



The
Seven

Churches

of

Revelation

David Cloud

The Seven Churches of Revelation Then and Now

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*“He that hath an ear, let him hear what the
Spirit saith unto the churches.”*

Introduction

This is a study of Christ's messages to the seven churches of Asia in Revelation chapters two and three as well as an eyewitness survey of the locations of the churches as they exist today from a tour we made in 2008.

In the apostle John's day the seven cities were located in a province of the Roman Empire called Asia, but today they are located in western Turkey. This part of the world is also called Asia Minor.

The seven cities are situated in a rough crescent about 400 miles in length, beginning with Ephesus on the coast by the Aegean Sea. About 60 miles north is Smyrna, and about 100 miles further north is Pergamum. From Pergamum you go southeast about 100 miles to Thyatira, then another 50 miles southeast to Sardis, then 40 miles southeast to Philadelphia, and finally 50 more miles southeast to Laodicea.

When John wrote the book of Revelation under divine inspiration, he was imprisoned on the island of Patmos, which is about 50 miles off the coast of Turkey in the Aegean Sea. Thus, he was not far from the churches to which he was writing.

Asia Minor was part of the Byzantine Empire, with its headquarters in Constantinople. The ruins of churches that exist today are from that period and represent the Greek Orthodox faith. An example is St. John's Basilica near Ephesus. We saw an interesting thing in the ruins there testifying to the biblical truth of believer's baptism. The ancient baptistery is nearly waste deep, and the only purpose for such a baptistery is immersion. It is almost exactly the same size and depth as the baptistery that we use in our church planting ministry in South Asia.

In the 15th century the Muslims conquered Constantinople and renamed it Istanbul. It was the headquarters for the Ottoman Empire until its dissolution in 1918. Today Turkey

is a democracy but the vast majority of the people are Muslim and Christians are often persecuted if they attempt to evangelize.

The countryside is rolling hills and small mountains, watered by rivers and streams and by rains part of the year. It is an agricultural paradise. Western Turkey is one of the breadbaskets of Europe. They export 80 types of fruits and 50 types of vegetables and are a major producer of olives, grapes, cotton, wheat, rice, and tobacco. Olive oil and wine have been two of the region's major products since ancient times.

Turkey is the home of angora wool (the source of mohair), and sheep and goats are common sights in the region of the seven churches.

Western Turkey is an interesting mixture of old and new. The large-scale farming is done with machinery, but there are still many smaller farms that are operated by hand, using horses, donkeys, buggies, wagons, sickles, and other things that would be recognized by the apostle Paul if he were to walk on the scene today.

When the book of Revelation was written the province of Asia was a peaceful, prosperous place, lying at the very heart of the Empire. New roads connected the cities. Bandits and pirates were under control. Public works were massive and far-reaching. An efficient financial and banking system existed. Coins were in common use. Business opportunities were great. Many people traveled extensively for business and pleasure. Public entertainment was provided in the form of plays, concerts, orations, sports, and gladiatorial fights.

Archaeology's Discoveries

High quality photographs of the following things can be found in *Christ's Messages to the Seven Churches* video presentation series, which is available from Way of Life Literature, www.wayoflife.org.

The archaeological excavations from the Roman period are extensive and far exceeded our expectations. The archaeological recoveries at Aphrodisias, Pergamum, Hierapolis, Laodicea, Sardis, and Ephesus are world class and can compete with anything I have seen in Greece and Italy. And in Turkey you are allowed wonderful access to examine the ruins up close.

We got a great feel for what conditions were like during the days of the Lord's apostles when they traveled across the Roman Empire preaching the gospel and establishing the first churches.

The aqueduct systems that brought water to the cities were extensive and well designed, and sections of them still stand in places. There were three aqueducts that supplied Pergamos. One was 50 miles long.

The gates to the cities were impressive. The cities were surrounded by walls and there were gates at each entrance and sometimes there were inner gates as well.

One of the gates to Ephesus is near the library.

The Gate of Hercules in Ephesus was narrow to restrict the flow of people into the main part of the city.

One of the main gates to Hierapolis was at the head of Frontinus Street.

There were marble-paved avenues lined with marble columns and statues and shops. These were sometimes lit at night with lamps. Paul would have walked on these roads as he entered these cities.

The Arcadian Way in Ephesus ran from the harbor on the Aegean Sea to the amphitheater.

Today you can also see the remnants of the following:

- The Priests' Way in Ephesus
- The Marble Way in Ephesus
- The Sacred Way in Pergamos
- The Frontinus Street in Hieropolis

Two of the ancient streets of Laodicea have been recovered.

There were colonnaded porticos or porches leading to major buildings.

There were broad markets called agoras surrounded with porticos, columns, and statues. The one at Ephesus was surrounded by a beautiful portico or covered porch on three sides and had three gates. Shops lined the portico. At the center of the Agora were a sundial and a water-clock.

There were elaborate monuments.

Some parts of the cities were paved with tiles and mosaics, such as those we saw at Aphrodisias and Ephesus.

The public baths were places for socializing and were richly ornamented. They were built of concrete and overlaid with marble veneer and decorated with carved figures, paintings, mosaics, and statues. The floors were tiled. Some had rooms as large as 200 yards square. There were separate sections for cold water, warm water, and hot water. The water was heated in furnaces and piped underground.

They had public toilets, such as those we saw in Ephesus, which could seat 50 people at once. They were situated over a canal of running water that flowed into the city's sewer system.

There were beautiful fountains, such as the Fountain of Trajan in Ephesus. And the Triton Fountain at Hierapolis. The Water Palace at Ephesus was probably the largest building in the city. It acted as a reservoir to supply water to the city through a network of pipes.

There were also magnificent libraries. The Celsian Library at Ephesus was a two-storey building with a beautiful colonnaded façade. It was restored in the 1970s. A statue of Athena sat in a prominent place inside.

The gymnasiums were used for athletic training, education, and socializing. They were often connected to public baths and small theaters and were ornamented with rare marble, statues, mosaics, and fountains. The one at Sardis had 100 columns on the front façade. It was restored between 1965 and 1973.

The theaters and stadiums were very impressive. They performed plays, concerts, orations, festivals to the gods and goddesses, gladiator competitions, and wild-animal fights. Condemned criminals would sometimes be burned alive or thrown to wild beasts. Christians, too, were tormented and killed in public spectacles.

The theater at Aphrodisias, completed in 27 B.C., was built into a hollowed out hill. It seated 7,000 and had a 3-storey marble stage. The man who funded it was a freed slave of the first Roman emperor, Octavian Augustus. He was a native of the city who was probably captured by pirates and sold to Octavian. After his release, he returned to Aphrodisias a wealthy man.

The theater at Hierapolis seated 20,000. The performance area could be flooded with water for miniature mock naval battles.

The theater at Ephesus was built into the side of Mt. Pion and held 25,000 spectators. It had a 3-storey marble stage, which has not been restored. The stage acted as a sounding board and actors speaking in a normal voice could be heard throughout the theater.

Pergamos had a large theater built on the side of the acropolis beneath the Temple of Trajan. It had 78 rows of seats and a capacity of 10,000. The “acoustics were so perfect that an actor speaking in a normal voice could be heard on

the topmost seat” (J. T. Marlin, *The Seven Churches of Asia Minor*).

The stadium at Aphrodisias was about 300 yards long and had 30 tiers of seating, with a capacity of 30,000. It is the best preserved and largest ancient stadium in the world. It was the scene of Greek athletic contests (foot races, long jumping, wrestling, discus, javelin throwing), gladiatorial contests, and wild-beast fights. It was built along the old city wall, parts of which can still be seen.

The gladiators oftentimes fought to the death, after giving the traditional salute to the emperor: “*Ave Caesar, morituri te salutant!*” (“Hail Caesar, we who are about to die salute you!”). The life of the loser could be saved if the governor and his entourage gave a thumbs up sign. In the Ephesus museum there is a chart that was recovered from tomb inscriptions, describing the careers of some of the gladiators.

- Age 21 - 4 years training, died during his 5th fight
- Age 23 - survived 8 fights, died during the 9th
- Age 27 - survived 15 fights, died during the 16th
- Age 30 - 34 fights 21 victories, 9 draws, 4 defeats (always pardoned)
- Age 48 - 19 victories, 20 years of service
- Age 60 - freed and pensioned

The cities also had small theaters that were used as a meeting place for the city assemblymen as well as for plays, concerts, poetry readings, pantomimes, and speeches. They were called Odeons. The one at Ephesus seated 2,000. The one at Aphrodisias seated 1,000. Originally it had a roof and was entered by a lofty double-aisled hall with marble columns running down the center. It had an upper section which has not been restored.

Wealthy people were buried in stone or marble caskets called sarcophagi. There is a large necropolis or burial ground outside of Hierapolis with hundreds of these intact. The

gardens and grounds were maintained by trade guilds. Many of these have also been preserved in Ephesus.

The cities of the Roman Empire were given over to idolatry. They worshiped Zeus, Athena, Aphrodite, Artemis (Diana), Apollos, Eros, Nike, Poseidon, and countless other deities.

Aphrodite, Artemis, and Diana were fertility goddesses (“the goddess of love”). Immoral rites were associated with their worship.

They were also mother goddesses. The ancient mother goddess worship permeated the Roman Empire. Mother goddess worship first appeared in ancient Babel and spread throughout the world. In the museum at Aphrodisias there is a section devoted to these goddesses. There was Artemis, Cybele, Opy, Rhea, Vesta, Kubaba, Tanrika, and others. Some of the goddesses were depicted with a child. An example is Tyche, the goddess of good luck. Another is Isis, who is depicted holding the baby god Horus. This is where Rome borrowed its Madonna-Child veneration.

Some of the old temples have been partially recovered. The temple of Aphrodite at Aphrodisias has some of the pillars still standing. The temple of Artemis at Sardis has been partially recovered. The temple of Artemis at Ephesus stood at the head of the harbor and was one of the Seven Wonders of the World. It took 220 years to build and was 361 feet long and 180 feet wide. “It was built of cedar, cypress, white marble, and even gold, with which it glittered. ... The magnificence of this sanctuary was a proverb throughout the civilized world” (*McClintock and Strong*).

The great altar of Zeus at Pergamos was 40 feet in height and was world renowned. It featured intricate marble carvings depicting a mythical battle between Greek gods (e.g., Zeus and Hercules) and giants. Significant parts of the altar were recovered in the 1870s by German archaeologists and it was reconstructed in the Berlin Museum.

The Roman cities also worshiped the emperors. This was called the imperial cult. An annual festival was held and every citizen was expected to participate. Refusal brought persecution upon the Christians.

At Aphrodisias there was a temple called Sebasteion, which was dedicated to Julius Claudius. It was also associated with the worship of Nike and Aphrodite. At Ephesus there was a temple of Hadrian. It was also associated with Fortune, the god of fate. At Pergamum the temple of Trajan has been partially restored.

We also saw the ruins of an ancient Jewish synagogue in Sardis. Paul preached in the synagogues when he first came to a city. The one at Sardis is the largest ancient synagogue that has been recovered. There was a fountain in the entrance hall. The floors were covered with mosaics. The walls had designs made of marble inlays. The main hall is thought to have had a capacity of 1,000. There were thrones for Elijah and Moses. The throne of Moses was possibly occupied by the head rabbi, the president of the Sanhedrin, and the throne of Elijah by visiting speakers. Smaller thrones have also been discovered in the ruins of the synagogues at Chorazin in Israel, at Hammath by Tiberius, and on the island of Delos in Greece.

Miscellaneous

1. Christ's messages in Revelation 2-3 are addressed to seven individual churches in the Roman province of Asia in that day. There were many other churches in that province (e.g., the church at Colosse was located only a few miles from Laodicea), but the Holy Spirit selected these seven in particular. Seven is the number of completion, and Christ selected these churches because they represented the various conditions that He desired to address.

2. The messages are not addressed to denominations or associations or parachurch organizations. The application is either to churches or to individuals.

3. There is a four-fold application of the messages:

First, the messages were given to instruct the particular churches to which they are addressed.

Second, the messages were given to instruct all churches. The instruction given to the seven churches of Asia in the first century applies to every church of every century (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). Each church that has ever existed is similar to one of these seven.

Third, the messages were given to instruct individual believers (Rev. 2:7, etc.). Every believer can find a wealth of edification and spiritual challenge and warning in these messages.

Finally, the messages offer a general overview of church history. While this is not the main lesson of these chapters (and I believe that any approach that focuses exclusively or even largely on this aspect is wrong), I do believe it is possible to see a general outline of church history here by way of application and I do not believe this is an accident. In fact, Revelation 3:10 obviously looks beyond anything that was experienced by the historical church at Philadelphia in the first century. By the divinely inspired order of the messages to the seven churches we see the same pattern of increasing

apostasy that is revealed in other ways in the New Testament. Compare 2 Timothy 3:1-5, 13; 4:3-4. 2 Timothy 3:13 describes the course of the church age in terms of increasing apostasy: “*But evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving, and being deceived.*” I believe we are living today both in the Philadelphian and the Laodicean age. These ages overlap. Though we are surrounded by the most incredible apostasy, there are still many Bible-believing churches that hold to the old paths and are patiently waiting to be saved out of the world before the tribulation begins. As with a parable, it is wrong to try to press every detail mentioned in these messages toward a historical overview, but the major features do lend themselves toward such an overview in a surprisingly clear manner. Theodore Epp said: “If I were to give a title to this section I would call it ‘The Great Apostasy of the Last Days Traced from the Beginning of the Church’s History.’ We will see how Satan uses what I call ‘the whittling method’ of cutting away the essential features that make a church a church and finally makes it an arm of apostasy. Apostasy is defection from truth, revolt against it, and abandonment of what one has voluntarily professed, or a total departure or desertion from one’s faith or renunciation of it. This is a very serious matter; it began early in church history and will be consummated in the world after the true Church is gone. This decline in faith can be traced through these seven churches with the climax in the great apostate church of Revelation 17” (Epp, *Revelation*).

Viewed Prophetically

EPHESUS (Rev. 2:1-7) -- *The apostolic church leaving its first love.* The early churches as a whole gradually began to abandon their wholehearted zeal for Christ and His Word; they gradually ceased living by faith and settled down comfortably in the world rather than walking as pilgrims in a strange land. “*Ephesus* means ‘desirable,’ such a term as a Greek applied to the maiden of his choice. Ephesus gives us a picture of the church as it was in the beginning, when the Lord held the stars (His servants) in His hand and controlled their ministry. He sent them here and there, just as He would, to proclaim the glad gospel of His grace and to minister to His saints. ... The early church was walking in separation from the world. ... In the days of Ephesus, believers could not bear those who were evil. ... More than that, they were loyal to the truth” (Ironsides).

SMYRNA (Rev. 2:8-11) -- *Persecution and poverty and the synagogue of Satan.* For more than 200 years the churches were persecuted by the Roman emperors. Christ mentions 10 days of persecution, and there were 10 major periods of persecution under 10 principal pagan persecutors (Nero, Domitian, Trajan, Marcus Aurelius, Severus, Maximum, Decius, Valerian, Aurelian, and Diocletian). There was also much poverty, because during this period the believers often had to live hand to mouth and in hiding due to the persecution. Judaism was also rampant throughout the Roman Empire and the Jews continued to hate the Christians and to torment them as they did during Paul’s day. It is written in church history that the Jews provided the wood to burn Polycarp in Smyrna. “Smyrna means ‘myrrh.’ Myrrh had to be crushed for it to emit its fragrance. This description sets forth the period when the church was crushed beneath the iron heel of pagan Rome, yet it never gave out such sweet

fragrance to God as in those two centuries of almost constant martyrdom” (Ironsides).

PERGAMOS (Rev. 2:12-17) -- *Nicolaitanism was developed into a doctrine and Balaamism was rampant.* “Nicolaitan” means “to conquer the people” and refers to the rise of the unbiblical hierarchical doctrine of church government. By the days of Constantine in the fourth century the bishop of Rome was exalted, together with his cohorts, and Nicolaitanism was well on its way to producing the papacy. In the early seventh century Gregory the Great solidified the papacy, becoming “the first of the proper popes” (Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, I. 15), and later that century Pope Theodore I was the first pope officially called sovereign or supreme Pontiff (*General History of the Church*, Darras, II, p. 232). At the same time, there was a gross breakdown of separation from the world (the doctrine of Balaam), and unregenerate pagans were brought into church membership and their pagan practices, such as prayers to the dead and veneration of relics, were Christianized and adopted into the churches. “Constantine’s patronage did what Diocletian’s persecution could not do: it corrupted the church, and she forgot her calling as a chaste virgin espoused to an absent Lord. Then she gave her hand in marriage to the world that had crucified Him, thus entering into an unholy alliance of which she has never really repented” (Ironsides).

THYATIRA (Rev. 2:18-29) -- *The Jezebel spirit; idolatry, fornication, and involvement in satanic things.* Jezebel brought fornication and idolatry into the churches and was associated with “*the depths of Satan*” (Rev. 2:20, 24). These practices, which began in earlier periods, became settled doctrine as the first millennium proceeded and the second began. Fornication became rampant in the Roman Catholic Church because of its unscriptural doctrine of celibacy and confession to a priest. The fornication surrounding the papacy itself has been well documented. Idolatry became rife and Mary was exalted as the chief idol. “Whoredom,

witchcraft, religious fasts,--and murdering God's prophets,--this was Jezebel. Is not this also Rome? Jezebel also supported a horde of idolatrous priests of her own--Babylonians all" (Newell). "During this period also there began that exaltation of Mary the mother of our Lord which has tended to exalt her to the plane of a female deity through whom intercession to God should be made, and apart from whose favor there can be no salvation. The prominence of a woman prophetess in the church at Thyatira anticipates the prominence of this unscriptural exaltation of Mary" (Walvoord). "Jezebel was adept in the art of mixing. She undertook to unite the religion of Israel and the religion of Phoenicia. That is just what Romanism is--a mixture of heathenism, Christianity, and Judaism. It is not Christianity--yet there is in it quite a bit that is Christian. From where did its superstition and image worship come? It was all taken from heathenism under the plea that it would help to convert the pagans. The church became very accommodating. In the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries, we find the church compromising with heathen rites and heathen ceremonies to such a degree that, by the seventh century, one could hardly tell heathen from Christian temples. The amalgamation is such that it is almost impossible to separate the one from the other. ... When He addresses Himself to the church of Thyatira, Christ speaks solemnly as 'the Son of God.' Why does the Lord Jesus Christ emphasize the fact of His deity here? Because Rome everywhere has accustomed people to think of Him as the Son of Mary" (Ironside).

SARDIS (Rev. 3:1-6) -- *A partial, insufficient reformation.* This church had a name that it was alive, but it was actually dead (Rev 3:1). Its works were not perfect before Christ (Rev. 3:2). The church was told to remember the first works, referring to the New Testament pattern given by the apostles (Rev. 3:3). All of these things are characteristic of the denominations that arose out of the Protestant Reformation in the 16th to the 18th centuries. They left the Catholic

Church and rejected some of Rome's false beliefs and practices, but they did not return to the pure apostolic model. They held to infant baptism, a special priesthood, sacraments, liturgy, and other errors. They established state churches and brought the unsaved into church membership by the rite of infant baptism. Thus, though they had a name that they lived, they were largely dead. "Nothing could describe 'Protestantism' more accurately! As over against Romish night and ignorance, she has enlightenment and outward activity: the great 'state churches,' or 'denominations,' with creeds and histories, costly churches and cathedrals, universities and seminaries, 'boards,' bureaus of publication and propaganda, executors of organized activities, including home and foreign missions, even 'lobby' men to 'influence legislation' at court! You and I dare compare the Church with no other model than the Holy Spirit gave at Pentecost and in Paul's day! And compared to *that*--it has a name, but is dead" (Newell). "Nothing can be much sadder than vast congregations of people who are baptized, banded together as Christians, 'taking the sacrament' of the Lord's Supper, zealous for church and Christianity, and yet largely devoid of personal, saving faith in Christ--trusting in forms, ceremonies, and what some people have called 'birthright membership' rather than in new birth through the Word and the Spirit of God" (Ironside).

PHILADELPHIA (Rev. 3:7-13) -- *The churches that keep God's Word* (Rev. 3:8) *and escape the great tribulation* (Rev. 3:10). This depicts the remnant of sound churches that remain true to God until the Rapture. From the fact that Jesus' promise to the church at Philadelphia obviously looks beyond anything that was experienced in that church historically and can only apply directly to churches existing at the time of the Rapture ("*I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth,*" Rev. 3:10), we see that there will be Philadelphia churches existing in the darkest hours at the end

of the church age. Many people today have abandoned the church as an institution, but Jesus said, “*I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it*” (Mat. 16:18), and He promised that He would be with it “*even unto the end of the world*” (Mat. 28:20). Thus in spite of the widespread apostasy that exists in our day we can be encouraged that there are true Philadelphia churches in the world and we are responsible to continue to support Christ’s chosen institution until He comes. We agree with Arno Gaebelein when he said, “Philadelphia is not a defined church-period, but rather a description of a loyal remnant called out by the Spirit of God and bearing the final testimony to the whole counsel of God by word and deed.” And Harry Ironside makes the following observation: “Following the Reformation came a time when a cold, lifeless formalism seemed to settle over *all* Protestant Christendom ... But in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries a great wave of blessing came over all of those lands where the Reformation had gone. God began to work afresh in mighty power. Marvelous awakenings occurred all over Northern Europe and the British Isles. A half century later, the same mighty power began to manifest itself in America. ... A little later, in the early part of the last century, God began in a very special way to arouse many of His people to a deeper sense of the value of His Word and its all-sufficiency for the guidance of His people in this scene” (Ironside).

LAODICEA (Rev. 3:14-22) -- *The unregenerate end-time church*. This church is described as physically wealthy but spiritually wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked (Rev. 3:17). The Lord Jesus is standing outside of this church inviting individuals to come to Him. This is a picture of the apostate churches of the last hours of the church age. Compare Revelation 18:4. “Laodicea is a compound word meaning ‘*the rights of the people*.’ Could any other term more aptly set forth the condition of modern affairs? It is the era of

democratization in both the world and the church. ... The spirit of this ultrademocratic age has invaded a large portion of the professed church. The authority of God and His Word is rapidly being denied. The spirit of the age is the spirit of a large part of the church; hence, the striking correspondence between this letter to the Laodiceans and the latitudinarianism so prevalent about us. ... There is neither burning zeal for His Word nor yet absolute repudiation of Christ and the Bible. Instead, there is a nauseating, lukewarm condition that is abhorrent to the Spirit of God. ... Never were church dignitaries and carnally minded religious leaders more satisfied with themselves and their great work than today. They advocate anything and everything that will seem to increase the church's popularity. ... Ah, beloved friends, it is getting late in the dispensation, the night-shades are fast falling, and the Lord who, in the beginning, was in the midst of His church, stands outside that lukewarm system that calls itself by His name, and He knocks in vain for entrance!" (Ironsides). "It is *Laodicean*,--conformed in everything to the popular judgment and will,--the extreme opposite of Nicolaitan. Instead of a Church of domineering clericals, it is the Church of the domineering mob, in which nothing may be safely preached except what the people are pleased to hear,--in which the teachings of the pulpit are fashioned to the tastes of the pew, and the feelings of the individual override the enactments of legitimate authority. It is lukewarm,--nothing decided,--partly hot and partly cold,--divided between Christ and the world,--not willing to give up pretension and claim to the heavenly, and yet clinging close to the earthly,--having too much conscience to cast off the name of Christ, and too much love for the world to take a firm and honest stand entirely on His side. There is much religiousness, but little religion; much sentiment, but very little of life to correspond; much profession, but very little faith; a joining of the ball-room to the communion-table, of the opera with the worship of God, and of the feasting and

riot of the world with pretended charity and Christian benevolence. And it is self-satisfied, boastful, and empty. Having come down to the world's tastes, and gained the world's praise and patronage, the Laodiceans think they are rich, and increased with goods, and have need in nothing. Such splendid churches, and influential and intelligent congregations, and learned, agreeable preachers! Such admirable worship and music! Such excellently manned and endowed institutions! So many missionaries in the field! So much given for magnificent charities! Such an array in all the attributes of greatness and power! What more can be wanted? ... Can any man scrutinize narrowly the professed Church of our day, and say that we have not reached the Laodicean age?" (J.A. Seiss, *The Apocalypse*, 1900).

