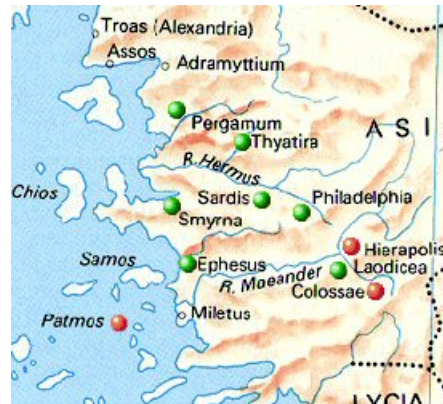


The Revelation to John  
Chapter Two  
Letters to Four Churches  
Ephesus, Sardis, Pergamun, Thyatira

Leon L. Combs, M.A., M.Div., Ph.D.



### Introduction

It is important to discover how Jesus describes or presents Himself in each of the letters. It is equally important to note the different promises to each of the churches. The description of Jesus and the promises of Jesus are an important distinctive note in the letters to each church. It is important to realize that churches 1 and 7 are in grave danger, churches 2 and 6 are in excellent condition, and churches 3, 4, and 5 are neither very good nor very bad.

### The Church at Ephesus

Ephesus was the most important of the seven cities as I discussed in my commentary on Acts. It also contained one of the great Seven Wonders of the World, the temple to the goddess Artemis. Timothy was at this church for a time (1 Tim 1:3) and tradition says that John also lived there for a while. The church became a center for evangelization of the entire area (Acts 19:26) and the Christians had a great witness (Acts 19:10) and had given up a lot for the practice of Christianity (Acts 19:19). But an entire generation had passed by the time of this writing and the congregation had cooled considerably.

**Rev 2:1 “To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands, says this:”**

Presentation of Jesus: His description is of a preserver and watchman. He is present among all the churches.

**Rev 2:2 'I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot endure evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false;**

**Rev 2:3 and you have perseverance and have endured for My name's sake, and have not grown weary.”**

There is no doubt that this is a message from Jesus as He evaluates the performance of this church. He begins with some positive reinforcement. Jesus knows all that is going on in this church and He selects three things for praise: their deeds, their hard work, and their perseverance. He also praises them for their testing of the messages by people claiming to be apostles. All of us should continually test the messages of anyone claiming to speak for God and we now have the entire Bible to help us. Since they found these people to be false apostles we know that they were deceivers and not merely deluded people. Paul had warned about the coming of such false wolves and now they had come.

*Acts 20:29 “I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock;*

*Acts 20:30 and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them.”*

Many modern churches would do well to also practice such discernment. Paul also warned the church of Corinth of such dangers:

*2Cor 11:13 “For such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ.*

*2Cor 11:14 And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light.*

*2Cor 11:15 Therefore it is not surprising if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness; whose end shall be according to their deeds.”*

Jesus praised them for their perseverance and endurance for His sake. He also complements them on not growing weary in their work for Him.

**Rev 2:4 “But I have this against you, that you have left your first love.**

**Rev 2:5 'Remember therefore from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you, and will remove your lampstand out of its place-- unless you repent.**

**Rev 2:6 'Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.**

**Rev 2:7 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the Paradise of God.”**

Now Jesus levels some hard criticism of them. It is always a temptation to lose our love for Jesus in our devotion to the work of the church. It is not clear if Jesus is here referring to their love for Him, for each other, or for mankind but the criticism could be

for all three. When I taught chapter 13 of 1 Corinthians we saw the importance of God's love working through all that we do. I remember an important theologian once saying that the proof to him that he was a child of God was that he loved Jesus. There was and still is a movement called the "social gospel" in which the churches concentrate their efforts on helping communities and individuals in need. What is often missing in such efforts is the emphasis on why the work is being done: for the love of Jesus. No matter the extent of our work, if we do not do it with the love of Jesus then it is for naught. Any community group can do works of helping people but if there is no difference between the "Community Club" and the church in its functions then something is bad wrong with the church.

