

THE REVELATION OF JOHN

CHAPTERS 2 & 3

As we established from Chapter 1:1 & 3 and Chapter 22:6 & 10, the events described in this revelation were to begin shortly after the writing was completed. In chapters 2 and 3, John specifically addresses seven churches in the province of Asia, as to their current spiritual condition and the events that would shortly confront them and their faith. We previously noted that the number “7” was a number of spiritual perfection or completeness in the Hebrew mind, and it is used 54 times in John’s revelation to convey this idea in many different ways. These seven churches basically lie in order following existing letter and trade routes, suggesting this was a ‘circular letter’ to be taken to and read to each congregation along the way; indeed. The order in which they are addressed in the revelation follows this sequence.

Although only seven congregations are addressed here, we know there were several others in existence in Asia at this time, including Troas, Colossae, and Hieropolis. These particular seven were chosen to represent the whole of the church (both for the first century and actually all time) as to their soundness spiritually and the various difficulties internally and externally which face congregations of the church on a regular basis. A thorough and honest evaluation is given by the Lord, followed by a specific prescription for correcting the problem or meeting the challenge. Finally, each congregation is reminded about the reward of a crown of life for faithfully overcoming their spiritual challenge (external persecution or internal apostasy and decay), and also the tragic result of failure, the death of the congregation and removal of their spiritual ‘lampstand.’

EPHESUS – the intellectual/ academic church

At the time of writing of this book, Ephesus was likely the fourth largest city in the Roman Empire. It was very cosmopolitan, the major seaport of Asia and gateway of travel and commerce in the province. It was also at one time the capital city and was a ‘free’ city, never requiring the presence of a Roman garrison and state intervention. Its major claim to fame was the great temple to Artemis (Gk) or Diana (Roman), the goddess of wild animals and vegetation, the hunt, and childbirth. The great temple structure was 450 X 225 feet in size (after its second rebuilding, 4 times larger than the Parthenon in Athens) and was one of the 7

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wonders of the ancient world, bringing in a tremendous amount of tourism and money to the city (remember Acts 19:24-27).

Paul's had visited Ephesus briefly during his second missionary journey while en route to Jerusalem (Acts 18:18-21). He returned during his third journey and stayed there longer than any other location during his travels (Acts 19:10; 20:31). The church was strong when Paul wrote his letter to them some 4-5 years later (~AD 62), with no indication of trouble and no need for reproof (Eph. 1:15-16).

The Ephesian church was very strong on doctrine, even strongly opposing the apostasy of the Nicolaitans. Jesus lists seven commendable qualities of the congregation, but has one great serious charge against them: they had left their first love. The word "left" is *aphiemi* in the Gk, meaning leave, or send away, or neglect, or abandon, or sometimes even divorce. Although they were intellectually sound and had enough faith and love to remain true to doctrine, they no longer had enough *agape* love to produce the kind of fruit needed as servants of Christ. Galatians 5:22-23 reminds us: "*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.*" All Christian fruit must begin with love. John reminds us: "*By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*" (John 13:35). Without this kind of "first love" spirit inside us, our personal and congregational works will 'profit us nothing' (I Cor. 13:1-3). Perhaps the Ephesian church was suffering from self-satisfaction. Perhaps they had 'grown weary in well-doing'. Perhaps, as many second and third generation congregations, the Christian fervor was waning with time. *Agape* is not hereditary. This is often an issue seen in modern churches. The penalty for the church losing its first love is clear: the candlestick will become a useless ornament, good for nothing and in need of removal.

SMYRNA – the poor, yet rich church

Smyrna also a very large city and very prosperous, second only to Ephesus. It was one of the oldest allies of Rome and a center for emperor worship. The acropolis on Mt. Pagas had the appearance of a crown, and thus a crown was the symbol of the city. Although the city was wealthy, the church was evidently in

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poverty and suffered materially due to their faith. In addition to opposition and persecution from the Romans, the Jews there regularly harassed Christians and caused trouble whenever possible. The Scottish church historian Barclay tells us that the Jews there were quick to compromise with the Romans and willingly burn incense to Caesar. By such blasphemy and also their active persecution of Christians, they had become the true *“synagogue of Satan”*. It was in Smyrna that Polycarp, a disciple of John, was later martyred...assisted by the Jews.