A summary of the lessons from this overview of church history:

1. The church of Jesus Christ will not be conquered by the world and will not die. In spite of apostasy and persecution, the Philadelphian church exists in the last days and is Raptured. Compare Matthew 16:18.

2. Apostasy will increase until the end. Compare 2 Timothy 3:13. The prophetic picture described in Christ's messages to the seven churches is one of increasing apostasy from the New Testament pattern as the church age progresses. This, of course, is exactly what we see in history, and the apostasy is increasing continually before our very eyes.

3. In these messages Christ reveals Himself in a different way to each church in accordance with the church's situation and need (Rev. 2:1, 8, 12, 18, etc.). This is true in the Christian life. As we walk through this world and we have many experiences, we come to know Christ in new ways as He communicates with us in those experiences. "Christ's titles, and Christ's threats, and Christ's promises are adapted to meet the specific condition of each church as it comes up:

he does not use the same threats, he does not use the same titles; he does not offer the same promises, but in every case there is an adaptation to the need, showing the infinite diversity in Christ so as to suit the diverse needs” (B.H. Carroll).

4. Christ’s promises to the overcomer, when grouped together, show the wonders and blessings of salvation. There are 13 specific promises. He that overcometh will eat the tree of life (Rev. 2:7), will not be hurt of the second death (2:11), will eat the hidden manna and have a white stone upon which a new name is written (2:17), will have authority over the nations (2:27), will have the morning star (2:28), will be arrayed in white garments and his name will not be blotted out of the book of life and Christ will confess his name before the Father and the angels (3:5), will be a pillar in the temple of God (3:12) and will bear the name of God and of the city of God and will have a new name (3:12), and will sit down with Christ in His throne (3:21).

5. The messages to the churches inform us that false teaching and compromise had already leavened some of the apostolic churches. These churches were about 40 years old when Revelation was written (the church at Corinth, for example, was established in about 58 A.D. on Paul’s third missionary journey), so they were in their second generation; the founding believers were quickly passing from the scene.

If the apostolic churches in the first century became corrupt so quickly, we should not be surprised when we see such widespread apostasy in churches today, 2000 years later, at the end of the church age.

This warns us that every church must be exceedingly alert because apostasy can occur quickly. A church is always in danger of losing its first love and backsliding.

6. Prosperity is a danger to the spiritual life of the church. The two churches that were most prosperous were in the worst condition (Sardis and Laodicea), while the two

churches that were most weak and poor were in the best condition, spiritually (Smyrna and Philadelphia).

7. Churches need to be reprovved so they will stay on the right path. The job of preachers is to “*reprove, rebuke, exhort*” (2 Tim. 4:2).

8. Sin and error must be dealt with at its inception. Christ does not wait for error in the churches to come to full bloom. He exposes it and rebukes it in its infancy, so that it will not increase, because “*a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump*” (1 Cor. 5:6). This is an important lesson for pastors and preachers. Even good churches need correction and reproof. When I expose the error of fundamentalists and independent Baptists and evangelicals, I am told that I should look at the good and not be so critical. Those who have such a philosophy do understand neither the nature of error (it begins small but increases rapidly if not dealt with) nor the job of a preacher.

9. Church membership has never been a guarantee of salvation. There were unsaved people even in these apostolic churches. There was Jezebel and her children and the Nicolaitans and the Balaamites, and the majority of the members at Laodicea were “*wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked*” while Christ was standing outside of the church.

10. Many of the major heresies that have plagued the churches throughout the age originated in the first century and are described in these chapters. There is the heresy of Nicolaitanism, which is the abuse of pastoral authority and prelaty and priestcraft; the heresy of Balaam, which is to join the church with the world; the heresy of false apostles; the heresy of Judaism, which is to corrupt the grace of Christ by mixing it together with law and works; the heresy of female leadership, etc.

11. John faithfully wrote all that the Lord showed him in regard to the churches. John showed himself a true and faithful minister by holding nothing back, by giving both the

positive and the negative, the popular and the unpopular. Though John was familiar with these churches and had personally labored in the church of Ephesus, he does not allow human sentimentality or fear of man to keep him from delivering Christ's warnings. The preacher who refrains from delivering the whole counsel of God is a terrible compromiser who does a serious disservice to the people and brings judgment upon himself. Like John, Paul declared the whole counsel of God to the churches and by doing so he understood that he had made himself "*pure from the blood of all men*" (Acts 20:26-27). He understood that he was accountable before God to give the whole counsel of God, and if he refrained from doing so he would stand accused of a serious spiritual crime.

The Church at Ephesus

“Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus write; These things saith he that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand, who walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks; I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil: and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars: And hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name's sake hast laboured, and hast not fainted. Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love. Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent. But this thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God” (Revelation 2:1-7).

1. The ancient city of Ephesus

Ephesus was the chief city of the region of Lydia in the Roman province of Asia and during the time of Caesar Augustus it bore the title “the first and greatest metropolis of Asia” (McClintock and Strong). It was called “the light of Asia” and “the market of Asia.” It was here that the Roman proconsul or governor lived.

Its prestige and wealth stemmed largely from its situation. It was located on the coast of the Aegean Sea, surrounded by very fertile soil and enjoying an exceptional climate. It had a large artificial harbor, the greatest in Asia, though it was subject to silting and shifting. After centuries of this process the sea has receded and the shore is now six miles away. “Standing at the entrance of the valley which reaches far into the interior of Asia Minor, and connected by highways with

the chief cities of the province, Ephesus was the most easily accessible city in Asia, both by land and sea” (*International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*).

It had a magnificent theater that could seat 24,000, and a large portion of it is still visible today in the excavated area of the city. It is in this theater that the event described in Acts 19:23-41 took place, when the people were stirred up against the apostle Paul by the idol-maker Demetrius. The theater was adorned with numerous pagan statues such as Cupid and Nike (also called Victory).

Ephesus was dedicated to the worship of Diana (Acts 19:24-28). (The Greeks called her *Artemis*, while the Romans called her *Diana*.) There was a magnificent temple of Diana at the head of the city’s harbor. The temple, which took 220 years to build with funds provided from cities throughout Asia Minor, was listed among the “seven wonders of the ancient world.” It was 110 meters (361 feet) long and 55 meters (180.5 feet) wide, sitting on a platform 127 meters (420 feet) long and 73 meters (240 feet) wide (Edwin Yamauchi, *New Testament Cities*, p. 103). “It was supported by 127 columns, each of which had been contributed by some prince, and were 60 feet high; 36 of them were richly carved. [They were also overlaid with gold.] ... The temple was built of cedar, cypress, white marble, and even gold, with which it glittered. ... The magnificence of this sanctuary was a proverb throughout the civilized world” (*McClintock and Strong*). One ancient writer testified: “I have seen the walls of the hanging gardens of Babylon, the statue of Zeus of Olympia, the Colossus of Rhodes, the lofty pyramids, the pharos of Alexandria and the ancient tomb of Mausolus. But when I beheld the temple at Ephesus towering in the clouds, all these other marvels were eclipsed” (J.T. Marlin. *The Seven Churches of Asia Minor*, p. 36).

The temple of Diana was filled with incalculable treasure that was donated to the goddess, and because of its strength

and prestige it became a banking center where people stored their money for safe-keeping.

The right of sanctuary or asylum was granted to any criminal who took refuge within a bowshot of the Diana temple, but this system became so abused and the number of criminals so increased in the surrounding village that it was abolished by the emperor Tiberius.

The temple of Diana burned in 262 A.D. for the fifth time and was never rebuilt. Some of its marble was used to build the Church of St. Sophia in Constantinople and the Basilica of St. John in Ephesus. Other columns and sculptured stones were carried to Rome and used in the building of Roman Catholic churches. In the 14th century the Cayster river overflowed its banks and deposited mud over the spot of the former temple, “and at last its very site was forgotten.”

The temple ruins were discovered in 1870 during an excavation for the British Museum led by John T. Wood. “Almost by accident it was then found in the valley outside the city walls, several feet below the present surface. Its foundation, which alone remained, enabled Mr. Wood to reconstruct the entire temple plan. The temple was built upon a foundation which was reached by a flight of ten steps. ... like the temples of Greece, its interior was open to the sky” (*International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*).

Ephesus was also famous for its magic arts. The “Ephesian letters,” containing magic formulas written on paper or parchment, were much sought after for use as amulets to ward off evil spirits and to bring good luck. Through Paul’s preaching and the conversion of many people at Ephesus a bonfire was made of magic books at the time of the founding of the church there (Acts 19:17-19).

Present day Ephesus is located in Turkey and is called Selcuk, with a population of 10,000. Extensive archeological excavations have been carried out since the discovery of the ruins of the ancient Diana temple in the 19th century.

2. The history of the church at Ephesus

This church had a glorious history. Paul visited Ephesus briefly on his first missionary journey (Acts 18:19-21), but the church was established on his third journey when he spent two years there preaching the Word of God (Acts 19:8-10).

Paul's epistle to the church at Ephesus (written from Rome during his first imprisonment) is one of great spiritual depth. It is obvious that this church was mature and could receive the deeper things of Christ.

Paul gave a powerful final message to the elders at Ephesus on his third missionary journey (Acts 20:17-31). He was headed back to Jerusalem and was hurrying in an attempt to get there by Pentecost. He sailed down the western coast of Asia and stopped at Miletus, which is about 30 miles south of Ephesus, and sent for the elders to come there. It was a two-day journey in those days. He warned them to stand fast in the apostolic doctrine that he had delivered to them and to feed the flock and protect it from false teachers.

Timothy labored in Ephesus and was there when that he received Paul's first epistle (1 Tim. 1:3). Thus, the very powerful and practical instruction from the first epistle to Timothy was doubtless delivered directly to the church at Ephesus by Timothy. The theme of this epistle is how to conduct ourselves in the church (1 Tim. 3:15), and it deals with such things as prayer (1 Tim. 2:1-8), the woman's ministry (1 Tim. 2:9-15), qualifications for pastors and deacons (1 Tim. 3), and how to deal with false teachers (1 Tim. 4).

According to early and well-documented tradition, the apostle John ministered at Ephesus in his old age.

3. Christ's revelation of Himself to the church at Ephesus (Rev. 2:1)

Christ reveals Himself to each of the churches in a particular way that relates to their condition.

To the church at Ephesus he reveals Himself particularly in the aspect of intimacy and protection, as "*he that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand, who walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks.*" "What could be more proper to awaken and recover a drowsy and declining church than to hear Christ speaking as one that held the stars in his hand, and walked in the midst of the golden candlesticks?" (Matthew Henry).

We are reminded that Christ protects and leads the churches, holding the seven stars in his right hand.

He is also actively involved with the churches, walking in their midst, watching over them, observing everything they do, intimately involved with every aspect of the church's life.

4. Christ's commendation of the church at Ephesus (Rev. 2:2-3, 6)

He begins by encouraging them about what they are doing right. Though He does not ignore their error, He also does not ignore their good works.

"I know thy works, and thy labour ... and for my name's sake hast laboured" (Rev. 2:2, 3).

To each of the churches Christ says, "*I know thy works...*" (Rev. 2:2, 9, 13, 19; 3:1, 8, 15). "This word 'I know' is inexpressibly solemn, and we cannot avoid the truth that the Lord is directly cognizant of every detail about every assembly of His on earth" (Newell).

This was a very zealous church. Jesus spoke of their works and their labour three separate times.

We are saved by grace but we are saved to serve (Eph. 2:8-10). It is not "legalism" for the believer to take Christ's commands in the New Testament seriously and to labour

therein diligently. In John 15 Jesus likened the believer to a branch that grows from the Vine, and He expects the branches to be fruitful (Jn. 15:16).

Laziness in the Christian life is a great sin. There is much work to do. The book of Proverbs warns about the sin of sloth many times (e.g., Prov. 6:6-11; 10:4, 26; 12:24; 13:4; 18:9; 19:15; 20:4, 13; 21:25; 22:13, 29; 24:30-34; 27:23-27).

Note that they labored *for Christ's sake*.

This was the commendable motive of their labor. They were not laboring in order to make themselves right before God or to justify themselves. They were not laboring to please a friend or a parent or a church leader. They were not laboring in order to appear spiritual to others. They were laboring for the Lord.

We are reminded here that God alone can look on the heart and see its motives. Man can only see the external things.

The mention of works reminds us of Christ's Great Commission. This is the work that He emphasized after His resurrection. Five times it is repeated in the Gospels and Acts (Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:44-48; John 20:21-23; Acts 1:8). The churches are to go into all the world, preaching the gospel to every creature, baptizing those that believe, and teaching them to observe all things that Christ has commanded us in the Scripture. This requires the establishment of New Testament churches as discipleship centers and headquarters for the furtherance of the gospel.

"and thy patience ... And hast borne, and hast patience ... and hast not fainted" (Rev. 2:2).

Patience is repeated four times for emphasis. This was something in which they excelled, and it is a very commendable thing.

Patience is necessary because of the trials of the Christian life and the many spiritual enemies we face. Peter says, *"Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you"* (1

Pet. 4:12). Peter elsewhere speaks of “*manifold temptations*” (1 Pet. 1:6) and instructs his listeners, “*Forasmuch then as Christ hath suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves likewise with the same mind*” (1 Pet. 4:1). James says, “*My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations, knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience*” (Jam. 1:2-3). Paul told the church at Thessalonica: “*That no man should be moved by these afflictions: for yourselves know that we are appointed thereunto. For verily, when we were with you, we told you before that we should suffer tribulation; even as it came to pass, and ye know*” (1 Thess. 3:3-4).

The Christian life is a marathon rather than a sprint. It is a long distance race that must be “*run with patience*” hour by hour, day by day (Heb. 12:1).

Patience is evidence of true saving faith. In the Parable of the Sower, Christ described the good seed as they “*which in an honest and good heart, having heard the word, keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience*” (Lk. 8:15).

“*and how thou canst not bear them which are evil* (Rev. 2:2)

This refers to the discipline of sin in the church. Compare 1 Corinthians 5. Today such discipline is rarely heard of even in Bible-believing churches. In 1998 Dean Register, president of the Mississippi Baptist Convention, testified: “It’s very unusual for Southern Baptist churches to take disciplinary action against an individual” (*The Sun Herald*, Biloxi, Mississippi, Sept. 13, 1998). And in “Church Discipline: The Missing Mark,” R. Albert Mohler, Jr., observed: “The decline of church discipline is perhaps the most visible failure of the contemporary church. No longer concerned with maintaining purity of confession or lifestyle, the contemporary church sees itself as a voluntary association of autonomous members, with minimal moral accountability to God, must less to each other. ... THE PRESENT GENERATION OF BOTH MINISTERS AND CHURCH MEMBERS IS VIRTUALLY WITHOUT EXPERIENCE OF

BIBLICAL DISCIPLINE. ... By the 1960s, only a minority of churches even pretended to practice regulative church discipline. ... Consumed with pragmatic methods of church growth and congregational engineering, most churches leave moral matters to the domain of the individual conscience” (from chapter 8 of *The Compromised Church*, edited by John H. Armstrong, Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1998).

Observe how dogmatic and “narrow-minded” the church at Ephesus was. They distinguished plainly between good and evil, righteousness and unrighteousness, truth and error. All was black and white. And where did this dogmatism come from? It came from their love for the Word of God. They knew good from evil because they were committed to the Scriptures. In contrast to the church at Ephesus, the New Evangelical today likes to think that most issues are gray and that we should not draw strict lines. He tells us that we should look at issues from all sides and then we will learn to be more broadminded. The church at Ephesus would be greatly despised by today’s evangelicalism.

and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars” (Rev. 2:2).

The church at Ephesus did not tolerate error. In contrast to this, Paul was afraid that the church at Corinth “*might well bear with*” those that taught false doctrine (2 Cor. 11:3-4). New Evangelicalism is characterized by toleration of error. While the New Evangelical might not agree with such errors as Roman Catholicism or Pentecostalism, he also does not like to speak plainly against them. For example, prominent evangelical leader Chuck Swindoll said: “I’m not a charismatic. However, I don’t feel it’s my calling to shoot great volleys of theological artillery at my charismatic brothers and sister” (*Grace Awakening*, p. 188).

The church of Ephesus tried false teachers. We see by the fact that Christ commended them for that that He is pleased when churches test all things by God’s Word. In Acts 17:11

the Bereans are called “noble” because they “*searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.*” See also Romans 16:17; 1 Thessalonians 5:21; 1 John 4:1. Contrary to the thinking of this compromised generation, this is not legalism or Phariseism. The Pharisees did not test things by God’s Word; they tested things by their own tradition (Mat. 15:3). They judged on the basis of their own thinking rather than on the basis of God’s. “Ministerial courtesy’ had no place at Ephesus! Plain scripture tests are given. To permit men known to be bad to be in fellowship or even in office, is common today, but is treachery to Christ--whom the Church represents. Further, it is deadly wrong instead of kindness, to the unsaved and evil, to have them in ‘fellowship.’ Some day they will curse you for such unfaithfulness” (Newell).

Jesus commends the church for finding the false teachers out to be liars (Rev. 2:2). The Bible is a very plain-spoken book. Its focus is truth rather than diplomacy. The Lord Jesus Christ is not a New Evangelical who tries to focus on the positive and avoid injuring His hearer’s self-esteem. If a man is a liar, He calls him a liar.

According to Christ, those who claim to be apostles but are not are not merely wrong and misguided; they are liars. There is no excuse for men to be deceived about the truth. They can know the truth if they will submit to God and obey His Word (John 7:17). Those who are deceived are those who are not doers of the Word (James 1:22). False teachers are both “*deceiving, and being deceived*” (2 Tim. 3:13). Their conscience is seared (1 Tim. 4:1-2).

We see that even in the early days of the churches there were many false apostles. Jesus uses the term in the plural. Compare 2 Corinthians 11:13-15.

These false apostles existed in the first century and multiplied in the next two centuries. They not only taught false doctrine but they also wrote false gospels and epistles. There was the Gospel of Nicodemus, with its mythical history of Mary’s early years; and the Shepherd of Hermas, with its

fanciful visions of a female angel; and the Gospel of Peter, which denied that the man Jesus was the Christ; and the Gospel of Thomas, with its mythical record of miracles wrought by Jesus when he was a child; and the Gospel of Judas, which depicted Judas as the only apostle who truly understood Jesus and who betrayed his master only because Jesus asked him to do so.

The papacy is built upon a claim to apostleship. The pope claims by means of “apostolic succession” to sit in Peter’s seat and to exercise apostolic authority. He claims to be able to issue apostolic decrees (bulls) and to create apostolic councils to declare doctrine.

Pentecostals and Charismatics in general have claimed to operate in apostolic power and “sign gifts,” and some have claimed to be actual apostles.

“But this thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate” (Rev. 2:6).

Two separate times Christ commends this church for standing against false teaching. It is never wrong, never contrary to God’s will, never contrary to New Testament Christianity, for a church to be zealous for the truth and to expose every error. The spirit of evangelical Christianity in our day is against those who fight for the faith and who hate error, but to fight the good fight of faith is to follow the apostolic pattern.

What was the error of the Nicolaitans?

From the two mentions in Revelation 2:5 and 2:15 we learn the following: both their deeds and their doctrines were contrary to the New Testament faith, and their deeds and doctrines were hated by the church of Ephesus and by Jesus Christ.

Many commentators have identified this Nicolaitanism with a sect that existed in the second century by that name. It was Antinomian in doctrine, meaning that it taught that since the believer is saved by God’s grace he is free to do what

he pleases and sin cannot hurt him. Adam Clarke, for example, says the Nicolaitans “taught the community of wives, that adultery and fornication were things indifferent; that eating meats offered to idols was quite lawful; and mixed several pagan rites with the Christian ceremonies.” I do not believe that this is the correct identity of Nicolaitanism for two reasons. First, if this is the definition of Nicolaitanism, it would mean that the doctrine of Balaam and the doctrine of Nicolaitanism were the same, but since Christ mentions both in regard to the church of Pergamos (Rev. 2:14-15) we believe there are two separate errors. Second, God does not require us to go outside of the Scripture to define Bible words; the Bible is a self-defining book. Thus we do not believe that Nicolaitanism was the error of mixing Christianity with the world, but that it was characterized as follows:

From its name, Nicolaitanism appears to be a misuse of pastoral authority and the unscriptural exaltation of men over the churches. The term *Nicolaitan* means “to conquer or rule the people” (from *nikao*, to conquer; and *laos*, people). It describes the philosophy of prelacy that arose during the days of the apostles and spread quickly in the following centuries and that eventually produced the papacy. It describes the exercise of unscriptural authority by church leaders. Nicolaitanism begins small and increases with time. Not content to fulfill the humble pastoral role God has assigned to them, these men expanded their authority first within the assembly and then beyond the bounds of the assembly and ruled over entire regions, and in the case of the pope, the entire world. Nicolaitanism produced the territorial bishop (as opposed to the biblical bishop, which is the same humble office in the assembly as the *elder* and *pastor*), the archbishop, the metropolitan, the cardinal, and the pope. This false doctrine was carried over to some extent into the Protestant denominations (Lutheran, Anglican, Presbyterian, Methodist). “Who were the Nicolaitans? The old writers tried to connect them with Nicolas of Antioch, but unsuccessfully.

There is really no known record, except in The Revelation, of any sect by this name in the early church. It is not the manner of Scripture to compel its readers to obtain wisdom for its interpretation from outside history. Therefore, if we do not find a direct Bible allusion, as in the case of Balaam, we may look for the meaning in the structure of the word, as, for instance, in the name Melchizedek, 'king of righteousness,' from the meaning of his name; and 'king of peace,' from the city (Salem) he rules. We would in this way find 'Nicolaitan' derived from *nikao*, to conquer; and *laos*, people; and the meaning, rulers of the laity, indicating that dire clerisy which very early sprang up. A priestly caste was formed, corresponding to the priests and Levites in Judaism" (Newell).

The most important lesson from Christ's mention of Nicolaitans is that every doctrine and practice that is contrary to the New Testament is to be exposed and rejected by the churches. "All that is important, however, for our purpose, is clear, namely, that God is pleased when the church is decided and firm in withstanding every corruption, in sentiment and practice within her pale" (Abbott).

Christ put labels on prominent errors, and this is an example for us today. In these messages to the churches Christ named the doctrine of the Nicolaitans and the doctrine of Balaam and the woman Jezebel (Rev. 2:20). It is wise to put labels on canned food, and it is just as wise to put labels on heresy. "It is very lawful to fix the name of the leaders of any heresy upon those who follow them. It is the shortest way of telling whom we mean" (Matthew Henry).

Note that the church at Ephesus hated the deeds of these false teachers, and Christ commends them for it.

