



Jesus Christ has a message for you. This Journey will guide you through seven ancient Christian congregations, painting a portrait of what it means to be a Christian in a world opposed to Christ.

LifeHope&Truth

GETTING STARTED

HOW TO USE THIS JOURNEY

Dear Reader,

Following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ is rarely as easy as we'd like it to be.

Some days will be a success. Some days will be a failure. And most days will be somewhere in between.

The first Christians were no different. Those first followers, who lived almost 2,000 years ago, had their own share of successes and failures.

What can we learn from them?

In the final book of the Bible, Jesus Christ had a message for seven congregations in first-century Asia Minor—and for us. These Christians, who lived in a different time and a different culture, faced many of the same challenges we face today. And the words Christ shared with them are words He intended for us to hear as well.

This Journey is broken into 10 readings that you can navigate at your own speed. You might spend a week going through Reading 1, or you might tackle Reading 2 and 3 in a single marathon session. Make sure to find the pace that works for you!

In each section of this Journey, you'll find three things:

- That reading.
- Recommended passages from the Bible that tie in with and enhance the reading.
- Supplemental material from Life, Hope & Truth that will help you dig deeper into the subject.

As we learn more about the seven churches mentioned by name in the book of Revelation—what they did well and where they were failing—we can learn more about what our Savior expects of *us*.

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (Revelation 2:7).

All the best,

Jeremy Lallier, author

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READING 1

THE WORLD OF THE SEVEN CHURCHES

If Jesus wrote you a letter, what do you think it would say?

Would it be a message of praise—or of censure?

Maybe it would be both.

What things are you getting right about what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ? What things are you getting wrong? And just as importantly, what does doing better *look* like?

For seven congregations in the first century, this was more than just a thought experiment—it was a reality. The Church members there didn’t have to wonder what a letter from Christ would look like—they could see it for themselves.

Toward the end of the first century, the resurrected Jesus Christ—the glorified Son of God, enthroned in divine splendor at the right hand of the Father—sent a letter to His Church.

That letter has been preserved for us in the book of Revelation—the record of a prophetic vision given by God the Father to Jesus Christ and then to the apostle John (Revelation 1:1). And although the vast majority of Revelation is focused on key end-time events “which must shortly¹ take place” (verse 1), the second and third chapters set the stage with a special message for “the seven churches which are in Asia” (verses 4, 11).

Revelation is a book filled with prophetic significance, but it’s vital to remember that these seven churches²—Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea—were seven literal congregations filled with literal disciples of Jesus Christ.

¹ For the God who views 1,000 years as a day and a day as 1,000 years (2 Peter 3:8), “shortly” has a different meaning than it does for us. Revelation was written 2,000 years ago. God can look at this span of time just as we might look at 48 hours.

² For the sake of clarity, it’s important to note that these weren’t seven distinct church organizations. They were seven *congregations* of God’s Church. In this Journey, we’ll use a lowercase “church” to refer to the individual congregations and a capitalized “Church” to refer to the collective grouping of all God’s people.

READING 1

THE WORLD OF THE SEVEN CHURCHES

Bible scholars have debated the prophetic significance of these seven churches for centuries. Do they represent progressive eras of Church history, with each church indicating the dominant characteristics of God's people during various times? There are some compelling parallels between these two chapters of Revelation and our understanding of Church history, and this is covered in our Life, Hope & Truth articles on the "**Seven Churches of Revelation**." But that's not what this Journey is going to focus on.

This Journey is about what we can learn from the seven congregations that existed 2,000 years ago. They were filled with flesh-and-blood human beings just like you and me—Christians who had accepted the sacrifice of Jesus and who called Him their Lord, their King and their Savior.

They got some things right.

They got some things wrong.

But they were *people*. More to the point, they were people whose successes and failures we can learn from.

Think about it. These are not the words of a human apostle, but of *God Himself*, intended for the growth and edification of His people. He told them what they were doing right, He told them what they were doing wrong, and *He told them the changes they needed to make*. What we have in these letters to the seven churches of Revelation is a valuable set of insights into Christian living.

The world has changed a lot in 2,000 years—but people haven't. Not really. The challenges we face might wear a new coat of paint, but the issues at their core are still, in many ways, the same.

As individuals, we will each find ourselves succeeding at some aspects of Christianity—and failing at others. What we have in these letters is a treasure trove of guidance on how to continue doing what's right and how to overcome and stop doing what's not. From Ephesus to Laodicea, there are powerful lessons for each of us in the timeless words of our Savior and King.

What Jesus had to say in Revelation 2 and 3 was not just for men and women who lived and died two millennia ago. Century after century after century, Christ's words remain relevant for anyone who becomes His disciple.

Which means, of course, that they were written for you.

And me.

We are, each of us, commanded to "hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (Revelation 2:7).

THE SEVEN CHURCHES OF REVELATION

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READING 1

THE WORLD OF THE SEVEN CHURCHES

Even now.

Especially now.

Before we can talk about the individual messages Jesus sent to each individual congregation, there are two bigger-picture items we ought to take care of. One is the general structure of the messages, and the other is what it meant to be a Christian in first-century Asia Minor.

We'll start with Asia Minor. If we want to understand the words written to an ancient world, it helps to have some familiarity *with* that ancient world. And while there are many details unique to each of the seven cities, it's worth painting a general picture of the world these cities existed in.

The seven churches addressed in Revelation were all located in the Roman province of Asia—which is, confusingly, only a very small portion of the modern-day continent of Asia.

What the Romans and New Testament writers called “Asia” was actually part of the peninsula that forms the western portion of modern-day Turkey. The Greeks knew it as *Anatolia* (“the place of the rising sun”), while later historians would begin to distinguish the whole peninsula as Asia Minor (from a Greek phrase meaning “Little Asia”).

In fact, the peninsula's significance was anything but little. Throughout its long and storied history, Asia Minor served as the stage for some of history's most significant moments. It was the birthplace of . . .

- Thales of Miletus, the first philosopher of the Western world.
- Pythagoras, the famous mathematician.
- Herodotus, regarded as “the father of history.”
- Galen, a physician whose work impacted medical theory for centuries.
- Paul, a tentmaker-turned-apostle who would play an instrumental role in spreading Christianity throughout the first-century Roman world.

Asia Minor was also home to two of the seven wonders of the ancient world—the Temple of Artemis in Ephesus and the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus. It also housed the Library of Pergamos, a close rival to the Library of Alexandria, and was probably the birthplace of coinage (and maybe even parchment as well).

By the time of the Romans, control of Asia Minor had shifted between multiple kingdoms for the better part of 2,000 years. The end result was that the Roman province of Asia was filled to the brim with a diverse mixture of cultures—and, notably, the host of pagan gods that came with those cultures.

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When it came to the religions of the lands they conquered or annexed, the Romans generally took the approach of “the more the merrier.” The ancient world often viewed gods as territorial—stronger in some locations than others (see 1 Kings 20:23). Rather than risk upsetting the local gods of new territories, they chose to incorporate those gods into their own pantheon.

Generally, this worked the way Rome wanted. Local territorial gods were slowly absorbed and blended into the national pantheon, and rulers could rest easy knowing that a vast array of gods were being kept satisfied enough to pour out their blessings on the empire at large.

There were, however, occasional wrinkles with that approach.

The Jews were one of those wrinkles.

In the Roman view of things, the Jews were atheists.

Yes, the Jews believed in *a* God, but they were adamant that the other gods worshipped across the empire *weren't real*. They refused to participate in the sacrifices to those gods, refused to acknowledge the emperors as divine—sometimes they even refused to touch money that carried the emperor's image.³

Although there was no love lost between the Jewish people and their Roman overlords, the Romans were generally willing to overlook Jewish idiosyncrasies. They might not have been team players, but they also didn't try to convince other Roman citizens to abandon the gods that were believed to be providing for the safety and prosperity of the empire. For the most part, the Jews kept to themselves—and so, for the most part, Rome left them alone.

Christians were a different story entirely.

At first, Romans officials considered Christians to be just a sect of Judaism—the result of infighting and squabbling over their own holy texts. When some of the Jews tried to bring a legal case against the apostle Paul for preaching that Jesus Christ was the prophesied Messiah (Acts 18:4-6, 11-13), the Roman proconsul was quick to reply, “If it were a matter of wrongdoing or wicked crimes, O Jews, there would be reason why I should bear with you. But if it is a question of words and names and your own law, look to it yourselves; for I do not want to be a judge of such matters.’ And he drove them from the judgment seat” (verses 14-16).

³ For everyday commerce, the Jews typically used special copper coins minted specifically for them. This way, they wouldn't have to handle coins describing the emperor as “son of a god” (R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, p. 830). Mark 12:15-17 shows there were exceptions to this.

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In other words: “This is an internal debate. Sort it out among yourselves. *I don’t care.*”

Except, in time, the Romans *would* care. These Christians, as they came to be known, were not content to keep to themselves the way their Jewish brethren typically did. They had a lot to say about a Messiah, and they were determined to preach Him to the whole world.

Soon, it became obvious that this was more than an internal Jewish debate. Itinerant preachers were traveling across the empire, spreading the message that God “now commands all men everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30). They were telling people—not just their fellow Jews, but *all men everywhere*—that it was time to abandon their idols and false gods, repent and worship the only true God.

And people were listening.

Gentiles (that is, non-Jews) were flocking to hear these words. Whole cities were coming together to hear something that, for centuries, had been an exclusively Jewish message (Acts 13:42-49). And that message wasn’t staying localized in Jerusalem—it was spreading like wildfire across the Roman world. Throughout the empire, Roman citizens began abandoning their gods, refusing to acknowledge the divinity of the emperor—and convincing others to do the same.

The message had “turned the world upside down” (Acts 17:6-7), and it showed no signs of stopping.

The cities of Asia Minor—an area where Paul spent a great deal of time spreading the gospel message—were a hotbed of economic activity. Natural resources and fertile land meant Asia Minor was equipped to grow, produce, manufacture, export and trade all manner of goods. Many cities in the peninsula enjoyed a great deal of wealth and prosperity—and as a result, the trade guilds of the region thrived.

Good news for everyone . . . except Christians.

The trade guilds of the Roman world weren’t like the trade unions of today. They were social groups, more like fraternities—and they were everywhere. “Records exist of guilds of bankers, doctors, architects, producers of woollen and linen goods, dyers, workers in metal, stone, or clay, builders, carpenters, farmers, gardeners, fishers, bakers, pastrycooks, barbers, embalmers, and transport workers” (E.M. Blaiklock, *The Christian in Pagan Society*, p. 10).

Trade guilds were tight-knit brotherhoods. Trying to work a trade without belonging to its guild could be professional and social suicide—a slap in the face to your fellow trade workers.

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The problem for Christians was that each trade guild worshipped its own patron god. “All members of trade guilds were expected to worship the god of that guild. On regular occasions, the members of the guild would offer a sacrifice to its god and eat the meat at a licentious party. If a member did not attend this party, the absence endangered the member professionally and socially” (Carl Gibbs, et al., *Introduction to Hermeneutics*, p. 227).

Economic survival seemed to require participating in pagan rituals that flew in the face of God’s commandments. Spiritual survival meant withdrawing from foundational elements of society and potentially making enemies out of neighbors and colleagues.⁴

“In the Graeco-Roman world, religion permeated all aspects of culture; there was no separation between the secular and the sacred” (Cynthia Long Westfall, “Roman Religions and the Imperial Cult,” *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*). The pantheon of the Roman Empire was all-encompassing, and there was no safe, socially acceptable way for a Christian to untangle himself from its convoluted webs.

“It is difficult for a modern Christian to grasp the pervasive nature of the paganism with which his spiritual forbears had to deal . . . The conscientious Christian had to absent himself from public festivals. They opened with pagan adoration and sacrifice. His membership of a trade guild, and in consequence his commercial standing and goodwill, involved the awkwardness of ‘sitting at meat in the idol’s temple.’ His very shopping raised the problem of meat which had been sacrificed to idols. Here was the true source of the animus against the Christians. It lay in ‘the way in which the new religion struck at the roots of social intercourse, and menaced the time-honoured fabric of society . . . The popular view that Christians were anti-social kill-joys with a more than Jewish hatred of the human race, if mistaken, is at least intelligible” (Blaklock, pp. 21-22).

“Christians were accused of atheism because they rejected the worship of the local gods that were supposed to be the source of health and welfare for the Roman Empire; they were also accused of hatred of humanity because they refused to participate in city life that was defined by Roman religion . . . In the eyes of Roman officials and the public, Christians were causing a decline of religion, including an increasing neglect of religious responsibility, a challenge to the empire’s unity, and a violation of Roman traditional morality” (Westfall, *ibid.*).

A decade or two after John wrote Revelation, a Roman governor in Asia Minor would write to Emperor Trajan looking for advice on how to prosecute the Christians in his jurisdiction. He explained how

⁴ Perhaps some trades or guilds allowed more freedom. We aren’t told exactly how the apostle Paul as a tentmaker (Acts 18:1-3) and other Christians working trades dealt with such things.

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he executed those who refused to renounce their faith, but spared those who were willing to both curse Christ and perform acts of worship before statues of Trajan and the Roman gods (Pliny the Younger, *Epistulae X.96*).

This was the world of the Christians of the seven churches of Revelation. These were the societal pressures they faced day in and day out. The pressure to be like the world around them—to make spiritual compromises in order to escape social and economic persecution or even death—was *tremendous*.

When we read these letters to the churches, it's important to remember that they were written to real Christians living real lives and facing real challenges. Even though their world looked radically different from ours, the lessons they needed to learn then remain not just *relevant* but *absolutely vital* for us to learn now.

What the Church needed to hear 2,000 years ago, it still needs to hear today.

FURTHER READING

Scriptures

- ☐ Revelation 1 [!\[\]\(61d2ec24b93c859d7bf46791016d6e2f_img.jpg\)](#)
- ☐ 1 Corinthians 10:18-22 [!\[\]\(599a9ddcf368d3c444c2c316dcd45c01_img.jpg\)](#)
- ☐ 1 Peter 4 [!\[\]\(0bae9d828980246a40d1f4cff98af6a7_img.jpg\)](#)

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- ☐ Church History: The Beginning [!\[\]\(3239adc73b4233528de2fb29a9bbf562_img.jpg\)](#)
- ☐ The Book of Revelation [!\[\]\(10c1cbaf936cbb486a61d1ed76d6d6dd_img.jpg\)](#)

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READING 2

THE STRUCTURE OF THE LETTERS

All you have to do is skim through chapters 2 and 3 of Revelation to notice that each of the seven letters follows a very specific pattern. Before we dive into the specifics of each individual letter, let's take some time to understand the overall framework Christ used when addressing seven congregations of His Church. This will help us extract more meaning and deeper lessons from these valuable passages of God's Word.

Each of the seven letters is structured around four key elements: (1) an **introduction**, (2) an **assessment of the church's condition**, (3) an **exhortation and/or warning** and (4) a **conclusion**.

In each introduction, Jesus introduces Himself to the congregation, revealing an aspect of His identity that has a special significance to the situation facing the church.

Next, the Son of God **assesses** the congregation, revealing His perfect awareness of the spiritual condition of His people and the challenges they face. He follows this with a combination of **exhortation and warning**, depending on the situation.

Finally, in His **conclusion**, He offers two things: a command for the entire Church to listen to the message and a specific promise for all the faithful Christians who prove themselves to be overcomers.

In the following readings of this Journey, we'll look at how each of these four elements functions in each of the seven individual messages—but first, we're going to examine the elements themselves and the roles they play in communicating a timeless message to the Church of God.

Introduction

Each of the seven letters begins with a command from Jesus Christ to the apostle John: "To the angel of the church in _____, write . . ."

The first and most important thing this consistent introduction does is remind us of the true Author of Revelation. John may have transcribed the words, but it was Jesus Christ doing the speaking. What follows are not John's thoughts, John's suggestions or even John's vendettas. They are the words of God.

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The second thing it does is raise the question: Who or what are these “angels of the seven churches” (verse 20) that John was commanded to write to?

Unfortunately, that’s a difficult question with no clear answer.

In the New Testament, the Greek word *aggelos* is used over 180 times. Usually, that word refers to the spiritual beings we call “angels”—but sometimes, it refers more generally to a “messenger.” (In Matthew 11:10 and Mark 1:2, John the Baptist is called the *aggelos*, or “messenger,” who prepared the way for Jesus Christ).

It wouldn’t seem to make sense that Jesus, who directly commands the angels, would use John as a middleman to communicate with these heavenly beings. A human messenger would seem much more likely, but that still leaves us with questions. Are we talking about a literal messenger dispatched to each of the churches? Maybe the minister tasked with leading each congregation?

What we *do* know for sure is that the angels of the seven churches are important—and tied to a mystery (Revelation 1:20). In New Testament Greek, a “mystery” (*mystērion*, Strong’s #G3466) is something that cannot be understood without divine revelation. While John may have understood the precise identity of these angels, the truth might remain a *mystērion* to us.

Whatever or whoever the angels are, they are closely tied to the spiritual character of the members of each of the seven churches—and that’s all we need to know to make sense of these letters. In writing to the angel of each church, John was ultimately tasked with sending a message that was intended for every human member of that congregation.

And for *us*.

The actual message to each congregation begins with a specific Greek phrase that would have sounded both familiar and ancient to the ears of the New Testament Church: *Tade legei*, or “Thus says.”

Church members would have recognized it from the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament), and it would have felt as old to them as the King James Version feels to us today. This was the phrase that signaled the royal proclamation of a king or a divine judgment from God. The phrase itself had fallen out of use, but there was a gravity to it that would have immediately caught the attention of the congregations that were hearing it read aloud.

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READING 2

THE STRUCTURE OF THE LETTERS

To each congregation, Jesus provides a different appellation, or title. To the Smyrnaeans, He identifies Himself as “the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life” (Revelation 2:8). To the Thyatirans, He is “the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire” (verse 18).

We’ll take a look at each of these appellations once we start examining the individual letters, but for now, it’s worth noting *where* all these names and titles are coming from.

The book of Revelation opens with the apostle John receiving a vision of the glorified Jesus Christ. John spends most of the first chapter trying to convey the incredible splendor of that vision:

“Then I turned to see the voice that spoke with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the seven lampstands One like the Son of Man, clothed with a garment down to the feet and girded about the chest with a golden band. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and His eyes like a flame of fire; His feet were like fine brass, as if refined in a furnace, and His voice as the sound of many waters; He had in His right hand seven stars, out of His mouth went a sharp two-edged sword, and His countenance was like the sun shining in its strength. And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as dead” (Revelation 1:12-17).

This short passage contains most of the appellations Jesus uses to address the seven churches. (Others are found scattered throughout the rest of chapter 1, while others still come from descriptions of Christ in ancient Old Testament passages.)