Nothing negative is said about the church in Smyrna. Although poorer than the generally wealthier populace, these Christians were rich and strong in what really counted, the spiritual things which would not perish with death, such as faith in God (John 6:27; Matt. 6:19-21 & 16:26). The Savior warns them that they are about to experience tribulation for *“ten days”*, or a complete period of time, truly lasting from Domitian through Constantine (313 AD). They are also told *“the devil is about to cast some of you into prison.”* We see here that the real enemy and instigator is Satan, who used the Jews and Roman officials to ignorantly persecute God’s children. He is truly a *“roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour”* (1 Peter 5:8). Despite their trials, their persecution would eventually end. Jesus reminds them: *“Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give you a **crown of life.**”* The type of crown mentioned here is the *stephanos*, the crown of victory and celebration (as opposed to the *diadema*, or crown of rule or royalty). The trials of life may seem insurmountable at times, but they pale in comparison to the glory to be found in God (Rom. 8:18). Physical death is painful, but true suffering is realized by those who suffer the **second death**: eternal life suffering without God. Only those who conquer the trials of sin can wear such a crown of victory, but the Lord will provide the necessary armor and strength to successfully fight Satan.

PERGAMUM (or Pergamos) – the church attacked from without

Pergamum was the capital city of the province for over 250 years. Pliny, who long served as governor, called it “the most illustrious city of Asia.” It boasted the second largest library in the world, second only to that of Alexandria, Egypt. When a jealous Pharaoh cut off their supply of papyrus for writing, the leaders put out a contest to find a replacement. The result was parchment (*pargamena*), to which we can eventually attribute the creation of modern books.

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Pergamum was the most thoroughly pagan city of Asia, and was a center for pagan temples and sensuous worship. Patron deities included Zeus, Athena, and Dionysius. A giant temple/ hospital to the god of healing, Aesculapius, whose symbol was a serpent, was located outside the city. Emperor worship in the province was centered in Pergamum, and temples to Roma, Augustus, Trajan, and Severus were built here.

Christians faced several spiritual threats in the city “where Satan dwells”: popular Greek deities, local Asiatic gods, and the official imperial cult of Rome. Emperor worship was primarily political, as sacrificing a pinch of incense to the emperor every year was considered a citizen’s test of loyalty to the state. Afterward, the Roman officials had little care for how anyone actually conducted their personal worship. Persecution had already taken its toll here, as the martyrdom of Antipas is even specified by the Lord. Given the threat of persecution, banishment, and even death, it is easy to see how even faithful Christians could somehow justify that such a “small” act of disloyalty to God wouldn’t really matter, as long as one’s heart was still right with God. Not so to Jesus.

Two specific heresies and spiritual compromises were beginning to seep into the local church. First the charge is made that some have “*followed the teachings of Balaam*”. In Numbers 31:16, we learn that he cast a stumblingblock (*skandalon* or “bait-stick”) before Israel. In like fashion, some Christians in Pergamum were eating the food of idols and actually participating in pagan worship, as well as committing fornication, likely also related to idol worship. Although this would engender them to the local population, there could be no excuse for such behavior. They had forgotten Paul’s reminder in I Cor. 6:19-20: “*Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body.*”

This leads to the second compromise some weak and frightened Christians were willing to make: accepting the teachings of the Nicolaitans. Little is really known about their beliefs, started by a deacon named Nicolas, although it is usually thought that their practices involved the acceptance of ritual fornication in worship in both pagan and Christian practices. Such laxity and compromise in

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service of God is vehemently condemned. Jesus promises that He will “*come quickly and make war against them with the sword of My mouth.*” The sword here used is the long and broad, two-edged Thracian sword or *rhomphaia*, use to hack and destroy the adversary. Remember also the analogy of the sword in Hebrews 4:12 (for the authority to save or destroy) and Ephesians 6:17 (where the sword is the word of God).

