

INTRODUCTION TO CHAPTERS 2 & 3

Chapters 2 and 3 contain seven letters addressed specifically to the seven churches in Asia. Although each letter is directed to a specific church, we must realize that those lessons are for us today just as each epistle, although addressed to a specific church or group of people, is for us today. The number “7” is the number of divine completeness showing that these lessons are for all churches of all ages. We should study the criticisms and commendations given to those seven churches and strive to apply the lessons to our individual congregations.

Each of these letters begins with a portion of the symbolism used in chapter 1 to describe Christ. This shows the contents of these letters are from Jesus Christ—not from some man. The apostle John wrote these letters as they were given to him by divine revelation from Jesus Christ. This great book is definitely not the work of man, and the symbols used herein were not developed by man. This book comes to us from Jesus Christ and is applicable to all people of all ages.

“ANGELS OF THE CHURCHES”

Each of these seven letters is addressed to the angel of that specific church. There are several ideas concerning the meaning of the angel of the church, but as discussed in 1:20, the angel represents those whom Christ holds in his right hand—Christians. Therefore, each letter is addressed to all Christians who worship at these specific congregations. The problem some would have with this interpretation is understanding how it could be possible to describe Christians as angels. It might help to solve this problem by looking at how heaven is used symbolically in the Bible. In Eph. 2:6, Paul said that God has “made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus.” These heavenly places are a reference to the church. Rev. 12:12 uses this same symbolism to describe the spiritual dwelling place of Christians here on earth as heaven. With this in mind, it is not difficult to understand how angels could be used symbolically to represent Christians. Just as angels are literally dwelling in heaven with God today, we are figuratively dwelling in God’s heavenly place, the church, here on earth. Therefore, the angels of the churches are those Christians who are dwelling in God’s spiritual place on earth—the church.

“OVERCOME”

One important concept in interpreting Revelation is understanding what it means to “overcome.” Many writers emphasize this term by using it as the theme of the entire book. There can be little doubt that Revelation was written to warn us about many things that will test our faith. It is also written to encourage us to remain faithful through these trials and tribulations, and by so doing, we will be rewarded with an eternal home in heaven. When this happens, those who have remained faithful will have obviously “overcome” all things because all of our trials will have ceased at that time. Many commentators believe that this is the meaning of the term “overcome” throughout Revelation.

Although this is definitely our final overcoming of all things, using this term strictly in this manner puts mankind into the eternal realm before he can overcome. It also takes away the meaning of Revelation for Christians today and makes us look entirely to eternity for its fulfillment. This concept should become very clear as you study chapters 21 and 22, which many have interpreted for years as a description of heaven, but actually, it is a figurative description of the church. Then, how is the term “overcome” used in Revelation? To determine this we must

examine how this term is used elsewhere in the New Testament. In 1 Jn. 5:3-5, we read, “For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous. For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith. Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God?” To overcome the world is to separate oneself from a world of sin by becoming obedient to God’s commands. In this passage we are given three ways of overcoming the world. They are: (1) being born of God, (2) by our faith, and (3) by believing that Jesus is the Son of God. All three of these statements are obviously different ways of saying the same thing. When we believe that Jesus is the Son of God, have faith in him, and are born again by baptism, we “overcome” this world of sin. We have our sins forgiven and enter into that holy city of God, which is his church.

In 1 Jn. 4:3, those who do not believe that Jesus came to earth in a fleshly form are called the “spirit of antichrist.” Then, 1 Jn. 4:5 says they are “of the world.” This refers to their being outside of Christ or his church and living in a world of sin. In 1 Jn. 4:4, we read that those who are of God (Christians) have already “overcome them.”

Each of the letters to the seven churches contains a promise to those who “overcome.” To properly understand these promises, it is first necessary to understand certain symbols used throughout Revelation because each promise is tied directly to some type of symbolism. The meaning of these symbols remains constant throughout the book. Therefore, if we study a symbol in one passage, it will also give us an insight into its usage in other passages. We recommend that you make a complete study of “overcoming” and the symbols used to bestow the promises upon Christians. This should make it clear that almost all symbols used in Revelation have a constant meaning. A simplified definition of some of these symbols will be given here, but more complete definitions will be given in sections dealing specifically with each symbol.

We believe it will become apparent that “overcoming” refers to our obedience to the gospel, and that the promises given apply to us as Christians today as part of God’s holy city, the church. We must also not forget that our obedience to the gospel must be continued. Rev. 2:10 says, “Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.” Also, 2:26 says, “He that overcometh, and keepeth my works unto the end” shall have “power over the nations.” Notice that the “overcoming” takes place first; then, keeping the works unto the end must follow. This is exactly what happens when we obey the gospel. We first “overcome” the world of sin by our obedience; then, we serve God faithfully by doing his works for the remainder of our lives. To those who overcome, the following blessings are promised:

2:7 We are able to eat of the tree of life. Rev. 22:2 states that the tree of life is located in the midst of the beautiful city of God which is his spiritual kingdom—the church. Since we know that it is located in the church, and we are told here that it is located in the paradise of God, then the church must be the “paradise of God.” When we “overcome,” obey the gospel, we enter into that paradise of God, the church, where we have forgiveness of sins. Therefore, as long as we remain faithful, we have access to the tree of life.

