

The Letters to the Seven Churches

Overview¹

The basic building block of the Revelation is a setting followed by a series of seven. After the setting provided by the vision of the Lord in ch. 1, ch. 2-3 give seven letters to the churches of Asia.

What Are They?

Common dispensational view: represent seven periods of church history; we are now in Laodicea. BUT

- Would expect the Lord to interpret the current period for John; most emblems in the book are interpreted. None of these is.
- Most of this section would have been unintelligible for those who read it in earlier ages.

Bullinger (ultra-dispensational): seven periods of Israel's past history! Based mainly on the demands for godly living found throughout these epistles, and his emphasis that salvation is only by grace and thus there can be no promises contingent on "overcoming" in the church age. But his distinction is overdrawn; cf. Col. 1:22,23.

Take them for what they are presented as: seven literal churches in Asia Minor in the first century. Important cities on the great postal road, named in order. Letters intended in the first instance for these churches, just as Paul's letters were. But as in the case of Paul's letters, the churches faced problems common to other churches, and thus the analysis and instruction given to them here is useful for us today. In fact, even then, all of the letters were to be sent to all of the churches, Rev. 1:11.

Application: How are we like one or another of these churches? What can we learn from their instruction? These letters are a divinely prepared checklist to evaluate ourselves as a church, and heavenly instructions on how to maintain and improve our usefulness to the Lord. We ought to be very prayerful as we work through them.

Overview of Common Elements

These seven descriptions follow a highly stylized structure. But even within this structure, some the emphasis differs from church to church. Note the **gaps**, **unique elements**, and **changes in order** in the table.

	Ephesus	Smyrna	Pergamos	Thyatira	Sardis	Philadelphia	Laodicea
Address	2:1a	2:8a	2:12a	2:18a	3:1a	3:7a	3:14a
Description of the Lord	1b	8b	12b	18b	1b	7b	14b
"I know thy works:"	2a	9a	13a	19a	1c	8a	15a
--commendation	2b-3	9b	13b	19b		8b	
--promise						9	

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	Ephesus	Smyrna	Pergamos	Thyatira	Sardis	Philadelphia	Laodicea
--condemnation	4		14-15	20-21	1d, 2b		15b
--threat				22a			16
Command: Repent	5a		16a	22b			17-20a
--threat	5b		16b	23	3b		
Command: Hold Fast		10a		24-25	2a, 3a	11	
--promise		10b					20b
Commendation	6				4a	10a	
--promise					4b	10b	
He that hath an ear	7a	11a	17a	29	6	13	22
Promise to Overcomes	7b	11b	17b	26-28	5	12	21

Fixed address, "unto the angel of the church of X write," *twi aggelwi t8s en X ekklesias grapson*. Take dative as reference, rather than indirect object: "with reference to the angel of the church of X, write." John is taking minutes in the heavenly council, so that the churches can learn what is of concern when the Lord discusses their cases with the angels given charge over them.

A **description of the Lord Jesus**, usually drawn from the image in Rev. 1. Emphasizes certain features of the Lord that pertain to the needs of that particular church.

The **body** of each epistle begins with the words, "I know thy works." Made up of selected elements from a set of six. No letter has all six. Note in both cases the interplay of declaration of current state, command, and prediction (threat or promise) for the future.

Three of the six elements deal with sin:

- A declarative condemnation of their sin;
- An imperative command to repent and turn from it;
- Threats of future punishment, which may be associated either with the command (Ephesus, Pergamos, Thyatira) or the condemnation (Sardis)

The other three deal with demonstrated righteousness:

- A declarative commendation of their conduct;
- An imperative command to hold fast and continue to live that way;
- Promises of future blessing, again associated either with commendation (Sardis, Philadelphia) or command (Smyrna).

Commendation (though not condemnation) may be repeated as an afterthought, sometimes with associated promises. The Lord does not take pleasure in threats and condemnation, but desires to recognize righteousness, even when it is only faintly glimmering.

Final two elements (order shifts with fourth epistle):

- "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches." Common phrase of the Lord in the gospels (Matt. 11:15; 13:9,43; Mark 4:9,23; 7:16; Luke 8:8; 14:35). "This is important; pay attention. If you miss out, it's your fault."
- Promise to overcomers. Tailored to the needs of the individual church. Emphasizes the doctrine of the perseverance of saints, so sorely needed in our day. cf. 21:7, where the phrase recurs; all of these allude to ch. 19-22, as the intros do to ch. 1. Thus each letter points to both ends of the book.

Classes of Churches

Determined based on the contents of the bodies of the epistles.

- Two have only elements associated with righteousness (Smyrna and Philadelphia).
- Two (Sardis and Laodicea) have no commendation at the outset, and are basically unrighteous, but both recognize the possibility of individual righteous people within them; 3:4, 20).
- The other three are a mixture of righteousness and unrighteousness.

Summary

Prayerfully seek the Lord's guidance for his assembly here, through these examples. These are the matters that he is discussing with our angel. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Ephesus, 2:1-7²

Description of the Lord

Recalls the Lord's place in the center of the churches. 1:12-13, 16.

Ephesus was the chief city of Asia. Though Pergamum was the formal capital, Ephesus was the main port of entry (cf. Washington vs. New York). The Roman Emperors always came in via Ephesus, and so did the gospel.

Prominence was not only secular, but spiritual as well.

- First point of entrance for the gospel into Asia, Acts 18-19.
- This and Laodicea were the only churches to have received a letter from Paul, and only Ephesians has been preserved for us.
- Became the residence of John in his later life, and would draw prestige from that.

This dual prominence had its effect. Later, as individual assemblies lost their autonomy, Ephesus became the chief church over the region. Its bishop was looked to as head by the other cities.

Thus the need to emphasize at the outset that it is the Lord, not any one of the churches, who binds

them together. Their center is in him, NOT in the most prominent of the churches.

Commendation (2-3) and Condemnation (4)

Not interrupted with promises or threats; pulled closely together. These echo Matt. 24:9-12, and show how far we have come into that prophecy even by the end of the first century. Ephesus' problems are characteristic of a church that is organizationally prominent, emphasizing the things that people can see, but at the expense of its inner devotional life.

The **Commendation** (2-3) is Chiastic, and reflects success in dealing with the warnings of Matt. 24:9-11, concerning external persecution and internal apostasy.

- Outer members deal with their works, labor, diligence, patience. They have exerted themselves, even unto weariness, for the Lord. Focuses on their relations with unbelievers and the persecution they might experience from them; cf. Acts 19; Eph. 6. Matt. 24:9
- Inner member (2b): healthy discernment of visiting teachers (of whom there would be many in such a highway town). They heeded the apostle's warning in Acts 20:29,30 about internal and external false teachers. Relations with professed believers. Matt. 24:10,11.

The **Condemnation** (4) reflects Matt. 24:12, "the love of many shall be cold." The reference is to our first love: our love for the Lord, not the love for other believers that results from it. Cf. Jer. 2:2,3. Relation with the Lord. Labor for the Lord and zeal for his word are the legitimate issue of our love for him, but when the love fades away, they remain only as a shell, as formal orthodoxy. Compare Laodicea, 3:15, chiastically arranged, which also has lost its ardor.

Command: Repent

Three steps:

Remember. Stir up a recollection of what it was like when first you were a believer. Recognize that you have "fallen," lost ground.

Repent. Acknowledge your error and change direction. The key to Christian growth. The world cannot do it without losing face. But it is the only way to achieve lasting change.

Resume the first works--those motivated by love for the Lord, not by empty formalism.

Threat

Note the chiastic structure: two independent threats. The first one actually takes place later.

- If you do not {remember, repent, resume}, "I come unto you quickly." Cf. frequent warnings of the Lord's return "as a thief in the night." They will experience his return as unbelievers, not as those expecting him.
- If you do not repent, "I will take away your lampstand." No church in Ephesus now, nor even much of a city. Bishops died out in 11th century; Turks took over in 1308. There is no longer a lampstand to hold up the testimony of the believers there. The most prominent church in Asia now does not exist at all. How foolish to seek our center in people and organizations, rather

than in the Lord who alone walks in the midst of the candlesticks.