John references the “*hidden manna*” in verse 17 of chapter 2. This could either refer to the pot of manna hidden inside the holy ark of the covenant and preserved for the children of God, or be a reference to Jesus as the “true manna of heaven” (John 6:33-35; 50-59), known only to those who serve Him. The “white stone” (or *psephos*, a small, worn pebble) with a “new name” written on it. This could reference the legal practice where the accused in a trial was given either a black stone (guilty) or white stone (innocent). The only other reference to this *psephos* is in Acts 26:10, where Paul states “*I gave my vote (pebble of voting) against them*”. The white color reflects the Christian’s innocence before God. The “new name” which was to be known only to those who received it, likely reflected the new identity of the faithful servant and the totality of their new relationship to God, forever inscribed in stone. Only the one possessing it would know his true relationship with the Lord.

THYATIRA – the church under attack from within

Thyatira was another wealthy city, but least of the ones under consideration in this letter. Emperor and pagan worship activity was less prominent in this city when compared to Ephesus or Pergamum. We mostly know of this city from reading about one of its most spiritually important citizens, Lydia, who was converted in Philippi by Paul (Acts 16:11-15). She was a “seller of purple”, a business owner or agent who sold the expensive dye or dyed fabrics colored by the *Indigofera tinctoria* plant, the leaves of which produced a coveted deep reddish-blue or indigo hue.

Thyatira was a manufacturing city, and many scholars believe the large number of local trade guilds may explain the difficult situation faced by Christians there. Various guilds were present, including wool and linen workers, garment makers, tanners, leather workers, dyers, bakers, slave traders, and bronze smiths.

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Many local Christians would have their livelihood connected to membership in these guilds. Feasts were often sponsored by the guilds, involving meat sacrificed to idols, drunken parties, and often immoral fertility rites. Christians would be pressured to conform to the guild activities by friends and co-workers, just to preserve their own social and economic standing. Government persecution was less of a threat to the local church here, but greed, pride, and peer pressure would place a great strain on one's faith and tempt the weak and unstable to compromise their beliefs.

Jesus greatly commends the local congregation for its love, faith, service, perseverance and deeds. Further, He acknowledges that their works continued to increase and the congregation was growing spiritually and likely in number. Unlike at Ephesus, the saints here were not only upholding the truth, but also putting their faith into practice and bearing great spiritual fruit due to their growing love. Many of the body were resisting the pleasures and conveniences of the world and choosing instead to "*...store up riches in heaven...*" (Matt. 6:20). However, there was one glaring fault and deep weakness in the body at Thyatira: tolerance of the woman called "*Jezebel*". Likely used figuratively in verse 20, it quickly brings to mind the wife of King Ahab, who encouraged him to commit all kinds of wickedness (I Kings 21:25). It is likely she was a powerful and influential woman who taught and encouraged local Christians to give in to the pressure to join the guilds and participate in its feasts and immoral activities, without worrying about compromising one's faith. She probably preached the Christian was initiated into a "superior wisdom", unable to be corrupted by something that didn't exist, such as an idol. Such was her hubris that she even scoffingly encouraged her followers to know "*...the deep things of Satan...*," as if they were somehow immune from the stains and damages of sin. This idea of keeping a pure mind despite engaging in unchristian behavior was similar to the appeal of spiritual compromise of Balaam in Pergamum, as well as a foundation for other heresies such as the Nicolaitans and later Gnosticism.

Despite her unrelenting refusal to repent, God had given her adequate time for her to change. The Lord stated that her fate was already sealed – she would perish along with her gullible followers. It is not completely clear if there were several in the local church who directly and adamantly opposed her, although

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many still clung to the truth and remained unstained. One main difference between Thyatira and Pergamum is that the latter **tolerated** this Jezebel. We do not see any inference that anyone challenged her and forced the issue to be dealt with. A faithful church will exercise discipline when needed. Churches who fail to reprove and correct individuals who teach false doctrine or live ungodly lives are in reality tolerating them, not showing love and patience. Peace can never be achieved at the expense of truth. Any church that allows ungodly behavior has a secular mind, having only a veneer of spirituality that compromises the truth and insults God. Congregations that love their brethren will also correct and even withdraw from the disorderly, in order to bring them into repentance (I Cor. 5; II Thes.3:6).

