (Exod 25:31-37). The fact that the seven lampstands of chapter 1 are directly tied to the seven churches encourages us to see the chiasm in terms of the seven-branched lampstand. The structure of the seven churches, therefore, is like a seven-branch candlestick with three branches on each side and one in the middle and the pairs of branches meeting at the same level in the stem of the candlestick. Ephesus and Laodicea represent the opposite lower branches of the candlestick. Smyrna and Philadelphia are the next level; Pergamos and Sardis the third. Thyatira would be the center branch.

Ephesus and Laodicea are parallel in their lovelessness and legalism. Pergamos and Sardis are parallel in their spiritual decline. Smyrna and Philadelphia are parallel in faithfulness and both are opposed by the "Jews" (whatever that means in these passages). Thyatira, as noted before, has both a positive and a negative phase. These parallels do not seem accidental and the lampstand provides a visual image of the chiasm.

The importance of chiastic structures for interpretation is great. What you discover on one side of the parallel may help you to understand what you find on the other side. For example, when we get to the message to the Laodicean church, the parallels with Ephesus will help us understand the messages to both churches.

A second major point about the seven churches is that they are listed in a semi-circular geographical order that is shaped somewhat like a crown. If you were to superimpose a seven-branched candlestick over the Roman Province of Asia, the geographical locations of these

seven churches are located roughly at the candlestick's points of light. So, these cities are in a geographical relationship to each other and their locations had symbolic significance to John. The last time I was there (western Turkey today), it took about three days to visit these seven cities by bus. Scholars suggest the order of these cities may have represented an ancient postal route. The mail from a distance would come ashore in Ephesus or Smyrna and circulate around the cities. John appears to have been familiar with such practices.

A third point regarding the seven churches is that they follow a common seven-fold format: address, description of Jesus, praise, censure, exhortation, promise to the overcomer, and an appeal to hear the Spirit. All seven elements are found to some degree in each message with a couple of exceptions. Smyrna and Philadelphia receive no censure and are not, therefore, exhorted to repent. In fact, the exhortation to these two churches does not even contain the least tone of threat. Jesus is particularly tolerant of those who suffer and these two churches are suffering greatly.

On the other hand, just as two of the churches receive no censure, Laodicea receives no praise. She is not doing anything particularly reprehensible, yet the message contains nothing at all positive. Perhaps this is because the great sin of Laodicea is inauthenticity? Would "faking it" be considered the greatest of all sins by God? There may be no greater sin than trying to portray yourself to be what you are not.

The sixth and seventh elements of the format sometimes reverse in order. The exhortation to listen to the Spirit comes before the promise to the overcomer in the first three churches. The exhortation to listen to the Spirit comes last in churches four through seven. Basically, the seven letters each follow a seven-fold pattern, but there are small differences among the letters.

A fourth point about the seven churches is that Jesus seems to have special knowledge about each of the churches. Each letter contains the words "I know." If any of the churches wants to know how to improve its situation before God, they need to listen to the messages of Jesus. Jesus' deep knowledge is also a very important concept in the Gospel of John, but there the special knowledge of Jesus functions at a more individual level. Jesus knows everything He needs to know about Nathaniel, Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, the gentile nobleman, and the paralytic at the Pool of Bethesda, to name some clear examples. The characters in the Gospel of John often try to hide their secrets from Him, but they never succeed, because Jesus knows everything about everyone. This same kind of knowledge is directed to the churches as a whole in the Book of Revelation. This underlines a theme we may touch on more than once in this commentary. The Book of Revelation has significant parallels with the Gospel of John, yet even within those parallels there are significant differences.

In the previous post we noted that Jesus knows everything about everybody. Should it frighten us to find out that He knows everything there is to know about us? That He is fully aware of who we really are and not just how we present ourselves? Human beings like to hide behind a facade because we are afraid of what people will think if they knew all about us. If they knew all about us they might not love us any more. They might become disgusted and reject us. So we put up an image that is not our true self, knowing that if they reject that image they are not rejecting the real "us."

On the other hand, there is no need to hide from Jesus, since He already knows. We don't need to be afraid to come to Him or tell Him the truth about ourselves. In fact, this truth brings us to the core of what confession is all about. Confession, whether to Jesus or to another human being, is simply telling the truth about ourselves. There is no reason NOT to confess our sins to Jesus because He already knows all about us. And the fact that Jesus knows all about us means that we don't have to hide from Him anymore. We cannot frighten or disgust Jesus. We can't chase Him away. Jesus is completely safe with His knowledge of us. And that changes everything. When we are completely honest with Jesus, we can begin to be honest also with other people. And that is the core of what authenticity is all about. Through Jesus we feel safe to confront the truth about ourselves. And that opens us up to the truth about other people as well.

A fifth point about the seven churches is that the various characteristics of Jesus in Revelation 1 are distributed among the churches. Each of the churches gets some of the characteristics, but no church gets them all. Jesus introduces Himself to each of the churches with one, two or three of the characteristics in the introductory vision.

In Revelation 2:1, Jesus is holds the stars (Revelation 1:16 and 20) and is among the seven lampstands (Revelation 1:13). The church of Ephesus is ministered to by the Jesus that holds the stars and walks among the lampstands. In Revelation 2:8 Jesus approaches the church in Smyrna as the First and the Last, the One who died and came to life (Revelation 1:17-18). In Revelation 2:12, to the church in Pergamum, Jesus has a sharp, double-edged sword coming out of His mouth (Revelation 1:16). In Revelation 2:18, the church in Thyatira receives a Jesus who is the son of God (Revelation 1:6) with eyes of blazing fire (Revelation 1:14) and feet like burnished bronze (Revelation 1:15).

In Revelation 3:1, the church in Sardis receives a Jesus who hold the seven spirits of God (Revelation 1:4) and who holds the seven stars in his hand (Revelation 1:16 and 20). In Revelation 3:7, to the church in Philadelphia, Jesus is portrayed as the holy and true one (the only characteristic not found in Revelation 1, perhaps it is a reference ahead to Revelation 6:10) and the holder of keys (Revelation 1:18). In Revelation 3:14, to the church in Laodicea, Jesus is presented as the faithful and true witness (Revelation 1:5) and the ruler of God's creation (Revelation 1:5).

The various characteristics of Jesus in the introductory vision are applied to the churches, and each church gets a unique picture of Jesus. Jesus does not approach any of the churches in exactly the same way as He approached others. Jesus presents Himself in a unique way to each of the churches. Each church's picture of Jesus is uniquely fitted to that church's situation and need.

In a real sense, the way Jesus presents Himself to the seven churches is a strong parallel to the four gospels. These gospels offer four unique pictures of Jesus and His life on this earth. The question is, why were four gospels necessary when in the ultimate sense there is really only one Gospel? Because there are many different types of people and God is not limited to one picture of Jesus. *God meets people where they are.*

The various characteristics of Jesus in Revelation one are applied to the various churches in chapters two and three. There are a number of interesting implications that arise

out of that fact. Many people feel that when it comes to spiritual things, there is only one way to think, to act, or to be involved in a religious community. But that is not the picture one gets from the Seven Churches. Jesus is not portrayed the same way to each church. Each church can capture a unique facet of who Jesus is and can portray something about Jesus that no other church could. No two churches have to be exactly alike, but each church needs to understand Jesus as He has presented Himself to them. In terms of my own local church, I think its unique witness is in the area of family, the church seems like an extended family with multiple generations and inter-relationships. Jesus would come to our church, perhaps, to model the kinds of relationships that lead to an effective and fulfilling community.

The letters to the seven churches teach us that Jesus comes in a special way to each church and these various characteristics of Jesus correspond to the needs of the churches.

Ephesus is faced with false doctrines because the Nicolaitans are not teaching the truth. Jesus comes in a theme of light (seven stars and seven lampstands), the church's light is threatened by the presence of a false light. Smyrna faces persecution and death, so Jesus (the One Who died and came to life) comes to them with the promise of the resurrection. Pergamum is another church filled with false doctrine. Jesus (a two-edged sword in His mouth) comes to divide between truth and falsehood. Thyatira has a false queen, Jezebel. Jesus comes as the true ruler of the church.

Sardis is asleep, so Jesus comes to them with the awakening spirit of God. Philadelphia, though faithful, has very little strength. Jesus presents them with an open door. He is not even asking them to turn the knob and push. Finally, Laodicea is a lukewarm church about which Jesus has nothing good to say. Jesus first offers His discerning witness to get them to confront the truth about themselves. Then He offers His creative power (to create something out of nothing). Each church, therefore, receives a Jesus whose characteristics are calculated to meet that church's need. Each church's experience is a different and each has encountered Jesus in a different way.

Taking a second look at the Seven Churches reveals that in addition to the chiastic structure, there is a general pattern of decline and degeneration throughout the seven messages. In the first three churches, it is the smaller group that are the "heretics." The church as a whole is faithful but some in the church are not behaving the way Jesus would prefer. In churches four through six, on the other hand, it is the majority that are out of harmony with Jesus and the minority that seems faithful. And if that is not bad enough, when it comes to Laodicea, Jesus doesn't have a single good thing to say about it. So looking at the Churches as a whole, there is a general pattern of decline from Ephesus to Laodicea. At one end Ephesus has simply left its first love and faithfulness to God, but at the other end, Laodicea is deeply uncommitted to faithfulness and in a sense doesn't even seem to care.

In response to this general pattern of decline in the seven churches there is increasing severity from Christ, although this pattern is not as clear and consistent as the pattern of decline. To the church at Ephesus He says mildly, "If you don't repent, I'm going to reconsider your special place in my plan." In an attempt to get the attention of Pergamum, on the other hand, he threatens to become an adversary with the sword of His mouth. To Thyatira he threatens a portion of the church with sickness, tribulation and even death. The severity

reaches a climax with the final church. To Laodicea says, "I'm going to spit you out of my mouth." In other words, He will totally reject them as a church. So the general decline as one proceeds through the churches is met, to some degree, with warnings of increasing severity.

Not only is there increasing degeneration among the seven churches, there is also progression. Jesus matches the decline of the churches by adding promises to each church in progressive fashion. This is, perhaps, along the lines of Paul, when he said, "Where sin abounds grace does much more abound" (Rom 5:20).

In Revelation 2:7 the overcomer in Ephesus is promised the Tree of Life (one promise). In Revelation 2:10-11 the overcomer in Smyrna is promised a crown of life and not being hurt by the second death (two promises). In Revelation 2:17 the overcomer in Pergamum is promised the hidden manna, the white stone, and the new name (three promises). In Revelation 2:26-28 the overcomer in Thyatira gets authority over the nations, to rule them with an iron scepter, to dash them in pieces, and also gets the morning star (four promises).

In Revelation 3:4-5 the overcomer in Sardis walks with Jesus, dresses in white, is assured that the faithful names in the church will not be blotted out of the book of life, but will rather be acknowledged before His Father, and before His angels (five promises). In Revelation 3:12 the overcomer in Philadelphia is kept from the hour of trial, will be a pillar in the temple, will never leave the temple, will have written upon him God's name, the name of the city of God, and Jesus' own new name (six promises).

The first six churches each get an extra promise. Does that mean Laodicea is going to get seven promises? No. It actually gets only one. But it is the promise that will end all promises! In Revelation 3:21 the overcomer in Laodicea gets to sit with Jesus on His throne (one all-inclusive promise). In a real sense, that ONE promise includes all the other promises received by the churches! If you sit with Jesus on His throne, you have everything that He has to offer. The church that has absolutely nothing to commend receives a promise of everything. The purpose of this exhortation is encouragement. No matter how severe the decline in a church, no matter how far the church has wandered, there is still hope as long as Jesus stands at the door and knocks. And the reward is in inverse proportion to the decline.

There is one final general question about the interpretation of the seven churches. How should the seven churches be understood in terms of history? There have been four major approaches to the seven churches throughout Christian history. Should the churches of Revelation be interpreted in a preterist fashion as messages to historical churches without any prophetic element? Should they be interpreted from a futurist perspective, as messages written primarily to the final generation of earth's history? Should they be interpreted in a historicist fashion, as predictions of the various stages of the Christian church from the first century until the last? There is a long tradition within the Seventh-day Adventist Church to read the seven churches in this last manner. Or should the seven churches be read from an idealist perspective as a collection of timeless truths that are not specifically grounded in any particular time or place? In the postings that follow we will look at the strengths and weaknesses of each of these approaches.

For starters we can probably rule out Futurism as a valid approach to the seven churches. While the promises to each of the churches clearly point to the future, the full

context of the churches is clearly in the immediate context of John. Even Futurist commentators usually begin seeking the future in chapter four rather than in the seven churches. So while the seven churches have elements that point to the future, futurism is not the best approach to the seven churches.

Should Revelation 2-3 be read as messages to seven churches in a particular time and place (the Preterist approach)? The text certainly seems to support such an approach. John is told that what he has seen is to be written in a book and sent to seven specific churches of Asia Minor (Rev 1:11). The messages to the churches also betray elements of each city's geography and history. Sardis was a nearly impregnable city that had been surprised by sneak attacks in the past (Rev 3:3). Philadelphia was so named because of a historical instance of brotherly love. Laodicea was known for its lukewarm water and its eye medicines. So it makes sense to read the seven churches, in the first instance, in the same way that one might read Romans or Galatians, as messages to real churches in a real time and place. God meets people where they are and we should try to understand what it was that God was trying to say to the original readers. We are then in a better position to understand what the text might mean to us.

The problem with preterism is that it places inappropriate limits on the meaning of the text. Revelation clearly portrays itself as a prophecy focused on future events. It is modeled on the book of Daniel (Rev 1:1). To limit its message to the first generation does not take the text's own prophetic claims seriously enough.

Should Revelation 2-3 be read as timeless truths for God's people in all times (the idealist approach)? There is certainly clear evidence that the book of Revelation contains a message for every reader and every generation. A blessing is offered to everyone who reads the words of the prophecy (Rev 1:3). Each of the seven churches contains an exhortation to "everyone who has an ear" (Rev 2:7, 11, 17, etc.) So the messages to the seven churches should not be limited to the first generation, nor are the messages to the churches to be limited to specific eras of Christian history. There is something timeless about each of the messages to the seven churches. On the other hand, these timeless messages are not the whole picture of the book's purpose.

Adventists have traditionally treated the seven churches as if they were an apocalyptic prophecy, foreshadowing a sequential series of historical realities. But the seven churches bear little resemblance to apocalyptic visions like Daniel 2 and 7. A study of such passages reveals that "historical apocalyptic" can be identified by four major characteristics. 1) There are *textual sequence markers* like "after you" and "next" (Dan 2:39). In other words, the language of the text suggests a sequence of events moving through time. 2) There is a *consistent sequence of symbols*, like the series of metals in Daniel 2, the series of carnivorous beasts in Daniel 7 or the functions of the dragon in every part of Revelation 12. 3) There is a *comprehensive sweep of events* moving from the time of the vision to the end of the world. Such a comprehensive sweep is clearly present in Daniel 2 (39-45) and Daniel 7 (17-18). 4) When available, there are *parallels to earlier apocalyptic literature*. Daniel 7 is strongly parallel with Daniel 2. Revelation 12 is strongly parallel with Daniel 7.

The seven churches have none of these characteristics as a whole. While there are occasional sequence markers in the text (Rev 2:4, 10, 16, 22), they are occasional and localized,

they are not related to any sequence of the whole. There is no consistence sequence of symbolism like the metals in the statue of Daniel 2. There is no indication in the text of any comprehensive sweep from the prophet's day to the End. And there are no significant parallels with earlier apocalyptic, like the visions of Daniel. So treating the seven churches of Revelation as if their primary purpose was an apocalyptic sequence prophecy is not appropriate.

Reading Revelation 2-3 as a historical series from John's day until Jesus comes again is not the primary intent of the passage. Not only do the seven churches not bear the characteristics of historical apocalyptic, the introduction to the churches clearly underlines their primary intention. In Revelation 1:19 John is told, "Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later." As we have seen, this verse is a nutshell summary of the entire book of Revelation. John's vision concerns (1) the things which are and (2) the things which will happen after these things. The sequence of Revelation is made clear in chapter 4:1: "After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, 'Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.'"

Revelation 4:1 is clearly looking back to Revelation 1:19. The events of Revelation after chapter four are primarily in the future (from John's perspective), so with the seven churches preceding chapter four, they become the things that are primarily present from John's perspective. In Revelation 1:19 John has clearly spelled out the larger time-frame of the Book of Revelation. The seven churches focus on the things which are, but the majority of the book focuses on the future. That means that, from John's perspective, the messages to the churches are not primarily future nor are they primarily a history in advance of the Christian church. These messages are primarily to seven churches in John's day with extended implications for what happens later.

Both the literary style of the seven churches and the context (Rev 1:19 and 4:1) indicate their primary purpose is not a sequence of history from John's day until the end. However, I would not totally rule out a historicist reading of the churches. There may be reasons to see an extended historical meaning in these seven messages.

For one thing, there were more than seven churches in Asia Minor, we know of churches in Troas, Colossae and Magnesia, to say the least. Why were these seven churches chosen out of the many that John could have written to? One strong possibility is that the number seven indicates a broader focus than just seven local churches. In the book of Revelation, seven is a very significant number—the number of completeness. In a sense, these seven churches are chosen because they represent ALL churches—not only all those in Asia Minor but all those throughout history. Perhaps the selecting of this particular seven was a hint that they should be representative of the churches throughout history.

A second reason to suspect that the seven churches were intended to be read as a general prophecy of the whole Christian age is how well the characteristics of the seven churches fit the various eras of Christian history. The great church historian, Philip Schaff, outlined church history into seven basic periods: apostolic, the time of Roman persecution, the time of union of the church with the state, the dark ages, the Reformation, the period of Protestant orthodoxy, and a final period that he felt was characterized by both infidelity and

world-wide mission. This outline of history fits rather nicely with the characteristics of the churches from Ephesus to Laodicea. It is quite possible, however, that John suspected none of this. God may have overseen the writing of the seven churches in such a way that they not only spoke powerfully to the original context, but also represented the major periods of Christian history.

If the seven churches are a prophetic projection of Christian history, what is the history that they portray? We will cover this in more detail, church by church, but let me lay out the broad outline briefly here. Ephesus would represent the first love of the early church with the beginning of a falling away noted already in the New Testament (Acts 20: 28-31). Smyrna would represent the following centuries, in which the church was persecuted by the Roman Empire. Pergamum would represent the creeping compromise that occurred when the church accommodated itself to Roman society and became the dominant religious philosophy of the Empire.

Thyatira would represent both the misery of the Dark Ages and the promise of the Renaissance and the Reformation. Sardis would represent the hollowness of the church during the time of Protestant orthodoxy. It seemed alive, yet in many ways was dead. Philadelphia would represent the powerful missionary expansion of the nineteenth century in particular. Laodicea represents the lukewarmness and infidelity of the church in the present day. If one suspects that the seven churches were intended by God to represent the major periods of Christian history, it is not hard to see the parallels within that history.

A third reason to suspect that the seven churches may have a prophetic relationship with Christian history is found within the book of Revelation itself. It seems that Laodicea has to do particularly with the last period in Christian history. In Revelation 3:17-18 it says, "You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes so you can see."

The language of Revelation 3:17-18 is directly parallel to the language of Revelation 16:15, which is a call to God's people right in the middle of the battle of Armageddon: "Behold, I come like a thief! Blessed is he who stays awake and keeps his clothes with him, so that he may not go naked and be shamefully exposed" (Rev 16:15). There are four words in Revelation 16:15 that are found together nowhere else in the Bible except the message to the church of Laodicea (a verb for seeing, garment, shame and nakedness). The final warning in the final battle of earth's history uses the same combination of words as the letter to Laodicea. So the final warning of Armageddon is in the context of the message to Laodicea. And if Laodicea is the last church in earth's history, then it would be wise to look for parallels between the other churches and the major eras of church history, which we will seek to do, church by church.