He tells them to remember their first love, meaning the moment when they first knew that Jesus lived and died for us because He loved us and we must love Him for such a sacrifice. Whenever we find ourselves having moved away from the driving force of all that we do for Him being our love for Him then we must also repent. He then tells them to repent and to return to that first love. His warning to them is fierce. If He removes their lampstand then they will no longer be a Church of Jesus Christ. They may still exist and do their social work but they will no longer be recognized by Him as a real church. I read a report where someone recently went to that area and counted only three people claiming to be Christians and they could not even clearly remember who Paul and John were! Jesus did say that He recognized that they hated the deeds of the Nicolaitans, whom He also hated. We are not clear as to the origin of these people but they seem to be similar to the worshipers of Baal and of Jezebel. I will discuss these people later. The huge danger to such people is that they do not claim to be destroying Christianity but that they are presenting a more modern and improved version of it. Such work is insidious work of the fifth column that seeks to destroy from within. A **fifth column** refers to any clandestine group or faction of subversive agents who attempt to undermine a nation's or some group's solidarity. We should all recognize similar work being done here and now in the church.

He ends this section with the same warning as He does to all the churches and it is a general warning to all churches today. The only people who have ears to hear and eyes to see are the people who have been born again and given those abilities. So He is telling His people to listen carefully and to heed the warnings. The reward is only for those who overcome and persevere, as will all true Christians. The tree of life was cut off from mankind after the sin of Adam but it will be freely available to those who will live with Him forever (chapter 22 of Revelation). The word "paradise" is from the Persian and it means a park where we will exist in true bliss forever with Him.

Promise from Jesus: His warning to them is fierce. If they do not repent He will remove their lampstand and they will no longer be a Church of Jesus Christ. The tree of life was cut off from mankind after the sin of Adam but it will be freely available to those who will live with Him forever (Rev 22:2).

## The Church at Smyrna

**Rev 2:8 “And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life, says this:”**

Presentation of Jesus: He is the One who has always existed, He is the One who let Himself become dead, and He is the One who was resurrected.

**Rev 2:9 'I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.**

**Rev 2:10 'Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.**

**Rev 2:11 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death.’”**

Smyrna was also a major city in the area and was one of the first cities to worship the Roman emperor. Smyrna was destroyed in 580 BC and was rebuilt in 290 BC so His reference to being dead and now alive may have been a reflection to the history of Smyrna also. The introduction leaves no doubt that the message is from Jesus. The tense of the words implies the meaning: “he became dead and sprang to life again”. He lets the church members know that He knows of their worldly condition and compares it to their spiritual condition. Their tribulation relates to their severe burdens that could crush people. He knows of their worldly poverty but contrasts it to their spiritual riches and we could all constantly be making such comparisons. The Greek word of poverty used here, “*ptochos*” means having nothing at all so their poverty was extreme. Many think that their poverty was a result of the Jewish persecution of the Christians. Since Christianity was illegal, the Jews could rob from them with no fear of being legally persecuted. The people of the town were very wealthy so the poverty of the Christians is in stark contrast to the average citizen. Christians have often been poor because of their devotion to Jesus so the “prosperity gospel” of today is in great opposition to true discipleship.

*Heb 10:32 “But remember the former days, when, after being enlightened, you endured a great conflict of sufferings,*

*Heb 10:33 partly, by being made a public spectacle through reproaches and tribulations, and partly by becoming sharers with those who were so treated.*

*Heb 10:34 For you showed sympathy to the prisoners, and accepted joyfully the seizure of your property, knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and an abiding one.”*

Jesus also knows of the work of the Jews there and even though they think that they are worshipping God, they actually are worshipping Satan. Jesus also recognized such people during His ministry on earth:

*John 8:44 "You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature; for he is a liar, and the father of lies."*

Remember that Saul was also such a false worshipper before he was born again into Paul.

The blasphemy of the Jews was slander that sinks deep into the heart and lasts a long time. Those of us who have had similar arrows thrown at us know somewhat of that type of suffering. They had already endured slander and poverty and now He then tells them that they are about to endure even more tribulation.

Polycarp was probably a member of the church of Smyrna and he may have read the letter and used it as an encouragement when his time of death for Christ came in about 156 AD. He is rumored to have been the Bishop of the church appointed by John. At the age of 86 Polycarp was martyred in Smyrna and the hostility against Christians was so great then that the Jews even cut wood for the fire on the Sabbath to burn him at the stake. All Christians are called to suffer, not to reap great earthly wealth. Below are a few verses related to our earthly position.