It is not enough to love the truth; we must hate that which is contrary to the truth. This is the spirit of Jesus Christ, who "*loved righteousness, and hated iniquity*" (Heb. 1:9). This is the spirit of the godly Psalmist: "*Therefore I esteem all thy precepts concerning all things to be right; and I hate every false*

way” (Psa. 119:128). The Psalmist exhorts God’s people to follow his example: “*Ye that love the LORD, hate evil*” (Psa. 97:10). The fear of the Lord teaches the wise “*to hate evil*” (Prov. 8:13). The New Testament believer is admonished to “*abhor that which is evil*” (Rom. 12:9). When King Jehoshaphat tried to love the truth and love heretics at the same time, he was rebuked of God. “*And Jehu the son of Hanani the seer went out to meet him, and said to king Jehoshaphat, Shouldest thou help the ungodly, and love them that hate the LORD? therefore is wrath upon thee from before the LORD*” (2 Chron. 19:2).

Note that the church did not hate the Nicolaitans themselves; it hated their deeds (Rev. 2:6). It has been said that the believer should hate the sin and love the sinner, and this is the teaching of Scripture. Likewise, Christ did not hate the Nicolaitans; He hated their doctrine (Rev. 2:15). God the Father loves all sinners and sent Jesus to die for them (John 3:16), and they can be saved if they will repent and receive Christ as they are divinely enlightened (Jn. 1:9), drawn (Jn. 12:32), and convicted (Jn. 16:8). God “*will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth*” (1 Tim. 2:4).

5. Christ’s exhortation to the church at Ephesus (Rev. 2:4-6)

We see that Jesus does not overlook sin and error just because believers are zealous. Jesus is not a New Evangelical who focuses on “positive truth.” He does not neglect reproof and discipline and separation. One fundamental Baptist leader taught that God overlooks many things if someone is a zealous soul winner, but the Bible does not support this. In this passage we see very clearly how Jesus looks upon the churches and how He judges. The Bible says that Jesus had these things against the church at Ephesus. He warned them sharply. He did not fear injuring their self-esteem, so to

speak. That Jesus greatly loves His people does not mean that He does not rebuke and warn. Compare Hebrews 12:6.

Notice the nature of their sin. They had left their first love (Rev. 2:4). How amazing it is that the eternal Son of God would feel this loss so deeply!

The believer's first love is his warm devotion to Christ, his continual thankfulness toward God in Christ, his zeal not only to serve Christ wholeheartedly but also to fellowship closely and sweetly and continually with Him.

Compare Jeremiah 2:2-5, where God describes Israel's first love.

It is like the first love of marriage. It is spiritual "honeymoon love." Christ is the bridegroom, and the church is His bride (Eph. 5:25). "Consider newly-married people. Their life is one continuous story of affection--delight in one another. Service is not service, but gladness, for such a bride. Two New England girls worked in a textile factory. Mary went away on a visit of several months. Returning, and meeting her friend on the street, she asked her, 'Maggie, are you working at the same old factory?' 'I'm not working at all,' burst out Maggie: 'I'm *married!*' Doubtless such a one was busier with her housework than ever she had been at the factory! But she toiled unconscious of the work as such, because it was for *him*. She parted from him with an embrace as he went to work in the morning, and she prepared the evening meal ever looking out at door or window for his coming. As he neared home, she went to meet him. All her labor was a mere circumstance, swallowed up in her devotion to her husband. But days, weeks, months pass, and she becomes occupied with the details of her housekeeping, of her own life. She prepares just as good meals, keeps the house in as good, perhaps even better, order; but she has gradually changed her habit of watching for her husband at night, or going eagerly to meet him. She calls, 'Goodbye' from somewhere upstairs in the morning, instead of holding him fast every moment she can. Now this was Ephesus; and this

was the departure from first love: while Christ, the Bridegroom, has love in all its freshness, and will evermore have, for the Church. It was Ephesus, leaving that devoted pouring out of response to His love that grieved His very heart!” (Newell).

We see that a church can be doctrinally sound and very zealous in many ways and still not be pleasing to the Lord.

To leave one’s first love is a heart matter and is therefore something that only Jesus can see. If we could have observed the church at Ephesus we would doubtless have been impressed. There would have been nothing that we could have found against them by all external tests. This is why Paul said that he did not judge anything before the time (1 Cor. 4:3-5). He was not saying that he refused to judge anything at all. We know that he judged many things. He judged sin in the church at Corinth (1 Cor. 5) and he judged false teachers and other things. What he was saying in 1 Corinthians 4 is that since we do not know everything in this present life we cannot make *final* judgments. That must be left to God.

To leave one’s first love for Christ is a serious matter. Jesus described it as “*thou art fallen*” (Rev. 2:5). Fallen! Backslidden! Not because they committed some gross sin or were lazy in the service of Christ, but because they had left their first love for Him.

Notice that they didn’t *lose* their first love; they *left* it. It is a willful thing. Instead of retaining their focus on Christ, they allowed themselves to become sidetracked and allowed their spiritual fervor for the Saviour to cool down.

Leaving one’s first love is the result of the love of other things entering in. A wife loses her first love when she begins to focus her attention on things other than her husband, whether it be her children or her work or her friends or her hobbies or even another man. The believer must be very careful not to allow the love of other things, even good things, to quench his love for Christ. The Bible warns us not to love the world (1 John 2:15) and not to love money (1 Tim.

6:10) and not even to love father and mother more than Christ (Mat. 10:37). “Whatever the object of love, anything which hinders a true love for God may cause a Christian to lose his first love even as was true of Ephesus so long ago” (Walvoord).

Thus, to leave one’s first love is to break the first commandment (“*Thou shalt have no other gods before me,*” Ex. 20:3). The first and great commandment, Jesus said, is to “*love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength*” (Mark 12:30). Thus, anything that is first in one’s heart before God is an idol.

To leave the first love for Christ is characteristic of the second generation. This church had been established about 40 years earlier in about 58 A.D. (on Paul’s third missionary journey), and it was therefore in its second generation when Christ addressed it in Revelation 2. The founding believers were quickly passing from the scene. There is always great spiritual danger in the second generation of a church or a Christian family. The first generation has received Christ and delighted in the things of Christ and fought great spiritual battles and learned the value of faith, but oftentimes the Christianity of the second generation is more nominal and less fervent. The things of Christ are not as personally exciting and fulfilling as they were to the first generation.

To leave one’s first love for Christ is the first step toward every form of backsliding and apostasy. If we see a professing Christian stop reading his Bible and stop attending church and stop serving Christ, it is because at some point he left his first love in his heart. We speak of the believer “falling into sin,” but in reality we do not fall into gross sin; rather, we slide into it because of a wayward heart. “Thus it has ever been in the history of the church: first a cooling of spiritual love, then the love of God replaced by a love for the things of the world, with resulting compromise and spiritual corruption. This is followed by departure from the faith and

loss of effective spiritual testimony” (Walvoord). “This is the beginning of that decline which ends in Laodicea, and Laodicea’s awful state: ‘I have need of nothing,’ yet loathsome, in poverty, wretchedness, misery, blindness, and nakedness!” (Newell).

One cannot leave his first love unless he has first had a first love, and the first love is the product of Biblical salvation. The conversions recorded in the Bible produced dramatic changes, e.g., Zacchaeus (Luke 19:8-9), the Jews at Pentecost (Acts 2:41-42), the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:39), Lydia (Acts 16:14-15), the Philippian jailer (Acts 16:30-34), the Thessalonians (1 Thess. 1:9-10), etc. In contrast, the popular “Quick Prayerism” methodology of evangelism rarely results in any sort of first love for Christ and righteousness, because it is too quick to lead an individual in a sinner’s prayer even when there is no clear evidence that he understands the gospel properly and there is no conviction of sin or repentance, and it is quick to give such an individual “assurance of salvation” even when there is no evidence of the new birth.

There is a relative aspect to the Christian’s first love. In marriage not every wife loves her husband with the same fervency even in the earliest days of the relationship. This is also true in the Christian life. Every true believer has a first love for his Saviour, but this “honeymoon love” for Christ does not have the same fervency in every believer. Knowing each heart perfectly, Christ can gauge to what extent each believer has left his or her first love. It appears that the church at Ephesus had a very fervent first love.

Notice how seriously Jesus took this sin (Rev. 2:5).

He was going to deal with it quickly (“*or else I will come unto thee quickly*,” Rev. 2:5).

It is important to interpret this in light of how God looks at time rather than how man looks at it. Christ is patient and longsuffering and desires mercy more than judgment, but He warned the church that He would not delay in taking action

against this sin, and it would be foolish to presume upon His patience. Consider how quickly He dealt with the sin of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11). As soon as they lied to Peter and the Holy Spirit, they were judged.

This also refers to the fact that when Christ acts in judgment on a church, He acts decisively.

He was going to remove their candlestick (“*and will remove thy candlestick out of his place,*” Rev. 2:5). Since the candlestick is the church’s testimony itself, Christ was warning that this church would no longer function as a church of Jesus Christ *before Him*. This does not mean that the church would cease to exist physically. Multitudes of churches exist in this world that are not true candlesticks before the Lord. They go through the motions of church life, but Christ has departed.

Notice what Jesus required of them:

They were exhorted to remember (“*remember therefore from whence thou art fallen,*” Rev. 2:5). This is always the first step in getting right with God. When I have sinned, I must acknowledge my sin. I must stop making excuses for it and blaming other things or other people. I must agree with God that it is a sin. Note that Christ described their condition as having “fallen.” If they pretended that everything was fine between them and God and refused to admit that they had fallen from His will, they would be judged. “Those that have lost their first love must compare their present with their former state, and consider how much better it was with them then than now, how much peace, strength, purity, and pleasure they have lost, by leaving their first love,--how much more comfortably they could lie down and sleep at night,--how much more cheerfully they could awake in the morning,--how much better they could bear afflictions, and how much more becomingly they could enjoy the favours of Providence,--how much easier the thoughts of death were to them, and how much stronger their desires and hopes of heaven” (Matthew Henry).

They were exhorted to repent (“*and repent*,” Rev. 2:5).

More was required than remembering and agreeing that they had fallen. They must repent of the sin. *Repentance means to turn around and go the other way. It is a change of mind that results in a change of life.*

There are two types of repentance. *First, there is a repentance unto salvation that is a one-time thing and is never repeated* (Acts 3:19; 11:18; 17:30; 20:21; 26:20; 2 Pet. 3:9). *Second, there is a repentance in the Christian life that occurs on an ongoing basis as often as sin needs to be repented of* (2 Cor. 7:9; 12:21).

Repentance is mentioned six times in Christ’s messages to the churches in Revelation 2-3. It is mentioned in connection with the church at Ephesus (2:5), the church at Pergamos (2:16), the church at Thyatira (2:21-22), the church at Sardis (3:3), and the church at Laodicea (3:19). The only churches that were not exhorted to repent were those at Smyrna and Philadelphia. The latter two were the poorest, weakest, and most despised of the seven churches.

They were exhorted to do the first works (“*and do the first works*,” Rev. 2:5).

Their repentance would be evident by a change in action. Christ is exhorting them to return to the first love that they had for Him. They were doing many works, but they were not doing the works from a heart of first love for Christ.

This is God’s requirement for backsliding in general. I must remember from whence I have fallen, and repent, and do the first works. If I have slacked off on my private devotions and am no longer meeting the Lord daily for prayer and Bible study as I once did, I must renew this practice. I recall one Christian brother who vowed to the Lord never to eat a meal in a day until after he had read God’s Word. That is a first love sort of zeal, but it is not difficult to let that slide away. If I have stopped being faithful to church as I once was, I must start being faithful again and put the Lord’s church in its

proper place in my life. If I have stopped being sensitive to the effort of sin in my life and stopped putting it out of my life as diligently as I once did, I must begin this work anew. The backslider meets the Lord by returning to his first works.

Since Christ commands His people to love Himself and others, it is obvious that love is in the power of the will by God's grace. Christian love is not something I must feel, but something I must do.

Notice that Jesus does not want them to tone down their zeal for the truth and their repudiation of error (Rev. 2:6). It is not uncommon for believers who have been zealous for the truth and who have backslidden to some degree to think that they should tone down this side of things and to focus rather on the "positive" and "loving" things, but note that in the very context of rebuking the church at Ephesus for leaving their first love Christ commends their hatred of the deeds of the Nicolaitans.

6. Christ's final word to the church at Ephesus (Rev. 2:7).

"He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit sayeth unto the churches."

This is a powerful exhortation by which the Lord would impress upon us that these messages are very important and that it is imperative that each church and each believer give heed to them earnestly and apply their principles vigorously.

Christ used this expression in His earthly ministry (Mat. 11:15; 13:9, 43).

Man is responsible to hear God's Word. Though the message is given to the "churches," the responsibility to hear is that of the individual.

How does a sinner receive an ear to hear God's Word? The unregenerate sinner does not have an ear to understand the Scriptures (1 Cor. 2:14), but if the sinner will turn in repentance and faith, God will give him spiritual understanding (Prov. 1:22-23; 2 Cor. 3:14-16). Christ is the

light “*that lighteth every man that cometh into the world*” (John 1:9). Light is therefore offered but man must respond. In the Parable of the Sower Christ taught that man is responsible to receive the seed of the gospel into his heart by hearing it and understanding it. “*But he that received seed into the good ground is he that heareth the word, and understandeth it; which also beareth fruit, and bringeth forth, some an hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty*” (Mat. 13:23).

Even after we have received a spiritual ear through regeneration, we must make certain that we hear God’s Word. We must pay close attention to it and make every effort to understand it. This is true for Bible study (2 Tim. 2:15). It is not enough to hastily read something from the Bible. We must read it carefully with our full attention and read it prayerfully, crying out to God for understanding; and we must study it diligently so that we understand it properly, and then meditate upon it so that we apply it to our lives. This is also true of hearing sermons. I must give the preaching and teaching my full and undivided attention and prayerfully seek to understand the message and apply it to my life. I must hear what the Spirit saith. One preacher likened hearing God’s Word to receiving a radio signal. If the radio set is tuned properly to the signal it will come in loud and clear, but if the set is turned to some other channel or is tuned to the correct channel improperly or if there is some obstruction of the signal the message will not come through loud and clear. The believer must keep his spiritual radio tuned to God’s channel and not allow the signal from heaven to become obstructed by sin or carnality or spiritual laziness.

The message was for the church.

The Spirit speaks in a special way to the church. It is the pillar and ground of the truth (1 Tim. 3:15). This is one reason why it is so important for the believer to have a right relationship to the church and to be faithful to its services.

The fact that Christ used the word “church” in plural here teaches us that the message to each individual church was for all of the churches.

The messages were spoken by the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit of God who gave the Scriptures (2 Pet. 1:21; 1 Cor. 2:9-13). What Christ says the Spirit says. “The ‘Spirit’ may be regarded either as speaking through the Saviour, (compare Jn. 3:34) or as imparted to John, through whom he addressed the churches. In either case it is the same Spirit of inspiration, and in either case there would be a claim that his voice should be heard” (Barnes).

“To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God” (Rev. 2:7).

Who is the overcomer?

Note: This is an important matter, because Christ mentions “*him that overcometh*” to all seven of the churches -- Ephesus Rev. 2:7, Smyrna Rev. 2:11, Pergamos Rev. 2:17, Thyatira Rev. 2:26, Sardis Rev. 3:5, Philadelphia Rev. 3:12, and Laodicea Rev. 3:21. It is also mentioned again in Revelation 21:7.

The overcomer is the one who is born again through faith in the blood of Jesus Christ and who exhibits this in his life by his testimony and his willingness to suffer for Christ (Rev. 12:11; 1 John 4:4; 5:4-5). The overcomer is the one who receives the seed of the gospel and hears it and understands it and bears fruit by it (Mat. 13:23).

It is crucial to observe that the overcomer does not overcome by nominal “faith.” Multitudes of professing Christians are not overcomers and will not be in heaven. Many have believed a false gospel and are trusting Christ plus something else, whether it be baptism, works, a church, sacraments, priests, Mary, etc. Others are Christians merely because they were born into a Christian home and grew up in church. Others have prayed a sinner’s prayer without the exercise of heart repentance and saving faith in Christ.

The overcomer in Revelation 2-3 is not a special category of believers that receive greater rewards. It is only the overcomer that can eat of the tree of life (Rev. 2:7) and that will not be hurt of the second death (Rev. 2:11) and is clothed in white raiment and written in the book of life (Rev. 3:5). Obviously those that are not overcomers are not saved.

Consider the tree of life (*“the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God,”* Rev. 2:7).

The tree of life was in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2:9; 3:22-24) and will be in the midst of the new heaven and new earth (Rev. 22:2). The tree of life was placed in the Garden to provide immortality to the natural body, but after man sinned he was put out of the garden so that he could not eat of the tree and live forever in his fallen condition in a body of sin (Genesis 3:22).

The tree of life is therefore the promise of eternal life and especially the glorified incorruptible resurrection body, and the believer has this in Jesus Christ (Jn. 3:16). “The promise means everything set forth in Paul’s words (1 Corinthians 15:42-49, 51-58): incorruption, glory, power, a spiritual body in the image of the Second Adam; or in his other words, ‘Who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself’ (Phil. 3:21). Or as John elsewhere puts it: ‘but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is’ (1 John 3:2). Hence the psalmist: ‘I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with thy likeness’ (Psa. 17:15)” (B.H. Carroll).

The Church at Smyrna

“And unto the angel of the church in Smyrna write; These things saith the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive; I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich) and I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan. Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death” (Revelation 2:8-11).

1. The ancient city of Smyrna

It was located about 50 miles north of Ephesus on the Aegean Sea in a pleasant location with a prevailing gentle west wind. It had an excellent harbor that could be closed to shipping. The city was built at the head of a gulf that reached 30 miles inland. “The harbor was double in fact. The outer harbor was a portion of the gulf and was used as a place for the mooring of ships and the inner harbor, now silted in, was small enough that it could be closed to the seagoing boats of that age by a chain” (Marlin, *The Seven Churches of Asia Minor*).

It was one of the finest cities in the province of Asia. It was beautifully and advantageously situated. “From the sea it spread to the foothills and to Mt. Pagos that was covered with temples and lovely buildings. These have been referred to as the ‘crown of Smyrna.’ Aristides said that Smyrna was the most beautiful city in the world, ‘a flower of beauty such as earth and sun had never showed to mankind” (Marlin). “The streets were handsome, well paved, and drawn at right angles, and the city contained several squares, porticos, a public

library, and numerous temples and other public buildings” (McClintock and Strong). The “golden street” that connected the temples of Zeus and Cybele is said to have been the best in the world (*International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*).

It was a place of great commerce, science, and medicine, and was also famous for its rhetoric and philosophy.

It had many pagan temples dedicated to gods and goddesses, including Zeus, Dionysius, and a goddess called the Mother of the Gods. From the time of Tiberius there was a temple in Smyrna dedicated to Roman emperor worship.

Olympic games dedicated to Zeus were held here and a magnificent 20,000-seat stadium was built for this purpose. It was in this stadium that the Christian preacher Polycarp was martyred in 155 A.D. “It was exactly on such occasions that what the pagans regarded as the unpatriotic and anti-social spirit of the early Christians became most apparent; and it was to the violent demands of the people assembled in the stadium that the Roman proconsul yielded up the martyr” (McClintock and Strong).

The city was famous for its wine and drunkenness. It was devoted to the worship of Dionysus, the god of wine and moral debauchery. A statue “representing an old woman intoxicated illustrates the prevalent habits of the population.”

Today the city is called Izmir and it is located in Turkey. The population is two million. The modern city is built over the ancient one.

2. The history of the church of Smyrna

It is probable that it was founded during Paul’s third missionary journey when he spent two years in nearby Ephesus and “*all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus*” (Acts 19:10).

3. Christ's revelation of Himself to the church at Smyrna (Rev. 2:8)

He is the first and the last

This identifies Jesus as the Almighty. Compare Revelation 1:8 and 11.

Christ is not the first in the sense that He was the first created being. He is the first, rather, in the sense that He is before all things. Compare Colossians 1:16-17.

Christ is the eternal self-existent one and thus ever lives to intercede for and care for His people. This is an important revelation in light of the persecution this church was enduring.

He was dead and is alive

This is the gospel of our salvation. See 1 Corinthians 15:1-4. Christ died for our sins according to the Scripture, and rose again the third day according to the Scripture.

This is the object and power of our faith. Because Jesus died for our sins and rose from the dead, the believer can take heart in any trial. His death atoned for all of our sins and His resurrection proves that He is the Son of God (Rom. 1:4) and is the sure token that God accepted His atonement. His death and resurrection, therefore, are the promise and surety of eternal blessing.

4. Christ's knowledge of the church at Smyrna (Rev. 2:9)

He knew their works (Rev. 2:9).

We are saved by God's grace *without* works, but we are saved *unto* works (Eph. 2:8-10). We are not saved to serve ourselves but to serve God.

The works are found in the New Testament. In Ephesians alone, the same book that says we are saved by God's grace without works, there are 88 specific works described in the sections on Christian living.

Jesus takes account of everything the believer does.

The believer will give account of his works at the judgment seat of Christ (1 Cor. 3:11-15; 2 Cor. 5:9-10).

The phrase “*and the last to be more than the first*” could mean a couple of things.

It could mean that their last works were better than the first works. In this case, it would be a contrast with the church at Ephesus, which had left its first love (Rev. 2:4). It is very unusual for a church to increase in its devotion and zeal, but this appears to have been the case with Thyatira.

It could also mean that their patience was greater than their love. In this case, Jesus would have been gently exhorting them to increase their charity so that it would permeate everything they did.

He knew their tribulation (Rev. 2:9).

The church was suffering, which is a necessary part of the godly Christian life (2 Tim. 3:12).

Jesus knew their suffering. He is not a Saviour who is far away, but is a very present help in trouble (Psa. 46:1). He is the Good Shepherd who tenderly watches over His sheep, never sleeping, always watching. Though we are persecuted, we are not forsaken (2 Cor. 4:9).

He also knew their poverty (Rev. 2:9).

They were poor. God has not promised financial prosperity in this life, and the Charismatic “prosperity” gospel is a perversion of New Testament Christianity. Compare 1 Corinthians 4:11-12; 2 Corinthians 8:2; Hebrews 10:34; 11:37-38. The Lord Jesus Christ taught us to lay up treasures in heaven and not on earth (Mat. 6:19-20). Paul taught that godliness with contentment is great gain (1 Tim. 6:6-10).

Yet Christ knew their poverty. He was with them in their poverty and promised to provide their needs (Psa. 23:1-2; 37:25; Mat. 5:33; Phil. 4:19; Heb. 13:5-6).

God places us in difficult situations to teach us spiritual lessons and to train us to live by faith (Deut. 8:3-4). When we fall into “*divers temptations*,” it is for the purpose of trying

our faith and producing spiritual fruit (Jam. 1:2-4). The manifold temptations of life are “*the trial of your faith*” (1 Pet. 1:6-7).

This is why prayer is not answered immediately. If it were, we would never suffer or have any lack and we would not, therefore, have to live by faith. Further, if the believer’s prayers were always answered immediately, the unbelievers would see this and would be saved by sight rather than by faith. They would see that Christians are never sick, never poor, never have any trouble, that they can turn back any problem immediately by prayer, and it would thereby be obvious that the Christian serves the true God. But without faith it is impossible to please God (Heb. 11:6).

He knew the blasphemy “of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan” (Rev. 2:9).

This refers specifically to the Judaizers that plagued the early churches.

