

# REV. 1:1–3:22

By Ashby L. Camp

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## I. Introduction and greeting (1:1-8)

A. The Greek word translated "revelation" (*apokálupsis*) has the basic sense "to uncover what was hidden." The revelation in this book is *of* Jesus Christ in the sense it *comes from* him and is *about* him (taking the genitive as a "plenary" genitive per notes in NET). God gave it to Jesus for him to show his servants, the recipients of Revelation, the things that they are to reckon (see introduction) will take place soon, things regarding which they are to live in constant expectation as they face hostility because of their faith. The revelation uncovers "the hidden reality of God's sovereign control of the future, of how he is going to bring an end to the seeming success of the forces of evil in the present age" (Osborne, 53). Jesus' return is referred to as a revelation elsewhere in the N.T. (1 Cor. 1:7; 2 Thess. 1:7; 1 Pet. 1:7, 1:13, 4:13, 5:1).

B. In keeping with apocalyptic form, Jesus showed the revelation to his servants by sending his angel to his servant John. The angel was involved in communicating the revelation to John, and John then bore witness to it by writing down for the churches all that he saw. This revelation is the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ.

C. Revelation was intended to be read out loud in a Christian assembly (1:3, 22:18-19), as were Paul's letters (1 Thess. 5:17; Col. 4:16). At that time, that was the only practical way of sharing its contents with the community of faith. A blessing is pronounced on the reader and on those who hear *and keep* what is written.

D. John sends a greeting of grace and peace and then identifies the source of that grace and peace as the Trinity, the three members of the Godhead.

1. God the Father is referred to as he who is, who was, and who is to come. Putting the present tense first is probably designed to emphasize that he is in control of the present even though it may not seem like it. The mention of his future *coming* in the last clause instead of the expected parallel that he "will be" highlights the main stress of the book that God is going to intervene decisively and bring this reality to a close.

2. The Holy Spirit is referred to figuratively as "the seven spirits who are before his [God's] throne."

a. This imagery is rooted in Zech. 4:2-7 where seven lamps are identified as the one Spirit of God who imparts his grace. In Rev. 4:5 seven lamps are identified with the seven spirits of God. So apparently the seven lamps of Zechariah are the seven spirits in Revelation, and since the seven lamps of Zechariah represent the one Spirit, the seven spirits of Revelation likewise represent the one Spirit. The tie to

Zechariah 4 is confirmed by Rev. 5:6. In Zech. 4:10 the seven lamps (the one Spirit) are said to be the eyes of the Lord that range through the whole world. In Rev. 5:6 the seven eyes are identified with the seven spirits of God sent into all the earth.

b. This fits with the fact one would expect "spirit" to refer to the Holy Spirit in the context of references to God and Christ.

c. It is also possible that Isa. 11:2-3 is in the background of this reference. The LXX of that text lists seven virtues of the Spirit (wisdom, understanding, counsel, power, knowledge, piety, and fear of God), and the number seven symbolizes completeness or totality. So "seven spirits" may be a way of referring to the "sevenfold Spirit," which is how it is translated in NLT and footnoted in a number of other translations.

3. Jesus Christ is described as the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. He bore witness to God through his faithfulness under pressure, was the first to be raised from the dead *to resurrection life* (which is different from merely being raised from the dead – see, e.g., Rom. 6:9), and is the King of kings and the Lord of lords, the only ruler worthy of worship.

E. In 1:5b-6 John breaks into an expression of praise for Christ that celebrates his work and his relation to his disciples. He loves us, freed us from our sins by his blood, by his sacrificial death, and has made us to be a kingdom of priests to serve his God and Father, an allusion to Ex. 19:6 (see 1 Pet. 2:9). As saints, we are members or participants in the kingdom Christ inaugurated – children of the great king despite whatever difficulties we may be facing – and as priests we have free and joyful access to God and serve him in this world. In light of all this, John praises the Lord, saying to him be the glory and the power forever and ever, amen.

F. Revelation 1:7 refers to Christ's *parousia*, his magnificent and triumphant return in judgment that will leave all the people-groups of the entire earth, which groups on the whole reject him, wailing over their condemnation. The description recalls Jesus' words in Mat. 24:30 (par. Mk. 13:26; Lk. 21:27) and brings to mind Paul's description in 2 Thess. 1:6-10. The sense of the "Yes, amen" at the end is that this will certainly come to pass.

G. In v. 8 the Lord God himself declares that he is the Alpha and the Omega. As the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, the meaning is that he is the beginning and the end (21:6), the all-encompassing one who is sovereign over all things. The statement, "who is, who was, and who is to come, the Almighty," may have been from John or directly from God.

## II. Vision of Christ (1:9-20)

A. John identifies himself in 1:9 as a Christian brother of his addressees and as a partner or sharer with them in the persecution, the kingdom, and the endurance that are

all part of being in Christ. As participants in the kingdom Christ inaugurated, Christians at present, during this overlap of ages, endure the persecution that comes with identifying with Jesus. All the while, we await his return when he will pour out his wrath on the opposing kingdom of this world and consummate the eternal kingdom. John's share in this situation is evident in his being exiled to the island of Patmos because worldly powers were opposed to his preaching the word of God and testifying about Jesus (taking the genitive as objective).

B. John says that he "was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day." The Lord's Day is almost certainly a reference to Sunday, the day of the week on which Jesus rose from the dead. Christians from the earliest time assembled on Sunday to commemorate the Lord's resurrection (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2), and Christian writers in the second century clearly used "Lord's Day" to refer to Sunday. John's being "in the Spirit" probably refers to his being in a Spirit-enabled state for receiving the visions that he reports.

C. He hears from behind him a loud voice like a trumpet that tells him to write what he sees in a book and to send it to the seven churches. He turns toward the voice and sees seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands is "one like a son of man."

1. Revelation 1:20 makes clear that the seven lampstands represent the seven churches to which he is writing. A lampstand is a fitting symbol of a church because Christians are to be "the light of the world" (Mat. 5:14-16). We are to be the light of God's presence in a darkened world, a world that has turned from its creator. Given the connection in Revelation, by way of Zechariah 4, between the Holy Spirit and a lamp (see discussion of 1:4 above), symbolizing a church by a lampstand may further suggest that the churches are empowered in their mission by God's Spirit.

2. Revelation 1:18 makes clear that "one like a son of man" is the Lord Jesus, the one who overcame death. The phrase is taken from Dan. 7:13-14 (part of a vision given in the first year of Belshazzar king of Babylon, c. 553 B.C.). It indicates Christ's absolute power and dominion. The picture shows the glorious Christ in the midst of his church. We are not alone; Jesus promised that he would be with his church in a special way until the very end of the age (Mat. 28:20). And with that, he is examining that state of his churches, observing whether they are faithful.

D. The various descriptions of the Lord that are given in 1:13-16 are not to be accumulated into a single visual image of Jesus. Rather, each description serves to evoke within the hearer an emotional sense of some aspect of Christ's glory.