2:11 We shall not be hurt of the second death. Rev. 20:14 defines the lake of fire as the second death. When we “overcome” this world of sin by becoming Christians, we obtain forgiveness of our sins which is necessary to avoid the second death. If we are faithful Christians we will not be hurt of the second death.

2:17 We shall be able to eat of the hidden manna and receive a white stone with a new name written on it. Just as the children of Israel were fed literal manna from heaven as they wandered in the wilderness, the church is fed today by spiritual manna from heaven which is the Word of God. (See 12:14.) The key to understanding the white stone and the new name is the word “new.” When we “overcome” we enter into the church and receive a new name which is “redeemed,” “Christian,” or “saved.” All of these terms refer to the same thing; when one becomes a Christian, he enters into a “new” state of purity and holiness. He has “overcome” this world of sin. The color of the stone also strengthens this interpretation because white is always symbolic of purity.

2:26-28 We shall have power over nations and shall receive the morning star. Rev. 19:15 describes Christ as having a sharp sword going out of his mouth which he uses to smite the nations. He also rules them with a rod of iron. Obviously, this sharp sword is symbolic of the Word of God. Therefore, Christ rules over the nations through Christians preaching and teaching his Word. Christ is our morning star. When we enter into the church or “overcome,” we enter into Christ or receive the morning star. (Also see comments on 22:16.)

3:5 We shall be clothed in white raiment, have our names written in the book of life, and Jesus will confess our names before God. All of these take place when one obeys the gospel. Rev. 3:4 speaks of those who had not defiled their garments. Therefore, they were walking with Jesus in white. Phil. 4:3 indicates that a person's name is written in the book of life when he obeys the gospel. In Mt. 10:32, Jesus says, “Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven.” Therefore, “overcoming” means that upon becoming a Christian, we walk with Jesus in white, have our names written in the book of life, and Jesus confesses us before God in heaven.

3:12 We will be pillars in the temple of God. Jesus will write upon us God's name and the name of the city of God, new Jerusalem, and his new name. As we “overcome” this world of sin and enter into the temple of God (the church), Jesus will write God's name and his new name upon us showing that we are among the saved. Only those who are redeemed will receive this new name. We also receive the name of the city of God which is new Jerusalem. Just as the city of Jerusalem was the headquarters of religious activities under the old law, new Jerusalem, the church, is the place of our worship today. Only those who have “overcome” this world of sin by obedience to the gospel are in this new Jerusalem. (See the section on “The Holy Jerusalem” in chapter 21 for additional information.)

3:21 We will be able to sit with Jesus in his throne. Just as Jesus “overcame” by his physical death and resurrection, we “overcome” this world of sin by our spiritual resurrection. Just as Jesus was raised to his throne in heaven, we are raised to our spiritual throne in the church. Rev. 1:6 says that Jesus has made us kings and priests unto God. A king is one who sits upon a throne. This concept makes chapter 20 much more understandable. Rev. 20:4 says, “And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given unto them.” This shows that Christians are reigning on thrones today and have the judgment of God which is his Word.

Therefore, to “overcome” means to render obedience to God's law, thereby overcoming this world of sin and entering into God's holy city, the church, where we have forgiveness of our sins. We must remember that it is our duty to remain faithful. If we do not, we are told that our names will be blotted out of the book of life. Also, 22:19 says that we can be taken out of that holy city. As members of the Lord's church, we need to realize just what the church is and exactly what it means to be members of that church. When we obey the gospel and enter into the Lord's church, the holy city, we receive all the blessings awarded to those who “overcome.” We must then remain faithful in order to keep these blessings and finally receive the “crown of life” which is our eternal inheritance in heaven.

CHAPTER 2

THE LETTER TO EPHESUS

Verse 1. Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus write; These things saith he that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand, who walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks;

This first letter is addressed to the church at Ephesus. Most likely the book of Ephesians was written to this same church. The city itself was the most important city in the Roman province of Asia. It had an excellent harbor which helped it become a great commercial city and export center. Its population has been estimated at one-third of a million. Ephesus was also a city of religious importance under Roman rule. It became a center of the emperor cult, and eventually possessed three official temples.¹ One of these was known worldwide and is called “Diana of the Ephesians” in Acts 19:34. The city, now uninhabited, has been undergoing excavation for many years and is probably the most extensive and impressive ruined site of Asia Minor.²

A part of the description of Christ, given in chapter 1, is used to identify him as the author of each of these letters. The description used in this verse was taken from 1:13,16. (See those passages for further comments. Also, see the introduction of chapters 2 and 3 for comments concerning the “angel” of the church.)

Verse 2. I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil: and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars:

Jesus begins by praising this church. They were doing many things that would be considered great qualities for any church today. They were performing many good works and laboring long and hard for the Lord. We constantly stress this in our teaching, and rightfully so, because we must do these things in order to be acceptable to God. But, as this letter points out, these works must be done for the correct reasons. While working for the Lord is important, it must be done because we love him. Any other reason is like unto Cain’s sacrifice—unacceptable to God. (See Gen. 4:4, 5; Heb. 11:4.)