Their main error was in teaching that salvation is by grace plus the law and requiring believers to keep the Mosaic Law (Acts 15:1). Paul wrote the entire epistle to the Galatians to counter this heresy. The Judaizers were perverting the gospel of Christ by adding works to grace for salvation (Gal. 1:6-7). Their goal was to bring the believer into bondage to the Law of Moses (Gal. 2:4). They taught that the believer is saved by faith in Christ *plus* the works of the law (Gal. 3:1-3). To the contrary, the Law of Moses was a schoolmaster to bring the sinner to Christ, and after he is saved he is no longer under the old schoolmaster but is under the new law of the Spirit (Gal. 3:24-26; 5:16-18).

Judaizers confuse the church with Israel. Since the days of Augustine and his book “The City of God,” this error has increased among professing Christians. The Roman Catholic Church claims to be the new Israel, and the Protestant denominations have held to the same error. They wrongly allegorize Israel’s covenants and prophecies and fit them into the church age.

Judaizers bring Old Testament rituals into the church. The Roman Catholic Church is a mixture of Judaism and Paganism. It got its priesthood from Israel and many other things from the pagans (e.g., the Roman emperor's office of *Pontifex Maximus* or Chief Bridge Builder).

The doctrine of the Judaizers is attractive to unregenerate men. "But alas, the early Church speedily became Judaized. There is great appeal in a visible temple, gorgeous ritual, an accredited priesthood ready to assume responsibility *for you* in divine things. ... Judaism is more acceptable to the flesh than faith in an *unseen Lord*; an earthly 'religion' is more attractive to a carnal heart than a *heavenly home*" (Newell).

When Jesus said that "*they say they are Jews, and are not,*" He was referring to two things:

The Judaizers of that day were Jews in the flesh but they were not Jews in spirit (Rom. 2:28-29; 9:6-8; John 8:37-44).

Many of the Judaizers throughout church history have not even been Jews in the flesh, but have falsely claimed to be the recipients of Jewish promises and covenants.

These legalists were of the synagogue of Satan.

Paul taught the same thing. Satan has his ministers who teach false christs, false gospels, and false spirits (2 Cor. 11:3-4, 13-15). There are those who teach "*doctrines of Devils*" (1 Tim. 4:1-3).

Satan must not be ignored by the churches. We must be vigilant against him, because he is an aggressive and active enemy. He is mentioned in connection with four of the seven churches in Revelation (Rev. 2:9, 13, 24; 3:9), and he is mentioned at least 89 times in the New Testament.

We must never forget that we have an enemy (1 Pet. 5:8). Satan is not to be feared; he is to be resisted in the power of God (Eph. 6:10-18; Jam. 4:7).

This statement ("*them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan*") applies to any who teach a false gospel. They claim to be the true covenant people of

God, just as the unsaved Jews of John's day, but they are actually of the Devil (2 Cor. 11:1-4, 12-15; 1 Tim. 4:1-3). "Those assemblies which are set up in opposition to the truths of the gospel, and which promote and propagate damnable errors,--those which are set up in opposition to the purity and spirituality of gospel worship, and which promote and propagate the vain inventions of men and rites and ceremonies which never entered into the thoughts of God,--and those which are set up to revile and persecute the true worship and worshippers of God,--these are all synagogues of Satan: he presides over them, he works in them, his interests are served by them, and he receives a horrid homage and honour from them" (Matthew Henry).

5. Christ's exhortation to the church at Smyrna (Rev. 2:10)

First, He exhorted them not to fear tribulation.

"Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer."

This is the right attitude in the Christian life. There are all sorts of trials and tribulations in this life, but the believer has no need to fear any of them, whether it is pain or sickness or disease in himself or a loved one, family trouble, persecution, old age, death, the present, or the future. Christ exhorts His people to fear none of these things.

Fear is a dangerous thing. We must not allow it to gain control of our lives. Fear begets fear, but faith begets faith.

"The Devil shall cast some of you into prison that ye may be tried"

Christ knows the future. He is the omniscient God. Compare Isaiah 41:23; 42:8-9; 46:9-10.

Some suffering comes from the Devil. He is the "god of this world" (2 Cor. 4:4) and the "prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience" (Eph. 2:2). "It is the Devil that stirs up his instruments, wicked men, to persecute the people of God; tyrants and persecutors are the Devil's tools, though they gratify their own sinful

malignity, and know not that they are actuated by a diabolical malice” (Matthew Henry).

Suffering is a trial of our faith. The Devil intends it for evil but God allows it for good. See James 1:2-3; 1 Peter 1:6-7.

Second, He exhorted them to be faithful unto death and promised them a crown of life (Rev. 2:10).

To be faithful unto death is every believer’s obligation. In fact, we are dead already, positionally. When we are saved we are purchased with a price and we are no longer our own but we belong to Christ. We are henceforth dead to our own will and live to His. This is what baptism pictures. We have died with Jesus and risen again to new life (Rom. 6:3-4). We are thus to count ourselves as dead already.

Jesus warned, “*Whosoever will save his life shall lose it, and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it*” (Mat. 16:25). To live for one’s own self and to draw back from suffering with Christ is to prove that one does not have genuine saving faith. Those who suffered in Old Testament times simply demonstrated their faith (Heb. 11:13-15, 32-39).

For the faithful believer, the suffering of this life will be rewarded with great comfort and riches in the next. The church at Smyrna was poor and persecuted in this life, but was promised a crown of glory in the next. Solomon’s glorious kingdom will seem as nothing compared to the glory of Christ’s kingdom in which the believer will rule.

6. Christ’s final word to the church at Smyrna (Rev. 2:11)

“He that hath an ear let him hear what the Spirit sayeth to the churches.”

Each individual believer is responsible to hear what the Spirit says, and this does not mean merely to listen to the Word of God but also to heed it. Nothing is more crucial in life than properly hearing what the Spirit of God says. It is the way of salvation, sanctification, joy, victory, fruit, and reward.

For more about this see the notes on the message to Ephesus under Revelation 2:7.

He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death.

How do we overcome? This is explained in Revelation 12:11 and 1 John 5:4-5. We overcome by faith in the blood of Jesus Christ, such a faith that regenerates us and produces a true testimony and perseverance in the faith.

What is the second death? It is to be cast into the lake of fire following the Great White Throne judgment (Rev. 20:11-15). It is the eternal punishment of the soul and body. The first death is the separation of the spirit from the body (Jam. 2:26); the second death is the eternal separation of the individual from God. It is imperative that each individual be certain that he is in Christ and that he has eternal life in this present world, because if he dies without salvation there is no second chance or opportunity. The rich man who died without Christ went immediately to hell and was in torments and was told that there was no passage out of that place (Lk. 16:22-26). Those who are in hell will be raised to stand at the Great White Throne to be judged for their works and then cast into the lake of fire to be punished forever and ever. "This second death is unspeakably worse than the first death, both in the dying pangs and agonies of it (which are the agonies of the soul, without any mixture of support) and in the duration; it is eternal death, dying the death, to die and to be always dying. This is hurtful indeed, fatally hurtful, to all who fall under it" (Matthew Henry).

"This promise was specially precious to the church at Smyrna, at that time undergoing persecution unto death. The Devil, through his agents, might kill their bodies, the first death, but these martyrs should not be hurt of the second death" (B.H. Carroll).

The Church at Pergamos

“And to the angel of the church in Pergamos write; These things saith he which hath the sharp sword with two edges; I know thy works, and where thou dwellest, even where Satan’s seat is: and thou holdest fast my name, and hast not denied my faith, even in those days wherein Antipas was my faithful martyr, who was slain among you, where Satan dwelleth. But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balac to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication. So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate. Repent; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna, and will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it” (Revelation 2:12-17).

1. The ancient city of Pergamos

Pergamos is located about 90 miles north of Smyrna, and though it was some 15 miles from the sea, the nearby river Caicus was navigable by small craft.

In John’s day the city had been built around the foot of the hill while the city’s acropolis (high fortified city) was located on the summit. On the acropolis were palaces and temples.

Pergamos was located at the crossroads of all the major roads of western Asia and was the district center of jurisdiction and of commerce. It was a banking city for the wealthy. It was famous for its ointments, pottery, tapestries, and parchment. “The sumptuousness of the Attalic princes had raised Pergamos to the rank of the first city in Asia as

regards splendor, and Pliny speaks of it as without a rival in the province” (McClintock and Strong).

The Pergamos mosaicists were renowned. “The mosaicists of Pergamum seem to have been among the earliest artists who superimposed one colour on another to create an intermediate shade, such as applying a translucent coat of red plaster to white mosaic cubes to obtain a particular bright red. They were also known as the first who reduced the size of the mosaic cubes to the size of pin-heads. By using very small mosaic cubes in graded shades of each colour they achieved gradual transitions of tone and shadow which gave their works the impression of painting” (Fatih Cimak, *Pergamum*).

It was a magnificent city of impressive, highly ornamented palaces, public buildings, and pagan temples, featuring fine marble, Corinthian and Ionic columns, and splendid capitals. It had a large theater built on the side of the acropolis with 78 rows of seats with a capacity of 10,000, “whose acoustics were so perfect that an actor speaking in a normal voice could be heard on the topmost seat” (J. T. Marlin, *The Seven Churches of Asia Minor*).

Its library, consisting of 200,000 volumes, was exceeded in magnificence only by that of Alexandria, Egypt, and eventually the emperor Mark Anthony gave it to the Egyptian Queen Cleopatra.

The making of books on parchment (prepared animal’s skins) was invented here, the word “parchment” being derived from the name of the city. While visiting Pergamos I bought a sheet of sheepskin parchment made in the region.

Pergamos was addicted to idolatry and its attending sensuality. Most of the temples were located on the top of the acropolis overlooking the city. There was a beautiful grove called the Nicephorium in the midst of which were temples dedicated to Zeus (Jupiter or Jove), Dionysus, Athena, Diana, Apollo, Aphrodite, and Venus. The great altar of Zeus was 40 feet in height and was renowned as one of the wonders of the world. A large frieze carved in marble depicts a mythical

battle between Greek gods (e.g., Zeus and Hercules) and giants. Significant parts of the altar were recovered in the 1870s by German archaeologists and it was reconstructed in the Berlin Museum. “The frieze around its base depicting the Battle of the Giants was one of the greatest achievements in the field of sculpture. It pictured the victory of the gods of the Greeks over the gods of the barbarians” (Marlin).

There were three temples in Pergamos dedicated to Roman emperors. There was also a statue of Augustus in the Athena temple. The temple of Trajan has been partially restored.

Probably the most celebrated temple was dedicated to Asklepios (Asclepios or Aesculapius), *a god worshipped in the form of a serpent*. *Asklepios Soter* means “Asklepios the Savior,” and this idol was called “the god of Pergamos.” The city’s coins depicted a rod encircled by a serpent. This symbol was adopted by the medical school that was associated with the temple, and it remains the symbol of medical practice today. The sick flocked to this temple seeking a cure, believing that while they slept in the court of the temple the serpent god would reveal the remedy either to themselves or to the physician-priests by means of dreams. If they were touched by any of the snakes that were kept in the temple, they felt that they had been touched by a god. Asklepios was depicted as a bearded man holding a serpent-entwined staff.

Jesus spoke of Pergamos as the seat of Satan, and some think He was referring particularly to the temple of Zeus or to the emperor worship, but it is impossible to say if this is true. It might be that He was referring to Pergamos’ function as a center for idolatry in general.

2. The history of the church at Pergamos

It was probably founded on Paul’s third missionary journey when he spent two years in nearby Ephesus and “*all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus*” (Acts 19:10).

3. Christ's revelation of Himself to the church at Pergamos (Rev. 2:12)

He reveals Himself as *“he which hath the sharp sword with two edges,”* which speaks of the truth and power of God's Word. To remind them of this would both encourage them and warn them. They needed to be reminded of God's Word in order to have faith and wisdom in their persecutions and they needed to be reminded of God's Word in their battle against false teaching, so they would not lean upon their own understanding and would not fight against the Devil's ministers in the arm of the flesh.

4. Christ's commendation of the church at Pergamos (Rev. 2:13)

“I know thy works”

Christ knows all about this church and its situation and commends them for standing even in such a difficult place and time. In spite of the fact that they dwelt where Satan's seat was located and where he was active in a special way and in spite of the fact that one of their members had been put to death for his faith in Christ, this church held fast and did not deny Christ or turn from His faith.

Again Christ commends a church for its works. He takes no pleasure in laziness in the Christian life. We are saved by God's grace, and we are saved to serve Him in this needy world. Each church and each believer needs to examine his own works to see if they are pleasing to the Lord. Am I working for the Lord? Is that the chief characteristic of my life? How diligently am I working? Am I working in those things that are emphasized in the New Testament or am I working in man-made projects? Am I working as diligently as I have in the past? Am I conscious that each day is precious and that I must make it count for the Lord?

“and where thou dwellest, even where Satan's seat is”

Satan has many seats in this world, and Pergamos was one of those in that day. Satan is called “*the god of this world*” (2 Cor. 4:4). “This people dwelt where Satan’s seat was, where he kept his court. His circuit is throughout the world, his seat is in some places that are infamous for wickedness, error, and cruelty” (Matthew Henry).

Pergamos was possibly called Satan’s seat because of its idolatry. The city was given over to idolatry. We have seen that the city featured many pagan temples dedicated to satanic gods and goddesses, and the “god of Pergamos” was one worshipped in the form of a serpent, which is one of the Devil’s designations (Rev. 12:9).

Pergamos was possibly called Satan’s seat because it was a place of persecution. “Some think that the Roman governor in this city was a most violent enemy to the Christians; and the seat of persecution is Satan’s seat” (Matthew Henry).

“and thou holdest fast my name, and has not denied my faith, even in those days wherein Antipas was my faithful martyr, who was slain among you”

They were commended for holding fast to Christ’s name and His faith, because that was the focus on the enemy’s attack. Judaism and the pagan religions and the emperor worship were all aimed at this point. They would allow that Jesus was a good man and a prophet but not that He is the only Lord and Saviour. In John’s day the emperor Domitian had proclaimed himself “Lord and God.” The enemy tries to weaken our faith in the doctrine and reality that Jesus Christ is the only Saviour and that His faith is the only true faith (e.g., Jn. 14:6; Acts 4:12; 1 Jn. 5:11-12, 19). This truth continues to be attacked on every hand in this dark world.

It is attacked by non-Christian religions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam, which claim that there is salvation outside of Jesus Christ.

It is attacked by liberal Christians who allow for salvation in other religions.

It is also attacked among evangelicals. Many who otherwise teach that Christ is the only Saviour allow for the possibility that those who do not believe in Christ can be saved. According to the book "More Than One Way?" (Zondervan, 1996) one-third of students in evangelical colleges no longer believe that those outside of Jesus Christ are lost. "Increasingly students in Christian colleges are affronted when hearing the traditional claim that salvation is found in Jesus Christ alone" (p. 11). This position is an attack upon Christ's name and faith, because the Scripture plainly states that apart from faith in Christ there is no salvation.

It is imperative that we hold fast to Christ's name and not deny His faith. This is each believer's individual responsibility and each church's corporate responsibility. We must stand boldly against the enemy's attacks and not doubt His Word.

Antipas was Christ's faithful martyr. He was called by name and commended with the highest commendation. What Christ said about Antipas reminds us of the Lord's parable in Matthew 25, where it was said unto the faithful servant: "*Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord*" (Mat. 25:21, 23). "Mark here, What an honourable mention Christ makes of the services and sufferings of his people; nothing we either do or suffer for Christ, but it is recorded, and shall be remembered to our commendation and honour in this life, and to our consolation and happiness in the next" (Burkitt).

Antipas was slain where Satan dwelleth, reminding us that Satan hates God and everything pertaining to God, including His people. Ever since man's creation he has done everything in his power to destroy and corrupt the work of God, and today his attack is primarily against the churches of Jesus Christ. During the Tribulation he will continue to make war with those that keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ (Rev. 12:17). We must therefore put

on the whole armor of God in order to stand against the Devil (Eph. 6:10-18).

5. Christ's exhortation to the church at Pergamos (Rev. 2:14-16)

First, He exhorted them about *the doctrine of Balaam* (Rev. 2:14).

Observe that it does not please Christ if churches give up the defense of the faith and separation from error regardless of the situation. Even though this church was enduring bitter persecution even unto death, Christ rebuked them for not dealing with heretics. I recall hearing a man speak who had been in prison for many years for Christ's sake in a communist country. He said that during times of persecution the churches should come together in fellowship regardless of their doctrine, because they need each other too much to be separated and they need to unite against their common enemies. This is logical thinking, perhaps, but it is not scriptural.

There were some in the church who held the doctrine of Balaam, and the church was rebuked for allowing this. Churches are responsible to keep their doctrine and practice pure according to the New Testament faith. We are to allow "no other doctrine" (1 Tim. 1:3). We are to "*purge out the old leaven*" (1 Cor. 5:7). This is true both for the leaven of sin, which is the subject of 1 Corinthians 5, and for the leaven of false teaching, which is the subject of Galatians 5:9. The heretic who tries to corrupt the church through error is to be dealt with in a very strict manner (Titus 3:9-11). The church at Ephesus was obeying this responsibility (Rev. 2:2, 6), but Pergamos was not, and Christ rebuked them on this count.

Consider some lessons on the doctrine of Balaam:

The doctrine of Balaam is to entice God's people by teaching them that they are at liberty to commit sin. Balaam was hired by Balak to curse Israel (Num. 22:3-6). When Balaam failed

to do this in Numbers 23-24, he instructed Balak to entice Israel with idolatrous fornication, and this is what happened in Numbers 25. This temptation resulted in the breakdown of separation between God's people and the world and brought God's judgment upon Israel. See Numbers 31:16 and 2 Peter 2:14-18.

This false doctrine was being taught in Pergamos and other churches in the first century. False teachers were enticing believers to live in a loose manner by emphasizing that since they were saved by grace they could do as they pleased. They corrupted the doctrine of Christian liberty into a doctrine of moral license. There were some in the church at Corinth that were thus abusing their liberty and committing idolatry and fornication (e.g., 1 Cor. 6:18; 10:14). Paul warned about those who did not consent to the doctrine which is according to godliness (1 Tim. 6:3).

In contrast to the doctrine of Balaam, the Bible says that the true grace of God that brings salvation teaches us to deny ungodliness and worldly lusts (Titus 2:11-12).

There are many brands of this false doctrine in our day. Modernists claim that the Bible's moral code is old-fashioned and not for today. They claim that homosexuality is not sinful and that fornication is acceptable in some circumstances. Christian rockers claim that in order to "be all things to all people" they are at liberty to do many things that were formally condemned in churches. Smoking, cussing, drinking, tattoos, short skirts, tight jeans on women, long hair on men, and such things are a common part of the Christian rock scene. It is not uncommon even in evangelical schools and churches today for professing Christians to adopt the sensual dress of the world and to involve themselves in worldly dancing and theater and Hollywood productions and sensual music and other things. All of this is justified under the banner of being "culturally relevant," but it is condemned by Scripture.

Next, He exhorted them pertaining to *the doctrine of the Nicolaitans* (Rev. 2:15).

This is the same doctrine that was mentioned in connection with the church at Ephesus (Eph. 2:6). There it was the *deeds* of the Nicolaitans that were mentioned, and here it is the *doctrine* of the Nicolaitans. Doctrine and practice are always closely associated. It is not just one or the other that the Lord is concerned about; it is both. Those who exalt Christian living above doctrine or doctrine above Christian living are not wise.

As we have seen, the doctrine of the Nicolaitans was probably the misuse of pastoral authority which eventually led to the hierarchical practice of Roman Catholicism, which in turn passed over into Protestantism. The exaltation of bishops over entire regions of churches was the fruit of this false doctrine. We have dealt with this under the previous study on the church at Ephesus.

The most important lesson from Christ's mention of the Nicolaitans is that every doctrine and practice that is contrary to the New Testament is to be exposed and rejected by the churches.

Christ *commanded them to repent* (Rev. 2:16).

This is the second time that Christ required repentance of one of the churches. The first time was in regard to Ephesus (Rev. 2:5). Repentance was not mentioned in the message to Smyrna.

Repentance is the first step to spiritual restoration. Repentance means to turn around and go the other way. It is a change of mind that results in a change of life. It results in turning away from the thing that displeases the Lord. The church at Pergamos was exhorted to repent of its toleration of false doctrine and false teachers. This would require that they start judging and exercising discipline toward heretics after the fashion of the church at Ephesus (Rev. 2:2, 6).

If there is not repentance there is judgment. Christ's command to repent is not a hollow command. It matters deeply whether men repent or not. If the unsaved sinner does not repent he will be judged with eternal suffering in the lake of fire. "I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish" (Lk. 13:3, 5). If the sinning believer does not repent he will be judged in this life and will suffer loss at the judgment seat of Christ.

Notice that the entire church was commanded to repent about this matter. Even though the error itself was limited to only some of the members, the church as a body was exhorted to repent because they had allowed the error to continue and had failed to bring discipline to bear. Though pastors and teachers have a greater responsibility before God (James 3:1), each church member has his own responsibility in regard to the spiritual condition of the church. Every believer is commanded to "*admonish one another*" (Rom. 15:14; Col. 3:16) and to "*warn them that are unruly*" (1 Thess. 5:14) and to "*exhort one another daily ... lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin*" (Heb. 3:13; 10:25) and to "*consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works*" (Heb. 10:24). "When God comes to punish the corrupt members of a church, he rebukes that church itself for allowing such to continue in its communion, and some drops of the storm fall upon the whole society" (Matthew Henry).

See the comments on Revelation 2:5 for more about repentance and the churches of Revelation.

6. Christ's final word to the church at Pergamos (Rev. 2:17)

Each individual believer is responsible to hear what the Spirit says, and this does not mean merely to listen to the Word of God but also to heed it. Nothing is more crucial in life than properly hearing what the Spirit of God says. It is the way of salvation, sanctification, joy, victory, fruit, and reward.

For more about this see the notes on the message to Ephesus under Revelation 2:7.

The overcomer is encouraged (Rev. 2:16). We have seen under the study on the church at Ephesus that the overcomer is the one who is born again through faith in the blood of Jesus Christ and who exhibits this in his life by his testimony and his willingness to suffer for Christ (Rev. 12:11; 1 Jn. 4:4; 5:4-5).

The overcomer will *eat of the hidden manna*.

The hidden manna is Christ and the believer's intimate relationship with Him by which the believer will enjoy life forevermore. The manna is what God fed Israel in the wilderness (Psa. 78:24). It is called "*bread from heaven*" (Jn. 6:31). The Lord Jesus taught that He is the true manna, the true living bread, which a man can eat and have everlasting life (John 6:48-51). Christ is the only true spiritual food which a man can eat and live forever. We eat the bread of Christ by believing on Him as our Lord and Saviour (Jn. 6:47).

The resurrection body is a spiritual body and it will be sustained not by food and air, as the natural body (1 Cor. 15:44), but by the believer's very relationship with Christ and the spiritual things of God. Then it will be evident that we are indeed "*members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones*" (Eph. 5:30). If man lives by every word of God in this present world (Lk. 4:4), how much more will that be true in the next when he lives in a spiritual body and is no longer in bondage to the body of this death (Rom. 7:24).

The overcomer will receive *a white stone*. There are almost as many interpretations of this as there are interpreters. I do not believe that we should try to interpret this stone by any former custom outside of the Bible.

There are many things about this that we cannot know at this time. We don't know what the stone is made of or where

it will be kept, whether on one's person or elsewhere, or the name's significance nor its basis.