Closing Commendation

Recalls their zeal for orthodoxy. No clear details on who the Nicolaitans were; from 2:14,15, may be associated with libertinism.

- **Promise to Overcomers:** Just as the descriptions of the Lord with which the letters open are drawn from Ch. 1, so the promises to overcomers are drawn from the last few chapters of the book; here, 22:2. God will restore the world to its Edenic state, and those who overcome will share in its blessings.
- **Application:** Keep our personal love for the Lord fresh; don't confuse orthodoxy or orthopraxy with a fresh, personal relationship with him.

Smyrna, 2:8-11

One of the two churches with no condemnation. (The other is Philadelphia, chiastically symmetrical.) Emphasis throughout on the paradox of how one can dying and yet live. Historically, the city disappeared as a city for three centuries (600-290 BC), its citizens dispersed in small villages, but (unlike Ephesus) continues to this day as Izmir, one of the largest cities of Turkey. Still retains a (nominally) Christian population; the city of my Armenian ancestors.

Description of the Lord, from 1:17,18.

First and last: emphasizes his deity, from Isa. 44:6; 48:12.³

Dead and lived: emphasizes his humanity. Includes the resurrection, but goes beyond it: he became dead, and yet (in spite of that death) lived on.

Importance: they are facing persecution "unto death." He is able to sympathize with their situation, and give them life in the midst of death.

Commendation, 9

Tribulation. Because of the predominantly eschatological use of this term, we must emphasize that most times in the NT (37/45) it refers to present trials for the child of God, not to a future time of judgment for unbelievers. Our comfort is not that we shall escape tribulation, but that the Lord knows and controls it.

Poverty (in the world's eyes, though in his they are rich). We must learn to treasure that which the Lord values.

He knows not only their **faithfulness**, but also the **opposition** that they face from Jewish persecution. (On the pseudoJewishness, cf. Rom. 2:28,29.) Here is our comfort in trial, that God knows our situation and is able to uphold us in it.

³ Note added 3/5/08: see Easter sermon from 2007 for evidence that this phrase should be understood to refer, not to the Lord's deity, but to his humiliation.

Command: Hold Fast

Do not fear. The world's worst threats cannot challenge the Lord's care.

Tried: What Ephesus did to the false teachers, 2:2. The false teachers had failed the trial; the Smyrnans pass.

Ten days: probably a reference to Dan. 1:12. So we are to view persecution: as God's opportunity to show his superiority over the ways of the world.

May even take them to **death**--then they are to remember him who "died and lived."

Promise

James 1:12, the crown of life for those who endure temptation. Ps. 21:3,4, recalling the prophecy of the Lord's resurrection after his prayer for deliverance in Ps. 20.

Promise to Overcomers, 11

Escape the Second Death, 21:8.

Application: Comfort in persecution. God knows it and allows it; he can give us victory through defeat, life through death. Fear not them who can kill the body but not the soul, Matt. 10:28.

Pergamos, 2:12-17⁴

Compare to the churches so far:

- Ephesus: striving for organizational dominance, has become superficial.
- Smyrna: life in the midst of apparent death.
- Pergamos: danger of compromise.

Pergamos was the official capital of Asia; seat of Roman government; site of the first two Imperial temples in Asia.

Description of the Lord

Governors of Roman provinces had two levels of authority: those who could pronounce the death penalty on a Roman citizen, and those who could not. The ones who could were said to have "the power of the sword." By claiming to himself the "sharp two-edged sword" (the characteristic Roman weapon), the Lord Jesus here assumes to himself the supreme authority that Pergamos assumed belonged to the Roman governor who made his seat there.

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Commendation, 13

He knows two things about them: their deeds and where they live, the latter setting the stage for the former.

Location: the "dwelling" and even the "throne" of Satan. Two local allusions.

- Pergamos was the seat of Roman rule in Asia. This does not make Rome = Satan, but in the build-up to the final Antichrist "there are many antichrists" (1 John 4), and the Roman emperors with their claim to deity certainly fit among them, therefore as Satan's representatives.
- One of the primary deities of Pergamos was Asculapius, whose symbol (featured on coins from the city) was the serpent.

Works: Two of them, described directly, then illustrated by Antipas, "my martyr, my faithful one."

- They hold fast the Lord's name. Positive emphasis. They are identified with him; they are known as his people. They hold this fast, grasp it; will not let anyone take it from them. This requires that we make ourselves publicly known as the people of our Lord Jesus, and stand up whenever anyone by implication tries to hide it. Reinforced by calling Antipas "my martyr," that is, my witness. Our witness for Christ is not only explicit presentation of the gospel, but also our willingness to be known, day by day, as his people.
- They have not denied his faith. When challenged, they have not caved in. Reinforced by calling Antipas "my faithful one."

The degree to which this is taken is seen in Antipas' fate. As in Smyrna, where some had to be "faithful unto death," so believers in Pergamos needed to be willing to die for the Lord. The requirements haven't changed. In buying a car, people distinguish purchase price from ownership price. That's important in salvation as well. Acquisition is free, but possession may cost us all that we have in this earth.

Condemnation, 14-15

There is a single "doctrine" here, not two. John is using the ancient episode of Balaam in Num 22-24 as an illustration of the followers of one Nicholas in his day. Thus this passage is our best commentary on the error that the Ephesians were praised (2:6) for rejecting. Paraphrase:

- You have those there (in P.) who hold fast to Balaam's teaching.
- You all recall, of course, what Balaam's teaching was.
 - Balak the king of Beor hired Balaam to curse Israel for him.
 - Balaam could not curse them, because God had blessed them.
 - In order to satisfy his client, Balaam told Balak that to get a curse on Israel, he should get them to sin against God through idolatry and fornication. This "stumbling block" led to the plague of Baal-Peor (Num. 25).
- Likewise, you also (in addition to ancient Israel) have those who hold tightly to just such teaching. The comparison is drawn through two links.

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- A popular etymology could connect the names "Balaam" ("swallow the people") and "Nicholas" ("conquer the people").
- The end of 2:15 (AV "which I hate") is one of those points at which the majority text differs from the TR underlying the KJV. The Lord certainly does hate the teaching of the N's, as 2:6 makes clear, but the majority of mss at this point read the word "likewise." This is an adverb modifying "holding"; those who now hold the doctrine of Nicholas do so in a fashion similar to that in which the doctrine promulgated by Balaam was held, i.e., by fornication and idolatry.

Summary. The little we know about the Nicolaitan error is that it encouraged Christians to think that they could combine Christian faith and pagan life. There would have been tremendous social temptation to join in the emperor-worship at the temple in Pergamos, and the licentious nature of the world would have made it so easy to fall into fornication. We face precisely the same two temptations today. Fornication is clear. Idolatry: covetousness (Col.), the love of money. Thus Pergamos is falling into the Jim Bakker syndrome. He clings fast to the Lord's name and would never deny the Lord, but still got sucked into fornication and idolatrous covetousness. The Ephesian church, though superficial, at least recognized and rejected this error. Pergamos has faced persecution perhaps more severe than that in Ephesus, and for this is praised; yet perhaps because of this has been tempted to shrink into the woodwork. The Lord will leave no question in their minds: this sort of compromise will not be tolerated.

Command: Repent

Here is the Lord's command when we are tempted to live like the world: Repent. Turn away from it. Flee it, as Joseph did Potiphar's wife. We cannot serve God and mammon.

Note that the whole church is to repent, though only some have yielded to sin (shown by the second person singular in vv. 14, 16). Compare Achan in Josh 7. If one member of the body is in sin, all suffer. This dynamic motivates discipline in the church.

Threat

If by compromise they seek to escape the sword of the Roman governor, they will not escape the more powerful sword of the Lord Jesus. Matt. 10:28.

