



The Book of Revelation

Scripture's Crescendo and Culmination

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“The Inspiration of St. John” by Jean Duvet

The Message of Revelation

The message of the Book of Revelation is one of comfort and encouragement to beleaguered believers. Be strong in the faith! Take courage and persevere! Things are not as they seem! It may appear that the forces of evil are triumphant on every side but that is not true. God remains in control of His universe and all that takes place within it. Past, present, and future are in His hands alone. Do not despair. With the eyes of faith, look behind the deceiving facade of things as they appear to be and see things as they truly are. With the din of desperate battle raging all around us, listen with the ears of faith to the “*distant triumph song*” already resounding in the halls of heaven. The foe has already been defeated. Christ has won the victory. Dr. Donald Richardson says it well:



***“John’s Vision of the Secret Revelation”
by Hans Memling - 1475***

“The Christians of that generation were in the midst of an alien, hostile environment; and in a period of unprecedented persecution. The present was characterized by chaos and confusion, ruin was around them, and the future seemed impenetrably dark. To the ordinary observer it seemed as though the church and all it stood for would be utterly crushed, and that this community of those who followed Christ would be driven into denial of Him or done to death. John, however, with eyes that can see, looks beyond the borders of the visible. He lifts for his companions in tribulation the veil that obscures the far vision. When the hearts of others are failing them for fear, he sounds a clear note of confidence and of sure victory. The golden age, he tells them, is not behind us; the best is yet to be....The joys and sorrows of life, the pain and persecution of the present, are not without meaning. They are only parts of a great plan whose design for the moment we may be unable to see; but the plan is there, and behind it all is God. The present may be dark and troubled and our minds perplexed, but John calls upon the future to carry his readers courageously over the present...The Book of Revelation, says Dr. C.A. Smith, is the Christian epic of the day that is after tomorrow...Think of where you are going instead of where you have been, or now are. Things are bad today, but don’t act as if the heavens were falling in bits of blue plaster around your feet. “By God’s will doubt not, the last word is still victory.” The first word of the book is the key to its content and purpose: “Apocalypse,” revelation. The word means uncovering, unveiling. Christ is unveiled and the future of the church is unveiled. Unveiling is the key to the book. The word opens wide doors, and magnificent visions of conflict and victory and great glory appear. The unveiling of Christ, the

final truth about Christ and His Church, that is the purpose of the last book of the Bible. And in this book we have the unveiled Person, the unveiled program of His purpose, and the unveiled power. The central truth which the writer seeks to impress upon his readers is that the world and all of its events and affairs are under the control of Christ. History with all of its powers and forces, is under His direction; and He will ultimately bring about the full and final victory of good. He shows that the conflict between God and Satan, between good and evil, is inevitable, persistent, prolonged. The

Church is in the wilderness, meeting with opposition, enduring persecution; but Christ is present with the Church, the source of her life and the assurance of her ultimate victory. Evil for the present seems regnant, but it is only for a time, and times, and half a time. The final triumph of God's purpose and the reign of His righteousness is certain. In the midst of persecution and peril, the Christian should fear none of those things which he is called upon to suffer, but be faithful in his witness to Christ; and in the end he shall receive the crown of life. And so, the true Christian should be constantly looking forward. Of him it is true that hope springs eternal in the human breast; and when the night is darkest, he may be comforted and cheered by the promise of the coming day. There is a divine conviction in the soul of the Christian which causes him to believe that when all human resources have failed and he is utterly helpless, then a Helper is on the way. When man's means are exhausted, God is coming; for man's extremity is always God's opportunity....The coming of Christ is the dominant note of the book. "Surely, I come quickly!" is the word of Christ to His suffering saints...This a book of supreme optimism. There is an undertone of hope running through every page... The Church, with the risen, living Christ in the midst of her is to go into conflict. Her warfare in the world is inevitable. That warfare John pictures for us in all its tragedy. It is the tragedy of the struggle between right and wrong, and often wrong seems to be triumphant; but Christ is in the midst of the Church as she battles for the right. His presence and His power are the Church's assurance of her ultimate victory. And so, the Revelation is the symbolic story of the Church's journey through the wilderness of the world into the land of promise....The story of the Church is a story of unceasing conflict, but also of increasing victory; and in the end, the devil and all his works will go down before her, and she shall issue from the field of battle forever triumphant. That is the message of John, and that is the Christian's sure conviction." (Richardson, pp. 13-14)



"John on Patmos" by Ernst Barlach - 1919



"St John on Patmos" by Jan Wellens de Cock - 1520

The Author and Date of Revelation

The author of the Book of Revelation tells us four times that his name is "John" (Revelation 1:1,4,9; 22:8). The Greek name "*Ioannes*" is a form of the Hebrew name "*Yohanan*" which means "*Yahweh is gracious!*" The name was relatively common among the Jews of the first century. The fact that John considered it unnecessary to further identify himself indicates that he was a well known figure among the churches of Asia Minor who could safely assume that his audience would recognize him and acknowledge the authority of that which he wrote. It is the overwhelming testimony of the fathers of the early church that St. John the Apostle, the son of Zebedee and brother of James, was the author of the Book of Revelation.

Tradition indicates that St. John spent the last years of his life in the Greek city of Ephesus, on the western coast of the Roman Province of Asia. It is conjectured that John arrived in the city in the year 69 or 70 A.D. The fathers further indicate that

John was later banished from the city to the nearby island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea, during the persecution of the Roman Emperor Domitian who reigned from 81-96 A.D. St. Jerome reports:

“In the fourteenth year then after Nero, Domitian having raised a second persecution, John was banished to the island of Patmos, and wrote the Apocalypse on which Justin Martyr and Irenaeus later wrote commentaries. But Domitian having been put to death, and his acts, on account of his excessive cruelty, having been annulled by the senate, he returned to Ephesus under Nerva Pertinax and continuing there until the time of the emperor Trajan, founded and built churches throughout all Asia, and, worn out by old age, died in the sixty-ninth year after our Lord’s passion and was buried near the same city.” (NPNF, 3, pp. 364-365)

This, of course, conforms with the testimony of the text itself, which indicates that at the time when the Revelation came to John he was ***“on the island of Patmos because of the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus.”*** (Revelation 1:9) Thus, the date of the Book of Revelation would seem to be in the early to mid nineties, during the last decade of the first century.



“St. John on the Isle of Patmos” - 19th Century Bible Engraving



"The Vision of St. John by Jean Duvet

Apocalyptic Literature and Revelation

The Book of Revelation calls itself the “*Apocalypse*” (Revelation 1:1) from the Greek word “*apokalypsis*” which means “*to remove the cover from*” or “*to reveal*.” It shares many basic characteristics with a unique form of literature which flourished among the Jews during the last two centuries B.C. and the first century A.D.

Apocalyptic literature is the product of hard times. It was directed mainly to a people in trouble, as people who saw themselves as God’s own, but who were puzzled by the plight in which they found themselves, dominated and oppressed by a succession of foreign conquerors. It is a uniquely Jewish form of literary expression which finds its way into both the Old and the New Testaments, although the great majority of apocalyptic writing is extra-biblical (i.e. The Book of Jubilees, the Psalms of Solomon, the Assumption of Moses, The Martyrdom of Isaiah, the Apocalypse of Moses, etc.).