But why does it matter where all these phrases and titles are coming from?

Because the Son of God’s eyes don’t burn like a flame of fire *only* when He’s speaking to the church in Thyatira. He doesn’t wield the sharp two-edged sword of His mouth *only* when speaking to the church in Pergamos. He isn’t the One who is holy and true *only* when speaking to the church in Philadelphia.

He is all those things.

All the time.

He was, and is, and will always be the First and the Last, whose face shines like the sun, the firstborn from the dead who rules with sovereign authority over all creation.

In other words, the appellations to the seven churches are puzzle pieces that slot together and offer us a more complete picture of our Savior. Each piece is relevant to the specific condition of each congregation, but ultimately *all* of the pieces matter.

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Assessment of the church's condition

After His introduction, Jesus reveals to each congregation His knowledge of their spiritual condition. In the book of Acts, the apostles acknowledged Him as *kardiognōstēs*—the Heart-Knower, “who know[s] the hearts of all” (Acts 1:24).

Jesus is still the *kardiognōstēs* here in the book of Revelation. He doesn't just know how His people *appear* to be doing—He knows how they *are* doing. He begins by confronting them with this knowledge—sometimes in the form of praise for their faithfulness, sometimes as censure for their failures, but most often as a mixture of both.

And it's here that we encounter the greatest danger of reading the letters to the seven churches: namely, reading them as letters for *other people*.

Other Christians.

Because, yes—they *are* technically letters for other people. But they're here, preserved in the pages of the Bible, for *us*.

You and me.

It's easy to read about a church that has left its first love (Revelation 2:4) and think, “Oh, sure, I know people like that.” It's a lot more uncomfortable to think, “Am I like that? Am I at risk of *becoming* like that?”

In other words, these letters shouldn't become a measuring stick for evaluating others, but a mirror for evaluating ourselves. The failures and successes of these first-century churches are not so very different from the failures and successes we face here in the 21st century.

Where they failed, we can fail. Where they succeeded, we can succeed. The ultimate lesson is about asking, “What does God want me to learn from each of these churches? How can understanding their victories and challenges make me a better Christian?”

Those are the questions this Journey seeks to answer.

Exhortation/warning

But no congregation is without hope.

READING 2

THE STRUCTURE OF THE LETTERS

After telling the people in these congregations what He knows about them, Jesus tells them what to *do* with that information. Where the churches are succeeding, He encourages them to stay the course. Where the churches fall short, He outlines the necessary steps to set things right.

Even Sardis, which Jesus identifies as being spiritually dead, is commanded to “hold fast and repent” (Revelation 3:3). No failure, no matter how grave, is beyond redemption.

At no point in the letters does Jesus disown these churches. Some of them are at risk of severing their connection with Christ, but they are still His people. He *wants* to see them succeed.

He wants to see *us* succeed.

The exhortation and warnings are for us too. No matter what personal failings you might be struggling with, no matter where you need to improve as a disciple of Jesus Christ, *He wants to see you succeed*. He will help you find the way forward and He will give you the strength to walk it.

He is the One who holds the seven stars in His right hand (Revelation 2:1)—and more to the point, the One who holds *you* in His hand (John 10:28). We can choose to leave His hand, but if we stick with it—if we never stop trying to get things right—then we can count on Jesus to strengthen and support us.

Conclusion

Every letter ends with the same two elements—a command to listen and a promise to the disciple who overcomes.

The command to listen is easy to overlook. In nearly every translation, it sounds more like an invitation: “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (Revelation 2:7). But the verb Christ used indicates an urgent command. *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary* translates that sentence far more emphatically: “Anyone who has an ear must listen to what the Spirit says to the churches” (volume on Revelation, p. 120).

If we can hear the message, we *must* listen. We *must* obey.

But what are we commanded to hear?

The message spoken through God’s Spirit to *His churches*.

Plural.

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READING 2

THE STRUCTURE OF THE LETTERS

Jesus didn't say, "The Ephesians must listen to what the Spirit says to the church in Ephesus." He didn't say, "The Smyrnaeans must listen to what the Spirit says to the church in Smyrna."

No. Anyone who has an ear must listen to what the Spirit says *to the churches*.

All of them.

Each of them.

All seven churches were commanded to hear all seven messages. All seven churches were commanded to *take action* based on those messages.

The members in Thyatira needed to hear what the members in Pergamos heard. The Smyrnaeans needed to hear what the Ephesians heard. Not so they could rank themselves against each other, but so they could learn and grow as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Just like you need to do.

Just like I need to do.

We're called to live "by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4), and these words to the seven churches offer invaluable insight into what God wants His Church to look like.

You might relate more to one congregation and less to another, but each one has lessons for us. Each one received words that we are commanded to hear—if we have the ears to hear them.

And then, of course, there are the rewards.

To each congregation, Jesus extended a promise "to him who overcomes." That tells us, first and foremost, that each congregation had the *capacity* to overcome—to rise above its failings and push toward the finish line. No matter what was holding them back, victory was possible with God's help.

That's what the Greek word translated "overcome" *means*. To him who is victorious. To him who *conquers*. Jesus acknowledges to every congregation that they are engaged in a battle—but also that victory is both *possible* and *attainable*.

As Paul wrote, "The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets

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READING 2

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itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:4-5, New International Version).

With God’s help, we *can* win this war—and *when* we win, God’s promises will be there waiting for us. Because those promises aren’t just for the seven churches. They’re for *us* too.

Just as considering the appellations together gives us a more complete picture of Christ, and just as considering the exhortations and warnings together gives us a more complete picture of what the Church ought to be (and not be), so, too, considering the rewards together will give us a more complete picture of the future God has in store for us.

The seven letters are so much more than interesting historical documents and prophecies—they are insight, they are instruction and they are encouragement for any Christian willing to spend time with them in heartfelt reflection.

The descriptions of Christ are for you.

The warnings are for you.



The exhortations are for you.

And the *promises* are for you.


“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

FURTHER READING

Scriptures

- ☐ James 1:22-25 
- ☐ Revelation 2–3 

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- ☐ What Is the Church? 
- ☐ Seven Churches of Revelation 

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READING 3

EPHESUS: WHEN WE LOSE OUR LOVE, WE LOSE OUR PURPOSE

“Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. Therefore *watch*” (Acts 20:28-31, emphasis added throughout).

These were some of the apostle Paul’s final recorded words to the church leaders in Ephesus. He charged them to take heed, to watch, to pay *careful attention* to the spiritual condition of the church, because false teachers would be coming to pervert the truth.

They listened.

Paul’s warning came roughly three decades before John wrote the book of Revelation—and what we see there is a church that certainly appears to have taken Paul’s warning to heart.

Jesus’ assessment of the Ephesian church begins with admirable praise: “I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars; and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name’s sake and have not become weary” (Revelation 2:2-3).

That’s a glowing review. Not only were the Ephesian members diligently rooting out the “savage wolves” Paul had warned them about—false apostles who claimed to represent Christ, whose perverse words would destroy the whole congregation if left unchecked—but they were also laboring without growing weary. They were doing the work God had for them to do, and they weren’t getting tired or worn out by it.

It’s hard to imagine a more positive description of Christianity in action—tireless dedication toward doing what’s right and preventing evil from gaining a foothold.

And yet in a couple sentences, Jesus will threaten to disown and disavow the entire Ephesian church unless the members make some radical changes.

How can that be?

How a love gets lost

In verse 4, Christ's assessment of the Ephesian congregation takes a sharp turn. But we don't find a laundry list of faults and shortcomings in that verse—just a single item: “Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love.”

To our modern-day ears, that phrase might not sound quite so serious. We tend to associate someone's “first love” with concepts like “puppy love”—a very genuine but very fleeting kind of emotional attachment. It's a feeling we might experience before we understand what love truly is.

That kind of first love is a slurry of powerful emotions not necessarily grounded in reality, almost certain to vanish in the face of life experience and clearer perspective. It's real and tangible, but also fleeting and transient.

That's not the kind of “first love” Jesus is talking about.⁵

He isn't taking the Ephesians to task for failing to maintain an adolescent maelstrom of supercharged emotions. The whole situation is far more serious than that. He says that what the Ephesians have lost is *putting their spiritual future in jeopardy*.

Jesus tells them, “Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent” (verse 5).

Jesus is not some distant observer of the seven churches.

Earlier, Jesus clarified to John that the seven lampstands “are the seven churches” (Revelation 1:20). He introduced Himself to the Ephesians as “He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands” (Revelation 2:1).

He holds (from the Greek word *krateō*, Strong's #G2902, implying a *strong grasp*) the seven stars of the churches in His right hand. He walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands, personally inspecting and evaluating them.

When He tells each of the churches, “I know,” He does not mean that He is aware of them from some report He received. He is *there*. He *sees*. When He says, “I know your works,” He means, “I know *you*. I know the things you do. I know *who you are*.”

⁵ Other translations—like the English Standard Version and NIV—translate “your first love” as “the love you had at first.” That simple rewording makes the concept a little clearer. Jesus isn't talking about an unrealistic emotional high, but something both attainable and sustainable.

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This can be a comforting or an intimidating thought. Jesus will never misunderstand us, but He will also never be fooled by us. He *will* force us to confront the things in our lives that we need to overcome.

Here, He confronts the Ephesians with the one thing He has against them: that they have left their first love. If they do not repent and “do the first works”—if they do not remember from where they have fallen—they will forfeit their place and their future within God’s Church.

Jesus Christ Himself will do the removing.

Taking a closer look at the Greek gives us a better sense of the seriousness of the situation. First of all, the Ephesians haven’t just momentarily stepped aside from their first love. The Greek word for “left,” *aphiēmi* (Strong’s #G863), tells us that they have *abandoned* and *forsaken* it.

They are charged to “remember therefore from where you have fallen,” but we’re talking about more than a stumble. The Greek word for “fallen” places “emphasis upon extent and suddenness” (*Louw and Nida Greek-English Lexicon*, 13.59). The NIV translates it this way: “Consider *how far* you have fallen!”

In his letter to the Ephesians (written some 30 years before the book of Revelation), Paul praised them for “your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints” (Ephesians 1:15). But that love didn’t last. Over time, Jesus says the Ephesians had walked away from—*abandoned*—the initial love they had as His disciples.

It’s obvious from the rest of the letter that they hadn’t walked away from the Christian faith, but the *love* that Jesus expected to see in their congregation—the love they *once had*—was now gone.

After abandoning their first love, the Ephesians fell hard and fast. It was a spiritual plummet—even though they were still tirelessly laboring on behalf of God. It seems impossible that both these things can be true at once, and yet that’s exactly the situation that Jesus describes.

To understand how that can happen, we need to answer the question we’ve been dancing around: What *is* a “first love”?

Defining “first love”

John, who recorded the vision of Revelation, had this to say about love: “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for *God is love*” (1 John 4:7-8).

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Earlier John had also quoted Jesus, who said, “If you love Me, keep My commandments” (John 14:15). And John had likewise written: “But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him” (1 John 2:5) and “this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments” (1 John 5:3). The love of God also includes love of God’s law and love of God’s truth.

Love is something that both comes *from* God and *defines* God. Our own love for God is incomplete if it does not include obedience to His law and love for our fellow Christians—the two are inextricably bound together. “If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also” (verses 20-21).

The kind of love God calls us to have—toward Him and toward each other—is a love defined primarily by our actions, not our feelings.

Paul described the Church as the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12-14)—not a loosely related network of like-minded believers, but a spiritual organism where the welfare of each individual is deeply connected to every other member of the Church. “If one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it” (verse 26).

That’s the context of our love for each other—a single spiritual body, connected together in Christ. Our decisions, for good or for bad, impact others.

Here’s the benchmark John highlighted for the Church: “By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren” (1 John 3:16).

Christ showed us His love by becoming our sacrifice. That same attitude of willing self-sacrifice ought to define how we show love to each other.

John continued, “But whoever has this world’s goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, *how does the love of God abide in him?* My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth” (verses 17-18).

James asked a similar question in his epistle: “What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,’ but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead” (James 2:14-17).

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The love God is looking for in us—the love the Ephesians had drifted away from—the love *we must have as Christians*—is a love defined by *action*.

The Ephesians had spent decades—*decades*—on high alert against the internal and external threats Paul had warned them about. Savage wolves outside the congregation. False teachers speaking perverse words within the congregation. A constant motivation to test, to defend—to *doubt* the intentions of everyone around them.

It wasn't paranoia. These threats were legitimate.

For example, their city was home to the temple of Artemis (called Diana in some Bible versions), one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Visitors to the temple could purchase silver shrines of the pagan goddess, which “brought no small profit to the craftsmen” of the city (Acts 19:24).

In an economy like that, men like Paul would have been public enemy number one. The craftsmen of Ephesus actually started a riot in the early years of the Church, claiming that “not only in Ephesus but in almost all of Asia this Paul has persuaded and turned away a great many people, saying that gods made with hands are not gods. And there is danger not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis may be counted as nothing, and that she may even be deposed from her magnificence, she whom all Asia and the world worship” (verses 26-27, ESV).

In response, the city was “filled with confusion” (verse 29) while a mob spent roughly *two hours* chanting, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” (verse 34, ESV).

The gospel of the Kingdom was a threat to the stability of the Roman Empire. Pliny the Younger, the Roman governor who wrote to Emperor Trajan around A.D. 110 concerning the appropriate way to persecute Christians, confirmed the concerns of the Ephesian craftsmen.

After his initial attempts to “check and cure” the “contagious superstition” of Christianity, which had been spreading through cities and villages and rural districts alike, Pliny was relieved to find that “the temples, which had been almost deserted, begin now to be frequented; and the sacred festivals, after a long intermission, are again revived; while there is a general demand for sacrificial animals, which for some time past have met with but few purchasers. From hence it is easy to imagine what multitudes may be reclaimed from this error, if a door be left open to repentance” (*Epistulae X.96*).

Pliny believed he could stamp out the fledgling Christian religion by forcing believers to publicly recant (and executing anyone who refused). He, too, saw the threat of a religion that left Roman

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temples deserted and sacrifices unpurchased—and the easiest way to remedy it was to kill anyone who clung to Christ.

Savage wolves, indeed.

Internally, false teachers claiming to represent Jesus Christ were another grave threat. Decades before Jesus sent His message to Ephesus, Paul upbraided the church at Corinth: “For if he who comes preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or if you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted—you may well put up with it!” (2 Corinthians 11:4).

The first and second centuries were filled with false narratives about who Jesus was and what Christianity ought to look like, and believers who blindly accepted everything everyone said were at serious risk of ending up with a corrupted version of the true gospel.

The Ephesian church put up an admirable defense on both fronts. Their works included “your toil and your patient endurance” (Revelation 2:2, ESV); they were “enduring patiently and bearing up for my name’s sake” (verse 3, ESV).

But it’s not hard to imagine the toll that decades of patient endurance and constant toil might take.

They hadn’t grown weary, but somewhere, in this decades-long process, their first love had faded. And love is supposed to define our faith.

“By this all will know that you are My disciples,” Jesus told His friends shortly before His death, “if you have love for one another” (John 13:35).

This love is not optional. It is not a nice side benefit that comes with our Christian faith. It sits at the *core* of our faith. If that love is missing, *we are failing as disciples of Jesus Christ*.

Christ’s warning to the church at Ephesus is stern and crystal-clear: a church not defined by godly love is no church at all. It is not a partial church, it is not an underperforming church—it is a church at risk of losing itself. Jesus warned that unless the Ephesians undertook some serious course correction, “I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place” (Revelation 2:5).

No lampstand, no church.

That brings us to our next big question: *How* do we make that course correction? If our first love is missing, *how are we supposed to get it back?*

Reclaiming a lost love

Thankfully, the answer is in the warning. Jesus urged the Ephesians to do three things: “[1] *remember* therefore from where you have fallen; [2] *repent* and [3] *do* the first works” (verse 5) .

The process starts with looking back. There was a time when the Ephesians had the love they now lacked—they are commanded to *remember*, to dredge up their memories of what that time was like.

It’s not that God expects us to recapture some emotional high—although if our excitement for serving God has waned over the years, it’s worth asking why. What Jesus expected of the Ephesians (and what He expects of *us*) is to reflect on the practical, intentional love that naturally flourishes at the beginning of the Christian journey—love for God and love for each other. That initial love is often expressed through a strong motivation and zeal to learn, grow and serve.

That kind of love is core to being a Christian, but the Ephesians had lost sight of it. They must *remember* what they had abandoned.

Second, they must *repent*. The Greek word for “repent,” *metanoeō* (Strong’s #G3340), literally means to change the mind—but its actual meaning goes deeper than that.

Repentance is an internal change that leads to external action. When we repent of something, we aren’t just changing how we *think* about it—we’re changing what we *do* about it. We’re changing our course to reflect the change in our hearts.

Repenting of sins also requires seeking God’s forgiveness *for* those sins. True repentance *begins* internally. But it never *ends* there.

This is reflected in the third and final instruction to the Ephesians: to *do* “the first works.” Just as “your first love” can also be translated, “the love that you had at first,” so can “the first works” be translated, “the works that you did at first.” Remembering would fix their attention on the love they had lost. Repentance would set them on the path to reclaiming that love. Their next step was to start *doing* the works they did at first.

Christ’s solution to the lost love of the Ephesians didn’t involve them conjuring up a strong emotion.

Godly love involves how we feel, certainly—but it is far more rooted in what we *do*.

To recapture their first love, the Ephesians would need to *do* the first *works*, not *feel* the first *feelings*. As they would make the conscious choice to do works that express love toward God and their fellow believers, the *feeling* of brotherly love would no doubt return as well.

But first comes *action*.

It is what we choose to do, not how we happen to feel in the moment, that defines true, godly love.

For the Ephesians, and for us, repenting and doing the first works meant treasuring the precious gift of fellowship God gives us through His Church, actively seeking to understand and help provide for the needs of our fellow Christians. That might involve “this world’s goods,” or it might instead be a willingness to offer our time and energy wherever they can make a difference—in conversation, in acts of service, in prayer and so on.

Remember that Jesus was on the verge of removing the Ephesians’ lampstand. Their lack of love was so significant that the Ephesians were on the brink of being rejected by Christ. Reclaiming that love was a *mandatory requirement* for remaining connected to God’s Church.

If our own love for God and for the children of God is beginning to falter, then we, too, must remember, repent and do the first works.

The importance of vigilance

The charges against the Ephesian Christians were serious—but so was the praise. We can get so focused on what they got *wrong* that we fail to consider what they got *right*.