1. Full-length robe and a golden sash or belt around his chest

a. This depicts Christ as an exalted, dignified figure. A full-length robe was a mark of distinction, a sign of high rank or authority (e.g., Isa. 22:21; Mk. 12:38). Long robes and sashes across the chest were worn by dignitaries and rulers. Laborers wore belts around their waists so they could tuck their tunics into them for

work; aristocrats wore the belts up on their chests. That the sash is gold only magnifies the symbolism.

b. In this case, the robe may signify Jesus' high-priestly function. The word used to describe this robe is the same word used in the LXX to describe the robe the high priest wore (Ex. 28:4; 29:5).

2. Hair white like wool, like snow – In that society, the white-haired person was worthy of honor, and white hair conveyed the idea of wisdom and dignity (e.g., Lev. 19:32 commands respect for the elderly, and Prov. 16:31 says gray hair is a crown of glory that is gained in a righteous life). But this description echoes Dan. 7:9 which speaks of God (Ancient of Days) as having hair as white as wool. Jesus is being identified with God.

3. Eyes like blazing fire – The image comes from Dan. 10:6. The burning, piercing look of Christ misses nothing. As stated in Heb. 4:13, "Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account." The churches among whom he walks need to live in awareness of this.

4. Feet like bronze glowing in a furnace – In Ezek. 1:4-7, 27 and Dan. 10:6 glowing metal is connected with the appearance of the glory of God. It apparently portrays strength, stability, and absolute purity.

5. Voice like the sound of many waters – This image is used of God's voice in Ezek. 43:2. It suggests the awe-inspiring power of a great waterfall and again associates Jesus with God the Father.

6. Holds seven stars in his right hand

a. In 1:20 the stars are said to be the angels of the seven churches. Though some have argued that angels in 1:20 means simply "messengers" and thus refers to a human being, whether a church leader or someone transporting the letter to the church, that is almost certainly wrong. Angel refers to heavenly beings throughout Revelation, as is common in apocalyptic literature.

b. These probably are angels who in some distinctive way are associated with the individual congregations (as demons are associated with geographical areas in Daniel 10) and thus function as spiritual representatives of those congregations. The blurring of the earthly and the heavenly in terms of the addressees of the letters, such that the letter is written to the angel but speaks to the congregation, reinforces the critical notion that these realms are interlocked.

c. The right hand is a place of power and protection. This symbolizes Christ's control of the angels and, through their representation of the churches, his protection and blessing of the churches.

7. Sharp double-edged sword coming out of his mouth – This depicts that Christ's authoritative word (mouth) will be the basis of divine judgment (sword). His word will be what ultimately counts, not the decrees of the imperial cult. Jesus says in Jn. 8:51, "If a man keeps my word, he will never see death." He says in Jn. 12:48, "There is a judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept my word; that very word which I spoke will condemn him at the last day." Revelation 2:16 and 19:15, 21 employ this imagery of judgment.

8. His face like the sun shining in all its brilliance – This symbolizes his divine glory and power. Recall how Moses' face was radiant just from being in the divine presence (Ex. 34:29-30; 2 Cor. 3:7-8). Jesus was shown in this same manner to Peter, James, and John on the mountain when he was transfigured (Mat. 17:1-2).

#### E. The Aftermath of the Vision

1. John falls down as though dead. The qualifier "as dead" shows that this was not the typical oriental prostration to show respect but was the physical effects of the overpowering vision. Any movement in the presence of such an exalted being would be presumptuous. Jesus is that awesome. As Vern Poythress says (*The Returning King*, 80), "Christ is our friend, according to John 15:14-15. But he is more than a mere friend: he is awesome in majesty, power, and purity. Too many Christians in our generation have seen Christ only as a 'buddy,' losing sight of his majesty. Revelation provides a strong corrective to this notion."

2. Jesus tells John not to be afraid, the same thing he told a terrified John on the mountain of his transfiguration (Mat. 17:7). He identifies himself with God by declaring "I am the first and the last" (1:17), which refers to God in Isa. 41:4, 44:6 and 48:12 and is essentially the same as God's self designation in Rev. 1:8, "the Alpha and the Omega." Jesus proclaims his resurrection and his eternity and makes clear that he has power even over death and its realm (1:18).

3. In light of Jesus' glorious identity ("therefore"), John is commanded in 1:19 to write "the things he saw and the things that are and the things that will take place after these things." Some put a lot of weight on this verse in terms of the structure of the book, but I think it probably just means he is to write all that is shown to him, which includes what has been shown, what is now being shown, and what will be shown to him.

4. In 1:20 John is told the meaning of the golden lampstands and the stars in Christ's right hand. This explanation was discussed above.

### III. Letters to churches (2:1 - 3:22)

#### A. The Church in Ephesus (2:1-7)

##### 1. Background on Ephesus

a. Ephesus was the most important city in Asia Minor. Its harbor and location at the convergence of three great trade routes made it an important commercial center. Rome had granted Ephesus the right of self-government, and Ephesus served as a site at which the Roman governor would regularly try important cases.

b. Ephesus had a major stadium and marketplace and a theater (cut into the hillside) that seated 25,000 people. This is the theater that the Ephesians rushed into in Acts 19:29 and where they shouted for about two hours "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians." The city also had a great marble main street, flanked on both sides by an elaborate colonnade that ran from the harbor to the theater. The population in N.T. times is estimated to have exceeded 250,000.

c. Ephesus had temples devoted to emperors, but its major religious attraction was the Temple of Artemis (Latin = Diana), one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. According to one reconstruction, it was about 420 feet long, 240 feet wide, 60 feet high, and supported by 117 columns. Since the temple was regarded as sacrosanct throughout the Mediterranean world, it became the primary banking institution of Asia Minor. It also attracted pilgrims to Ephesus during the festivals of Artemis in March-April. The statue of Artemis quite possibly was in part constructed from a fallen meteorite (see, Acts 19:35). The temple was destroyed in A.D. 262 by the Goths.

d. Magic arts, the attempt to master spirits, were popular in Ephesus. Charms or books believed to possess magical powers were called "Ephesian Letters." The scope of this phenomenon is evident in Acts 19:19 where, after the episode involving the seven sons of Sceva, people repented of their involvement in magic and burned their magic books. The value of these books, in current American dollars, would be over \$3 million (7.80/hr x 8hrs x 50,000)!

e. The Christian faith came to Ephesus about A.D. 52 when Paul left Priscilla and Aquila there en route from Corinth to Antioch (Acts 18:18-22). On his next missionary journey, Paul remained there about three years (Acts 19:8, 10, 20:31). He was violently opposed by a silversmith named Demetrius who made silver shrines of Artemis. Demetrius stirred up the people against the Christians, arguing that their message threatened both their livelihood and their god. When Paul met with the Ephesian elders in Miletus in Acts 20:17-38, he told them that "savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock" (20:29). Sometime later Timothy ministered in Ephesus (1 Tim. 1:3), and tradition associates the Apostle John with the city during the latter part of his life.