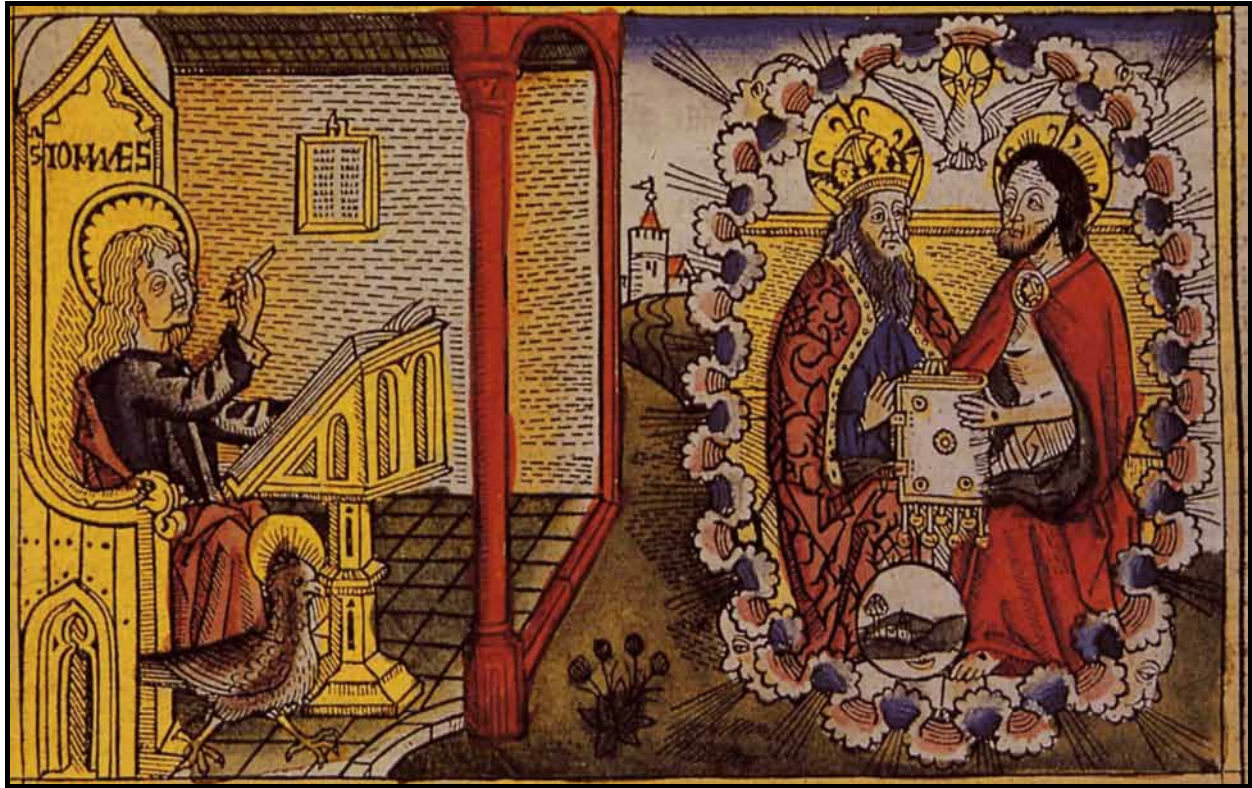
The basic characteristics of apocalyptic literature include the following:

1. Apocalyptic writing deals with secret or hidden information which can only be disclosed by supernatural means through dreams or visions from God or angelic intermediaries.
2. The message of apocalyptic literature is communicated in mysterious, enigmatical forms through the use of bizarre, oftentimes obscure symbolism and imagery. Its fantastic worlds of beasts, signs, colors, numbers, and angels seems to have functioned as a type of code which effectively communicated its message to a select group while concealing the message from the uninitiated.
3. Apocalyptic literature is basically pessimistic in its assessment of mankind’s potential. There is little possibility for progress or positive development within the normal framework of human endeavor. From the apocalypticist’s point of view, things are bad and they are only going to get worse as far as men are concerned.
4. Apocalyptic literature is written in times of catastrophic change as previously well-ordered world views collapse. Apocalyptic writers see themselves in the midst of the catastrophic destruction of a way of life, even of the entire universe.

5. Apocalyptic literature proceeds on the firm conviction that in his own good time, God will intervene to bring the evil of this world to an end and proclaim His ultimate victory. It has been aptly described as “ *the anticipatory raising of the curtain to display the final scene*” - it is, in a way, conveying pictorially and in symbol, the conviction of the ultimate victory of God.
6. Apocalyptic literature is rigidly deterministic. All of history is pre-ordained in the power and wisdom of God. Nothing can interrupt or frustrate His plans.
7. Apocalyptic literature is basically dualistic. History is perceived as an ongoing conflict between God and Satan, good and evil.
8. Extra-Biblical Apocalyptic literature is generally pseudonymous, that is to say, written under a false name, most commonly the name of one of the great heroes of the Old Testament.
9. A feature of many extra-Biblical apocalypses is that they take past or present events and rewrite them in the form of predictive prophecy.
10. Apocalyptic writing is produced to bring cheer and comfort to the righteous in the midst of their tribulations.
11. The assertion of the supernatural ability to predict future events is an important component of this type of literature.

Martin Franzmann offers this helpful summary of the differences between apocalyptic literature in general and the Book of Revelation:

“As the man of Jewish descent, language, and culture that he obviously was, John was acquainted with and influenced by a form of Judaic religious literature which modern scholars have classified as “apocalyptic.” Apocalyptic literature elaborated certain elements or aspects of Old Testament prophecy, found in such passages and books as Isaiah 24-27, Zechariah 9-14, Ezekiel, Joel, and Daniel. It sought to interpret all history on the basis of purported visionary experiences of the author. It was especially interested in eschatology, that is, in the end of history and the ushering in of the world to come. It utilized pictures, allegories, and symbols (which soon became traditional); numbers, colors, and stars were in these images endowed with a profound significance....Formally, the Revelation to John belongs to this class; apocalyptic furnished the familiar vocabulary of its speech. The influence of



“The Vision of St. John” from the “Koberger Bibel - 1483

apocalyptic on the Revelation to John can be and often has been exaggerated. The Revelation to John is set apart from the general run of apocalyptic literature by profound differences. Apocalyptic itself drew heavily on the Old Testament; John draws even more heavily. In fact, it is the Old Testament itself and not apocalyptic that constitutes the immediate background and the richest source for Revelation. Revelation is at bottom much more deeply akin to the Old Testament than it is to apocalyptic which it resembles so strongly on the formal side. Other differences are equally striking. Apocalyptic works are generally pseudonymous; that is, they claim some great figure from Israel's past, such as Enoch, as author; and the past course of history as known to the actual author is made a prediction in the mouth of the purported author. John, however, writes in his own name. Apocalyptic has speculative interests and seeks to calculate the times of the world's days and of the world's end. John has no such speculative interest; he does not aim to satisfy men's curiosity but to give them hope and courage, and he does not attempt to calculate the approach of the end...The visions of apocalyptic betray their origin; they are fantasies of men. The visions of John have on them the stamp of genuine visionary experience; they are not products of the study. If apocalyptic can be termed literary meditation on prophetic themes, Revelation is genuine prophecy, a prophecy which uses apocalyptic motifs and forms insofar, and only insofar, as they are legitimate explications of Old Testament prophetic themes and are germane to its own thoroughly Christ-centered proclamation.” (Franzmann, pp. 27-28)