Jesus praised the Ephesians for their tireless vigilance in protecting the truth from those who would have corrupted it. Their labor, their patient endurance—these were traits He valued and praised. He also praised them for hating “the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate” (Revelation 2:6). We’ll talk more about this mysterious group when we get to Pergamos, but they appear here in the context of “those who are evil” (verse 2).

What Jesus objected to was that the Ephesians had abandoned their first love. That should serve as a warning to us as well.

The reward for overcoming

To “him who overcomes”—that is, to the one who *conquers*, who obtains a victory over his or her sins and shortcomings—Jesus promises to “give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God” (Revelation 2:7).

The Ephesians would have immediately recognized the tree of life as a reference to the very beginning of the Bible.

Adam and Eve, the first man and the first woman, lived in an idyllic garden—a paradise—that contained two important trees: the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Adam and Eve disobeyed God’s explicit instructions, eating from the one tree He had placed off-limits—the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The devil had lied in his efforts to deceive them, getting them to question God’s motives and to seek to decide for themselves what was right and wrong, good and evil.

As a result of their disobedience, God banished Adam from the garden, “lest he put out his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever” (Genesis 3:22).

The garden itself would be guarded by angels and a flaming sword. The human race lost access to paradise—and with it, a tree that offered the possibility of eternal life.

After this, the Bible is silent about the tree of life.⁶ It vanishes from both the earth itself and the biblical narrative—until the book of Revelation. What Jesus is saying here is huge. Beyond ensuring their lampstand remains unmoved, Jesus is reminding the Ephesians that they have the opportunity to reclaim what humanity forfeited 4,000 years earlier.

If they repent and emerge victorious, God will give them access to the tree of life—and with it, eternal life with God in paradise.

To the Ephesians, the promise of an idyllic eternity with God would have stood in stark contrast to the decades they had spent fending off false teachers and perverted teachings. This was a promise not just of a beautiful future, but of *rest* from their tireless efforts and patient endurance.

There would be no savage wolves to guard against, no Nicolaitans threatening the truth. They would finally have “rest on every side” (1 Kings 5:4), knowing that “the work of righteousness will be peace, and the effect of righteousness, quietness and assurance forever” (Isaiah 32:17).

Maybe that promise carries a special meaning for you too.

⁶ With the exception of the book of Proverbs, where it appears four times as a metaphor.

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Maybe you've spent decades pursuing and defending the truth in your own life, and the idea of a future defined by peace, quietness and assurance is the motivation you need to keep going—to keep *defending* the precious pearls you've been given by God.

But on our quest to overcome, we can't afford to forget the warning Christ gave the Ephesians. If we lose our love for God and the brethren, our hope of that beautiful future is lost with it.




When we find that the love we had at first is waning, the solution is the same today as it was then. Remember where we've fallen from, repent and do the works we did at first.

FURTHER READING

Scriptures

- ☐ Revelation 2:2-7 
- ☐ 1 John 3-4 
- ☐ Acts 20:17-38 

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- ☐ Ephesus 
- ☐ Love of God 
- ☐ Overcoming Spiritual Fatigue 

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SMYRNA: LOOK BEYOND DEATH TO FIND LIFE

In the Roman world, prison wasn't a destination so much as a means to an end.

Prisoners generally weren't there to serve a sentence or to sit and rot. Prison was a stopover—a place people were held . . . *until*.

Until they complied with an official demand.

Until their trial.

Or until their execution.

Why is this important to understand? Because it would have been on the mind of the members in Smyrna when Jesus promised that prison was looming in their immediate future.

Persecution from the synagogue of Satan

Christ's letter to the church in Smyrna is the shortest of the seven—about 100 words long in Greek—but it manages to say quite a lot in that space.

Along with Philadelphia, Smyrna is one of two churches that receives unmitigated praise and encouragement from Jesus Christ. His letter mentions no sins He holds against them, no spiritual flaws for them to work on overcoming. Instead, He focuses on a shared trial the congregation is facing—one that will get much, much worse.

By way of setting the stage, He tells the congregation, “I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich); and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan” (Revelation 2:9).

The Greek word for blasphemy, used in this context, may actually mean “the slander against you” (verse 9, NET Bible). Much of the trouble the congregation in Smyrna was facing seemed to stem from this “synagogue of Satan,” who may have been ethnically Jewish, but spiritually, they had been rejected by God.

In the earliest days of the New Testament Church, Christians experienced a number of attacks from some of the Jews. For context, remember that the earliest Christians (and even Jesus Christ Himself) were Jews. It took some time before the Jewish followers of Jesus Christ began to be distinguished as Christians in the first place (Acts 11:26). Their faith in Jesus was a natural extension of the first-century Jewish religion. The Old Testament promised a Messiah; the Christians were simply Jews who believed He had arrived.

So as Paul and the other apostles moved through the Roman world, explaining that Jesus Christ *was* the prophesied Messiah—that He had been unjustly murdered by Jewish leaders, that He had been resurrected by God and returned to heaven as our Savior and High Priest—there were invariably a mixture of Jews that believed the message and Jews that did not.

(Also note, in Romans 2:28-29, Paul made a distinction between those who were Jews outwardly—that is, ethnically Jewish—and those who were Jews inwardly—that is, those who faithfully obeyed God. And so those who pretended to be spiritual Jews—who claimed to be Christian—could also be those who “say they are Jews and are not” in that sense.)

What we see in the book of Acts is that these unbelieving Jews often set out to slander and persecute their believing countrymen. They spread lies against Stephen and had him stoned to death (Acts 6:8-14; 7:57-60). In Antioch (Acts 13:49-50), in Iconium (Acts 14:1-6) and in Thessalonica (Acts 17:5-8), they employed a mixture of slander and mob violence to expel the gospel message from their cities. In Corinth, they tried to initiate legal proceedings against Paul as an enemy of the Roman Empire (Acts 18:9-17).

In all likelihood, the Jewish synagogue in Smyrna was doing far more than pestering the Christian congregation there. If they were slandering God’s people (and involving the authorities), it’s not hard to imagine what their tribulation and poverty looked like.⁷

Jesus wrote to tell His people that He knew their trials, He knew their poverty, He knew that they were remaining faithful in spite of it all—but that things were about to get much, much worse.

“Ten days” of tribulation

That’s not necessarily the message you want to get directly from Jesus Christ. It’s great to hear that you’re doing well as Christians—despite their physical poverty, Jesus identified them as spiritually rich (Revelation 2:9)—but it’s less encouraging to have that coupled with a warning that Satan is about to double down on his efforts to destroy you.

⁷ The Greek word for “tribulation” has a heavy, oppressive weight to it. One commentary calls it “the burden that crushes” (Leon Morris, *The Book of Revelation*, p. 63). The word for “poverty,” meanwhile, doesn’t mean just surviving on the bare essentials. It means having nothing at all.

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“Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer,” Jesus tells the faithful Christians in Smyrna. “Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life” (verse 10).

Imagine finding a letter from Jesus in your mailbox.

And imagine that halfway through that letter, Jesus tells you, “I know things have been really bad lately, but you’re about to suffer even more. Don’t be afraid.”

How would you feel getting that news?

How do you think the members in Smyrna felt?

When Jesus said, “The devil is about to throw some of you into prison,” the congregation would have understood that prison could easily serve as the prelude to an execution. To follow that warning with an admonition to “be faithful until death” would have cemented the thought.

Their lives were on the line.

Satan was gunning for Smyrna.

Technically speaking, it would be the city officials who would throw Church members into prison—officials no doubt urged on by this synagogue of Satan—but Jesus was making it abundantly clear *who* was operating behind the scenes. Smyrna’s tribulation was the work of “the great dragon . . . that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan . . . the accuser of our brethren, who accused them before our God day and night” (Revelation 12:9-10).

There are a couple lessons to take from this identification. The first is that it’s easy to do the wrong thing, even when we believe we’re doing the right thing. During His time on earth, Jesus warned His disciples: “They will put you out of the synagogues; yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service” (John 16:2).

The Jews of Smyrna did not see themselves as the synagogue of Satan. They saw themselves as God’s chosen people, and they saw the Christian faith as a perversion of their religion. “These things they will do to you because they have not known the Father nor Me,” explained Christ (verse 3). Because their eyes were not open to God’s truth, they had been “taken captive by [the devil] to do his will” (2 Timothy 2:26).

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The city officials also would not have seen themselves as servants of the devil—but by throwing God’s people in prison, they were doing Satan’s will.

For us, the takeaway is this: the difference between becoming an instrument in Satan’s hands and a tool in God’s hands is our relationship with God. We didn’t *earn* that relationship; we don’t *deserve* it—but if we don’t take the time to maintain and nurture it, Satan will have an easy time taking us captive to do his will. We won’t even notice it happening.

The second lesson is to remember that physical circumstances never give us the complete picture of any trial. From a physical perspective, the brethren in Smyrna were being persecuted by a Jewish group and being thrown into prison by Roman officials.

But that’s not the whole picture. *We* know—though only because Jesus makes a point of telling us—that *Satan* was pulling the strings in Smyrna. *Satan* was using the city officials to persecute the Church; *Satan* was working with the synagogue of Jews that were opposing God. What was happening in Smyrna was the result of spiritual forces operating behind a curtain that typically prevents us from seeing the bigger picture.

From time to time, the Bible gives us the briefest of glimpses behind that curtain. It shows us that Job’s incredible trial had its origin in a heavenly confrontation between God and Satan (Job 1:6-12; 2:1-6) while reminding us that God was using the same trial to shape and refine Job (James 5:11; compare Job 42:5-6). It shows us that, in an apparently hopeless situation, two servants of God were surrounded by an invisible spiritual army tasked with protecting them (2 Kings 6:14-18). It shows us that even God’s most influential angels must contend with the forces of darkness and that their victories are not always instantaneous (Daniel 10:10-13).

The point of these brief glimpses seems to be a reminder that the physical events we see are only part of the equation. More often than we might suspect, they are symptoms of spiritual circumstances outside our ability to perceive. Anytime we experience a trial, it’s important to remember that the reasons and explanations sometimes exist behind a curtain we’re not yet capable of peering behind.

Testing reveals the truth

But the church in Smyrna *did* get a glimpse—enough to know that Satan was gearing up for something big. What’s more, Jesus explained Satan’s motivation for throwing some Church members into prison: “that you may be tested” (Revelation 2:10). The Greek word translated “tested,” *peirazō* (Strong’s

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#G3985), can mean a proving or testing “with good or mischievous intent” (*Mounce’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*). Satan’s intent is to do harm, but God allows him to do things that will test—prove—members’ faith.

When Satan is behind our being *peirazō*, the word is often translated “tempted.” In these instances, the testing isn’t about an honest inquiry into the nature of something, but a desire to expose it as inadequate. Satan tempted Jesus in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-11); the Pharisees tried to expose Him with trick questions (Matthew 22:18); and so on. Satan tempts God’s people with sinful actions in the hopes of drawing them away from their Creator.

But *peirazō* is also the word Paul used when he told us to “examine yourselves” (2 Corinthians 13:5). Depending on who is doing the *peirazō*, the motivations can be different, but the end result is proof of something.

So how were the members in Smyrna being tested? *Some* of the congregation would be thrown into prison, but it appears that the *whole congregation* would be tested by Satan’s actions. The coming trial in Smyrna wasn’t just that *some* Christians would wind up in prison—it was the distinct possibility that *any* Christian could wind up in prison. The threat loomed over the whole congregation with only one obvious route of escape:

Renounce Christ.

You can’t get persecuted for being a Christian if you *aren’t* a Christian. Make it clear that you’re leaving your faith behind—maybe hold onto it privately, secretly, while publicly worshipping the gods that Rome expects you to worship—and there won’t be any reason to persecute you.

The church in Smyrna would be tested—tempted by Satan—to take the easy way out. To avoid persecution by walking away from their relationship with God. How they responded to this temptation, this *test* by Satan, would reveal something important about themselves.

What did they value?

What was most important to them?

What were they willing to walk away from in order to protect their lives?

The members in Smyrna had the opportunity to walk away from God and avoid a serious trial—or they could choose to knowingly *embrace* that trial in order to cement their identity as God’s chosen and faithful people.

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Jesus called on them to do the latter in His letter to the church in Smyrna. “You will have tribulation ten days,” He told them. “Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life” (Revelation 2:10).

Sometimes in the Bible, a day can represent a year (Ezekiel 4:4-6; Numbers 14:33-34). So “ten days” could mean 10 years.

Or the “ten days” of tribulation promised to the congregation may not have been a literal length of time, but a reminder that even when things are at their bleakest, Satan’s spiritual assaults have a time limit. God will not permit Satan to persecute us forever—and even if our trials end with our physical death, Jesus reminds us that *death itself is temporary*.

It’s there in the introduction: a message from “the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life” (verse 8). It’s there in the admonition to “be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life” (verse 10). And it’s there in the promise to the overcomer: “He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death” (verse 11).

Death and hardship—the only real threats that Satan can hold over the heads of God’s people—are, in the end, entirely temporary. Jesus set a hard limit on the amount of time that Satan would be at liberty to bring tribulation to the brethren in Smyrna, with the promise that nothing Satan can do is permanent.

More than that—staying faithful through the worst of Satan’s assault will guarantee a truly incredible reward. In Greek, “the crown of life” actually means “the crown that is *made* of life.”

The Greek word Jesus used for crown, *stephanos* (Strong’s #G4735), wasn’t a royal crown, but the garland awarded to the victors of athletic games. This was a crown that was acquired through nothing less than extreme effort and unwavering dedication. It was imagery the members in Smyrna would have been very familiar with, since the city hosted Olympic-style games at its stadium (Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 6.14.3).

But these words encouraging them to be brave in the face of death are more than just hollow platitudes. They come from the One who *was* dead—the One who experienced a brutal death firsthand before being raised to eternal life. Jesus Christ wasn’t asking the congregation in Smyrna to do anything He hadn’t already done Himself.

And when they did—when they proved themselves to be faithful—Jesus promised they would “in *no way* be harmed by the second death” (Revelation 2:11, NET).

Jesus used a Greek double negative to drive home His point here. The phrase *οὐ μή* is the strongest way to negate something in ancient Greek; it says that something is both impossible and unthinkable.

There is not even the slightest possibility that the faithful members in Smyrna will find themselves in the second death⁸—they will have obtained the crown of life, a victor’s garland, placed on their head by the One who has already overcome death.

Choosing faithfulness

The ultimate question for the members in Smyrna—and for us—is whether we’ll choose to be faithful. Whether we’ll reject the easy way out and choose to suffer for our beliefs instead.

We noted at the beginning of this Journey that we don’t live in the same world as the seven churches of Revelation. It might sound a little extreme to talk about our allegiance to the teachings of Jesus Christ as a thing that could cost us our livelihood—or our life.

But what if it could?

What if your physical life was on the line because of your faith in the First and the Last, who died and came to life?

Would you have the strength to look your accusers in the eye and confess your faith? Or would you abandon your spiritual future to save your physical life?

It’s difficult for any of us to say exactly what we’d do in a situation like that. But those situations are more than hypotheticals.

They’ve happened before.

They *will* happen again.

Our job, right now, is to be building a relationship with God that can weather the 10 worst days of tribulation Satan can throw at us. And part of the key to building that kind of relationship is the core belief that the reward for weathering that tribulation is *worth* it.

Jesus warned all His would-be disciples that becoming a Christian requires putting God first. “He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it” (Matthew 10:37-39).

⁸ The punishment of those who knowingly refuse God’s calling and choose to rebel against Him. See “[What Is the Lake of Fire?](#)”

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One way or another, taking up our cross and following Jesus will end with physical death. The faithful members in Smyrna believed that such a death was a small price to pay for claiming the crown that was made of life.



What about you?

FURTHER READING

Scriptures

- ☐ Revelation 2:8-11 
- ☐ Hebrews 2:10-18 
- ☐ Philippians 3:7-21 

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- ☐ Smyrna 
- ☐ 4 Keys to Understanding the Afterlife 

READING 5

PERGAMOS: HOLDING FAST IN SATAN'S COURT

Pergamos⁹ had a lot in common with the other six cities that received letters in Revelation.

It had temples dedicated to the worship of false gods. It had a strong imperial cult dedicated to worshipping the emperors of Rome. It was filled with trade guilds that made it difficult (if not completely impossible) for a Christian to have economic security. Its residents competed (and paid money) for the privilege of serving as the priests and priestesses of its various temples.

But *unlike* the other six churches, Pergamos was identified by Jesus as the spiritual headquarters of Satan the devil.

Why?

What does it mean to be a martyr?

In the letter to Pergamos, Jesus mentions, “Antipas was My faithful martyr, who was killed among you” (Revelation 2:13). Other translations call him a *witness*—so which one is it? Martyr or witness?

Actually, it’s both.

Today, we use the word *martyr* to talk about someone who dies on account of his or her faith. We get that word directly from the Greek word *martys*—but, interestingly, *martys* didn’t always carry the modern meaning of “martyr.”

The meanings of words change all the time. That’s nothing new. For example, 800 years ago, the word *nice* meant “stupid.” And 500 years ago, it meant “careful and precise.”

What’s interesting here is that when Jesus described Antipas as His faithful *martys*, the meaning of the word was already beginning to shift.

⁹ Or Pergamum, depending on your translation. The New King James Version (which we use as our standard Bible) uses “Pergamos,” while most other translations use “Pergamum.”

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Originally, a *martys* was a witness—someone who could personally confirm the truthfulness of an event because he or she watched it happen. In the early days of the New Testament Church, that’s how the word was used. In fact, when we read the account of Stephen’s death, the Bible doesn’t call *him* a *martys*. Instead, it uses that term to describe the people *watching* his death (Acts 7:58). They were witnesses—observers who could verify that Stephen had in fact been stoned to death.

And yet, today, it would be more accurate to call *Stephen* the martyr.

What changed?

Context mostly.

As the first century rolled on, Christians like Stephen—who bore witness to the power and majesty of Jesus Christ, who dared to call Him the Son of God and who dared to call other gods worthless imaginings of depraved minds—were increasingly likely to die as a result of their witness.

Eventually, the two things became entwined. A *martys* was someone who died *because* he or she was a witness. Antipas was a faithful witness for Jesus Christ—and, as a result, he was killed. The *martys* was *martyred*.

Faithful until death

The death of Antipas helps set the stage for Christ’s letter to the congregation in Pergamos. In Smyrna, the storm of physical persecution was on the horizon—in Pergamos, it was already there. If the authorities were willing to put one faithful Christian to death because of his faith, how long until the rest of the congregation was at risk?

In the face of death, the church in Pergamos remained faithful. Jesus praised them for holding fast to His name and not denying His faith. Christians facing official punishment would likely have been given the opportunity to recant their faith by cursing the name of Jesus Christ and worshipping the gods of Rome, especially the sacrifice to the emperor. The church in Pergamos refused to do either.