Let me summarize the role of the seven churches in the book of Revelation. In the primary sense, they are messages from Jesus to seven specific churches in Asia Minor at the time that John wrote. The language of the churches is fairly straightforward, as one might expect in Romans, Galatians or 1 Peter. Since these writings are Scripture, we seek to understand their meaning to the original readers first, and then seek to apply the principles to

our lives today. The text also endorses the latter approach, since the message to the seven churches are designed for everyone “who has an ear.” So the primary purpose of the seven churches is for the original churches John wrote to and also for everyone who reads the book. But in an extended sense, the churches also seem to apply to periods of history that run from John’s day until the End. The latter is not the primary purpose of the messages, but is an extended meaning hinted at in the text itself.

### **Rev 2:1–**

Jesus begins the seven churches with Ephesus, which was the nearest of the Asian cities to Patmos, a little more than 63 miles away in a straight line. In the time of the New Testament, Ephesus was also clearly the chief city of Roman Asia. It was the political, economic and religious center of the region. At the time it was a major harbor for commercial shipping (the harbor later filled with silt and moved a number of kilometers away, ending the primary usefulness of the location). It was an early adopter of the emperor cult, but also the home of the great Temple of Diana (one of the “seven wonders” of the ancient world). In addition to its religious functions, the Temple of Diana was also a banking center and a “city of refuge” for anyone who had committed a crime. Ephesus also seems to have been a center of the magic arts (Acts 19:19).

After the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, Ephesus received exiles from Jerusalem and elsewhere in Roman Palestine, including John and his followers. Ephesus was soon one of the major centers of Christianity, becoming one of the “big five” cities (along with Rome, Alexandria, Antioch and Constantinople) by the Fourth Century. Paul lived in Ephesus for about three years (Acts 20:31) and Priscilla, Aquila, Apollos (Acts 18:24-28) and Timothy (1 Tim 1:3) also worked there. Toward the end of the first century Onesimus, likely the slave mentioned in Philemon, became the leader of the church there. It was around the end of the century that John is reputed to have returned from Patmos to close out his years in Ephesus.

In this text Jesus “holds the seven stars.” They are defined as the angels of the seven churches in the previous verse. But there is a difference between here and the first appearance of the seven stars in the original language (1:16). There it simply says he “has” (*echôn*) the seven stars in His right hand. In this verse, however, He has “seized control” (*kratôn*) of the seven stars. This is a much more emphatic term than is found Revelation 1:16. While Jesus holds the leaders of the churches as a whole lightly, when He comes to the church of Ephesus, He makes the point that He is in control, in total control, of the situation. He holds them securely in His hand. This is reminiscent of John 10:28-29, where He asserts that no one can snatch those who believe in Him out of His hand. It also recalls 2:25 and 3:11, where He encourages believers to “hold fast” (*kratêsate, kratei*) until He comes.

In no sense does the church in Ephesus need to be afraid or concerned that Jesus would be losing control of the situation. He wants to assure them that He is conscious of what they are going through and is well able to deal with it. These texts also encourages individual believers to trust in Christ’s power to keep them safe in spite of their shortcomings and failings.

While Jesus introduces Himself to the church at Ephesus as the one who holds the seven stars tightly in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands, there is a sense in

which this introduction stands for all the churches, since the seven stars represent the “angels” or leaders of the seven churches and the seven lampstands represent the churches. Just as the lampstand was the only light in the sanctuary, so the churches are the only light about God that many people will ever see (Matt 5:14-16; on the light-bearing witness God has intended for Israel, see Isa 42:6-7, 49:6 and 60:1-3). In a special sense, Ephesus was intended to be a bright and shining light to the world. That light would have burned the strongest had Ephesus not left its first love (Rev 2:4).

This text also describes Jesus as “walking” among the lampstands. This is in contrast to Revelation 1:13 where the son of man is described simply as “in the midst of the lampstands.” The concept of walking reminds one of the covenant, where parties to the covenant walked in the middle of the sacrifice to signify their commitment to the agreement and to the other party in the agreement (Gen 15:9-18). Jesus walking among the lampstands indicates His steadfast purpose in behalf of the church. He never gives up on His people lightly. The walking may also suggest the priest in the holy place actively trimming the lamps so that they will shine brighter.

#### **Rev 2:2-4, 6 (Introduction)–**

We will begin with an overview of Jesus' analysis of the church. He says a number of things about the church of Ephesus, most of them positive. First of all, it's an energetic church that knows how to work (2:2). Secondly, it is a patient church that perseveres and endures without getting weary (verses 2-3). Third, it is discerning and doctrinally sound (verse 2). It is interested in truth and does not want to see falsehood gain entry. It wants to be sure the right things are taught. It is a positive church that we might get excited about but there's one small problem: the church is backsliding in love (v.4). A final positive element is found in verse 6, they share with Jesus a hatred for the works of the Nicolaitans. We will have a lot more to say about each of these characteristics.

#### **Rev 2:2-3–**

Jesus knows all about the church's works, nothing is hidden from Him (see discussion in Rev 2 [Introduction]). The comment “I know your works” is followed by the Greek “and” (*kai*). As in Revelation 1:19, this word should be translated “namely.” It functions like a colon. Although it is not obvious in most English translations, the works Jesus is talking about includes everything through the end of verse 3. Verses two and three in the original are a lengthy compound sentence tied together with a series of “ands.” These two verses summarize what Jesus knew the church was doing right.

#### **Rev 2:2–**

Knowing their works, Jesus summarizes those works with the words labor (*kopon*) and patience (*hupomonên*). The Greek word for “labor” normally represented the really hard, toilsome, physical kind of work, working with one's hands (Matt 11:28; 1 Cor 4:12; Eph 4:28). This Greek word describes the kind of labor that makes you really tired. In 1 Thessalonians 2:9,

Paul connects this word with hardship and also with the concept of working day and night just to provide for basic needs. The NIV translates *kopon* as “hard work” here and as “very hard work” in Romans 16:6, 12. But in Paul, this term is often used metaphorically; to describe the difficult work of the gospel touching people’s minds and hearts (Rom 16:12; 1 Cor 15:10; Gal 4:11; Col 1:28-29, 1 Thess 5:12). The Ephesian church was an example of those who sacrificed greatly to spread the gospel among their neighbors, friends and family. Since the patience that follows this word seems to be elaborated in verse 3, it is likely that the hard work here is elaborated in the rest of verse 2, a reference to the church’s vigorous dealings with wicked men who claim to be apostles but are not. In the spiritual realm the hardest work is often dealing with difficult personalities in the church.

The word for patience (*hupomonên*) is tied closely to the “labor” previously mentioned. The two words are tied together by one “your” (Greek: *sou*) which applies to both. The kind of labor Jesus is talking about requires patience. These two words nicely summarize the active and passive sides of Christian life. Godly living involves active effort, on the one hand, and more passive endurance on the other. It is likely that the labor is elaborated in the rest of verse 2 and the patience is elaborated in verse 3.

*Hupomonên* in its most literal sense means “remaining under” (“*hupo*” means under, and *monên* is from the root *menô*, “I remain”). It involves patient perseverance under great pressure. See notes on Revelation 14:12. There is an implication of endurance in the face of persecution (Rom 5:3; 2 Cor 6:4-5; 2 Thess 1:4; Rev 1:9; 13:10), but it can also be related to spiritual trials and interpersonal difficulties (Titus 2:2; James 1:4; 5:11; Heb 12:1). What Jesus means by patience here is elaborated in verse three. While the weak are a burden to be borne, the perverse are a burden to be laid aside or cast off. The Ephesians seem to have been skilled at both.

The latter part of verse 2 expresses two main concepts. The Ephesians cannot tolerate wicked men, and they test those who claim to be leaders of the church, but are not truly so in reality. The word translated “tolerate” is from the Greek word “carry” (*bastasai*), the carrying of a burden. What the Ephesian church refuses to carry is evil people (*kakous*). Evil actions in the New Testament are actions that contradict the truth from God. Evil people in the church are experienced as a heavy burden by true believers. They are not to be tolerated because their actions undermine God’s truth. In practical terms this probably meant some sort of censure, a public calling out of those who willfully subverted the very things the church stood for.

One of the greatest dangers to the church is when people claim special gifts of insight and leadership (as in the case of apostles) but are not true apostles. So all claims to special insight from God need to be tested, lest people be led astray on account of their desire to know God and do His will. Some “heretics” are liars, as indicated in this verse, willfully deceiving people for power or financial gain. Others are sincere but self-deluded. The former need to be exposed and rebuked, the latter need to be brought to their senses. The Ephesian Church was good at both tasks.

### **Rev 2:3–**

Verse 2 portrayed the Ephesian church as active in opposing evil and exposing falsehood. In this verse we see the more passive qualities of endurance in the face of hardship. They did not grow weary in their faithfulness. The word for “growing weary” (*ekopiasas*) is the verb form of the word for “labor” (*kopon*) in the previous verse. The flavor of the Greek language here is something like this: They had labored to the point of weariness without wearying of their labor!

There is another interesting word play in this verse. Jesus speaks of “bearing up for my name’s sake” (ESV). The “bearing up” (*ebastasas*) uses the same Greek word as the previous verse, where they “cannot bear with” (*bastasai*) those who are evil. The Ephesian church could “bear with” things and people that God had called them to bear with. But they did not bear with evil and deception. So the Ephesian church was a discerning church, responding differently to people and situations depending on their discernment of God’s will in the situation. So this verse introduces a double wordplay (“labor” and “bearing with”) between verses two and three. The word for “patience” is also repeated in verse 3, but in a more straightforward manner.

### **Rev 2:4–**

This verse introduces the primary flaw of the Ephesian Church, they had left their first love. I have often heard this verse quoted as “lost their first love,” which would imply that the love had drifted away unintentionally, but the text indicates the Ephesians had actually “left” their first love, an active error. The NIV translates “forsaken,” implying active participation. Even in the earlier letter to the Ephesians, there is a subtle concern that love must be expressed in all sincerity (Eph 6:24).

Since love is one of the clear marks of discipleship (John 13:35), the forsaking of such love is a serious matter. This verse does not allude to Matthew 24:12, but it could be seen as a fulfillment of the prophecy of Jesus (ESV): “And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold.” It could also be seen as the fulfillment of Paul’s prediction of the church’s future made to the elders of Ephesus in Acts 20:28-31. The analysis here and there is in contrast to Ephesians 1:15, where Paul recites how the church’s faith and love is renowned. Something has slipped from the time when Ephesians was written until the time of Revelation. Perhaps in their fervor to expel the evil ones and expose the liars, they had become judgmental, critical and fault-finding. Such a stance may seem correct and God-fearing, yet is a subtle concession to pride. Ephesus was a busy church with strong standards, but labor is no substitute for genuine love.

The word for “first” here (*prôtên*), does not mean first in a comparative sense, as “better than others,” but is first in a chronological sense. It is referring to the love that was present at the beginning of the church’s faith. A striking parallel is 1 Timothy 5:12, where Paul accuses certain widows of abandoning their “first faith.” While also probably not an intentional allusion, there is an interesting parallel to our verse in Jeremiah 2:2 (NIV), where God says of Jerusalem: “I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me and followed me through the desert, through a land not sown.” In Jeremiah this first love concerned the relationship with

God, in context here, the love for each other is at least equally in view.

While the Ephesians have “left” this first love, it is not to be understood as the language of divorce, although the Greek word for left (*aphêkes*) can mean that in other contexts (1 Cor 7:11ff.). The “works” of verses two and three are sufficient evidence that the relationship is still there, just not in the purity and fervor of earlier times. The decay of the church is not visible on the outside, the works continue, but it is on the inside, the condition of the heart. Jesus comes to each church as the one who searches hearts (Rev 2:23).

The Greek language has four words for love, two of which occur in the New Testament. I will share on these briefly, at the risk of over-simplification. The first word for love is *storgê*, which can be translated by the English word “affection.” It is the most natural of the loves, an emotive response of fondness for the people that life has placed in your path. It is sometimes called instinctual love. An example might be the natural affection of a parent for a child (although *storgê* in no way fully describes parental love). It is an important piece of the bonds that hold society together. The opposite of affection is jealousy or ambivalence.

The second Greek word for love is *eros*, which is passionate or sexual love. This is “love” in the sense of “falling in love.” It is a powerful and pleasurable attraction, the erotic bond, that focuses on sexuality and promotes reproduction. It is the most animal-like and “natural” of the four loves and in a biblical sense is rooted in the creation design of God for male and female. It is a strong motivator and can drive people to evil actions as well as good ones. On the positive side, it can lead to appreciation of the inner beauty in another, not just the outward form. Focused on exclusively, in the absence of the other kinds of love, it can become a veiled form of selfishness, which can turn to murderous anger when one doesn’t get what one wants from the other party. Neither *storgê* nor *eros* are found in the NT (although *storgê* is combined with *philia* as a compound word in Romans 12:10: *philostorgoi*). The dark side of *eros*, however, can be seen there in such words as fornication (*porneia*), lustful passion (*epithumia*), sensuality (*aselgeia*), impurity (*akatharsia*) and adultery (*moicheia*).

The third Greek word for love is *philia*, a love between friends that is as strong and lasting as that between siblings. Humans do not need friendship in order to reproduce, so this is a love that is freely chosen, it is not natural in the sense that affection and *eros* are. It generally represents the love that is shared among equals. If there is a dark side to friendship, it is that it can produce cliques which exclude other people in hurtful ways. A later church exists in the city of Philadelphia (*philadelphieia*), which got its name from the love of one ruler for his brother (see notes on Rev 3:7).

The fourth Greek word for love is *agapê* (pronounced with three syllables). This is self-sacrificing love, and is thus especially appropriate in describing the love that led Christ to the cross. This unconditional type of love motivates a person to serve others regardless of changing circumstances. It is experienced by what it does rather than how it feels. From the Christian perspective, this is the greatest of the loves, and the others, especially the more natural loves, like affection and *eros*, need to be subordinated to *agapê* if they are to have the most positive effect on human relationships. It is the love that most clearly expresses the love of God, the love

of the greater for the lesser. God's love is selfless, unconditional and eternal.

The word used in this verse is *agapê*, the self-sacrificing kind of love that is the unique mark of Christian discipleship (John 13:35). While a diminished love might not seem to be a serious flaw, 1 Corinthians 13 is clear that *agapê* love is truly the greatest characteristic of all for Christians to possess and act upon. Paul there sums up all religion in that one word, *agapê* love. Serious repentance is, therefore, necessary for the church of Ephesus, and this is the focus of the verse that follows.

### **Rev 2:5–**

Here the church's leaving of the first love is described with the Greek word for "fallen" (*peptôkas*). In context this word means to fall down from a great height. The remedy for this condition is described with three imperatives, "remember," "repent," and "do." In other words, "repentance" is described as occurring in three stages. The first stage is to "remember" (*mnêmonēue*). The second stage is to turn your mind around (*metanoêson*). The third stage is to "do" (*poiêson*) the first works. The word for remember (*mnêmonēue*) is in the present tense, the remembering is to be a prolonged effort, an ongoing attitude and action. On the other hand, the word for turning your mind around (*metanoêson*– "repent") is a Greek aorist, which implies a sudden, sharp turnaround in the direction of the heights once experienced. I am reminded of Ellen White's advice in the book *Ministry of Healing* (250): "When temptations assail you, when care, perplexity, and darkness seem to surround your soul, look to the place where you last saw the light."

The aorist imperative for repenting implies that they need to start doing something they have not been doing. Repentance is remembering where you came from and allowing that memory to trigger a sharp turn around in the course of both thinking and behavior. This kind of repentance would lead the Ephesians to the third stage of repentance, doing "the first works" (*ta prôta erga*), in other words, the works that are the outward expression of selfless love (*agapê*). This verse implies that believers are empowered with the ability to remember, repent and do, and all these actions are expected as a response to this message. Repentance itself is the most important thing, but the works that flow from love are the evidence that repentance has taken place. Even more than this, repentance is a gift from God, but "doing the first works" can put believers in the place when repentance can occur.

The consequence of not remembering, repenting or doing is that Jesus "is coming" (*erchomai*– present tense) to them and will remove (*kinêsô*– future tense) their candlestick out of its place. The present tense of "coming" in its context is yet future and may indicate the nearness and immediacy of Jesus' concern, while the future tense of removal signals the results that would come from that approach, unless there is a change. As noted earlier, the candlestick was the only source of light in the ancient tabernacle. The church is intended to be the agent of God's light to the world. But those who fail to be agents of the light can lose that role (see also Mark 4:21-25 and Luke 8:16-18), even if their salvation is not in question.

When would this removal of the candlestick take place? The threat is rather vague and

may imply something close at hand. If this is the meaning, the threat is directed at the church's leadership ("the angel of the church at Ephesus"— 2:1). The church's leaders will be removed and the care of the church be given to others to care for properly. But if this warning is addressed to the whole church, it is more likely an eschatological threat, the final judgment. At the time of the warning, probation is still open for the church at Ephesus. Jesus does not want a single one to be lost. He wants each member of the church to trust in Him for salvation and to freely respond with love to God and love toward one another. But the current condition of the church falls short of this goal, and unless a change comes the outcome at the end will not be what Jesus and they have hoped for. The anticipation of judgment is intended to evoke repentance and renewed relationship in the present.

If removing the candlestick in this verse applies to the whole church it means the Ephesians as a group would no longer be part of Jesus' family. Jesus walking among the lampstands (Rev 2:1) recalls Old Testament covenant relationships (see notes on 2:1). It represents the covenant commitment Jesus and the churches have to each other. When the candlestick is moved out of its place, the blessings of the covenant are forfeited. The active language ("I will remove," Greek: *kinêsô*) should not be read to mean that Jesus is taking away something that belongs to the church, rather He is acknowledging their choice to not be part of the family. Those who choose not to remember and choose not to repent have removed themselves from the genuine community of the followers of Jesus.

In a literal sense today, the removal of the lampstand has already taken place. The ruins of ancient Ephesus bear no witness to Christian influence that I am aware of, and the small village near the ruins today has no Christians residing there.

### **Rev 2:6—**

This verse actually follows on from the commendations of verse three and completes them. Almost as an afterthought Jesus adds the positive comment about hating the practices of the Nicolaitans: "But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate." (NIV). Note that the "hatred" here is not directed against the Nicolaitans themselves, it is directed against the works (*erga*) of the Nicolaitans. It is not clear exactly who this group in the church was. Many early church fathers mention a sect of Nicolaitans (Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Tertullian and others), but it is not clear if they knew an actual group of people with that name, or if they were simply extrapolating from the text of Revelation. The church fathers suggest that the name came from Nicolas (*nikolaon*), a proselyte from Antioch, one of the seven "deacons" in Acts 6 (6:5). But other church fathers defend his reputation as one of the seven. So later writers were probably speculating on this as well, having no other possible historical reference to offer for this verse. But even if the tradition were true (that one of the seven "deacons" founded the Nicolaitans), it would not add anything significant to the little we know about this group.

In the Greek this (*nikolaitôn*) is a compound word, from "people" (*laos*) and "conquest" or "overcoming" (the root is *nik*). So the name would mean "the one who conquers the people."

For more on the Nicolaitans, see the Excursis below and the comments on Revelation 2:14-16. What is clear from this text is the displeasure of both God and the Ephesians in relation to the teachings and practices of the Nicolaitans.

Are the Nicolaitans one and the same with “those who are evil” (ESV) in verse two? Scholars have debated this issue, some thinking that these are two different designations for the same group. Others suggest they are two different groups. But if we consider the evidence of 2:14-16, the fault of the Nicolaitans lies at the very core of the Christian challenge at the end of the First Century. That challenge went something like this: How do you live a reasonably normal life with neighbors (both Jews and Gentiles) who believe that your faith is somehow a threat to their normalcy? All the opponents of the church at Ephesus were exploring how far Christians could compromise with their neighbors in exchange for a little peace and tranquillity. The Excursis to follow explores the challenges Christians of all kinds faced in Roman Asia.