“St. John on Patmos” by Hans Burgkmair - 1518

Interpreting the Book of Revelation

There are four basic interpretive approaches to the Book of Revelation. Their perspectives may be summarized as follows:

1. THE PRETERIST OR CONTEMPORARY HISTORICAL VIEW

This view is favored by theological liberals and those who reject the inspiration of Scripture and the possibility of predictive prophecy. The Preterist View assumes that Revelation is no different than any other example of apocalyptic literature from the

period. The author, whomever he may have been (most preterists reject the traditional view that St. John the Apostle was the author of Revelation), is describing events from the recent past and the present as if he were foretelling future events. According to this view the book is a tract on contemporary history written for the First Century. It deals with nothing more than Roman or Jewish persecution of the Christian Church during that period.

2. THE FUTURIST VIEW

This view is favored by fundamentalists who subscribe to the theory of dispensational pre-millennialism. It is sometimes called “Dispensational Futurism.” According to this view the visions of chapters 4-22 refer exclusively to a future time immediately preceding the end of history. Dispensational Futurists emphasize a rigid literalism through which they decipher a hidden time line for the end of the age. The time line includes these events: 1. The restoration of ethnic Israel to its promised land; 2. The rapture of the Gentile church into heaven; 3. A seven year tribulation period; 4. The reign of the Antichrist in Jerusalem during the Tribulation Period; 5. The gathering of the godless nations to battle for Jerusalem; 6. The triumphant return of Christ to defeat His foes in the battle of Armageddon; 7. The thousand year (millennial) reign of Christ on earth; 8. Satan’s final rebellion at the end of the millennium; and, 9. The destruction of Satan and the eternal reign of Christ in heaven.

3. THE HISTORICIST OR CONTINUOUS HISTORICAL VIEW

There are many varieties of the Historicist view. It is the traditional viewpoint of mainstream Christendom. In this view, Revelation is seen as predicting the major events and movements of Christian history throughout the first and second comings of Christ. Individual symbols and signs within the Book are specifically identified with personalities, places, and events in Christian history providing a chronological sequence of prophecies which are being continuously and successively fulfilled from the days of John the Revelator until the Last Day. The difficulty with these specific identifications is that they cannot be validated in the text and often tend to focus the applications of the text to persons and events contemporary to the interpreter.

4. THE IDEALIST OR SYMBOLIC VIEW

The fourth and final view is, in a sense, a variation of the Historicist viewpoint that has prevailed throughout much of Christian tradition. The Idealist agrees that Revelation describes and predicts persons and events throughout the New Testament era. However, he disagrees with the Historicist, in that he generally refuses to limit

the identification of the symbol or application of the prophecy to only one historical reality. Such specific individual application may be made only when it is facilitated and required by the text of Revelation itself. However, in most cases, the prophecies of Revelation portray events and patterns that are repeated over and over again throughout history. In this way, Revelation is relevant for God's people in every time and place, as pertinent to us today as it was to the First Century believers of John's original audience. Conservative Lutheran scholar Siegbert Becker argues that the idealistic view is based on Scripture's interpretation of itself and is thus the true literal interpretation of the Book:

"The idealistic interpretation is really only a variation of the church historical interpretation of Revelation...The idealistic or church historical interpretations are really the grammatical-historical method of interpretation applied to this particular form of literature. And it ought to be stressed again and again that the words of the text itself tell us that we are dealing with symbols that stand for something else...The idealistic interpretation is the literal interpretation." (Becker, pp. 18-19)