Twice, Jesus identified the city of Pergamos as being particularly aligned with Satan. Ephesus may have been dealing with false teachers and Smyrna may have been home to a synagogue of Satan, but Pergamos was “where Satan’s throne is” and “where Satan dwells” (Revelation 2:13).

Scholars have spent years making guesses about what specifically Jesus had in mind when He mentioned Satan’s throne. Was it the shape of the thousand-foot-high cone-shaped mountain the

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city was built on? Was it the enormous altar of Zeus that jugged out near the top of that mountain? Was it the shrine of *Asklepios Sōter* (“Asclepius the Savior”), the god of healing closely associated with snakes?¹⁰

It’s impossible to say with any kind of certainty.¹¹ More important than connecting “Satan’s throne” to a physical object is understanding that Pergamos was being described as the place “where Satan is enthroned and holds court” (*Tyndale New Testament Commentary*, Revelation 2:13). Here was a city so suited to Satan’s goals and purposes that he chose to establish his metaphorical earthly throne there.

Pergamos was his *residence*.

It’s hard to imagine what it would mean to be a follower of God in a town linked with the throne of Satan. And yet there were the members in Pergamos, putting their lives on the line and holding fast to the name of Christ.

But even with that faithfulness, there was an issue in Pergamos that needed to be addressed.

Balaam and the Nicolaitans

The rebuke that Jesus brings against the Christians in Pergamos is less harsh than the one He brings against the Ephesians. He has “a few things” against them (Revelation 2:14), a Greek phrase that could refer to something small in number or stature. (*The Word Biblical Commentary* translates Revelation 2:14, “But I hold a minor matter against you.”)

The issue *itself* was far from minor, but context seems to suggest that the congregation in Pergamos wasn’t as collectively *involved* in this issue, even though it was still affecting them. Notice the shift in wording in verse 16: “Repent, or else I will come to *you* quickly and will fight against *them* with the sword of My mouth.” Jesus Himself draws a distinction between *you* (the congregation at large) and *them* (the people behind the problem).

Who were *they*, exactly?

¹⁰ One of Asclepius’ symbols (a rod entwined by a snake) has gone on to become a symbol of the medical world, commonly displayed on ambulances and in hospitals. Temples to Asclepius usually included live snakes to assist in the healing process of supplicants. It’s not difficult to imagine how Satan, “that serpent of old” (Revelation 12:9) could be tied to this false savior god.

¹¹ One commentary relates the story of Christian stonecutters serving in the quarries of the Roman province of Pannonia some 200 years after Revelation was written. When they refused to carve an image of Asclepius, they were executed as “followers of Antipas of Pergamum” (Timothy Zahn, *Introduction to the New Testament*, Vol. 3, p. 421). Did Antipas die for taking a stand against something related to Asclepius? It’s one possibility, but we just don’t know for sure.

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This is the warning Jesus gave to the church at Pergamos: “But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality. Thus you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate” (verses 14-15).

We’ve already seen the Nicolaitans pop up in the letter to the Ephesians—but aside from Christ’s hatred of their deeds (verse 6), that letter gives us no context clues about the group itself.

Here, we get context.

Jesus links “the doctrine of the Nicolaitans” to “those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality.”

That doesn’t help us unmask the Nicolaitans in a historical sense, but it tells us everything we really need to know about this mysterious group. If the Nicolaitans were linked with Balaam, then they were a group of people who promoted compromise with God’s way of life—a group who endorsed behaviors that would drive a wedge between God and His people.

In the Old Testament, Balaam played a pivotal role in Israel’s journey to the Promised Land. Balak, king of the neighboring nation of Moab, saw the defeated kingdoms in Israel’s wake and summoned the soothsayer Balaam to curse the fledgling nation (Numbers 22:4-6; Joshua 13:22).

It didn’t work. God refused to allow Balaam to curse Israel, compelling him to speak words of blessing instead (Numbers 22:12; chapters 23–25). But Balaam, eager to receive his wages from Balak, managed to find a loophole. He counseled Balak to send Moabite women to tempt the men of Israel to participate in idol worship and ritual prostitution (Numbers 31:16).

Balaam couldn’t curse Israel from the outside, but he could introduce a “stumbling block” that would draw them into conflict with God—thus prompting a divine punishment.

That *did* work. The men of Israel “began to commit harlotry with the women of Moab,” worshipping Moabite gods and eating of their sacrifices (Numbers 25:1-2). God sent a plague on Israel as a punishment that didn’t stop until the harlotry did (verses 4-5, 8-9).

After the dust settled, Israel launched a counterattack that wiped out several kings of the area—along with Balaam himself. The soothsayer was “killed with the sword” (Numbers 31:8), without time to enjoy whatever riches he’d received from Balak.

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Fast-forward some 14-odd centuries to the church in Pergamos, and a similar situation was rearing its head.

Remember that it was difficult to work a trade in the Roman world without belonging to a trade *guild*—and it seems belonging to a trade guild meant participating in regular sacrificial meals for its patron god.

That meant eating things sacrificed to idols, and things sacrificed to idols could also involve ritual or cultic prostitution. In fact, as gentiles became part of the Church, the apostles had to highlight four important prohibitions for new Christians to be mindful of: “to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood” (Acts 15:20). These things were all common in the Roman world, but they were unacceptable in the Church of God.

And that’s important context for understanding why the Nicolaitans were making headway into God’s Church. Obeying God’s restrictions meant sometimes facing economic and social jeopardy, inviting mockery and even persecution for your beliefs.

Imagine yourself in that situation. Imagine seeing a fellow believer martyred because he refused to compromise with God’s instructions.

Imagine knowing that you could easily be next.

And now imagine hearing a compelling argument that, actually, God *doesn’t* mind if you sit down in the temple of a pagan god and share in a communal sacrifice. Imagine hearing someone make a convincing case that, in the right circumstances, ritual prostitution is totally fine.

It’s not that you’re looking for an opportunity or an excuse to do these things—but wouldn’t it be nice to be able to provide for your family and live your day-to-day life without worrying about poverty, persecution and death?

The Nicolaitan message would have been appealing, not necessarily as an excuse for licentiousness, but for *the opportunity to live a normal life* by being part of the culture. Idol worship was deeply woven into so many aspects of Roman life—the idea of being given some leeway to participate without compromising your relationship with God would have been incredibly tempting.

Maybe the Nicolaitans even believed the lies they were selling—but that’s all they were.

Lies.

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God doesn't leave room for a rival. The Second Commandment forbids idol worship, "for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God" (Exodus 20:5).

Elijah asked the Israelites who believed they could serve the true God alongside the pagan god Baal, "How long will you falter between two opinions?" (1 Kings 18:21). James warned that "whoever wants to be the world's friend becomes God's enemy" (James 4:4, Holman Christian Standard Bible). Jesus was emphatic: "No one can serve two masters" (Matthew 6:24).

The church in Pergamos—or any congregation of God, for that matter—couldn't straddle the fence on this one. They couldn't strike a compromise with the physical world around them and maintain their spiritual connection to God.

It would have to be one or the other.

You've probably never felt the pressure to eat an animal sacrifice in the temple of a pagan god in order to spare yourself some level of persecution or financial difficulty. But Christ's warning to the church of Pergamos still matters today, and here's why:

The message of the Nicolaitans is still out there.

The altars have changed, the temples have changed, the gods have changed, and the way to worship them has changed—but the central issue hasn't.

The world values things that run contrary to God's way of life. It always has because the world is "under the sway of the wicked one" (1 John 5:19).

Following God puts you in conflict with the world. It always has and it always will, because "friendship with the world is enmity with God" (James 4:4).

Take a moment to think of all the things the world values, praises, objectifies, prioritizes and obsesses over that clash with God's instructions. These can be anything from physical possessions to philosophical worldviews. What's a big deal on the news right now? What social issue is the media fixating on? What's the cultural spotlight shining on?

How much of what you see there is incompatible with God's way of life?

Because the thing is, sometimes the world will turn a blind eye to the fact that you refuse to worship at its altars.

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But sometimes it won't.

Peter warned the Church about nonbelievers who “consider it strange of you not to plunge with them into the same flood of reckless indiscretion, and they heap abuse on you” (1 Peter 4:4, Berean Standard Bible). When we make the conscious choice to avoid the godless activities of the world, we make ourselves a target of the world.

The world doesn't want to hear that it's wrong. Often, the world doesn't even like the *idea* that you might be thinking of it as wrong. The world may well demand to see you worship at its altars—to hear you sing the praises of its values, to see you pursuing the things it pursues, desiring the things it desires.

And when you don't, the world is typically in the position to take away things you need.

Your job. Your income. Your possessions. Your property. Your food.

Your life.

This sort of thing has happened, with varying frequencies and levels of intensity, throughout human history. The book of Revelation even talks about a future time when a God-opposing economic power will control much of the earth, cutting off the financial means of anyone who refuses to accept it (Revelation 13:15-17).

Things aren't that extreme right now. But even without that pressure, you can probably imagine ways that your life could be (physically) improved if you were willing to compromise a little with your beliefs—to be a little more flexible with the boundaries established by God.

The message of the Nicolaitans is that *it's okay*, that God understands, that He doesn't mind when you cross those lines with a good reason—that it's a perfectly legitimate thing to do, and in fact, you're *missing out* if you don't.

The chances of you feeling socially or professionally pressured to sit down to a sacrificial meal in a pagan temple are slim to none—but there are plenty of modern-day equivalents. When our social and professional lives come into conflict with God's laws, we can be tempted to skirt around those laws with creative interpretations and willful misinterpretations.

What are your conflicts?

Where are you tempted to compromise?

What is tempting you to compromise? More to the point, how often do you give it that opportunity?

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Those who taught “the doctrine of Balaam” and “the doctrine of the Nicolaitans” were problems Jesus had against the Church in Pergamos.

It wasn’t that the whole congregation had been taken in by this heresy—from the way Jesus phrases His rebuke, it sounds as if few of them were buying what the Nicolaitans were selling. He said that “you [referring to the congregation as a whole] have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam [referring to a smaller subset of people].”

But the congregation doesn’t get a pass. What they’re allowing to exist within the Body of Christ, even if it’s only near the fringes, is unacceptable. Just like the Corinthians, who hadn’t taken action against a Church member who was openly committing a sexual sin (1 Corinthians 5:1), the members in Pergamos were failing to take action against these false teachers.

But if the Bible teaches us anything, it’s that small things can become big things very quickly—especially if they’re left unattended. The members in Pergamos had a responsibility to cut the Nicolaitans off at the pass—to ensure that God’s Church did not become a place where that kind of heresy could exist unchallenged.

We have the same responsibility, especially in our own lives. It’s our job to be continually asking ourselves, “Am I giving a foothold to anything that encourages me to spiritually compromise with God’s way of life?”

The sword of His mouth

Jesus instructs the congregation to “repent, or else I will come to *you* quickly and will fight against *them* with the sword of My mouth” (Revelation 2:16). Again—a distinction. Christ will come quickly (the Greek word can also mean “suddenly”) and fight against *them*—the Nicolaitans and the Balaamites.

Jesus identifies His weapon as “the sword of My mouth.” This ties back to this letter’s introduction: “These things says He who has the sharp two-edged sword” (verse 12).

There are two important connections to note here. The first is the *ius gladii*—“the right of the sword.”

Roman governors of provinces could legally sentence any of their subjects to death. If Antipas was martyred at the command of Roman officials, then the *ius gladii* would have certainly been on the mind of the church at Pergamos.

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But Jesus identifies Himself as wielding a far more important sword: the sharp two-edged sword of His mouth. This is the weapon He will bring to bear on those who pervert God's instructions, and it is capable of far greater destruction than the executive authority of any human governor:

"For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account" (Hebrews 4:12-13).

No matter what kind of persecution we face in this life—even if it means the *end* of this life—the *true* power over life and death rests in the hands of God, not man.

When we have a healthy fear of and respect for God's incredible power, and when we make the choice to obey Him over human authorities, "we may boldly say: 'The LORD is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?'" (Hebrews 13:6).

The other connection is much more straightforward:

Balaam died by the sword.

The Balaamites—Balaam's spiritual successors, who advocated compromising with God's Word—would *also* face the sword.

Maybe the Nicolaitans and the Balaamites believed the false worldview they were peddling. It's certainly possible, but ultimately beside the point.

Taking a stand against God's way of life means taking a stand against Jesus Christ—the One with the sharp, two-edged sword that cleaves to the division of soul and spirit.

At the end of the book of Revelation, Jesus returns on a white horse, wielding the sharp sword of His mouth (Revelation 19:15). The armies of the world, gathered together in a misguided attempt to fight against Him, are summarily defeated.

In this life or the next, there is no victory against that sword. Those who pervert the gospel message will ultimately have to choose between repenting or perishing.

Jesus, the One with the true *ius gladii*, speaking as the One wielding the blade that discerns even the thoughts and intents of our hearts, is telling the church at Pergamos that He Himself will soon be intervening to deal with this group of heretics. If the Christians there aren't actively rejecting and

resisting the false teachings now, they may find themselves on the wrong side of the conflict—that is, on the wrong side of the sword.

God’s truth is a precious thing. He will defend it jealously, and we must learn to do the same.

Hidden manna and white stones

To those who prove themselves to be overcomers, Jesus promises to “give some of the hidden manna to eat” (Revelation 2:17).

The only time manna makes a physical appearance in the Bible is during Israel’s 40-year trek through the wilderness. For four decades, God miraculously supplied an entire nation with the physical nourishment it needed (see Exodus 16:13-18, 31-35).

Moses called it “the bread which the LORD has given you to eat” (verse 15). Asaph called it “the bread of heaven” and “angels’ food” (Psalm 78:24-25). When the choir of the second temple recounted God’s history with Israel, they sang:

*“You . . . did not withhold Your manna from their mouth,
And gave them water for their thirst.
Forty years You sustained them in the wilderness;
They lacked nothing” (Nehemiah 9:20-21).*

Even though God provided manna for only a short window of Israel’s history, the bread became a symbol for the miraculous ways God provides for His people. In fact, God commanded a container to be filled with manna “to be preserved throughout your generations, so that they may see the bread I fed you in the wilderness when I brought you out of the land of Egypt” (Exodus 16:32, HCSB).

But manna could only do so much. It was physical food intended for physical people, and although it sustained Israel in the wilderness, it didn’t sustain anyone forever.

It wasn’t *meant* to.

When a crowd asked Jesus to perform a sign along the lines of the “manna in the desert” (John 6:30-31), He told them that they were missing the point: “Most assuredly, I say to you, Moses did not give you the bread from heaven, but My Father gives you the *true* bread from heaven” (verse 32). The miracle of manna was actually the forerunner of something better—Jesus Christ Himself.

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“I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, *and are dead* . . . I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world” (verses 48-49, 51).

The manna in the wilderness pointed toward the *true* bread of life—the true *manna*—that came through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. When Jesus died on the cross to pay the penalty of our sins, the door was opened for human beings to live forever in the family of God.

The overcomers in Pergamos—the faithful Christians who refused to participate in the sacrificial meals of the false gods around them—would instead eat the bread of life provided by the true God. Along with Antipas, the faithful martyr, their dedication to the name of Jesus Christ would mean eternal life in God’s Kingdom—a promise that no one, not even a Roman official wielding the right of the sword, could take away.

Of all the rewards depicted in these letters to the churches, the white stone that Jesus promises to the overcomers in Pergamos is probably the most difficult to make sense of. It appears to be a symbol that the Christians there would have easily recognized, but from our modern-day vantage point, the meaning is extremely unclear.

One possibility is that the stone is a *tessera*. In the ancient world, a *tessera* was a token (made of wood, bone, metal or stone) that often entitled the bearer to something—a prize, special status or admission to an exclusive event. These tokens would sometimes carry an inscription relevant to their purpose.¹²

If Jesus had *tesserae* in mind when speaking to the church in Pergamos, then the white stone might be our metaphorical “ticket of admission” into God’s Kingdom. Although we don’t *earn* the right to be part of God’s eternal family, it *is* a right that Jesus *gives* to His faithful disciples (John 1:12-13).

In this interpretation, the imagery of the stone is a reminder that as long as we continue to overcome, “an entrance will be supplied to [us] abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 1:11).

Conversely, there’s a reminder that if we *don’t* overcome—if we leave our sins unaddressed and ignore the command to hear what the Spirit says to the churches—then we won’t find an entrance, but a stinging rebuke from Christ Himself: “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!” (Matthew 7:23).

¹² For example, gladiators who proved themselves in the arena would receive a *tessera* inscribed with their name and the words *GLADIATORIIS SP.*, indicating their status as gladiators of distinction.

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But what about the name written on the stone? Jesus says it will be “a *new* name . . . which no one knows except him who receives it” (Revelation 2:17).

In the Bible, the meaning of names is often important. When Ruth’s mother-in-law says she wants to change her name from Naomi (meaning “pleasant”) to Mara (meaning “bitter”), it’s significant (Ruth 1:20). When Jacob renames his newborn son—changing it from Ben-Oni (“son of my sorrow”) to Benjamin (“son of the right hand”)—it’s significant (Genesis 35:18). When God Himself changes the name of Abram (“exalted father”) to Abraham (“father of a multitude”), it’s significant (Genesis 17:5).

And when God promises to give *us* new names, *it’s significant*.




Our new names will belong to us, since they will be ones “which no one knows except him who receives it” (Revelation 2:17). Throughout the Bible, a change in name reflects a change in situation or in character. Our new names will be given to us after we have been fully transformed into the image and likeness of God—spirit beings no longer limited by a physical existence. As we learn to live and think like God in this physical life, the godly character we’re developing will reach its fullest potential in that moment when we become like Him.

We are today, right now, in the process of becoming the sons and daughters of God who will live up to that new name.



And it starts with overcoming.

FURTHER READING

Scriptures

- ☐ Revelation 2:12-17 
- ☐ Matthew 7:21-23 
- ☐ 2 Peter 1 

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- ☐ Pergamos 
- ☐ Saying No 

READING 6

THYATIRA: REJECTING HERESY FROM THE INSIDE OUT

As ancient cultures mixed and blended together, their gods inevitably followed suit. The mythologies of regional gods merged with national ones, creating a familiar but distinct patchwork of deities across the Roman Empire.

In Thyatira, the blending of Lydian, Macedonian and Greek cultures resulted in Helios Pythius Tyrinnaeus Apollo—a sun god who became one of the city’s primary deities, and who would have been worshipped in citywide festivals and by the trade guilds there.

His connection with Apollo meant that Apollo Tyrinnos (his shortened name) was considered a son of Zeus, chief of the Greek gods. The emperor, in turn, was considered Apollo incarnate—and therefore *divi filius*, or “son of a god.”