The reference to the Lord's return does not make that contingent on their failure; nor does it reduce his coming to some near-term judgment (a position that Paul opposes in 2 Thess. 2). Rather, it is a global truth that motivates them to heed the warning. Example: "If you want some milk, it's in the fridge; help yourself." Really means, "The milk is in the fridge. Therefore, if you want some, help yourself." So here, the construction means, "I'm coming quickly; no one can escape me. So pay attention to this warning: if you don't repent, I will use my sword on you."

Detailed (NOT FOR SERMON) As in 2:5, raises the question of whether the Lord's return is solely the public one of the future, or whether it can also describe intermediate judgments. Here; 2:5; 3:3. Ideas:

- Can "I am coming" refer to some non-eschatological judgment? One could best support this with the OT notion of God "visiting" his people for blessing or judgment. BUT *erxomai*

NEVER renders pqd in the LXX. I know of no reference in the NT to the Lord's return in the sense of an intermediary judgment, and Paul seems to be rejecting this view in 2 Thess. 2.

- Strict grammar would require, "If you don't repent, then I'll come quickly," implying "If you do repent, I won't." But (in keeping with the weak grammar throughout the book) one could also paraphrase, "If you don't repent, remember that I'm coming quickly, and when I do, I'll bring the appropriate judgment." That is, the return is not conditioned on their repentance, but rather motivates it. Cf. "If you don't do as I say, I'm bigger than you are, and I'll pop you one." Or "If you want some milk, it's in the fridge; help yourself." Resolve: The milk is in the fridge. Therefore, if you want some, help yourself. This construction requires two propositions after the conditional (though one may be an implied imperative). Then the final "unless" in 2:5 is really resuming the conditional status of the second clause after the interjection of the first. Connect all this with the distinction between different use of "because," giving sometimes the reason for the thing explained ("gas costs more because it's scarce,") sometimes the reason for the hearer to believe ("gas costs more because I saw the sign"). Cf. 2 Tim. 2:13; the qualifier is some timeless truth. Note the shift from present to future in 2:5,16 (though not in 3:3).⁵ ***Need some other biblical examples of this construction.***

Promise to Overcomers

Continue to develop the thesis that these promises are drawn from the last chapters of the book, just as the descriptions of the Lord are drawn from the first. This is less clear in this case than in the others, but still credible.

Hidden manna

A pot of manna was hidden in the ark of the covenant, Exod. 16:33,34.

Though lost since the fall of Jerusalem to Babylon, the ark reappears in 11:19, at the seventh trumpet. (The seventh in each series brings us to the heavenly sanctuary; at the seventh seal, 8:1-6, we see the brazen and golden altars, and the seventh bowl, 16:17, leads us directly to the throne, which would be the mercy seat above the ark.

In ch. 21, God himself comes to dwell with his people; no more temple needed; thus no more ark. God's supernatural provision, hidden for centuries, now is directly available to all. Cf. 7:13-17 (the promise of no more hunger or thirst) with 21:3-6.

White inscribed pebble

In the tabernacle, the High Priest carried the names of the tribes inscribed on his shoulders and on the breastplate.

ch. 21 describes how the gates and foundation stones of the heavenly Jerusalem are inscribed with the names of the tribes and of the twelve apostles.

⁵ It would be helpful to collect some other biblical examples of this construction.

Does the inscribed pebble here then indicate that the individual believer is memorialized in the city to come? (Problem: small pebble)

Application: The TV Evangelist problem, soiling a highly visible witness for Christ with compromises with the world.

Thyatira, 2:18-29⁶

Review the themes so far:

- Ephesus: striving for organizational dominance, has become superficial.
- Smyrna: life in the midst of apparent death.
- Pergamos: danger of compromise.
- Thyatira: compromise has gone further.

A garrison city, guarding an important road. Became a major manufacturing and trading center in peace-time; the home of Lydia, whom we meet in Philippi trading purple cloth.

Description of the Lord, 18

Three descriptions:

- "Son of God." This is the only place this title appears in Rev.
 - Fittingly summarizes his position as the God-Man, set forth in 1:17-18.
 - On the basis of Psalm 2, entitles him to give his followers the rod of iron (Rev. 2:27).
- Eyes like flames of fire. 1:14. Our eyes depend on light; when it fails, they cannot see. But darkness cannot hide from him. His eyes bring their own piercing light to penetrate our secrets. "All things are naked and open unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do."
- "Feet like fine brass." A very rare alloy (most ancients had only bronze). Requires zinc, which is very difficult to obtain in metallic form. There is evidence that Thyatira prided itself on its ability to produce this alloy. But the Lord is not impressed; it is nothing new to him.

The reference to both eyes and feet together imply that he both sees and acts; cf. v.23.

Commendation, 19

Presents the three Pauline graces (faith, hope, love), each accompanied with a word indicating the practical expression.

- Work and love. True love expresses itself through deeds. Focuses on our relation to other believers.
- Faith and service. Focuses on our relation to the Lord. We cannot truly serve the Lord unless we believe in him; true faith will in turn produce dedicated service. We cannot claim him as Savior

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unless we are willing to have him as Lord.

- Patience (cf. Paul's "hope") and works. Patience means that we don't give up in our efforts, in spite of opposition and difficulty. Thus focuses on our relation to Satan's opposition.

"The last are more than the first." Contrast 2:5. Unlike Ephesus, whose inner spiritual graces have dwindled over time, Thyatira has grown stronger.

Condemnation, 20-21

The sin in question is the same as in Pergamos: fornication, and fellowship with idolaters. Two basic items in the decision of the Jerusalem conference in Acts 15 (the other two were eating blood or strangled things). We'll see evidence later that this decree is in John's mind here.

This problem stems from shortcomings in ecclesiology.

- Woman prophet? Sure, Acts 21:8-9, daughters of Philip--but when there's a message for a man, God sends a man.
- "Calls herself a prophet." The call should come from God, and the recognition from the assembly. Watch out for self-appointed ministers.

Compare the descriptions of this error through the chapter.

Summary table: note pivot between NT leader and ID of the error.

	Ephesus, 6	Pergamos,14-15	Thyatira, 20
NT Leader	Nicholas	Nicholas	
OT Leader		Balaam	Jezebel
Error ID		Idols & Fornication	Idols & Fornication
Verb	Hate	Have	Suffer

We now have three names associated with this error.

- Called "Nicolaitans" in 2:6,15 after their contemporary leader. Nicolas of Antioch from Acts 6:5? A proselyte to Judaism; perhaps lured back to compromise?
- Compared with Balaam in 2:14. Hired by an unbeliever to curse Israel.
- Compared with Jezebel, wife of Ahab and proponent of Baal, here. Worse than Balaam; her influence is brought in through a putative believer (her husband, nominally a Yahwist).

The progression in names reflects the church's response.

- Ephesus: recognizes the error and judges it.
- Pergamos: They are under attack from an enemy. They "have" those who hold the doctrine of Balaam; they need to wake up and realize the danger in which they stand.
- Thyatira: They not only "have" such people, but "suffer," permit, one to exercise a responsible role as a prophet in the assembly.

Threat, 22-23

Three groups are threatened. With two of them, there is clear implication of the potential for repentance.

- 21, 22a. She herself had a chance to repent, and was not willing, so she is cast into a bed. Probably a reference to sickness; out of the nine other times we read of beds in the NT, in five of them they hold sick people.
- 2 22b. Those who commit adultery with her
 - Who are these? Not her disciples, who are called "her children," 23. Rather, these are the responsible brethren in the church who have tolerated her evil teaching, and allowed her to produce those disciples.
 - They will join her in "great tribulation," some chastisement during their own time. Cf. 1 Cor. 11:30. NB: This phrase cannot refer here to Daniel's 70th week; the leaders of the church in Thyatira have all passed on by now. If saved, they will be raised before the 70th week; if not, after. In either case, they will miss it. Note that in Acts 7:11, the same phrase appears, and again in reference to something past from our current perspective. Matt. 24:21 does use the phrase to refer to the coming time of trouble, as may Rev. 7:14 (the only one of the four occurrences to take the article, "THE great tribulation").
 - Her chance for repentance is already past; they still have the opportunity to repent. MT reads, not "their deeds," but "her deeds." Their guilt is tolerating her baneful influence in the assembly; cf. 1 Cor. 5. The Achan Affliction all over again.
- 23a. Her children: those who follow her teaching. From "a bed" (of sickness) to "great tribulation" to "death." No room for repentance indicated here.