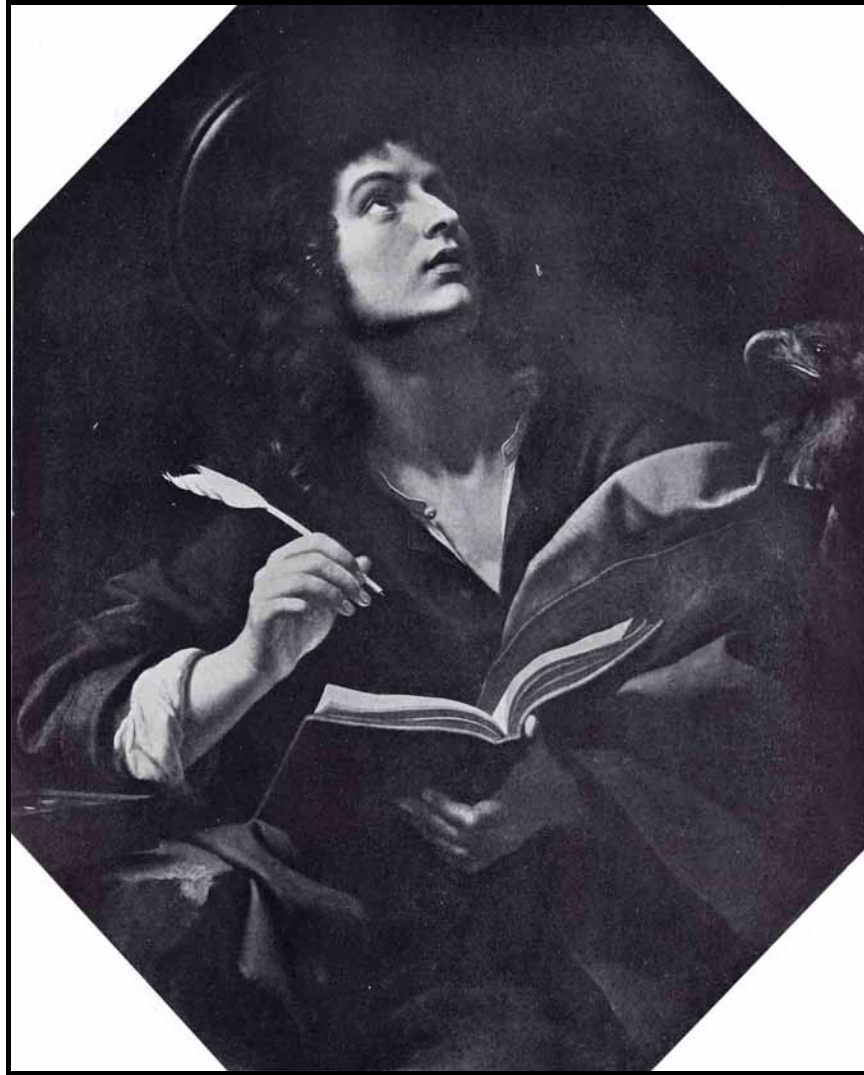


"St John Delivered from the Boiling Oil"
by Albrecht Dürer

An Outline of Revelation

- I. The Prologue (1:1-20)
 - A. Introduction (1:1-3)
 - B. Salutation (1:4-8)
 - C. John's Commission from Christ (1:9-20)
- II. The First Vision - The Letters to the Seven Churches (2:1-3:22)
 - A. The Letter to Ephesus (2:1-7)
 - B. The Letter to Smyrna (2:8-11)
 - C. The Letter to Pergamum (2:12-17)
 - D. The Letter to Thyatira (2:18-29)
 - E. The Letter to Sardis (3:1-6)
 - F. The Letter to Philadelphia (3:7-13)
 - G. The Letter to Laodicea (3:14-22)
- III. The Second Vision - The Vision of the Seven Seals (4:1-7:17)
 - A. The Throne of God in Heaven (4:1-11)
 - B. The Book of the Seven Seals (5:1-5)
 - C. The Lamb Before the Throne (5:6-14)
 - D. The First Seal - The White Horse (6:1-2)
 - E. The Second Seal - The Red Horse (6:3-4)
 - F. The Third Seal - The Black Horse (6:5-6)
 - G. The Fourth Seal - The Pale Horse (6:7-8)
 - H. The Fifth Seal - The Souls Beneath the Altar (6:9-11)
 - I. The Sixth Seal - The Final Judgement (6:12-17)
 - J. The Servants of God (7:1-17)
- IV. The Third Vision - The Seven Trumpets (8:1 -11:19)
 - A. The Seventh Seal - The Seven Angels with the Seven Trumpets (8:1-5)
 - B. The First Four Trumpets (8:6-13)
 - C. The Fifth Trumpet - Locusts from Hell (9:1-11)
 - D. The Sixth Trumpet - The Host From Beyond the Euphrates (9:12-19)
 - E. The Impenitence of Those Who Remained (9:20-21)
 - F. The Angel with the Little Book (10:1-7)
 - G. John's Commission to Preach (10:8-11)
 - H. The Two Witnesses (11:1-14)

- I. The Seventh Trumpet and the End of the World (11:15-19)
- V. The Fourth Vision - The Seven Scenes (12:1-15:8)
 - A. The First Scene - The Great Red Dragon's Assault (12:1-13:1)
 - B. The Second Scene - The Beast from the Sea (13:1-10)
 - C. The Third Scene - The Beast from the Earth (13:11-18)
 - D. The Fourth Scene - The 144,000 with the Lamb (14:1-5)
 - E. The Fifth Scene - The Three Angels (14:6-13)
 - F. The Sixth Scene - The Harvest (14:14-20)
 - G. The Seventh Scene - The Angels with the Plagues (15:1-8)
- VI. The Sixth Vision - Christ and Anti-Christ (17:1-19:21)
 - A. The Great Harlot (17:1-18)
 - B. The Defeat of Babylon (18:1-24)
 - C. The Church's Victory (19:1-21)
 - D. The Marriage Feast of the Lamb (19:1-10)
 - E. The Rider on the White Horse (19:11-21)
- VII. The Seventh Vision - The Final Victory of Christ and His Church (20:1-22:5)
 - A. Christ and Satan (20:1-3)
 - B. The 1,000 Year Reign (20:4-6)
 - C. The Defeat of Satan (20:7-10)
 - D. The Final Judgment (20:11-15)
 - E. The New Heaven and Earth (21:1-8)
 - F. The New Jerusalem (21:9-27)
 - G. Paradise Restored (22:1-5)
- VIII. The Conclusion (22:6-21)



“St. John the Revelator” by Carlo Dolci

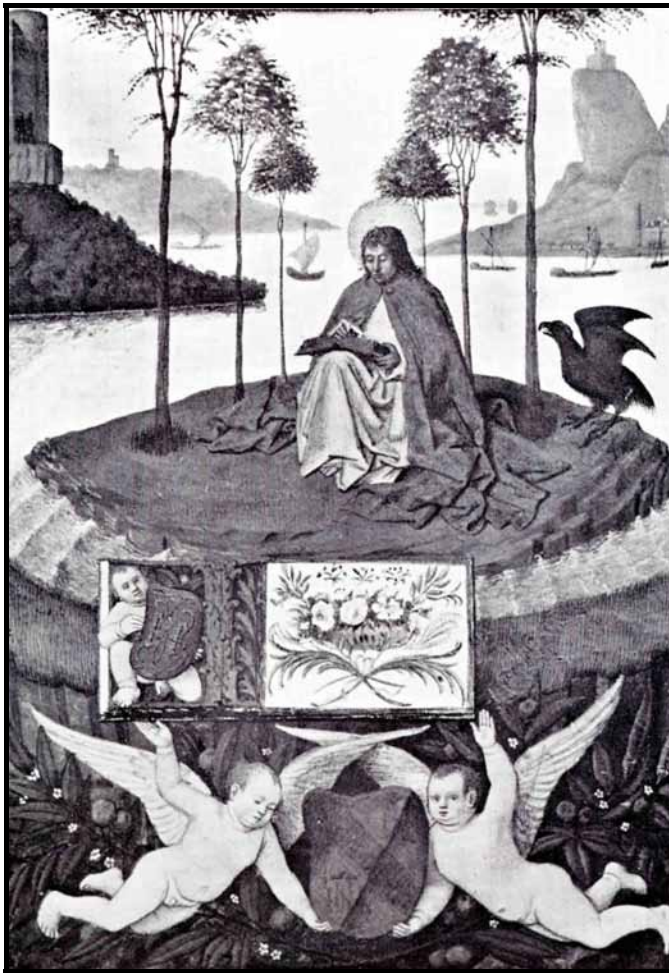
The Prologue (Revelation 1:1-3)

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show His servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending His angel to His servant John, who testifies to everything he saw - that is, the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.

“The revelation of Jesus Christ” - The opening phrase provides the title of the Book, thus “Revelation” in most English Bibles although some simply transliterate

the Greek word and title the Book the “*Apocalypse*”. (Greek - “*apokalypsis*”) - literally “*to take away the cover*” or *to take away the veil*,” the term pertains to uncovering that which is hidden or concealed and comes to refer to the action of God in revealing that which could not naturally or normally be known by men. In this instance the agent of revelation is identified as “*Jesus Christ*.” The text spells out a clear chain of communication. GOD >> JESUS CHRIST >> ANGEL >> JOHN.

“*To show His servants what must soon take place.*” - Those to whom the revelation is directed are “*His servants*,” that is, the community of God’s people. This is a message for the encouragement of the saints. That which is to be uncovered in this divine revelation is “*what must soon take place.*” This thought is reinforced in the next sentence: “*because the time is near.*” Note the sense of imminence. These are not far distant events. The last days foretold by Daniel (2:28) have arrived. The final era of human history has begun.