Here was a false god laying claim to the majesty of the sun—and not only that, but a reason to worship the emperor as the divine son of a god.

In the opening line to his letter to the church in Thyatira, Jesus challenges all those lies. He identifies Himself as “*the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet like fine brass*¹³” (Revelation 2:18).

Jesus is the *true* Son of God—not Apollo, and not the emperor. *His* eyes shine like a flame of fire—not the eyes of this imaginary god of the sun. He has no equal—not in Thyatira, not anywhere. One commentary remarks, “With such eyes the Son of God can see into the most distant and darkest places, and with such feet he can stamp out all opposition to his rule” (Robert Bratcher and Howard Hatton, *A Handbook on the Revelation to John*, p. 57).

This is the imagery Jesus uses to set the stage for His message to the church in Thyatira.

Works greater than the first

It’s easy to skip over Thyatira’s praise and go right to its censure. But the praise is important, and we can learn from it too:

¹³ Jesus used the Greek word *chalkolibanon* (Strong’s #5474), which so far has not been found in any other contemporary Greek text. Its etymology and its connection to Daniel 10:6 suggest it refers to a valuable, shining metal alloy, most likely bronze or brass.

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“I know your deeds—your love, your faith, your service, your perseverance—and your latest deeds are greater than your first” (Revelation 2:19, BSB). In sharp contrast to the Ephesian church, which was at risk of losing its lampstand unless it heeded Christ’s warning to “repent and do the first works” (verse 5), the church in Thyatira had *grown*. The members there had *more* love, *more* faith, *more* service, *more* perseverance (from a Greek word meaning “patient endurance,” “steadfastness” or “fortitude”) than they had when they first became Christians.

This was high praise from Jesus Christ, who saw a vibrant and spiritually developing congregation when He looked at His people in Thyatira.

How long have *you* been a Christian?

Is that a stretch of time you measure in weeks? Months?

Years?

Decades?

If you have a long history of following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, think back to what your works were in those early days. You probably had an excitement—an eagerness to practice things like showing love, serving others and exercising your faith. If the letter to the Ephesians teaches us anything, it’s that holding onto that eager desire is integral to our Christianity.

But eagerness isn’t growth. Eagerness creates *opportunities* for growth. We grow in love, service, faith and patient endurance by *practicing* those things—even trying and *failing* at those things. The Ephesian Christians had disconnected themselves from the love they began with; the Christians in Thyatira had embraced it and leaned into it. As a result, they had spiritual fruit to show for it. They were among those “who hear the word, accept it, and bear fruit: some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred” (Mark 4:20).

Now back to you.

What changes have the passage of time and an eagerness to do God’s will produced in you? How have you grown since you started down this path?

Those are good questions to be able to answer—but there’s nothing you can do to *change* those answers. The past is the past. You’ve done what you’ve done. That story is written.

What matters more is what’s ahead.

Whether you're brand-new to this way of life or you have half a century of experience, the focus is on the changes you want to see in your future.

What kind of Christian do you want to be a year from now?

Ten years from now?

Thyatira improved in the areas it did—in love, in faith, in service and in patient endurance—by *doing* those things. That's the only way anyone can get better at anything. And it's the only way *we* can get better.

We have to seek out opportunities, even *create* opportunities to practice these skills over and over and over again. And in the process, we *will* change, we *will* improve, we *will* have works “greater than the first.” If we ask God for help, He will help us find opportunities to grow just like the church in Thyatira did. And growth is such a big part of what God is looking for in us.

That woman Jezebel

In many ways, Thyatira is the spiritual mirror image of Ephesus.

While the Ephesians had walked away from their first love while remaining vigilant against false teachers and doctrinal heresies, the members in Thyatira had grown in godly love while at the same time failing to protect the congregation from heretical teachings.

This is the charge Jesus brings against the church in Thyatira: “But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols” (Revelation 2:20, ESV).

You may immediately notice some connections between Jezebel and the issues plaguing both Ephesus and Pergamos.

In Pergamos, we learned that the Nicolaitans were promoting “the doctrine of Balaam . . . to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality” (verse 14). These same Nicolaitans had been rejected by the Ephesians (verse 6), but they seemed to be making inroads in Pergamos, where their doctrine of spiritual compromise was beginning to take root.

In Thyatira, the situation is even more dire. This time, we have no mention of the Nicolaitans, but their doctrine finds a mouthpiece in the form of “that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess”—an

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enigmatic figure who aims to “teach and seduce My servants to commit sexual immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols” (verse 20).

The most immediate and striking difference between the problems in Pergamos and Thyatira is a matter of proximity. In Pergamos, the Nicolaitans appear to be operating at the fringes of the congregation. They are dangerous, but they are distinct—Jesus draws a line between “you” and “them” (verse 16).

In Thyatira, Jezebel claims to be a prophetess—that is, *she claims to speak the inspired words of God*. She is not an outside agent trying to smuggle heresy into the Church, but an established figure *within* the Church. It seems the congregation in Thyatira is providing her with a platform to spread her message.

Her exact identity and message have been lost to time, but like the Nicolaitans, we have enough context to know that she was promoting compromise with Roman society—a compromise that God rejected in the strongest of terms.

In the Old Testament, Jezebel was a wicked queen of Israel (and often the true power behind the throne of her spineless husband, King Ahab¹⁴). Jezebel was the daughter of a foreign king, and it was through her marriage to Ahab that Baal worship became prominent in Israel (1 Kings 16:31-32).

When Ahab wanted the vineyard that was beside his palace, Jezebel was the one who planned a vicious conspiracy to have the vineyard’s owner murdered in cold blood (1 Kings 21:1-16). When Elijah the prophet publicly exposed 450 prophets of Baal as false prophets serving a false god, it was a furious Jezebel who threatened Elijah’s life (1 Kings 18:20–19:3).

Elijah’s challenge to the Baal-worshipping crowds must have seemed odd: “How long will you falter between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him” (1 Kings 18:21).

Israel had fallen into syncretism, a blending of religions. Why should they *choose* between these two gods? Why not just worship both?

Just as a variety of cultures had blended together in Thyatira to create Apollo Tyrimnos, so, too, did Jezebel’s Baal worship blend and mingle with worship of the true God. The result was an abomination that God hated (Deuteronomy 12:29-32), but that the people saw as perfectly acceptable. In their minds, they *weren’t* faltering (or “limping,” as the ESV translates it) between two opinions—they were just combining the two into one.

¹⁴ See 1 Kings 21:25.

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The Bible is clear: for God’s people, this kind of compromise is not an option.

The fact that the false prophetess of the congregation in Thyatira is spiritually associated with Queen Jezebel of the Old Testament tells us a great deal about her role in God’s Church—the same way that associating the Nicolaitans with Balaam tells us about *their* role.

Unlike Balaam, who was an external threat to Israel, Jezebel was an internal threat. She was the *queen*—she had an incredible amount of influence over the nation. Likewise, this Jezebel figure in Thyatira appears to have been an influential member of the Church—someone who held some amount of sway over the congregation.

Like the Nicolaitans in Pergamos and Ephesus, this “Jezebel” seems to have been advocating that Christians could (and maybe even *should*) get involved in the pagan practices of the world around them. Her teachings were designed to “seduce [Christ’s] servants to commit sexual immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols” (Revelation 2:20).

The teachings of this false prophetess claiming to speak on behalf of God were *seductive*—they drew people in and led them astray. How many Christians in Thyatira had she convinced to share in the trade guilds’ sacrificial meals for Apollo Tyrinnos, the city’s sun god? How many Christians in Thyatira now believed that God had placed His seal of approval on spiritual and moral compromise? How many Christians in Thyatira believed they could please God with one foot in the world and one foot in the Church?

How many Christians believe that today?

Jesus was not just sitting idly by while Jezebel masqueraded as His mouthpiece. For Jezebel—and for all those who refused to separate from her—judgment was coming.

Satan’s “deep secrets”

Claiming to speak on behalf of God, Jezebel packaged her deceptions artfully. She offered “deep secrets” (Revelation 2:24, NET). The Greek phrase here suggests “knowledge which is very difficult to know” (*Louw and Nida Greek-English Lexicon*, 28.76), and Paul used the same word when he explained that “the Spirit searches all things, yes, the *deep things* of God” (1 Corinthians 2:10).

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As a false prophetess, Jezebel likewise presented her teachings as God's deep secrets, but Jesus unmasked them for what they really were: "the so-called 'deep secrets of *Satan*'" (Revelation 2:24, NET). They weren't real deep secrets, and they weren't from God.

They were lies originating from Satan the devil.

Jesus reveals that Jezebel's punishment is already en route: "I gave her time to repent of her sexual immorality, and she did not repent. Indeed I will cast her into a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of their deeds. I will kill her children with death, *and all the churches shall know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts*. And I will give to each one of you according to your works" (verses 21-23).

There is poetic justice in Jezebel's fate: the woman promoting spiritual harlotry¹⁵ will be cast (from a Greek word meaning "to throw forcefully") into a different kind of bed—a sickbed. Jezebel's message would have promised social and economic security through compromise with paganism. Jesus was making it clear that such compromise would accomplish the exact opposite. Unless Jezebel's coadulterers repented, they would find only sickness, tribulation and death.

This coming judgment would be a warning to not just Thyatira, but *all* the churches—Jesus is the One with "eyes like a flame of fire," who "searches the minds and hearts" (verses 18, 23). Nothing escapes His sight. He sees all, He knows all, and He will reward each of us according to our works.

Thyatira's false prophetess remains a powerful warning to the Church today: convincing lies can come from within God's Church. Left unaddressed, these "deep secrets of Satan" will produce the only thing Satan's lies ever produce: pain and self-destruction.

Paul told the Thessalonians, "Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good" (1 Thessalonians 5:20-21, ESV).

Prophecy refers to any message inspired by God. As Christians, whenever we encounter something that appears to be prophecy, our job is to test it—to examine it, to ensure it doesn't conflict with the inspired message of the Bible (Isaiah 8:20). If it does, we must reject it both from our own lives and from the Church as a whole. Satan's lies must be given no space to take root and grow.

¹⁵ Throughout the Old Testament, God uses sexual immorality as a way to describe spiritual unfaithfulness to Him—idol worship, the blending of religions and so on. Jezebel's promotion of literal sexual immorality went hand in hand with her spiritual unfaithfulness to God. Those who "commit adultery with her" (verse 22) seem to be those who joined in her unfaithfulness, whereas "her children" (verse 23) seem to be those who fully accepted her message.

Authority and the morning star

With the (notable) exception of Jezebel's influence, the church in Thyatira was on the right track. Their works had only improved over time. They had increased in love, service, faith and patient endurance. And so to the remainder of the congregation—to the ones who weren't entangled with Jezebel and Satan's lies—Jesus says, "I will put on you no other burden. *But hold fast what you have till I come*" (Revelation 2:24-25).

The overcomers in Thyatira would be the ones who removed themselves from Jezebel's sphere of influence, repenting if necessary, and who then *held fast* to the truth. Judgment on Jezebel and her followers was looming, but the overcomers were promised rewards at Christ's return: "power [or *authority*] over the nations" and "the morning star" (verses 26, 28).

The promise of power and authority is straightforward. Just as God the Father gave the resurrected Christ authority over the nations, so, too, does He promise to share that authority with His faithful disciples. Together, they will "rule them with a rod of iron; they [unrepentant nations] shall be dashed to pieces like the potter's vessels" (verse 27).

However, the Greek word Jesus uses for "rule" can also refer to the act of shepherding.¹⁶ As faithful Christians join Christ in ruling over the nations (compare Revelation 20:4), they will be tasked with not only disciplining rebellious nations, but lovingly shepherding all God's creation into a state of unity with Him.

The reference to the morning star is a little more difficult to decipher. As with the white stone promised to the overcomers in Pergamos, there are theories, but no definitive answers.

At the end of the book, Jesus identifies Himself as "the Bright and Morning Star" (Revelation 22:16). The people of the first century world would have also referred to the planet Venus as "the morning star." To see the morning star in the sky was to know that daylight—and the end of darkness—was at hand.

Peter offered similar encouragement to the Church: "And so we have the prophetic [divinely inspired] word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts" (2 Peter 1:19).

Jesus Christ is our Morning Star—our promise that the night of this world will not last forever, that in fact "the night is far spent, the day is at hand" (Romans 13:12).

¹⁶ Revelation 2:27 quotes from Psalm 2:9, which speaks of *breaking* the nations with a rod of iron. In the original Hebrew, the words for "break" and "shepherd" are pronounced similarly—*rā'a* (Strong's #H7489) and *rā'ā* (Strong's #H7473), respectively.

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The future that matters—the future you and I are dedicating our lives to reaching—*that* future is on the horizon. It is *real* and it is *on its way*. For assurance, we don’t need to look any farther than “Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith” (Hebrews 12:2).



Whether this was the exact imagery Jesus had in mind when He spoke to the church of Thyatira is unclear, but there is no doubt that our Elder Brother *is* our hope before the dawn. Our job is to overcome and keep Christ’s works till the end (Revelation 2:26), at which point we, too, “will shine . . . like stars in the sky” (Philippians 2:15, NIV).

FURTHER READING

Scriptures

- ☐ Revelation 2:18-29 
- ☐ 2 Timothy 2:1-19 
- ☐ 1 Kings 18:17-40 

LifeHopeandTruth.com

- ☐ Thyatira 
- ☐ False Prophets 

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SARDIS: HOW PEACE CAN PRODUCE COMPLACENCY

Jesus has no praise to offer the church in Sardis. This is a message of censure and a demand for immediate change. After introducing Himself as “He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars” (Revelation 3:1), Jesus gets right to the point: “I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but *you are dead*” (verse 1).

Does any other congregation of Revelation receive so harsh an evaluation? Later, Jesus will bring the Laodicean church to task for being “wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked” (verse 17), but even this evaluation seems to pale in comparison to being identified as spiritually *dead*.¹⁷

The concept of a name appears four times in this short letter to Sardis. Jesus begins by revealing that their name is contrary to their true nature. Despite having a *name* of being alive—of being a living part of the Church of God—the Christians in Sardis were the spiritual equivalent of corpses. There was a disconnect between how they appeared to others and who they really were—a disconnect that was going to end very, very poorly if they didn’t take steps to correct it.

Up until Sardis, threats and persecutions figure prominently in the letters to the churches. Ephesus is taking a stand against false teachers. Smyrna is under attack from the synagogue of Satan. Pergamos must contend with the Nicolaitans, and Thyatira must expel the false prophetess Jezebel.

But Sardis . . . in His message to Sardis, Jesus names no spiritual threat. He mentions no looming persecution from agents of the devil. It seems possible that God’s people in Sardis weren’t actively facing any major trials.¹⁸ It’s possible that everything in Sardis was fine.

If that’s the case, then maybe *fine* was part of the problem.

¹⁷ While the church as a whole is described as “dead,” verse 4 indicates that there were some members who had “not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy.”

¹⁸ Archaeological expeditions in Sardis have uncovered a large, ornately decorated fourth-century Jewish synagogue in a prominent, high-traffic area of the city. Although this synagogue can’t tell us too much about the congregation that existed hundreds of years earlier, a synagogue so comfortably integrated into the city suggests that the Jews and gentiles of Sardis got along unusually well. But why?

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“For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh” (2 Corinthians 10:3). As Christians, we must remember that any trial we face in this physical life has its roots in a much bigger spiritual war—one being waged on a battlefield our human senses can’t directly perceive.

Still, the physical challenges can be a helpful reminder of the bigger spiritual picture. When our faith brings us into conflict with our professions, our communities or even our families, it’s easier to remember that an unseen foe is operating behind the scenes, actively attempting to sabotage our focus and weaken our resolve.

When things are calm, it can start to feel like our foe is taking a break.

He isn’t.

That’s not to say that there’s anything wrong with a lack of persecution. We shouldn’t be actively seeking out trials for the sake of trials. But it’s vital to remember that *an absence of physical challenges does not mean the spiritual war is over*.

“For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12). A lack of tangible, physical problems can lull us into a false sense of complacency. It can dull our spiritual self-awareness and leave us distracted and unprepared for Satan’s next tactic.

Whether we are actively facing trials or experiencing a moment of respite, our connection with God and His Word must remain our top priority.

Jesus reminded His disciples, “I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away . . . I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned” (John 15:1-2, 5-6).

Disconnected from the true vine, we quickly become useless, shriveled-up deadwood. This was the case in Sardis. Although the members there are still identified as part of God’s Church (Revelation 3:1), their spiritual disconnection from God has turned them into dead branches. They haven’t yet been broken off and discarded, but that decisive moment is looming.

And so Jesus warns the congregation, “Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God” (verse 2).

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Jesus, who knows the works of *all* His congregations, has not found the works of the members in Sardis “perfect before God.” It’s important to note that the Greek word Jesus used here (*plēroō*, Strong’s #G4137) doesn’t imply the kind of flawless perfection we think about in English, but rather a sense of fullness and completeness.

The members in Sardis had not been doing the works God expected of His people. More to the point, they didn’t seem to be doing anything at all! They were so comfortable, so stagnant, so totally removed from God’s will for them that the congregation was spiritually dead or dying.

What happens to your relationship with God when you aren’t actively defending it from Satan’s attacks? What happens when things are going *well* in your life?

Do you still put time and energy into your fellowship with God? Or is it tempting to start coasting—to get comfortable with the way things are instead of focusing on growing and bearing fruit?

In the hands of the devil, peace can become a tool that accomplishes what outright assault never could: convincing us to lower our guard.

Wake up and watch

The solution for the imperfect (and seemingly abandoned) works of Sardis begins with the command to “be watchful” (Revelation 3:2)—or, as it can also be translated, “wake up!” (NIV).

The members in Sardis aren’t aware that they are in the final throes of a spiritual death. They *aren’t paying attention*. This letter is designed to rouse them from their stupor and stir them to action before they reach a point of no return.

To remedy their inadequate and incomplete works, they must “remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent” (verse 3). Like those in the Ephesian church, the members in Sardis must think back to the beginning—remember the message, the promise and the hope they had received and heard.

Why were they there?

Why are *any* of us here?

Because the gospel of God’s soon-coming Kingdom promises us a future worth fighting for. Nothing in this life is wonderful enough (or terrible enough) to justify taking our eyes off of that promise.

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We must not become so comfortable existing where we are that we forget where we're going.

We must not forget that we are “strangers and pilgrims on the earth” (Hebrews 11:13)—wanderers, foreigners, sojourners who are only passing through this broken and decaying world, journeying toward something far greater:

Our home.

The Kingdom. The future in which Jesus has prepared a place for us.

If an absence of conflict convinces us to start seeing the world around us as our permanent home, then we are in the same danger as the church in Sardis. Jesus warned them, “Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you” (Revelation 3:3).