We do know that it will be a white stone (there is no reason to spiritualize it) in which is written a new name that is known only to the Lord and to the recipient. The new name will be a special name and revelation given by Christ to the individual believer. This stone and name is doubtless a private token of Christ's personal relationship with the believer. It is probably a token of his adoption into the family of God and the new name is the special name that God gives to him in this new connection. It is a great encouragement to think that Christ has a special, private relationship with me, a relationship that will continue throughout eternity, and that this relationship will be blessed by such tokens. The white color of the stone probably signifies holiness, both that which is imputed to the believer by Christ and that which is lived out in the believer's life by the indwelling Holy Spirit. "The Saviour will give him a token of his favour which would have some word or name inscribed on it, and which would be of use to him alone, or intelligible to him only: that is, some secret token which would make him sure of the favour of his Redeemer, and which would be unknown to other men. ... The meaning then probably is, that to the true Christian--the victor over sin--there is given some pledge of the Divine favour which has to him all the effect of assurance, and which others do not perceive or understand" (Barnes). "If the heart *'knoweth its own bitterness, and a stranger intermeddleth not with its joy,'* (Prov. 14:10), then the deep, secret dealings of God with each of us during those times by which our sonship is assured and our spiritual strife carried on to victory, can, when revealed to us in the other blessed state, be known thoroughly to ourselves only" (Dean Alford, quoted by William R. Newell, *Revelation: A Complete Commentary*).

God gave a new name to Sarah (Gen. 17:15) and to Jacob (Gen. 32:28), and Christ gave a new name to Peter (Mat. 16:18).

The Church at Thyatira

“And unto the angel of the church in Thyatira write; These things saith the Son of God, who hath his eyes like unto a flame of fire, and his feet are like fine brass; I know thy works, and charity, and service, and faith, and thy patience, and thy works; and the last to be more than the first. Notwithstanding I have a few things against thee, because thou sufferest that woman Jezebel, which calleth herself a prophetess, to teach and to seduce my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed unto idols. And I gave her space to repent of her fornication; and she repented not. Behold, I will cast her into a bed, and them that commit adultery with her into great tribulation, except they repent of their deeds. And I will kill her children with death; and all the churches shall know that I am he which searcheth the reins and hearts: and I will give unto every one of you according to your works. But unto you I say, and unto the rest in Thyatira, as many as have not this doctrine, and which have not known the depths of Satan, as they speak; I will put upon you none other burden. But that which ye have already hold fast till I come. And he that overcometh, and keepeth my works unto the end, to him will I give power over the nations: And he shall rule them with a rod of iron; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers: even as I received of my Father. And I will give him the morning star. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches” (Revelation 2:18-29).

1. The ancient city of Thyatira

Thyatira, located about 100 miles southeast of Pergamos, was a wealthy town in the region of Lydia in the Roman province of Asia. It was situated in a valley near the river Lycus.

The city was famous for its dying processes. The dye was made of the madder-root, the color of which is now called

Turkish Red. “With this guild there can be no doubt that Lydia, the seller of purple stuffs, from whom Paul met with so favorable a reception at Philippi (Acts 16:14), was connected. ... The waters here are said to be so well adapted for dyeing that in no place can the scarlet cloth out of which fezzes are made be so brilliantly or so permanently dyed as here” (McClintock and Strong). “A small quantity of this expensive dye would cost the equivalent of a workman’s wages for a year” (Marlin).

The city’s trade guilds were very advanced. There was a separate guild for each trade and each artisan belonged to his particular guild. Through their unity they wielded great influence. “These guilds were a source of great problems for the Christians. There were guilds for the workers in the various trades like leather, wool and linen, metal, pottery, dyeing, dressmaking, baking, etc. At their various meetings they would have a meal and oftentimes the meat served had been offered to an idol or they met in an idol temple and Christians could not engage in these practices. ... To refuse to belong to a guild in that day and age would be like a carpenter, a plumber or a coal miner refusing to belong to his union today. Commercial existence was dependent upon one’s belonging to a guild” (Marlin).

The principal deity of Thyatira was Tyrimnos, who was worshipped as the sun-god. There were also cults dedicated to the worship of Artemis (Diana), Hercules, Bacchus, and Athena, among others. The temple of Sambethe featured a prophetess who acted as an oracle of the god.

Ancient Thyatira is located in modern-day Turkey and is called Akhisar, with a population of 60,000.

2. The history of the church at Thyatira

It was probably founded on Paul’s third missionary journey when he spent two years in nearby Ephesus and “*all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus*” (Acts 19:10).

We know that Lydia, the first convert in Philippi, was from Thyatira (Acts 16:14-15). She was occupied with selling the purple dye that the city was famous for. It would be natural for her to be concerned about the spiritual welfare of her native city, but we will have to wait until Glory to find out if there is a direct connection between her conversion and the establishment of a church in Thyatira.

3. Christ's revelation of Himself to the church at Thyatira (Rev. 2:18)

Christ reveals Himself to this church particularly by those things pertaining to authority and judgment.

He is *the Son of God, referring to His great power and authority*. He has all authority in heaven and in earth (Mat. 28:18). "His general title is here, the Son of God, that is, the eternal and only-begotten Son of God, which denotes that he has the same nature with the Father, but with a distinct and subordinate manner of subsistence" (Matthew Henry).

He mentions that His *eyes [are] like a flame of fire and his feet like fine brass*, referring to His omniscience and judgment. This is in light of the presence in the church of the Jezebel doctrine, which if not repented of would be severely judged (Rev. 2:20-23). Christ is not only the believer's Saviour; He is the believer's judge and will not overlook sin and error. Christ is a loving and compassionate friend of sinners, but Christ is also "*holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners*" (Heb. 7:26). This aspect of Christ is commonly ignored or denied in modernistic churches and even in contemporary evangelical ones. There is little or no plain preaching on such things as judgment of sin in this life, hell, church discipline, the judgment seat of Christ, dying unto self, the sin unto death, and nominal Christianity.

4. Christ's knowledge of and commendation of the church at Thyatira (Rev. 2:19)

Christ knows all about this church, both good and bad, and He commends many things. It is a blessing to know that it is possible to please Christ. He is not a harsh taskmaster. He doesn't require perfection. He only requires that we set our hearts to do His will as set out in the New Testament faith. He is merciful of our failings as long as we are walking in the light and confessing our sins.

Notice what Christ commends:

He commends their *works*. In the messages to each of the churches so far we see that works are very important to the Lord. He will never commend the believer who is spiritually slothful and who refuses to work for Him and who puts his own will and pleasure and business above that of the Lord. For a born again, blood-washed, saved-by-grace believer to do the good works of the New Testament faith is not an optional part of the Christian life, and it is not "legalism" or "Phariseeism."

He commends their *charity*. See 1 Corinthians 13:1-3; 16:14; Colossians 3:14; 1 Peter 4:8. It is impossible to please the Lord without charity. Peter teaches us that charity is the end of a process of spiritual growth (2 Pet. 1:5-7).

He commends their *service*.

Works is what we do and service is the spirit and objective in which we do it. One can do the works of the Lord without being submitted to the service of the Lord. For example, a believer can be a good employee, which is what Christ requires, but he can do it for motives other than purely to serve the Lord (Eph. 6:6-7). Paul says the believer's reasonable service is to present himself as a living sacrifice to God (Rom. 12:1). From that reasonable service of surrender and dedication flows all of the works that please the Lord.

Service is also used in the New Testament to describe giving (Rom. 15:31; 2 Cor. 9:12; Phil. 2:30). Giving is an

important part of the Christian life. It is one way that we honor and praise the Lord (Heb. 13:15-16).

He commends their *faith*. Without faith it is impossible to please God (Heb. 11:6), and faith comes by hearing the Word of God (Rom. 10:17). When we exercise faith in the midst of the trials of the Christian life and we believe God's promises rather than doubting and complaining, we greatly please the Lord. Five times in the Gospels Christ said, "*O ye of little faith*" (Mat. 6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8; Lk. 12:28). He is disappointed when His people lack faith.

He commends their *patience*. This is necessary because of life's trials and sufferings, and because God answers prayer and fulfills His promises according to His divine schedule and not by our frail human one. The one who promised to "*come quickly*" (Rev. 22:20) will surely come quickly but not by man's shortsighted temporal clock. In this present world we do not have our resurrection bodies and do not live in the glorious kingdom of God; rather, we wait for those things by faith with patience (Rom. 8:23-25).

He commends their *works* again with the words, "*and the last to be more than the first.*" This phrase could mean a couple of things.

It could mean that their last works were better than the first works. In this case, it would be a contrast with the church at Ephesus, which had left its first love (Rev. 2:4). It is very unusual for a church to increase in its devotion and zeal, but this appears to have been the case with Thyatira.

Since the first works are directly associated with charity and the last works are associated with patience, this could also mean that their patience was greater than their love. In this case, Jesus would have been thereby gently exhorting them to increase their charity so that it would permeate everything they did.

5. Christ's exhortation to the church at Thyatira (Rev. 2:20-25)

Though this was a zealous, busy church, with many commendable things, Christ did not hesitate to warn them about error in their midst.

It is the attitude of tolerance of error that is rebuked ("*because thou sufferest that woman Jezebel,*" Rev. 2:20).

Churches cannot stop false teachers from teaching, but they can stop them from teaching in their midst. They can stop their mouths by sound teaching (Titus 1:9-11) and by dismissing them from the church and refusing to listen to them (Titus 3:8-11).

The church at Thyatira was putting up with error rather than dealing plainly and strictly with it. This was the same sin that was committed by the church at Corinth. They were *bearing with* those who taught error (2 Cor. 11:4). The Greek word translated "*bear with*" (*anechomai*) is elsewhere translated "suffer" (Mat. 17:17), "endure" (2 Thess. 1:4), and "forbear" (Eph. 4:2). It means to put up with something, to have patience toward it. As a result of this improper and carnal tolerance of error the church at Corinth was in danger of being corrupted and led astray by the Devil (2 Cor. 11:3). For the same error of tolerance the church at Thyatira was in danger of the Lord's judgment.

Tolerance of error is one of the hallmarks of the ecumenical movement. The cry of "unity in diversity" refers to tolerating doctrine and practice that I do not personally agree with for the sake of a broader unity. This philosophy is refuted by Christ's message to the church at Thyatira as well as by Paul's epistle to Corinth.

Tolerance of error is one of the hallmarks of the contemporary New Evangelical movement. The popular and influential preacher T.D. Jakes epitomizes this philosophy. He says: "I try to avoid setting myself up as a judge to tell anybody what God did or did not call them to do. There are

many women who are celebrated as ministers” (*Charisma*, Dec. 16, 1996). Thus he is tolerant of these women’s error and disobedience to God’s Word.

What about “*that woman Jezebel*”?

This was a real woman but the name Jezebel is probably the designation that Christ gave her. *It is likely that He is naming her according to her character and influence, thus likening her to the wicked Jezebel of old, who stirred up her husband Ahab and others to do evil* (1 Ki. 21:25). She stirred Ahab up to idolatry (1 Ki. 16:31) and she stirred up the men of Jezreel to commit murder (1 Ki. 21:1-15). “The kind of character, therefore, which would be designated by the term as used here, would be that of a woman who was artful and persuasive in her manner; who was capable of exerting a wide influence over others; who had talents of a high order; who was a thorough advocate of error; who was unscrupulous in the means which she employed for accomplishing her ends” (Barnes).

The most important thing in this passage is to identify the woman’s error (Rev. 2:20). As Jezebel exalted herself above the bounds of her womanly and wifely position and used her influence for evil, so this woman in the early churches exalted herself beyond the bounds of the New Testament faith and used her illicit influence to corrupt others and to lead them into wrong paths.

She called herself a prophetess. She exalted herself and called herself to the ministry. Paul warned, “*For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, NOT TO THINK OF HIMSELF MORE HIGHLY THAN HE OUGHT TO THINK; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith*” (Rom. 12:3). Believers are not to exalt themselves to any ministry. They are to humbly find out what God has called them to, and this calling should be authenticated by God’s Word and recognized by the church (e.g., Acts 13:3-4). This woman was

self-deceived, thinking that God had called her to be a prophetess when in reality He had not.

She was a teacher. This was contrary to the Scripture's injunction against a woman teaching men (1 Tim. 2:12-14).

She taught the believers to commit fornication and to eat things sacrificed unto idols. This is the same error that was identified as "*the doctrine of Balaam*" in the church at Pergamos ("*to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication,*" Rev. 2:14). It was to break down the walls of separation between the believer and the world and paganism. The difference between the error at Pergamos and the error at Thyatira is that the teacher of this error at Thyatira was a woman.

Idolatry entered into the churches very quickly and grew rapidly. The *McClintock and Strong Cyclopedia* describes this as follows: "*Images were unknown in the worship of primitive Christians, who abstained from worship of images because they thought it unlawful in itself to make any images of deity. By the steady pressure of the heathen ideas and habits upon Christianity, emblems such as the dove, the fish, the anchor, vine, lamb, etc., formed the first step; then, paintings representing great biblical events, saints, martyrs, which were placed in the vestibule of the church. Yet this practice was unfavorably regarded by the synods of the fourth century. When, however, in the same century, Christianity was proclaimed (by Constantine) the religion of the state, the use of painting, sculpture and jewelry became general for the decoration of the churches, resulting in the adoption of a regular system of symbolic religious images. The teachers of the church became gradually more accommodating in their relations with the heathen, allowing them to retain their old usages, while conforming to the outward forms of Christianity. ... In the sixth century, it had grown into a great abuse, especially in the East, where images were made the object of a special adoration: they were kissed, lamps were burned before them, incense was offered to them,--in short,*

they were treated in every respect as the heathen were wont to treat the images of their gods. The same arguments now used by the Romanists to defend image worship were rejected by Christians of the first three centuries. The heathen said, 'We do not worship the images themselves, but those whom they represent.' To this Lactantius (third century A.D.) answers, 'You worship them; for, if you believe them to be in heaven, why do you not raise your eyes up to heaven? Why do you look at the images, and not up where you believe them to be?' Thomas Aquinas, a Roman Catholic (13th century), declared, 'A picture, considered in itself, is worthy of no veneration, but if we consider it as an image of Christ, it may be allowable to make an internal distinction between the image and its subject, and adoration and service are as well due to it as to Christ.' Bonaventura, the Franciscan, said, 'Since all veneration shown to the image of Christ is shown to Christ himself, then the image of Christ is also entitled to be prayed to.' Bellarmine, Rome's principal authority in dogmatic theology (1542-1621), writes, "The images of Christ and the saints are to be adored, not only in a figurative manner, but quite positively, so that the prayers are directly addressed to them, and not merely as representatives of the original."

There have been many examples of this Jezebel in church history:

The Mariolatry in the Roman Catholic Church is an example of the Jezebel spirit.

Female preachers and prophetesses in church history are an example of the Jezebel spirit. Two women, Priscilla and Maximilla, were prominent in the Montanist movement in the second century. There were many female prophetesses, such as Catherine of Siena and Teresa of Avila, among the Catholic mystics during the Dark Ages. Women prophetesses were prominent in the early history of the Irvingites in late 19th century England. Women preachers were prominent in the Holiness movement in America in the 19th century.

Female founders of cults are examples of the Jezebel spirit. Women were founders of the Shakers, Seventh-day Adventism, and Christian Science.

Female prophetesses have been prominent throughout the history of Pentecostalism. A woman, Agnes Ozman, was the first to speak in “tongues” in Charles Parham’s Bible school in Topeka in 1901. Many women were in leadership positions at the Azusa Street Mission in California, and William Seymour’s wife, Jennie, took over the pastorate of the mission after William’s death. Many women were ordained and went out from Azusa Street. The Assemblies of God (AG) received ordained women at its first General Council in 1914, and by 1936 there was one ordained woman for every four ordained men. Today there are almost 4,000 licensed and ordained women in the Assemblies of God. By 1950, 18% of the ordained ministers in the Church of God of Cleveland, Tennessee, were women. Women founded many of Pentecostal denominations, including International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, Church of the Living God, Apostolic Faith Church, Mount Sinai Holy Church in America, Pentecostal Assemblies of Newfoundland, Apostolic Faith Mission, Christ for the Nations, and many others. Many of the pioneering Pentecostal evangelists were women, including Carrie Judd Montgomery, Louise Nankivel, Rachel Sizelove, Leanore Barnes, Mildred Wicks, Louise Nankievell, Fern Huffstutler, Thelma Chaney, Juanita Coe, Hattie Philletta Hammond, Ivey Campbell, Kathryn Kuhlman, Mae Eleanore Frey, Marie Burgess, Maria Woodworth-Etter, Alice Belle Garrigus, Emma Cotton, Elizabeth Sisson, and Lilian Thistlethwaite. Some of the prominent Charismatic women preachers today include Gloria Copeland, Jan Crouch, Marilyn Hickey, Joyce Meyers, Annette Capps, Francis Hunter, Carol Arnott, Cindy Jacobs (God’s Generals), Jane Hansen (Women’s Aglow), Daisy Osborn, and Anne Gimenez, and this is the mere tip of the iceberg.

She was given “*space to repent*” (Rev. 2:21).

Christ is longsuffering and desires repentance more than judgment. There are times when He judges sin immediately (e.g., Acts 5:1-10), but ordinarily He waits and gives space for repentance. “*Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?*” (Rom. 2:4). God was longsuffering in the days of Noah and apparently waited 120 years before judging them (1 Pet. 3:20). God’s longsuffering toward sinners and His desire for their repentance is the reason why Christ has waited so long before returning (2 Pet. 2:9).

The longsuffering of Christ has a limit. There is a space to repent, but that space has an end. “As a young preacher, in every revival meeting I preached on ‘the space to repent,’ emphasizing the fact that beyond that allotted time there was no hope of salvation. This woman crossed the boundary line, she sinned against the Holy Spirit and her sin, therefore, had never forgiveness, either in this world or in the next. There is such a boundary line and then no more space for repentance” (B.H. Carroll).

She did not repent (Rev. 2:21). Men are responsible to repent. It is not something God does for them; it is not something they are sovereignly foreordained to do; it is something they must do toward God of their own free will. God demands repentance, and man must repent. This woman could have repented and she was given opportunity to repent, but she did not.

Christ’s warning about how He will judge is severe (Rev. 2:22-23).

He warned that He would cast her into a bed, and them that commit adultery with her into great tribulation (Rev. 2:22). The bed is a bed of tribulation and suffering. There are many reasons for tribulation in the Christian life. Sometimes it is for the purpose of purifying faith and strengthening the spiritual life (Jam. 1:2-4), while other times it is for the purpose of punishing sin.

He warned that He would kill her children (Rev. 2:23). *For the believer there is the possibility of the sin unto death* (1 John 5:16). Ananias and Sapphira were killed for lying to the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:1-10). Many in the church at Corinth had been put to death for abusing the things of God (1 Cor. 11:29-30). *For the unbeliever, there is the possibility of the second death* (Rev. 20:11-15).

When Christ is present in an individual or a church, there will always be discipline toward sin (Heb. 12:6-8). When a professing Christian or a church that names the name of Christ can sin with impunity, it is because that individual or church does not truly know Him in regeneration.

The judgment would be a lesson to other churches (Rev. 2:23). Compare Deuteronomy 13:6-11; 17:12-13; 21:18-21; and Acts 5:9-11.

Christ searches the reins and hearts (Rev. 2:23). This is a proof that Christ is God, as this is the prerogative of God. See 1 Samuel 16:7; 1 Chronicles 28:9; Psalm 7:9; Jeremiah 11:20; 17:10; 20:12. The hearts and reins refer to everything in the heart, including its deepest secrets and motives. The *reins* refers to the wellspring of man's heart, that which motivates him and lies at the bottom of his decisions and actions. As a horse is guided by the reins or bridle (Psa. 32:9), a man is guided by the reins of his heart (Psa. 16:7). "This is clearly a claim to omniscience; and as it is the Lord Jesus who speaks in all these epistles, it is a full proof that he claims this for himself. There is nothing which more clearly appertains to God than the power of searching the heart, and nothing that is more constantly claimed by him as his peculiar prerogative" (Barnes).

Christ gives to each individual according to his own works ("*I will give unto every one of you according to your works,*" Rev. 2:23). He does not judge me for another person's sin. Compare Psalm 62:12; Isaiah 3:10-11; Matthew 16:27; 2 Corinthians 5:10; 1 Peter 1:17. I can't blame someone else for my sin nor will I give account for someone else's sin. Those

who are led astray by a false teacher cannot blame their sin on the teacher; they themselves will give account because each individual is responsible to hear the voice of God and to know the truth (Jn. 7:17; 8:31-32). *This is true in the church.* If my pastor or a deacon or a Sunday School teacher sins and does not live in a Scriptural manner, I will not answer for that, nor can I blame the condition of my Christian life on that. *This is also true in the home.* If my father or mother do not live for the Lord as they should and are hypocritical, I cannot use that as an excuse for what I do and how I live, nor will I give account for their sin.

6. Christ's final word to the church at Thyatira (Rev. 2:24-29)

Christ encourages those in the church that had not followed the error described in the previous verses and He exhorts these to hold fast to what they had (Rev. 2:24-25).

They were to hold fast to the works, charity, service, faith, and patience mentioned earlier (Rev. 2:19). Holding fast is necessary because there are many spiritual enemies and great pressure is brought to bear against the faithful believer.

They were to hold fast until Christ comes (Rev. 2:25).

The Christian faith found in the New Testament Scripture is in force throughout the church age. It is not to be abridged, enlarged, or modified. It is the "*faith once delivered to the saints*" (Jude 3). Timothy was solemnly commanded to keep the apostolic commandment without spot "*until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ*" (1 Tim. 6:13-14).

The greatest challenge and encouragement for Christian living is found right here; it is the imminent return of Christ. We have to hold fast in this present time; we have to endure trials and apostasy, but the enduring is not forever. It is only until Christ comes. Then faith will become sight and waiting and suffering and enduring will forever be past. The "*manifold temptations*" of this life are only for a "*season*" (1

Pet. 1:6). Paul said: “*For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us*” (Rom. 8:18), and, “*For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory*” (2 Cor. 2:17).

The doctrine of Jezebel is described as “*the depths of Satan*” (Rev. 2:24).

The Devil’s plan of attack has not changed since the Garden of Eden. He has nothing new. He simply attacks man’s faith in God’s Word and seeks to get him to disobey it. Jezebel was enticing professing believers to commit fornication and involve themselves in idolatry and thus renounce and disobey God’s Word. She was enticing by means of the three-fold attraction of the world: *the lust of the flesh*, and *the lust of the eyes*, and *the pride of life* (1 John 2:15-16).

Satan loves to make things complicated and mysterious. In contrast, the things of Christ are of a simple nature. Paul warned the church at Corinth that the devil would corrupt “*the simplicity that is in Christ*” (2 Cor. 11:3).

The “*depths of Satan*” might also refer to the Gnosticism that was prevalent in that day and that was plaguing the churches then and continues to do so today. The Gnostics claimed to have hidden and deeper knowledge than that of the Lord’s apostles. Compare Colossians 2:3-8. Today’s Gnostics are the practitioners of Christian Science, Theosophy, Unity, New Age, Spiritualism, theological Modernism and any other sect that claims a deep special knowledge and an elite following and that rejects the apostolic faith. “The Gnostic philosophers claimed that they had a new knowledge, later and better than any revelation, as if to say: ‘You know what Paul says, and you know what John said, but we have the depths of a later and better knowledge.’ Our Lord admits the depths, but declares them ‘the depths of Satan’” (B.H. Carroll).