These people were also praised for being unable to “bear them which are evil.” They would not condone the practices of sin. They taught against it and refused to allow it in their midst. This is a good lesson for the church today. Sin should not go unnoticed and uncorrected in the church. Robert Usrey says, “It is vital that responsible and merciful people freely judge the guilty and try to influence the guilty to judge themselves.”³

They also had tried those who falsely claimed to be apostles and had proven them to be impostors. This enables us to conclude that the congregation at Ephesus was doctrinally sound. They had the ability to distinguish between false teachings and the truth. Today, we must be sound in the gospel and be able to recognize false teachings. We can accomplish this only by a thorough study of the Word, thereby gaining knowledge of God’s will for mankind. Even though study is of utmost importance, it is by no means all that is required. These people at Ephesus knew the Word; yet they were condemned for forsaking their first love (2:4, 5) and were warned that their candlestick could be removed. Knowledge is of no benefit if it is for the sake of knowledge alone. Our study and application of God’s Word in the church, as well as our individual lives, must be because we love the Lord. If we study, attend church or worship for any reason other than because we love the Lord and are seeking to do his will, our worship is vain.

Verse 3. And hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name’s sake hast laboured, and hast not fainted.

These people had borne the Word of God. They had taken it up and patiently carried it to many people. They had carried it in the face of difficulties or rejection. It is almost frightening when we compare the many virtues of the church at Ephesus with some congregations that presently exist. Ephesus did many good works which congregations today fall very short in doing; yet they were condemned and told that their candlestick was in danger of being removed. Let us each examine ourselves to make sure we are working for the Lord and doing so out of love for him and not for ourselves.

They had also labored and not fainted. They were working long and hard by doing what God had commanded. They were praised for this; yet, later, they are severely condemned as a congregation. This again points out that they were doing these works for the wrong reasons. We know what the correct reason is: because we love the Lord. Our labors and works in the church must not be for selfishness, pride, or the praise of men. We must do them because we love the

Lord and desire to serve him by doing his will.

Verse 4. Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love.

Jesus condemned this congregation for this reason: They had left their first love. They must have forgotten the first commandment as is stated in Mt. 22:37, 38: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment.”

Many ideas have been presented concerning the meaning of leaving one’s first love, but it seems that only one admonition could have been intended here. They had ceased to love the Lord. Though they were performing works that the Lord had commanded, they were being done without love. Compare this to a man held as a slave. He does the work assigned by his master out of fear rather than out of love. Our Lord does not desire us to be slaves, but, rather, servants because we love him.

Verse 5. Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent.

They were admonished to repent and do the first works or else their candlestick would be removed. The “first works” must make reference to the Christian’s first duty, which is to love God. In the above verses, they had been praised for their many works; yet they were not considered “first works.” Our first duty as Christians is to love God. If we do this, all of these other works will follow.

They were commanded to repent. Even though they were doing these good works, something was lacking, making it necessary for repentance to take place. We can never work our way to heaven on our own accord. This is not to say that we do not have to perform these works. It means we must work for the correct reasons. The concept being presented here is that God gave his Son to die on the cross for us because he loved us. Therefore, the Christian’s first duty is to love God (Lk. 10:27). If we love him, we will desire to do his work. Notice he commanded them to do the first works, not give up what they were doing to do something else. They were to do this in addition to the works they were already performing.

If they did not do the first works, Jesus said he would remove their candlestick. Since the candlestick is the symbol for the true church, removing the candlestick means that this congregation would no longer be considered the true church of our Lord. It would be no better off in God’s sight than those who practice error. The candlestick, the true church, was and is the spiritual light unto the world, and if it were removed, it would no longer give that light.

Verse 6. But this thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

No one is certain of who these Nicolaitans were. Perhaps they were followers of Nicolas, one of the seven on whom the apostles laid their hands (Acts 6:5, 6). Since there is no solid evidence to support this, we should not place blame. Regardless of the nature of these deeds, Jesus praised the Ephesians for hating them. They, obviously, were deeds that the Lord hated, and he praised his people for being like him in that respect. Notice also that Jesus hated the deeds of these people, not the people themselves.

Verse 7. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God.

“He that hath an ear, let him hear” calls this announcement to the special attention of any person who has the ability to listen and the desire to understand. To “hear” means more than just the ability to distinguish words. It means to understand the message and do the things which we are instructed to do. Speaking of Christ, Acts 3:23 says, “And it shall come to pass, that every soul, which will not hear that prophet, shall be destroyed from among the people.” These people

were not going to be destroyed because they did not actually hear him speak. They were going to be destroyed if they failed to follow his teachings.

These messages are from the “Spirit.” In 1:4, a greeting is given to each of the churches from the seven spirits which must represent the Holy Spirit. (See comments on 1:4.) To find that these messages come from the Spirit should not surprise us because Eph. 6:17 describes the Word of God as the “sword of the Spirit.” (Also see Jn. 14:26.) These messages are the words of God given to man by the Spirit.

The promise given to the church at Ephesus and applying to all Christians is this: “To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God.” The symbolism that immediately comes to mind is the tree of life, which stood in the midst of the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2:9). As long as Adam and Eve were obedient to God in not eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, they could eat of the fruit of the tree of life. As indicated by Gen. 3:24, this tree of life could sustain their physical life forever. This is a likeness to the church. The church is our spiritual Garden of Eden and referred to here as the paradise of God. As long as children of God remain obedient to God’s commands, they remain in the spiritual Garden of Eden and have access to the spiritual tree of life. Christ is our spiritual tree of life, standing in the midst of the church, the paradise of God. (See 1:13.) If we are unfaithful, God will remove us from that spiritual paradise and block our way to the tree of life. We must also be thankful that we have the opportunity to return if we repent and ask forgiveness, just as the prodigal son did (Lk. 15:11-32). (For further comments on this symbolism, see the introduction to chapters 2 and 3 and also 22:2.)