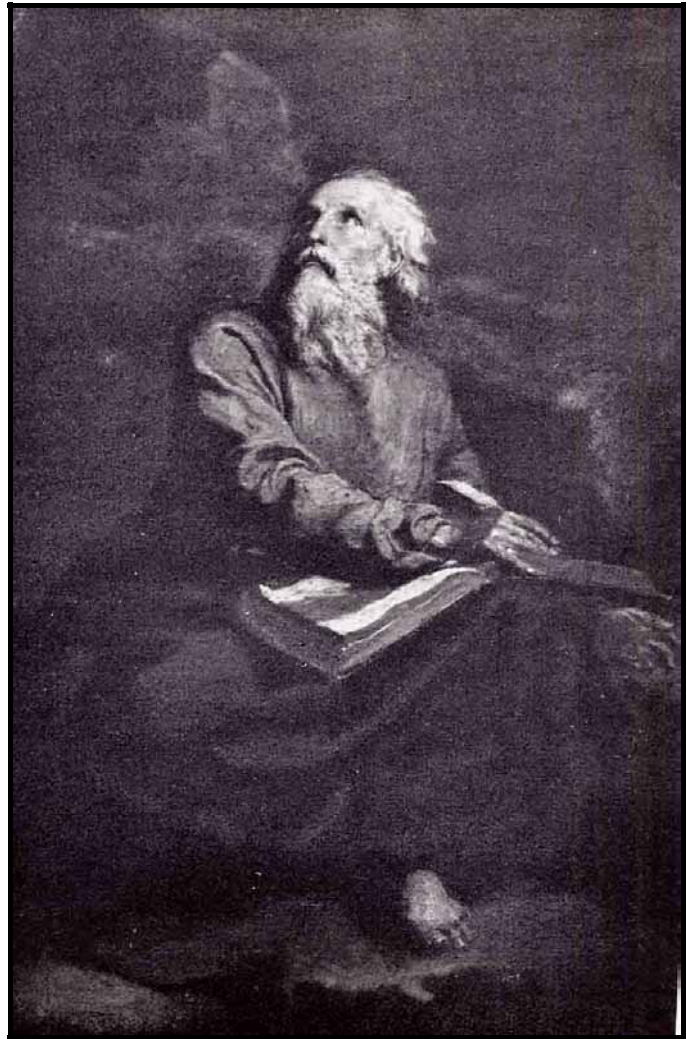


“*St. John on Patmos*” by Jean Fouquet - 1450

“*John, who testifies to everything he saw - that is, the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus.*” - These are not the fever dreams of a man’s overactive imagination. This is “*the Word of God, and the testimony of Jesus.*” This revelation does not originate with John; he merely “*testifies to everything he saw.*” Note the emphasis on the visual nature of that which is to be revealed.

“*Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy...*” - This is the first of Revelation’s seven beatitudes, pronouncements of blessing (cf. 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7; 22:14). As the Word of God, Revelation carries the power and the promise of the Almighty. The second phrase in the sentence, “*and blessed are those who hear it*” reflects the

practice of the New Testament church in that these apostolic letters were read in the worship service of the congregations, much like the Scripture readings of our liturgy today. Accordingly, the majority of those in the first generation who would encounter John's letter would hear it rather than reading it. Those who not only hear it but also keep it ("**take it to heart**") will truly be blessed (cf. Luke 11:28). The usefulness of the information to be revealed is indicated in the phrase "**because the time is near.**" This is not abstract theology or information about the distant future. That which is about to be disclosed is vital and necessary for immediate practical application. The Greek word for time in this phrase is "**kairos**" not ordinary chronological time, but a moment of opportunity offered by God for the benefit and blessing of His own.



"St John on Patmos" by J.L.E. Meissonier - 1850

The Salutation (Revelation 1:4-8)

John, to the seven churches in the province of Asia: Grace and peace to you from Him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before His throne, and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To Him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve His God and Father - to Him be glory and power forever and ever! Amen. Look, He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of Him. So shall it be! Amen. "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty."



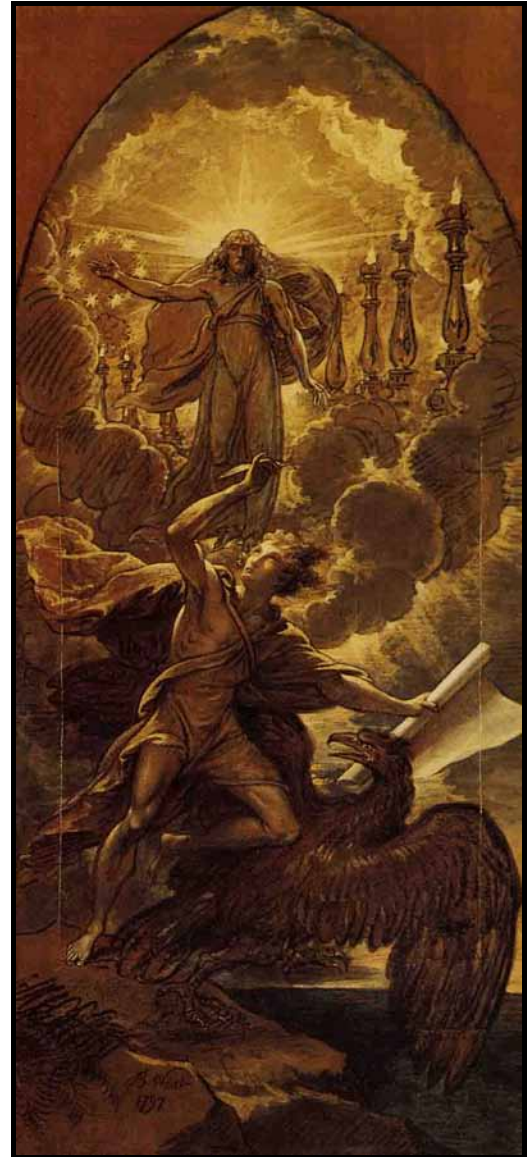
*“John’s Vision of the Seven Candlesticks”
by Giovanni Andrea Vavassore*

“John, to the seven churches in the province of Asia.” - The Book of Revelation has the form of a letter and John now inserts the standard epistolary greeting formula which typically includes three components: the writer, the addressees, and the greeting. The writer identifies himself simply as ***“John.”*** The recipients of the letter are designated as ***“the seven churches in the province of Asia.”*** The reason for the selection of these particular churches is much debated. These were not the only churches in the region. Surely the fact that seven are chosen is no accident, the use of the perfect number indicating completion and thus signally that this is a message intended for the entire church. It is likely that these particular churches were singled out because they were representative of the specific spiritual situations and characteristics that the inspired writer wished to highlight. It may,

of course, also be true that these were the seven churches most closely related to John and with which he was most familiar. They cluster geographically around John’s base in Ephesus.