## 2. The Letter

### a. Greeting

(1) The letter is addressed to "the angel of the church in Ephesus." It is written to a single person or entity ("you" and "your" are singular), so

"angel" cannot refer merely to a messenger or a spokesman. The letter is addressed to the angel, not simply given to him.

(2) Yet, 2:7 makes clear that the message is to the "churches." As I said, it seems that the angel is a heavenly being who in some sense represents the church. Gregory Beale (p. 218) suggests that the churches are addressed through their representative angels to remind them "that already a dimension of their existence is heavenly, that their real home is not with the unbelieving 'earth dwellers' . . . , and that they have heavenly help and protection in their struggle not to be conformed to their pagan environment."

b. Title – Jesus is identified as "the one who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands." As the "mother church" of this region, the church in Ephesus is reminded that Christ alone is sovereign over the churches. He is walking in their midst, both protecting them and observing their faithfulness.

#### c. Praise

(1) The Lord commends them for their works, which consisted of toil, meaning intense labor, and patient endurance (perseverance). Their toil seemingly involved their struggle against, their refusal to put up with, certain evil people, heretics who falsely claimed to be apostles of some kind. This was in keeping with what Paul had foreseen in Acts 20. In what apparently was a significant ordeal, they "tested" the claims of these false teachers, meaning they critically examined them, and exposed their lies. The Ephesian Christians were not gullible.

(2) These false teachers are probably the same group referred to in v. 6 as the Nicolaitans. There the church is commended for *hating* the works of the Nicolaitans, which the Lord also *hates*. It is not sub-Christian to hate sin and to fight against its promotion and spread, and the church cannot get lured into accommodating sin by the false claim that it is unloving to reject it. This is very relevant to the push in some so-called churches to accept things like homosexual conduct and sex outside of marriage.

(3) We can be certain of very little with regard to the Nicolaitans. Based on later references to the group, they were a sect that practiced idolatry and immorality. The accuracy of that later description is supported by the fact the sins of idolatry and immorality are linked in Revelation with the teachings of Balaam (2:14-15) and Jezebel (2:20-23), which probably are different ways of referring to the Nicolaitans. (I will say more about that when we get to those verses.) So the Nicolaitans it seems had rationalized accommodating the pagan world in idolatrous practices like emperor worship, the pressure for which had increased greatly under Domitian, and had rationalized immoral living.

(4) In Mat. 7:15-20 Jesus warned against false teachers who would come in sheep's clothing but inwardly be ferocious wolves. Jude 4 speaks of those who pervert the grace of God into a license for immorality. Jesus said (Mat. 7:15-20) that any teaching that permits or justifies sinful living is false teaching, no matter how wise or sophisticated it was made to sound: "You will know them by their fruits." That no doubt factored into the Ephesians' testing of the claims of the self-styled apostles.

(5) It is not clear how the Nicolaitans tried to justify their practices theologically. An incipient or proto-Gnosticism was prevalent in Asia Minor (see 1 John), a view that disparaged the physical as being spiritually irrelevant, and it is quite possible they followed that to the conclusion that what one did with one's body in terms of sexual activity was spiritually irrelevant.

(6) The patient endurance for which the Ephesians are commended by the Lord involved their bearing up and not growing weary for the sake of his name. They had stood up for Christ in the face of persecution (1:9) and false teaching (2:2). They had persevered, they had borne patiently the hostility of a society at odds with their goals and efforts (recall Acts 19).

#### d. Criticism

(1) They are criticized for having abandoned the love they had at first. Given the fact they had persevered for Christ's name and had not grown weary, I do not think this is referring, in the first instance, to their love for Christ. I think it is a reference to the fact they no longer loved each other as they once did (which evidences a loss of love for God - 1 Jn. 4:20-21). The sense of spiritual family had ebbed.

(2) It is possible that this had resulted from the threat they faced from false teachers. Their good and commendable love for the truth and desire to maintain doctrinal correctness may have deteriorated into an unduly suspicious and critical spirit that stifled brotherly love, made it grow cold. We must learn how to maintain a zeal for orthodoxy that is not harsh and unloving.

(3) To the extent their love for God is in view, it means that they had gotten off track in their motivation. They were enduring and doing good things, but they did them for some lesser motivation than love for God (see 1 Cor. 13:1-3).

#### e. Command

(1) They are commanded to remember how far they have fallen. Remembering how things used to be can be a powerful force in effecting repentance. In this type of situation, it is the basis of conviction, the first step in overcoming sin.



(2) They are told to repent. They must make a decisive break with how they are now living. They must commit their hearts to change and implement that commitment by doing what they did at first.

#### f. Warning

(1) Unless the church repents of its lack of love, Christ will come in a preliminary judgment and remove its lampstand, probably meaning eliminate its status as a church. G. R. Beasley-Murray comments (p. 75), "Whatever outward appearance may suggest, the congregation will be as devoid of Christ as the temple of Jerusalem was of the presence of God's glory when his judgment fell upon it (see, Ezek. 11:22ff), and it will lose its place in the fellowship of Christ's congregations."

(2) This warning is reinforced with the call in v. 7a to listen to what the Spirit says to the churches. The exalted Christ is speaking through the Spirit as he inspired John to write to the churches. Grant Osborne observes (p. 122), "All who read this letter are to ask whether their church fits this situation and whether they too should 'listen' and 'repent.'"

(3) From Ignatius's letter to the Ephesians, written around A.D. 110 while Ignatius was en route to Rome to be put to death, the church in Ephesus heeded the Lord's word, showing evidence of deep love.

g. Promise – Those who "overcome" the enemy, which is done by remaining faithful to the one who defeated that enemy, will receive eternal life in perfect fellowship with God. Osborne writes (p. 122-123):

According to Homcy, "Our lives must declare the victory of Jesus over sin and death, with confidence in the ultimate triumph of his work over all the power of the enemy." Thus it demands faithfulness and a determination that we will place living for him alone above all earthly things. To be an "overcomer" in the eschatological war demands a day-by-day walk with God and dependence on his strength. In this sense, there is also warning, as seen in the contrast between the "overcomer" and the "cowardly" in 21:7, 8. Only the ones who conquer in Christ will stand on the crystal sea and sing hymns of victory as in 15:2 or "inherit" God's kingdom as in 21:7.