The overcomer is described (Rev. 2:26). He keepeth Christ’s works unto the end. This is a description of a true regenerate

Christian. He does not believe for a few days only. He is fully convinced that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and trusts Him exclusively and confidently. When others turn away, the true believer shows his character by keeping his faith (John 6:66-69). The just are those that live by faith and do not draw back unto perdition (Heb. 10:38-39). Those that turn back are those that do not have true saving faith and never did have. There are "*things that accompany salvation*" (Heb. 6:9), and one of those is that the saved continue in the faith. Those that continue in God's Word thereby prove that they are Christ's true disciples (John 8:31). Christ's true sheep, which have eternal life, hear their Saviour's voice and follow Him (John 10:27-28).

The overcomer is promised two things (Rev. 2:26-28):

He is promised *power over the nations, to rule them with a rod of iron* (Rev. 2:26-27).

This will be fulfilled in Christ's kingdom when He returns in glory. The saints will rule and judge in the kingdom (Psa. 149:5-9; Dan. 7:22, 27; Mat. 19:28; Rev. 19:15). Christ will judge all nations at His return (Mat. 25:31-32). In that day the Word of the Lord will be the law of the entire earth (Isa. 2:3; Mic. 4:2), and it will be enforced with a rod of iron. Justice and righteousness will reign because injustice and unrighteousness will be punished and punished quickly. Saints rather than sinners will sit on the throne of judgment. Even so, come, Lord Jesus! (See the notes for Revelation 20:4-6 for more about the Lord's rule by "a rod of iron.")

By misinterpreting this and confusing itself with Israel and the church with the kingdom of God, the papacy perpetrated great injury by lording it over secular powers and bearing the sword against "heretics." The same error was committed, though to a lesser extent, by the Protestant denominations such as the Anglican, Reformed, and Lutheran. We have documented this in "The Protestant Persecutions," which is available at the Way of Life web site -- <http://www.wayoflife.org/fbns/protestant-persecutions.html>.

The overcomer is also promised *the morning star* (Rev. 2:28).

The morning star is Christ Himself (Rev. 22:16; 2 Pet. 1:19). Like a star that shines brightly in its reflected glory, the believer will reflect the very glory of Christ in the resurrection. "I will give unto him Myself, who am 'the morning star' (Rev. 22:16); so that reflecting My perfect brightness, he shall shine like Me, the morning star, and share My kingly glory (of which a star is the symbol, Nu. 21:17; Mt. 2:2)" (Jamieson, Fausset, Brown). "Christ is the morning-star. He brings day with him into the soul, the light of grace and of glory; and he will give his people that perfection of light and wisdom which is requisite to the state of dignity and dominion that they shall have in the morning of the resurrection" (Matthew Henry).

The morning star appears at the darkest part of the night preceding the dawn. That Christ is the believer's morning star signifies that He is the ever-soon-coming One. It reminds the believer to be ready and waiting. "The 'morning star' is that bright planet--Venus--which at some seasons of the year appears so beautifully in the east, leading on the morning--the harbinger of the day. It is one of the most beautiful objects in nature, and is susceptible of a great variety of uses for illustration. It appears as the darkness passes away; it is an indication that the morning comes; it is intermingled with the first rays of the light of the sun; it seems to be a herald to announce the coming of that glorious luminary; it is a pledge of the faithfulness of God" (Barnes). "To the faithful believer Christ becomes indeed the Morning Star, the harbinger of the glorious coming day, though the night be yet all around us. Just as the multitude lie physically asleep, while here and there one, watching all night, or risen very early, sees the blazing beauty of the morning star, so these spiritually awakened or aroused find Christ's coming arising as the day-star in their hearts (2 Pet. 1:19)" (Newell).

Christ concludes with the exhortation, “*He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches*” (Rev. 2:29). Each individual believer is responsible to hear what the Spirit says, and this does not mean merely to listen to the Word of God but also to heed it. Nothing is more crucial in life than properly hearing what the Spirit of God says. It is the way of salvation, sanctification, joy, victory, fruit, and reward. For more about this see the notes on the message to Ephesus under Revelation 2:7.

The Church at Sardis

“And unto the angel of the church in Sardis write; These things saith he that hath the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars; I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead. Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God. Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent. If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee. Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with me in white: for they are worthy. He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches” (Revelation 3:1-6).

1. The ancient city of Sardis

Sardis was located about 50 miles south and slightly east of Thyatira, and was situated on the northern slope of Mt. Tmolus. The river Pactolus flowed by the base of the mountain, and the surrounding area is a well-watered plain. The soil is rich and the climate moderate. Its acropolis (high fortified city) was built on a rock of soft sandstone 950 feet high, which was a spur of the mountain, and its southern perpendicular wall was considered impregnable and thus left unguarded, though, as we will see, troops found a way to scale the wall and successfully attack the city in the 6th and again in the 3rd century B.C.

The historian Pliny said the art of dyeing wool was invented here. There were vast flocks of sheep in the surrounding region and the wool was sent to Sardis for processing. Its

carpets were so famous that they were used by the king of Persia.

The sands of its rivers produced much gold, and gold and silver coins were first minted in Sardis.

The city featured magnificent pagan temples, such as the temple of Zeus (Jupiter, Jove), that was built by Alexander the Great, and the temple of the goddess Artemis. Portions of the 78 great pillars that adorned the latter temple remain today; they were 58 feet high.

The city was also infamous for its immoral habits.

The city was populated by many Jews. An excavation in 1962 uncovered the largest synagogue ever discovered. The first stage of it was built sometime after the earthquake of 17 A.D. (Eddwin Yamauchi, *New Testament Cities*, p. 71).

2. The history of the church at Sardis

It was probably founded on Paul's third missionary journey when he spent two years in nearby Ephesus and "*all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus*" (Acts 19:10).

3. Christ's revelation of Himself to the church at Sardis (Rev. 3:1)

He reveals Himself as He that hath the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. This describes His omniscience and power as well as His intimate involvement with and control of the churches. He is not far off. He holds the messengers of the churches in His hand, both to own them and to control them. He and He alone is the head and judge of the church.

In the eyes of man this church had a name that it lived, but this judgment would not stand. Only the judgment of Christ matters, and in the eyes of Christ the church was dead.

4. Christ's exhortation to the church at Sardis (Rev. 3:1-4)

There is no word of commendation to this church. The same is true for the church at Laodicea. What a frightful thing it is for a church to become so disobedient that Christ has nothing good to say about it! "There is a marked change in our Lord's method of address to the church at Sardis. Hitherto He has commenced with words of commendation. Here, He commenced with words of condemnation. In the other churches, evil had not been the habit, but rather the exception, and therefore it was possible first to commend. Here the case is reversed, and no word of commendation is addressed to the church as a church" (G. Campbell Morgan).

This church was not suffering. It was not poor nor was it persecuted. Prosperity and peace have proven throughout history to be one of the church's worst enemies.

The church had a name that it lived but it was dead. In man's eyes this was a good church, but before God it was dead. Compare Matthew 23:27-28. Men are concerned about what man thinks and how man judges; but ultimately, God's judgment is the only thing that matters.

This describes unregeneracy. Many members of this church were still dead in trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1). This happens when a church is not careful about preaching the gospel properly and examining the testimony of those who are brought into the membership. In contrast, the first church at Jerusalem received those who had repented and had gladly received the gospel and showed clear evidence of salvation in that they "*continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers*" (Acts 2:38-42). Nominal Christianity results when a church does not take salvation seriously. Nominal Christians can do many things that appear right. They can have "a form of godliness" (2 Tim. 3:5). They can learn how to talk like a Christian and be faithful to the services and even read the Bible and pray; they might even reject idolatry and replace it

with the “Christian religion.” Thus they can have a name that they live even though they are dead.

This also refers to the general spiritual health of the church. It was dead in the sense that it was not doing God’s will. Its works were not according to the apostolic pattern. So many things in the church were not scriptural that it was said to be dead. It was dead in regard to communion with Christ and godliness in leadership and spirituality in Christian living and zealous evangelism and fervent discipleship and discipline of sin and separation from error. Apparently the leaders and deacons and teachers were carnal and unqualified and the church had no burden for the lost and was not reaching out with the gospel. The average church member doubtless loved the wicked things of the world.

Note the steps to restoration that are contained in Christ’s exhortation:

They were exhorted to ***be watchful and to strengthen the things which remained*** (Rev. 3:2).

The challenge to be watchful reminds us of the city’s history and its carelessness in the face of the attack of the enemy. In the 6th and 3rd centuries B.C., the city had unwisely put its confidence in its situation and had failed to be cautious. The first time this occurred was when the city was attacked by Cyrus, king of the Medo-Persian Empire. “Cyrus offered a great reward to any soldier who came up with a way to gain entrance into Sardis. One of Cyrus’s soldiers by the name of Hyeroeades, who for fourteen days had been observing the fortifications, happened to see a Sardinian soldier accidentally drop his helmet over the wall. When Hyeroeades saw him appear at the base of the battlements and retrieve his helmet he immediately concluded that there was some passage way down which the soldier had come to pick up his helmet. Concluding that what he had done the Persians could duplicate, that night he led a group of Persian troops by the fault, down which the Sardinian soldier had made his way. Upon reaching the top they found the fortifications

completely unguarded. As a result the city fell to the Persians. So it was from a background of historical truth that the Holy Spirit cautioned the church at Sardis to watch” (Marlin).

Backsliding comes through spiritual slothfulness and neglect of the things of God, neglect of fellowship with Christ, neglect of the Bible and prayer and the church. As soon as the individual believer or a church begins to be careless and stops strengthening the spiritual things, it is on a backsliding path.

A church that is partially dead is in danger of dying entirely very quickly unless radical steps are taken. If “*a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump*,” what then will a lot of leaven do? Everything that is still alive and sound; any spiritual activity that remains, must be encouraged and increased. Any spiritual believers that remain should be strengthened and put into positions of influence.

The exhortation to be watchful brings to mind the church leaders. The term “bishop” means *overseer*. The bishop’s job is to watch over the church and to lead it in the paths of obedience. Bishops have the greatest responsibility in the assembly and the authority to bring real change. It behooves church leaders to watch carefully and to strengthen the church in all of the ways of God. If the church has fallen into a backslidden condition, the church leaders should lead the way in repentance and revival.

Watching and strengthening the church is not only the job of the church leaders, though; it is the job of every member. Each believer is to live for Christ. Every believer is to admonish one another (Rom. 15:14), comfort and edify one another (1 Thess. 5:11), and exhort one another (Heb. 3:13; 10:25). Every member is to become skilful in the Word of the Lord so that he can teach others (Heb. 5:12-14). Each member of the church has a solemn responsibility to build up the church so that it pleases Christ. The church is a body and each member is important (1 Cor. 12:18-27). It is easy to criticize others in the church, but each member should ask

himself, “If the whole church were like me, what would the church be?”

They were exhorted **to repent** (Rev. 3:3). Without repentance there can be no spiritual restoration. I must confess my sin and my backslidden condition and turn away from it. I cannot make excuses for it and refuse to acknowledge that I have been wrong. Repentance is a strong action. It is a radical change of mind. It means to “turn right around and go the other way.” When the church at Corinth was rebuked by the apostle Paul and repented, the repentance was a dramatic and evident thing. *“For behold this selfsame thing, that ye sorrowed after a godly sort, what carefulness it wrought in you, yea, what clearing of yourselves, yea, what indignation, yea, what fear, yea, what vehement desire, yea, what zeal, yea, what revenge! In all things ye have approved yourselves to be clear in this matter”* (2 Cor. 7:11).

They were exhorted to **“remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast”** (Rev. 3:3). This refers to returning to the apostolic faith and practice. This is the divine standard for all churches throughout the age, and it is found in the New Testament Scriptures. Compare 1 Corinthians 11:1-2; Philippians 3:17; 1 Timothy 6:13-14; 2 Timothy 2:2; 2 Peter 3:1-2; Jude 3. The church’s standard for faith and practice is not another church or some group of churches. It is not the “church fathers” of the early centuries after Christ. It is not a denomination or “evangelicalism” or “fundamentalism.” It is not a popular preacher. It is not some historic statement of faith. It is not “the Baptist faith.” It is the Bible alone. The church has no legislative authority. Its law (“*the royal law*”) was settled 2,000 years ago. Its faith was “*once delivered to the saints*” (Jude 3). A church that wants to please Christ must go back to the original apostolic faith and practice and reject every man-made tradition, everything pertaining to the flesh and contrary to the Spirit of God. This is true for every area of church life: whether it be doctrine, leadership, Christian living, baptism, the Lord’s supper,

family life, prayer, discipline, evangelism, missions, discipleship, you name it. The standard for everything is “what saith the Scripture?”

They were warned that if they did not repent Christ would come on them as a thief (Rev. 3:3).

This is not Christ’s second coming or the Rapture; it is His coming to judge a church in this present dispensation.

This warning is addressed, first of all, to the church of Sardis as a whole. The warning that Christ would come upon Sardis as a thief refers to the fact that He would judge the church. Historically that happened to the church at Sardis, and it has happened time and time again as churches have turned from the Lord and apostatized. The few names in Sardis that had not defiled their garments were the few who were truly saved. Revelation 3:6 is a proof text for eternal security. Christ promises that a saved person will not be blotted out of the book of life.

5. Christ’s final word to the church at Sardis (Rev. 3:5-6)

He that overcometh shall be *clothed in white raiment* (Rev. 3:5).

Those who overcome are simply those who are truly born again and who therefore follow Jesus Christ because they have genuine saving faith (Jn. 10:27; Heb. 6:9; Rev. 12:11).

The clothing in white raiment signifies the righteousness of the saints (Rev. 19:8), which is imputed to those that believe in Jesus Christ (Rom. 3:22; Rev. 7:14). This is to be justified or declared righteous because of Christ’s blood. A sinner cannot stand before God in his own righteousness, because it is as filthy rags (Isa. 64:6). He can only stand in that imputed righteousness that was purchased by Christ on the cross. Even to Abraham and to David righteousness was imputed (Rom. 4:3-6). Since man receives this imputed righteousness through faith it is called “*the righteousness of faith*” (Rom. 4:13). What an indescribable blessing it is to be clothed in the

white raiment that Christ has provided so that one's nakedness and vile sinfulness does not appear before God!

There will be a real white garment in eternity, and its glory cannot now be fathomed. The clothing of the sinner in Christ's righteousness is typified in Genesis 3:21 and in Matthew 22:8-12.

His name will not be blotted out of the book of life (Rev. 3:5).

The book of life contains the names of those who belong to Christ (Rev. 13:8). Their names were written in the book of life before the foundation of the world, by the foreknowledge and election of God (Rev. 17:8; 1 Pet. 1:2). "Let it be remembered that the period is coming when it will be felt to be a higher honour to have the name enrolled in that book than in the books of heraldry--in the most splendid catalogue of princes, poets, warriors, nobles, or statesmen, that the world has produced" (Barnes).

Though God foreknows the names of all that are in His book, for the individual sinner's part he must repent and put his faith in Jesus Christ (John 3:16; Acts 17:30-31).

To say that this passage teaches that a true believer can be blotted out of the book of life if he does not maintain a certain level of obedience is to commit two serious errors:

First, such an interpretation is contrary to the Bible's description of the METHOD of salvation, which is by grace through faith WITHOUT works (Eph. 2:8-10; Rom. 3:24; 4:1-8; Tit. 3:5-7). Salvation is a gift, and if any works whatsoever are added it is no longer a gift and grace is no longer grace. See Romans 11:6. "To make the continuance of our salvation depend upon works is gross failure to comprehend that salvation is by grace alone. If it depended upon the believer's perseverance, the name would not have been written there in the first place" (Walvoord).

Second, such an interpretation is contrary to the PROMISE of salvation. John 3:16 and hundreds of other verses promise

“he that believeth on him SHALL NOT PERISH BUT HAVE EVERLASTING LIFE.” Are those promises true, or are they a deception? Is the gift of salvation eternal or does it last only until the believer displeases the Lord? The eternal security of the believer is assured by the fact that Christ has promised never to blot his name from the book of life.

Christ will confess his name before the Father and the angels (Rev. 3:5). Compare Matthew 10:32 and Luke 12:8.

He that hath an ear let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches (Rev. 3:6). Each individual believer is responsible to hear what the Spirit says, and this does not mean merely to listen to the Word of God but also to heed it. Nothing is more crucial in life than properly hearing what the Spirit of God says. It is the way of salvation, sanctification, joy, victory, fruit, and reward. For more about this see the notes on the message to Ephesus under Revelation 2:7.

The Church at Philadelphia

“And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write; These things saith he that is holy, he that is true, he that hath the key of David, he that openeth, and no man shutteth; and shutteth, and no man openeth; I know thy works: behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it: for thou hast a little strength, and hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name. Behold, I will make them of the synagogue of Satan, which say they are Jews, and are not, but do lie; behold, I will make them to come and worship before thy feet, and to know that I have loved thee. Because thou hast kept the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth. Behold, I come quickly: hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown. Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out: and I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, which is new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God: and I will write upon him my new name. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches” (Revelation 3:7-13).

1. The ancient city of Philadelphia

The city was located about 40 miles southeast of Sardis and about 150 miles due east of Ephesus and was built on several hills “extremely regular in figure and having the appearance of truncated pyramids.” It was about 650 feet in altitude and had a pleasant and healthy climate. The land nearby was exceedingly fertile.

The city got its name from Attalus Philadelphus, one of its kings, or was named after him by his brother Eumenes in the 2nd century (Edwin Yamauchi, *New Testament Cities*, p. 77).

It was called “Little Athens” because of the magnificence of the temples and other public buildings which adorned it (*International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*).

It was famous for its wine (which was celebrated by the Roman poet Virgil), and the city’s coins featured an image of Bacchus (or a female Bacchant), the god of revelry and debauchery. Dionysus was also worshipped in Philadelphia.

2. The history of the church at Philadelphia

It was probably founded on Paul’s third missionary journey when he spent two years in nearby Ephesus and “*all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus*” (Acts 19:10).

3. Christ’s revelation of Himself to the church at Philadelphia (Rev. 3:7)

Christ reveals Himself as “*he that is holy, he that is true, he that hath the key of David, he that openeth, and no man shutteth; and shutteth, and no man openeth.*”

This was the fullest revelation of Christ that was given to any of the churches, and it was given to the church that was most faithful to Him.

This revelation was given to encourage a weak, despised church that was keeping God’s Word in the midst of a wealthy, proud, and sensual society. Christ reminds them that He is the holy one in contrast to the wickedness of the pagan society in which the Philadelphia church existed, and He is the one and only true Lord (“*he that is true*”) who has control over all things (“*openeth, and no man shutteth; and shutteth, and no man openeth*”).

What is the **key of David**?

A key denotes authority, control, access, ownership; and *the key of David is the throne that God promised to king David*. See 2 Samuel 7:12-13, 16; Psalm 89:3-4, 19-29, 34-37. Jesus Christ is the greater Son of David who has inherited His

father's kingdom and will rule over it forever (Isa. 9:6-7; Mat. 1:1; Lk. 1:32). Jesus Christ is the King of kings who will come and establish an eternal kingdom, and the believers at Philadelphia were strengthened by being reminded of this fact. This present world, with its suffering and mockery and blasphemy and lies and unrequited unrighteousness, will soon pass, and then the humble believer will be exalted to rule and reign with Christ.

The term "*the key of the house of David*" is used in Isaiah 22:22 to refer to Eliakim, and it looks beyond him to the Messiah. Eliakim was a type of Christ.

Christ *openeth, and no man shutteth; and shutteth, and no man openeth.*

This is another statement of Christ's omnipotence. He is in control of all things, both pertaining to heaven and to earth, to life and to death, to the unsaved and the saved. Men make plans, but the outcome is entirely in God's hands. "*The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the LORD*" (Prov. 16:33).

The wise person submits his life and decisions wholly unto Christ, the One who alone can effectively open and shut. He does not lean unto his own understanding and live by his own will, but in all his ways he acknowledges Christ and desires that He will direct his paths (Prov. 3:5-6).

4. Christ's commendation and promise to the church at Philadelphia (Rev. 3:8-10)

Philadelphia was a model church. Together with Smyrna, it is the only church that has no warning about sin and error and no call to repentance.

Christ knows their works and condition (Rev. 3:8). He knows them intimately.

He knows that they had **a *little strength.***

This means they had *only* a little strength. This was a weak, insignificant church, possibly small in numbers and certainly

in resources, poor in worldly goods and of small account in the eyes of man. It was not wealthy and impressive. It was not comprised of those who were mighty in this world. Its leaders did not have impressive credentials.

When we are weak then are we strong, meaning that when we are conscious of our complete inability of serving Christ in our own strength, then we cast ourselves upon God's strength and resources.

Observe that even first century churches did not exercise "*kingdom power*." This was the very best of the seven churches that Christ addressed, but it is described in terms of little strength rather than great miracle power. Though believers are translated into the kingdom of Christ at salvation (Col. 1:13), this is in a spiritual sense rather than a physical. In the physical sense, we are waiting for the kingdom to be established at Christ's return (2 Tim. 4:1). In this present world we are waiting for the physical aspects of our redemption to be fulfilled, and in the mean time we suffer, are subject to vanity and the bondage of corruption, and groan within ourselves, "*waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body*" (Rom. 8:18-24).

Even so they had ***kept His Word and not denied His name***.

We see that the Word of Christ was available to this church. It was the inspired teaching of the apostles and prophets that was gradually inscripturated and canonized. Christ promised that He would send the Holy Spirit Who would guide the disciples into all truth (John 16:13), and this was fulfilled by the inspiration and canonization of the New Testament Scripture. Revelation was the final book of that canon. The churches received the teaching of the apostles as the Word of God (1 Thess. 2:13). Paul exhorted the church at Colosse, "*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom*" (Col. 3:16). The churches were guided by the Holy Spirit in the choice of which books to add to the canon of Scripture.

It pleases Christ greatly when His people keep His Word. He commanded in the Great Commission that baptized

believers be taught “*to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you*” (Mat. 28:19-20). The same Greek word (*tereo*) is translated “keep” in Revelation 2:8 and “observe” in Matthew 28:20. It has two meanings. First, it means to guard and protect. The same word (*tereo*) is translated “hold fast” (Rev. 3:3), “watch” (Mat. 27:36), “reserved” (Acts 25:21; 1 Pet. 1:4), and “preserved” (1 Thess. 5:23). It is used to describe those who were assigned to guard Christ’s tomb (Mat. 28:4). It is used for being kept in prison (Acts 12:5). Second, it means to fulfill or obey. It is used to describe the keeping of Christ’s commandments (Jn. 15:10). To keep or observe God’s Word means more, therefore, than having it and believing it and studying it. It means to obey it and to protect it against error. Thus we see that the churches have a key role in the preservation of the Scripture. Christ’s words were given by inspiration of the Holy Spirit to the apostles and prophets and inscripturated. We have the words of Christ in the completed canon of Scripture, and the churches are tasked with guarding this treasure from corruption, defending it against the devil’s attacks (“*observe all things*”). They are also tasked with obeying it in all points. This is what the church at Philadelphia was commended for.

It also pleases Christ greatly when His people do not deny His name. This means to deny or to be ashamed of what His name signifies. His name means Saviour (Mat. 1:21), and His name is the only name by which men can be saved (Acts 4:12). His name also means God (Isa. 9:6), and He has been given a name above every name and at His name every knee shall bow (Phil. 2:9-11). To not deny the name of Jesus Christ means to exalt Him as the only Lord and Saviour and to not back down from this profession. The pressure to deny Christ’s name is tremendous, as this world is filled with lies and false gods. This world crucified Christ 2,000 years ago and it would do it again today if it had the opportunity. The world will accept Jesus as a good man and a great prophet, but not as the only Lord and Saviour.