### **Rev 2:6 (Excursis on Christians in Roman Asia)–**

Christians in Asia Minor, even if they weren’t persecuted, struggled with how to live as Christians in a pagan world. In the ancient Roman world most human needs were met by one of two institutions, the family or the state. There was also a third category of society, what we might call “associations” or “clubs.” These associations in the ancient world existed to meet needs that were not met by either the home or the government. In a way they were like an extended family. The church found its place in this ambiguous third category of society. It was seen by Roman society as a strange sort of “club.” These Roman “associations” were often harmless, but at times the state felt threatened by them. According to Adela Yarbro Collins, five major events made the situation of the church in the Roman world seem increasingly precarious at the time Revelation was written. We will cover these five and the Christian reaction to them in the following postings.

First of all, the church was suffering from a number of conflicts with the Jews. These conflicts had serious potential consequences. You see, Judaism was known in Latin as a “*religio licita*,” a legal religion. As a legal religion Jews had privileges not granted to others, such as the right to Sabbath observance and to exemption from worship of the emperor. Rome had learned that cutting the Jews some slack avoided many problems in society. As long as Christians were thought of as Jews, and many of them were, they were sheltered under Roman law.

Toward the end of the first century, however, conflicts between Christians and Jews threatened to separate them in the minds of others. Since Jews were a recognized association and the church was not, the more Christians were distinguished from Judaism, the more difficulties they would have in society. So Jewish attempts to repudiate Christianity had legal consequences for Christians in the first century (note the evidence of Rev 2:9-10; 3:7-9).

There is evidence Jews made note of the fact that Christians were the only Jewish sect that did not stay in Jerusalem and fight during the war of independence against Rome in AD 70. It is likely that from that time on, Christians were increasingly seen as a foreign element, even when they attended the synagogues. Some scholars believe that an extra prayer or benediction

was added to some synagogue services around 80-90 AD. This “eighteenth benediction” was basically a curse against Christ and Christians. Christians attending such a service would identify themselves by falling silent during that benediction. When this occurred they could be singled out and excluded from the community.

So around the time that the book of Revelation was written, the legal standing of Christians in society was coming under threat. Christians would naturally be concerned about this situation and wonder what the future would hold for them in Roman society.

A second problem that Christians began to face at this time were accusations from their Gentile neighbors. As Gentiles came to see a distinction between Christian faith and Judaism, they often examined Christianity with hostile contempt. From the second century on, there is plenty of evidence for Gentile accusations against Christians. It is reasonable to assume that such accusations were already beginning to occur toward the close of the first century, although we have no direct, written evidence. Let's look at the kinds of accusations that were thrown at Christians shortly after the time when Revelation was written.

One second-century accusation was that Christians were “haters of the human race.” They were seen as exclusive because they did not participate in civil society the way most people did. Public events in Asia Minor were saturated with pagan rituals and rhetoric. Christians, therefore, usually avoided them so as not to compromise their faith. The general population, on the other hand, took the smorgasbord approach to religion. They felt free to pick and choose among a variety of ideas. But much like today, they did not appreciate people who thought they had the truth and that everybody else was wrong. So they accused Christians of being anti-society.

Since religion was so tightly connected with civil affairs in ancient Rome, Christians were also accused of “atheism” because they would not worship any god but their own. The peoples of the Empire each had their own religious preferences but added to them worship of the state gods as a token of their allegiance to the state. Christians were charged with atheism because they would not accept the state gods as objects of worship.

Christians, oddly enough, were also accused of “cannibalism.” How on earth did this one come up? It had to do with Gentile perceptions of the Lord's Supper, where Christians were “eating the body and drinking the blood” of their Lord. Christians understood these statements in a spiritual way, but apparently their pagan neighbors did not. So stories went around that Christians were sacrificing children and others in order to eat at their Lord's table. The combined effect of all these accusations was an insecure world for Christians to live in.

A number of traumatic events would have been further indicators that Christian standing in Roman society was increasingly uncertain. One such event was the destruction of Jerusalem. While this event did not affect Christians directly, it raised an important question, “If a *legal* religion could be handled in such a brutal manner by the Romans, what would happen if Rome focused its attention on Christians?”

A second piece of traumatic news would have been reports of Nero's persecutions. These persecutions were brief but gruesome. Though probably the work of a madman, the

helplessness of Rome's Christians showed just how fragile the relationship of all Christians to the Empire was. There were not a lot of safeguards in Roman society for minorities. We are used to the idea that when people's views are in the minority the legal system should prevent the majority from totally abusing the minority. But in New Testament times it was not so. A Roman emperor could mistreat a minority with little danger of retribution.

A third piece of traumatic news was the gradual development of the imperial cult of emperor worship. The call to worship the emperor was both a religious and a political act. Refusal to participate in emperor worship was more than unpatriotic, it was treasonous. This made it difficult for people to be good citizens and good Christians at the same time. Christians were singled out because even small tokens of loyalty to the emperor compromised their loyalty to Jesus Christ. Asking Christians to worship the emperor would be like forcing Jews to become Nazis or African Americans to give public lip service to the tenets of the Ku Klux Klan. There was no good news for Christians in these developments.

The book of Revelation also reports the execution of a Christian named Antipas. While details are not given, it is clear that he died a martyr to his faith. "You did not renounce your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city--where Satan lives" (Rev 2:13). Pergamum was one of the places where the Roman governor held court and made judicial decisions. It is possible that early Christians would see in the "sharp, two-edged sword" of Christ (2:12,16) a contrast to the governor's power over the "sword," the death sentence. If so, Antipas was probably executed by the Roman governor for being a Christian.

The procedure in Antipas' case may have been that described by the Roman governor Pliny some fifteen years after the writing of Revelation, in a letter to the Emperor Trajan:

"I have asked the accused whether they were Christians. If they confessed, I asked a second and a third time, threatening penalty. Those who persisted I ordered to be executed, for I did not doubt that, whatever it was they professed, they deserved to be punished for their inflexible obstinacy. . . . I dismissed those who said they were not or never had been Christians, and who in my presence supplicated the gods and placed wine and incense before your (Trajan's) image, and especially cursed Christ, which I hear no true Christian will do."

Trajan responded that Christians were not to be sought out or tried on the basis of anonymous accusations, but if they were openly brought to the governor's attention, they were to be handled as Pliny had described (An English translation of Pliny's letter and Trajan's response can be found in Roland H. Bainton, *Christendom: A Short History of Christianity and Its Impact on Western Civilization*, vol. 1 [NY: Harper and Row, 1966], 57). Antipas was probably not sought out by the governor, but was accused by a hostile neighbor, either Jew or Gentile. Imagine living in a place where you never knew which neighbor might suddenly report your faith to the authorities! If it could happen to Antipas, it could happen to any Christian.

Finally, of course, Christians would have been aware of John's own exile. Although recent scholarship has raised some questions about this, early church tradition widely held that the

beloved patriarch of the church in Asia Minor was exiled to the island of Patmos in order to prevent him from spreading his faith. If the leader of the churches was now in exile, it would increase a sense of insecurity within the church. The original readers of Revelation, therefore, seem to have been Christians whose position in society was becoming more and more insecure on account of their faith. They were concerned about where things were going in the future and they looked to John to provide direction and comfort in their situation.

The believers in the churches of Asia Minor seem to have been in vigorous disagreement as to how to handle their marginalized position in society. We can see this very clearly as we work our way through the seven letters (Revelation 2-3). “Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality.” (Rev 2:14) Apparently there were some Christians in Pergamos who were following what Jesus calls the “teachings of Balaam.” Balaam did not succeed in destroying the Israelites through prophetic curses. So instead he counseled the Moabites to use sexual enticement and idolatrous feasts (Num 25:1-3; 31:16) to lead them away from God. The letters to the churches draw a strong tie between the temptations of Israel and the situation of the churches in Asia Minor.

The majority of Christians in Pergamos, Ephesus and Smyrna were faithful to the course John had taught them. But a minority in these churches were tempted to accommodate to the prevailing winds of their communities, and in the process, John feared that they would lose their connection to Christ. But while these three churches were divided, the majority seem to have remained faithful. When you get to Thyatira, the fourth church, it begins to look more like a 50-50 split. Even some of the leaders of the church at Thyatira were on the wrong side.

The impression of degeneration continues in the last three churches. In Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea the majority are not on John's side. “Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy.” (Rev 3:4) In Sardis, the faithful ones are few. While Philadelphia seems to have less problems with heresy, the church has little strength (Rev 3:8). With Laodicea things are even worse, the letter gives the impression that the church is locking Jesus out (Rev 3:20). There isn't even a faithful minority. Jesus can find nothing good in Laodicea at all (Rev 3:14-20).

Among the seven churches of Asia Minor three seem largely on John's side of the conflict, one it seems to be about 50-50, and the last three have only a minority who are faithful. The churches of Asia Minor are seriously divided about how to relate to society and the problems around them. It is a time of both external and internal stress. So the book of Revelation was written not only to encourage the faithful in a time of impending persecution, but also to confront the churches about their divided condition.

The seven letters of Revelation 2-3 offer a sharp rebuke to many in the churches. When we compare what we find in Revelation with other New Testament books, we gain insight into the following questions: “Why were the Christians of Asia Minor divided? What was the basis for that division? Who were John's opponents and what did they believe?”

The opponents of John are described by means of three different names in Revelation 2-- they are Nicolaitans, Balaam, and Jezebel: "Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: **You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam**, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality. Likewise **you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.**" (Rev 2:14-15, NIV) "Nevertheless, **I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel**, who calls herself a prophetess. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols." (Rev 2:20 NIV)

So the Christian opponents of John are called followers of Balaam, Jezebel, and those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Apparently all three names represent the same group because all three names involve the same problems: the two basic issues of food offered to idols and sexual immorality. A further evidence of the unity between these groups is based on the meaning of the two of the names. "Nikolaos" is a Greek term that means "conqueror of the people," while the Hebrew term "Balaam" means "one who swallows up the people"-- the two names mean essentially the same thing (one in Greek and one in Hebrew).

So all three of these "groups" taught essentially the same thing--something to do with food offered to idols and sexual immorality. Interestingly enough, when you go to the writings of the following century, the same two issues are front row center. Why were Christians divided over these issues? Because these two issues, in particular, had to do with how Christians related to the state and the society around them.

All non-Jews in the Empire were required to participate in Roman civil religion. The Romans tolerated all kinds of religious practices, but no matter what your religion was or where you came from, you were also expected to participate in the ceremonies and public events of Roman society. These events were somewhat like the Fourth of July parade in the United States. It did not matter what religion you were, it was part of your duty as a citizen to participate.

There were serious consequences for citizens who did not participate in the civil religion (the Jews, of course, were exempted), even when the death penalty was not generally in view. Those who did not take part in the civil ceremonies would lose significant economic opportunities. They would be ostracized from the trade guilds, where people networked to build their businesses. When jobs opened up, the best would be reserved for the "good citizens" of the area. Non-participation also had political consequences. Civic positions required people to encourage and lead out in the civil religion. Without political position, Christians lost the ability to influence the development of society or to improve their position within it. Lack of participation in the civil religion also resulted in the loss of social opportunities. Just like today, the party crowd was also the "in crowd" and Christians had a hard time becoming "in." As a result those who refused to participate in Roman civil religion became poor, powerless, social outcasts. These were very real issues to anyone who considered becoming a Christian in first-century Asia Minor.

Why did Christians have so many problems with the Roman civil religion? Because there were two major elements in it that would involve a compromise with Christian faith; the issue of

food offered to idols and the matter of “fornication.” Why was food offered to idols a problem for John’s churches? After all, in the first letter to the Corinthians, Paul says that an idol is nothing and offering food to an idol does not really matter because idols cannot speak, hear, or feel (1 Cor 8:4, 7-9). If something is offered to an idol, nothing has really happened, so in principle there is no big problem here. But by the time of Revelation, the situation seems to have changed. When the idol feast was seen as a way of putting the state before God, it would create a serious conflict for many or most Christians.

There was also the problem of cultic prostitution. A part of the ancient religious scene was ritualized prostitution. The idea seems to have been that if sexual intercourse took place in the temple between the men of the city and cultic priestesses, that rain would fall in abundance, the crops would grow, and the community would be prosperous. It was felt that a good citizen would on occasion visit a temple prostitute simply to encourage a little rain at the proper time. As strange as this sounds to us it made sense to the ancients. People who held aloof from these “civic traditions” might be thought hostile to the community welfare.

In the Western world today wealth and security seem to represent the highest goals of secular society. But in the Greco-Roman world there was an even higher goal, status. It was a world that reveled in the honor and esteem of others, and poured shame on those who did not conform. In such a world, the restrictions of Christian life and practice virtually guaranteed exclusion from honor and status in one’s own neighborhood.

Many Christians, however, were loath to give up the quest for a high place in the esteem of others. They wanted to have a function in society, they wanted to have economic, political, and social opportunities. They wanted to accumulate some wealth and have some influence. But that was not going to happen unless they participated in the cultic feasts and in the temple prostitution. The letters to the churches in the book of Revelation indicate that there were some Christians who weighed the options and asked, “Why not? Isn’t John being just a little exclusive here? Doesn’t God want us to be involved in reaching the world? How can we reach the upper classes for Christ if we are not involved in their lives?”

Early Christians seem to have faced a tension between outreach and involvement in society, on the one hand, and strict adherence to the full counsel of God, on the other. When faced with the challenges of cultic prostitution, I don’t doubt that many Christians pointed out the Seventh Commandment, “Thou shalt not commit adultery.” On what basis could a serious Christian back then even think about participating in cultic prostitution? I would like to suggest that some Christians found a theological justification for this kind of activity in the writings of Paul, who argued that the state had authority to require certain things:

“Everyone must **submit himself to the governing authorities**, for there is no authority except that which God has established. **The authorities that exist have been established by God.** Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgments on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. For he is God's servant to do you good. But if

you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to **submit to the authorities**, not only because of possible punishment but also **because of conscience**. This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor." (Romans 13:1-7, NIV)

Might the Nicolaitans have thought that they were following Paul's counsel in submitting to the requirements of civil religion? "(Pray) for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good and pleases God our Savior." (1 Tim 2:2-3 NIV) We are to pray for, obey, respect, and honor the authorities. I'm sure Paul would not have approved of cultic prostitution. In 1 Corinthians 8-10, however, Paul is fairly clear that eating food offered to idols is not a major issue in itself. For Paul, forty years before Revelation, eating food offered to idols was a personal choice based on the situation. One suspects that sincere Christians who differed with the perspective of Revelation might have found encouragement in Paul's letters, whether or not they were reading correctly.

The reality is that Paul's situation was quite different than John's. **Circumstances alter cases**. By the time of Revelation the appropriate response was: "No compromise. Those idols may be deaf and dumb, but behind every idol is Satan himself. If you honor the idol, you invite him into your life and you will lose your place in heaven. So you basically have a choice: honor God and lose your place now or honor Satan and lose it later."

The book of Revelation recommends social, political, and economic withdrawal from society, if necessary, in order to be faithful to the instructions of Jesus. John takes a hard line with the believers that Paul did not feel was necessary in his day. Evidently circumstances had changed in the forty years between Paul's letters and Revelation. Actions that would have been acceptable in the past were no longer so, due to changing circumstances.

How does one persuade the believers to take a stance of radical obedience regardless of the consequences? First of all, the book of Revelation creates what some scholars call a "symbolic universe." The empire of Rome dominates the "universe" of everyday experience. But Revelation describes an empire that transcends the empire of Rome. The reality of this world is not all there is, nor is the money, power, and social opportunity of this world all there is. The book of Revelation offers the Christians of Asia Minor a larger perspective: they are kings and priests in their own right. They have genuine dignity in the eyes of God. In giving up their status in this world, they gain political and religious status that transcends even that conferred by Rome.

But it is more than a matter of being on the right side now. Jesus is coming soon and the believer needs to be on the right side when He comes. So Revelation teaches that the difficulties Christians face are part of God's plan and their current lack of power and wealth is not to last forever. They will not always lack access to gold because one day they will walk on gold. There is no need to compromise with society because the people of God are on the winning side. True, Rome could threaten your life, your status and your earthly possessions, but God is even more

powerful than Rome. Ultimately, who would you rather face, the wrath of Rome or the wrath of God? The message of Revelation is a no compromise, hard line message.

We will refer back to this excursus as we move through the seven churches, particularly the church of Pergamum.

### **Rev 2:7–**

The messages to all seven of the churches of Asia contain a warning near the end about hearing what the Spirit has to say to the churches. The warning is given to “everyone who has an ear.” That means that the messages to the churches are not limited to particular cities in First Century Asia Minor. Neither are they limited to specific periods in history. The message to each of the seven churches has relevance to every believer throughout Christian history. The statement is so general, it even has relevance to non-believers as well. The message of Revelation is ultimately relevant to every person on earth. All need to be ready for the return of Jesus. Everyone who can hear at all should hear what the Spirit has to say to the First Century churches of Asia Minor.

In the messages to the first three churches, the warning about the Spirit comes just before the promises to the overcomer (2:7, 11, 17). In the last four messages (2:29; 3:6, 13, 22), the warning about the Spirit comes at the very end of the message. These closing messages to the seven churches strongly echo the words of Jesus in the gospels, as He frequently said something similar in the course of His earthly ministry (Matt 11:15; 13:9, 43; Mark 4:9, 23; 7:16; Luke 8:8; 14:35). In none of these expressions does the verb have an object, it is a general exhortation to be attentive to the Holy Spirit.

In the Bible the heart that is hardened is closely associated with the ear that cannot hear (Isa 6:12-13; John 12:40). So the hearing in this text is not primarily physical, it is a metaphor for being tuned to spiritual truth. The true object of the messages to the seven churches is not just anyone who can hear (which would imply the messages have no value to the physically deaf), it is anyone whose heart is open to truth.

Each of the seven church letters concludes with a promise to the overcomer. For an analysis of the promises as a whole see Rev 2 (Introduction). The root word for “overcomes” (the participle form *nikônti*) means to prevail, conquer or vanquish in military terms. But while the military or political usage may lie on the surface at times in Revelation (Rev 11:7; 13:7), the prevailing use of the word in the seven churches is spiritual. It refers to victory in matters of moral character. To overcome is to remain faithful to God in spite of opposition, deception and temptation.

The reward to the overcomer in Ephesus is the right to eat from the tree of life. This promise is fulfilled in Revelation 22:1-2, where the tree of life can be found on either side of the river of life that comes out from the throne of God in the New Jerusalem. That tree produces twelve kinds of fruit, presumably a different fruit each month for variety. The leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. The “servants of God and the Lamb” (22:3) and “those who wash their robes/do His commandments” (22:14) have the right to eat of that fruit (presumably

each month) to preserve their immortality (Gen 3:22-23). Since the tree of life is on either side of the river, the tree of life and the river of the water of life are parallel images (Rev 22:1-2), suggesting that the water of life also has healing and preservative qualities.

“Paradise” is a loan word from the Persian that found its way into Hebrew and Greek and now even in the English. While the Hebrew of Genesis does not use this word to refer to the Garden of Eden, the LXX (Greek OT) consistently translates the Hebrew for garden (*gan*) as “paradise” (Gen 2:8-10, 15-16; 3:1-3, etc.– Greek root *paradeisos*). So while the Hebrew doesn’t use the term, reference to “the paradise of God” reminds the reader of the tree of life “in the midst of the garden” (Gen 2:9). In Luke 23:43 and 2 Corinthians 12:4 the word is used for the heavenly place where the saved will live with Jesus.

To eat from the tree of life was to live forever (Gen 3:22). According to the text of Genesis, Adam and Eve’s expulsion from the garden was specifically to keep them from eating of the tree of life and thus perpetuating sin. The book of Revelation projects a change in the human condition. Because of the Lamb that was slain (Rev 5:9-12) human beings will once again have access to the tree of life and the opportunity to live forever in the new earth. The overcomer in Ephesus is promised an eternal home in a restored Eden. There will be no more suffering and pain and no more death (Rev 21:4), thanks to the tree of life. Just as the tree of life was in the midst of the original garden, it is in the midst of the great street of the New Jerusalem (Rev 22:2), always available to those who live there.