### B. The Church in Smyrna (2:8-11)

#### 1. Background on Smyrna

a. Smyrna was about 35 miles north of Ephesus, where the modern city of Izmir is located. It had a population in N.T. times of about 200,000 (some would put the figure around 100,000), slightly less than that of Ephesus, had an excellent harbor, and was second only to Ephesus in regard to exports. Smyrna had a famous stadium,

library, and public theater (the largest in Asia – the one at Ephesus seated 25,000!). Its famous street, called the "Street of Gold," curved around Mt. Pagus (which rose over 500 feet from the harbor).

b. Smyrna had long history of being loyal to the Roman Empire. When Domitian began emphasizing Emperor worship, Smyrna was one of the cities leading the way. This, plus a large Jewish population that was hostile to Christianity, made it very difficult to be a Christian in Smyrna.

c. We are not sure when the church was planted there. It may well have been in the early to mid-50's when Paul was in Ephesus. Around A.D. 110, Ignatius of Antioch, on a forced march to Rome where he would be martyred, stopped at Smyrna and there wrote letters to four other churches in the region. When he arrived in Troas, he wrote a letter to the church in Smyrna and a personal letter to Polycarp, one of its leaders.

## 2. The Letter

a. Title – Jesus is described as "the one who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again." This letter is to a persecuted church that needs to be reminded that Christ is the sovereign one, the one who is in control of all things. (In Isa. 44:6 God declares, "I am the first and the last; besides me there is no god.") As he was victorious over death, they need to be reminded that they too will be victorious if they remain faithful to him in the face of persecution.

b. Assures them he knows:

(1) their affliction (distress or suffering)

(a) This doesn't mean inconvenience; it means a serious burden that is threatening to crush them. They were being persecuted, which is not unusual for Christians. Christians have been mistreated from the beginning: Acts 4 – arrested and threatened; Acts 5 – imprisoned and flogged; Acts 7 – stoned to death; Acts 8 – great persecution; Acts 12 – arrested and put to death; Acts 13 – slandered and expelled; Acts 14 – run out; stoned in next city; Acts 16 – imprisoned and flogged; Acts 17 – arrested by rioting mob; run out; laughed at; Acts 18 – abused; arrested; beaten; Acts 19 – involved in riot; Acts 21 – beaten by mob; Acts 22 – imprisoned; Phil. 1:28-30 – church persecuted; 1 Thess. 1:6, 2:14 – church persecuted; Heb. 10:32-34 – persecuted; Jas. 1:2-8, 5:10-11 – persecution; 1 Pet. 4:12-16 – persecuted.

(b) Pliny the Younger was governor of Pontus/Bithynia. His letter to Emperor Trajan in A.D. 112 reveals just how serious this persecution became after Emperors began demanding that their subjects worship them and the Roman gods. From <http://www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/jod/texts/pliny.html>:

**Pliny wrote to Trajan:**

It is my practice, my lord, to refer to you all matters concerning which I am in doubt. For who can better give guidance to my hesitation or inform my ignorance? I have never participated in trials of Christians. I therefore do not know what offenses it is the practice to punish or investigate, and to what extent. And I have been not a little hesitant as to whether there should be any distinction on account of age or no difference between the very young and the more mature; whether pardon is to be granted for repentance, or, if a man has once been a Christian, it does him no good to have ceased to be one; whether the name itself, even without offenses, or only the offenses associated with the name are to be punished.

Meanwhile, in the case of those who were denounced to me as Christians, I have observed the following procedure: I interrogated these as to whether they were Christians; those who confessed I interrogated a second and a third time, threatening them with punishment; those who persisted I ordered executed. For I had no doubt that, whatever the nature of their creed, stubbornness and inflexible obstinacy surely deserve to be punished. There were others possessed of the same folly; but because they were Roman citizens, I signed an order for them to be transferred to Rome.

Soon accusations spread, as usually happens, because of the proceedings going on, and several incidents occurred. An anonymous document was published containing the names of many persons. Those who denied that they were or had been Christians, when they invoked the gods in words dictated by me, offered prayer with incense and wine to your image, which I had ordered to be brought for this purpose together with statues of the gods, and moreover cursed Christ--none of which those who are really Christians, it is said, can be forced to do--these I thought should be discharged. Others named by the informer declared that they were Christians, but then denied it, asserting that they had been but had ceased to be, some three years before, others many years, some as much as twenty-five years. They all worshipped your image and the statues of the gods, and cursed Christ.

They asserted, however, that the sum and substance of their fault or error had been that they were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god, and to bind themselves by oath, not to some crime, but not to commit fraud, theft, or adultery, not falsify their trust, nor to refuse to return a trust when called upon to do so. When this was over, it was their custom to depart and to assemble again to partake of food--but ordinary and innocent food. Even this, they affirmed, they had ceased to do after my edict by which, in accordance with your instructions, I had forbidden political associations. Accordingly, I judged it all the more necessary to find out what the truth was by torturing two female slaves who were called deaconesses [better *servants* – Latin

*ministrae*]. But I discovered nothing else but depraved, excessive superstition.

I therefore postponed the investigation and hastened to consult you. For the matter seemed to me to warrant consulting you, especially because of the number involved. For many persons of every age, every rank, and also of both sexes are and will be endangered. For the contagion of this superstition has spread not only to the cities but also to the villages and farms. But it seems possible to check and cure it. It is certainly quite clear that the temples, which had been almost deserted, have begun to be frequented, that the established religious rites, long neglected, are being resumed, and that from everywhere sacrificial animals are coming, for which until now very few purchasers could be found. Hence it is easy to imagine what a multitude of people can be reformed if an opportunity for repentance is afforded.

**Trajan responded to Pliny:**

You observed proper procedure, my dear Pliny, in sifting the cases of those who had been denounced to you as Christians. For it is not possible to lay down any general rule to serve as a kind of fixed standard. They are not to be sought out; if they are denounced and proved guilty, they are to be punished, with this reservation, that whoever denies that he is a Christian and really proves it--that is, by worshiping our gods--even though he was under suspicion in the past, shall obtain pardon through repentance. But anonymously posted accusations ought to have no place in any prosecution. For this is both a dangerous kind of precedent and out of keeping with the spirit of our age.

(c) Jesus wants these suffering Christians to know that their loyalty to him is not going unnoticed. He wanted them to know what Paul had told the Corinthians, that their "labor in the Lord is not in vain" (1 Cor. 15:58).

(2) their poverty

(a) Their lack of money and possessions is no doubt connected with their persecution. As outcasts, it would be difficult for them to make a living. It may also be the case that their property had been looted (see, e.g., Heb. 10:32-34).

(b) Despite this poverty, Jesus declares that they are rich! They are rich because true wealth, true value, is not a matter of material things. The person who has a faith that he or she will not abandon when pressured by persecution to do so has something worth more than all the world's gold.

(3) their being slandered by non-Christian Jews

(a) Non-Christian Jews, those who refused to believe Jesus was the Messiah, opposed Christians because they saw Christian worship of Jesus as blasphemy, because Christians were having success winning people to their faith, including Jews and those investigating Judaism (God-fearers), and probably because they were nervous, after the Jewish war with Rome in A.D. 66-73, about Judaism being associated with a messianic movement like Christianity.