Christ gives this church some wonderful promises (Rev. 3:8-10).

He promised to ***set before them an open door and to keep them from the hour of temptation*** (Rev. 3:8, 10).

We believe that these promises go together. *The open door is to escape the Great Tribulation described in verse 10.* The “*hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world*” is the Great Tribulation mentioned by Isaiah (Isa. 2:10-22), Daniel (Dan. 12:1), Joel (Joel 2:2), Malachi (Mal. 4:1), and Jesus (Matt. 24:21), and it is described in detail in Revelation 5-18. It is called “*the time of Jacob’s trouble*” (Jer. 30:7), because God’s attention will again be upon Israel and the judgments that will be poured out at that time will bring Israel to repentance. We believe the door and the way of escape refers to the Rapture (1 Thess. 4:15-17), whereby the New Testament saints are taken to heaven at the beginning of the Tribulation. Note that the Rapture is held forth as a source of comfort to New Testament saints (1 Thess. 4:18). If the Rapture occurred at the end of the Great Tribulation, it would not be much of a comfort, to say the least! In 1 Thessalonians 5:1-9 we see that the day of the Lord to judge the world will come upon the unsaved as a thief in the night, but that day will not overtake us because we are not appointed to wrath. Two distinctly different groups are described in this passage, “they” (the world) and “ye” or “us” (the believers) (1 Thess. 5:3-5, 7-9).

The promise to the church of Philadelphia is God’s promise to every true believer who is alive when the church age ends and the “*time of Jacob’s trouble*” begins.

This promise also applies to the open doors that Christ sets before His people in this present life. When God opens a door, no man can shut it. I recall when my wife and I first arrived in Nepal in 1979 to start a church planting ministry. Everything looked impossible. It was against the law to preach the gospel in Nepal in those days. We could only get a one-month tourist visa. No other type of visa was available to

us then. We were all alone. There were no Baptist churches and no other fundamentalists of any type in the entire country. The ecumenical association resisted us and tried to make us leave. It looked impossible, but God opened a door that no man could shut and by His power and grace and through the associates that he brought into our lives we were able to start a church that has prospered to this day. Jesus said, *“All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth”* (Mat. 28:18), and when He opens a door we can be sure that it is open!

He promised to make those of the synagogue of Satan to worship before their feet (*“Behold, I will make them of the synagogue of Satan, which say they are Jews, and are not, but do lie; behold, I will make them to come and worship before thy feet, and to know that I have loved thee,”* Rev. 3:9).

This refers to the Judaizers that plagued the churches in the first century. They required that the believers obey the Mosaic law (Acts 15:1). Paul wrote the entire epistle to the Galatians to counter this heresy. The Judaizers were perverting the gospel of Christ by adding works to grace for salvation (Gal. 1:6-7). Their goal was to bring the believer into bondage to the Law of Moses (Gal. 2:4). They taught that the believer is saved by faith in Christ *plus* the works of the law (Gal. 3:1-3).

When Jesus said that they *“say they are Jews, and are not, but do lie,”* He was referring to the fact that though they were Jews in the flesh they were not Jews in spirit (Rom. 2:28-29). *“The meaning is, that, though they were of Jewish extraction, and boasted much of being Jews, yet they were really under the influence of Satan, and their assemblages deserved to be called his ‘synagogue’”* (Barnes).

Christ called them liars and the synagogue of Satan. Unlike so many preachers today, Christ does not mince words or speak in generalities and *“beat around the bush.”* His preaching is characterized by truth rather than diplomacy. He preaches the plain truth in love. There is no New Evangelical

emphasis on the positive, no attempt to avoid injuring His listeners' self esteem.

Some of the Judaizers were liars because they denied Jesus' Messiahship, His Deity, His miracles, and His resurrection. Others were liars because they denied salvation by grace alone (Gal. 1:6-7; 2:4).

These legalists were of the synagogue of Satan. Paul taught the same thing. Satan has his ministers who teach false christs, false gospels, and false spirits (2 Cor. 11:3-4, 13-15). There are those who teach "*doctrines of Devils*" (1 Tim. 4:1-3).

This statement is not limited to Judaizers but also applies to any who teach a false gospel. They claim to be the true covenant people of God, just like the unsaved Jews of John's day, but they are actually of the Devil (2 Cor. 11:1-4, 12-15; 1 Tim. 4:1-3).

Christ will make them to worship before the believers' feet, and to know that He has loved them (Rev. 3:9). They will be forced to worship God in the presence of and at the feet of the believers and to thus honor them, acknowledging that they were wrong and that they did not know the truth. The Philippian jailer comes to mind (Acts 16:29-30). "It does not mean necessarily that they would themselves be converted to Christ, but that, as they had been accustomed to revile and oppose those who were true Christians, they would be constrained to come and render them the respect due to those who were sincerely endeavouring to serve their Maker" (Barnes).

This again demonstrates that Christ is omniscient and omnipotent. He knows the future and controls the future. He is able to do anything He so desires, and whatsoever He promises will surely come to pass. No mere man can make such bold and dogmatic statements about the future.

As to when this will occur, it is not certain. Perhaps it occurred to some extent even in that day, when some of the

Jewish teachers repented and apologized to the church. It will probably occur at Christ's return when He establishes His kingdom and the Jews will acknowledge that the Christians were right about Jesus being the Messiah. Perhaps it will occur at the Great White Throne judgment when the unsaved are resurrected and judged.

5. Christ's exhortation to the church at Philadelphia (Rev. 3:11)

“Behold, I come quickly.” This expression is repeated four times in Revelation (3:11; 22:7, 11, 20).

The quick coming of the Lord refers to His coming in God's perspective. It must be interpreted by God's clock, not ours. See 2 Peter 3:8. Elsewhere in the New Testament Christ's coming is described as soon (Lk. 18:8; Rom. 16:20). To God a thousand years is as a day or even less than a day. In Isaiah 54:8 He told Israel, *“In a little wrath I hid my face from thee for A MOMENT; but with everlasting kindness will I have mercy on thee, saith the LORD thy Redeemer.”* Though He has forsaken Israel for at least 2,000 years, to God that is but a moment because He measures things by eternity.

The quick coming of the Lord also refers to the imminency of His coming, meaning that it is not preceded by specific signs and could happen at any time (Matt. 24:42, 44; 25:13; Phil. 4:5; 1 Th. 1:9-10; Tit. 2:12-13; Jam. 5:8-9). It will begin with the Rapture of church-age saints (1 Thess. 4:3-18), and from then until the return of Christ to establish His kingdom as described in Revelation 19-20 only seven brief years elapse. If a father leaves his teenage son in charge of his younger siblings and the household affairs and tells him, “I have to go away on some business, but I will come quickly,” what will that teenage son do if he is wise? He will be ready at all times for the return of his father! The church-age believer is not looking for the Antichrist but for Christ. The events described in Revelation 6-18 are *“the day of the Lord,”* and it will come “as a thief in the night” and as “sudden

destruction” (1 Thess. 5:2-3), but the New Testament believer is “*not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief*” (1 Thess. 5:4). God has not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thess. 5:5).

Why has Christ waited for so long to come?

He has waited to test and demonstrate man’s faith. In Matthew 25 Christ told the Parable of the Virgins (Mat. 25:1-13). This parable teaches that Christ will go away and will be gone so long that the faith of professing Christians will be tested. Those who have genuine faith will continue to look for the Saviour’s return and will be found prepared and ready even though He “tarries.” In Luke 12:35-47 Jesus exhorted the disciples to be watching and ready when He comes and warned that some will grow tired of waiting and will cast off their faith, proving that their faith was only nominal.

He has waited in order to allow unrepentant unbelievers to scoff (2 Pet. 3:3-7). His waiting presents an opportunity for men to believe, and it also presents an opportunity for others to disbelieve. As with Pharaoh, God gives rebels all the rope they need to hang themselves if they refuse to submit to Him.

He has also waited to save the lost (2 Pet. 3:9). This is the chief reason Christ has waited for 2,000 years to come. He desires all men to be saved. He “*will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth*” (1 Tim. 2:4).

The quick return of Christ is a great incentive to persevering faithfulness and a great consolation under present trials (Jamieson, Fausset, Brown).

Hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown.

It is possible to lose one’s rewards by carelessness and disobedience. Compare Hebrews 10:35 and 2 John 7-11.

Thus, it is imperative that every believer hold fast to the New Testament faith and to obedient, godly Christian living and to faithfulness in the things of Christ.

6. Christ's final word to the church at Philadelphia (Rev. 3:12-13)

Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out (Rev. 3:12).

As we have seen, those who overcome are simply those who are truly born again and who therefore follow Jesus Christ because they have genuine saving faith (Jn. 10:27; Heb. 6:9; Rev. 12:11).

A pillar speaks of glory and eminence. It is a monument. The pillars of the assembly are its eminent men (Gal. 2:9). The believer will be a pillar in the eternal temple of God in heaven, not in the sense of supporting the temple, but as “a monument of the free and powerful grace of God, a monument that shall never be defaced nor removed” (Matthew Henry). Those who were once the epitome of weakness and nothingness, those who were dead in trespasses and sins and separated from God, will in that day be glorious and eminent. They will be monuments and examples of God's amazing grace.

They will no more go out. They will be eternally secure and stand forever in the very presence of God. This does not mean that they will never leave the temple and never travel but that they will be in the presence of God and in His perfect fellowship and service regardless of where they are. As the angel could describe himself as “Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God” even though he was on earth talking with Mary, so the believer will never be separated from God's presence.

And I will write upon him the name of my God.

This speaks of the believer's security in Christ. “[I will write upon him the name of my God] as belonging to God in a peculiar sense (Rev. 7:3; 9:4; 14:1; and especially Rev. 22:4), therefore secure. As the name of Jehovah (*‘Holiness to the Lord’*) was on the golden plate on the high priest's forehead (Ex. 28:36-38); so the saints in their heavenly royal

priesthood shall bear His name openly, as consecrated to Him. Compare the caricature of this in the brand on the forehead of the beast's followers (Rev. 13:16-17), and on the harlot (Rev. 17:5; compare Rev. 20:4)" (Jamieson, Fausset, Brown).

When Christ speaks of the Father as "my God," this does not mean Christ is not God. Hebrews 1:8 quotes from Psalm 45:6 and says that Jehovah God also calls the Son God. Christ adopts this language on three occasions.

When He was made sin for us on the cross (Mat. 27:46). "In this instance, we understand that Jesus has so fully taken the sinner's place that He is cut off (Dan. 9:26) from the Father (Psa. 22:1ff)."

When He ascended, just after the resurrection (Jn. 20:17). "In this instance, Christ is the firstborn among many brethren. Having died as a man and risen as a man, He will now ascend as a man (1 Tim. 2:5) to open up the new and living way to the throne of grace."

When He is referring to the New Jerusalem (Rev. 3:12). "In this instance, He is so pleased with the condition of the church at Philadelphia and that they are so perfect a manifestation of His person, He associates Himself with them in their labor, hope and reward. The writer of Hebrews quotes the words of Christ when He said of the Father, 'I will put my trust in Him' [God] showing that 'both he that sanctifieth and they who are sanctified are all of one: for which cause he is not ashamed to call them brethren, saying ... I will put my trust in him' (Heb. 2:11-13). So, when stating that the believer may know God's power in quickening him together with Christ, the apostle offered prayer to 'the God of our Lord Jesus Christ' (Ephesians 1:17)."

and the name of the city of my God, which is new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God (Rev. 3:12)

The citizenship of the New Jerusalem will somehow be written on the believer. Citizens of nations in this present world receive a passport signifying that they are lawful members of that nation and that they enjoy all of the rights and privileges thereof, but nothing in this world can begin to compare with that glorious city described in Revelation 21-22. What rights and privileges will be enjoyed by its citizens!

And I will write upon him my new name (Rev. 3:12).

This name cannot be presently known because it will be Christ's new name in the New Jerusalem. It will be a new name associated with His new work and position. "New also relates to Christ, who shall assume a new character (answering to His 'new name') entering with His saints on a kingdom--not that which He had with the Father before the worlds, but that earned by His humiliation as Son of man" (Jamieson, Fausset, Brown).

Whatever it is, it speaks of the believer's unity with Christ. His very name will be written upon them.

He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches (Rev. 3:13). Each individual believer is responsible to hear what the Spirit says, and this does not mean merely to listen to the Word of God but also to heed it. Nothing is more crucial in life than properly hearing what the Spirit of God says. It is the way of salvation, sanctification, joy, victory, fruit, and reward. For more about this see the notes on the message to Ephesus under Revelation 2:7.

The Church at Laodicea

“And unto the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write; These things saith the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God; I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth. Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked: I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eyesalve, that thou mayest see. As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent. Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me. To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches” (Revelation 3:14-22).

1. The ancient city of Laodicea

Located about 40 miles south and a little east of Philadelphia and 18 miles west of Colosse, Laodicea was a large and important city in John’s time. It was situated upon six or seven hills about a mile and a half from the small river Lycus. It was located on the crossroads of the most important highway running from Ephesus to the east. The road entered the city on the west through the Ephesian Gates and left the city on the east by the Syrian Gates. The ruins of the Ephesian Gates still stand, composed of three half-culvert-like structures made of stone.

The city was the residence of the Roman governors of Asia under the emperors and had magnificent public buildings and a large stadium and three marble theaters, one of which was 450 feet in diameter.

It was famous for its wealth. It was a banking and trading center. It has been called the “Wall Street” of Asia Minor. It was so wealthy that when the city was destroyed by an earthquake in 61 A.D. the citizens rejected the help of the Roman government and rebuilt at their own expense.

It was a clothing and fashion center. The fine glossy black wool of its sheep was known far and wide. One thing made from this was a soft wool tunic called *trimita*, which was extremely popular (William Ramsay, *The Letters to the Seven Churches*).

The city was also devoted to sports and music. The enclosed stadium 1,000 feet in length served for gladiatorial games as well as musical contests.

The city was given over to idolatry, worshipping Zeus, Dionysus, Helios (the sun), Athena, Aphrodite, and others (Yamauchi, *New Testament Cities in Western Asia Minor*).

There was a renowned school of medicine there, and a popular Phrygian powder for weak and sick eyes was manufactured in Laodicea and distributed widely in tablet form.

2. The history of the church at Laodicea

It was probably founded on Paul’s third missionary journey when he spent two years in nearby Ephesus and “*all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus*” (Acts 19:10). Since Laodicea was in this area, it is likely that the church was established at this time, perhaps through the instrumentality of some who were converted under Paul’s preaching.

We do know that the church existed in Paul’s day and that he was familiar with it. In his epistle to the church at Colosse,

Paul exhorts them to salute the church at Laodicea (Col. 4:15) and mentions a letter that he had written to Laodicea (Col. 4:16).

3. Christ's revelation of Himself to the church at Laodicea (Rev. 3:14)

How does Christ reveal Himself?

He reveals Himself as true and faithful. *Amen* means “truly, surely, certainly.” When Paul says that all the promises of God “*in him are yea, and in him Amen*” (2 Cor. 1:20), it means the promises are true and sure. Jesus thus reveals Himself to this lukewarm church as thrice true and faithful (“the Amen, the faithful and true witness”). He is therefore utterly dependable.

He reveals Himself as *the beginning of the creation of God*. This does not mean that Christ was created. Colossians 1:16 states that all things were created by Christ, and John 1:3 says, “*All things were made by him; AND WITHOUT HIM WAS NOT ANY THING MADE THAT WAS MADE.*” The “*beginning of the creation of God*” means that Christ is the firstborn from the dead and the head of the new creation (Col. 1:18; Rev. 1:5). He has all preeminence, all authority in heaven and earth (Mat. 28:18), and has been given a name above every name (Phil. 2:9).

What is the significance of this?

That Christ is the faithful and true one and the Head of the new creation means there is no excuse for backsliding and lukewarmness, because Christ is everything the believer needs and can supply everything he needs, and if he will simply keep his eyes on Christ he will remain spiritually steadfast.

The fact that Christ is the true and faithful one means that He does not countenance error and unfaithfulness. Not only are His promises true but so are His warnings of judgment, as this church would soon learn. Truth is never something that

is of little consequence to God. The Spirit of God is “*the Spirit of truth*” (Jn. 14:17; 15:26; 16:13). “Himself characterized by sincerity and truth, he can look with approbation only on the same thing in others: and hence he looks with displeasure on the lukewarmness which, from its very nature, always approximates insincerity” (Barnes).

4. Christ’s exhortation to the church at Laodicea (Rev. 3:15-20)

Note that there is no commendation for this church. The same is true for the church at Sardis. There were two churches with no rebuke and two churches with no commendation.

Christ condemned them because of their lukewarmness (Rev. 3:15-17).

Consider the historical background to this statement. The city had no source of water within its boundaries, and the supply of water from the nearby river was not dependable; thus they brought water in from a hot spring located about six miles south of the city by means of an aqueduct made of stone pipes (Colin Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia*; p. xxi; Edwin Yamauchi, *New Testament Cities*, p. 141). By the time the water arrived at the city it was tepid and notoriously odious. In contrast, the water in nearby Hierapolis (to the north) was hot and medicinally healthy, while that of Colossae (to the east) was refreshingly cold.

The condition of the church at Laodicea is described.

Notice the severity and directness of this condemnation. Christ is not always gentle. He drove the money changers out of the temple with a whip (John 2:13-15). He rebuked the Pharisees as hypocrites, children of hell, blind guides, fools, serpents, generation of vipers (Mat. 23:13-33). When He was grieved at the hardness of the hearts of the Jewish leaders he “looked round about on them with anger” (Mark 3:5). When

Peter spoke foolishly, Christ said to him, “Get thee behind me, Satan” (Mat. 16:22-23).

Note how self-deceived they were. The heart is deceitful above all things (Jer. 17:9), and there is great danger in this sin-cursed world to be deceived. Christ warned, “Take heed that no man deceive thee. For many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and shall deceive many” (Mat. 24:4-5). He said that “false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive many” (Mat. 24:11). The words of false teachers are capable of deceiving the hearts of the simple (Rom. 16:18). A man can even deceive himself (1 Cor. 3:18). The only way to overcome deception and to be found in the truth is to continue in God’s Word (John 8:31-32), carefully measuring everything by it, and to obey God’s will as He shows it to me (John 7:17).

They were neither cold nor hot (Rev. 3:15). Some historians believe that this metaphor refers to the water situation in Laodicea as compared to nearby cities. The water in Hierapolis was hot, and that in Colosse was cold, but the water in Laodicea was lukewarm and distasteful after being brought from four miles away in a concrete pipeline.

Whether that is true or not, it is certain that they were spiritually lukewarm. They were lackadaisical and half-hearted in spiritual matters. They had a little interest but only a little. They were church members and went through the motions of Christianity, but they didn’t take it very seriously. They loved the world as much as they loved Christ. They didn’t believe in being fanatical about the Bible. Christ said He would rather that they were cold than lukewarm. If they were entirely cold and irreligious it would be easier to convince them of their lost condition, but since they saw themselves as right with God it was much harder to bring them to repentance. “Lukewarmness or indifference in religion is the worst temper in the world. If religion is a real thing, it is the most excellent thing, and therefore we should be in good earnest in it; if it is not a real thing, it is the vilest imposture, and we should be earnest against it. If religion is

worth any thing, it is worth every thing; an indifference here is inexcusable: Why halt you between two opinions? If God be God, follow him; if Baal (be God), follow him. Here is no room for neutrality. An open enemy shall have a fairer quarter than a perfidious neuter; and there is more hope of a heathen than of such. Christ expects that men should declare themselves in earnest either for him or against him” (Matthew Henry). “Smyrna was hot--it flamed like fire in its zeal; its fidelity unto death glowed like an oven. Sardis got as cold as ice. But Laodicea was lukewarm, neither cold nor hot--it did not come out strong and openly for anything. It was like the man in the canoe who once had lost his paddle in the stream, and prayed: “Good Lord, help me; Good Devil, help me” (B.H. Carroll).

They were proud of and trusted in their worldly prosperity (Rev. 3:17). See how rich we are! See our salaries and our buildings and equipment and our technology, was their testimony.

They looked at things through carnal rather than spiritual eyes, measuring things by man’s standards rather than by Christ’s (Rev. 3:17). Because they were prosperous they thought things were fine and God must be pleased, but in reality they were in wretched spiritual condition.

They were poor (Rev. 3:17), even though they were rich in this world. If the rich in this world could only see how desperately poverty-stricken they are in light of eternity, they would flee to Christ. The wealthiest men of this world, who can purchase the satisfaction of every desire and whim, are paupers before God and their poverty will be exposed for all to see in the next life. They will not take one particle of wealth from this world, and having died without Christ they will be eternally bankrupt, without hope of recovery. Further, all of the riches of this world cannot purchase one iota of God’s salvation. The only thing that was valuable enough to purchase it was the “*precious blood of Christ*” (1 Pet. 1:19). There is no excuse or necessity of any man dying with this

blood being put to his account. “*Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price*” (Isaiah 55:1).

They were blind (Rev. 3:17). They could not see their true condition. They could not see understand spiritual things. They were oblivious to the danger that lay before them because they could not see it. The fact that they thought they could see made their condition even more perilous. If a man knows that he is blind, he is very cautious and seeks help, but if a blind man thinks he can see he walks boldly on and is in danger on every hand. Compare John 9:41; Proverbs 26:12; Isaiah 5:21.

They were naked (Rev. 3:17). The spiritual condition described here is that of the unsaved. To be naked before God is to be without the clothing of Christ’s righteousness. Every righteousness that the sinner has of his own is but filthy rags before God (Isa. 64:6).

This condition is found among churches today.

This is a description of Christianity in general in this age. Never have so many churches been so prosperous, and they glory in this. How can we be wrong, they think, when we have such massive crowds and such fabulous buildings and we give so much money to fight AIDS and poverty and global warming?

This is a description of the Word-Faith movement, which is one of the most prominent aspects of the massive Charismatic movement today. It holds that healing is guaranteed to those who have faith, that Jesus was rich and that He desires for His followers to be financially prosperous, and that faith is a creative force that can be used to shape one’s world. Kenneth Hagin, Sr., the father of the Word-Faith movement, defined positive confession in his booklet *How to Write Your Own Ticket with God*. Jesus allegedly appeared to him and gave him “the formula for faith,” promising that “if anybody, anywhere, will take these four steps or put these

four principles into operation, he will always receive whatever he wants from Me or from God the Father.” The formula is simple: “Say it, Do it, Receive it, and Tell it.”

This is also a description of popular evangelicalism. It has become so prosperous and its leaders so impressive that it has been featured in secular news publications. Evangelical churches are large and prosperous. Evangelical colleges and publishing houses are influential. Evangelical syndicated radio and television ministries are heard by millions. The leaders of evangelical ministries are often very wealthy men. Evangelical missions enterprises are highly impressive, featuring multi-million dollar endeavors such as Samaritan’s Purse and World Vision. In 2006 churches in America spent \$8.1 BILLION just on audio and projection equipment (“High Tech Churches,” *Christian Post*, Sept. 26, 2007). An article in *Christianity Today* for October 2006 entitled “Let’s Improve the Public Perception of Evangelicalism,” described “evangelicalism” in the following terms: “We now have institutional resources and influential churches to a degree barely hoped for 50 years ago. Our people are better educated and more affluent. Our global networks are connecting believers like never before.” This sounds much more like Laodicea than Philadelphia.