23b. The Lord's objective in all this: not only to purge the Thyatiran church, but also to provide an example of his judgment to others, so that they may fear. Cf. the effect of the judgment on Ananias and Sapphira in Jerusalem, Acts 5:11. We must not only serve the Lord with a motive of LOVE, but also shun sin because we FEAR him. Note his double scrutiny: of motives as well as deeds; inward as well as outward. Man looks on the outward appearance; God, on the heart.

Command: Hold Fast, 24-25

Those to whom it is addressed: those who have not embraced her doctrine, either as disciples or by tolerating it in the assembly. The Nicolaitans' own description of this teaching is "the deep things of Satan." They felt that the true believer could not be hurt by looking into the things of Satan; indeed, that only by understanding them could they effectively oppose them. But we are not to "intrude into those things that we have not seen," Col. 2:18; rather, we should (Col. 3:2) "set our affection on things above, not on things on the earth." The "deep things" we are to pursue are those "of God," 1 Cor. 2:10.

"No other burden" recalls Acts 15:28, the decision of the Jerusalem conference. They are to continue to show forth the vitality of their love, faith, and patience through godly living.

Promise to Overcomers, 26-29

This one reverses the order of the promise and the exhortation to hear.

Only here, in the central epistle, is "overcoming" defined; it is "keeping my deeds to the end." No easy believism (faith without works); no excuses for falling away. This is the perseverance of the saints.

Two gifts promised to those who do overcome:

- 26-28a, A share with Christ in the rule the Father promised him in Psa. 2:8,9, in keeping with his title as "Son of God." Anticipates 22:5, "they shall reign" with him "for ever and ever."
- 28b, "the morning star." Cf. 22:16; Christ himself. What does it mean to be given Christ in his character as the morning star? To see him arise, and bring with him the world to come. This is a promise of his return.

Summary

Note the contrast with Ephesus, along two lines: greater inner spirituality; less discernment re. error. Suggests that strength in one area is likely to be paired with weakness in the other. Where do we stand? Highly discerning, like Ephesus; therefore greatly in need of having our love, faith, and hope kindled.

Sardis⁷

Common features of these last three churches and their letters:

- They do not show the mixture of commendation and condemnation that Ephesus, Pergamos, and Thyatira do. Philadelphia, like symmetrically placed Smyrna, is all good. Sardis and Laodicea are all bad.
- This homogeneous character of the church is emphasized in each case by a doubled condemnation or commendation in the letter.
- Yet even in churches that he cannot commend, the Lord finds *individuals* who are faithful, or at least holds forth the promise of life to such. There is a slim spark of hope.

Focus of Sardis: on the worthlessness of outward reputation in the absence of inner reality.

Description of the Lord

Ch. 1 identified three groups of seven, arranged in a descending order.

- Seven spirits of God--the very essence of God himself.
- Seven angels, God's servants who deal with the churches.
- Seven candlesticks, the churches.

Ephesus focused on the bottom two, the 7 stars and 7 candlesticks. Ephesus is still alive, but fading. The Lord's focus is on the link between the angels and the church, maintaining its care. Sardis is dead.

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The angel has nothing more to do with the church as a church. However, the day of judgment is coming, when the individuals within the church will have to give account before God and the angels (v. 5). So Here the Lord focuses on the reporting end of the spectrum.

Condemnation and Command

This is a double element in this letter. Both deal with the hypocrisy of the church. The first is a summary statement of the problem. The second describes its effects in more detail. Thus the relation between the two condemnations, as well as the two commands, is one of amplification.

First Condemnation (Summary)

They have a reputation for life, but in fact are dead.

Examples in other churches in Rev. 2-3:

- Ephesus had outward zeal but no inward love.
- In Smyrna, 2:9, those who say they are Jews but are not.
- Laodicea, 3:17, thinks she is rich and ignores her poverty.

Matt. 23:27, the Lord compares the scribes and Pharisees to "whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead [men's] bones, and of all uncleanness."

Application: The possibility of inconsistency between internal state and external conduct is perhaps the greatest challenge for the believer; cf. Rom. 7 for Paul's struggle.

- Beware of Hypocrisy: righteousness done for the eyes of men, that does not stem from inner life.
- Equally serious, beware of Negligence: neglect of the practical exercise of our faith, as in Pergamos and Thyatira, where their inner life is commended but they are not dealing with error in the church.

First Command (Summary)

"Be watchful" has inchoative sense: "become watchful." They are not now. Wake up.

Strengthen the few sparks of life that remain. NB: the church as a whole is dead, but there are living things within it. No hope for the church, but there may be for some of the individuals.

Second Condemnation (Amplification)

Now we look into the symptoms of their hypocrisy. "Perfect works" are here "fulfilled" or "completed works," works that have achieved their purpose. We need to understand the standard by which these works are judged as being fulfilled.

- Acts 14:26, end of first missionary journey: Paul and Barnabas have **fulfilled** the work to which they had been called by God and entrusted to his grace by the church at Antioch. In man's eyes,

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much remained unfinished. There were other fields to evangelize, and within the churches they had just planted were arising errors that Paul in this very period has to answer through the epistle to the Galatians. But they had done what God gave them to do; in this sense they had "fulfilled the work." They carried out God's agenda.

- 2 Thes. 1:11, Paul prays that God would powerfully **fulfill** two things that are probably in apposition to one another:
 - the good pleasure [delight] of [in] goodness;
 - the work of faith.

We are not told who is doing the delighting, God or man, and with the HS in us, the two merge into one. As believers, we long for goodness, for the world to be restored into consistency with God's character. Our deeds tend toward this end.

In both cases,

- the standard is God's purpose and call;
- the enabling must come from him;
- he is judge as to whether it is fulfilled.

In Sardis, this is a more detailed way of saying that they have a reputation for life, but are really dead. Note the contrast between "thy" and "my."

- **thy works**--suggestion that they stem from the wrong motivation and proceed under the wrong power.
- not fulfilled before **my [MT] God**. Whatever men may think of their accomplishments, they do not meet God's standard.

Application: Guideline for our service to the Lord:

- Is it what he has called us to, or do we go in our own strength?
- Are we content to rest in his evaluation and approval, rather than that of men?

Second Command (Amplification)

Three imperatives describe in more detail how they are to wake up and strengthen the things that remain.

Remember.--Recall their introduction into the faith, how they received and heard. "How"--the entire circumstances of their conversion. Specific things for them to bear in mind:

- the vital faith of those who evangelized them; cf. Heb. 13:7.
- the teaching itself, the life-giving word of God;
- their own initial joy and zeal; 2:5 "remember from whence thou art fallen"; Heb. 10:32 "call to remembrance the former days"; Ezek. 16:22, 43; Psa. 103 "forget not all his benefits."

Such recollection is a salutary aid to godliness for all of us. Cf. Jonah. After his flight from the Lord,

the Lord brings him right back to where he started from, and picks up from there.

Hold fast.--Not the same as 2:25. There, the verb means "to grasp with strength" so that the treasure will not be taken away from you. The dead church in Sardis has no strength. Rather, "watch, give, heed, pay attention." Cf. "be watchful," v.2. Object: the recollection of the circumstances of their salvation. Guard these memories; meditate on them.

Repent.--Turn around. Acknowledge your error and start over.

If we are defensive and insist on maintaining our self-image, we can never grow.