(b) These Jews slandered Christians presumably by fanning the lies that Christians were engaged in criminal and antisocial behavior (were immoral, subversive, home wreckers, atheists, cannibals, and arsonists) and by sometimes renouncing individual Christians before authorities as threats to the public peace and welfare. There is evidence of this in Smyrna some sixty years later when Polycarp was killed by the Romans. When the authorities came for Polycarp, then an old man, the Jews were screaming for him to be killed and helped in the gathering of the wood that was used to burn him to death. Poythress suggests (p. 53) the statement in 2:9 that "they say that they are Jews and are not" may be a play on Jews who denounced to the Roman authorities Christians who were seeking the protection of Jewish identification by saying "they say they are Jews but are not."

(c) Jesus makes clear that these opponents were not "real" Jews. A real Jew is not simply a physical descendant of Abraham but one who accepts God's truth about Jesus (Rom. 2:28-29). Unbelieving Jews had been removed from God's olive tree by their unbelief (Rom. 11:17-21). By rejecting Christ they had rejected God and by aiding the persecution of Christians they were working for God's supreme adversary, Satan (see Jn. 8:31-47).

c. Calls them to endure future suffering

(1) He tells them not to fear what they are about to suffer. This is reminiscent of his words in Mat. 10:28 where he told his disciples: "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell."

(2) Outwardly the Roman authorities would be harming them, but in reality they were tools of the devil. The devil is going to do this "that they may be tempted/tested" (*peirázō* has both senses). If the clause refers to the devil's purpose, it means he is doing it so that they may be *tempted* to abandon their faith, their allegiance to Christ. If it refers to God's purpose, as the passive form may indicate, it means he is allowing it that they may be *tested* with regard to their faith, given the opportunity to demonstrate its character and to be strengthened in it. Some (e.g., Beckwith) think it has a double meaning here. Although this coming period of affliction was going to be temporary ("10 days"), it was going to be extreme and was going to cost some of them their lives.

(3) He commands them to be faithful, even to the point of death.

(a) This theme appears throughout the book. In 12:11 it says that Christians overcame the devil (NIV) "by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death." In 14:9-12 an angel announces that (NIV) "If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives its mark on their forehead or on their hand, they, too, will drink the wine of God's fury." In 21:7-8 God says (NIV), "Those who are victorious will inherit all this [great blessings], and I will be their God and they will be my children. But the *cowardly*, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars—they will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulfur."

(b) As Pliny said in his letter to Trajan, he had been told that people who are really Christians cannot be made to burn incense to the Emperor's image or to Roman gods. The Lord's message had sunk into these early Christians. Being faithful to him was more important than life itself. That puts a different light on such verses as Lk. 9:24, "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it."

(c) It is quite likely that Polycarp was one of the members of the church in Smyrna at the time Revelation was written. He went on to become a leader in that congregation. In A.D. 155 he was put to death by the Roman authorities for his refusal to renounce Christ. We have an account of that event that was made by members of the church not long after his death. See, e.g., the translation at <http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-01/anf01-13.htm>.

(d) This type of commitment and faithfulness was repeated throughout the history of the church. In A.D. 311-12 there was a horrible persecution of Christians in Egypt. Eusebius was an eyewitness to some of it. See especially chapters 7 – 9 at <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/250108.htm>.

(4) Jesus promises that he will give the faithful a crown of life. This is a victor's crown, what was awarded to athletes who triumphed through a struggle. Smyrna was famed for its games, so this would be a natural metaphor. The crown is a "crown of life" because the faithful will be resurrected to an eternal and glorious life, just as Jesus was. Paul certainly grasped this. He told Timothy in 2 Tim. 4:6-8 (ESV):

<sup>6</sup> For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. <sup>7</sup> I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. <sup>8</sup> Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.

(5) Jesus assures them that those who overcome, who remain steadfast in their faith, will not be hurt by the second death. They will receive

eternal life, not eternal condemnation. They will not be cast into the fiery lake of burning sulfur, which 21:8 identifies as the second death.

d. He exhorts them to heed his words saying, "He who has an ear, hear what the Spirit says to the churches!"

### C. The Church in Pergamum (2:12-17)

#### 1. Background on Pergamum

a. Located about seventy miles north of Smyrna, about fifteen miles inland, where the modern city of Bergama is located. As early as 197-159 B.C. it boasted a library of more than 200,000 volumes. The city was so famous for book production that the modern term "parchment" was derived from "Pergamum" (Aune).

b. It was a center for the worship of the most important pagan gods (Zeus, Athena, Dionysus, and Asklepios). It was the capital of the province and the official center in Asia for the imperial cult. It was the first city in Asia to receive permission to build a temple dedicated to the worship of a living ruler. In 29 B.C. Augustus granted permission for a temple to be erected in Pergamum "to the Divine Augustus and the goddess Roma."

#### 2. The Letter

a. Title – Jesus is described as the one "who has the sharp, two-edged sword." This is a reminder to the threatened congregation that, although the Roman proconsul in this capital city had the power to execute at will, ultimate power over life and death belongs to God and his Christ. He is the true judge.

b. Jesus assures them he knows:

(1) They live where Satan has his throne. This probably refers to the fact Pergamum was the official center of emperor worship in Asia. This would make it a hotbed for Christian persecution.

(2) Despite the difficulty this created, they had remained faithful to his name. Even when the persecution had become so intense that one of them (Antipas) was put to death, they did not renounce their faith. The phrase "where Satan lives" reveals that such hostility to Christianity is ultimately driven by Satan.

c. Criticism

(1) They are criticized for tolerating in their midst some who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans, which teaching is analogous to the teaching of Balaam. In Numbers 25:1-9 and 31:16 we see that Balaam was the mastermind behind luring Israel away from God and into idolatry and sexual immorality. These people have

figuratively grabbed hold of the teaching of Balaam in grabbing hold of the analogous teaching of the Nicolaitans.

(2) Like Balaam, it seems the Nicolaitans had rationalized participating in idol feasts and the accompanying sexual immorality, events that under Domitian would often include emperor worship as a sign of patriotism and loyalty. There would be great pressure for this type of compromise living in a city that was a center of pagan worship.

(3) Whereas the church in Ephesus was praised for not tolerating, indeed for *hating*, the works of the Nicolaitans, the church in Pergamum is endangered by its failure to oppose these heretics.

d. Command - Repent! They must cease accepting in their fellowship those who engage in such works. It is not "spiritual" to be tolerant of wickedness; it is disobedient, ungodly, unloving, and damaging to the body of Christ. That is why Paul in 1 Cor. 5:1-5 rebuked the church in Corinth for tolerating a sexually immoral man in their midst and demanded that they disfellowship him. Christ forgives without limit, but he always demands repentance.

e. Warning and promise

(1) If the church does not repent of tolerating this sin, Christ will come in judgment against the church, presumably by removing its lampstand as in 2:5, and will war against the adherents of the Nicolaitan heresy, presumably by inflicting illness, suffering, and even death on them as in 2:21-23 (see also Acts 5:1-11, 1 Cor. 11:27-30).