If they wouldn't watch—if they refused to *wake up* and *pay attention*—then the consequence would be as swift and as disastrous as a thief in the night.

The city of Sardis knew a thing or two about the importance of watchfulness. The town's citadel sat atop 1,500-foot-high rock walls, making it virtually impregnable. And yet “twice in its history the acropolis had fallen to the enemy due to a lack of vigilance on the part of the defenders” (Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, p. 93)—once in 549 B.C. and again in 216 B.C. In both instances, a handful of people were able to exploit an overlooked weakness in the citadel, leaving the entire city open to defeat.

Paul warned the Thessalonians, “For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night. For when they say, ‘Peace and safety!’ then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman. And they shall not escape. But you, brethren, are not in darkness, so that this Day should overtake you as a thief. You are all sons of light and sons of the day. We are not of the night nor of darkness. Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober” (1 Thessalonians 5:2-6).

Like the members in Sardis, we risk “sudden destruction” if we begin to grow comfortable in a state of relative peace and safety. We can never, ever afford to forget that we are engaged in a spiritual war with an enemy who “walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour” (1 Peter 5:8).

With God's help, it's a war we can *and will* win—but that victory is impossible if we settle down and drift off to sleep.

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“But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and the helmet of our hope of salvation. For God has not appointed us to suffer wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thessalonians 5:8-9, BSB).

The church in Sardis needed to wake up and strengthen “the things which remain” (Revelation 3:2). They needed to “remember, then, what you received and heard” (verse 3, ESV). What core doctrines and teachings had they drifted from? What important habits had they discarded? The last remaining vestiges of godly works remaining to their name were at risk of dying off for good. We can shake our heads at them for finding themselves in this condition, or we can heed the warning:

Any Christian can start to get a little drowsy and begin to compromise when the pressure is off.

Names, names, names

Having established that the reputation of Sardis was out of sync with its true identity (its “name”), Jesus continues the theme—this time adding hope into the mix.

In Pergamos and Thyatira, the spiritual problems weren’t fully integrated into the congregation. Jesus used key words like “few,” “them” and “the rest” (Revelation 2:14, 16, 24) to signify clear divisions between the offenders and the congregation at large.

In Sardis, the opposite is true. The congregation at large *is* the offender, and the faithful servants are the exception.

But they’re there. Even in a congregation God calls dead, there are a few seeds of hope. Jesus continues, “You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy” (Revelation 3:4).

Here, the idea of a name becomes not the reputation of a congregation, but the identity of an individual. A small handful of members in Sardis are awake and undefiled. They haven’t polluted their identity by compromising with the world around them, and they haven’t become so comfortable with this life that they’ve lost interest in what matters.

Jesus extends a promise not just to the few, but the entire congregation: “He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels” (verse 5).

Notice the heavy emphasis on names at the end of this letter:

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Those who overcome and keep themselves undefiled will keep their names in the Book of Life and have their names proclaimed by Jesus Christ in the throne room of heaven.

The overcomer's name (identity) is accurately tied to the way he lives his life. There is no discrepancy—no reputation of being alive while actually being dead.

More than once, the book of Revelation revisits this idea of being clothed in white. The bride of Christ is “arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright [white in the KJV], for the fine linen is *the righteous acts of the saints*” (Revelation 19:8). In contrast with the incomplete works of the congregation in Sardis, we see this bright white linen symbolizing acts of righteousness from God's people.

But who makes the linen white and clean?

Not us.

No matter how many righteous things we do, we can't turn a dirty garment into a clean one. We can't clean our own failures and shortcomings.

But Jesus *can*.

Revelation also describes “a great multitude” of people “clothed with white robes,” who have all “washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (Revelation 7:9, 14).

The imagery is meant to be striking—a huge crowd of people, washing their robes in blood. Normally, blood would stain white clothes—but here, the blood of Christ is what *removes* the stains and makes the robes white.

Without the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, we would be dead in our sins (Ephesians 2:1). Without His blood, our names and our garments would be forever stained by our own failures and shortcomings. It is exclusively because of Him that we can hope to walk in white in the first place.

And so these white robes are doing double duty. They remind us of the righteous lifestyle we must be pursuing and striving to emulate, and they remind us that our redemption and salvation from sin cannot possibly be earned. Even the righteousness we have after repentance comes “from God by faith” (Philippians 3:9) and not from ourselves.

We are *given* white garments; we don't *earn* white garments.

A Christian's life is one of striving to do the right things, all the while understanding that no amount of *doing* can earn us the incredible future God has in store for us. “For by grace you have been saved

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through faith, and that not of yourselves; *it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast*” (Ephesians 2:8-9).

And yet, in the very next verse, what do we read? “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus *for good works*, which God prepared beforehand *that we should walk in them*” (verse 10).

The undefiled names in Sardis had kept themselves from the compromise and spiritual death of the congregation around them—they were still *doing* while others were *dying*.¹⁹ As a result, their names will be preserved in the Book of Life and declared before God and His angels.

This understanding of God’s Book of Life stretches at least as far back as Moses (Exodus 32:32).

God made it clear that trading places was not an option: “Whoever has sinned against Me, I will blot *him* out of My book” (verse 33). The members in Sardis would have understood the reference in a modern way as well: “When a criminal’s name was removed from the civic register of an Asiatic town, he lost his citizenship” (Martin Kiddle, *The Revelation of St. John*, p. 47). To have your name removed from God’s Book of Life is to forfeit eternal life as a citizen of God’s Kingdom.

These faithful Christians who were walking worthily before Christ were assured that their place in God’s Kingdom was a certainty. As long as they continued overcoming, their names would remain in the Book. More than that, Jesus promised a special honor: “I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels” (Revelation 3:5).

Surrounded by those who had a name (a reputation) of being alive, these faithful names were reminded that their faithfulness would be rewarded—that their names would remain in the Book of Life, announced by Jesus Christ in the throne room of heaven.

Our name—our reputation—our true identity before Jesus Christ and God the Father—is more precious than all the treasures of this world. “A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, loving favor rather than silver and gold” (Proverbs 22:1).

What’s in a name?

¹⁹ It’s worth noting that Jesus describes these undefiled names as “worthy” (Revelation 3:4) to walk before Him. In his Gospel account, John explains that “as many as received Him, to them He gave the *right* to become children of God” (John 1:12). It can seem almost contradictory, but we are worthy to walk before Christ because He *makes* us worthy to walk before Him.

The remainder of the congregation in Sardis is a reminder that our God-given worthiness is not a blank check that enables us to coast into God’s Kingdom. God’s gift *must* translate into *action* on our part—walking worthily (Colossians 1:10)—but neither should we doubt our worthiness to be part of God’s family. That’s a right we’ve been given by a very loving God. We are worthy because He makes us worthy.

READING 7

SARDIS

Long before Shakespeare was around to ask that question, Jesus answered it for the church in Sardis:

Everything that matters.

FURTHER READING

Scriptures

- ☐ Revelation 3:1-6 [!\[\]\(1759ce020dfc4da577c680b799515414_img.jpg\)](#)
- ☐ Ephesians 2 [!\[\]\(024ac29d17cdecb0a41b469235e3257d_img.jpg\)](#)
- ☐ 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 [!\[\]\(4bba4f9a46080efd35448edd18df0ed0_img.jpg\)](#)

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- ☐ Sardis [!\[\]\(3ee3e71e1113600f60520f9271f68a31_img.jpg\)](#)
- ☐ What Is the Meaning of John 4:24: Worship in Spirit and Truth? [!\[\]\(a80da459097949a3e530a0322afccdff_img.jpg\)](#)

READING 8

PHILADELPHIA: A LITTLE STRENGTH IS MORE THAN ENOUGH

From an outsider's perspective, things weren't looking great for the church in Philadelphia.

They were not a big, influential group. Jesus noted that they had “but little power” (Revelation 3:8, ESV). They faced persecution from the local Jewish synagogue (verse 9), including pressure to abandon Christ's words and deny His name (verse 8).

It was a bleak picture—but only from the outside.

Christ's letter to Philadelphia is one of praise and encouragement. Against all physical odds, this faithful group of believers was holding its ground against forces stronger and more imposing than themselves.

They refused to give up. Jesus had given them an “admonition to endure steadfastly” (verse 10, NET), and they were determined to prove themselves faithful.

After acknowledging what the Christians in Philadelphia had done for the sake of His name, Jesus shifted the focus squarely onto what *He* will do for *them*.

“He who opens and no one shuts”

Most of Christ's letter to the Philadelphian church revolves around the place reserved for them in the New Jerusalem, the coming city of God.

He introduced Himself to Philadelphia as the holy One, the true One—and then, somewhat cryptically, as “He who has the key of David, He who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens” (verse 7). This is the first appellation Jesus uses that doesn't appear in the first chapter of Revelation—and to make sense of it, we need to track down its source.

The idea of “the key of David” goes back centuries to one of Isaiah's prophecies. When Hezekiah (a descendant of King David) was ruling in Jerusalem, a man named Shebna was the steward of Hezekiah's household.

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But Shebna was corrupt, and God was about to replace him with a new steward named Eliakim.²⁰ Eliakim would be charged with the responsibilities Shebna had neglected—to “be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the house of Judah” (Isaiah 22:21).

As Hezekiah’s steward, Eliakim would have both the power and the responsibility to decide who had access to Hezekiah. Shebna appears to have abused this position to acquire prestige and wealth (verses 16, 18), but carrying the key of the house of David was supposed to be a position of service to both the king and his subjects.

God said this about Eliakim and his duty: “The key of the house of David I will lay on his shoulder; so he shall open, and no one shall shut; and he shall shut, and no one shall open” (verse 22).

In speaking similar words to the Philadelphian Christians, Jesus was assuring them—not as a steward of the New Jerusalem, but as its *king*—that He had the power to determine who came in and who stayed out.

Jesus told them, “I have set before you an open door, and no one can shut it; for you have a little strength, have kept My word, and have not denied My name” (Revelation 3:8).

In the context of the key of David, the “open door” that Jesus promised appears to be an entrance to the Kingdom of God. No one in Philadelphia—not the Roman authorities, not the Jews who were unwittingly doing the work of the devil—*no one* had the power to shut that door.

And that’s the lesson for us too. The door to God’s Kingdom is not something *we* have the power to open or shut—but it is something God *chooses* to open for His Church (Luke 12:32). God the Father calls people to Jesus Christ (John 6:44), who also said, “I am the door of the sheep” (John 10:7).

When we make it a priority to grow as Christians (in faith, virtue, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness and love—see 2 Peter 1:5-8), then we “will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (verse 11, NIV).

That’s not a door we can open for ourselves—but once Jesus opens it for us, there’s no one on earth who can shut it.

There is also another aspect to consider of Jesus opening a door. Since the gospel of the Kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness (Matthew 24:14), He is the One to open various doors for that to occur.

²⁰ “Replace” is putting it kindly. Isaiah told Shebna that “the LORD will throw you away violently, O mighty man, and will surely seize you. He will surely turn violently and toss you like a ball” (Isaiah 22:17-18).

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Paul frequently used the concept of an “open door” to refer to opportunities to preach the gospel (1 Corinthians 16:9; 2 Corinthians 2:12; Colossians 4:3). Here, too, these doors are held open not by the strength of the Church, but by the strength of the Son of God. The Church’s commission to “go therefore and make disciples of all the nations” (Matthew 28:19) requires it to step eagerly through these doors whenever and wherever God opens them.

How to lose a crown

Although Jesus had no reprimand for Philadelphia, He did admonish them to heed the messages given to the other churches (Revelation 3:13), and He warned them: “Behold, I am coming quickly! Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown” (verse 11).

The New Testament letters are filled with references to the crown that Jesus Christ will give His faithful servants at His return to earth—a return that is “coming quickly.” It is an “imperishable crown” (1 Corinthians 9:25)—a crown of life, righteousness and glory (James 1:12; 2 Timothy 4:8; 1 Peter 5:4), given to those who will reign alongside Christ during the coming Millennium (Revelation 20:4; compare 5:10).

Jesus carries the key of David. He also carries “the keys of Hades and of Death” (Revelation 1:18). He is the One “who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore” (verse 18).

There is no force in this world—in this *universe*—that can stand between God and His plan for you. “For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38-39).²¹

Well, no force in this universe . . . except one.

You.

You’re the only one with the power to thwart God’s plan for you—not because you’re stronger than Him, but because He gives you a choice.

If you don’t hold fast what you have—if you make the choice to let go of what matters—you *will* lose your crown. (The Greek word for “crown” in Revelation 3:11 is *stephanos*—traditionally, the wreathed crown given to the victor of an athletic contest. We cannot win what we refuse to compete for.)

²¹ In this passage is a beautiful reminder that *every* obstacle we face in this life, up to and including our adversary the devil, is ultimately a “created thing” incapable of overpowering God.

The flipside is that if we *are* doing our part—if we’re taking this seriously, if we’re making the effort to grow and overcome—then our victory is assured. The crown is as good as won. The door that no one can shut is open.

You’re the only one who can stop yourself from walking through it.

Struggling against Satan’s synagogue

Satan’s influence is pervasive in the world of the seven churches. He is behind the false apostles and Nicolaitans plaguing Ephesus, Pergamos and Thyatira. He has his seat of government in Pergamos. He has a “synagogue” doing his bidding in Smyrna and here in Philadelphia.

In fact, the only congregation so far where his meddling isn’t mentioned is Sardis—and that only because the majority of them are already spiritually dead.

In Philadelphia, God’s people are being persecuted by “those of the synagogue of Satan, who say they are Jews²² and are not, but lie” (Revelation 3:9). We don’t know exactly how, but we do have a sense of the intensity of such persecution from the example of some Jewish leaders trying to stamp out the early Christian Church.

In the book of Acts, we find detailed accounts explaining how some Jewish leaders stirred up mobs (Acts 17:5), spread lies (Acts 6:13-14), involved the local authorities (Acts 18:12-13) and even looked for opportunities to execute, imprison or outright murder those who helped spread the gospel (Acts 9:1-2).

Paul described Christians as those who are Jews inwardly (Romans 2:29), so those “who say they are Jews and are not” could also refer to those claiming to be Christian but persecuting the true Church.

Whatever the Philadelphian Christians were experiencing, Jesus commends them for their faithfulness—and explains that a reversal was coming. In time, Jesus promises, “I will make them come and worship before your feet, and to know that I have loved you” (Revelation 3:9).

This was a promise of vindication. Like the apostle Paul, who originally set out to persecute the Church, those who were unknowingly serving Satan would one day be forced to acknowledge that they had in fact been persecuting *God’s* people. They would be made to see that their sworn enemies were beloved by the very God they thought they were serving.

²² It’s also unlikely that they considered themselves to be agents of Satan—but by standing in opposition to Jesus, His gospel message and His disciples, that’s exactly what they had become.

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Shortly before His death, Jesus warned His followers, “They will put you out of the synagogues; yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service” (John 16:2). That time came for the early Church, and Jesus made it clear that such a time would come again—a time of “great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be” (Matthew 24:21).

You and I may live to see those days. And if we do, we can cling to the same divine promise—that one day, we will stand vindicated before our Lord and Savior, and it will be clear that He has loved us.

But that promise doesn’t make the idea of global tribulation particularly easy to swallow. Thankfully, Jesus has another assurance to offer the congregation in Philadelphia: “Because you have kept My command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth” (Revelation 3:10).

This promise carries greater and greater weight the closer we get to the end of this age. The return of Christ will be preceded by “great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be” (Matthew 24:21). It will “come as a snare on all those who dwell on the face of the whole earth” (Luke 21:35), and we’re commanded to “pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man” (verse 36).

Revelation refers to “a place prepared by God” in the wilderness where the Church will be protected for 3½ years during the Tribulation (Revelation 12:14), but it also refers to faithful Christians who will be martyred during the same 3½ years (Revelation 6:9-11; 12:17).

Physical protection is only part of the story. There’s nothing appealing about martyrdom, and Jesus even tells us to pray for escape from the trying times that are coming. But is that the ultimate goal?

The focus of Revelation (and the New Testament as a whole) is not on surviving this *physical* life, but on receiving *eternal* life in God’s Kingdom.

Many Christians are going to die before that happens. But this physical life isn’t what ultimately matters. Whether you and I physically survive until the return of Jesus Christ *isn’t the point*. Our ultimate deliverance will be from the clutches of death and into an eternity spent as the transformed and glorified sons and daughters of God. If we faithfully persevere like the church in Philadelphia, we know that Jesus Christ will be faithful in welcoming us into His Kingdom.

What happens in this physical life is “not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us” (Romans 8:18).

The power of the powerless

The Christians in Philadelphia were a people without a place. Christians were already at odds with the Roman world, which often treated them with contempt (if not outright persecution). Meanwhile, the Jews who rejected Jesus Christ as the promised Messiah saw Christianity as a dangerous heresy that needed to be silenced.

It's no wonder that Jesus describes the Philadelphian congregation as having only a little power. He described His followers as a "little flock" (Luke 12:32). They had no support, no social standing, no influence within the secular or religious worlds they existed in.

But that didn't stop them. Jesus praises them because they "kept My word, and have not denied My name" (Revelation 3:8). The implication is that they didn't just have the *opportunity* to recant their faith in Jesus Christ, but that they were *pressured* to do so.

Who knows what that pressure looked like? We've already seen throughout this Journey that Roman officials and Jewish leaders alike were willing to kill Christians who clung to their faith—and even when it didn't come to that, Christians could expect serious social and economic fallout for their beliefs. Their decision to remain faithful would trigger a cascade of life-altering, impossible-to-ignore consequences. Their lives (and their families' lives) would be changed forever.

Outmatched, overpowered and outmaneuvered, the congregation in Philadelphia refused to waver. They remained faithful to the name of Christ, not knowing what the immediate consequences of that faithfulness would be.

It's not that the congregation in Philadelphia didn't care about those things. They did care. But they cared much more about something else.

End-time Christians seeking to learn from the example of the church in Philadelphia should remember their steadfastness as the end approaches. Regardless of the pressure, the intensity of persecution or the unpopularity it may bring, remain absolutely faithful to God's Word and never deny Christ's name.

God's people rarely find themselves with the physical resources needed to resolve their biggest challenges. Our commitment to obeying God often pits us against forces we're not strong enough to face—and in those moments, our faith will be tested. Will we look at our own inadequacies and back down from the challenge, or will we trust in God and stand our ground?

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David against Goliath.

Elisha against the Syrians.

Moses against Pharaoh.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego against Nebuchadnezzar.

Esther against Haman.

These are some of the Bible's most inspiring stories. What makes them special is that the biblical heroes aren't asking, "Am I powerful enough to win this confrontation?" Instead, they're asking, "What's the right thing to do here? What does *God* expect me to do here?"