*2Tim 1:8 "Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, or of me His prisoner; but join with me in suffering for the gospel according to the power of God,"*

*Matt 5:10 "Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

*Matt 5:11 "Blessed are you when men cast insults at you, and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely, on account of Me.*

*Matt 5:12 "Rejoice, and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."*

*John 15:18 "If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you.*

*John 15:19 "If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.*

*John 15:20 "Remember the word that I said to you, 'A slave is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also."*

From Rev 2:10, we know that God uses the devil and his followers to test His children and to discipline them but here there is no indication of needed discipline so the persecution will just be a time of testing. So even though real people will put them in prison they are acting for the devil and so it is him that will do this. He tells them that they will have this tribulation for ten days, which is a very long time of testing. He tells them to persevere for the faith even if it means that they will be killed. Since God is the Giver of perseverance, true children of God will be able to endure such hard times and even to the death. The use of such an even number as ten days does not require that we interpret that time period literally. Ten is the number of perfection or completion so the

time of testing will be what is required from God's perspective to allow His children to show their perfect devotion to Him and to give them an assurance of their faith.

The reward is a crown and the Greek word is "stephanos", which means a wreath and not a crown. This same word is used for what the winners of the Games will receive and since Smyrna was famous for its Games, this was an appropriate word for John to use. The crown that the victor will receive is eternal life with Jesus and all of us should be willing to endure with that goal in mind.

He ends this letter in the same manner as the others except that He says that they will not be affected by the second death. The second death is being cast into the lake of fire that awaits the devil and all of his followers. Those who are in Christ are secure from any future judgment of God. Also in this area people were trying to destroy Christianity from the inside. There was a teaching evidently similar to that going on in Ephesus where people were teaching a false gospel like the Nicolaitans. Some scholars think that the teachings of the Nicolaitans were similar to that of the teachings of Balaam and Jezebel as I commented upon under the Ephesus church letter.

Promise of Jesus: The person who overcomes all tribulation and tests will not receive the final judgment of God.

### **The Church in Pergamum**

Pergamum was a city renowned for its great library that contained over 200,000 references. The word parchment comes from the word for Pergamum. There were many heathen temples of worship there and the city was the first to worship the emperor. In 29 BC they had been given authority to dedicate a temple to Augustus and this became the first temple dedicated to a living emperor. The acropolis of Pergamum was on a summit that was about 1000 feet above the plain and near it was a huge altar to Zeus.

**Rev 2:12 "And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: The One who has the sharp two-edged sword says this:"**

Presentation of Jesus: He is the One who possesses the two-edged sword that can render destruction or protection.

**Rev 2:13 'I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is; and you hold fast My name, and did not deny My faith, even in the days of Antipas, My witness, My faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.'**

Again there is no problem in identifying the person giving the letter but He adds the warning about the two-edged sword that will be used (verse 16). Twice He refers to Satan being there and this could be because of the many heathen temples and emperor worship there. Some think that it was also in reference to the serpent that was a symbol of Asclepius. This symbol represented healing to the Pergamums but was a symbol of evil for Christians. We do not know with certainty the identity of Antipas but he certainly was a loyal child of God who died rather than retract his belief in Jesus. Extra-

Biblical writings indicate that he died a horrible death of burning. He was killed in this area by slaves to Satan. So Jesus praises them for their firm faith even in this area where brutal persecutions were performed against Christians.

**Rev 2:14 “But I have a few things against you, because you have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit acts of immorality.**

**Rev 2:15 'Thus you also have some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans.**

**Rev 2:16 'Repent therefore; or else I am coming to you quickly, and I will make war against them with the sword of My mouth.**

**Rev 2:17 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, to him I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it.’”**

But Jesus has some things against these church members. It seems that Balaam was the man who advised Balak, ruler of Moab, that if he could get the Israelites to worship idols they would forfeit the protection of God.

*Num 31:16 “Behold, these caused the sons of Israel, through the counsel of Balaam, to trespass against the Lord in the matter of Peor, so the plague was among the congregation of the Lord.”*

His teachings then had prevailed in this time as the remembrances of the incidents were taught for generations as referenced below:

*Mic 6:5 “My people, remember now What Balak king of Moab counseled And what Balaam son of Beor answered him, And from Shittim to Gilgal, In order that you might know the righteous acts of the Lord.”*

It is probable that both the teachings of Nicolaitans and of Balaam as condemned practices were connected with worship of idols for eating of sacrificial meat and licentious behavior were involved in such worship. These people were evidently still trying to get the Jews to violate their laws and, in general, to rid the area of anyone worshipping God. Irenaeus wrote in the late second century and said that the cult of the Nicolaitans was founded by Nicolaus mentioned in Acts 6:5. This cult could have survived and mutated during the time to become a doctrine of Christian liberty that attempted an ethical compromise with heathen behavior. Does this sound familiar?