This symbolism also ties in closely with other symbols used in Revelation. In verse 7 the tree of life is located in the paradise of God. In 22:2, the tree of life is located in the holy city. Therefore, the paradise of God and the holy city are the same. The holy city symbolizes the church because 21:9 calls it “the bride, the Lamb’s wife.” The “holy city” and the “paradise of God” are two different ways of describing the church of our Lord. When we “overcome,” we conquer this world of sin and enter into the church, the holy city, the paradise of God, where we have access to our spiritual tree of life, Jesus Christ our Lord. If we remain faithful, we continue to have access to the spiritual tree of life, and, finally, we will receive the crown of life or heaven (v. 10). According to 22:19, if we are disobedient, we can have our names removed from the book of life and from the holy city.

THE LETTER TO SMYRNA

Verse 8. And unto the angel of the church in Smyrna write; These things saith the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive;

Christ identifies himself as “the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive.” A statement similar to this is used to identify Christ in 1:17,18. This shows that Christ is definitely the author of this letter.

Smyrna was a city in the Roman province of Asia, on the Aegean shore of what is now Asiatic Turkey. It was famous for its beauty and for the magnificence of its public buildings.⁴ The city was deeply involved in worshiping pagan gods. There were at least three temples erected in the city to honor Cybele, Zeus, and Roma. They also erected temples to Roman emperors, and the city became a center of emperor-worship. It is believed that the Jews also became caught up in this emperor-worship and may have encouraged the death of the famous martyr Polycarp in AD. 155.

Verse 9. I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich) and I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan.

This congregation must have been suffering many physical hardships. Jesus points out that he is aware of their trials and tribulations but praises them for being rich. Because of their physical poverty, “rich” must refer to their spiritual well-being. To be called spiritually rich is something

for which every congregation of the Lord's church should strive. It is fine to have nice, large buildings and plenty of money in the collection plate, but the most important thing in any congregation is to be spiritually rich.

Part of the persecution that this church suffered was due to the blasphemy of a group of people who claimed to be Jews but were of the synagogue of Satan. The use of the term "Jew" must be a reference to Christians. In other words, the actual meaning is this: There were people who claimed to be Christians but were actually followers of Satan. The use of the term "Jew" as a reference to Christians can be found in other passages in the New Testament. In Jas. 1:1, James addressed his letter to the "twelve tribes." We know he was not writing to the literal twelve tribes of Israel because they had been dispersed many years prior. He was using this as a figurative term to mean all Christians because he refers to them as his "brethren" (Jas. 1:2). Just as the twelve tribes of Israel were God's chosen people under the law of Moses, all Christians are his chosen people today under the law of Christ. Rom. 2:28, 29 also uses the term "Jew" to mean Christians. It makes a comparison between Jews of the Old Testament who were Jews because of physical circumcision and the "Jews" (Christians) of the New Testament whose circumcision is of the heart. Therefore, the term "Jews" is a symbolic reference to all Christians.

With this in mind, we realize this verse is teaching that just because a person claims to be a Christian does not necessarily make it so. These people claimed to be Christians, but Jesus said they were of the synagogue of Satan. The only way we can be Christians is by obeying the commands of God.

Verse 10. Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.

The intent of this verse is to encourage Christians to remain faithful, even though our trials and persecutions may sometimes seem to be unbearable. Some of these people were going to have their faith tried by being cast into prison by Satan. Any time Christians suffer for the cause of Christ, Satan is responsible. He will use any powers or forces available to him in order to cause Christians to forsake Christ.

These persecutions were to be for a period of ten days. To understand this as a literal ten days of imprisonment would be unreasonable because it would require that everyone be imprisoned for the same exact amount of time. The number "10" is used in Revelation as a descriptive number showing completeness. Therefore, these persecutions were to last for a complete period of time. It is not the intent of verse 10 to tell these people how long they would be persecuted, but, instead, to tell them they were to experience complete trials of their faith. This is why they were encouraged to remain faithful all their lives.

Even though we overcome this world of sin by our obedience to the gospel, we remain faithful through the many trials of this life in order to receive the crown of life. When we become members of God's family, his church, we also become adopted children of God (Rom. 8:14-17). As children in God's family, we have an inheritance awaiting us (Rom. 8:17). According to Mt. 19:29, the inheritance we are to receive is everlasting life. When we are baptized, we are resurrected from spiritual death unto spiritual life (Rom. 6:3-18), and eternal life in heaven is the crown of that spiritual life. If we remain faithful until death, we will receive that crown of life and live eternally in heaven. (Also see I Pet. 5:4.) Jas. 1:12 says, "Blessed is the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love him."

Verse 11. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death.

Rev. 21:8 states, "But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death." Anyone not having his name written in the book of life will be cast into the lake of fire (20:15). We also know that Christians are the ones who have their names written in the book of life. (See Phil. 4:3.) Therefore, when we

overcome this world of sin by becoming Christians our names are written in the book of life, and we no longer have to fear the second death. All must go through the first death, which is the death of our physical bodies, but Christians are not subject to the second death because they have overcome sin. We have a responsibility to remain faithful because 3:5 indicates that it is possible to have our names removed from the book of life.