And then they do it.

Against a giant, against armies, against kings—the opposition is irrelevant, and God's will is everything. And even when they have access to the resources they need, these heroes of faith still look to God for deliverance rather than their own power: "For I will not trust in my bow, nor shall my sword save me. But *You* [God] have saved us from our enemies, and have put to shame those who hated us" (Psalm 44:6-7).

Even when we feel equipped and prepared to face our challenges, we must remember that our own skill is no guarantee of success. Ultimately, "the salvation of the righteous is from the LORD; He is their strength in the time of trouble" (Psalm 37:39).

But not every inspiring Bible story ends with God's servants living happily ever after in this life. In Hebrews 11, we read about the faithful men and women who made enormous sacrifices and endured miserable trials during their lives.

More importantly, we learn about *why* they made those sacrifices and endured those trials.

They trusted God.

They trusted the future God had shown them.

Abraham left his home and set out as a nomadic wanderer, "for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (Hebrews 11:10). Moses left behind a life of royalty in order to lead God's people through the wilderness, for "he regarded abuse suffered for Christ to be greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for his eyes were fixed on the reward" (Hebrews 11:26, NET).

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Others “were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection. Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented—of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth” (verses 35-38).

These faithful servants did what God expected of them—and that obedience cost them dearly. Their stories don’t end with a spectacular display of divine intervention at the last possible moment.

They end with humiliation.

With unthinkable pain.

With *death*.

If obedience to God doesn’t guarantee our physical protection during trials, and if some of those trials come precisely *because* of our obedience to God, then there’s a question we need to seriously consider:

Why bother?

Why stand up when there’s a good chance someone will beat us down? Why hold our ground when the very action all but ensures we’ll become the victim of a long, drawn-out siege?

There are a few ways to answer that question. One is that the right thing to do is always the right thing to do, regardless of the outcome. Christians are called to stay faithful to God, whether that makes our lives easier or harder.

But here’s another answer:

We bother because there’s something worth bothering *for*. The faithful men and women who came before us had a vision that kept them going. Whether they “escaped the edge of the sword” or “were slain with the sword” (Hebrews 11:34, 37), they were pursuing something they valued even more than their own physical lives:

A better resurrection.

A reward.

A city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.

“These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland. And truly if they had called to mind that country from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for *He has prepared a city for them*” (verses 13-16).

The place we belong

Throughout history, God’s people have been motivated by the promise of a better world.

A world where they *belong*.

That’s why they’re willing to suffer. To wander. To be humiliated, abused and even killed. The homeland God promises them has always been more important to them than any pain or pleasure in this physical life.

They see God’s promises on the horizon, and they spend their lives closing the distance.

Jesus extended those promises to the church in Philadelphia—and, by extension, to us. “He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more. I will write on him the name of My God and the name of the city of My God, the New Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God. And I will write on him My new name” (Revelation 3:12).

For a persecuted congregation with a limited amount of power and influence, Christ’s words are personal and full of meaning. He isn’t just offering them a prize for toughing it out. He isn’t simply offering to compensate them for their trouble.

He’s promising them a *home*.

A pillar is stable. It is strong, it is sturdy, it is immovable. It *belongs*. It’s a permanent fixture, a structural element—not just present in God’s temple, but *part* of God’s temple.

Strabo, a Greek geographer from the first century, called Philadelphia “ever subject to earthquakes. Incessantly the walls of the houses are cracked, different parts of the city being thus affected at

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different times” (Strabo, *Geography*, 13.4.10). But here, Jesus promises that these future pillars of the temple will “go out no more” (Revelation 3:12).

In Greek, the phrase translated “no more” is a double negative—a powerful negation in biblical Greek. The two negatives together emphasize that something is not true in the moment and will never be true in the future. Jesus is saying that once established, these pillars will not be moved—not in that moment and not *ever*.

But that’s not all. Jesus also promises to write three names on the overcomers: “the name of My God,” “the name of the city of My God” and “My new name” (verse 12).

We saw in Sardis that the biblical concept of a name is tied into the concept of an identity. Your name is more than just the specific sounds people make to talk about you. Your name is your reputation—a reflection of *who you are*.

But this idea of having another name written on you signifies a *belonging* and an *alignment*. To carry the name of something or someone else indicates shared values and characteristics—for good or for bad.²³

By writing these three names on the Philadelphian overcomers, Jesus is making it abundantly clear who they are aligned with and where they belong. They will carry the name of God the Father, the name of the New Jerusalem, and what Jesus enigmatically calls “My new name.”

(What exactly this means is up for debate. The Greek allows for translating it as both “My new name” and “a new name which is from Me.”)

Whether this new name will be a further revelation of Jesus Christ’s character or the believer’s, the overall message is clear—for the Philadelphians and for us:

The one who overcomes—who conquers, who emerges victorious—will have a permanent, immovable position within the incredible future God is building. The center point of that future is a city, a *homeland*, a heavenly country where each of us will belong.

Now—and forever.

²³ This is a theme that appears often in Revelation. The woman riding the scarlet beast has a name on her forehead identifying her with “BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH” (Revelation 17:5). The citizens of the beast’s empire receive “the mark, that is, the name of the beast” on their hands or foreheads (Revelation 13:16-17, ESV). In contrast, God’s people are shown with the “Father’s name written on their foreheads” (Revelation 14:1).




It’s also a theme found in the Old Testament. The high priest was to wear a signet on his turban engraved with the words “HOLINESS TO THE LORD” (Exodus 28:36-38). Zechariah prophesied of a time when those same words would be engraved on the cooking pots of Jerusalem (Zechariah 14:20-21). Ezekiel saw a vision of the New Jerusalem being given the name “THE LORD IS THERE” (Ezekiel 48:35). He watched angels place a mark on the foreheads of those who “sigh and cry” over the abominations committed in ancient Israel (Ezekiel 9:2-4).

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FURTHER READING

Scriptures

- ☐ Revelation 3:7-13 
- ☐ Psalm 37 
- ☐ Hebrews 11 

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- ☐ Philadelphia 
- ☐ Seven Keys to Coping With the Trials and Tribulations of Life 

READING 9

LAODICEA: SELF-RELIANCE LEAVES US WORTHLESS

Stability.

That's the dream, isn't it? To reach a point in our lives where we feel secure—firmly rooted, financially stable, equipped to face the inevitable ups and downs of life.

Imagine reaching that point. Imagine feeling good about the routines and habits you've established. Imagine feeling like you're in a good place both spiritually and physically—and then discovering a letter from Jesus Christ in your mailbox.

There are no compliments in this letter. No words of praise or commendation. In fact, Jesus has *nothing positive to say about you at all*. As you read through His words, this seems to be the gist of His overall message:

You are failing in every imaginable way.

You don't see that, of course. You're so blinded with self-deception that you can't see the wretched, pitiful state you're existing in.

The way you live makes Me feel sick. I love you, so I urge you to make some drastic changes now.

The hardest thing about that letter would probably be *believing* it. Everything about it flies in the face of your own experience. *Wretched? Pitiful?* Things are going so well! How could Jesus possibly be right?

But then—how could the Son of God possibly be *wrong*?

That was the situation facing the congregation in Laodicea.

They lived in a city of incredible wealth. Archaeological finds have revealed that Laodicea was a large town marked by sophisticated, expensive buildings. Located at an important junction on an important trading route, the city became both an economic powerhouse and a center for banking. When an earthquake caused extreme damage to multiple towns in A.D. 60, Laodicea refused the imperial aid offered by Rome, instead choosing to rebuild using its own finances.

That wealth seems to have extended to God's people as well.

As early as 62 B.C., we have a record of Rome seizing the Laodicean Jews' annual contribution to the temple in Jerusalem: 20 pounds of gold. It was "a substantial sum, potentially the equivalent of the offering of 7,500 Jewish freemen" (*Lexham Geographic Commentary on Acts Through Revelation*, p. 689).

By the end of the first century, this extensive wealth was deeply connected with the warning message the Laodicean Christians received from Jesus Christ: "You say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing'" (Revelation 3:17).

That's a great position to be in—if it's true.

But it's *not* true.

It *can't* be.

As imperfect humans, anytime we start to believe that we "have need of nothing," we're falling into a dangerous trap. We're forgetting how fickle material possessions can be. We're forgetting how much we need God's continued mercy and blessings.

As Paul warned the Corinthians, "Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Corinthians 10:12).

Standing is important. Paul also warned the Ephesians to "stand therefore" (Ephesians 6:14) in their battle against Satan. The danger comes when we forget about the God who gives us the *strength* to stand in the first place.

When we convince ourselves that we're standing on our own—standing because of *our* strength, *our* cleverness, *our* resourcefulness—that's when we begin to fall.

And the Laodiceans were plummeting.

The God of Amen

But before Jesus confronts the Laodiceans with their own self-delusion, He lays out His credentials. In this final message to the seven churches, Jesus highlights His ability to see all things from a perfect, unclouded perspective. What He has to say to His people will be hard to hear (and harder to accept as true), but no one else in the universe is better equipped to see the Laodiceans as they truly are.

Not even the Laodiceans themselves.

Jesus is, first of all, “the Amen” (Revelation 3:14). This is a title reaching all the way back to the prophet Isaiah, who makes a reference to “the God of truth” (Isaiah 65:16)—or more literally, “the God of Amen.”

The Hebrew word *’āmēn* (Strong’s #H543) is nearly identical to the Greek word *amēn* (Strong’s #G281), which is nearly identical to our modern-day *amen*. But what does it mean?

In the Old Testament, “amen” was a traditional response to blessings, cursings, commands and songs of praise. The Hebrew word itself comes from a root word that describes reliability, faithfulness, permanence and trustworthiness. To say “amen” was to confirm something as true and binding—or else petition God to *make* it true and binding.

The *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* describes *amen* as “an acknowledgment that the divine word is an active force: May it happen in just this way” (Vol. 1, p. 321).

When the Hebrew word passed into Greek, this sense of truth and affirmation came along with it. In the Gospel accounts, when Jesus told His audience, “Assuredly, I say to you,” He was actually saying, “Amen, I say to you” (see Matthew 5:18, 26; 6:2, 5, 16; 8:10, etc.). The word was a promise to anyone listening: what’s coming is true, faithful and dependable.

And this is the identity He uses to address the church in Laodicea.

The Amen.

The affirmation of all things true. The knower of reality. The promise of all that is coming.

This emphasis is only reinforced by His next title: “the Faithful and True Witness” (Revelation 3:14).

What Jesus claims to have seen, He *has* seen. His reports are accurate and reliable. Beyond the shadow of a doubt, He can be trusted.

And what has the Faithful and True Witness seen?

Everything.

Jesus is not just the Amen, but “the Beginning of the creation of God” (verse 14). This title uses a nuanced Greek word that might be better translated as “the *originator* of God’s creation” (Christian Standard Bible) or “the *ruler* of God’s creation” (NIV).

God the Father created all things through the Word, who became Jesus Christ: “All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made” (John 1:3). God is the originator of physical life as we know it. And now, as the resurrected Son of God, Jesus is seated beside the Father “in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come” (Ephesians 1:20-21, ESV).

God created and rules the universe in which we exist. As Paul affirmed, “In Him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). No one else could be better situated to accurately see and convey the truth in any given circumstance.

So when Jesus tells us we’ve lost touch with reality, it’s time to put aside our perceptions and *listen*.

The lukewarm Christian

The first problem Jesus highlights in Laodicea is a matter of temperature. The Christians there, He says, are lukewarm.

It’s clearly a problem. He threatens, “Because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth” (Revelation 3:16). As in Ephesus, Jesus is threatening to sever His connection with the Laodicean Christians unless something significant changes.

But what does it *mean* to be lukewarm?

For that matter, what does it mean to be hot or cold?

To our modern ears, this might sound like a spectrum of spiritual intensity: To be hot is to be on fire for God’s truth; to be cold is to be either openly hostile (or at least entirely indifferent) toward that truth.

That would put a lukewarm Christian somewhere in the middle—not a passionate supporter, but not a frigid opponent either. It would describe a kind of half-hearted Christianity, tepid and entirely unremarkable.

Except . . . Jesus threatens to vomit²⁴ the Laodiceans out of His mouth *specifically because* they are neither cold *nor* hot. More than that, Jesus specifically expresses a desire that the Laodiceans would align themselves with *either extreme*: “I wish you were either cold or hot!” (verse 15, NET).

²⁴ The Greek word translated “vomit” is intended to be coarse and shocking—a different word exists for the less intense act of spitting.

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If all Christians should be striving toward one end of that spectrum, why didn't Jesus simply say, "I wish you were hot"? If being cold means being cut off from God—living in sinful opposition to His way of life—why would He wish for the Laodiceans to be cold? How could He possibly choose to keep that kind of "coldness" in His mouth while threatening to vomit out lukewarm Christians?

It seems this is a different metaphor, not measuring spiritual intensity but usefulness. According to Jesus, cold and hot are *both* good. These are temperatures He will not vomit out. Lukewarm—specifically and exclusively—is the problematic temperature.

Why? It's hard to be certain, but there are a few possibilities. The Romans, like most of us, had a preference for cold drinks when it was hot and for hot drinks when it was cold.²⁵ Also, nearby, the towns of Colossae and Hierapolis were well-known for their access to cold and hot springs, respectively.²⁶

Whatever the exact nature of the metaphor, it appears that hot and cold are both desirable and useful—while lukewarm is repulsive to the point of inducing vomiting.

Now, does God *want* half-hearted, tepid Christianity? Of course not. James talks about a faith that produces works (James 2:17-18). Jesus set the example of being consumed by zeal for the house of God (John 2:17). Paul praised the Corinthians for the positive impact their zeal had on fellow Christians (2 Corinthians 9:2).

But Jesus isn't calling the Laodiceans to task for a lack of passion—He's calling them to task for going entirely off the rails *without even noticing*.

Remember, the whole metaphor is tied to the *works* of the Laodicean congregation—their deeds and their actions. When we fit all the puzzle pieces together, it becomes clear that a lukewarm Christian is a Christian whose lifestyle is both useless and repulsive in the eyes of God. Far more serious than simply lacking passion, a lukewarm Christian is the source of such offensive deeds that he is at risk of being forcibly vomited out of the Body of Christ.

But how does a disciple of God end up in that condition? And more importantly, what can we *do* about it?

²⁵ We have at least one reference to a homeowner complaining about a water supply that was too warm for drinking and too cold for washing—although his servants were happy to use it for either purpose (Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, 3.13.3).

²⁶ This is an interesting possibility, but it's an awkward fit with Christ's words. The hot springs in Hierapolis were used for bathing and medicinal purposes, not drinking.

Wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked

The city that was wealthy enough to rebuild itself after a devastating earthquake was a city that didn't see itself as needing any outside help. That attitude bled over into the church as well.

But Jesus could see what the Laodiceans could not. His people were in the thralls of self-deception. And so He confronts them with five adjectives intended to jar them out of their fantasy world:

"You are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked" (verse 17, ESV).

They aren't just a little out of touch with reality—they're entirely disconnected from it.

The Greek word translated "wretched" refers to a state of active suffering. The Laodiceans are so disconnected from the reality of their spiritual condition, *they don't even realize they're hurting*. They think they're the poster children for success, but in reality, they're pathetic to the point of evoking pity.

The wealth they think they have—that they *do* have, physically—doesn't translate at all in a spiritual sense. They are spiritually poor the way Smyrna is physically poor—totally, completely destitute.

And they can't see it. They're blind to the fact that, spiritually, they're walking around in naked shame.

The Laodiceans had a choice to make.

It's a choice we all have to make:

Do we trust what God sees—or what we see?

There's something unnerving about being presented with evidence of our own spiritual blindness. It's only natural to assume we're seeing ourselves clearly—but what happens when we aren't?

Jesus probably won't personally send you a letter in moments like that—but He might direct your attention to a corrective passage of Scripture that may as well have your name on it. He might guide a friend (or even an enemy) to point out the disconnect between the way we see ourselves and the way we're actually living.²⁷ He might even place us in a difficult situation where our own snap decisions reveal a misalignment between our ideals and our actions.

²⁷ Friend or foe, it's important to remember that not everyone who makes such an accusation is acting on behalf of God. They might not even be seeing clearly themselves! Still, when someone brings a perceived disconnect to our attention, it's worth taking the time to consider it seriously and carefully.

In these moments, God tells us what He told the Laodiceans: “You think you’re this, but you’re actually that.” And in those moments, our spiritual survival depends on whether or not we can tell God, “I trust Your words more than my own eyes.”

It requires humility. It requires perspective.

It requires placing our relationship with God above anything we have in this life—or, more accurately, anything we *think* we have.

The way forward

Jesus spends more time rebuking the Laodiceans than any of the other churches in Revelation, and their rebuke is arguably the most severe.²⁸

But He hasn’t written the Laodiceans off. He hasn’t written *any* of us off. His correction comes from a place of love—from a desire to see us succeed. The Laodiceans are still His people, and He still offers them a way forward:

“I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see” (Revelation 3:18).

The Laodiceans were wretched and pitiable because, spiritually, they were poor, blind and naked. The solution was to acquire true spiritual wealth, spiritual sight and spiritual clothing.

These instructions would have really struck a nerve in Laodicea—a wealthy financial center full of gold, renowned for exporting expensive garments made from the long black wool of its local sheep, and with ready access to eye salves from premiere medical schools.

Jesus was driving home the point:

What you have isn’t enough.

But I can help.

²⁸ Sure, Sardis might be spiritually dead, but Laodicea is entirely oblivious to its condition. Coming back from the brink of death can be less of a feat than admitting one has been self-deceived.

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Let's start with the gold, because gold seemed to be at the root of the Laodicean rebuke: "You say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing.'"

But the biggest mistake we can make when studying this letter to Laodicea is assuming that this is a problem exclusively affecting rich people.

It's not.

The problem wasn't how much wealth the Laodiceans had—it was *how they saw that wealth*.

Paul famously warned Timothy about money, but that warning has become warped over the years. It's often repeated as, "Money is the root of all evil," but that's not what Paul said.

Here's the quote in context:

"Those who *desire* to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. For *the love of money* is a root of all *kinds* of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows" (1 Timothy 6:9-10).

The *love* of money. The *desire* to be rich. Not the money itself, but the desire to have it.

It really doesn't matter if we're rich or if we're poor—when we see money as the answer to our problems and the ultimate source of stability, we fall into the same trap as the Laodiceans.

There is no earthly price tag we could attach to the true riches that come from God. They are "hidden treasures" (Proverbs 2:4) and "more precious than rubies" (Proverbs 3:15).

When Jesus asked the disciples if they wanted to give up and walk away from following Him, Peter responded, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68). There is nothing more precious in this life than the promises and truths that come from God's inspired Word.