Those who resisted and kept their purity in Thyatira would be given “...*power over the nations.*” The world could never control their destinies, and they would share in the final victory of Christ over all the enemies of truth. They would be given “...*the morning star.*” As the morning star signals the dawn of a new day, the faithful are promised the morning of victory through Christ when the dark night of persecution and temptation is over.

SARDIS - the ‘living-dead’ church

Five major roads converge in Sardis, making it an important city of trade. Gold had been discovered in the local Pactolus River, making it at one time the richest city in the world under King Croesus. It was one of the oldest and greatest of ancient cities and was where coins were first minted. It was wealthy and long noted as a center for pleasure and luxurious living. The main part of the city was located on the high mountain ridge of Mt. Timolus and thus generally protected from invaders.

This congregation was likely established while Paul was spending time in Ephesus (Acts 19:10). The church here was not generally plagued by fanatical emperor worship, and also not generally disturbed by the Jews and the Nicolaitans. Although we do not read of significant outward or inward spiritual threats, it seems the greatest problem may have been the influence and character of the population in general. Seen to the outsider, the church likely looked peaceful and happy, possibly even with a good reputation in human terms.

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Unfortunately, looks can be deceiving. To the Lord, it was a church alive in name only, quite dead spiritually. They had probably become lethargic about preaching the gospel, unconcerned about evangelism and gradually blending in with the behaviors of the secular world. Peace with the world is not the way to convert souls. Jesus reminds us: *“Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace but a sword.”* (Matt. 10:34).

Jesus reminds them to stop being complacent and start being watchful. Watchful of what? Of their sudden destruction by removal of their lampstand. Despite their strategic advantage, this ‘impenetrable’ city had been invaded and captured at least twice in their past by carelessness and a lack of vigilance. Similarly, the church here would suddenly and traumatically be consumed when least suspected when the Lord would come *“...like a thief...”*. With their false sense of spiritual security, they were about to have their names erased from the Book of Life, completely unaware of the situation. The church here was already dead. The fire in the lampstand had already gone out, and the only thing left for Christ to do was remove the lampstand. Does this scenario seem familiar even today?

Yet, there were still a few left who remained faithful and active and who were not *“soiled”*. They would still be found in the Book of Life. In every congregation, there are always those few who do their best to keep the lamp burning. They will *“walk in white”* with Jesus, as did the military leaders who would march through Rome after a great military victory.

PHILADELPHIA – the healthy church

Philadelphia was a ‘missionary city’, built as a cultural center to spread the Greek language and promote Greek customs and culture to the barbarian populations to the east. It was known for its fine wines, and also had so many temples and festivals to the pagan gods that it was often call “Little Athens.” It had been destroyed, along with Sardis, by a great earthquake in 17 AD and rebuilt by Tiberius Caesar, but due to many years of aftershocks and small tremors, the population always lived in fear of disaster.

Like that of Smyrna, this congregation has no negative comments made in its address by Jesus. Despite the church here having just *“...a little power,”* (few

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material resources), Jesus reminds them that He is acutely aware of their works and knows they have faithfully kept His word. It is God and not The Roman government that has the “*key of David*” (the ultimate authority of Jesus, our Savior). They were also apparently regularly persecuted by the evil and compromising Jews (the “*synagogue of Satan*”). Due to their faithfulness, the Lord would make their persecutors “*bow down*” at their feet so as to know of God’s love for His true children. As the city was built to be a gateway of influence to the region, so God was about to put before them “*...an open door...*,” a great opportunity to spread the gospel (II Cor. 2:12; I Cor. 16:19; Acts 14:27). Despite local circumstances of culture and persecution, the Christian still has the responsibility to preach the gospel whenever possible.

Jesus finally promises to safeguard them from their future trials. This is not a promise of no trials or persecution, but rather that He would completely protect and strengthen them so that they would overcome. The word “*hour*” can describe a short time, but also a longer but definite period or season. Jesus reminds them that they already have the crown of victory – they should never relinquish their prize.