### **Rev 2:1-7 (spiritual lessons)–**

The church of Ephesus, in a number of ways, was reenacting the experience of Israel. The Old Testament prophets often spoke of Israel’s experience in the wilderness as a time of devotion and faithfulness to God (Jer 2:2; Hos 2:14-15). Israel began with a relative faithfulness to God, but soon lost touch with God and with one another. They had forsaken God and turned against Him (Jer 2:13, 21). Related to this slippage in relationship with God was an appropriate focus on works but that focus was out of balance because of the lack of love.

It reminds me of a story that Martin Luther told about drunken peasants. Do you know what happens when you put a drunken peasant on a horse? You know that he is going to fall off the horse. What you don't know is whether he will fall off the horse to the right or to the left. Luther compared Christians to a drunken peasant on a horse. They had a hard time keeping their balance between love and the gospel of free acceptance, on the one hand, and faithfulness and keeping the commandments, on the other. Luther felt like he was preaching to drunken peasants who would go to one extreme or the other but you could never predict just which way they would fall. He felt that when he preached love they would forget to obey; when he preached obedience, they would forget the gospel.

I find that true in my own experience. When I emphasize love and the gospel in my life, obedience can seem a little less important. On the other hand, when I concentrate on obedience, I start feeling guilty for my shortcomings and sometime forget the free acceptance He offers in the cross. Its no wonder Ellen White sometimes called sanctification “a battle and a

march.”

The early Christians in Ephesus fought some of the same battles we have to face. Even though some had the memory of walking with Jesus and they also had apostles with them, they nevertheless struggled with some of the same issues we struggle with today. I find encouragement in that.

This letter is fairly specific about the things they struggled with. First of all, they had trouble acting on the truths they had been taught. When Jesus tells them to “remember,” it is a present imperative of on-going action in the Greek. It doesn't say "start remembering" because they haven't forgotten. They are aware of the problem and want to do the right thing. So Jesus is saying to them, "Look, keep the goal before you: remember where you have come from and renew in your mind the things you already know."

Secondly, they needed to repent. In this case it was something they needed to get started--a one-time decisive turn-around. It seem the church of Ephesus was not used to repenting. Jesus urges them to get a fresh start. Through repentance, they could begin to bring their actions in line with their intentions. Third, they had drifted away from the love and the actions that they did at first. Jesus encouraged them to renew that first love by doing the things they used to do. They were to revive the earlier attentions that had caused their love to blossom in the first place.

Fourth, along with the other six churches, they seem to have lost focus on the role of the Spirit in their walk with Jesus. He counsels them to listen attentively to the spirit. They were to tune their spiritual attention to what the Spirit was trying to say to them. If they placed themselves in the hands of the Spirit, the Spirit would certainly bring them back to the love they had had at first.

Finally, they needed to keep their eyes on paradise. They were told that the one who overcomes would receive the tree of life and will be in the paradise of God. Any kind of repenting would be well worth it then. Any sacrifice would be worth that reward. The fulfillment of that promise of Jesus would occur when the redeemed eat the fruit from the tree of life in the New Jerusalem (Revelation 22).

In summary, what can we learn for today from the church of Ephesus? I'd like to suggest at least three things. First, look to the place where you last saw the light. If you sense that you are not where you ought to be in Christian life, go back and do the things that you did at first. Marriage counselors may counsel a couple who has fallen out of love to go back through the original steps of bonding. It may sometimes be good for a married couple to retrace the steps of their original courtship, perhaps even back off from sexual relationship, so that they can renew the mental, emotional and spiritual bonds that can truly hold their marriage together. This principle can be applied to the spiritual life when you know that you have fallen away from God. Examine what it was like in your life when you were first in love with God: how did you get yourself in the place where you first felt God's presence and how did you respond in kind?

It's not so much what we do as Christians but the motive behind it that counts. The Ephesians did a lot of things, but because they were not motivated by love they didn't have the

approval of God that they wanted or needed. Sometimes the motive is more important than the final result. Mistaken actions done out of love are easier to accept than loveless actions.

Jesus message to the Ephesians underlines the primacy of the gospel. It is only through the gospel that we can truly love because no one has the capacity to love unless we have been loved first. Any church that loses touch with the centrality of the gospel is a church that will begin to wound people even though it may be faithful in terms of sound doctrine.

There are many paradoxes in Christian life and paradoxes can be hard to maintain. On one hand, there is the call to be faithful--energetic, discerning, doctrinally sound, and on the other hand, there is the call to be masterful in love. Checking someone out to see if they are doctrinally sound and at the same time loving them are two actions that seem hard to keep in balance. The desire for sound doctrine and decisive action often leads to the loss of the mutual love--the badge of discipleship: "All men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another." John 13:35.

Err on the side of the people. When you are a Christian leader, you sometimes sense that there is something wrong in the community that you want to set right, but you don't know how to go about it. When attempting to address wrong, it's best to err on the side of mercy when you are not sure of the right approach.

I remember visiting someone as a pastor and thinking that I needed to challenge and confront that person. But I sometimes didn't get around to actually confronting them. I would leave that place kicking myself, saying, "You didn't tell this person what they really needed to hear. You gutless pastor!" Then I'd get a phone call from that person. "Pastor, you knew what I was doing but you didn't humiliate me and make me feel bad. You treated me with love and respect. Since then the Holy Spirit has been after me to get my life in order. Will you come back and teach me how?" I went to rebuke them but treated them with love and respect instead. That usually had a more powerful impact on people than my own ideas of confrontation.

If one has to choose between 1) strong doctrinal soundness with decisive action and 2) love, which would you choose? Obviously, Scripture would not encourage us to choose, but when you are caught on the edge, the choice should be on the side of love. 1 Corinthians 13 tells us that we could have everything else--doctrinal soundness and all kinds of works (which could describe the Ephesian church)--but if you don't have love, none of the rest is of any value. When dealing with problems in the church, if you must err, it's probably better on the side of mercy.

### **Rev 2:1-7 (Church History Reading)--**

We have noted that the primary focus of the seven letters to the churches of Asia Minor was the original situation and the general needs of all readers of the apocalypse. But we also noted evidence that the letters to the seven churches had extended applications to the long sweep of Christian history that the church has experienced. If one looks at the seven letters in terms of a sequence of Christian history, where would the message to Ephesus fit? Most interpreters have suggested that it would fit the apostolic era up to the time of John (roughly 31 A.D. to 100 A.D.).

The early church had a great beginning, but by the middle of the first century, there were signs that trouble was beginning to brew. The Ephesian period of the church, the first couple generations of the Christian era, was one with a magnificent start and a great reputation and yet a church now in trouble as the first century came to a close. The Christian church was beginning to lose touch with its first love. Historical records of the time suggest that by the end of the first Christian century, the church had begun to depart from the purity and simplicity of the gospel.

### **Rev 2:8-11 (Introduction)–**

The city of Smyrna, modern-day Izmir, was a harbor city on the west coast of Asia Minor, in what we today call Turkey. It was and is about 50 miles north of Ephesus. The original city, across the bay to the northeast, was destroyed in the seventh century BC. Its restoration on the south side of the bay began at the time of Alexander the Great, several hundred years later. Since it was the nearest of the seven cities to Ephesus, it is the second to be mentioned in Revelation. There is evidence that in the first century there were more than 100,000 residents. It was a wealthy and beautiful city, sometimes called “the glory of Asia.” It is thought to have been the birthplace of the famous Greek poet Homer and claimed to be the first city in the ancient world to build a temple to the goddess Roma.

At the time Revelation was written, Smyrna was a center of emperor worship and citizens were required once a year to burn incense to Caesar and receive a certificate that proved that they had done it. So Christians in Smyrna were early on in difficulty with the civil religion. There was also a large and wealthy Jewish population which by this time had become hostile to the Christians in their midst (see excursus on “the Jews” in the notes on verse 9). Among those who suffered martyrdom in the city was Polycarp, who was burned at the stake in 156 AD (he would have been a young adult at the time Revelation was written and history records that he knew John and became bishop of Smyrna within fifteen years of the writing of Revelation).

It was later observed that ancient Christians approached the requirement of emperor worship and the threat of persecution in five different ways. Some refused to participate in the worship of the emperor even though the requirement was simply to put a pinch of incense into the holy fire. Such would often be imprisoned and were sometimes executed. Others went ahead and performed the ritual, contending that it was an inconsequential act. Still others would leave town before the ritual could be enforced, returning later when the attention of government was diverted to other issues. Another group bribed city officials to get a certificate that certified their performance of duty, even though they had not actually done it. And a fifth group appointed slaves or hired surrogates to perform the duty in their behalf. When the persecution had ended, the church would have a difficult time reconciling people who had behaved so differently in the face of persecution.

While Ephesus could be thought of as the backsliding church in Revelation, Smyrna was the suffering church. In some ways it is the exact opposite of Laodicea. Laodicea thought of itself

as rich and in need of nothing, yet was poor in spiritual reality. Smyrna, on the other hand, was poor and afflicted, but was rich in a more significant sense.

This is the shortest of the messages to the seven churches and it focuses on the church's faithfulness, suffering, and experience of persecution, particularly from "those who say they are Jews but are the synagogue of Satan." Jesus predicts that the suffering is only going to increase, but invites them to be faithful unto death, because the death of martyrdom is nothing to fear and the reward will, in any case, be great.

#### **Rev 2:8–**

On the phrase "angel of the church" see notes on Revelation 1:20. Jesus introduces Himself to the church at Smyrna as "the First and the Last." This phrase is often found in the mouth of Yahweh in the Old Testament (see notes on Revelation 1:17). So this is one of the many ways that New Testament writers include Jesus in the one God of Judaism. A suffering, persecuted church needs to know that Jesus is powerful enough to make everything right at the end, because there is no true justice in this life.

Related to this, He also begins the letter by reminding the suffering Smyrna church of His own suffering, death, and resurrection. He is the one who "died and came to life again" (see also Rev 1:17-18) The "came to life" (*ezēsan*) is in the aorist tense here, which implies a completed action in the past. This Greek word is frequently used for physical resurrection (John 5:25; Rom 14:9; Rev 13:14; 20:4-5, see also the Greek of Ezek 37:10), so the reference to Jesus' own death and resurrection is clear. In times of suffering, it is comforting to be in the presence of someone who has truly gone through what we are going through and has survived. Jesus here is faithful to His promise to always be with His suffering people. Better yet, His resurrection is a foretaste and promise of the resurrection of the believer.

Jesus introduces Himself to the church at Smyrna with the two attributes most calculated to comfort the church in the midst of its sufferings.

#### **Rev 2:9–**

After offering a unique introduction of Himself to the church at Smyrna, Jesus offers an analysis of this church. First of all, He says, "I know your afflictions." The Greek word for afflictions is "*thlipsis*." It can mean persecution (Matt 24:9; Acts 11:19; Col 1:24; 1 Thess 2:6; Rev 7:14), difficult circumstances (2 Cor 8:13; Jam 1:27) or simply distress (2 Cor 2:4; Phil 1:17). The root meaning of the word is related to "pressure," the experience of a heavy, even crushing burden. The church is under pressure brought in by outside forces. It is not under pressure because it is dysfunctional and unable to cope with ordinary life. The kind of stress expressed by this word can be both physical and psychological, so the implication may be that the church is becoming worried and fretful over the situation it finds itself in (2:10). They are afraid of what they are about to suffer. But Jesus comforts them in that he knows what they are going through by experience and He will not abandon them, but comes to them to comfort and encourage.

The church at Smyrna lived in one of the wealthiest of ancient cities, yet they were

extremely poor. The financial situation of the church is not lower middle class, the Greek word here (*ptôcheian*) reflects deep poverty. The church possessed absolutely nothing, a better word than poverty might be destitution. The association with “afflictions” suggests that the poverty is related to the persecution. They were destitute because their possessions had been taken away from them on account of their faith (see Heb 10:34). The same word for destitution is found in 2 Corinthians 8:9: “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor (destitute), so that through you his poverty (destitution) you might become rich.” When He was on earth Jesus often had “nowhere to lay His head” (Matt 8:20; Luke 9:58). The church at Smyrna was experiencing what Jesus had experienced while on earth. Since poverty is often disrespected by others, it added to the sense of rejection and affliction the church experienced.

Earthly poverty can sometimes be the means of exposing true riches to our consciousness. The Smyrneans were outwardly poor, they were not rich in material things, but they were rich in the things pertaining to God, such as grace and faith and the presence of the Spirit. This turn of phrase recalls James 2:5, ESV: “Has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom. . .?” It also recalls 2 Corinthians 8:2, where Paul says regarding the churches of Macedonia: “For in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.” (ESV) The experience of the church at Smyrna is the opposite of Laodicea, which is rich in material goods but poor in the things that truly matter (Rev 3:17, see also Matt 6:19-21; 2 Cor 6:10).

Scholars of Revelation have long debated how to identify the “Jews” of this passage. Were they ethnic Jews who did not follow Jesus and were seeking to eliminate the Christians among them? Or were they “figurative Jews” who were actually Gentile Christians of a different point of view than that of the author of Revelation? In the Excursus that follows I explore the situation of Jews within the Roman Empire at that time and how that would relate to the churches of Asia Minor. If Revelation is referring to Jews by birth who did not accept Jesus as the Messiah, then the “and are not” means that they are not Jews in the full spiritual sense of following God’s messianic leading. If this meaning is correct, the “synagogue of Satan” is a satirical term in tension with the Jewish claim to be “the synagogue of the Lord” (see LXX of Num 16:3; 20:4; 31:16 for the biblical root of this phrase). Though they worshiped in a synagogue, the author did not consider them truly worthy of the name. Since the word “synagogue” is used only once in the New Testament with reference to a Christian congregation (James 2:2, to a degree also in Heb 10:25), this literal meaning is more likely here. Later, during the martyrdom of Polycarp (mid-Second Century), the Jews of Smyrna gave supporting voice to the pagan authorities and were foremost in gathering fuel for his fire.

While it is likely that the term “Jews” is intended literally in this text (and Rev 3:9), the possibility that it is meant in a metaphorical sense (as in Rom 2:28-29, but here as Christians who are not really Christians in the full sense portrayed in Revelation) cannot be totally ruled out. It is clear from the letters to Pergamum and Thyatira that there were significant divisions among

Christians in the seven churches and it is possible that the reference to “Jews” here could be a reference to the Nicolaitans or some other group of in-house opponents to the positions espoused in Revelation. The external pressures from society caused many Christians to seek a middle ground between the demands of faith and the demands of society, a middle ground that the Jesus of Revelation rejects. See Rev 2:6 (Excursis on Christians in Roman Asia) for more detail on these historical backgrounds. If “Jews” is understood metaphorically here, “synagogue of Satan” would be a reference to groups and churches among the Christians that differed from the perspectives shared by John and the believers who accepted his authority.

The text says that the church was “slandered” by those who claimed to be Jews. To slander (literally “blaspheme”) means to use words in order to ruin someone’s reputation. Here again, the church’s experience involves a sharing of the experience of Jesus. He did not deserve the abusive speech that was cast on Him, yet was continually abused by both the Romans and the religious leaders. The members of the church at Smyrna did not deserve the descriptions that were hurled at them, but had to endure them anyway. But in the next verse it becomes clear that not only were they under pressure, in deep poverty, and subject to abusive speech, they were facing impending punishment and would suffer even more in days to come. It was not a matter of if but of when.

The reference to Satan here foreshadows a figure who lurks in the background of Revelation, yet has a crucial role in the story. In the background of Revelation is a cosmic conflict, clearly outlined in Revelation 12:7-10 and strongly implied in the scenes of Revelation 4-5 and Revelation 20:1-10. Revelation 12:9 connects Satan with the dragon, the devil, and the serpent in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3– see notes on Rev 12:9). According to hints in the prophets, Satan is a created being who was once the pinnacle of God’s creation, but allowed pride over his magnificence to lead him into rebellion against God (Isa 14:12-19; Ezek 28:12-19). His *modus operandi* is accusations against the people of God (Job 1-2; Rev 12:10), which are really veiled accusations against the character and government of God (Gen 3:1-5; Job 1-2). This cosmic conflict lies behind all the conflicts people experienced in the earthly realm. In every earthly context God is at work, but there is also another one at work, sowing dissension, rebellion and violence. Revelation will ultimately show that force and violence are not God’s methods of ruling the world or the universe. These are the methods of another who seeks to paint God into his own image.

### **Rev 2:9 (Excursis on “the Jews” in the Ancient World)–**

A well-known scholar of the Gospel of John noticed something interesting about the term “Jews” in the Gospel. The term “Jews” is used by the narrator of the Gospel (John 1:19; 2:6, 13, 20: 3:1, etc.), by the Samaritan woman (4:9, 20), and by Pilate (19:19-22). When Jesus responds to the Samaritan woman, he uses her own description to say that salvation is “of the Jews” (4:22). But when Jesus talks to Jews in the Gospel of John He never uses that term. For example, while the narrator calls Nicodemus “a ruler of the Jews” (3:1), Jesus calls him “the teacher of Israel” (3:10). He addresses Nathanael as an “Israelite” (1:47) and Nathaniel addresses Him as

“king of Israel” (1:49– in contrast to Pilate’s “king of the Jews”– 19:19, 22).

It would appear that “Jews” was the language of the Roman Empire, a word drawn from the fact that the Jews resided in the province of Judea. The word was not restricted to those who resided in Judea, but became extended to all residents of Rome whose allegiance was directed toward the temple in Jerusalem, regardless of where in the Empire they lived. The religion of the “Jews” became a legal, ethnic religion. Jews living in the *diaspora* (a term used of lands outside of Israel to which Jews had moved or been taken captive) tended to use the language of the Empire (as did the Samaritans, evidently), while Jews in the land of Israel used “Israel” and “Israelite” as their common self-designation (see John 1:49; 3:10). That means that the narrator of the Gospel of John had adopted the language of the empire in explaining the Jesus story to his readers. John, therefore, was a Jewish author who adapted his language to the *diaspora* context.

An interesting problem arose as increasing numbers of Gentile followers of Jesus joined synagogues. An ethnic religion that had dispersed all over the Empire was now no longer ethnic. This would have been confusing to the Romans and it jeopardized the legality of Jewish religion in the eyes of the Empire. So Jews began to take measures to isolate and expel the Christians in the synagogues by the year 85 AD. They added an eighteenth benediction to the seventeen that had been commonly used in their worship services up to that point. The eighteenth benediction was a curse against Christ and against Christians. Most Christians would have fallen silent during that part of the service, thus exposing themselves to detection and expulsion. It is in that context that the Gospel of John was written. The narrator of the Fourth Gospel speaks of Jews in the language of the Empire, as if he were an outsider. It reflects the distancing of the Christians from Jews who did not believe in Jesus. In the words of John 1:11– “His own people did not receive Him.” The book of Revelation seems to reflect that same reality at about the same time. Those called “Jews” have become a “synagogue of Satan” (Rev 2:9; 3:9) in the minds of Jesus’ followers. The split up of a great religion is a painful experience, usually for both sides.

### **Rev 2:10–**

Persecution does not always lead to spiritual riches, it can also discourage people to the point of leaving the faith (Matt 13:21; John 16:1-2). So Jesus exhorts the Smyrnians to be faithful unto death. I take it that the believers in Smyrna, while faithful, were also fearful of the trials that they believed were coming. Trials should not have been a surprise to them, since when He was on earth Jesus warned His followers that they would suffer persecution (Matt 24:9, 21-22; Mark 13:9-13; John 15:18-21; 16:33). In this message Jesus again foresees that they will suffer and even specifies the exact manner in which they will suffer, imprisonment with afflictions (*thlipsin*) for a period of ten days.

There is very little negative written in this message about the church. The closest thing to a negative comment is that the church is fearful about its precarious situation. But it is hard to blame them for being fearful, when they were under pressure from Jews and pagans outside, in deep poverty, subjected to abusive speech, and sensing that they were about to be thrown in

prison for no just cause.

As we noticed in the notes to Revelation 1:1, Daniel is like a companion book to Revelation. So the interpreter of Revelation needs to consider all parallels to the book of Daniel carefully. There were ten days of trial in the first chapter of Daniel (1:12-15). Similarly, this verse tells us that the church at Smyrna would experience ten days of trial, but for them it would be a very sharp trial. So the two references to ten days may be connected. Another possibility is that “ten days” in the ancient Jewish context may simply express a relatively short period of time (see Gen 24:55; 1 Sam 25-38; Acts 25:6).