(2) Those who "overcome," those who conquer the pressure of persecution and the pressure to tolerate the Nicolaitans, will be given "hidden manna." I think "manna" represents God's miraculous provision for his people, which is what it was in the desert after the Exodus, and it here stands for all that God will provide his people in the eternal state. Those blessings are currently unseen, hidden in heaven, awaiting disclosure in the consummated kingdom at Christ's return.

(3) Those who overcome also will be given a white stone inscribed with a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it. It is not clear what it means. The background may be the white stone that ancient jurors would place in an urn to vote for acquittal or a stone that was given to victors at games as an admission ticket to a feast. Either one would symbolize a blessing from God. The new name may be a way of indicating the special nature and status of the Christian's relationship with God in eternity.

f. He who has ears, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.



## D. The Church in Thyatira (2:18-29)

### 1. Background on Thyatira

a. It was about forty miles southeast of Pergamum (where modern Akhisar is located) on the road to Sardis. Politically, culturally, and religiously, it was the least significant of the seven cities, but it receives the longest of the seven letters.

b. It was a commercial city with a large number of trade guilds or unions. Inscriptions mention woolworkers, linen-workers, makers of outer garments, dyers, leather-workers, tanners, potters, bakers, slave-dealers, and bronze-smiths. Acts 16 refers to Lydia as a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira. Every craftsman and trader naturally belonged to the appropriate guild.

c. Ancient trade guilds were very much connected to local religious observances. Each guild had its own patron deity, and the meetings of these societies often included a common meal dedicated to a pagan god and frequently involved sexual immorality. The primary god worshiped in Thyatira was Apollo, the sun god and son of Zeus.

### 2. The Letter

a. Title – Jesus is described as "the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze." This is the only place in Revelation where the title "Son of God" is used, probably as a reminder that Jesus, not Apollo, is the true Son of God. His eyes of blazing fire see through the seductive arguments of Jezebel, and he is powerful in his opposition.

b. Jesus assures them he knows their good works or deeds, which he specifies as their love, their faith, their service, and their perseverance. Osborne remarks (p. 155), "These four describe a life of Christian caring for others and faithfulness to God." He also knows that, unlike the church in Ephesus that had forsaken its first love, they are now doing more than they did at first. They had some very important things right at the church in Thyatira.

### c. Criticism

(1) But whereas the church in Ephesus was praised for hating the practices of the Nicolaitans, the church in Thyatira is criticized for tolerating a woman referred to as Jezebel who calls herself a prophetess. Jezebel, of course, was the wicked Phoenician wife of the Israelite king Ahab who promoted in Israel the worship of the Canaanite god Baal (1 Ki. 16:29 ff.; 2 Ki. 9:30 ff.), which included sexual immorality.

(2) Like Jezebel, this woman in Thyatira, who claimed to be speaking directly for God, was teaching that it was acceptable for Christians to

participate in idol feasts and the accompanying sexual immorality. She most likely was the local voice of the Nicolaitan movement, which 2:14-15 and church history indicate involved the same practices. She offered a compromise that allowed them to be accepted in the economically important trade guilds, and her teaching was persuading a segment of the church.

(3) Christ, probably through his spokesmen, had urged her to repent of her compromise with paganism, but she was unwilling to heed his word. He now promises to inflict her with illness. He also threatens her followers with suffering and death unless they repent (e.g., Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5). The result of this will be to reinforce for the churches the fact that he knows all things and cannot be mocked, that he punishes impenitence and rewards faithfulness.

#### d. Encouragement and promise

(1) Jesus refers to those who do not hold to Jezebel's teaching as those "who have not learned what some call 'the deep things of Satan.'" The "deep things of Satan" was probably a sarcastic term used by faithful Christians to refer to what Jezebel's group, the Nicolaitans, called the "deep things of God," i.e., the notion that Christians can participate in idolatry (as Jewish opponents were called in 2:9 a "synagogue of Satan"). If "deep things of Satan" was a phrase used by Jezebel's group, it probably reflects their view that engaging Satan through such things as idolatry shows enlightenment in that it shows awareness of the "fact" that knowledge of Christ renders such engagement insignificant.

(2) He lays no burden on these faithful saints other than the requirement that they hold to the truth they have until he comes. Those who overcome and who do his will "to the end" will share with Christ in his final victory over his (and their) opponents, which is described from Psalm 2 as the breaking of them to pieces. It is a rule expressed in the ultimate defeat and punishment of the enemies of Christ (19:15), and Christians in some sense will share in that victory in and through their identification with Christ. As Leon Morris states (p. 74), "This seems to show that the overcomer will have a place in the final decisive victory of Christ over the world forces opposed to God."

(3) Those who overcome and do his will also will be given the "morning star." Jesus is called the "bright morning star" in 22:16, and I think the idea is the same one Peter expresses in 2 Pet. 1:19: And we have the wholly reliable prophetic word, to which you do well in paying attention as to a light shining in a dark place, *until [the] day dawns and [the] morning star rises in your hearts*. The "day" of which Peter is speaking is the day of Christ's consummating return. At that time, the "morning star," Jesus Christ, will rise in the hearts of the faithful in that their gratitude for and appreciation of him will become even greater as their faith becomes sight. They will, in the vernacular, "be busting." So the faithful will be given the morning star in the sense they will be given Christ in a new way, given a new experience of his glory.

e. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. We cannot allow our desire to fit in for economic or safety reasons to cause us to compromise our undivided allegiance to Jesus Christ.

## E. The Church in Sardis (3:1-6)

### 1. Background on Sardis

a. It was located on a mountain on the edge of the Hermus River valley, about 40 miles southeast of Thyatira and 45 miles east of Smyrna. Some 600 years earlier it had been one of the most powerful cities in the ancient world, but it had been in decline as far as political importance for many years.

b. In A.D. 17 Sardis was severely damaged in an earthquake. It was rebuilt with considerable financial assistance from Emperor Tiberius. It was an active commercial city and was very wealthy. It was a center for woolen goods, it claimed to be the first to discover the art of dyeing wool, and it was where gold and silver coins were first made. The estimated first-century population was around 120,000 (McRay, 261).

### 2. The Letter

a. Title – Jesus is described as "the one who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars." This suggests that in and through him they have available the power of the Holy Spirit and that he is the Lord and protector of the churches. This nearly dead church needed to know that the Lord who calls them to revival has and makes available the power to achieve it.

b. He assures them he knows their works:

(1) Here there is nothing to commend. In prior letters his assurance of knowing their works served to comfort the church. Here it is the basis for his criticism. They had a reputation for being alive, but in fact they were spiritually dead. This was demonstrated by the incompleteness or unsatisfactory state of their works. The works praised by Christ in 2:19 (re Thyatira) are love, faith, service, and perseverance. Just as Sardis had declined politically over the centuries, the church was declining spiritually.

(2) They apparently had enough "Christian show" to maintain their reputation, but their efforts were half-hearted attempts at obedience. They were not really obeying Christ; they were "playing Christianity." This may well be why we do not read of any persecution there. It was a mediocre form of Christianity that did not challenge or disturb its neighbors. It was a model of inoffensive Christianity.

c. Commands

(1) They must "wake up," must tune in to their condition and appreciate its serious and degenerative nature.