Rev. 20:6 says, “Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection: on such the second death hath no power.” This shows that “overcoming” and “having a part in the first resurrection” are the same. They both allow us to avoid the second death. They both represent obedience to the gospel. When we obey the gospel or have our part in the first resurrection, we overcome this world of sin. We enter into the church, which is the holy city or spiritual paradise of God. We begin our reign with Christ during this present gospel dispensation or the “thousand years.” (See comments on the “thousand years” in the introduction to chapter 20.)

THE LETTER TO PERGAMOS

Verse 12. And to the angel of the church In Pergamos write; These things saith he which hath the sharp sword with two edges;

This letter is addressed to the church in the city of Pergamos or Pergamum (ASV). It was a city in the Roman province of Asia, in the west of what is now Asiatic Turkey.⁵ “By Christian times, Pergamum had become the chief center of Roman emperor-worship, no less than three temples being erected there to Roman emperors, but with many other temples also, to Zeus, Athena, Dionysus, and Asklepios (the serpent-god of healing).”⁶

This city boasted of its great religious displays. This made it difficult for Christians who lived there to remain faithful in the face of persecutions. As Coffman says, “In this atmosphere, there were some Christians, no doubt, who favored the incorporation of Christianity into the religious life of the community without a collision with the pagan world.”⁷ Therefore, they were in great danger of compromising their faith.

This letter to the church at Pergamos comes from the one with the sharp sword with two edges. This identifies the writer of this letter as Jesus Christ because 1:16 describes Christ as having a sharp two-edged sword proceeding out of his mouth. (Also see 19:15.) Eph. 6:17 defines the sword of the Spirit as the Word of God. Therefore, this sharp two-edged sword proceeding out of his mouth must represent the Word of God. In Jn. 12:49, Jesus says, “For I have not spoken of myself; but the Father which sent me, he gave me a commandment, what I should say, and what I should speak.” Jesus came to earth to carry out the will of his Father. Therefore, this sword represents those words that Jesus spoke while on earth, as well as those things that he revealed through the Spirit to the apostles after he ascended to heaven. (See Jn. 14:26.)

Several references are made in Revelation to things proceeding out of the mouths of different symbols. Just as the sword proceeding out of the mouth of Jesus represents his words, that which proceeds out of the mouth of other symbols represents the speakings and teachings of those forces. (See 9:17; 12:15; 16:13.)

Verse 13. I know thy works and where thou dwellest, even where Satan’s seat is: and thou holdest fast my name, and hast not denied my faith, even in those days wherein Antipas was my faithful martyr, who was slain among you, where Satan dwelleth.

Jesus begins by praising this church for the works they were doing. They had held fast his name and had not denied the faith. This must have been difficult, considering the persecutions they were suffering. They had not denied the faith even when one among them had been martyred. This should be an example to us as we face the trials of life. Most Christians living at this present time do not face this type of physical persecution. We may have many social pressures and temptations which make it difficult to make decisions we know to be right in God’s sight, but we face few physical tortures. These people at Pergamos had both. They were faced with the social pressures of that day, as well as, actual physical persecutions. This is evident in verse 14 because some were eating things sacrificed to idols and committing

fornication as a part of the emperor-worship so predominant in this city. Sometimes temptations may be harder to overcome than persecutions. To be a Christian means that we must “hold the faith” regardless of persecutions or temptations.

Jesus knew they lived in a difficult situation because he said they were dwelling where “Satan’s seat is.” Some believe this statement refers to a temple erected in the city honoring the pagan god Zeus. It had a huge altar forty feet high “carved like a great throne into the face of the mountain dominating the city.”⁸ This also may have been where Antipas was killed. There is no way of knowing if this passage is referring specifically to the altar in this temple, but we do know that Satan’s seat is anywhere that sin dwells. This does show that Pergamos was a center of sin and corruption.

In most of these letters, symbols were used which had a special meaning to those living at that certain location, but they also hold a meaning applicable to all Christians of all ages. This serves to show the magnificent way in which Revelation is written. Only God could have composed such a marvelous book.

Concerning Antipas, this is the only time his name is mentioned in the Bible. He must have been a very faithful Christian and probably well known in the church. Though he lost his physical life, what an honor to be named a “faithful martyr” by Jesus Christ himself!

Verse 14. But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balac to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication.

Some at Pergamos held the doctrine of Balaam who taught the children of Israel to eat things sacrificed unto idols and to commit fornication. (See Num. 25:1, 2; 31:16.) This error of Balaam is also mentioned in 2 Pet. 2:15 and Jude 11. To the Jews the name of Balaam had become synonymous with sacrificing to idols and fornication, just as we associate the name of Judas with one who betrays his fellow man. Jesus condemned these people for this practice just as he did the people of Israel in the time of Moses. (See Num. 25:3, 4.) We must always be aware that false teaching can creep in among us. We must condemn it just as Christ did and remove it from our midst or he will condemn us.

Verse 15. So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate.

Many believe the doctrine of the Nicolaitans was the same as the doctrine of Balaam. From the construction of verses 14 and 15, it is hard to determine if there are two false doctrines being discussed or only one. It could be that the Nicolaitans were practicing the same things Balaam had taught during the time of Moses. This is only supposition on the part of some commentators, but it seems that nothing definite can be established. This verse seems to indicate that the doctrine of the Nicolaitans was in addition to the doctrine of Balaam because of the use of the word “also.” We do know that the church at Ephesus had this same problem approximately one hundred miles away, so it must have been well known and fairly widespread. (See comments on v. 6 for more information about the doctrine of the Nicolaitans.)