Historicist commentators, on the other hand, have tended to associate the ten days of trial mentioned here with the ten years persecution begun by the Roman Emperor Diocletian, and lasting from 303-313 AD. This may, in fact, be the purpose of this statement, but there is no actual indication in the text that such an application is intended. I suspect that normal numbers like “ten days” are less likely to trigger the “year-day principle” than truly strange numbers like 1260 days or 2300 evenings and mornings. See Rev 12:14 (Excursus on the Year-Day Principle).

The crown of life is mentioned also in James 1:12. A similar reward is described as a crown of righteousness (2 Tim 4:8) and a crown of glory (1 Pet 5:4). The Greek language of Revelation has two different words for crown, the royal crown (*diadêma*), and the victory garland (*stephanos*). See notes on Revelation 6:2 for more on these crowns. The crown here is the *stephanos* crown, a garland of leaves or flowers given to victorious athletes at the Olympic games. So this word is a natural one to describe the reward of the righteous at the return of Jesus. To receive the victory crown of life is to receive eternal life. This is a much better reward than the “perishable crown” of the Olympic games (see 1 Cor 9:24-27).

### **Rev 2:10-11–**

Jesus’ counsel to the church can be summarized in four statements:

1) “Do not be afraid.” In Greek the verb is a negative present imperative, which means to stop doing something you are currently and consistently doing. They are to stop being afraid, to stop worrying and to stop being fretful. This is the closest thing to a rebuke this particular church receives from Jesus. His exhortation could be paraphrased, “Don’t add to the stress from outside with the kind that comes from the inside.” Jesus is in control of the churches, He has already suffered and died, and He says, “Trust Me, you’re going to make it.”

2) “Be faithful unto death.” The Greek here (*ginou pistou*) could be translated “become faithful unto death.” Since this is a positive present imperative, the church has already been found faithful in an important sense, yet “faithful unto death” is only truly possible in the face of mortal threat. In the fullest sense Jesus invites them to live in such a way that when that mortal threat comes, their present faithfulness will continue in spite of that threat. Jesus indicates that their faithfulness will be tested in deeper ways in the future. It needs to be strong enough and consistent enough to weather the storm.

3) Listen to the spirit. Let the Holy Spirit calm your heart and take away your fear.

4) Keep your eye on the reward. What is the reward? A crown of life will be offered to

each one. There are powers on this earth that can take away your earthly life, but they cannot take away your eternal life. The crown of life lasts for an eternity. A second reward is the privilege of avoiding the second death. The second death is the total and permanent extinction of the wicked (Rev 20:6, 14, cf. Matt 10:28). The church at Smyrna seems to have been afraid of the first death, the one characterized in the Bible as a sleep (1 Thess 4:13; 1 Cor 15:51-53). The first death is actually more like a sleep, it is the second death that is the one to really fear. Death is a fearful thing that all of us worry about now and then, but the Holy Spirit (along with "perfect love" (1 John 4:17-18) has the power to cast out fear.

### **Rev 2:8-11 (Spiritual Lessons)–**

Let me offer a few spiritual applications drawn from the letter to the church of Smyrna. First of all, even in our most faithful moments we can all be like the church in Smyrna. In life, there are many things we don't know about, and people that we can't control who are in a position to hurt us. We are fearful of what other people might think and say about us and fearful of people who might oppose us. That was the condition of the church of Smyrna.

But there is good news from Scripture on this topic: Jesus says, "Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer" (Rev 2:10). "There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The man who fears is not made perfect in love. We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:18-19).

Those who fear God have placed themselves in God's control and are really not impressed with anybody else. They have learned to trust God in all circumstances because He knows all of our circumstances. He permits nothing that wouldn't be ultimately for our good or that we can't ultimately handle if we are in relationship with Him.

"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28).

"Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you a crown of life" (Revelation 2:10). In Gethsemane, Jesus wrestled over the control of His life. In spite of great pressure, He yielded His will to the Father and was enabled to endure to the end. There is no richer experience than to give your life over to God's control. It's the only way to live because it takes away stress and pressure. "Perfect love drives out fear. . ." (1 John 4:18).

A couple decades ago I was snorkeling near Heron Island in the Great Barrier Reef. I would rest from my snorkeling by just standing up occasionally and keeping my nose above the water. But at my most tired I discovered that the water was not 5 feet but 7 feet (more than two meters) deep and shore was 400 yards away. I thought I would find a coral rock to stand on but I could not find one. I realized that I did not have the strength to make it to the shore and I began to panic. I was convinced that it was the end of my life. Then a whole series of what seem like miracles took place: I did find a rock (18"x18") and was barely able to balance on it. Then my wife swam over and stood on the tips of her fins holding me up. People who know fins and diving say you can't do that. But she did, by God's grace. She assisted me until help came. When

I hit the shore I was rejoicing, for I realized that I shouldn't be alive and if I was, it was because God still had a purpose for me.

A few months later I was walking where tourists don't often go through a deserted section of the Muslim quarter of the old city of Jerusalem. Some of my students saw me walking alone and hid around a corner. When I came by they came roaring out and hollering like they were going to kill me. I didn't know who they were but nothing inside of me reacted to the situation. I was simply not afraid. The students were perplexed. But at that moment I realized that something had changed. The drowning incident a few months before had taken away all my fear. I realized at the deepest level of my being that if God is in full control of my life, I don't have to be afraid of death or anything else. I am alive for a purpose and I already am on borrowed time, so I really don't need to be afraid of anything anymore. That awareness has freed me to tackle challenges over the last decade I never would have tried before.

### **Rev 2:8-11 (Church History Reading)–**

Where does the church of Smyrna church fit into the larger picture of church history? History records that there was a tremendous time of persecution for the church from around 100-313 A.D. The beginning of that period is roughly the time when Revelation was written. That persecution climaxed in a period of about ten years severe persecution begun under the emperor Diocletian and pursued by his successors from 303-313 A.D. Constantine closed the era of persecution when he issued the Edict of Milan, granting Christians religious freedom. So the date of 313 is a major turning point in Christian history. Constantine himself was not yet a Christian in 313, but he had already decided that the unity of the Empire required an accommodation with the Christians and this was a turning point in Christian fortunes within the Empire.

The message to Smyrna fits well with the realities of persecution by the Empire in the second and third centuries of our era. This long period began with the separation of the church from Judaism, leaving it vulnerable to Roman persecution. It ended with Constantine and the Edict of Milan. These two centuries were a time of conflict with the Roman empire, the time when many Christians lost their lives in the arenas. Such was the condition of the early church, but Jesus said to them in anticipation, "Do not fear. Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life."

### **Rev 2:12-17 (Introduction)–**

Pergamum was the capital city of Roman Asia in John's day. It was located about 50 miles (80 kilometers) northeast of Smyrna (as the crow flies) and about 65 miles (105 kilometers) from there by road. In addition to its political importance, it was a major intellectual center, with a library that was second only to Alexandria's in the ancient world. The acropolis of the city is situated dramatically almost 1000 feet (300 meters) above the valley below, dropping precipitously on all but the southern side. So it was a natural fortress. The city was at the center of its own kingdom until 133 BC, when it was inherited by the Romans from its last king, Attalus

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Pergamum was also a major religious center with several temples. The most dramatic in ancient times was the Altar of Zeus, a major portion of which can be seen today in the Pergamum Museum in Berlin. It was shaped like a giant throne, some forty feet high. The most prominent temple at the current archaeological site is the Temple of Trajan, which stands at the top of the acropolis, overlooking the spectacular theater, which spills steeply down the west side of the acropolis. Pergamum was also the first city of Asia to support the imperial cult, with a temple dedicated to the Roman Emperor.

Nearby to the west in the valley below was a famous center of healing that included an ancient medical school. It too was a religious site, dedicated to the serpent-god of healing, medicine and physicians called *Asclepios* (Greek) or *Aesculapius* (Latin). The symbol of *Asclepios* (the snake-entwined staff) is still used by the medical profession today. The best known physician at the *Asclepios* was Galen (Second Century AD), who rivaled the much earlier Hippocrates as the most famous physician of the ancient world. Galen was certainly an accomplished medical researcher, doing dissections on monkeys and pigs. He provided written resources in the fields of anatomy, physiology, pathology, pharmacology and neurology. Medical students consulted his writings up to the Nineteenth Century. The healing strategies of Galen integrated religion with medical treatments, employing strategies like dream cures and early forms of psycho-somatic treatment.

The church at Pergamum has many parallels with both the church at Ephesus and the church at Sardis. The parallels with Ephesus are by way of contrast. The church at Ephesus was sound in doctrine and lacking in love. Pergamum, on the other hand, seems to have thought more of love than sound doctrine. Like Sardis, however, the church at Pergamum received mostly criticism from Jesus, but its decline was not nearly as severe. While the majority in Sardis seem to have lost their way, the majority in Pergamum were still faithful, although they were too tolerant of the Nicolaitan faction of the church.

The Nicolaitans were introduced in the message to the church at Ephesus. They come back into view in this message, but their role is elaborated in relation to the Old Testament character Balaam. While one could get the impression that the followers of “Balaam” in the church and the Nicolaitans were two different groups, the meaning of the two names suggests that they are the same group. They related to society differently than the majority of members in the church did. The teaching of Balaam and the Nicolaitans (Rev 2:14-16) involved two main features; eating food offered to idols and the practice of fornication. These features were very prominent in the century that followed, as they concerned the church’s relationship with the larger society and particularly the civil religion of the Empire.

### **Rev 2:12–**

On the phrase “angel of the church” see notes on Revelation 1:20. Traditional translations call the city Pergamos (like KJV), more modern ones call it Pergamum. Yet there is no difference in the Greek texts behind the KJV and the others. It has to do with word endings,

which are affected by the word's role in the sentence. "The church AT Pergamum (*en Pergamô*) is a dative (roughly an indirect object). What is unclear is whether the dictionary form for the city's name should be *Pergamos* or *Pergamon* (For Greek experts that is the difference between the first and third declensions). The Greek of Revelation 1:11 has *Pergamon* (as in *eis Pergamon*). In modern Turkish the city is called Bergama.

Jesus comes to the church at Pergamum as the one who has a sharp, double-edged sword coming out of His mouth (Rev 1:16). This church is sometimes called the compromising church. It is essentially faithful, but tolerates elements in the church that will ultimately lead it away from that faithfulness. So Jesus approaches this church with a sharp, double-edged sword. This recalls the words of Hebrews 4:12 (NIV): "For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." See also Ephesians 6:17, where the sword is the Word of God. The words for sword (Greek: *machaira*) in Hebrews and Ephesians, however, are different than the word used here (*romphaia*). For much more on the concept of sword, see notes on Revelation 1:16.

The Roman governors in any province had "the power of the sword" over the lives of their people. At the governor's command people could be put to death at any time. If that governor actually resided in Pergamum, it would make this reference even more powerful (see discussion below in Rev 2:13 (Excursus on Satan's Throne). But in any case, the church is here reminded that Jesus has the last word (John 16:33). Even the Emperor himself stands in a higher court, where Jesus presides. The judgments of Rome did not extend to the second death (Rev 20:14), so the members of the church were not to see those judgments as final.

In the context of compromise there is the deep need of discernment to recognize where one is standing. That discernment is grounded on the Word of God, the Scriptures, when it is read with the guidance that comes from the Holy Spirit (Rev 2:17). That the sword is two-edged here and in Hebrews 4:12 is appropriate to the Word of God, whose judgments can be both negative and positive. The words of Scripture cut and penetrate deeply when we are open to receive them (John 16:12). It is important to study many things in this life, but the Scriptures need to have the last word in our lives if we are to maintain our faithfulness to God.

### **Rev 2:13–**

Bible scholars have long wrestled with the meaning of "Satan's throne" in this passage. To what exactly in Pergamum was John referring? In general terms the "throne of Satan" would refer to Satan's counter-claim to the throne of God (Rev 4-5), a rebellious usurpation of God's authority that began before creation (13:8) and continued on earth after he was cast out of heaven (Rev 12:4). Satan's throne would represent the kingdom of Satan in opposition to the kingdom of God.

But while this general meaning is easy to detect, the location of Satan's throne in Pergamum suggests that Jesus/John had something more specific in mind than the general opposition to God that arose from the figure of Satan. Pergamum doesn't house "a" throne of

Satan, but “the” throne of Satan (*ho thronos tou Satana*). A precise location must have been in mind. The best summary of scholarly research on this can be found in Steven J. Friesen, “Satan’s Throne, Imperial Cults and the Social Settings of Revelation,” JSNTS 27.3 (2005): 351-73. I will summarize his work in an excursus with a few reflections of my own.

### **Rev 2:13 (Excursus on Satan’s Throne)–**

There are four popular candidates for Satan’s throne in Pergamum. The first of these is the mighty Altar of Zeus Soter. The ruins of the altar were first discovered in the 1870s and then moved to the Pergamon Museum in Berlin. It is a spectacular sight, covered with marble and sculpture and fronted by a wide staircase. In fact from the front it looks like a gigantic throne. So it is not surprising that it might be derogatorily called the “throne of Satan.”

According to Friesen, however, commentators quickly focused on this altar as the likely candidate for Satan’s throne primarily because in the Nineteenth Century it was one of the few monuments from Pergamum known to scholars, and it was on display in Berlin, where scholars could readily access the altar and its impressive artwork, depicting battles between the gods. Having seen the altar several times myself, this is an easy call to make, but Friesen thinks it is not the best candidate for Satan’s throne.

The second popular candidate for Satan’s throne is the ancient hospital called Asklepiion, mentioned earlier, since the symbol for Asklepios is a serpent wrapped around a pole. Elsewhere in Revelation, Satan is called a serpent (Rev 12:9; 20:2), so this connection might have made a lot of sense to the original audience. Friesen rejects the Asklepiion as Satan’s throne for two reasons: (1) Serpents were common symbols in a number of Roman cults (Dionysos, Demeter, Zeus, etc.) so the serpent in Revelation is not necessarily connected with Asklepios. (2) Recent scholarship has clarified that the temple/healing complex did not become important until the reign of Hadrian (117-138 AD), a few decades after the writing of Revelation, and even more so later in the second century. He concludes that the Asklepiion was probably not in John’s mind as he wrote this passage.

The third candidate for Satan’s throne is related to the assumption that Pergamum was the seat of power in the region, as it had been before Rome assumed rule over the province of Asia. The ancients clearly considered it “the most famous place in Asia.” (Pliny) There is a scholarly consensus that Pergamum was the capital city of the region when the Romans formed the province around 130 BC. It is also agreed that the capital was in Ephesus a few centuries later. But it is difficult to say just when that switch was made. While more scholars favor Ephesus over Pergamum as the capital in the time of John, it is possible that the switch to Ephesus only occurred during the reign of Hadrian (117-138 AD), several decades after Revelation was written. But though its civil pre-eminence at the time of John is uncertain, Pergamum clearly appears to be the chief city of Asia when it came to religion. Whether Satan’s throne was seen as a political or a religious matter, one could argue that Pergamum was at the center of Satan’s opposition to the churches.

The fourth candidate for Satan’s throne is the imperial cult, that is thought to have been

centered in the city of Pergamum. This theory was based on the presence of a temple dedicated to Augustus around 27 BC. Therefore, New Testament scholars over the last century have interpreted this temple to be the center of Asian imperial cults and the throne of Satan. One problem with this view, according to Friesen, is that the restored temple on the acropolis was first established during the reign of Trajan and not completed until Hadrian (both emperors after the time of Revelation). The actual location of the temple to Augustus and Rome has yet to be discovered. The second, and more important, problem is that Pergamum was not the center for the imperial cult in Asia. Many temple complexes throughout the province could offer worship to the emperor. In addition, two other imperial cult temples existed in the province. One was in Smyrna and the other was built in Ephesus by Domitian in the 80s. Friesen argues that it was during the time of John a network of imperial cults operated throughout Asia Minor. I would note, however, that the use of the imperial cult as a test of loyalty to the state is attested immediately after the time of Revelation (see the letter of Governor Pliny to Emperor Trajan about ten years later: *Pliny's Letters 10.96.1-8*), so this position cannot be totally ruled out.

Having rejected all four popular candidates for Satan's throne in Pergamum, Friesen offers a fifth option. He contends that the persecution in Pergamum must have been more severe than in the other churches because it resulted in Antipas' execution. He, therefore, suggests that Satan's throne is merely a reference to the "local hostility toward the Pergamene assembly." John is placing the Pergamene setting of persecution in a larger framework of Satan's activity throughout the Empire. But since Revelation refers to many slain "souls under the altar" (Rev 6:9-11), it is probably a stretch to suggest that mention of the death of Antipas was intended to indicate that the persecution was more severe there than anywhere else.

So which of the five options is it? I have to leave you with the unsatisfying conclusion that I don't know. There is not enough data to be sure. In spite of Friesen's opposition, it seems to me that the imperial cult option remains the most accepted among scholars of this text and its ancient setting. I would agree with this were Revelation written a few decades later. At that time the imperial cult was clearly at the center of the state's opposition to the Christian faith. But the first century setting is less certain. I can't entirely shake the impression that the Zeus Altar would be the natural counterpart of "Satan's throne." It was in a spectacular location at the south side of the Acropolis of Pergamum, where most of the residents of the city below would see it every day. Not only so, it was in fact shaped like a gigantic throne. So if John had a specific visual location in mind, the Altar of Zeus Soter is the best option. But I suggest this tentatively, no one can guarantee with certainty exactly what John had in mind when he wrote this.

### **Rev 2:13—**

Jesus, then, begins His analysis of the church at Pergamum with a comment about Satan's throne. The members of the church live in a dangerous place. If the throne of Satan is there, they are exposed to Satanic power and influence in a way none of the other churches are. It is as if Satan himself had chosen Pergamum as his dwelling place. Pergamum was a major

center of pagan worship and pagan lifestyle, it was the spiritual center of the region.

I can verify this from personal experience. When you visit the ancient ruins of Pergamum you will see a number of major temples there. Even in their ruined state they are tremendous to behold and it would have made the pagan religions very attractive to anyone living there. It was certainly a dangerous place for Christians to live, especially in the spiritual sense. There was also the spectacular theater, which Christians would be reluctant to visit, separating them from the social life of the city. Jesus knows all the temptations they are exposed to and all the allurements that surround them in that pagan city.

In spite of the challenges in Pergamum, the church is “holding fast” (*krateis*) to Jesus’ name. To hold fast here is to seize the whole of whatever Jesus’ name means rather than just a part. To hold fast the name of Jesus is also the opposite of denying (*êrnêsô*) His name (see Rev 3:8). In the Hebrew background of Christian faith, a name is representative of a person’s character. The name “Jesus” is a Greek equivalent of Yehoshua (Joshua), which means “Yahweh is Saviour.” Just as Jesus lived each day by trusting in His Father (Heb 5:7; John 5:19, 30; 8:28-29; 15:10), so also those who remain true to the name of Jesus are looking to God for their salvation rather than their own efforts, which would inevitably fail.

To hold fast to the name of Jesus probably had a very practical application in Pergamum also. They were not ashamed to use the name of Jesus even though it got them in trouble or irritated their neighbors. Even though they were a minority in the city, they confessed the name of Jesus publically with great courage. “Not renouncing their faith” in Jesus seems to be another way of honoring His name. They did not renounce their faith either in word or in deed. They wore their faith in everyday practice, where it could be seen and heard by all.

The name Antipas, as written, means “against everyone” (*Anti-pas*— it could also be a shortened form of the Hellenistic name Antipater, as in “Herod Antipas,” the one who beheaded John the Baptist). This has led some interpreters to suggest that Antipas was not a specific individual in the church. In this line of thinking, John would have been using the name in a symbolic way to express the condition of the church members in Pergamene society. They were thought to be “against everyone.” In Roman society everyone was free to worship any god they wished, as long as they also gave obeisance to the Roman state in the person of the Emperor. By refusing to participate in the civil ceremonies, Christians were thought to be hostile to the state and enemies of their neighbors. At a later time they were even accused of being “atheists” because they denied the legitimacy of the other gods.