Jesus tells them to repent. If they do not repent quickly then He is going to come to them and fight against them with His sword. The sword of Jesus has two edges that signify either strength and encouragement or destruction. It is clear from these verses that He will come with destruction. He ends with the same comment about the person who responds to this message will only be those who have been born again. But He then

promises something different than that in the other letters. Here He is offering hidden manna that probably refers to the celestial food that will be available only to believers.

*John 4:31 "In the meanwhile the disciples were requesting Him, saying, "Rabbi, eat."*

*John 4:32 But He said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about."*

*John 4:33 The disciples therefore were saying to one another, "No one brought Him anything to eat, did he?"*

*John 4:34 Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to accomplish His work."*

This food is in direct contrast to the food offered to idols freely indulged by the Nicolaitans.

Many possibilities have been discussed for the white stone:

- 1.) From the legal practice if a juror put forward a white stone it meant the person was innocent.
- 2.) It may have been from the practice of reckoning where white stones were used in calculations.
- 3.) It could be the symbol for a happy day as we might say "a red-letter day".
- 4.) Some see the stone as an amulet bringing good luck.
- 5.) The white stone may represent a ticket to bread and circuses.
- 6.) A rabbinic speculation is that when manna fell from heaven it was accompanied by special stones.
- 7.) It could represent a stone on the breastplate of a high priest.

The special name probably is from this era when a name was representative of the character of the person and represented the whole man. Thus the name was very special. So here the name could mean the new character of the man that is bestowed upon him by God. I like this interpretation and coupled with a story that I do not know is true. It was told that in those times when two friends parted a white stone was picked and the names of both people written on it on the opposite sides. It was then broken and then each person took a half of the stone. When one of them traveled back to the home of the other they could then present their half of the stone to be matched with the half the other person had kept. So even if the other friend were not there the people in the house would know to let the person into the home. I do like that!

Promise of Jesus: The person who overcomes all that the world can hurl will be allowed to partake of the sustenance of God, he will receive a white stone of entrance into Heaven, and he will receive a new name appropriate for a child of God.

### **The Church in Thyatira**

This is the smallest of the churches and the letter is the longest. The town was situated between two valleys and in a good trade location. There were many trade guilds (what we would call unions) there so it appears to have been a good commercial center of activity. However there is not much more known about this city or the church.



**Rev 2:18 “And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: The Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet are like burnished bronze, says this:”**

Presentation of Jesus: He is the one who can see into the heart and soul of mankind and He is the one Who can stomp out all opposition to Him. This is a picture of someone coming with penetrative judgment.

This is the only letter using the title for Jesus as “The Son of God”. We see the character of Jesus presented here as the judge. He is the One Who can tell them some good and bad news. His eyes can penetrate the soul and His feet can trample any of the people’s misrepresentation of Him.

**Rev 2:19 “I know your deeds, and your love and faith and service and perseverance, and that your deeds of late are greater than at first.**

Again He praises them for their deeds, service, and perseverance. But unlike the church at Ephesus, they are also praised for their love. These aspects of the church should be those of all Christians. Without the love of Jesus our works are meaningless. Faith and perseverance are gifts of God to His chosen children and service is a mark of the truthfulness of the other characteristics. He even tells them that He notices that their work for the kingdom is increasing. These two sentences are very good reports.

**Rev 2:20 'But I have this against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and she teaches and leads My bond-servants astray, so that they commit acts of immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols.”**

However Jesus does have a problem with some in their church because of the presence of Jezebel since some people are following her teachings. The original Jezebel was the wife of the Israel king Ahab. She is credited with making Baalism the official religion of the northern kingdom that led the area’s rapid decline. She had been dead for about 1000 years when this book was written but evidently someone like her had arisen to try to lead the church in a similar direction. She claimed to be a Christian because she calls herself a prophetess. We do not know really who this woman was but she claimed to be a prophetess and we know that was not true. So she was a false prophet and some of the people were being led astray.