Verse 16. Repent; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.

In this congregation two groups of people were practicing false doctrine. One group held the doctrine of Balaam (v. 14), and the other held the doctrine of the Nicolaitans. Regardless of the specific teachings of these groups, we know these doctrines were not in accordance with the true gospel of Christ. The people were warned to repent or Christ would come and fight against them with the sword of his mouth. As explained in verse 12, this sword of the mouth is the gospel of Christ. Therefore, Christ is warning them that if they refuse to repent and turn from these false doctrines, he will come and fight against them with the true Word of God. He surely must do this through strong Christians who preach and teach his Word. The gospel is a powerful instrument. Heb. 4:12 says, “The word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged

sword.” We must use this gospel to fight against any type of false teaching.

Jesus will not tolerate false teaching among his people. If false teachers exist within a congregation, it is our duty to use the Word of God to war against them and cause them to repent. For a church to be true and faithful in the sight of God, it cannot tolerate false teaching!

Verse 17. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna, and will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth It.

“He that hath an ear, let him hear” again calls special attention to the promise given to those who overcome. The first part of the promise says that by overcoming we will be able to eat of the hidden manna. This symbolism is taken from the Old Testament. When the children of Israel were wandering in the wilderness, God fed them with literal manna (bread) from heaven. Christ said, “Your fathers did eat manna in the wilderness, and are dead. This is the bread which cometh down from heaven, that a man I-nay eat thereof, and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live forever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world” (Jn. 6:49-51). We partake of that living bread by being obedient to the gospel that he gave us.

Today, the church is the spiritual kingdom of God wandering in the “wilderness” of the world. It is fed by Christ through his Word, which is the spiritual manna from heaven for Christians today. Rev. 12:6 describes the church as being in the wilderness today and states that it is being fed by God. All of these symbols fit together and are used to explain the situation of Christians in the world today. When one overcomes” this world of sin through baptism, he enters a period of “wandering,” waiting for heaven which is the “promised land.” He is being fed by spiritual “manna” from heaven, which is Christ or his Word. We believe this manna is called “hidden” because it was hidden throughout the time of the law of Moses. Eph. 3:9 speaks of the gospel as a “mystery” which was “hid” from the beginning of the world. Also, to those who are outside of Christ, the saving grace of the gospel is hidden. Only when one becomes a member of the church does that spiritual manna nourish his soul unto everlasting life.

When one overcomes this world through obedience to the gospel, he receives a white stone with a new name written in it. There are many ideas about the meaning of the white stone but because it is white and is given to those who overcome, it must represent something concerning our salvation. If the meaning of this white stone is to be drawn from history, two possible explanations agree with the symbolism here. First, “in the ancient law courts, white and black stones were used for registering the verdict of juries.”⁹ White was a vote for acquittal and black for condemnation. When one partakes of the hidden manna or the gospel of Christ, he receives a white stone representing a pardon of all his sins. Second, small stones, not necessarily white, were sometimes used as admission to public events. If this is the symbolism intended, it would represent admission to the church when we partake of the manna from heaven. Either or both of these interpretations may be correct because they actually stand for the same thing, the forgiveness of sins, and this enables us to enter into the Lord’s church.

The key to the meaning of the white stone may be in this fact. It has a new name written in it that no man knows except the one who receives it. This new name must be “redeemed” or “Christian.” We should not look for a specific word or words that make up the new name. Instead, we should look for the symbolic meaning of the “new name.” It is the name that a person receives when he overcomes the world of sin through salvation. This could be described in several ways such as “saved,” “redeemed,” or “Christian.” This is similar to the “new song” (14:3) which is sung by the 144,000 who are the “redeemed” from the earth. The key is that it was “new.” When Christ died on the cross, he made salvation available to all those who obey him. This salvation was not available under the old law. Therefore, it is a new name or a new song available to those who live during the Christian dispensation. When we obey the gospel of Christ, we are given a new name, the name of the redeemed, and we sing a new song, the song of salvation. This is why “no man knoweth the name saving he that receiveth it.” The only ones who can wear the new name or sing the new song are those who are obedient to the gospel of

Christ. Everyone else will be outside of Christ and have no hope of heaven unless they obey the gospel and wear the new name.

THE LETTER TO THYATIRA

Verse 18. And unto the angel of the church in Thyatira write; These things saith the Son of God, who hath his eyes like unto a flame of fire, and his feet are like fine brass;

Thyatira came under Roman rule in 133 B.C. and was located in what is now known as Asiatic Turkey. The city of Akhisar stands at this same location today. Thyatira was situated on the road from Pergamum to Laodicea, making it an important point in the Roman road system. "It was also an important center of manufacture: dyeing, garment making, pottery, and brass working are among the trades known to have existed there."¹⁰ This is where Paul met Lydia, a seller of purple (Acts 16:14). "It was also the home of many influential trade guilds, having their own deities, temples and guild halls, where feasts, tending to obscenity, and all kinds of immoralities were practices."¹¹

This letter to Thyatira comes from the one whose eyes were like unto a flame and whose feet were like fine brass. Both phrases were used to describe Christ in chapter 1. This once again shows that these letters to the seven churches were from Christ, not man. (See comments on 1:14,15 for interpretations of these symbols.)