The language of this verse is so specific, however, that it is likely Antipas (probably a short form of Antipater) was an actual individual in Pergamum. He is called “my faithful martyr” (genitive of apposition) and then the text goes on to say “who was put to death in your city— where Satan lives” (NIV). “In your city” (*par’ humin*) is an interpretation, the Greek text simply says “among you.” So whatever larger meaning this text is intended to have, it seems to be based on a recent event that the original readers of this letter would have known about and recognized. Of the martyr Antipas nothing historical is known. Later martyrologies suggest that he was the bishop of Antioch and was put to death in a glowing bronze ox, but this was probably

a later speculation rather than grounded in the actual event.

The members of the church at Pergamum had staying power and courage. Jesus says that they live in a dangerous place, made manifest by the martyrdom of Antipas. But now that we have explored Satan's throne and the death of Antipas, it would be helpful to come back to the opening phrase of this verse: "I know where you live" (NIV). The Greek word for "live" is *katoikeis*, which implies much more than just to live in a place. It means to reside or "settle down." They are not just passing through, they have determined to settle down and reside permanently in Pergamum. Although they are surrounded by oppressive evil, they are not trying to escape. They are strong, courageous, and willing to stay it out, even in the face of persecution and the threat of death. And they are assured that Jesus understands all the temptations to which they are exposed in that place.

### **Rev 2:14-15–**

Up until now Jesus' analysis of the church is fairly positive. The members of the church at Pergamum could have found an easier life somewhere else. They chose instead to settle down in the face of both spiritual and physical dangers. But the analysis is not all pleasant. Jesus has a few things against them. They have among them a minority who hold to (*kratountas*) the teaching of Balaam. In other words, they are as serious about the teaching of Balaam as the majority in the church holds fast (*krateis* in verse 13) to the name of Jesus. Jesus here is speaking to the faithful majority rather than the unfaithful minority. The problem is that they have become tolerant of false teaching and behavior and Jesus is clear that such tolerance calls for repentance (see verse 16). On the relationship of Balaam and the Nicolaitans, please see the comments on Revelation 2:6 and the lengthy excursus on Christians in Roman Asia.

There is an interesting parallel between the name Balaam in Revelation 2:14 and the name Nicolaitans repeated in verse 15. In Hebrew the name Balaam is a compound of "*am*" (people) and *bala* (to swallow or destroy). So the meaning of Balaam is "the one who destroys (or swallows up) the people." Nicolaitan, on the other hand, means "the one who conquers the people" in the Greek language. So these two names are a hendyadis; though the words are very different, they mean roughly the same thing in different languages. One can find a similar example in the nicknames of Peter. Peter is based on the Greek word (*petros*) for stone, while Cephas is based on the Aramaic word (*cephas*) for stone (John 1:42). This leads many interpreters to conclude that "Balaam" is a derogatory reference to the same group that was earlier called the Nicolaitans.

In this text we have one of the clearest allusions to the Old Testament in the entire book of Revelation. It harks back to the story of Balaam who coached Balak, king of Moab, to entice the Israelites to sin. In this verse the sin is described as eating food sacrificed to idols and committing sexual immorality. To understand the point of the allusion, it will be helpful to review that Old Testament narrative briefly.

Balaam was a true prophet of God (apparently– Num 22:8-13) who lived in Mesopotamia, modern day Iraq, the place from which Abraham and the wives of Isaac and Jacob

had come). When the king of Moab (a small nation near the Israelite entry point into Canaan) saw the Israelites coming he realized that he couldn't fight them militarily (Num 22:2-4). He thought that if a true prophet of Israel's God would come and curse them, perhaps their God would forsake them and he could conquer them in battle.

Evidently, Balaam's fame as a prophet had spread from Mesopotamia all the way to Canaan. So Balak sends messengers to Balaam asking him to come and curse Israel so that he can conquer them. And he was ready to pay well for this service (Num 22:7). It appears that Balaam had a problem with financial greed. When God's initial response is not to let him go to Moab (22:8-13), Balak enhances the incentives (22:16-17). Knowing that his power to bless or curse is solely at the discretion of Yahweh (22:18), Balaam nevertheless asks for time to see if Yahweh may grant his desire (22:19). Yahweh allows him to go with Balak's men, but reminds him who is really in control of his prophetic gift (22:20). He does not want Balaam to go (22:22), but allows him the freedom to choose (sort of a reverse Jonah story).

Then follows the classic children's story of the talking donkey. As Balaam is traveling toward Moab (Num 22:21), God sends "the angel of the Lord" to stand in the road and block his way (22:22), but only the donkey sees the angel. When the donkey acts to avoid the angel, he beats it unmercifully three times (22:23-27). The donkey then talked back by the power of God (22:28-30) until Balaam himself could see the angel (22:31-33). The angel makes clear that Balaam is resisting the will of God in traveling to Moab. Although at this point he is willing to go back (22:34), God allows him to go anyway, but only to give the message that God will give to him (22:35-36).

In Numbers 23 Balaam three times uses sacrifices and divination (according to 24:1) to get Yahweh to allow him to curse Israel, but Yahweh refuses. Then in chapter 24 the spirit of God comes upon him and he blesses Israel instead of cursing them (Num 24:1-9). The king is angry and withholds the reward he had promised (24:10-14). Balaam delivers a final prophecy to Balak (24:15-24) about the future of Moab, Edom, Amalek and other countries/tribes. Then Balaam and Balak returned to their homes (24:25). And that seems at first glance to be where the story ends. But it does not.

The next event in Israel's desert sojourn was when some Moabite women enticed Israelite men through sexuality to join them in the worship of the gods of Moab at Baal-Peor (Num 25:1-3). After Yahweh orders the execution of those Israelites who had engaged in this activity, one of them brought a Midianite princess into his tent at the very time the rest of Israel was repenting at the Tabernacle (25:4-6). After this specific incident was dealt with (25:7-15), Yahweh orders the destruction of the Midianites, "because they deceived you in the affair of Peor" (25:18). There is no mention of Balaam in this chapter, but he seems to have, nevertheless, played a role, as we will see. An early Jewish expansion on Numbers 24:14 implies Balaam advised Balak to set up inns near the Israelites that offered food and drink at a low price and when the men were drunk, they could be sexually enticed into idolatrous rituals.

At this point the Old Testament narrative (of Balaam, Numbers 22-25) apparently digresses (chapters 26-30) with a description of a census, the complaint of the daughters of

Zelophehad, the appointment of Joshua, a variety of instructions related to the Tabernacle, and laws concerning vows. It is only in chapter 31 that the narrative picks up where chapter 25 left off. Here we learn that one of the casualties of the attack on the Midianites was Balaam the son of Beor, the prophet Moab had brought to the region (Num 31:8). Evidently, when Numbers 24:25 says that Balaam returned to his home after blessing Israel, it did not mean he went all the way back to Mesopotamia. Instead he appears to have stayed in the area and been part of the sexual enticement described in chapter 25 (see 31:16). Perhaps he thought that if he could get Israel to sin in a high-handed way (as in Numbers 25:6), God would allow him to curse Israel and he could get his reward from Balak. In this fiendish scheme, he used the fascination of pagan feasts and sexual immorality, attracting a number of Israelites to sin through food sacrificed to idols, great feasting, and the resulting sexual immorality. The Israelites were led astray and a great plague destroyed many of them.

The point of this study in the Old Testament is that Revelation 2:14-15 connects Balaam with immorality and eating food offered to idols. Both of these actions took place in the Old Testament context, but are not directly connected with Balaam there (Num 25:1-3). It is only in Numbers 31:8 that we find out that Balaam had not gone back to Mesopotamia, but had remained in the area and was killed in the battle between Israel and the Midianites. Then in Numbers 31:16 we learn that Balaam was the one who advised the Midianite women to entice Israel to rebel against God at Baal Peor. So the allusion to Balaam and Balak in Revelation 2:14-15 follows the general pattern of how the New Testament uses the Old. Rather than quoting proof texts, allusions to the Old Testament are used as pointers to the larger context. It is only as we keep the larger context in mind that we can fully understand the power of the allusion. Our text does add one further detail to the story. It says that Balaam *taught* Balak how to entice the “sons of Israel” into sin and thus bringing God’s curse upon themselves. Balaam may not have taught the Moabite women directly but through their king, Balak. He may have been more directly involved with the women of the Midianites. So the letter to Pergamum clarifies details that are not explicit in the Old Testament Balaam story.

There is one other significant reference in Revelation to Balaam and the Moabites, although this one is far less explicit. The story of God’s last day people from Rev 14:4 to 15:4 includes verbal, thematic and structural parallels to Numbers 25:1-18 (outlined in the recent dissertation on the image of the beast by Rebekah Liu). Words related to “women,” “worship,” the wrath of God, and “anger” occur in both passages. Both passages involve references to false worship. Both passages include cultic meals (idol feast in Numbers 25:2 and the wine of Babylon— Rev 14:8). Both passages involve the last crisis of worship before entering the “promised land.” Both involve a false prophet (Balaam in OT, land beast in Rev). And the strategy of the false prophets in both cases involves deception (Num 25:18; Rev 13:14). Not being defiled by women (Rev 14:4) is part of the victory over the beast and its image (Rev 15:2). Although the connection is more subtle in the latter part of Revelation, one can make the case that the Balaam incident is an important back story for the visions of Revelation. Themes of eating and drinking, idolatry, seduction, deception and worship are woven into the outline of final events.

Without the explicit reference in Revelation 2:14-15, the reference to Balaam in Revelation 14 and 15 would be too subtle. But knowing that Balaam is part of the back story of Revelation helps connect the dots in the later narrative.

A faction of the church at Pergamum, then, taught and practiced something similar to what Balaam taught to Balak. The problem here is not so much the existence of Balaamites or Nicolaitans, but the fact that the faithful church was tolerating these ideas and practices. Perhaps the Pergamenes were tolerant of the Balaamites and the Nicolaitans because they believed Paul's teachings "to be all things to everyone" and that "an idol is nothing" (1 Corinthians 8— see also Rev 2:6 [Excursus on Christians in Roman Asia]). No doubt they were thinking how it was important to be involved in the civil religion of the empire—to help society have rain, crops, etc., by participating a little bit in food offered to idols and sexual immorality. So, the Pergamenes were schooled in compromise by the opponents of John's strict teaching and said, "A little compromise is a healthy thing." According to this letter, Jesus would have none of it.

#### **Rev 2:16—**

Jesus' rebuke to the church at Pergamum is short but pointed. "Therefore, repent!" The aorist indicative form of "repent" means to start doing something they are not presently doing (because they think their course is right). It is a decisive act of turning around in the matter of compromise and thus returning to the direction of faithfulness. Regarding summons to repent, see the notes on Revelation 2:5. If they do not turn around in this manner, He will come and fight against them with the sword of his mouth. The whole body is called to repent, since the faithful ones are guilty of tolerating the very ideology that the Ephesians are commended for refusing to tolerate (Rev 2:6).

The sharp, two-edged sword is not literal but represents God's word (see comments on Rev 2:12). It is clear from this verse that the sword represents judgment, in this case a negative judgment. God's judgments in the Bible are always two-fold, offering salvation to those who trust Him and leaving others to reap the consequences of their own rebellious choices. A good example of such two-fold judgment is the Flood story in Genesis, which contains both salvation and destruction.

If the church at Pergamum continues in this overly tolerant stance, the consequences will be severe (the reference to the sword is perhaps another allusion to the Balaam story— see Num 22:23, 31; 31:8). It is not completely clear if the "them" in this verse is limited to the Balaamites and Nicolaitans or if the judgment is on the whole church, on some for the doctrines and practices they promote and on others for their tolerance of those doctrines and practices. But since the whole church is addressed with "repent," I suspect that the "them" includes all who do not repent, both unfaithful and faithful. In that case it would be parallel to the passage in Revelation 18:4, where the faithful who refuse to distance themselves from Babylon share her fate. Although most translations use the future "I will come to you," in the Greek it is actually a present tense (*erchomai*), which in combination with "quickly" (*tachu*) implies that Jesus is

already on His way to judge the church. So the call to repentance is urgent. Regarding the entire Greek expression (*erchomai tachu*– I am coming soon or quickly) see comments on Rev 3:11.

The judgment that Jesus threatens in this verse is carried out later in the book. The language of “make war” (*polemêsô*) is found four other times in Revelation. In 12:7 Michael and his angels make war against the dragon and his angels. In Revelation 13:4 the followers of the beast challenge “who can make war against the beast?” This claim is startling in light of 12:7. In 17:14 the ten horns and the beast make war against the Lamb. This attack is pictured in more detail in 19:11-19, where the beast and the kings of the earth make war against the Lamb and his army. This pattern of language shows that the final war of Revelation 19 is forecast in the message to Pergamum of this verse.

The portrayal of the divine warrior in Revelation 19 also recalls the language of this verse. In 19:12 the lamb has a sharp two-edged sword coming out of his mouth to strike the nations. He also has a name written on him that is not known to anyone but himself. To the original audience, the war of Revelation 19 is the fulfillment of Jesus’ promised judgment against the unrepentant members of Pergamum, the followers of Balaam and the Nicolaitans. The letters to the seven churches provide the prophetic setting to the rest of the book of Revelation.

#### **Rev 2:17–**

Once again the church is invited to listen to the Spirit. This is counsel that all the churches receive. Their repentance is encouraged by keeping their eye on the reward to those who overcome. The one who overcomes will receive divine food. God will nourish them with manna—essential physical food in the desert, but here a symbol of spiritual food for Christians in fellowship with God. When ancient Israel journeyed away from all sources of food in the desert, God sent them bread from heaven (Exodus 16:1-36). It would fall like snow and they would collect it each morning except on the Sabbath (on Friday a double portion fell and it remained fresh throughout the Sabbath day). The manna started to fall on the fifteenth day of the second month (Exod 16:1– seen by the Jews as an alternate Passover date). As Israel arrived in Palestine and reaped the crops from Canaan, they no longer needed the manna, so it stopped falling on another Passover (Josh 5:10-12), 40 years later (Exod 16:35).

The fact that the manna in this text is “hidden” takes on additional meaning if John was familiar with what the author of Hebrews had to say about the manna (Heb 9:4). There it tells us that in the time of the tabernacle, the Ark of the Covenant contained the ten commandments, Aaron’s rod that budded (see also Numbers 17:1-11), and a golden urn containing a sample of the manna, probably as a reminder of God’s faithful provision to His people in the time of their greatest need. This pot of manna was “hidden” inside the Ark.

The text in Hebrews seems an expansion of Exodus 16:33-35, where Aaron placed an omer (about two liters) of manna “before the Lord” (Exod 16:33) or “before the Testimony” (Exod 16:34). Since this event was before the production of either the Ten Commandments or the Ark, the command of Exodus 16 may only have been implemented after the Tabernacle was built and inaugurated (Exodus 25-40). The point in this verse is that overcomers in Pergamum

would receive spiritual sustenance as needed straight from the throne of God (symbolized by the Ark).

According to Exodus 16:14, the manna was flaky in shape. According to Exodus 16:31 it was white in color and like a coriander seed. The Greek translation supports the coriander reference (koriou). Coriander leaves are what the Mexicans call cilantro. The coriander seed is actually round and brown, but that is irrelevant to the color and texture since the coriander reference is a figure of speech, being clearly introduced with "like" or "as" in both the Greek and the Hebrew of Exodus 16:31. Whatever the manna was, it was white and flaky, with some resemblance to a coriander seed, but with a flavor like wafers made with honey.

There was a tradition in first century Judaism that when the Messiah would come, the manna would begin to fall again. It would be one of the signs of Messiah's coming. When Jesus fed the five-thousand people, He "multiplied" the bread and many people saw in that miracle the sign that He was the Messiah. That is the reason the crowd challenged Him in John 6 to produce manna: "Moses brought bread from heaven. If You are the Messiah, why don't you do the same" (John 6:26-33)? They wanted Him to be the Messiah on their terms, but He refused to give in to their demands, even though He could have done so. It would have meant becoming the kind of Messiah they expected, rather than the Messiah His Father had sent Him to be (John 6:38-40).

Jesus promised the fulfillment of this Jewish tradition, but on His own terms. In contrast to the idol food that some in the church participated in, they would receive the very kind of food that they needed, the food that leads to eternal life. You don't need food offered to idols, you need the spiritual food that actually comes from heaven.

The second part of the reward was a white stone, which represented the favor of God. In the ancient court system, a judge might set out a white stone for acquittal or a black stone for condemnation instead of reading out a sentence. The defendant would know the judgment immediately, even before anything was said. Jesus is telling the church at Pergamum that in the heavenly judgment court, those who overcome will be acquitted and given a white stone. That stone is like the passport to eternal life. But of superlative importance for the readers of Revelation, this verse indicates that one can have the assurance now that one will be acquitted then. And that assurance makes all the difference in a broken world.

Finally, Jesus offers the overcomers of Pergamum a new name. In Hebrew thought, a name represents a person's identity and character, it was not just a designation of who the person was. In a number of Old Testament stories, God changed the name of the central character when he entered into an enhanced relationship with Him. A new identity and character called for a new name. Abram became Abraham when God ratified a new covenant with him (Gen 17:1-8). Jacob became Israel when he wrestled with the angel and prevailed (Gen 32:22-28). Simon became Cephas (Peter) when he decided to follow Jesus (John 1:40-42). In Revelation 14 the remnant of Mount Zion (Joel 2:32) is now called the 144,000. A new identity and character called for a new name (see also Isaiah 62:2 and 65:15). See comments on Revelation 14:1.

If the Pergamenes would overcome, they would receive a new name that no one would know. That no one knows the name except the person receiving it seems related to the hidden manna. Just as no one outside the High Priest could see the hidden manna, the full character implications of overcoming would be known only to the one who overcomes. Perhaps their lack of knowledge about the new name means that others will have no power over a person renewed in the image of Christ. When others have no sense of your true character they have no control over you. This thought is undergirded by John 3:8, where the born again person who is filled with the Spirit is like the wind. No one knows where they are coming from or where they are going. The truly transformed are rather unpredictable in worldly terms. This hidden identity might spare the believers in Pergamum from some of the threats they faced in the dangerous place that they lived.

### **Rev 2:12-17 (Spiritual Lessons)–**

How should we apply the message to the church in Pergamum to our lives today? I'd like to suggest four things that jump out at me as I consider this "letter."

First, compromise never occurs quickly. The church at Pergamum is drifting toward compromise, not rushing in or even being aware that they are falling into compromise. It reminds me of the concept of secular drift that I've written about in my book *Present Truth in the Real World*--that people don't just get up one morning and decide to give up their relationship with God and become secular. When genuine Christians become secular, they gradually drift into it. Perhaps they are not studying the Word or wrestling in private prayer as much as they used to. Perhaps they are not reading godly books the way they used to. Or perhaps they stopped attending church as often as they used to. The drift into secularism is a gradual one, it almost never occurs quickly.

Second, there is a natural tendency to lower the original standard. People don't naturally drift upstream--the natural drift in a church is downstream to a lower standard and a lesser firmness in doctrine. Unless there are people who are willing to swim against the tide through vigorous application of Scripture, a church will inevitably move to lower standards.

Perhaps this is a clue to the original fall of Lucifer. He was perfect in every way and a huge asset to the universe. But at some point he stopped swimming against the tide of entropy, the natural tendency of everything in the universe to degenerate, unless carefully tended and sustained by intelligent oversight. When God gave Lucifer freedom, He also gave him the freedom to tend his "garden" or not to as he chose. Over time pride and a focus on self produced a drift that led to sin and eventually to rebellion.

True compromise is rarely offensive. Compromise makes nearly everybody happy, is usually popular, and does not offend people. But can lead one away from God. There is a difference between conciliation and compromise. Conciliation attempts to make peace between people seeking to be faithful to God. The word "compromise," as used here, has the additional implication that what results is not spiritually healthy.