Threat

The unknown moment of the Lord's return is a stimulus to watch. As in 2:5, 16, the first phrase after the condition is not conditioned, but the motive for the warning. The result of failing to keep the condition is not the Lord's return, but their ignorance of "what hour." Actually, the phrase is "what sort or kind of hour." None of us knows the day or the hour (Matt. 24:36; 25:13), but those who walk with the Lord can discern the signs of the times, 1 Thes. 5:1,4. Our choice is either to watch, in which case the Spirit will give us accurate discernment of the circumstances around us, or to slumber, in which case our happiness is only illusory, and ready to be shattered at any moment by the Lord's return. This illustration has special force given the history of Sardis. Located on a hill with sheer sides and only a narrow neck connecting it to the main mountain, it was considered impregnable. Yet twice, in 549 and 218 B.C., the overconfident citizens were conquered by invaders who crept up the undefended steep mountain.

Commendation

It is a measure of God's grace that though there are churches with absolutely no condemnation, even in the churches with nothing good there is still a glimmer of hope for some individuals within the organization.

Application: Some folk justify apostate churches by saying, "But there are some saved people in that church." So were there in Sardis, yet the Lord condemns the church as "dead." Avoid two errors:

- Do not justify an apostate church on the grounds that you know a believer in it.
- Do not assume that no one within an apostate church can be a believer. God can have his remnant anywhere he pleases!

Note the word play with v.1. "You have a name that you live, but are dead; you have a few names who do in fact live." Described in terms of a sartorial metaphor. Consider three states of dress in the Scripture:

- Nakedness, being without cover before God. Adam and Even in the garden; cf. Isa. 59:6.
- Pure white garments as God's salvation. 3:18, the offer to the Laodiceans; Isa. 61:3, 10.
- Spotted or filthy garments: Here, Jude 1:23 ("spotted by the flesh"); Zech. 3:3,4 (defiled by the iniquity of Joshua the high priest). In each case refers not to rank pagans (they are "naked"), but to those who profess to wear the garments of salvation but live like the world. Application:

Warning against backsliding or falling away. Don't be deceived by theological arguments re. "once saved, always saved." The practical lesson is, God has given you a clean white garment. Don't get it dirty by playing in the mud.

Promise

The risk of spotted garments does NOT mean we are to stay at home as hermits in order to keep them clean. The Lord promises that we should "walk around" in our white garments--be involved in the world without becoming part of it. As long as we walk with him, we need not fear defilement.

Promise to Overcomers

As before, all of these anticipate the end of the Revelation, just as the descriptions of the Lord point back to the first chapter.

- "clothed in white raiment." Can be stative as well as inchoative (Matt. 6:29). In 7:14 the victors do not receive new garments, but are purged through the blood of Christ. If you overcome, you shall wear white. Cf. 19:8, the armies following Christ at his return.
- Name secure in the Lamb's book of life. 17:8 shows that this book has existed "from the foundation of the world," and is thus the book of election. Theologically minded folk have trouble with this promise not to blot out; does it mean you can lose your salvation?
 - There is no statement anywhere that someone could actually be removed from this book.
 - 22:19 in MT is "tree of life," not "book of life."
 - Exod 32:32 is the book of the living, the census book of earth--a different book. See my paper on "God's Library" at <http://www.cyber-chapel.org/GodsLibrary.pdf>.
 - But the Lord's point here is practical, not theological. An overcomer IS secure in his election; a loser has no reason to believe he was ever there.
 - Relation to end of Rev: references in 20:12,15; 21:27.
- Confession before the Father (Matt. 10:32) and his angels (Luke 12:8), the two parties corresponding to the spirits and stars named in 3:1. The antecedents in the gospels show that this experience is granted to those who confess him. Mal. 3:16-18 shows that this actually involves another book, the Lord's record book of the actions of the righteous. John 17:12, "those that thou gavest me I have kept." What a conversation, between the elector and the redeemer!
 - The Father will open the book of life, trace down the list to our name, and ask the Son, "I chose Dave Nelson. What do you have to say for him?"
 - The Lord Jesus will open the record book of those who have spoken for him, and will respond, "I redeemed that Dave Nelson, and his life has shown the reality of his new birth. Please accept him in my stead."
 - The message of Sardis is that only those in both books will enjoy the blessings of heaven.
 - Relation to end of Rev: 21:27, 22:4, the exclusiveness of our enjoyment of God's fellowship

in heaven.

Summary

- The danger of hypocrisy; of a reputation for life in the midst of death; of the world's filth on the garments of a Christian profession; of not balancing the book of life and the book of confessors.
- The steps to recover from such a deadly environment: Recall, Meditate, Repent.
- God's grace to offer salvation to anyone, even someone within such a church.

Philadelphia⁸

Common features of the last three churches and their letters:

- They do not show the mixture of commendation and condemnation that Ephesus, Pergamos, and Thyatira do. Philadelphia, like symmetrically placed Smyrna, is all good. Sardis and Laodicea are all bad.
- This homogeneous character of the church is emphasized in each case by a multiple (doubled or even tripled) condemnation or commendation in the letter.
- Yet even in churches that he cannot commend, the Lord finds individuals who are faithful, or at least holds forth the promise of life to such. There is a slim spark of hope.
- Philadelphia had no faults; triple commendation/promise. Cf. symmetrically placed Smyrna.

Description of the Lord

Holy; True.--A joint title, here and in 6:10; the one to whom the martyrs call for revenge. Fits his role here as well.

- Holy
 - From common OT title for God, "The Holy One [of Israel]. Especially common in Isa., 26x/31; cf. Isa. 6 for import.
 - ch. 1, vision of the Lord as the ancient of days.
- True
 - 1:5, "faithful witness"; cf. "faithful and true" in 3:14; 19:11; 21:5; 22:6.
 - "true" frequently associated with judgment; 16:7; 19:2. He will perform that which he has promised.

Together, they depict God as transcendent and immanent; untainted by his creation, yet faithful to his promises of judgment and reward.

Key of David

- 1:18 gave him the keys of hell and death. This is an expansion of that authority.

⁸ March 2, 1994

- "David" and "open/shut" comes from Isa. 22:22. Cf. vv. 15-25. Shebna and Eliakim in turn both hold the position of royal steward--cf. Chief of Staff at the White House. But Shebna holds it to abuse it for his own power, while Eliakim faithfully cares for the people of Jerusalem. --> Those who pretend to be God's people, and those who really are.

Commendation-Promise

The Lord triples the usual "commendation--promise" pair. He is really pleased with Philadelphia! The three commendations build on one another, becoming more specific.

First Commendation

Starts with the simple statement, "I know thy works." The following promise shows that this is in a good sense, unlike the same phrase toward Sardis in 3:1. It is the most general commendation possible; only in the sequel do we learn what these works consisted of.

First Promise: Open Door

Note elaboration on the opening metaphor of the Lord who holds the key of David. If he opens the door, no one can shut it.

The uniform NT usage of "open door" shows that this means "opportunity for witness," Acts 12:16; 14:27; 1 Cor. 16:9; 2 Cor. 2:12; Col. 4:3. They have been faithful in the ministry God has given them; he will entrust more to them. Cf. parable of the talents, Matt. 25:21; Luke 19:17.

Second Commendation

Clarification of what the "works" of 3:8 were. Three points. They build on one another.

Thou has a little strength.--Cf. 2 Cor. 12:10; earthen vessels, 2 Cor. 4:7-10. Men praise those who amass great strength and power to themselves. God praises those who serve him in weakness and trust in his strength. But what do we do in our "little strength"?

Thou ... hast kept my word.--Common Johannine phrase; cf. John 8:10. Obedience. Having only a little strength is no excuse for disobedience, any more than having much strength guarantees obedience. But this itself is not enough.

Thou ... hast not denied my name.--**Unlike Peter on the night of the Lord's arrest. Being known as his. If we rest in his strength and obey his word but do not bear his name, it brings no glory to him.**

Second Promise

Those who say they are Jews,--cf. 2:9. The two churches without condemnation are the two that have to contend with false Jews. Cf. Rom. 2:28,29; 9:6-8.