Verse 19. I know thy works, and charity, and service, and faith, and thy patience, and thy works; and the last to be more than the first.

Christ praises this church for their works, charity, service, faith, patience, and works. Notice that their works were mentioned twice, but he says the last were more than the first. This indicates they were working more all the time. As they grew in faith, they were also performing more works. Many people today teach that works are not necessary for us to be saved eternally, but Jas. 2:17 says that "faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone." "Works" are an outgrowth of faith. If we have faith, works come naturally. If we grow in faith, our desire to work for the Lord will also grow.

Verse 20. Notwithstanding I have a few things against thee, because thou sufferest that woman Jezebel, which calleth herself a prophetess, to teach and to seduce my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed unto idols.

Even though Christ praised this congregation for many things, he still had something against them. They were allowing the woman Jezebel to teach a doctrine contrary to the gospel of our Lord. By her teaching she caused some Christians at Thyatira to revert to idol worship and to commit fornication. These same sins were prevalent at Pergamos and were referred to there as the doctrine of Balaam (v. 14). If this was the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, as some suppose, the church at Ephesus was also commended for hating them. From this it seems quite evident that the early church had a serious problem with those who desired to eat things sacrificed to idols and commit fornication. Both of these sins were part of idolatrous pagan Worship which meant they were forsaking the true God for idols. The children of Israel made these same mistakes many times during the Old Testament period.

Most likely the name "Jezebel" refers to one specific woman who was teaching and leading others into idolatrous worship, rather than some factious group. We have no way of knowing if this was her actual name or a symbolic name assigned to her by God because of her deeds.

In Old Testament times, Jezebel was the wife of Ahab, the seventh king of Israel, and the daughter of the king of Sidon. She was well known among the Israelites for her deeds of fornication and sorceries (2 Kings 9:22). Regardless of whether this was her actual or symbolic name, this church was condemned for allowing her to teach false doctrine. This is the lesson for us: God will not tolerate false teachings in his church, and neither should we as Christians.

Verse 21. And I gave her space to repent of her fornication; and she repented not.

The longsuffering of the Lord is evident in this verse. Jezebel had "space" to repent indicating

that the Lord had given her sufficient time to repent of her deeds. He was willing to give her time to repent; yet he was not willing to let her continue in her deeds indefinitely. We should have this same attitude in the church today. We must avoid fellowshiping sin in the church. Those who sin openly must be corrected. Gal. 6:1 tells us that we are obligated to restore anyone who has been overtaken in a fault. We must give them time to repent; yet we must not let sin continue. We must not ignore or fellowship sin, thereby causing others to follow that same path. (Mt. 18:15-17 outlines the procedure a church should follow in practicing discipline.)

Verse 22. Behold, I will cast her into a bed, and them that commit adultery with her into great tribulation, except they repent of their deeds.

It is hard to understand exactly how Jesus would cause this false teacher and her followers to be afflicted with great tribulation, but one thing is for certain, it would happen if they did not repent. We may not know exactly how God operates in this world, but we should understand that he is in control of all things. Though we may not recognize certain events as being directly controlled by God, we do know that “all things work together for good to them that love God” (Rom. 8:28). We cannot tolerate false doctrines in the Lord’s church, and we must make every effort to bring those who teach such to repentance. If they refuse to repent, it is our duty to remove that sin from the church by “marking them which cause divisions” (Rom. 16:17), and “withdrawing yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly” (2 Thess. 3:6).

Verse 23. And I will kill her children with death; and all the churches shall know that I am he which searcheth the reins and hearts: and I will give unto every one of you according to your works.

This further emphasizes that God will not tolerate those who seek to lead his people astray. God may or may not operate directly against false teachers in the church today, but he definitely expects us as Christians to “war against them with the sword of the Spirit.” (See v. 16; 19:14,15.)

The language of verses 22 and 23 reminds us of the action that the Lord took against Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-10). Since John was receiving these visions directly from Christ, we understand that Jesus was still operating in the world in ways that have since ceased. We know the writings of the New Testament are complete and there will be no further revelations. Since Jesus was still operating in the world in this fashion, it is possible that he would act against this church just as he did against Ananias and Sapphira. Furthermore, we have no way of knowing whether Jezebel repented or Jesus carried out this condemnation. One or the other definitely took place.

Verse 24. But unto you I say, and unto the rest in Thyatira, as many as have not this doctrine, and which have not known the depths of Satan, as they speak; I will put upon you none other burden.

God assures those who are faithful that they will not be required to bear any greater burdens than they already have. Christ is making a definite distinction between those who follow him and those who hold false doctrines or follow Satan. The rest are the ones who have not followed the teachings of Jezebel. They have not committed fornication or participated in pagan idol-worship. They are faithful children of God.

There were two groups of people in this church at Thyatira. One was faithful; one was not. The lesson for us is that even though some may be in our congregations who are living in sin or teaching false doctrines, we can remain faithful if we reject the false teaching and worship God as he has directed.

We do not know exactly why Jesus said he would put no other burden upon them. Perhaps their burden was as great as they could bear and continue to remain faithful. God will not suffer us to be tempted above what we are able to bear (1 Cor. 10:13). Perhaps they had proven their faithfulness to God. Therefore, he would put no other burden upon them.

Verse 25. But that which ye have already hold fast till I come.