Detecting compromise is no exact science. I remember a search committee for a high

administrative office in an academic entity. One particular candidate rose quickly to the top. Everybody on the committee liked him. Not only that, the more references that came in the more that candidate shone brightly. It seemed that everybody loved him. There were no dark marks on his record. Then a colleague of mine said, "This worries me. If everybody likes this guy there must be something wrong with him." My colleague had a radar finely tuned to compromise. In this case, as he himself later admitted, too finely tuned. The hiree turned out to be everything people had said about him. But it is wise to be vigilant. Compromise, when it comes, will not normally appear evil or perverse. It will likely make a lot of sense. The drift into compromise certainly made sense to Lucifer in the beginning. If compromise did not make sense, no one would drift into it.

What is the remedy for a compromising spirit? What is the remedy for secular drift? The remedy of the letter to Pergamum is found in one word, "Repent!" The remedy for compromise begins with a firm decision. Make a total turn in your life by renewing the practices of prayer, study, and action. Do the right thing even if you don't feel like doing the right thing. It is not enough to simply drift along and do what feels good or what comes naturally. Be intentional in what you do. Make sure you have time for prayer and study and make time in your life for action--doing the things God would have you to do. For example, one of the reasons God wants us to witness is that witness strengthens the faith of the one who witnesses. If you talk faith, you will have more faith. See Ellen White, *Ministry of Healing*, pages 250-253. A major reason for the spiritual decline of so many churches today is a lack of focus on the ultimate mission and purpose of church, which is to focus every encounter of one's life on the goal of leading every person we know to a deeper relationship with God than they know now. And we will discover that that mission is a two-way street. Each of these spiritual encounters involves the Holy Spirit, and two people are listening to the Spirit, the one being witnessed to but also the one doing the witnessing. Mission has a powerful impact on the one doing the mission.

The concepts of compromise and secular drift need to be balanced with the awareness that spiritual growth passes through stages of faith. A rigid, uncompromising spirit can seem very faithful in its adherence to tradition and a strict, rule-based approach to every detail of life. Such rule-based "faithfulness" majors in criticism of all who do not toe the line and come up to every detail of expectation. But true spiritual development moves from the head to the heart and prizes love and relationship above slavish obedience to the rules. We become friends of God rather than servants or slaves. Genuine spiritual life is a balance between consistency, on the one hand, and openness to the freedom that comes in the Spirit (John 3:8) on the other. To put it in other words, the anti-compromise message of Pergamum needs to be balanced with the pro-love message of Ephesus. The message to each church is valid and important, but read out of balance with the whole can lead to extremes.

### **Rev 2:12-17 (Church History Reading)–**

The situation of the church at Pergamum seems to fit in very well the period after the

conversion of Constantine to Christianity around 313 AD. During this third period of Christian history (313-538 A.D.), the church was wrestling with the temptation to compromise because the pressure from the outside is no longer there. The church was no longer the enemy of the state and life was improving for Christians all over the Empire. They no longer had to fear persecution.

A further aspect of this period was the sincere desire to convert the millions of pagans who remained. If the gospel could be framed in a way that made sense to them, that connected with their culture and world view, they would be more likely to accept Jesus. There is some evidence that holidays like Christmas and Easter were connected to corresponding festivals of the birth and death of the gods in the pagan context.

Before long Christianity became the state religion. Though many Christians remained faithful to Christ and the Scriptures, many others relaxed their vigilance and went along with the culture even where it contradicted the Bible. One could say that this was a period of spiritual decline, inappropriate tolerance and even apostasy. The majority were still faithful but it was a situation of decline, as expressed in the message to Pergamum.

### **Rev 2:18-29 (Introduction)–**

The city of Thyatira was located about sixty kilometers (nearly forty miles) southeast of ancient Pergamum, about halfway on the road between Pergamum and Sardis, which were much more important cities. It was founded by Alexander the Great as a Macedonian city after his defeat of the Persian Empire. The city was noted in the ancient world for its trade guilds (bakers, tanners, weavers and those who dyed cloth), particularly trades related to the dyeing of fabrics. In the book of Acts (16:12-14) we meet a citizen of Thyatira during Paul's visit to Philippi; Lydia, the seller of purple. She was likely visiting Philippi because of trade relations between Asia and Macedonia. It is possible that she was the founder of the church at Thyatira, bringing the gospel back to her home city.

Thyatira was the smallest and least important of the seven cities anciently, with no great religious or political significance. Unlike Ephesus, Sardis and Laodicea, it has continued throughout the centuries at the very same site. Ephesus and Sardis went into decline and ruin and new settlements were built a short distance away. Laodicea was massive in the early centuries of Christian history, but is in the middle of "nowhere" today. In the case of Thyatira, on the other hand, the ancient and modern cities are in exactly the same place. There is very little to see, therefore, of ancient Thyatira, most of which is underneath the very center of the modern city.

The letter to Thyatira is the midpoint of the seven churches. The fact that it is almost twice as long (12 verses instead of 5-9) as the average of the other six messages supports the idea of a chiasm among the seven letters. As the mid-point of the chiasm, it is possible that early readers would have considered this message the most important. The church at Thyatira did not face the same spiritual dangers as Pergamum. There were no splendid, attractive pagan temples there. There were no major governmental entities to apply the pressures of persecution. There

is also no mention of Jewish opponents. So life in Thyatira was not as hard for Christians as it was in Pergamum.

Although governmental persecution does not seem to have been a problem in Thyatira, there were considerable social pressures in relation to the trade guilds. If one was not part of a trade guild it would be very difficult to “buy or sell.” So Christians had to wrestle with the degree to which one could be involved in the trade guilds without compromising the faith. Guild members would probably be required to attend festivals in the pagan temples and eat common meals which would include food offered to idols. Such festivals also led to drunkenness and immorality. To avoid the trade guilds would be to experience social isolation and economic deprivation. These challenges seem to have resulted in divisions among the members of the church. According to this letter, Thyatira was a divided church, but one whose latter works were better than the former. So while there were internal challenges in the church, things were looking up at the time John wrote Revelation.

### **Rev 2:18–**

Jesus comes to the church at Thyatira with eyes like blazing fire and feet like burnished bronze. Both characteristics are drawn from the vision of Jesus in 1:12-16 (specifically verses 14 and 15). Eyes like a flame of fire (*phloga puros*) may recall the divinity of Daniel 7:9-12 and 10:5-6, the omniscient discernment of Hebrews 4:12-13, and the judgment anger of Revelation 19:11-12 (see also 2 Thess 1:8). See comments on Revelation 1:14. Blazing eyes light up the deeds that are done in the dark (see John 3:20).

Jesus comes to the church with penetrating scrutiny and the urgency of divine judgment. Nothing can be concealed from Him (John 2:25). But this deep discernment is positive as well as potentially negative. Whatever negative judgments come from Him, they are grounded in full knowledge of the situation in Thyatira. And if He already knows everything that is wrong with the church, there is no reason not to confess these sins to Him, He already knows them anyway! This theme is taken up in verse 23, where Jesus is portrayed as the one who “searches minds and hearts.”

The feet like burnished bronze also recalls the divine figure of Daniel 10:5-6. But the unique way John expresses this idea in Revelation recalls the bronze incense holder (censer) of the Hebrew tabernacle. This was frequently used as an instrument of intercession and mercy (see especially Numbers 16:37-48, see also the comments on Revelation 1:15). So while the eyes like blazing fire may seem threatening, the feet like burnished bronze herald the arrival of intercession and mercy. The appearance of Jesus to the church at Thyatira is a balance between mercy and negative judgment. Likewise, the message to Thyatira contains both encouragement and warning.

Some commentators also note that burnished bronze is very strong. Having very strong feet might be useful in shattering to pieces the “pottery” that represents opposition to His authority on earth (verse 27).

## Rev 2:19–

Because of His penetrating scrutiny, Jesus knows their works, both positive and negative. This verse focuses on the positive. Like a good pastor, Jesus offers praise before he speaks a word of blame. And there is much to praise about this church.

Right after the word “works” is a Greek “and” (*kai*). But this word can be translated in three ways, depending on the context. It can be a simple connective (“and”), it can imply something in addition (“also”), or it can signal that what follows is intimately connected to the point of being virtually the same (“namely”). The *kai* here is of the third kind (sometimes called “epexegetical”). When Jesus says “I know your works,” he then subordinates four following qualities to the word “works” (*ta erga*). Thyatira is active in love (*agapên*) and faith (*pistin*), in service (*diakonian*), and in patient endurance (*hupomonên*).

Love and faith are often paired together in the New Testament (Gal 5:6; Eph 1:15; 3:17; 6:23; Col 1:4; 1 Thess 3:6; 5:8; 1 Tim 1:14; 2 Tim 1:13; Phil 1:5). That means that the *kai* (Greek “and”) after the word “faith” is probably also epexegetical (best translated “namely”). If so, these four qualities are intended to be seen as two pairs, first love and faith, then service and patience, which define love and faith in everyday practice. The inner qualities of love and faith are demonstrated in the outward qualities of service and patience. Stefanovic cross-pairs them even further by suggesting that the outcome of love is service and the outcome of faith is patient endurance. Be that as it may, the natural fruits of love and faith are ministry to those in need and patient endurance in trial. Those who wish to grow in service and patient endurance would be wise to focus on love and faith, which are the root of all good works.

The word “love” here (*agapên*) probably reflects both love to God and love to others. The love believers receive from God and have toward God is expressed in trust (faith), service, and patient endurance. The core meaning of the word “faith” (*pistin*) is trust. It is more than just believing that some idea is true, it is a whole-person trust in God for both salvation and strength. Love and faith are gifts from God, but they can be exercised in practical ways in the real world. Without such exercise, there is reason to question whether the love and faith are truly real.

These four characteristics, particularly the latter one (patient endurance), are the qualities characteristic of God’s true people at the end of time (Rev 14:12). This church is busy with the very things that the church was designed to do and that the last day church will be found to be doing. And not only so, Jesus makes the interesting observation that its “latter” or “last” (*ta eschata*) works are better than the “first” (*prôtôn*) works.” In other words, while there are serious challenges in this church, it has recently been improving. The Christian life is to be a life of continual progress, continuing growth and development (1 Thess 4:1).

The experience of Thyatira is in contrast with that of the church at Ephesus, which started out strong, but more lately had been leaving its first love, the foundation quality of the four mentioned in this verse. Thyatira’s improvement is also in contrast with Matthew 12:45, where the condition of someone who goes back into sin is worse than it was before conversion (see also 2 Peter 2:20). The concept of “greater” or “better” (*pleiona*) works probably focuses on quality more than quantity (see also John 7:31 and Hebrews 11:4).

## Rev 2:20–

With this verse the message to Thyatira moves from the positive to the negative (“I have this against you”). The major problem in Thyatira was the conscious toleration of leadership that was morally wrong or even evil. By way of contrast, Pergamum was more at the beginning stages of such toleration.

In the original language, the word translated “tolerate” in most translations is actually closer to “permit” (*apheis*). In fact, this is a strong word that frequently expresses pardon or forgiveness in the New Testament. For example, this same Greek word is used to tell the story of the king who forgives (Matt 18:27– *aphêken*) his servant the 10,000 talents that he owes, but then is shocked that the servant doesn’t likewise forgive (Matt 18:32– *aphêka*) his fellow servant a much smaller debt. The same word root is used five times in the Lord’s prayer and the explanation that follows it (Matt 6:12-15, see also Rom 4:7 and 1 John 1:9; 2:12). While the same word can be used for divorce (1 Cor 7:11-16), that is clearly not the meaning here. In this case the King James Version comes closest to the original meaning in its use of “sufferest” (to put up with), but the language is archaic.

By His choice of a strong word for permission or forgiveness here, Jesus is concerned that the faithful people in the church are giving out the message to “Jezebel” that “what you're doing is OK.” They were conscious of leadership's behavior, they were not sympathizing with it or encouraging it, but they were certainly allowing it.

This verse goes on to speak of a local church leader in terms of Jezebel, one of the most notorious characters in the Old Testament. She was the daughter of Ethbaal, King of Sidon. When she married King Ahab, he became the first king of northern Israel to marry a heathen princess. King Ahab went on to introduce the worship of Baal to Israel (1 Kings 16:31-33), an action that was urged on him by Jezebel (1 Kings 21:25). While before this Israel had yielded to idolatry in the worship of the golden calves at Bethel and Dan (1 Kings 12:26ff.), they were still worshipping Yahweh and following the laws of Moses. But all that changed with Jezebel.

Later on in the historical records (2 Kings 9:22) Jezebel is referred to as practicing “prostitution” and “witchcraft.” But while she helped lead Israel to the worship of Baal and sought to destroy the prophets of Yahweh, she did not totally forbid the worship of Yahweh. So one could say the original Jezebel promoted syncretism, a compromise between worship of Yahweh and worship of Baal.

Knowing a little about the original Jezebel does not answer the question as to who or what Jezebel represents in Thyatira. One possibility is that “Jezebel” is the symbolic name John gave to a prominent woman in the church who claimed to have the prophetic gift (she calls herself *prophetin*, in New Testament times there were women who received the gift of prophecy– Luke 2:36; Acts 21:9). She clearly exercised great authority in the church. If that is the case, Jezebel was not her actual name, but a symbolic name used to express the character of her influence over the church. Her actual name and the exact role she played in the church is not known to us.

On the other hand, “Jezebel” promotes the same things as Balaam and the Nicolaitans in the letter to Pergamum (immorality and the eating of food offered to idols). It is, therefore, possible that “Jezebel” does not represent a specific woman in the church, but rather is the personification of a group of people within the church. A blend of the two positions would see “Jezebel” as the female head of the Nicolaitans themselves in Thyatira. But in Pergamum the work of the Nicolaitans went on largely in private, in Thyatira Jezebel’s group was functioning openly, hence the greater expression of concern in the letter.

In the last part of this verse it is said that “Jezebel” “misleads” Jesus’ servants to practice immorality and eat food offered to idols. A variant of the word for “misleads” (*plana*) is used elsewhere in the book for the deceptions of Satan (12:9– *planôn*) and the same word is also used for the deceptions of the land beast (13:14– *plana*). Compromise in Thyatira was not making peace with governing authorities who could persecute, but with the trade guilds. This was done more in the interest of commercial prosperity. The trade guilds were the place where you made business connections and could advance in social status.

Followers of “Jezebel” may have pointed to the Bible to justify the compromises they were promoting. Paul speaks about being “all things to all people” (1 Cor 9:19-23) as a way to make connections for the gospel and win more people. They would also point to her (or the group) as having the living voice of prophecy in their midst. The combination of Scripture and the Spirit has a powerful appeal. See Revelation 2:6 (Excursus on Christians in Roman Asia) for more on the social pressures in the seven churches. Followers of Jezebel would, however, be reading Paul out of context if they used him in that way. Paul in the same chapter of 1 Corinthians points out that “all things to all people” in one’s witness requires even greater carefulness in one’s personal life and walk with God (1 Cor 9:24-27).

### **Rev 2:21--**

Jesus gave “Jezebel” time to repent of her immorality, but she was not willing. The word for “time” here is *chronon*, which refers to literal or chronological time. It means to give someone time and space to do what they want or what is requested (in this case). The giving of time came with a purpose (Greek *hina*), in order that she might repent (*metanoêsê*), the same thing that was also requested of the churches at Ephesus and Pergamum (Rev 2:5, 16). On the meaning of repentance in the Greek of the New Testament, see comments on Revelation 2:5.

The situation at Thyatira is similar in some ways to Ephesus and Pergamum, as all three churches were affected by the Nicolaitan tendency to commit ritual fornication and eat food offered to idols. But the situation in Thyatira is more serious. In Ephesus and Pergamum, the majority of the church is faithful, only some elements of each church follow the teachings of the Nicolaitans. In Thyatira a much larger segment of the church follows. Only a “remnant” (2:24– *loipois*) in Thyatira do not follow Jezebel’s teaching.

The word for “repent” here is an aorist subjunctive in the Greek (*metanoêsê*). This implies a sharp turnaround; to do something that Jezebel was not doing up to that point. The text also says that she was invited to repent “out of” (Greek *ek*) her sexual immorality. The

repentance would be shown by moving away from the sins that she was committing. But the giving (Greek aorist indicative— *edôka*) of time to Jezebel is now in the past, so at the time Revelation was written, the time of repentance for Jezebel was over and the time of negative consequences was at hand. Her sins were not only flagrant, but she was persistent in them over a period of time. Business interests and relationships with the trade guilds proved too strong an attraction for this segment of the church.

### **Rev 2:22—**

The opening word of verse 22, translated “so” in the NIV and “behold” in many other translations, strongly emphasizes what follows, leading us to expect something new in comparison with verse 21. Jesus dramatically casts Jezebel onto a bed, with implication that it is a bed of suffering. It is ironic that the tool of judgment is the same as the tool of sin that led to it. The bed of seduction becomes the bed of suffering. The place of the sin is also the place of its punishment. Sin has its own natural consequences, but when God adds in a judgment, He often makes it ironic and proportionate. The word for “casting” or “throwing” Jezebel on this bed (*ballô*) is the same used of the casting down of Satan later on (Rev 12:9-10— *eblêthê, eblêthêsan*). Teaching the “deep things of Satan” has led her to a fate that is reminiscent of his. And the language chosen indicates that she clearly does not choose this bed, but is compelled to be there.

The followers of Jezebel don’t end up on her bed, but they too suffer as a result of their choices. Those who committed adultery with her are placed in great tribulation (*thlipsin megalên*, see also Rev 7:14— *tês thlipseôs tês megalês*, see also Matt 24:21— *thlipsis megalê*). But there is a difference. She is already past her time of repentance (Rev 2:21), but her followers are still offered the possibility of repentance. They do not need to suffer the consequences of her works if they will make the complete turn-around that repentance implies. It is a dangerous thing to be a teacher, because when the teacher goes astray, the damage is much greater and the judgment, therefore, comes first to the teacher.

While verses 20 and 21 speak of “sexual immorality” (*porneusai, porneias*) as something Jezebel is leading the church into, in this verse the specific sexual word is “adultery” (*moicheuontas*). It may be that the sexual immorality of verses 20 and 21 is the more literal kind that was practiced in relation to pagan temple worship. But “adultery” in the Bible is often a way of expressing unfaithfulness to God in general (Exod 34:15-16; Deut 31:16; Jer 3:8-9; 23:14; Ezek 16:8, 32; Hos 9:1). So verse 22 may refer to her followers acceptance of Jezebel’s spiritual teachings, which were leading the church away from God. This is very likely the meaning in Revelation 17:2 and may also be the case here.

### **Rev 2:23—**

The opening phrase of this verse literally says, “I (Jesus) will kill her children with death” (see a similar expression in Lev 20:10). This is a Hebraic expression that emphasizes the certainty of this outcome. If one takes this expression at face value it is, for many, one of the most

disturbing texts in the Bible. When you think of the lowly Jesus, meek and mild, who loved to gather the children around him (Matt 19:14; Mark 10:14; Luke 18:16), a statement like this seems totally out of character. Why should the innocent suffer with the guilty? Why would the same Jesus seemingly reverse his attitude toward children because of the sins of their mother?

This is not the place to deal with broad issues of theodicy (justifying the actions of God), but there are several brief lines of thought that may be helpful in the face of texts like this and Revelation 14:10-11 (see also comments there). First, the concept of Jezebel's children reminds the reader of the Old Testament story of Jehu, who ordered the death of Ahab's 70 sons (2 Kings 10:1-11; 2 Chr 22:7-8) as part of his military coup against Ahab and Jezebel. The text in Chronicles implies God's blessing on this act. How does one reconcile the grace and love of God with actions like this? The Old Testament is full of such stories. Some of them are the result of human perversity and in some cases God takes responsibility for what Satan or evil humans do. But there are times, such as the Flood story, where we see God taking "emergency measures." Before the Flood evil had reached such proportions that unless God took drastic action all faith on the earth might have been wiped out. Perhaps the situation at Thyatira is one of those emergency measures. The purpose of this killing is a demonstration to the churches that God knows what is going on in minds and hearts and that judgment is sure.