The promise is drawn from two passages in the book of Isaiah that promise God's care of his people in

the midst of persecution. Both passages identify the one thus favored as God's true Israel; "I have loved thee" from Isa. 43:4, and the first part of the verse from 60:14. This latter is particularly poignant here because in Isa. 60 it describes the submission of the Gentiles to Israel. Here the Lord promises that the false Jews will take the role of Gentiles in bowing down to the church as God's true people! Looks forward to the future salvation of Israel; cf. Rom. 11:26, grafting Israel back in to the tree and thus saving them.

Thus this is a refinement of the promise in 3:8. The open door is a door of witness to unsaved Jews.

Third Commendation

Yet a further refinement of the original commendation. He selects one of the three statements of 3:8 and focuses it further. What is the particular word that they kept? The word of his patience--contrast with "longsuffering," as dealing with circumstances rather than people. Sense of the genitive?

Most naturally, "His patience." Support:

- This phrase elsewhere of Christ:
 - 2 Thes. 3:5, not "waiting for Christ" (AV), but the steadfastness and patience manifested by Christ.
 - Rev. 1:9 "patience of Jesus Christ"
 - Rom. 15:5, he is our standard.
- Can also look at places where Christ is the subject of the corresponding verb. In the transitive sense (i.e., not Luke 2:43), only Heb. 12:2,3, which motivates our "patience" (the noun) in Heb. 12:1 .

Or we can take the syntax in the Hebrew way, "my word of patience," which fits closer with the earlier use of the phrase. Then the reference is to Christ's instruction to his people to be patient in tribulation. The only such direct instruction we have is Luke 21:19, describing their behavior under tribulation, and the verb in Matt. 24:13 and parallels, same context. (In fact, the Luke verse probably is parallel to the Matt. verse.)

Third Promise

This verse is often cited in discussions about whether the church will go through the tribulation. This is a teaching we need to examine very carefully; thus need to consider this text in some detail.

Universal meaning of "dwellers on the earth" in Rev. is the ungodly. Thus the verse is not talking about some local persecution of believers, but a time when unbelievers find their world falling apart; the period just before the Lord's return that we call the Great Tribulation.

"Hour of temptation" gives us a new description of this period. The various names call out diverse aspects of the period. Note that these aspects may bear different relations to believers.

- Wrath *orgh* (1 Thes. 5:9). This period is marked by the pouring out of God's wrath against unbelievers. No believer will ever suffer the wrath of God.

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- Testing *peirasmos* (here). When disaster happens, while some turn to the Lord, others shake their fists in his face. Thus it is a time of testing. Believers certainly can be tested, but we are to pray that we would not enter "into" temptation; that is, fall under its pressure. Some believers do fall; some do not. 1 Tim. 6:9; Luke 22:40, 46. (James 1:2 does not have the preposition, and carries more the sense "to encounter," cf. Luke 10:30.)
- Tribulation *qlipsis* refers primarily to what unbelievers do to believers. 2 Thes. 1:6 is exception, but that is placed at the return of Christ, not the "tribulation." This has always been the experience of God's people, and is what we are to "endure" against.

In sum: Believers never suffer God's wrath; are at risk from temptation, but can escape it by God's grace; should always be prepared for tribulation.

Because of their endurance under tribulation, the Lord promises to protect Philadelphia not just from the temptation, but from the hour of temptation, the particular period of time. This promise is

- conditional on their obedience (not guaranteed to those who do not endure in affliction);
- fulfilled through the postponement of the "hour of trial" until after all the members of this church have fallen asleep in Christ. Looking back, we can see that the hour of temptation was nowhere near them. But they could not know that, and this is a precious promise to them.

Relation of this text to the doctrine of pretribulation rapture:

- A specific promise to Philadelphia. Does not constitute a general promise of delivery.
- Conditioned on their godliness in the midst of tribulation. If the verse promises us deliverance from the coming hour of temptation, it does so on the same grounds as that offered to Philadelphia--endurance in the sufferings of this present age. It is not a general promise to all believers.
- Historically, we can see that the delivery was accomplished through postponement of the judgment til the church had died, not through rapture.

Command: Hold Fast

Cf. 1 Cor. 10:12, "let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall." Spiritual victory requires eternal vigilance. The end is in sight; hang on tight. Cf. promise to Smyrna in 2:10; the crown is the crown of life. Is this works salvation?

We are saved by grace through faith, not by works.

But there are some who pretend to be saved by faith who are not.

The difference between the two is seen in their perseverance.

Thus these commands to persevere are to be understood in the sense, "you claim to be saved and indwelt by God's HS; show it by your life."

If we fail to hold fast, it's a sign we may not be saved, and we should examine ourselves before it's too late.

Promise to Overcomers

Twofold promise.

For an individual as a pillar in the temple, recall that the church is pictured as a temple (Eph. 2:12), and Peter, James, and John are described as pillars in the church of Jerusalem (Gal. 2:9). Such an individual upholds the church and strengthens it. In Philadelphia, a city that suffered from disastrous earthquakes, this metaphor of architectural stability is particularly appropriate.

Such a person bears three names (cf. 22:4, on the forehead)

- God our father; commemorates our family. Even in the OT God's people bear his name (Deut. 28:10; Isa 43:7; 63:9; Dan. 9:19). Achieved through birth. He is known through us; if we do not walk in holiness, we abuse that name (James 2:7).
- The name of the New Jerusalem (cf. 21:2), commemorates our citizenship. Here is the reference to the end of the book that we find regularly in these promises to overcomers. Achieved through maturity.
- Christ's new name. People get names when they are born, but again when they accomplish some notable deed. Cf. Phil. 2:9. This name thus commemorates our victory.

Laodicea⁹

Like the previous two letters, homogeneous (here, nothing to commend), and multiple condemnation sections.

Laodicea was the largest of three neighboring cities, the other two only ten miles away from it: Colossae and Hierapolis (cf. Col. 4:13), along the valley of the Lycus river.

Nothing good to say of this city; only a double condemnation, yet marked with a tender and personal love of the LJC for those who are his within the city.

14, Description of the Lord

A round-about version of calling him "Alpha and Omega."

The Amen.--Not directly from ch. 1. Consider usage.

- In the OT, "Amen" is usually a response from the people to a proclamation from God, a prophet, or a priest; cf. Deut. 27:15ff, or Jer. 11:5, "So be it."
- Once, it is a title for God himself, Isa. 65:16, as the God who will bring to pass his own promises.
- 2 Cor. 1:20, our Lord gives the "Amen" to all of God's promises.

So here, Christ is the fulfillment, the final word. Looks forward to the completion of God's work.

Faithful and True Witness.--1:5. Takes us back a bit in time, to a point where we need a witness to report to us things that we cannot yet see.

9 March 13, 1994

Beginning of the creation of God.--Cf. Col. 1:15-17. Apparently there is a teaching circulating in the district that would diminish the priority of the Lord Jesus and make him only a created being. Both Paul (Col. 1) and John (John 1) elsewhere insist that he is the foundation of creation, and he repeats this claim here. Takes us all the way back chronologically.

Thus these three titles emphasize the Lord's eternity. Cf.

- "which was, and is, and is to come." Title for God, but the deity of our Lord is always emphasized throughout the book.
- Thus recalls titles such as "Alpha and Omega," "beginning and end," "first and last."
- Heb. 13:8, Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, forever.

Condemnation

The two condemnations have different foci. The first looks at what they are in the Lord's eyes; the second shows us how they think of themselves.

15, First Condemnation

The imagery comes from the hydrology of the region, which is heavily volcanic.

- Hierapolis had hot mineral springs that were valued for their medicinal properties as a bath--but they would make you sick to drink.
- Colossae had springs of cold, pure water, refreshing to drink.
- Laodicea's water was brought by aqueduct from a warm spring. The mineral content was high, and the water nauseating. Good neither for a hot bath nor for a refreshing drink.