“Grace and peace to you from Him who is...” - This is the standard form of greeting among Christians of the First Century. It combines a Christianized form of the ordinary Greek salutation in which the verb *“chairein”* - *“to greet”* is converted into the noun *“charis”* - *“grace,”* thus emphasizing the undeserved love of God to His people in Christ with the traditional Hebrew salutation *“shalom”* - *“peace.”* The Triune God, identified in the phrases which now follow, is the source of the grace and peace which we enjoy as the people of God. God the Father is identified as ***“He who***

is, and who was, and who is to come.” The threefold designation stresses the timelessness of God and reminds us of “*Jahweh - I Am*” the sacred name of God in the Hebrew Old Testament. The second member of the divine Trinity mentioned here is “*the seven spirits before His throne.*” There are those who argue that this is not a reference to the Holy Spirit, but rather to the seven angels who stand before the throne of God (cf. 8:2). However, nowhere else in the book of Revelation are angels referred to as “*spirits*” and the immediate context makes it very clear that in this instance, the reference to “*the seven spirits before His throne*” who are, along with the Father and the Son, a source of the grace and peace that belong to the people of God, must be identified with the third Member of the holy Trinity, God the Holy Spirit. In that sense, the perfect seven is not an inappropriate designation and may refer back to the traditional sevenfold gifts of the Spirit outlined in Isaiah 11:2 - “*The Spirit of the Lord, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord.*” Another interesting parallel to this description of the Holy Spirit is found in Zechariah 4 where the prophet urges the leaders of Israel to rely upon the power of the Spirit: “*Not by might, not by power, but by My Spirit, says the Lord Almighty.*” (Zechariah 4:6) In the vision which surrounds that admonition the prophet sees “*a solid gold lampstand with a bowl at the top and seven lights on it, with seven channels to the lights...These seven are the eyes of the Lord, which range throughout the earth.*” (Zechariah 4:2,10)



*“John Called to Write Revelation”
by Benjamin West*

The typical order of the Trinity - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - has been altered in this Verse to allow for an expanded description of God the Son. In Hebrew numerology, three is the God number. As God the Father was identified with a series of three phrases (“*Him who was, and who is, and who is to come*”), so



“St. John on Patmos” by Martin Schoengauer

now God the Son is also labeled with three designations - ***“who is the faithful witness, the first-born from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.”*** Each of these three descriptive titles is drawn from Psalm 89 which affirms the messianic promise of a royal king from the line of David. ***“The faithful witness”*** is an allusion to Psalm 89:37, and serves to describe Christ’s role as our divine prophet who reveals the truth of God’s love for men in word and deed. The next title, ***“the firstborn from the dead,”*** is drawn from Psalm 89:27 - ***“I will also appoint Him My Firstborn, the most exalted of the kings of the earth.”*** The reference is to the resurrection of Christ, who demonstrated His total victory over sin, death, and the devil by His resurrection from the grave on the third day. The language is virtually identical to that of St. Paul in Colossians 1:18 - ***“He is...the first born from among the dead.”*** The

third title, ***the ruler of the kings of the earth,”*** also comes from Psalm 89:27. All of the petty kings, emperors, and rulers of this world are but pawns in the hand of this mighty ruler, for Jesus is ***“King of kings and Lord of Lords.”*** (Revelation 19:16). On the last day, His rule over all will be revealed as all of humanity bows down before Him. Many commentators see in these three titles a sequential reference to the work of Christ past (***“faithful witness”***); present (***firstborn from the dead”***); and, future (***“ruler of the kings of the earth”***).

“To Him who loves us and has freed us from our sins...” - The Revelator’s description of Jesus Christ now naturally flows into triple doxology, a spontaneous song of praise and thanksgiving to God in three parts. The ongoing love of Christ for

His own is demonstrated by His redemption of mankind - ***“has freed us from our sins by His blood.”*** The blood of the Redeemer poured out in saving abundance upon the cross has loosed us from the curse and dominion of sin. ***“He has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve His God and Father.”*** Now we reign with Him in His kingdom and enjoy direct access to God as His priests. The Old Testament theme of the people of God as a kingdom and priests is repeated several times in Revelation (cf. Revelation 5:10; 20:6). The language closely reflects that of 1 Peter 2:9 - ***“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light.”*** (Cf. Exodus 19:6)

“To Him be glory and power forever and ever! Amen.” - The recitation of that which God has done provokes and irrepressible outburst of praise. The only fitting response to that which God in Christ has accomplished is doxology, an endless, eternal song of praise. The song closes with the traditional Hebrew *“amen.”* It is at the same time an affirmation and a prayer. The ***“Amen”*** occurs six times in the Book of Revelation (1:7; 5:14; 7:12; 7:12; 19:4; 22:20)

“Look, He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him...” - This is the first prophetic oracle of the Book. It is based on Daniel 7:13 and Zechariah 12:10. Jesus cited the same combination of texts in the *“Little Apocalypse”* of Matthew 24 (vs.30). The Christ once scorned and crucified will return in majestic splendor before the eyes of all mankind. The true meaning of his ignominious death will then be clear to all and the response from those who conspired to murder the Son of God will be profound mourning and bitter regret. This is as it should, and it must be. Amen. These verses were incorporated into the 5th Century Liturgy of St. James from Antioch in Syria. In the prayers which precede the consecration of the bread and wine for Holy Communion the priest intones:

“Let all mortal flesh be silent, and stand with fear and trembling, and meditate nothing earthly within itself: For the King of kings and Lord of lords, Christ our God, come forward to be sacrificed, to be given for food to the faithful; and the bands of angels go before Him with every power and dominion, the many eyed cherubim, and the six winged seraphim, covering their faces, and crying aloud the hymn, Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!” (Earliest Christian Prayers, p. 131)

This ancient liturgy is preserved in the modern hymn ***“Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence.”***

“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is...” - The Lord who will return in triumph to judge humanity is the divine Son of God. These are the first words of Christ directly quoted in Revelation. They serve as a unequivocal affirmation of the deity of our Lord. Jesus uses the same terminology in reference to Himself in Revelation 22 as the book comes to its triumphant conclusion (cf. vss. 22:12,16,20). In Exodus 3, the Angel of the Lord, had revealed Himself to Moses as “*Jahweh*,” the great “*I Am*,” the Almighty and Eternal God. Our Lord now reveals Himself to have been the Angel of the Lord who is the timeless and eternal Son of God. In this instance, the speaker is labeled as ***“the Lord God”*** (Greek - “*kurios ho theos*”) which is the Greek equivalent of the majestic Hebrew title “*Jahweh Elohim*.” He further claims as His own the title ***“the Almighty”*** (Greek - “*pantokrator*” which is the New Testament’s version of the Hebrew title “*Jahweh Sabaoth*” (“*Lord of Hosts*”). Christ, the Almighty (“*Christos Panokrator*”) is an extremely popular theme in the art of the Eastern Orthodox Church, typically depicted in mural or mosaic on the domed ceiling above the altar. The assertion of Christ’s power and authority as the divine Son of God becomes the foundation for the assurance presented in Revelation. Do not grow weary or despair. Behind the powers and authorities of this world there is One greater than them all, our Lord Jesus Christ.



“Christ as the Almighty Judge” - From the Baptistry of the Cathedral in Florence



*"Christ Amid the Golden Lamps"
by Hans Burgkmair - 1522*

John's Commission from Christ (Revelation 1:9-20)

I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus. On the Lord's Day, I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, which said: "Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea." I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, and among the lampstands was someone "like a son of man," dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around His chest. His head and

hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and His eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze, glowing in a furnace, and His voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In His right hand He held seven stars, and out of His mouth came a sharp, double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance. When I saw Him, I fell at His feet as though dead. Then He placed His right hand on me and said: "Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the living One; I was dead, and behold, I am alive forever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades. Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later. The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in My right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches."

"I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering..." - John once again identifies himself (for the third time), and at the same time asserts his solidarity with the beleaguered believers to whom his message is addressed. Like them, he is paying the price for faithfulness to the Lord and His Word - *"because of the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus."* He joins with them not only in *"suffering"* and *"patient endurance,"* but also in *"kingdom"* (literally *"kingship"* in the Greek). In the original text all three nouns are modified by one article, thereby emphasizing that they are to be considered together as a unit. To reign with Christ in His kingdom in this world is to endure suffering and tribulation, for Christ's is no earthly kingdom of glory and power.