(2) They must begin strengthening what remains and is about to die. They must fan the sparks of the spiritual life that remains within the church. He elaborates on how this will happen:

(a) They must remember what they had received and heard. They needed to recall the gospel they had received (had said "yes" to) and to recall the teaching they had heard on the implications of that gospel for their lives.

(b) They must repent and obey it. They needed to commit themselves once again to obeying the word of the Lord that had been delivered to them and to follow through on that commitment.

d. They are warned that if they remain on their present course, Christ will come in judgment against them at a time they do not expect. The nature of that judgment is not specified, but with many commentators I think it refers to some kind of temporal judgment that he will inflict on the church, a punishment *within* rather than at the end of history, perhaps the removal of its lampstand or some physical harm.

e. Commendation – There were a few in Sardis who had not "soiled their garments," a play on the manufacture and dyeing of woolen goods in the city. These saints had not compromised with the pagan environment and thereby defiled themselves so as to be unacceptable to a holy God but had remained faithful to Christ's call of discipleship.

f. Promise

(1) As faithful servants of Christ, those who had not "soiled their garments" are promised that they will walk with Christ in white, in the purity and holiness that his atoning death provides. This is a reference to their eternal fellowship with Christ and thus with the Godhead. As Robert Mounce explains (p. 112-113), "They themselves have done nothing to merit their exalted position. They are worthy in the sense that they have withstood the pressure to apostatize and hence have done nothing which would result in forfeiting their position." In Paul's words in Phil. 1:27, they had conducted themselves in a manner *worthy* of the gospel of Christ.

(2) The promise is now spoken more generally in terms of the one who overcomes. This includes the presently faithful in Sardis who are overcoming by not soiling their garments and any who will heed Christ's warning and repent. The one who overcomes will be clothed in white garments as just indicated, and unlike those who succumb to the pagan culture, will not have his name blotted out of the book of life.

(3) The overcomer's position among the saved is reinforced by the statement that Jesus will confess that person's name before his Father and the angels (see Mat. 10:32; Lk. 12:8). As Jesus said in Mk. 8:38 (ESV), "For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels." Osborne states (p. 181), "The majority of the church at Sardis had been 'ashamed' of Christ, probably by compromising their Christian distinctives in order to be accepted by their peers."

g. Again, he who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

## F. The Church in Philadelphia (3:7-13)

### 1. Background on Philadelphia

a. Founded in the second century B.C., Philadelphia was smaller and younger than the other cities addressed. It was located about 30 miles southeast of Sardis on the site of modern Alashehir. The city was destroyed in A.D. 17 by the same earthquake that leveled Sardis and was rebuilt with assistance from Emperor Tiberius.

b. Philadelphia was a prosperous city with much pagan worship, particularly worship of Dionysus, and it had an established Jewish population. These Jews were opposed to the church there and possibly taunted the Christians as having no part in the Messiah and his kingdom.

### 2. The Letter

#### a. Self-identification

(1) Jesus identifies himself to this church as "the holy one, the true one." The "holy one" was a familiar title for God (e.g., Isa. 1:4, 37:23, 40:25; Hab. 3:3; Mk. 1:24; Jn. 6:69). In Rev. 6:10 God himself is described as holy and true. Jesus is alluding to his divinity and to the fact he is the genuine Messiah and thus can be counted on to deliver on his promises.

(2) He further identifies himself as the one "who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens."

(a) This is an allusion to Isa. 22:22 where Isaiah prophesies that Eliakim will replace Shebna as Hezekiah's steward. The Lord says of Eliakim, "I will place on his shoulder the key to the house of David; what he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open." He had complete control of access to the king and complete control over the king's affairs.

(b) The expression is used of Christ to indicate his complete control over entrance to the eternal kingdom, the New Jerusalem. It is not a matter of public opinion or political debate. When Christ opens the door for his followers, no amount of criticism, denial, or persecution can shut it. When he shuts the door on those who oppose him, no human decree or desire can open it. This may well have been aimed at the Jews who were falsely claiming that they would inherit the kingdom and that Christ's followers would be shut out (as they had probably been shut out of the synagogue).

(c) In v. 8a Jesus specifically says he has placed before these Christians an open door that no one can shut. A Christian can choose to walk away from Jesus, but no person or power can prevent a faithful Christian from entering the consummated kingdom.

#### b. Jesus assures them he knows their deeds

(1) As with Smyrna, there is nothing but approval here. He knows that they have little strength, meaning they were not influential or powerful. They were a small congregation that had not made a major impact on the city. They would not make today's list of "great churches."

(2) Yet they have kept his word and have not denied his name. They are praised by Christ in spite of their little strength because they had not denied him in the face of persecution. As he notes in v. 10, they had kept his command to endure patiently. This reminded me of what Chuck Colson wrote some years ago in Prison Fellowship's monthly newsletter, *Jubilee*:

By the time you read this, we will have dedicated our new national offices near Washington, D.C. As a result of this and other recent expansions, many people have written me to the effect that "God is obviously blessing Prison Fellowship's ministry."

As much as I am sincerely certain that God is, indeed, blessing us, I believe even more certainly that it's a dangerous and misguided policy to measure God's blessing by standards of visible, tangible, material "success."

The inference is that when things are prospering "God is blessing us" and, conversely, that when things are going poorly, or unpublicized, God's blessing is not upon the work or it is unimportant. . . . We must continuously use the measure of our obedience to the guidelines of his Word as the real – and only – standard of our "success," not some more supposedly tangible or glamorous scale.

#### c. Reward for faithfulness

(1) Jesus promises that he will make those Jews who are slandering and persecuting them, who are a "synagogue of Satan" (see 2:9) in that they

are God's adversary despite their claim to be his people (see Rom. 2:28-29), ultimately bow down before their feet. As indicated in 2:26-27, Christians in some sense will share in Christ's ultimate defeat and punishment of his enemies through their identification with Christ, and these non-Christian Jews who were persecuting the church will be among the unbelievers who at that point are forced to submit to Jesus as Lord and to those with whom he has chosen to share his victory. They will acknowledge on that day that Christians are the blessed of the Lord. So the homage that these Jews expected they would receive from Gentiles at the eschaton, they will themselves give to the church, many of which were Gentiles!

(2) Because they kept the teaching about Christ's endurance ("my" modifying "endurance" rather than the entire phrase "word of endurance") in that they conformed their lives to his example, Jesus will keep them from the hour of trial coming on the whole world to try those who dwell on the earth.

(a) With Philip Hughes (p. 61) and Alan Johnson (p. 633) (see also Beale, 290; Beasley-Murray, 101), I think the point here is that, because of their faithfulness to Christ, they (and, by implication, all of like faithfulness) will be protected from the universal ordeal of the final judgment, which is always about to come (see Introduction). They have nothing to fear from that judgment for it is punishment of those who persisted in impenitence and unbelief. Note that in Revelation "those dwelling on the earth" is a technical term for unbelieving idolaters, the enemies of God (Beale, 290; Osborne, 193). So this trial is not persecution of Christians but God's judgment against the world.