Application: The point is not that Laodicea is tepid in spirit, but that they have lost their distinctiveness for the Lord and become emetic. Some believers stir our hearts with their warm fervor, and that is good. Some calm and refresh us in times of trouble, and that is good too. But those who have melted into the world can do neither, like salt that has lost its savor.

16, Threat

"Spew," lit. "vomit." The Lord says to insipid worldly Christians, "you make me sick." Much more graphic, and yet much more intimate, than the other threats. There (2:5, 16, 22, 23; 3:3) he appears as a judge or warrior. Here, he desires a close intimacy with them, yet they have made themselves a burden to him, and the very threat presumes that he as well as they suffers as a result.

17, Second Condemnation

This one emphasizes the difference between how they perceive themselves and how the Lord sees them.

Three characteristics are associated with the city's industry:

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- a rich banking city.
- the source of a key ingredient for eye medicine.
- famous for producing a choice black wool.

Historically, the city so prided itself on its wealth and self-sufficiency that after the disastrous earthquake of A.D. 60, when all of its neighbors were petitioning Rome for relief money, Laodicea refused to take any even when it was offered, and instead rebuilt itself! Imagine LA doing this today!

The Christians in Laodicea evaluate their success in life the same way their pagan neighbors do: "I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing." No spiritual dimension to their self-assessment. Yet in Christ's eyes, they are

- wretched--emphasizes what has been done to them: oppressed, abused, tormented. This is our status under the "god of this world," Satan.
- miserable--emphasizes what a fair-minded person should do to them: pity them, have mercy on them.
- poor--in spite of their gold, they do not have "treasure in heaven."
- blind--their famous eyesalve cannot give them spiritual insight.
- naked--Isa. 59:6; Adam and Eve; the unbeliever in his natural state.

18-19, Command: Repent

The Lord does not reject them summarily, but offers them the compassion and mercy they need.

- Gold for their poverty: Ps. 19, "more to be desired are they than gold." Would you rather have a silver dollar now, or a guaranteed check for a million? This world's present riches are nothing compared with the promises of the word of the God who cannot lie.
- The balm of the Spirit for their blindness: 1 Cor. 2:14, the natural man cannot know the things of the Spirit of God. The answer to confusion all around us.
- White clothing for their nakedness: 19:8, God's imputed righteousness. The only solution to the self-esteem problem.

The corrective is stated twice: once figuratively, at the beginning of v.18, and once literally, at the end of v.19.

- Figuratively, "buy of me." Cf. Isa. 55:1,2 "buy and eat," yet "without money and without price." Isa. expands this as "hearken diligently." While God's riches are free, we do not receive them passively. They require discipline on our part to shut out the competing voices of the world around us and cleave to him alone.
- Literally, "be zealous and repent," "repent zealously." Also emphasizes the diligence we need to apply in seeking God's blessings.

Application: Consider the blessings the Lord offers us, and the means by which we may receive them.

- The Lord's compassion on worldly believers. His reaction is not the wrath of a judge, but the

personal pain of someone who has eaten something emetic. He loves them, and his dealings with them are for their correction and closer fellowship with himself. He offers them the only things that can really make us prosperous:

- his imputed righteousness to take away our shame and nakedness; the only true answer to the need people feel for "self-esteem";
- his Spirit to give us true insight into the world around us;
- his Word as our true treasure.
- The diligence he requires of us to claim these blessings--buying that which is free; repenting zealously.

Promise (!)

Unexpected! Not a threat of judgment, but hope for the individual who will turn. Drawn again from the local circumstances of Laodicea. The Roman proconsuls and military claimed the right to impose themselves on the local citizens for lodging. Laodicea, at an important crossroads, must have often been subject to this abuse, one that is so common in western civilization that the third amendment of our constitution explicitly prohibits it: "No soldier shall, in time of peace, be quartered in any house, without the consent of the owner, nor in time of war but in a manner to be prescribed by law." Here the Lord issues his version of the third amendment: he will not impose himself on the people of Laodicea without their permission. He desires their allegiance, but will not force himself on them.

Promise to Overcomers

We have encountered this phrase (singular ptc.) seven times, once per letter. It recurs again only at the end of the book, 21:7. Note its opposite there. It does not describe the super-spiritual among believers, but those who are saved, as opposed to "the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars," who shall experience the second death.

Particular promise here: to share Christ's throne as he shares the Father's.

- That we shall do this is promised in 22:3-5, "they shall reign."
- The comparison with Christ's accession: Cf. Phil. 2, "became obedient ... wherefore God also hath highly exalted him"; Heb. 12 "endured the cross ... is set down at the right hand of the throne of God."

This example helps us understand the nature of the biblical teaching of perseverance. Neither of them calls into question in the least Christ's pre-incarnate deity or his "security" as the Father's Son. He perseveres and assumes the throne because he is the Son of God. There is no doubt that he will triumph. Yet he must go through the actual experience, and feel the suffering, and engage in the struggle.

Application: Resolve to be an overcomer--not in order to win salvation, but to manifest the salvation you already have. "Be sober, be vigilant." "Let him that thinketh he standeth, take heed lest he fall."

Summary of the Seven Churches¹⁰

Letters as microcosm of the book

Begin with allusions to ch. 1, usually in the identifications of the Lord Jesus: The Lord's present spiritual rule over his churches.

... and from the seven Spirits which are before his throne;	Sardis, 3:1a he that hath the seven Spirits of God,
5 And from Jesus Christ, [who is] the faithful witness, [and] the first begotten of the dead,	Philadelphia, 3:7b; he that is true, Laodicea, 3:14b the faithful and true witness,
12 I saw seven golden candlesticks; 13 And in the midst of the seven candlesticks [one] like unto the Son of man,	Ephesus, 2:1b he ... who walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks;
14 his eyes <i>were</i> as a flame of fire; 15 And his feet like unto fine brass, as if they burned in a furnace;	Thyatira, 2:18 These things saith the Son of God, who hath his eyes like unto a flame of fire, and his feet <i>are</i> like fine brass;
16 And he had in his right hand seven stars:	Ephesus, 2:1a; he that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand, Sardis, 3:1b ... he that hath ... the seven stars;
... and out of his mouth went a sharp twoedged sword: and his countenance [was] as the sun shineth in his strength.	Pergamos, 2:12 he which hath the sharp sword with two edges;
17 ... And he laid his right hand upon me, saying unto me, Fear not; I am the first and the last: 18 I [am] he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen;	Smyrna, 2:8 ... These things saith the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive;
... and have the keys of hell and of death.	Philadelphia, 3:7c he that hath the key of David, he that openeth, and no man shutteth; and shutteth, and no man openeth;

The promises to overcomers are filled with allusions to ch. 19-22; cf. 21:7, only occurrence of "he that overcometh" other than the conclusions of the letters. The Lord's future return and dominion over the earth.

19:8, 14 And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints. ... And the armies <i>which were</i> in heaven followed him upon white horses, clothed in fine linen, white and clean.	Sardis, 3:5a He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment;
20:12 And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is [the book] of life: ... 15 And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire. 21:27 And there shall in no wise enter into it any thing that defileth, neither <i>whatsoever</i> worketh abomination, or <i>maketh</i> a lie: but they which are written in the Lamb's book of life.	Sardis, 3:5b; I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels.
21:2 And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.	Philadelphia, 3:12b I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, <i>which is</i> new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God: and <i>I will write upon him</i> my new name.