"I...was on the island of Patmos" - The specific circumstances of his commission from Christ are carefully noted. Patmos is a small island off the coast of Asia Minor southwest of Ephesus, about forty miles west of the town of Miletus. The island is crescent shaped, about thirteen square miles in size, ten miles long and five miles wide at its extremities. A barren rock place, it was often used by the Roman authorities as a penal colony and place of exile. Irenaeus tells us that John was exiled there to work in the mines in the fourteenth year of the reign of the emperor Domitian, or 95 A.D., and that he remained in exile until 96 A.D. when Domitian was overthrown and replaced by Nerva.

"On the Lord's day, I was in the Spirit..." - The vision occurs on Sunday, *"the Lord's day,"* so designated because of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead on the first day of the week. Although this is the only use of the term in Scripture the designation is quite common in Christian usage by the beginning of the Second Century. John tells us that he was *"in the Spirit"* as the commission came to him.



"Christ Amid the Golden Lamps" by Albrecht Dürer

That is to say, the Spirit of God came upon him and enabled him to receive the revelations of this book. One commentator describes this condition as “*a state in which the ordinary faculties of the flesh are suspended, and inward senses opened.*” (Hort, p. 15) In this state, God brings the spirit of His man into contact with the invisible spiritual world and the things of God in such a way that they may be apprehended by and accommodated to finite human perceptions. Note that this is not a trance or a dream in the ordinary sense of those terms as John remains conscious and awake throughout the communication.



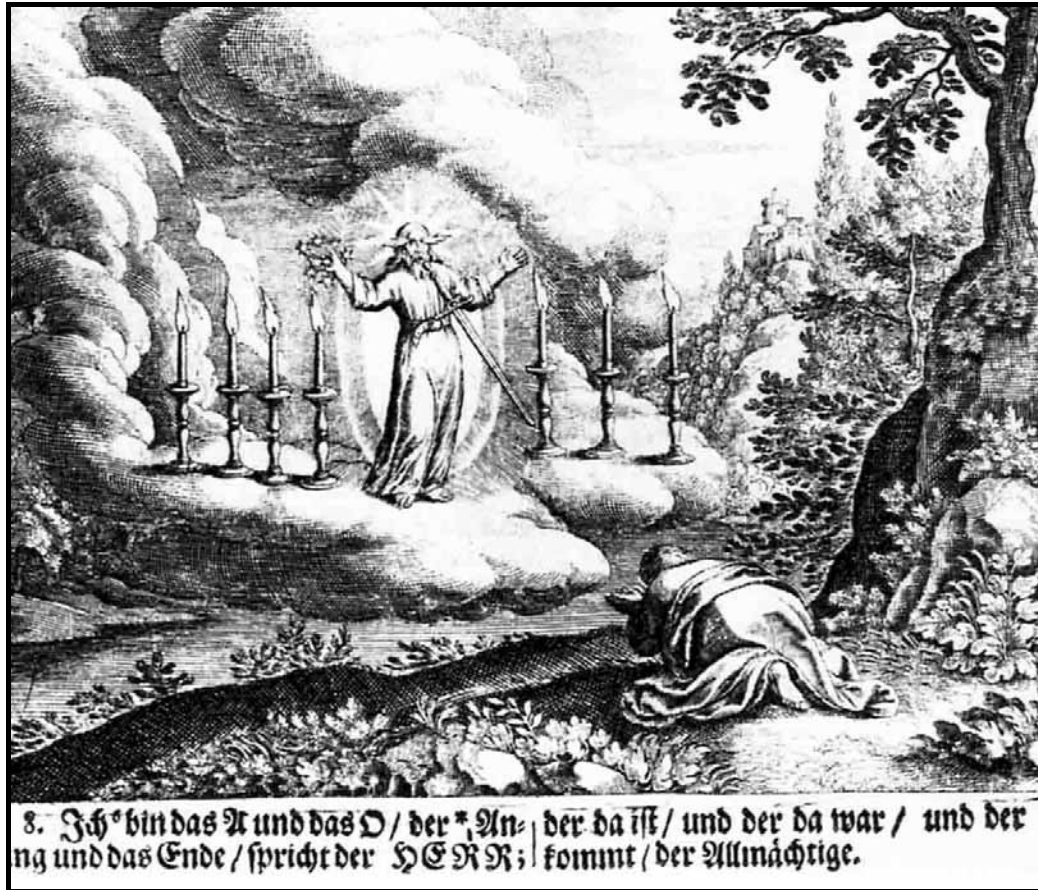
“John’s Vision of Christ Amid the Golden Lamps” by Virgil Solis - 1560

“And I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet...” - Like the ancient prophet Ezekiel (Ezekiel 3:12) the revelator’s commission begins with the sound of a loud voice coming from behind him. Here, as elsewhere in the Book, the incredible volume of the sound indicates the importance of the message it conveys. It is the voice of authority and command with the clarity and power of the trumpet’s blast. John is commanded to carefully record that which is revealed (**“what you see”**) and to deliver the message to seven churches scattered throughout the Roman province of



"Christ Amid the Golden Lamps" by Jean Duvet

Asia. The churches are listed in the order one might follow if he were riding a circuit made up of these congregations and the letters will subsequently be presented in the same order.



“Christ Amid the Golden Lamps” by Matthias Merian

“I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me...” - The sound had come from behind, and John now naturally turns to see who had spoken to him. The first detail that catches his eye are seven magnificent golden lampstands (Greek - *“lychnion”*). These are not *“candlesticks,”* in the modern sense of the term, but rather stands or brackets which held portable oil lamps. The best known example of such a lampstand was the famous seven branch menorah of the tabernacle and the temple. (Exodus 37:17-24; Numbers 8:1-4) Here the seven lampstands are individual and fashioned of precious gold. Christ Himself informs us that the seven lampstands represent the seven churches to which letters have been addressed (Revelation 1:20). The symbol is apt since the people of God are to be *“the light of the world.”* (Matthew 5:14) The image appears to have been adapted from Zechariah Chapter 4

and the prophet's vision of a golden lampstand with seven lights at it top. (Zechariah 4:2,10) In the midst of the seven golden lampstands there stands "*someone like a son of man.*" This may be a reference to the prominent messianic title of the Old Testament (Daniel 7:13) which is referred to Jesus eighty times in the Gospels and Acts. However, the phrase is also commonly used in reference to any human being, and that could be the intent in this text. In any case, there is no doubt as to the identity of the figure who stands amid the golden lamps. The position of the man in the middle of the seven golden lampstands is profoundly important. Jesus stands in the midst of His church just as He has promised: "***Where two or three are gathered together in My name there am I in the midst of them.***" (Matthew 18:20)



*"John's Vision of Christ Amid the Golden Lamps"
15th Century Bible Illumination*

"Dressed in a robe reaching down to His feet..." - The glorious appearance of the figure is described in precise detail. The imagery is drawn from Daniel chapters 7 and 10. It serves to present the Lord as our great High Priest and King. The flowing robe with the golden sash is reminiscent of the vestments of the high priest (cf. Exodus 28:4-5; Zechariah 3:4). The same word (Greek - "*poderes*" - a floor length robe) is used seven times in the Old Testament and in six of those instances it refers to the robes of the high priest. The priestly connotation is certainly fitting in this context amid the golden lamps, since it was the responsibility of the priest to tend the lampstands of the temple, to trim the wicks, refill the oil, and relight the lamps that had gone out. Thus, Christ is

the great High Priest who tends and cares for His churches. In Daniel 10:5, the messenger of God is similarly dressed in fine linen with a belt of gold.