(b) This protection of Christians from judgment is symbolized in the sealing of the 144,000 in 7:1-8. This does not mean that Christians will be exempt from suffering and even death at the hands of their enemies. On the contrary, Christians have and will experience the birth pains of persecution, the wrath of the dragon, which will intensify at the end in what is known as the great tribulation, but they will not experience the wrath of Almighty God.

(3) They are reminded in 3:11 of the fact Christ's coming is near, as it always is since he inaugurated the kingdom, as an encouragement to constant faithfulness. They must hold fast to their faith in the midst of persecution lest they allow their persecutors to deprive them of the crown of life that is promised to those who are faithful even to the point of death (2:10). This reinforces the conclusion that the hour of trial referred to in 3:10 is the judgment at Christ's return.

(4) Jesus says he will make the overcomer a pillar in God's temple. This symbolizes that those who remain faithful, who overcome the pressure to compromise their allegiance to Christ, will be permanently in the presence of God. It is a metaphor depicting the believer's permanent place in the consummated kingdom so it does not conflict with the absence of a temple as indicated in 21:22. The fact Jesus will inscribe on this pillar the name of God, the name of the city of God, specified to be the New Jerusalem that comes down out of heaven (see 21:2), and his own new name

symbolizes that the person belongs to God, to the city of God, and to the Son of God (whatever his "new name" may be).

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

## G. The Church in Laodicea (3:14-22)

### 1. Background on Laodicea

a. Laodicea (modern Eskihisar) was located at the intersection of two important trade routes about 45 miles southeast of Philadelphia and about 100 miles due east of Ephesus. Along with Colossae and Hierapolis, it was one of the cities of the fertile Lycus Valley. In Roman times, it became the wealthiest city in this area (Phrygia). An indication of its wealth is that when it was destroyed by an earthquake in A.D. 60 it rebuilt itself over several decades without any financial aid from Rome.

b. The city was known for its banks, for its linen and wool industry (famous glossy black wool), and for its medical school. The medical school was related to the temple (13 miles away) and cult of Mēn Carus, an ancient and local god of healing. Laodicean doctors believed in mixtures of different substances as the cure to diseases. Their two most famous compounds were ointments for the eyes and the ears. Other gods were honored and worshiped at Laodicea, the main one being Zeus.

c. The city lacked an adequate and convenient source of water, so it brought water in from springs six miles to the south through a system of stone pipes. The water was lukewarm when it arrived, which made it rather disgusting to drink.

d. The church was probably founded during Paul's stay in Ephesus on his third missionary journey (Acts 19:10), possibly by Epaphras who planted the church in Colossae. There is no evidence that Paul visited this church (but see Philem. 22), but he did write them a letter (Col. 4:16) that has been lost (unless it is our letter to the Ephesians). There is indirect evidence from ancient sources that suggests there was a sizeable Jewish population in the city.

### 2. The Letter

#### a. Self-identification

(1) Jesus identifies himself as "the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler/originator/beginning (*archē*) of God's creation." "Amen" is primarily an acknowledgment of that which is sure, valid, and binding. It is a word of human response to God's truth or action. Jesus is "the Amen" in that he is the perfect response to God's will and promises. He is the ultimate "so be it" or "your will be done," the ultimate man of faithfulness, which is quite a contrast to the Laodiceans.



(2) The phrase "faithful and true witness" clarifies this meaning of "the Amen." Jesus is an absolutely trustworthy and reliable witness on God's behalf. Indeed, as the writer of Hebrews put it (Heb. 1:3), he is the exact representation of God's being or nature. There is perfect fidelity in his representation.

(3) As "the ruler/originator/beginning" of creation he has absolute power over the world and thus needs to be heeded. This resonates with Christ's role in creation expressed in Col. 1:16, a text with which the Laodiceans were familiar (Col. 4:16).

b. Jesus assures them he knows their deeds. As with the church in Sardis, there is nothing to commend. His assuring them he knows their works is not a basis for comfort but a basis for criticism.

(1) He knows their works are neither cold nor hot. The hot springs of nearby Hierapolis were a famous means of healing and the cold, pure drinking water of nearby Colossae was a means of refreshment, but the lukewarm water that flowed into Laodicea over the aqueduct was good for neither. The church in Laodicea paralleled its water situation in that it was providing neither refreshment for the spiritually weary nor healing for the spiritually sick. It was not blessing the lives of people.

(2) That is why Christ says he wishes they were either cold or hot. He wanted them to be of some spiritual benefit rather than be too complacent about their faith to have any impact. Playing off the water situation, Christ says he is *about to* vomit them out of his mouth, i.e., reject them. They are running out of time, but there is still time to repent (v. 19).

(3) The complacency that was at the root of their ineffectiveness was itself rooted in their affluence. Material blessings carry the danger of a sense of self-sufficiency. Those who "have it now" have a hard time feeling their spiritual needs. The Bible warns repeatedly about the spiritual-numbing effect of wealth. They did not realize that, in terms of what matters (faith), they were poverty stricken. Osborne comments (p. 207), "With no external pressure from pagan (like Sardis) or Jewish (like Smyrna or Philadelphia) persecution, with no internal threat from heretical movements (like Ephesus, Pergamum, or Thyatira), they had succumbed to their own affluent lifestyle, and they did not even know it!"

c. The solution is to repent, to make Christ the center of their lives. Only from him can true riches be obtained. He urges their repentance in terms that were particularly suited to their situation, i.e., in terms that related to their banking industry, their textile industry, and their medical school.

(1) He "counsels" them to buy *from him* gold refined in the fire. This refers to the genuine spiritual wealth that only Christ can provide.

(2) He counsels them to buy from him white clothes to cover their shameful nakedness. In contrast to their famous black woolen garments, these white clothes are symbols of righteousness that will avert the judgment and humiliation symbolized by their nakedness.

(3) He counsels them to buy from him salve for their eyes so they can see. Only Christ can provide the true perspective on reality that permits one to see what is truly valuable.

d. Jesus urges them further to repent. He tells them that his stern rebuke is because he loves them. It is not loving to whitewash a spiritually deadly condition for the sake of not offending someone.

e. He stands at the door and knocks in the sense he is beckoning each individual in that congregation to repent. If any will respond to his plea, their fellowship with him will be secure. In Oriental lands, the sharing of a common meal indicated a strong bond of affection and companionship. The culmination of this fellowship will be at Christ's table in the consummated kingdom (Lk. 22:30).

f. He promises those who overcome, who resist all that threatens to alienate them from him, that they will share his glory in eternity. Through their identification with him, they will in some sense share the throne that he shares with the Father; they will in some sense reign with him.

g. The call to listen is repeated once more: He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.