A second way to read "kill her children with death" is to understand children here not as literal young people, but as another way of referring to Jezebel's followers (so Stefanovic). These would be the ones who most closely modeled their beliefs and lives on the teachings of the Nicolaitans, they are the true believers. In this sense the death of "the children" would be spiritual rather than literal. In other words, they suffer the spiritual consequences of following Jezebel, which means a complete break in their relationship with the true God. This punishment is due to a failure to repent and it is a warning to all others that repentance is critical for them. It will convince people of two things, that Jesus fully knows minds and hearts (sometimes called omniscience), and that judgment is certain regardless of how long it may seem to be delayed. This approach probably does not apply to Revelation 14:10-11.

But if the phrase "kill her children with death" is to be taken literally and represents one of God's "emergency measures," it might still seem inappropriate for God to end the lives of children who are not yet old enough to make adult decisions. Why should they die when they aren't old enough to know right from wrong or make decisions for or against Christ? Why should their eternal life be jeopardized so God can make a point with others in their community or nation? Here it is important to remember that death as we experience it is only a "first death" in Scripture (although never named as such). This death is followed by two resurrections, one preceding everlasting life (Rev 20:6) and the other preceding eternal extinction (Dan 12:2; John 5:28-29). Eternal extinction is the same thing the Bible calls the "second death" (Rev 2:11; 20:6, 14; 21:8). Premature first death does not assume that the child will be lost for eternity. Such decisions are in the hands of God. It must be kept in mind that first death is not the ultimate thing. In the end, God will be acclaimed as just and true (Rev 15:3-4), even in Thyatira.

Jesus was NOT pleased with the permissive stance that the church at Thyatira took

concerning Jezebel. He wants the church to know of His disapproval in no uncertain terms. In this passage Jesus demonstrates His penetrating judgment and His execution of that judgment on Jezebel, her followers and her family becomes a warning to all the others. Then “all the churches” will know the seriousness of these matters and the cruciality of repentance. The doom of Jezebel and her “children” is certain, the doom of her victims may yet be averted.

The phrase “all the churches will know” implies that the messages to each church in Revelation are not limited to the original time and place, but have universal application. Thyatira’s experience is a model for all and may have specific reference to a particular period in church history. See Revelation 2:18-29 (Church History Reading) below.

The phrase translated in the NIV as “minds and hearts” (*nephrous kai kardias*) is an interesting one. The concept of the heart as the seat of the emotions is familiar to most people today. But the word for “minds” is not the normal one (*nous*), it actually refers to the kidneys (dictionary form is *nephros*). In the Hebraic view the kidneys refer to the innermost secrets and hidden emotions of a person, perhaps because the kidneys are among the most hidden parts of the human body. It is not necessary to assume that the ancients actually believed that the kidneys could think or feel, this expression is somewhat like the modern one where where people say “I felt it in my gut.” In this verse, the term kidneys is used to express that there is no secret so hidden that Jesus is not aware of it (see the strong parallels in Jeremiah 17:10 and Proverbs 24:12, also Hebrews 4:12-13).

#### **Rev 2:24–**

In a real sense this letter divides the church at Thyatira into three groups. First there is Jezebel, either an individual or symbolic representation of a group, probably the former. Second are those influenced by her. While she has gone too far and no longer has time to repent, her followers can still repent (2:22). Then at the end of verse 23 and here in verse 24, Jesus is portrayed as addressing everyone else in the church, those who have not been involved in the compromises, but have nevertheless been permitting Jezebel free rein in the church.

This verse opens with an adversative conjunction (Greek *de*), something of a mild “but.” Jesus is contrasting Jezebel and her many followers with the members of the church who did not follow her or her teachings. In that sense verse 24 draws a contrast with verses 20-23. Jesus now addresses the most faithful members of the church directly.

When Jesus says “to the rest (*loiipois*) of you in Thyatira” He is using a very special Greek word often translated “remnant.” In the ancient Greek and Hebrew context, “remnant” meant the survivors of a disaster. Noah and his family, therefore, were the remnant of the pre-Flood world, the only ones who survived the Flood (Gen 7:23– “only Noah was ‘left’”). 2 Chronicles 30:6 speaks of the remnant of Israel who survived Assyrian captivity.

Over time, however, the word “remnant” had a powerful spiritual application. It meant the few in a religious context who “remained” faithful to the original message and mission of God’s visible followers. The faithful remnant were those God recognized to be faithful in the midst of a larger unfaithful body of people (1 Kings 19:14-18: Rom 11:1-5). That is the way

“remnant” is being used here. Within the larger church at Thyatira, a “remnant” (probably a minority of the church) remained faithful to Jesus in the midst of apostasy. At any point in history, God has movements that follow Him in name only. Within those movements are a faithful few that He recognizes as in genuine relationship with Him. Such was the situation in Thyatira. The same word is used of God’s faithful end-time people in Revelation 12:17. See Rev 14 (Excursus on the Remnant) for extensive further information on this theme.

The remnant in Thyatira are further described in two ways, signaled by relative pronouns (Greek: *hosoi*, *hoitines*) translated into English as “who” (NRSV, ESV) or “to you who” (NIV— the KJV helpfully translates the two pronouns “as many as” and “which have”). The remnant in Thyatira are those who do not hold to the teachings of Jezebel and who have not known “the deep things of Satan.” To know (Greek: *egnôsan*) in the Bible implies more than just intellectual knowledge, it is the kind of knowledge that comes from experience. Jezebel was teaching practices that the remnant had rightly chosen to avoid.

Deep things are hidden from view (as in far underground) and in a spiritual sense denote mysteries or complex teachings that most people do not understand. It is not clear if “the deep things of Satan” is a phrase Jezebel herself used or a designation used against her teachings by her opponents in the church. In favor of this being Jezebel’s own self-description is the phrase “as they speak” (KJV, Greek *hos legousin*, sometimes translated “so-called” [NIV]). If “they” refers to Jezebel and her followers it would imply that in using this phrase Jesus is quoting them. But grammatically it is not clear whether “they” refers to Jezebel and her followers or to people in general.

If Jezebel herself was consciously teaching “the deep things of Satan,” she would be promoting the idea that those closest to God can and should explore the deep things of Satan as a demonstration of their spiritual maturity and of God’s power over Satan. In other words, only those who have experienced the full depths of sin can truly enjoy freedom in Christ. Sometimes people become so confident in Christ that they think they can toy with Satan—they think they can sin, toy with evil, and mock Satan and get away with it. It may well be that Jezebel was teaching that she knew the deep things of Satan—how to control Satan and how to demonstrate the fruits of victory, an exorcist-type ministry.

Opponents of such a view would point to the temptation of Jesus to jump down from the pinnacle of the temple (Matt 4:5-7; Luke 4:9-12) as illustrating the appropriate response to such a suggestion. They might also point to Adam and Eve, whose original sin was the desire to know evil as well as good (Gen 3:5). Only God can know evil without being defiled by it. It is true that Christians will have victory over Satan in Christ. But one can also become more involved with Satan than is truly wise.

If the opponents of Jezebel were using “deep things of Satan” to disparage her teaching (as in “synagogue of Satan” — Rev 2:9), she likely claimed to be teaching the “deep things of God.” At a later period, the Christian Gnostics wrote about understanding the “depths” or secret knowledge of God that only they had. In 1 Corinthians, the same letter where Paul encourages people to become all things to everyone for the sake of mission (1 Cor 9:19-23), Paul makes

reference to the “deep things of God,” which are taught to believers through the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 2:10, see also Rom 11:33-34). In Daniel 2:22, it is God who reveals the deep and hidden things that are buried in the darkness. There is no question that, when speaking about God, there are deep things that are hard for humans to comprehend.

If “deep things of Satan” was a disparaging phrase, Jezebel likely taught that accommodation to the demands of society was part of a missionary campaign to reach the pagans of Thyatira. Those who knew the deep things of God would be strong enough to participate in the trade guilds, their ritual sexuality, and their idol feasts without losing their faith. The letter to Thyatira clearly takes a contrary position in that case. What Jezebel terms “the deep things of God” are actually “the deep things of Satan” which will lead many in the church astray. Perhaps Jezebel simply called her teaching the “deep things,” in which case Jesus expands the phrase here to show its true and hidden character.

Of the two options, I consider this latter interpretation more likely than the former. Accommodations for the sake of mission are often necessary, but not at the expense of one’s fidelity to God. Managing that tension can be a challenge under the best of circumstances. The line between contextualization and syncretism is often a fine line. Jezebel had crossed that line in suggesting mission accommodations that had been explicitly forbidden by the apostolic council in Acts 15 (15:28-29). When life is uncertain, there is safety in obedience.

What is the “burden” (*baros*) that Jesus will no longer lay on them? The basic meaning of the Greek word has to do with carrying a weight, but in the New Testament the word is consistently used in a more metaphorical sense. In Matthew 20:12 many workers complain that people who had worked only one hour didn’t deserve the same pay as those who had carried the “burden” of the labor and heat suffered by the others throughout the day. In the Matthew text burden is heavy toil pressing on someone like a weight. In Acts 15:28 the “burden” the Gentiles are not asked to carry is the full load of requirements that come with being Jewish, they are asked to follow only those regulations that would enhance fellowship between Jew and Gentile. In Galatians 6:2 “burdens” are a metaphor for the suffering and challenges of everyday life.

In this verse, it is not clear if the phrase about no further burdens is pointing backward or forward. If it is pointing backward, Jesus is saying that the only burden the remnant is asked to carry is to continue rejecting the teachings of Jezebel (sexual immorality and things offered to idols) and the “deep things of Satan.” If it is pointing forward, the only burden they are asked to carry is to hold fast what they already have until Jesus comes (Rev 2:25). That verse 25 opens with “nevertheless” (Greek: *plên*) suggests that the burdens they must carry are the previous, rejecting the sum total of Jezebel’s teachings. Their burden is the same as that of the Gentiles addressed in Acts 15:28-29 and includes having to deal with the followers of Jezebel in the church.

#### **Rev 2:25–**

The “nevertheless” (Greek: *plên*) at the beginning of this verse is a very strong

adversative conjunction that occurs only here in all of John's biblical writing. In the rest of the New Testament the word occurs mostly in Luke/Acts. It contrasts what follows with the previous clause. In verse 24 Jesus asks nothing more of them. Here, on the other hand, He does ask them to actively hang on to what they already have.

The phrase "hold on to what you have" (*ho echete kratêsate*) is essentially repeated in Revelation 3:11 (*kratei ho echeis*). There Jesus encourages a faithful church to remain so until His return. Here the faithfulness is somewhat diminished, but under the circumstances Jesus accepts it as their best effort and encourages them to halt any further decline (He is talking to the faithful remnant in Thyatira, not Jezebel and her followers). Jesus does not ask them to do any spectacular thing. They are not perfect, the church is not perfect, but Jesus does not require any more of them than to hang on to what they already have.

The expression usually translated "until" (Greek: *achris ou an*) is remarkable in that it implies a considerable amount of indefiniteness regarding the timing of Jesus' return. This is in contrast to the strong sense of nearness expressed in Revelation 1:1, 3.

#### **Rev 2:26-27–**

While verse 26 appears to transition to a new theme (the overcomer promise), the opening word in the original is a connective conjunction "and" (Greek: *kai*). This suggests that verse 26 is somehow connected to the previous verse. In a sense, the overcomer promise is viewed from the perspective of the second coming (v. 25– "til I come"). It is at the return of Jesus that the reward promises to the overcomers will become present realities. Those who overcome by doing Jesus' will until the end, will receive authority over the nations and the morning star (2:28). The concept of authority (Greek: *exousia*) here is not brute power, but rather right to rule. While the overcomer promises are normally singular and are directed to the individuals in each church, in this verse the overcoming of the believer impacts many others (authority over the nations). Authority over the nations here recalls Psalm 2:8, which is clearly alluded to in the verse that follows.

The fulfillment of these promises is seen at the end of the book (chapters 20-22), when the martyrs sit on thrones (Rev 20:4, see also 3:21) and have authority to judge and reign over the nations (20:4, 6; 21:24). Then in Revelation 22:16 Jesus is revealed as the Morning Star who guides the churches. For Thyatira, overcoming is what holding fast until Jesus comes is all about.

In the original language, the one who overcomes (Greek: *ho nikôn*) and the one who keeps Jesus' works (Greek: *têrôn ta erga mou*) until the end is the same, these are parallel sayings grammatically (present participles). The works of Jesus are in opposition to the works of Jezebel (compare this expression with "her works" in verse 22) and they are precisely what Jesus has commanded in verse 25, to continue in the positive works that the faithful ones in Thyatira had already been doing, minus their misplaced tolerance of Jezebel and her followers (see also Rev 14:12; 19:8). The reference to the works of Jesus implies a connection between the works that Thyatirans will do in the process of overcoming and the works of Jesus when He was on earth. He Himself has set the pattern and the believers are invited to follow (see also John

14:12).

There is an odd grammatical construction in the original language of verse 26 that is often lost in translation. The indirect object “to him” (*to auto*), which refers to those receiving authority over the nations, is equivalent to the nominative participles (the one who overcomes and the one who keeps. . .). In English translation the awkwardness is often reduced by placing the indirect object first: “To him who overcomes and does my will to the end. . . (NIV)” This is a reasonably good English equivalent of the original.

It would probably be obvious to the original readers that what the overcomers in Thyatira will receive (authority over the nations) has already been achieved by Christ. He has already been given authority over the nations (Rev 12:5, 10; 19:15; Matt 28:18). The reward the believers in Thyatira will receive for overcoming is grounded in the reward Christ has already obtained (Rev 3:21).

Verse 27 continues the theme of authority over the nations with a strong allusion to Psalm 2:9. God’s anointed king (Psalm 2:2, 5-7) is given the nations as his inheritance (2:8) and he is told that he will break them with an iron rod and smash them like clay pots (2:9). This king is declared to be God’s royal son (2:6, 12), so it is no wonder that the writers of the New Testament saw in Psalm 2 a powerful prophecy of Jesus the Messiah. The allusion to Psalm 2 in this verse is as strong an allusion as any in Revelation. While many scholars do not find any quotations of the Old Testament in Revelation (only allusions), this comes as close to a quotation of the Old Testament as any other allusion in the book.

While the Hebrew of Psalm 2:9 speaks of the king “breaking” (Hebrew: *terô’êm*) the nations with a rod of iron, the Greek Old Testament (Septuagint) translates it as ruling or shepherding (Greek: *poimaneis*) the nations (in unpointed Hebrew both readings are possible). In its choice of words (Greek: *poimanei*) Revelation follows the Greek version of the Psalm more closely than the Hebrew. Psalm 2 seems to be alluded to again in Revelation 12:5 and 19:15, and in both places the Greek reading is followed as well. So John here is following a reading of the Psalm that we are familiar with from the Greek but not the Hebrew. He, therefore, does not use the more common Greek language for rule (*basileuô*), but rather the word for shepherding (root: *poimainô*), which was frequently used in the Old Testament for the rulership of Israel’s kings (see Jer 23:1 in the context of chapter 22 and Ezekiel 34). Within Revelation itself, compare this verse with 7:17. The metaphor of a shepherd in relation to ruling/kingship is found throughout the ancient near east as far back as Abraham’s time.

Jesus’ reference to appointment by the Father at the end of this verse, fits well also with Psalm 2, where the king is viewed as the son of God and rules the nations in God’s behalf (Psalm 2:7, 12). The incontestible rule over the nations that Jesus had earned (see Revelation 5), will be received also by those who overcome (Rev 3:21; 7:15-17; Rev 19:11-15; 20:4-6).

### **Rev 2:28–**

The second major reward to the overcomer is to receive the morning star (a metaphorical reference to the planet Venus which in some seasons of the year shines brightly

just before dawn). The morning star precedes the sun in the sky and thus heralds a new day. The night of suffering, persecution and trouble will dawn onto a new eternal day with the return of Jesus for His faithful Thyatirans (see 2 Peter 1:19).

In Revelation 22:16 the morning star is clearly identified with Jesus Himself. Those who overcome will have continual access to Jesus, they will become part of His retinue (Rev 14:1-3; 7:15-17). Just as Jesus is the morning star, those who were faithful to him will become the shining stars of Daniel 12:3. Ironically, Lucifer also appears to have been equated with the morning star (see Isaiah 14:12). The KJV adopted the name Lucifer as the Latin equivalent of the Hebrew for “morning star” in Isaiah 14:12.

### **Rev 2:29–**

It is important to note a shift here. Up until this letter, the invitation to listen to the Spirit came before the promise to the overcomer. But beginning here and continuing through the letter to Laodicea, the invitation to listen to the Spirit follows after the promise to the overcomer. Since the structure of the seven letters seems very deliberate, this is probably not accidental and must have had a purpose. What is that purpose? Walter Scott had as compelling a suggestion as any I have heard. He noted that while the first three churches had problems, the main body of each church was faithful. Groups like the Nicolaitans were in the minority. From Thyatira on the faithful ones seem to be a minority. So Scott suggests that the call to listen to the Spirit was directed to the whole church and followed by a promise to the overcomer. But in churches four to seven, the call follows the promise and is directed only to the faithful who remain. In other words, the main body is considered incapable of repentance, as was the case with Jezebel. They no longer had an “ear” to listen to the Spirit, they had shut the Spirit out. That may not be the purpose of the shift, but I have no better explanation at this time.

### **Rev 2:18-29 (Spiritual Lessons)–**

What are some spiritual lessons all can learn from the message to the church at Thyatira? (1) Thyatira was the smallest and most insignificant of the seven cities. Big problems can occur in small places. In my experience, big problems can occur in small churches. Thyatira was small but its problems were as big as any in the seven churches. While large size may increase the quantity of problems one may face, the quality of problems can be as severe in the small community as in the large one. Spiritual leaders in all settings must be prepared for satanically-inspired challenges that often come in the guise of genuine faith.

The letter to Thyatira also tells us that very gifted people can be very wrong. Jezebel was very gifted and was recognized as a prophetess with a great authority and following, yet from the perspective of John and Jesus, she was greatly in error.

How can you know when you are wrong? How do you know when the gifts that God has given you are being used in a wrong direction? There are many individuals who are following God as well as they know how but their teachings are leading others into difficulty. The best way to examine one’s own faithfulness is to watch the results of your ministry in your followers. The

flaws in one's teaching often become clear only in the later behavior of those who love the teacher. It is those who love the teacher the most who will most clearly exhibit the flaws in that person's teaching. In Thyatira, there was a beloved and gifted teacher who was leading her people into darkness without realizing it herself, at least at first. Jesus steps in with penetrating discernment and points out that she is leading others on a road to destruction.

### **Rev 2:18-29 (Church History Reading)–**

A historicist reading of Thyatira correlates to the middle period of Christian history. It was a dark and difficult time when church tradition was often lifted above the Scriptures. During the Middle Ages, many of the greatest saints of the Christian church, people like Eberhard of Salzburg, Bernard of Clairvaux and Francis of Assisi, accused the leadership of the church of promoting greed and sinful action. Some even considered the institutional church of that time as the Antichrist, the one who would appear to be Christ-like yet would be found in opposition to God. The simplicity of the gospel was lost and works became regarded as the means of earning salvation. Those who resisted these changes were often rejected and persecuted.

The Middle Ages were a dark and difficult time in church history when the leading lights in the church were leading people away from the truths of Scripture. But toward the end of the Middle Ages--the Reformation and the Renaissance--people increasingly recognized what was happening and began taking actions for improvement. There was a revival of the simplicity and purity of the gospel.

Thyatira, therefore, seems to represent about a thousand years, from the 6th to 16th Centuries, a time when the church was largely in spiritual darkness and many of its leaders were teaching what is called in this passage "the deep things of Satan." Examples of this are the concept of transubstantiation, merits of the saints, and indulgences. So from a historicist perspective the letter to Thyatira describes the condition of the church from the Middle Ages through the time of the Reformation.

### **Rev 2 (Conclusion)–**

The division between chapter 2 and chapter 3 is an artificial one. The seven messages to the seven churches are a single vision in the book of Revelation, building upon the introductory sanctuary vision in chapter 1, verses 9 through 20. Chapter three contains the messages to churches five through seven (Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea) and continues the structures and themes of the first four messages in this chapter.