This writing has particular relevance for us today when we understand what was going on here. The powerful trade guilds in this city made it difficult for anyone to make a living without belonging to a guild. But belonging to a guild meant attending the guild banquets where meat offered to idols was offered and sexual looseness was encouraged. Does this sound familiar? We who work in the world often have to belong to groups that do not always conform to our standards. What do we do when the leader of the group offers us something that, as a Christian, we should not take or do? The temptations to conform there were severe and they can be here also. We all face dilemmas when we are faced with choices clearly in violation of Christian ethics. We cannot deny our position

in Christ but we are also not to live out of the world. We have to find Christian solutions to the worldly situations we face every day.

But this situation was worse than our worldly conflicts because she was teaching false doctrines in the church. The church is to be a light to the world and we must have church teachings that are Biblically consistent. Clearly the current popular prosperity Christian teaching is not consistent with the teachings of our Lord. Also the popular “seeker-friendly” churches are also more in line with the Jezebel teachings than the teachings of our Lord.

**Rev 2:21 “And I gave her time to repent; and she does not want to repent of her immorality.**

**Rev 2:22 'Behold, I will cast her upon a bed of sickness, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of her deeds.**

**Rev 2:23 'And I will kill her children with pestilence; and all the churches will know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts; and I will give to each one of you according to your deeds.”**

Jesus gave her time to repent but she refused. Her refusal showed that she indeed was a person trying to lead the church astray. Apostates will generally remain in the church and try to pervert its teachings rather than leaving the church. The result of her actions and those actions of her followers would be severely judged. The action of adultery could be either spiritual or physical and, from the context, it is probably both. The bed of sickness could be a literal bed or a time of great suffering. The “children” is probably a reference to her followers and maybe only to those who are strict followers of her teaching. Jesus says that all the churches will see His severe judgment on this church and they will know that Jesus is the only one Who can search both the minds and the hearts of people. This condemnation should have struck fear in the hearts of all of the churches in a similar manner to the judgment of Ananias and Sapphira as given in Acts 5: 1-11. Jesus tells us that His judgment will be very fair as each will receive according to their deeds. When He uses the word “each” He is making this very personal and the use of that word would have made the members deeply search their hearts, minds, and souls.

**Rev 2:24 'But I say to you, the rest who are in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not known the deep things of Satan, as they call them-- I place no other burden on you.**

**Rev 2:25 'Nevertheless what you have, hold fast until I come.**

Those who have not followed the teachings of Satan can now take a deep breath and relax! The teachers and followers of these false doctrines were calling them the “deep things” and such a comment reminds me of people thinking that they have received some deep secrets from God. The Gnostics were people who believed that they had received some “deep secrets” not available to those less sophisticated in the religion. We are to seek not just knowledge, but real knowledge:

*Phil 1:9 “And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment,”*

People such as this false teacher will try to lead us astray with worldly “wise” knowledge:

*Col 2:8 “See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ.”*

Rather than being “deep things” as the false teachers claim, the false teachings are really elementary principles of the world. Jesus insightfully calls these false teachings to have come from Satan. We must continually exercise discernment and test all teachings with the Bible.

He places no other burden on them other than what they are already doing. He then commands them to hold fast to the good things that they have displayed. This reminds us of:

*Acts 15:28 “For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials:*

*Acts 15:29 that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell.”*

Holding fast until He comes is emphasizing the necessity of perseverance in the life of the true Christian. “Until I come” refers to the end time when the time of perseverance is over and the glorious time of the actual physical presence of our Lord is here.

**Rev 2:26 'And he who overcomes, and he who keeps My deeds until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations;**

**Rev 2:27 and he shall rule them with a rod of iron, as the vessels of the potter are broken to pieces, as I also have received authority from My Father;**

**Rev 2:28 and I will give him the morning star.**

**Rev 2:29 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'”**

He ends with the same type of statement as before regarding who can really hear what He has to say. But He again gives a bit different promise to those who overcome and persevere. As long as we are alive we are to be immersed in the works of Jesus in all areas of our life. Authority to rule over nations seems to indicate a place in the ruling of Jesus over the nations who were against Him. The rod of iron and the statement of broken pieces seem to lend credence to this interpretation. He states that His authority is from the Father so we can rest in this promise.

Since later Jesus refers to Himself as “the Bright Morning Star” (22:16), it is likely that the reference to the star is to Jesus. The person who overcomes will receive the presence of Jesus Christ in a new era ruling with Him.

Promise of Jesus: The person who overcomes the entire world and performs the deeds of Jesus will be given ruling authority of nations and will receive the presence of Jesus.