¹⁰ March 26, 1994

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21:8 But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death.	Smyrna, 2:11 He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death.
21:14 And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and in them the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.	Pergamos, 2:17b To him that overcometh ... [I] will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth <i>it</i> .
22:1 And he shewed me a pure river of water of life, ... 2 ... the tree of life, which bare twelve [manner of] fruits,	Pergamos, 2:17a, To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna.
22:3 And there shall be no more curse: but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it;	Laodicea, 3:21b To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne.
22:4 and his name [shall be] in their foreheads.	Philadelphia, 3:12c I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, <i>which is new Jerusalem</i> , which cometh down out of heaven from my God: and <i>I will write upon him my new name</i> .
22:5 ... and they shall reign for ever and ever.	Thyatira, 2:26-27; And he that overcometh, and keepeth my works unto the end, to him will I give power over the nations: ²⁷ And he shall rule them with a rod of iron; Laodicea, 3:21 To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne.
22:2, 14 In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river, <i>was there</i> the tree of life, which bare twelve <i>manner of</i> fruits, and yielded her fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree <i>were</i> for the healing of the nations. ... Blessed [are] they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life,	Ephesus, 2:7 To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God.
22:16 I Jesus ... I am ... the bright and morning star.	Thyatira, 2:28 And I will give him the morning star.

In between, we see the churches in circumstances developed more fully in the body of the book: false professors (2:6, 9, 15, 20, 3:9), tribulation (2:10; 3:20); awaiting Christ's return (2:5; 3:3,11).

Thus the letters show in compact form what the rest of the book will develop in more detail:

- The Lord Jesus, though physically absent, spiritually superintends his church (ch. 1).
- He warns and admonishes them through the gloom of the present age ... (ch. 2-3; 4-18)
- ... so that they may overcome and be prepared for his glorious return and the age to come (ch. 19-22).

Gradations among the churches

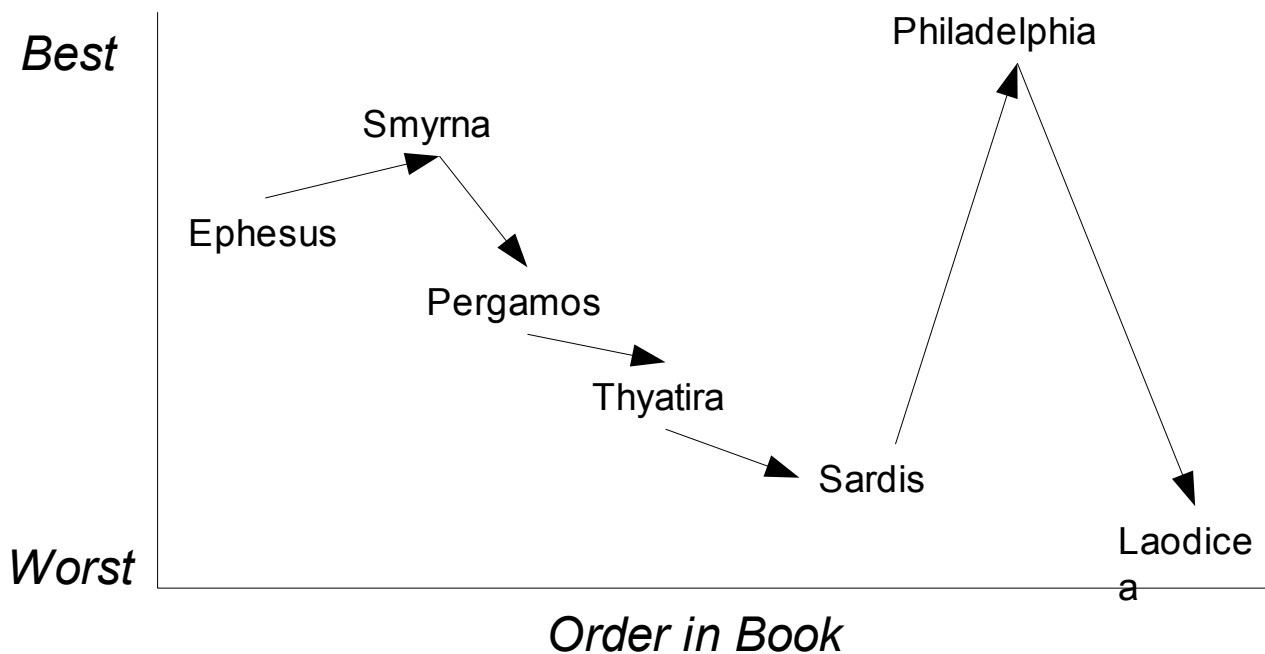
The components of which the letters are composed emphasize that the Lord has two basic attitudes toward them:

- commendation (associated with promises and commands to "hold fast")
- condemnation (associated with threats and commands to "repent")

We have already observed that the churches differ in their mix of commendation and condemnation:

- Smyrna and Philadelphia have no condemnation, only commendation.
 - These are the only two that face opposition from the "synagogue of Satan" (2:9; 3:9), pretending Jews. The others have begun a process of compromise that has reduced Jewish persecution (though not Roman, cf. Pergamos, 2:13).
 - Between these two, Philadelphia seems to be stronger than Smyrna; it has an open door of positive witness that will lead to the conversion of some from "the synagogue of Satan," while Smyrna is simply commended for holding fast in the face of blasphemy from this group.
- Sardis and Laodicea have no commendation, only condemnation. Laodicea seems to be weaker than Sardis; Sardis at least has a name that it is alive, while Laodicea doesn't even show any distinctiveness at all.
- Ephesus, Pergamos, and Thyatira have both. As Smyrna and Philadelphia were characterized by their interactions with the synagogue of Satan, these three are described in terms of the Nicolaitans (by name in Ephesus and Pergamos; the same doctrine in Thyatira). Again, there is a progression:
 - 2:6, Ephesus recognizes and opposes the Nicolaitans.
 - 2:14-15, Pergamos tolerates the presence of the Nicolaitans; compared with Balaam, an outsider trying to pollute the people of God.
 - 2:20, Thyatira permits such a person to teach within the church; compared with Jezebel, a member of the covenant community.

Thus the good get better, and the bad worse, as we work through the seven letters. Graphically, a horizontal 'V' with Ephesus at the apex:



The picture suggests that Ephesus is the turning point. Loss of love for the Lord is what turns the corner between a church that is pleasing to him and potentially has a strong ministry, and one that is on its way to making him sick.

Review the churches in order of "goodness." The big points of comparison are in their relation to unbelievers around them.

- Philadelphia. Little strength of its own, but by relying in the Lord shows faithful obedience; is promised an "open door" of outreach and effectiveness in conversion of some from "the synagogue of Satan."
- Smyrna. Persecuted and materially poor (though spiritually rich in Christ). Has borne blasphemy from false Jews, and faces coming tribulation by which it will glorify the Lord.
- Ephesus. Godly conduct and discernment of the compromises promoted by the Nicolaitans, but has lost its love for the Lord. (That love may be the shield that keeps worldly teachers away from the church. Only when it disappears does this error begin to make its appearance. Like the enamel on the teeth; until it goes, decay is no problem.)
- Pergamos. Once love for the Lord goes, discernment is not far behind. They are unable to avoid the impact of wolves from without (Acts 20:29).
- Thyatira. Now "from among themselves" (Acts 20:30) arise teachers to promote this same error, with the church's permission.
- Sardis. Only a name of life remains. A few individuals are undefiled and worthy; the church as a whole is dead.

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- Laodicea. Not even the reputation remains. Proud self-sufficiency and accommodation to the world lead to a church that makes the Lord sick.

Application: This range of churches has existed in every era of the church age. Where in it do we fall? Probably somewhere around Ephesus and Smyrna. We do not have problems with Nicolaitanism, as do Pergamos and Thyatira, but neither do we see the open door of Philadelphia.

Let's make sure of our love for the Lord. Spend time in his presence, praying and meditating on his word. (Distinguish Reading, Studying, Meditating--all are needed.) A good gauge of this is the exercise we feel (or otherwise) at the Lord's table. If we are dead when we come to worship, something's lacking in our love for the Lord.

Recognize that poverty (2:9) and lack of strength (3:8) in the world's eyes don't amount to a fig before the Lord; these are characteristics of the two strongest churches in the group.

Pray that the Lord would give us an "open door" of outreach, 3:8. Ask him to cultivate in us first the desire for the door, then the strength to take advantage of it.