In ancient times, with the death of a great person or someone of great service, a pillar was inscribed in his honor with his name upon it, located in the temple of his chosen god. In like fashion, the victorious Christian will also be given an important name and position in the temple of the true living God of heaven (Psalm 27:4). This name will be a new name, one that identifies the individual as belonging to God and being a resident of the New Jerusalem (Heb. 12:22-23; Rev. 21:2)

LAODICEA – the useless church

Laodicea was a center of Hellenistic culture. In Roman times, it became the wealthiest of the cities in Phrygia, so wealthy that they rebuilt the city entirely of their own resources when it was destroyed by an earthquake in 60 AD. It was the banking center of Asia, a center of the clothing industry (famous for a beautiful black wool), and center of a noted medical school (the producer of Phrygian powder, a remedy for weak and ailing eyes). An air of self-sufficiency and self-

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satisfaction permeated the city and its residents, likely also members of the church.

Little is known about the congregation here, although it is mentioned in Colossians 4 (versus 13 and 16), along with the nearby cities Hieropolis and Colossae, both of which had congregations. Jesus' assessment of the church here is very candid and very direct. In contrast to all the other churches, nothing good or encouraging is said about Laodicea.

Jesus begins by saying that their works are neither cold nor hot, but lukewarm. The Greek word here is *chlarios*, meaning lukewarm or tepid, of water or persons or ideas. Despite its wealth, the city had no good local source of fresh cold water. Colossae, just 10 miles away, had a great supply of fresh and cold drinking water, and Hieropolis, just 6 miles away, was famous throughout the region for its soothing and healing hot springs. At enormous cost, an elaborate system of conduits and aqueducts was created to have water piped in from Colossae. Despite these efforts, the water was less than pleasing and no longer cold and fresh. The wealth and ingenuity and smugness of Laodicea could not provide a quality basic necessity of life. Some have suggested that the analogy with water of Colossae and Hieropolis refers to the temperature / fervor of the work in the congregations. It is more likely Jesus is saying that whereas the cold water could be drunk and the hot water could be used for healing, this 'lukewarm water' (the church at Laodicea) could not be 'consumed' nor used to heal and was therefore unpleasing and **useless**.

The lukewarm Christian is usually self-satisfied and self-deluded. Complacent and confident, he or she usually considers "I *have need of nothing*." (vs. 17). The church in this city deemed it was spiritually wealthy, sufficient and pleasing to God. In reality, they were miserable (wretched, pitiful), poor (destitute, as a cringing beggar), blind (physically or mentally), and naked (generally, stripped to the undergarments). It's the same story as the old tale of the King's New Clothes. Surprisingly, Jesus never condemns them for false doctrine or lascivious behavior. Encumbered by earthly cares and possessions, they became inactive and blissfully unconcerned, believing all is well. The church here was on 'life support'. It was compromised in love, in zeal, in service, in

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evangelism and in purpose. Even today, we can all bring to mind congregations that unfortunately fit this mold.

Referring to physical things the Laodiceans held dear in this life, the Lord 'advises' them (as a friend would advise) to buy from Him **gold**, (spiritual riches, faith tested by fire), **white garments** (pure and holy, free of the stains of sin, as opposed to their famous black wool outer garments), and '**eye salve**' (they were spiritually blind and in need of true spiritual insight and healing). Following this humbling rebuke, Jesus reminds them that He reproves and disciplines those whom He **loves** (*phileo*, the expression of affection and feeling that one has for another friend). Chastening is given to correct faults and problems so that better attitudes and better actions follow. Christ always loves us and will never give up encouraging and correcting us, as long as we are receptive to His voice.

Chapter 3 ends with Jesus having us picture Him as a humble visitor knocking at our door, patiently waiting for a response. He will wait long for us to answer, but verse 20 never states He will wait forever. The idea of dining with us suggests that we have spiritual communion and fellowship, and the accompanying close confidence and affection. He wishes to come inside our hearts, not as an intruder, but as an old friend and welcome guest, and will stay as long as we will have Him. Even a useless church such as Laodicea can be resurrected back to spiritual health. If the church here would repent, they would still sit on Jesus' throne, just as He sat on His Father's throne.