The thing these people possessed and were admonished to hold fast was their faithfulness to Christ. Jesus told them to hold fast till he came. Some say this does not refer to the second coming of Christ but rather “visitation through the trials soon to confront the churches.”² We believe it means the second advent. Christians must continually be careful to hold fast their faith. If the above were true, there would come a time after Christ had made his visitation through trials when Christians would not have to be concerned with holding to their faith. Besides, we are not sure what “visitations through trials” are. Rev. 3:11 says, “Behold, I come quickly hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown.”

Verse 26. And he that overcometh, and keepeth my works unto the end, to him will I give power over the nations:

Jesus promises that he will give power over the nations to those who overcome. In 1 Jn. 5:4, 5, those who overcome as Christians are defined. Therefore, verse 26 says that Christians will be given power over the nations. (Refer to the introduction of chapter 2 for a more complete discussion of “overcoming.”) The natural question would be; How do Christians have power over the nations? The answer is; We have the gospel of Christ. The gospel is the “power of God” unto salvation (Rom. 1:16). This is the power Christians are given.

This is evident because verse 27 defines this power as a “rod of iron.” The last phrase in verse 27 shows that this “rod of iron” is the same “rod” that Christ received of his Father. In Jn. 12:49, 50. Jesus said, ‘For I have not spoken of myself; but the Father which sent me, he gave me a commandment, what I should say, and what I should speak. And I know that his commandment is life everlasting: whatsoever I speak therefore, wen as the Father said unto me, so I speak.’ The Father gave Jesus the words he should speak—the gospel. This is the rod or power over nations that God gave Jesus, and he in turn will give it to all those who overcome by obeying his words.

Speaking of Christians, 20:4 says, “Judgment was given unto them” Jn. 12:48 says that we will be judged by the Word of God. We do not have to wait until the judgment day to know how we will be judged. We will be judged according to the gospel of Christ. Christians have that judgment today. We have that power of God.

This power is not a physical power; it is a spiritual power. Christians are part of the most powerful kingdom that has ever existed. We are part of God’s spiritual kingdom, the church, which can never be shaken (Heb. 12:28). Those in that kingdom possess the greatest power on earth---the spiritual power of God, the gospel. Anyone who desires to enter into that eternal kingdom must submit to that power.

We must also notice that in order to have this power, we must keep the works of Jesus unto the end. Anyone who falls back into the world of sin no longer has access to that power of God: “It had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than, after they had known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered unto them” (2 Pet. 2:21).

As further evidence that “overcoming” means to be obedient to the gospel, we should consider the structure of this verse. Notice that overcoming takes place prior to keeping the works unto the end. We must first overcome this world of sin by obeying the gospel; then we must remain faithful throughout our lives in order to receive our eternal reward.

Verse 27. And he shall rule them with a rod of iron; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers: even as I received of my Father.

The power that Christians will use to rule the nations is described as a “rod of iron.” This is the same power that Christ uses to smite the nations in 19:15. As explained in verse 26, this rod of iron represents the gospel. It is the unbreakable spiritual power of God that Christians use to rule in this world. (Significant information on this “rod of iron” is given in comments on 19:15.)

The power of this rod of iron is compared to the ease with which an iron rod would break a piece of clay pottery. (See Ps. 2:9.) The Word of God is the most powerful force that exists upon this earth. No power of man is capable of destroying the Word of God or his kingdom. It will stand forever (Heb. 12:28).

Christ received this rod of iron from his Father. He received the gospel and will give the power of that gospel to all who obey it. (See v. 26 for more information.)

Verse 28. And I will give him the morning star.

Jesus says he is the “bright and morning star” (22:16). When we overcome this world of sin through our obedience to the gospel, we receive Christ. This obviously does not mean we receive him bodily; it does mean that we receive all the blessings he has promised to those who obey him. Some of the blessings Christians receive when they come into contact with Christ by obeying the gospel are these: all spiritual blessings (Eph. 1:3); forgiveness of sins (Rom. 6:17, 18); redemption (Rom. 3:24); an advocate with the Father (1 Jn. 2:1); an inheritance (Eph. 1:11; Heb. 9:15); and everlasting life (Jn. 3:16).

We must understand that Christians are promised these blessings and have access to them from the moment of their obedience to the gospel and that we must also remain faithful throughout our lives to receive that final crown (v. 10).

Verse 29. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.

This same statement is used in each of the letters to the churches. (Please refer to the comments on v. 7.)

Coffman has an excellent section in his book concerning the reasons for the corruption of the church at Thyatira. He points out that it is the duty of the eldership of any church to be constantly alert for any false teachers who might enter the congregation and to use their authority to see that they are removed.¹³

¹*New Bible Dictionary* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, 1984), p. 337.

²*ibid.*

³Robert S. Usrey, *Church Discipline for Caring Christians* (Searcy, Ark.: Resource Publications, 1983), p. 83.

⁴*New Bible Dictionary*, p. 1125.

⁵*ibid.*, p.912.

⁶James Burton Coffman, *Commentary on Revelation* (Austin, Tex.: Firm Foundation Publishing House, 1979), p. 57.

⁷*ibid.*, p. 58.

⁸*ibid.*, pp. 57-58

⁹William Barclay, *The Revelation of John, Vol 1* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Westminster Press, 1960), p. 118.

¹⁰*New Bible Dictionary*, p. 1197.

¹¹Coffman, p. 62.

¹²*ibid.*, p. 66.

¹³*ibid.*, pp. 68-69.