But how are we supposed to purchase gold we can't afford?

Through God's incredible kindness and mercy: "He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?" (Romans 8:32). And again: "Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat. Yes, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price" (Isaiah 55:1).

No amount of this world's gold can compare with the spiritual treasure God is eager to give to those who overcome.

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The Laodiceans must also cover their nakedness by putting on white garments—a type of clothing connected with “the righteous acts of the saints” (Revelation 19:8) and “the blood of the Lamb” (Revelation 7:14).

To be without these garments is to live in naked shame—opposed to God and in a defiled state. We can’t put on white garments if we aren’t living the way God commands us to live (the righteous acts of the saints)—and we can’t be clean without the sacrifice that *makes* us clean (the blood of the Lamb).

And what about their blindness?

Seeing what God sees doesn’t come naturally. “‘Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him.’ But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit” (1 Corinthians 2:9).

To see what God sees, we must be connected with His Spirit—paying close attention to the moments when God shows us things that conflict with our own perception.

And now everything has come full circle. The Laodiceans’ greatest impairment is their inability to see their true spiritual state. Their own eyes are failing them. To make any progress in overcoming, they must first trust Christ’s scathing indictment—one that flies in the face of everything they believe to be true.

Without these changes, Laodicea would remain in a wretched, pitiable state. They would remain *lukewarm*.

Remember, He was calling them lukewarm because their Christianity was useless to the point of being both distasteful and offensive. Unless they changed their ways, there was nothing left for Jesus to do but vomit them out in disgust.

Even more important to remember: their warning is *our* warning too.

Standing at the door

Jesus levels harsh and extensive criticisms at Laodicea—but He follows that up with a tender reminder: “As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent” (Revelation 3:19).

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To paraphrase: “The very fact that I’m calling you out on this is proof that *I still love you*. I want to see you succeed.”

Jesus is not standing aloof, issuing ultimatums from a distance. “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me” (verse 20).

God wants a close, personal relationship with us, and He frames it in the context of two friends sharing a meal together. But the responsibility of getting up and opening the door—responding to the knock—rests with each of us.

Distasteful as the Laodicean congregation was to Jesus Christ in this moment—and as much as they were in legitimate spiritual danger—He still saw them as His people.

As part of His *Church*.




He wasn’t content to let them slip into a spiritual death. He wanted to *rescue* them.

These were Christians with the capacity to emerge victorious. Their survival depended on passionate, eager repentance and a return to God—but they were hardly a lost cause. “To the one who conquers I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne” (verse 21, CSB).

No matter *our own* current spiritual state—even if we are lukewarm to the point of being useless—our older Brother and Savior calls on us to overcome, to *conquer*, and to sit beside Him as fellow rulers of the creation of God.

FURTHER READING

Scriptures

- ☐ Revelation 3:14-22 
- ☐ 1 Timothy 6:3-18 
- ☐ Proverbs 3:1-26 

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- ☐ Laodicea 
- ☐ Religious Zeal: The Bad and the Good 

READING 10

HE WHO HAS AN EAR TO HEAR: THE CONGREGATIONAL MOSAIC

If we only ever view these seven letters as historical curiosities—interesting fragments of the past—then we rob ourselves of their greatest value.

These are messages from the resurrected Son of God, delivered to *real* Christians living *real* lives. Each congregation was solemnly charged with the same responsibility: “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22).

No message was intended for a single congregation in isolation. Understanding those congregations can help us better understand the overall messages, but we must never forget that *the messages are for us*.

Two millennia later, God’s Spirit still has something to say to His Church, and if our place within that Church means anything to us, then we *must* listen.

The order of the seven churches appears to correspond to an established delivery route that a messenger could have traveled to share the contents of Revelation with God’s people in Asia Minor. Those Christians would have all heard the *entire* book of Revelation—not just the few verses addressed to their congregation.

Every follower of Jesus Christ—from those who gathered to hear these words for the first time two millennia ago, all the way to those of us reading them today—each of us is commanded to *hear*. To *listen*.

And ultimately, to *act* and *obey*.

So. What have we heard on this Journey?

As we look back on the nine readings exploring these seven ancient congregations, we’re going to use a different lens. This time, rather than focusing on what Christ’s words meant to each individual congregation—what they were struggling with, where they were succeeding—we’re going to take all those pieces and assemble a mosaic.

Seven churches received a glimpse of the majesty and character of Jesus Christ. What does it look like when we put all those glimpses together? What happens when we put together all the warnings, all the encouragements, all the promises to the overcomers?

What we get is a bigger picture—a beautiful picture of the Savior who loves us, what He expects to see in our lives, what He refuses to accept in our lives, and what God has in store for us if we refuse to compromise with the pervasive influence of Satan the devil.

Thus says the LORD

In Reading 2, we saw how each letter opened with an antiquated Greek phrase that gave the divine proclamation extra weight and gravitas. It was the same phrase used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament whenever a prophet brought a message from God:

“Thus says the LORD.”

In Revelation, these seven “thus says” introductions offer us seven different perspectives of Jesus Christ, the “KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS” (Revelation 19:16). Taken together, these seven views paint us an awe-inspiring portrait of our Savior and Redeemer, who is “able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them” (Hebrews 7:25).

Here’s the portrait:

- In the letter to Ephesus, we see “He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands” (Revelation 2:1).
- In the letter to Smyrna, we see “the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life” (verse 8).
- In the letter to Pergamos, we see “He who has the sharp two-edged sword” (verse 12).
- In the letter to Thyatira, we see “the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet like fine brass” (verse 18).
- In the letter to Sardis, we see “He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars” (Revelation 3:1).
- In the letter to Philadelphia, we see “He who is holy, He who is true, ‘He who has the key of David, He who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens’” (verse 7).
- In the letter to Laodicea, we see “the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God” (verse 14).

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This portrait draws from and complements the vision of Christ that John received at the beginning of Revelation: “I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the seven lampstands One like the Son of Man, clothed with a garment down to the feet and girded about the chest with a golden band. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and His eyes like a flame of fire; His feet were like fine brass, as if refined in a furnace, and His voice as the sound of many waters; He had in His right hand seven stars, out of His mouth went a sharp two-edged sword, and His countenance was like the sun shining in its strength. And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as dead. But He laid His right hand on me, saying to me, ‘Do not be afraid; I am the First and the Last. I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and of Death’” (Revelation 1:12-18).

This is Jesus, in all His glory—or at least as much of His glory as our tiny human minds can comprehend. He came to earth as a man, but this is no mortal we’re being shown.

The face of Jesus Christ shines like the sun. He radiates *light*—eyes like a flame of fire, feet that shine like flashing brass, wearing a golden sash, with hair as brilliant as snow. In His hand He holds the seven stars of the churches, and His voice thunders like the roar of a waterfall.

Everything about Him is brightness and majesty and splendor. This is the divine Being who has something to say to His churches.

And He *knows* those congregations—better than anyone else ever could. Better than the congregations know themselves.

He is not a God who stands at a distance. He walks in the midst of the lampstands, He holds the stars, His fiery eyes search deeper than any human can see, “piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow,” allowing Him to be “a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12).

He is not fooled by facades and pretense—He is the holy One, the true One, the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness. He sees the truth and speaks it; He is honest, just and undefiled by wickedness.

From this perfect and unclouded perspective, He wields all authority and power. He is the First and the Last, the ruler of all God’s creation, wielding the sharp two-edged sword, carrying the key of David alongside the keys of Hades and Death. Nothing He shuts can be opened, nothing He opens can be shut—and He is holding open a door for us.

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?” asked the apostle Paul. “Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?” (Romans 8:35).

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And the answers are “no one” and “no.”

No force in heaven above or earth below—“neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (verses 38-39, ESV).

Nothing.

Not even death. Death already tried to cut us off from Christ.

Death failed.

God the Father “raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it” (Acts 2:24, ESV).

Jesus is the One who lives and was dead and will continue living forever.

Many Christians in the seven churches faced either the possibility or the *certainty* of death because of their faithful obedience to Jesus Christ. Many Christians throughout time have faced the same thing—as will many Christians who live during the events of the Great Tribulation prophesied in Revelation.

But death couldn’t hold Jesus. Death could not separate Him from us, and it cannot separate us from Him. Quite the opposite—*through* death, Jesus was able to “destroy [render powerless] him who had the power of death, that is, the devil” (Hebrews 2:14).

Satan looms menacingly behind the seven churches of Revelation, but the truth is, his power is shattered. He can’t undo what Jesus has already done, and he can’t stop what Jesus is in the process of doing. Our Savior has already trampled the serpent, and He invites us to join in the victory.

This is the Son of God who commands us to hear what He has to say.

A portrait of the overcomer

When we take a step back and view the seven churches as seven pieces of the same puzzle, what we get is a snapshot of what it looks like to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

We don’t all face the same exact problems in the same exact environment.

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In these two chapters of Revelation, we see seven different congregations facing a variety of challenges. Some Christians are succeeding. Some are failing.

Most are somewhere in between.

Maybe that's where you are too.

As we read through these seven letters, we can't afford to forget that these are seven letters to *God's people*.

They are not perfect. Some of them are so close to the edge that they're in real danger of losing everything that matters. And yet each letter is still specifically addressed to a church—an *ekklēsia* or assembly of God's called and chosen people.

God is not quick to write off His people. Even in the spiritually dead congregation of Sardis or the wildly delusional congregation of Laodicea, Jesus comes with a stern warning that ultimately ends in a message of hope for those willing to overcome.

And that's the other thing we can't afford to forget.

From Ephesus to Laodicea, Jesus Christ comes to His people with the same expectation:

Overcome.

Conquer.

Emerge from this spiritual battle as *victors*.

Just *being* God's people isn't good enough. There has to be forward momentum. There has to be effort. There has to be change and improvement. And the Church has to be doing the work Jesus Christ directs in preaching the gospel of the Kingdom of God (Matthew 24:14; Mark 16:15).

Jesus told a parable about a fig tree that went years without producing fruit. It took up space and used up resources without doing anything useful. And while the vinedresser and the owner of the vineyard were ultimately patient with the tree, giving it every opportunity to succeed, the parable ends with a reminder that God's patience is not an invitation to drag our feet:

"Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down" (Luke 13:8-9, ESV).

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No matter the trial, no matter the environment, God the Father and Jesus Christ are looking for us to produce fruit. And fruit is what we get when we are living God's way of life, tied into His Spirit, allowing Him to take our human nature and reshape it more and more in His image:

"The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23). As mere human beings, it's beyond our ability to excel perfectly in all these things, at all times. But these traits perfectly describe who God is—and who He wants to help *us* become.

There are warnings here about what that looks like—and what it *doesn't* look like.

- The Ephesians show us the danger of becoming divorced from the love that we had at first—of allowing our love for God and our brethren to melt away.
- The members in Pergamos show us the danger of not protecting the truth—of allowing destructive teachings to gain a foothold within the congregation.
- The brethren in Thyatira show us the danger of making room for those same destructive teachings to put down roots and even flourish—of allowing pagan practices to take on a Christian veneer and pose as acceptable before God.
- The members in Sardis show us the danger of falling asleep at the wheel—of allowing ourselves to look the part while remaining spiritually hollow and disconnected from God.
- The Laodiceans show us the danger of going one step further and convincing ourselves that we're self-sufficient—of allowing ourselves to see God's blessings as signs of our own spiritual uprightness, slowly edging God out of the picture altogether.

And yet . . .

- The Ephesians were praised for their hard labor and patient endurance, coupled with a refusal to tolerate wickedness and impostors.
- The members in Smyrna were praised for their spiritual wealth in spite of crushing poverty and persecution.
- The brethren in Pergamos were praised for refusing to deny the name of Christ, even when their lives were on the line.
- The members in Thyatira were praised for growing in love, faith, service and patient endurance.
- The Philadelphians were praised for remaining faithful despite having relatively little strength.

The congregations that received a mixture of both praise and censure are a reminder that real life can be complicated and messy.

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The members in Thyatira, for example, were allowing a false prophetess to spread heresy while integrating herself into a congregation of God's people—but they had also been growing in key spiritual areas. The failure didn't cancel out the success—but at the same time, the failure couldn't be allowed to continue. Christ was coming to deal with Jezebel, and anyone who refused to repent and step away would share in her punishment.

The bad things need to go. The good things need to stay. Trying to hang onto both will destroy us.

By looking at all of the seven churches, we get a clearer picture of what God expects from His people.

The word for “patient endurance” (*hypomonē*, Strong's #G5281) shows up four times in these two chapters. This kind of patience isn't just about biding our time and twiddling our thumbs—it's about *enduring* the trials and difficulties that exist between us and the thing we're waiting for.

Christians must be prepared to endure—to stand strong against the onslaughts of Satan the devil. In these letters, we see Satan launching both internal and external attacks against God's people.

While the Ephesians are busy guarding against heresy, they step away from their first love.

While the members in Pergamos and Thyatira are busy growing spiritually, they leave room for heresy to take root.

Satan is always looking for the cracks in our armor—for the weak spots in our defenses. He lured the members in Sardis into a spiritual coma, and he sold the Laodiceans the lie of self-sufficiency. And when those tactics don't work, he can always resort to brute force—he hammered the brethren in Smyrna and Pergamos and Philadelphia with prolonged persecution and even death.

The “synagogue of Satan” makes repeated appearances in these letters, stirring up local authorities and public opinion against the Church of God, while the Nicolaitans and their philosophy of compromise seem determined to infect the Church from within.

Remember, by the early second century, Roman officials were actively executing Christians who refused to recant their faith and curse Christ. Pliny the Younger wrote to Emperor Trajan of his efforts to squash the fledgling religion:

“I interrogated them whether they were Christians; if they confessed it I repeated the question twice again, adding the threat of capital punishment; if they still persevered, I ordered them to be executed . . . Those who denied they were, or had ever been, Christians, who repeated after me an invocation to the gods, and offered

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adoration, with wine and frankincense, to your image, which I had ordered to be brought for that purpose, together with those of the gods, and who finally cursed Christ (none of which acts, it is said, those who are really Christians can be forced into performing) these I thought it proper to discharge” (*Epistulae* X.96).

And even when their lives weren’t on the line, rejecting the gods of the Roman world around them—refusing to participate in the communal sacrifices of trade guilds and general society—meant social ostracization and professional ruin.

It would have been so easy to just give up.

To stop fighting.

To stop *trying*.

But that’s not what overcomers do.

Overcomers *endure*.

When Satan starts applying pressure from within or without, overcomers plant their feet and, with God’s help, hold their ground. When Satan tries to lull them into a state of complacency or distraction, they refocus on God’s Word.

And when Jesus Christ tells them to repent and make a course correction, they do.

They reclaim their lost love by doing the first works.

They remain faithful in the face of tribulation.

They push back against false teachings and false teachers.

They refuse to compromise their spiritual life just to make their physical life easier.

They live the life God called them to live, in public and in private.

They draw on God’s strength when times get tough, not relying on their own.

They look to God for spiritual wealth, clothing and perspective.

And when they fail in these things—because they are human and they will fail—they repent and try again. They do this, over and over and over again, until either their physical lives end or Jesus Christ returns.

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And *when* Jesus Christ returns . . . they will claim His promises.

To the one who overcomes

The same God who calls us to be overcomers—who lays out a road map showing us *what* to overcome and *how*—that same God also paints us a vivid picture of the future that’s waiting for us when we *do* overcome.

Every letter closes with the same two things: a promise to “him who overcomes” and a command to “hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

The command is for all of us—but so are the promises. The individual promises don’t belong to individual congregations, but to every Christian—past, present and future.

Here is what Jesus promises to the one who overcomes:

- Access to the tree of life in the “Paradise of God” (Revelation 2:7).
- Immunity from the second death (verse 11).
- The hidden manna (verse 17).
- A white stone with a new name (verse 17).
- Power over the nations (verse 26).
- The morning star (verse 28).
- White garments (Revelation 3:5).
- A record in the Book of Life, to be announced before God and the angels (verse 5).
- Placement as a pillar in the temple of God (verse 12).
- An inscription with the names of God the Father, the New Jerusalem, and a new name²⁹ (verse 12).
- Becoming corulers on the throne of Christ (verse 21).

As we’ve seen throughout this Journey, Christ’s promises likely carried special meaning for the congregations receiving them. The Philadelphians with their little strength would have treasured the promise of becoming pillars in God’s temple, and the members in Smyrna facing prison and death would have found peace in the promise of protection from the second death.

But these promises aren’t any less valuable today.

²⁹ As noted in Reading 8, it’s unclear if the Greek refers to a new name *for* Christ or a new name *from* Christ.

READING 10

HE WHO HAS AN EAR TO HEAR

Two millennia later, they still show us a future worth living for—and, if it comes to it, worth dying for.

We started this Journey by discussing the world of the seven churches, and we found that even though a lot has changed, many of the pressures and challenges Christians face *haven't* changed. We still live in a world ruled by a fallen angel who wants to wear us down or just simply distract us until we give up on reaching the finish line. And he does not want the good news of Jesus' return to continue being spread by God's Church as Christ commissioned (Matthew 24:14).

Here, at the end of this Journey, the promises to the overcomers ought to shift our focus away from the world of the seven churches—away from *our* world—and look ahead to a time when this “present evil age” (Galatians 1:4) and its ruler will be a thing of the past.

The first heaven and the first earth—the existence we know—will one day pass away, to be replaced by “a new heaven and a new earth” (Revelation 21:1). And as the New Jerusalem descends to that new earth, a loud voice will cry out:

“Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away” (verses 3-4).

No more death.

No more sorrow.

No more crying.

No more pain.

And we—God's Church—will serve as pillars in this new world, inscribed with the name of our God and His holy city, our new names forever preserved in the Book of Life, adorned in the shining white robes of righteousness that only the blood of Christ can provide for us, knowing that eternity awaits us as sons and daughters of God.

What the Church needed to hear two millennia ago, it still needs to hear today.

These messages—these visions of our Savior, these warnings about what Christianity should and shouldn't be, these promises about the future that's waiting for the one who listens and overcomes—these words are for *you*.

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

THE SEVEN CHURCHES OF REVELATION

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FURTHER READING

Scriptures

- ☐ Revelation 2–3 [↗](#)
- ☐ Revelation 21–22 [↗](#)

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- ☐ Seek First the Kingdom of God [↗](#)
- ☐ God’s Plan [↗](#)

What next?

The Kingdom is the goal—the challenge is getting there. Study the equipment God provides us in “**The Armor of God**” Journey, learn more about the spiritual traits God is helping us to cultivate in “**The Fruit of the Spirit**” Journey, or brush up on how God’s holy days chart out the pathway to the Kingdom in Journey 3: “**The Plan of God.**”