In contrast to the condition of Laodicea was that of the churches at Smyrna and Philadelphia. They were weak, persecuted, despised, and poor. Christ called the true disciplines his “*little flock*” (Lk. 12:32). “Those belonging to this body of believers have never been exalted into temporal power, or decorated with worldly rank, but have dwelt for the most part, as it were, in dens and caves of the earth, even being found ‘destitute, afflicted, tormented’, and have thus proved themselves to be of the house and lineage of the Crucified” (Charles Haddon Spurgeon).

Christ warned them that He would spew them out of his mouth (Rev. 3:16).

This is strong language. To be spewed out of the mouth is to be vomited out. The lukewarm professor literally makes Christ sick at His stomach. He cannot stand a lukewarm person and will not abide by it for long but will vomit him out. “They may call their lukewarmness charity, meekness, moderation, and a largeness of soul; it is nauseous to Christ, and makes those so that allow themselves in it” (Matthew Henry).

For this reason we believe that this church was largely unregenerate. This is not a description of Christians who are saved but carnal; it is a description of nominal ones.

Christ exhorts them to repent (Rev. 3:18-19).

He counsels them to buy of Him gold tried in the fire and white raiment and to anoint their eyes with eyesalve.

Note that Christ’s counsel is always right, always the best. His name is “Counsellor” (Isa. 9:6). The soul that trusts Christ’s counsel and lives by it will never regret it, and praise God, we have this infallible counsel inscripturated and preserved for us in the Bible. We cannot benefit from Christ’s counsel, though, until we reject man’s counsel. Also, Christ’s counsel cannot be received as a suggestion; it is nothing if not a divine command.

This is a mysterious way of speaking. How can a poor man buy gold? This mystery is answered in the Gospel, by which it is possible to buy *without price*, as described in Isaiah 55:1. This is possible because the price for salvation was paid by Christ Himself, and it is therefore a gift that the sinner can receive freely by repentance and faith. Thus there is hope for the hopeless, and no sinner is beyond the reach of God’s grace.

Notice that this salvation comes directly from Christ (“*buy of ME*,” Rev. 3:18). They were not exhorted to go to an earthly priest or to a church or to Mary or to a “saint.” Jesus Christ is the one mediator between God and men and salvation as

received directly from His hand (1 Tim. 2:5). Jesus says to the sinner, “*Come unto me...*” (Mat. 11:28).

The **gold tried in the fire** whereby we become rich is the eternal redemption that was purchased by the precious blood of Christ (2 Cor. 8:9; 1 Pet. 1:18-19). Through Christ’s mercy we receive “*an inheritance incorruptible*” (1 Pet. 1:3-4). What incredible wealth! And this wealth is laid up in heaven, “*where moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal*” (Mat. 6:20).

The **white raiment** is the righteousness of Christ which is imputed to the believer so that he is thus clothed acceptably before God (Rom. 3:21-24; 2 Cor. 5:21). When Adam and Eve sinned against God’s commandment they immediately had the awareness that they were naked and they were ashamed and fearful before God, trying vainly to cover themselves (Gen. 3:7, 10-11). God did not accept their self-made coverings of fig leaves and instead clothed them with coats made from animals. This signifies the fact that the sinner cannot do anything by his own works to make himself acceptable before God, but that God must provide the covering and He did this through the sacrifice of His own Son as “*the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world*” (John 1:29).

The **eyesalve** is the unction of the Holy Spirit, whereby the believer understands the things of God and is able to judge things properly (1 John 2:27).

There is a sense in which this exhortation applies both to believers and to unbelievers. We are convinced that the chief problem in this church was unregeneracy and nominal Christianity, but there is a sense in which saved people can become so backslidden that they could be described as “*wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked*” (Rev. 3:17). In 2 Peter 1:5-8 the believer is exhorted to grow in grace, adding to his faith, virtue, knowledge, temperance, patience, godliness, brotherly kindness, and charity. This is followed by the warning that “*he that lacketh*

these things is blind, and cannot see afar off, and hath forgotten that he was purged from his old sins” (2 Pet. 1:9). The carnal believer can therefore become spiritually blind and terribly backslidden. The backslider is wretched and miserable because he becomes filled with his own ways and does not have the joy of the Lord (Prov. 14:14). He is poor because he is not laying up treasures in heaven and will suffer great loss at the judgment seat of Christ (Mat. 6:20; 1 Cor. 3:12-15). He is naked because he is not walking in the Spirit but in the works of the flesh (Gal. 5:16-17), and oftentimes the believer who walks according to the flesh is naked both physically and spiritually because he or she adopts the world’s immodest fashions.

Christ tells them that ***He rebukes them because He loves them*** (Rev. 3:19).

What amazing love Christ has! He loves this proud, deceived, lukewarm church that does not love Him, and He calls them to repentance and desires to help them.

To this carnal generation, rebuke is contrary to love. Rebuke is considered unloving, legalistic, and Pharisaical, but godly love does not overlook sin and error. Parents that love their children will discipline them. Preachers that love people will reprove their sin, and they that love the truth will reprove error.

Christ tells them to be zealous and repent.

Repentance is necessary both for salvation and for godly Christian living. The sinner who does not repent cannot be saved. The Lord Jesus Christ warned, “... *except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish*” (Lk. 13:3, 5). The Bible describes salvation is coming to repentance (2 Pet. 3:9). Preaching repentance is a part of the Great Commission (Lk. 24:47).

Repentance is to change my mind in respect to sin and to agree with God about it and to submit my life to Him. It is to turn around and go the other way. To repent, this church would have to receive God’s Word about its own condition

and acknowledge that it was poor and blind and naked. It would have to reject the filthy rags of self-righteousness and receive the imputed righteousness of Christ. It would have to reject the folly of human wisdom and receive the true wisdom of God.

The acceptable repentance required zeal (*“be zealous therefore, and repent,”* Rev. 3:19). A lukewarm church might repent in a lukewarm manner, but this is not sufficient. Christ wants a thorough repentance, such as that which was demonstrated by Zacchaeus, who repented so thoroughly that he was changed from a thief to a benefactor (Lk. 19:1-10), or such as that which was demonstrated by the church at Thessalonica, which *“turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God”* (1 Thess. 1:9), or such as that which was demonstrated by the church at Corinth: *“For behold this selfsame thing, that ye sorrowed after a godly sort, what carefulness it wrought in you, yea, what clearing of yourselves, yea, what indignation, yea, what fear, yea, what vehement desire, yea, what zeal, yea, what revenge! In all things ye have approved yourselves to be clear in this matter”* (2 Cor. 7:11).

Christ stands at the door and knocks (Rev. 3:20).

In the context, Christ is speaking to the church at Laodicea. This is therefore its primary interpretation. He is standing outside of the church, which shows its wretched condition like nothing else could. Yet this is still one of the seven golden candlesticks and apparently is still a true church of Jesus Christ at this point. The Lord is graciously knocking on the door of this wayward church and inviting the church as a whole, and individual members thereof, to respond to His compassionate rebuke by repenting of their apostate condition. Christ yearns for the church to return to a position of obedience and fellowship. He does not want to judge them; He wants to restore them. “This text is addressed exclusively to delinquent church members. In walking among the candlesticks our Lord knocks at the hearts of backslidden or

hypocritical members, demanding admission and promising spiritual intercommunion to those who admit him. In this way he often rings the spiritual doorbell at the houses of professing Christians whose ears are quick to hear the calls of fashion, pleasure, ambition, or business, but so stopped as never to hear the ringing of him who comes often and patiently stands and keeps ringing. Sometimes he rings by sickness, sometimes by financial loss, sometimes by death in the house. The sickness, loss or death are realized, but they do not recognize them as the calling of the Lord” (B.H. Carroll).

This verse is applicable to unsaved sinners in general.

Though the interpretation of this passage in context is to a backslidden church, I have no doubt that it is also applicable to Christ calling the unsaved sinner to salvation, and it teaches many wonderful lessons.

Here we see Christ’s mercy and compassion and longsuffering, His love and deep concern for those that are perishing. He longs to save every sinner and to restore every backsliding individual and congregation. Judgment is His “*strange work*” (Isa. 28:21). He desires to bless more than to judge. He is the merciful and longsuffering father who is watching and longing for the prodigal to return so that he sees him coming even when he is a great way off and rejoices greatly at his repentance (Lk. 15:17-24).

Here we see Christ’s humility. To knock on the door of someone who has shut you out is an act of humility. This depiction of the eternal Son of God, the Creator of all things, humbly beseeching a rebellious sinner to turn to Him is an amazing thing. “It is the plea of One who is meek and lowly of heart,--of a humility that is boundless and absolute. If we find ourselves shut out, where we have a right to be, we either rise to assert our rights, or leave in wrath. Not so Christ! After all the centuries, He still stands meekly knocking!” (Newell).

We see Christ’s zeal in reaching sinners. He is busy knocking and calling. He is earnest in this matter. He

“*lighteth every man that cometh into the world*” (Jn. 1:9) and draws all men (Jn. 12:32). He is the shepherd who goes in search of the lost sheep and rejoices when it is restored (Lk. 15:4-6). He wants all men to be saved (1 Tim. 2:4). Thus Christ has commanded that the gospel be preached to every person in every nation continually throughout the age (Mark 16:16; Acts 1:8). Paul shared his Master’s burden in this matter by staying busy in the work of the gospel and by doing everything possible to win souls to Christ (1 Cor. 9:19-23).

We see the sinner’s condition. Christ seeks sinners because they are lost. The sinner is separated from God because of sin. Man is naturally estranged from God, dead in trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1).

We also see the sinner’s obligation. Christ does not force the door to man’s heart. He gives man an opportunity to respond and enlightens him so that he can respond, but the sinner must respond. Salvation is a gift that was purchased by Christ and is offered to the world (John 3:16). It is free, but it must be received, and contrary to Calvinist philosophy, to receive a gift is nothing to boast of. The fact that a sinner can accept or reject the gift of God does not make man the author of his own salvation. If I receive an expensive gift that my wife has bought me, I am not the author of the gift and I have nothing to boast of in regard to possessing the gift. The Bible teaches from beginning to end that God has made man in His own image and has given him a will so that he can accept or reject God and His truth. God offers and pleads, and man can say no (Mat. 23:37; Psa. 81:8-11; Prov. 1:24-31; Jer. 6:16; 35:15; Zech. 1:4).

Here we also see the certainty of salvation. Christ says, “*I will come in to him...*” There is no doubt about it. If the sinner will but repent and cast himself upon Christ as his Lord and Saviour, he will surely be saved (Mat. 11:28-30; Jn. 3:16; 6:37; 1 John 5:11-13).

Here, too, we see the greatness of salvation. Christ not only saves the repentant sinner but He also comes into his life and

fellowships with him in the most intimate manner. The believer is adopted into God's family and becomes a part of Christ's body so that we are "*members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones*" (Eph. 5:30). Salvation is a personal relationship with Christ.

What about the evangelistic methodology of "asking Jesus into your heart"? To tell the sinner merely to receive Jesus into his or her heart gives the wrong idea UNLESS we carefully explain about his sinful condition and God's judgment of sin (Rom. 1:18 - 3:18) and Jesus' sacrifice for sin (Rom. 3:19-24). This is the true Roman's Road plan of salvation. Biblical salvation is described in Acts 20 as repenting of my sin and self-will, which means to surrender to God, and putting my faith in Jesus Christ as my sin bearer. This is the message that Paul preached. "*Testifying both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ*" (Acts 20:21). Biblical salvation is described in Romans 10 in terms of believing in the heart that God has raised Jesus from the dead (Rom. 10:9). Biblical salvation is described in John 3 in terms of being born again by putting my faith in what Jesus did when He was lifted up on the cross (John 3:3, 14-16). Biblical salvation is described in Acts 4 in terms of believing in Jesus Christ as the only Lord and Saviour (Acts 4:10-12). Biblical salvation is described in Acts 8 in terms of believing with all one's heart that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and that He made the sacrifice that was demanded by God's law and that is described in Isaiah 53 (Acts 8:26-27). When the Philippian jailer asked, "*Sirs, what must I do to be saved?*" (Acts 16:30), Paul did not reply, "Receive Jesus into your heart right now!" Rather, he replied, "*Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house*" (Acts 16:31). There are many other descriptions of salvation in the New Testament, but nowhere is salvation described as "inviting Jesus into my heart." I believe we need to be very careful about such terminology, though I do not doubt someone's salvation if

they have responded to such terminology, as long as they truly repented of their sin and put their faith in Jesus Christ as their only Lord and Saviour.

This verse is also applicable to the coming of Christ. See Luke 12:31-40. We cannot stretch every detail of this parable of the wedding. Parables are properly interpreted by finding their main meaning and emphasizing that, and the main meaning of this parable is that the believer must live in such a way that he is ready for Christ's return and will not be ashamed at his coming.

5. Christ's final word to the church at Laodicea (Rev. 3:21-22)

Christ promises, "***To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne.***"

We have seen that the overcomer is the born again Christian as opposed to the nominal one (1 John 5:4-5).

The overcomer will sit with Christ in His throne. Christ will rule the world at His return and kingdom, and the saints will rule with Him (Psa. 149:5-9; Dan. 7:22, 27; Mat. 19:28; Rev. 19:15). We see the greatness of salvation in that the believer will sit with Christ in His throne. What an exaltation of lowly sinners! What a thing to look forward to! What a motivation to live for Christ in this present world!

Christ overcame and sat down with His Father in the Father's throne. Compare Psalm 110:1; Ephesians 1:20-23. Christ will not sit on His own throne until He returns and establishes the kingdom promised to Israel and sits on the throne of David. See Psa. 132:11; Isa. 9:6-7; 16:5; Jer. 33:17-21; Luke 1:32.

He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches (Rev. 3:22). Each individual believer is responsible to hear what the Spirit says, and this does not mean merely to listen to the Word of God but also to obey it.

Nothing is more essential in life than properly hearing what the Spirit of God says. It is the way of salvation, sanctification, joy, victory, fruit, and reward. For more about this see the notes on the message to Ephesus under Revelation 2:7.

Conclusion

These messages are for all churches throughout the church age. “*He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.*”

The church at EPHESUS represents *the danger of losing our first love* (2:4).

The church at SMYRNA represents *the blessing of being faithful through suffering* (2:9-10).

The church at PERGAMOS represents *the danger of doctrinal compromise* (2:14-15).

The church at THYATIRA represents *the danger of moral compromise* (2:20).

The church at SARDIS represents *the danger of spiritual deadness* (3:1-2).

The church at PHILADELPHIA represents *the blessing of holding fast* (3:11).

The church at LAODICEA represents *the danger of lukewarmness* (3:15-16).

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THE BIBLE VERSION QUESTION ANSWER DATABASE, ISBN 1-58318-088-5. This book provides diligently-researched, in-depth answers to more than 80 of the most important questions on this topic. A vast number of myths are exposed, such as the myth that Erasmus promised to add 1 John 5:7 to his Greek New Testament if even one manuscript could be produced, the myth that the differences between the Greek texts and versions are slight and insignificant, the myth that there are no doctrines affected by the changes in the modern versions, and the myth that the King James translators said that all versions are equally the Word of God. It also includes reviews of several of the popular modern versions, including the Living Bible, New Living Bible, Today's English Version, New International Version, New American Standard Version, The Message, and the Holman Christian Standard Bible.

CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN MUSIC: SOME QUESTIONS ANSWERED AND SOME WARNINGS GIVEN, ISBN 1-58318-094-x. This book expounds on five reasons why we are opposed to CCM: It is worldly; it is ecumenical; it is charismatic; it is experience-oriented; and it weakens the fundamentalist stance of churches. We give examples of how changes are occurring in formerly fundamentalist churches through the instrumentality of

contemporary music. The rest of the book deals with questions that are commonly asked on this subject, such as the following: What is the difference between using contemporary worship music and using old hymns that were interdenominational? Didn't Luther and the Wesleys use tavern music? Isn't the issue of music just a matter of taste? Doesn't the Bible encourage us to use cymbals and stringed and loud sounding instruments? What is wrong with soft rock? Didn't God create all music? Love is more important than doctrine and standards of living, isn't it? Since God looks on the heart, why are you concerned about appearance? Isn't Christianity all about grace? What about all of the young people who are being saved through CCM?

THE FOREIGN SPIRIT OF CONTEMPORARY WORSHIP MUSIC. This hard-hitting multi-media video presentation, published in March 2012, documents the frightful spiritual compromise, heresy, and apostasy that permeates the field of contemporary worship music. By extensive documentation, it proves that contemporary worship music is impelled by “another spirit” (2 Cor. 11:4). It is the spirit of charismaticism, the spirit of the latter rain, the spirit of the one-world church, the spirit of the world, the spirit of homosexuality, and the spirit of the false god of *The Shack*. The presentation looks carefully at the origin of contemporary worship in the Jesus Movement of the 1970s, examining the lives and testimonies of some of the most influential people. Nearly 60 video clips and hundreds of photos are featured. It is available on DVD and as an eDownload from the Way of Life web site.

ISRAEL: PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE, ISBN 978-1-58318-116-4. This is a package consisting of a 234-page illustrated book, a DVD series, and a series of Powerpoint/Keynote presentations for teachers. The package covers all of the major facets pertaining to Israel in a professional, technologically cutting-edge way: geography, culture,

archaeology, history, current events, and prophecy. The series begins with an amazing aerial flyover over the land of Israel.

KEEPING THE KIDS: HOW TO KEEP THE CHILDREN FROM FALLING PREY TO THE WORLD, ISBN 978-1-58318-115-7. This book aims to help parents and churches raise children to be disciples of Jesus Christ and to avoid the pitfalls of the world, the flesh, and the devil. The book is a collaborative effort. It contains testimonies from hundreds of individuals who provided feedback to our questionnaires on this subject, as well as powerful ideas gleaned from interviews with pastors, missionaries, and church people who have raised godly children. The book is packed with practical suggestions and deals with many issues: Conversion, the husband-wife relationship, the necessity of permeating the home with Christian love, mothers as keepers at home, the father's role as the spiritual head of the home, child discipline, separation from the pop culture, discipleship of youth, the grandparents' role in "keeping the kids," effectual prayer, and fasting.

MUSIC FOR GOOD OR EVIL (4 DVDs). This video series for July 2011 is a new replacement for previous presentations we have produced on this subject. The series, which is packed with graphics, video and audio clips, has seven segments. I. Biblical Principles of Good Christian Music: II. Why We Reject Contemporary Christian Music. III. The Sound of Contemporary Christian Music. IV. Transformational Power of CCM. V. Southern Gospel. VI. Marks of Good Song Leading. VII. Questions Answered on Contemporary Christian Music.

ONE YEAR DISCIPLESHIP COURSE, ISBN 978-1-58318-117-1. (new title for 2011) This powerful course features 52 lessons in Christian living. It can be broken into sections and used as a new converts course, an advanced discipleship course, a Sunday School series, a Home Schooling or Bible Institute course, or preaching outlines. The lessons are thorough, meaty, and very practical. There is

an extensive memory verse program built into the course, and each lesson features carefully designed review questions.

THE PENTECOSTAL-CHARISMATIC MOVEMENTS: THE HISTORY AND THE ERROR, ISBN 1-58318-099-0. This book begins with the author's own experience with the Pentecostal movement. The next section deals with the history of the Pentecostal movement, beginning with a survey of miraculous signs from the second to the 18th centuries. We deal with Charles Parham, Azusa Street Mission, major Pentecostal healing evangelists, the Sharon Schools and the New Order of the Latter Rain, the Word-Faith movement and its key leaders, the Charismatic Movement, the Roman Catholic Charismatic Renewal, the Pentecostal Prophets, the Third Wave, the Laughing-Drunken Revival of Toronto, Pensacola, Lakeland, etc., and the recent Pentecostal scandals. The last section deals with the theological errors of the Pentecostal-Charismatic movements.

REPENTANCE AND SOUL WINNING, ISBN 1-58318-062-1. This is an in-depth study on biblical repentance and a timely warning about unscriptural methods of presenting the gospel. The opening chapter, entitled "Fundamental Baptists and Quick Prayerism: A Faulty Method of Evangelism Has Produced a Change in the Doctrine of Repentance," traces the change in the doctrine of repentance among fundamental Baptists during the past 50 years.

SEEING THE NON-EXISTENT: EVOLUTION'S MYTHS AND HOAXES, ISBN 1-58318-002-8. (new title for 2011) This book is designed both as a stand alone title as well as a companion to the apologetics course *AN UNSHAKEABLE FAITH*. The contents are as follows: Canals on Mars, Charles Darwin and His Granddaddy, Thomas Huxley: Darwin's Bulldog, Ernst Haeckel: Darwin's German Apostle, Icons of Evolution, Icons of Creation, The Ape-men, Predictions,

Questions for Evolutionists, Darwinian Gods, Darwin's Social Influence.

THINGS HARD TO BE UNDERSTOOD: A HANDBOOK OF BIBLICAL DIFFICULTIES, ISBN 1-58318-002-8. This very practical volume deals with a wide variety of biblical difficulties. Find the answer to the seeming contradictions in the Bible. Meet the challenge of false teachers who misuse biblical passages to prove their doctrine. Find out the meaning of difficult passages that are oftentimes overlooked in the Bible commentaries. Our objective is to help God's people have confidence in the inerrancy of their Bibles and to protect them from the false teachers that abound in these last days. Jerry Huffman, editor of *Calvary Contender*, testified: "You don't have to agree with everything to greatly benefit from this helpful book."

AN UNSHAKEABLE FAITH: A CHRISTIAN APOLOGETICS COURSE, ISBN 978-1-58318-119-5. (new title for 2011) The course is built upon nearly 40 years of serious Bible study and 30 years of apologetics writing. Research was done in the author's personal 6,000-volume library plus in major museums and other locations in America, England, Europe, Australia, Asia, and the Middle East. The package consists of an apologetics course entitled *AN UNSHAKEABLE FAITH* (both print and eBook editions) plus an extensive series of Powerpoint/Keynote presentations. (Keynote is the Apple version of Powerpoint.) The 1,800 PowerPoint slides deal with archaeology, evolution/creation science, and the prophecies pertaining to Israel's history. The material in the 360-page course is extensive, and the teacher can decide whether to use all of it or to select only some portion of it for his particular class and situation. After each section there are review questions to help the students focus on the most important points. The course can be used for private study as well as for a classroom setting. Sections include The Bible's Nature, The Bible's Proof, The Dead Sea Scrolls, The Bible's Difficulties, Historical Evidence for Jesus,

Evidence for Christ's Resurrection, Archaeological Treasures Confirming the Bible, A History of Evolution, Icons of Evolution, Icons of Creation, Noah's Ark and the Global Flood.

WAY OF LIFE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF THE BIBLE & CHRISTIANITY, ISBN 1-58318-005-2. This lovely hardcover Bible Encyclopedia contains 640 pages (8.5X11) of information, with more than 6,000 entries, and 7,000 cross-references. It is a complete dictionary of biblical terminology and features many other areas of research not often covered in Bible reference volumes. Subjects include Bible versions, Denominations, Cults, Christian Movements, Typology, the Church, Social Issues and Practical Christian Living, Bible Prophecy, and Old English Terminology. An evangelist in South Dakota wrote: "If I were going to the mission field and could carry only three books, they would be the Strong's concordance, a hymnal, and the *Way of Life Bible Encyclopedia*." Missionary author Jack Moorman says: "The encyclopedia is excellent. The entries show a 'distilled spirituality.'" A computer edition of the Encyclopedia is available as a standalone eBook for PDF, Kindle, and PUB. It is also available as a module for *Swordseacher*.

Way of Life Literature

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The Seven Churches of Revelation Then and Now

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