“His head and hair were white like wool...” - Once before, on the Mount of Transfiguration, St. John had seen the face of the glorified Christ. Now that awesome sight is repeated and carefully described. In Daniel 7:9, the prophet uses the imagery of pure white hair to signal the eternity of the Ancient of Days: ***“His clothing was as white as snow; the hair of His head was white like wool.”*** John uses virtually the same language here in reference to Jesus to portray Christ as the eternal Word who ***“was in the beginning with God.”*** (John 1:1-2). The ***“blazing fire”*** of His eyes indicate the omniscience of God, whose divine vision penetrates through every barrier, from whom nothing can be hidden, and to whom all things are known. The terminology in this phrase comes from Daniel 10:6 where the Angel of the Lord’s eyes burn like flaming torches. This is a figure who is holy and without sin, indicated by ***“his feet,”*** which ***“were like bronze glowing in a furnace.”*** The purifying fire of the furnace burns away the impurities and the dross until only the perfectly refined metal remains. The figure is barefoot as was Moses before the burning bush (***“Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.”*** Exodus 3:5). So also the High Priest entered into the Holy of Holies barefoot on ***“Yom Kippur,”*** the great Day of Atonement. ***“And His voice was like the sound of rushing waters.”*** There is a matchless power in the voice of this man, like a thundering waterfall or the crash of the surf upon the rock (cf. Ezekiel 43:2)

“In His right hand He held seven stars, and out of His mouth...” - Here, for the first time, the imagery of Revelation 1 lacks specific Old Testament precedent. There is, nonetheless, no doubt as to the significance of the seven stars since John later informs us that they represent the angels of the seven churches (cf. Revelation 1:20). The right hand is the traditional position of favor and protection. It also carries the connotation of power and strength. To be held in the right hand of God is to know peace and security that can be experienced nowhere else. ***“And out of His mouth came a sharp, double-edged sword.”*** Both St. Paul and the writer to the Hebrews describe the Word of God as a sharp sword (cf. Ephesians 6:17; Hebrews 4:12). John, however, may have had in mind the judgement image of Isaiah 11:4 - ***“He shall strike the earth with the rod of His mouth.”*** (Cf. also 2 Thessalonians 2:8). Thus does the Revelator portray our Lord as the Almighty Judge of the universe. ***“His face was like the sun, shining in all its brilliance.”*** This phrase calls to mind the Transfiguration when the face of Christ ***“had shone like the sun”*** (Matthew 17:2)

enabling John and the others there on the mountaintop to catch a brief glimpse of Christ's heavenly glory as the Son of God.



“John’s Vision of the Golden Lampstands” by Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld

“When I saw him, I fell at His feet as though dead...” - John, as a sinful human being, is overwhelmed by this stunning vision of the majestic and holy God. He responds in the only appropriate way - he falls face-down upon the ground in fearful awe. Thus had it been for Daniel (Daniel 10:7-9) and the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 6:5) and Ezekiel (Ezekiel 1:28) before him. John and his companions had reacted in a similar fashion on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matthew 17:6). On that occasion, and also here, Jesus reaches out to comfort and reassure his frightened disciple (Matthew 17:7). The Lord reaches out to John with the same strong right hand which had held the seven stars. His reassuring touch is accompanied by a comforting word. ***“Do not be afraid.”*** - The Greek verb is in the present imperative and would most accurately be translated - *“Stop being afraid.”* These words in the New Testament

often precede the proclamation of the Gospel, the good news that takes away our fear. Gabriel spoke them to Zacharias and to Mary (Luke 1:13,30) as he announced the births of John the Baptist and Jesus. The angel declared the same to the shepherds outside Bethlehem on the night of Christ's birth (Luke 2:10). Fallen man's first words to God were ***"I was afraid"*** (Genesis 3:10) because fear is the inevitable result of sin's guilt. God has acted in the person of His Son to pay the price for that sin and remove the basis for its guilty fear.



"Christ Amid the Golden Lamps" by Hans Burgkmair - 1522

"I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One..." - Christ's further self-identification not only continues John's reassurance, but also provides the foundation and authority for his commission to John. ***"I am"*** echoes the sacred Tetragrammaton ***"Jahweh,"*** the pre-eminent divine name of the Old Testament (Exodus 3:14). When confronted by skeptical Jewish religious leaders Jesus had bluntly declared, ***"Before Abraham came to be, I AM!"*** (John 8:58). In Verse 8 the Lord had asserted, ***"I am the Alpha and the Omega."*** He now reiterates that claim, again declaring His eternity - ***"I am the First and the Last."*** Not only the Lord of time, Jesus is also the Lord of Life - ***"I am the Living One; I was dead and behold, I am alive forever and***



“I Am Alive Forever” by Rudolf Schüfer

ever.” The resurrection of Christ affirms his claim to divinity and demonstrates His victory over death and its power. The reality of His resurrection becomes the basis for every Christian’s expectation of life eternal (cf. 1 Corinthians 15). **“And I hold the keys of death and Hades.”** The imagery signifies authority, control, and ownership. Death holds no terror for the Christian for Christ has risen and in so doing has conquered death for us. The Greek noun “*hades*,” transliterated in the NIV text, literally means “*the place that is not seen.*” It is the Greek equivalent of the Old Testament Hebrew word “*sheol*.” It is often used in Scripture to refer to hell, the place of the damned. However, on occasion, it is also used in a neutral sense to simply describe the place of the dead. That would appear to be the sense in this text as the state of death and the place of death are combined, both subject to the power and authority of the Lord.

“Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later.”

- The Revelator’s commission is repeated in this renewed command to write. This book was not produced at the initiative of man nor is its content determined by the mind of man. The command to write comes from God and the content of that which is written is determined by God and revealed to the human writer by Him. The grand sweep of Revelation’s message encompassing past, present and future is outlined in the threefold phrase ***“what you have seen, what is now, and what will take place later.”***

“The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this:...” - Following the command to write, an explanation of the two primary symbols of the initial vision is provided. The symbolism of the seven stars and lampstands is described as the ***“mystery.”*** The term refers to that which is hidden or secret to the natural mind and must be therefore be revealed by God. Ordinary understanding is not adequate here. Supernatural revelation is required. The lampstands are the seven churches previously introduced. The identification is simple and straightforward. The seven stars are identified as ***“the angels of the seven churches”*** through whom the letters will subsequently be presented to the congregations. The Greek word *“angeloi”* simply means *“messengers.”* It is commonly used in Scripture both in reference to human beings and to spirits. Accordingly, the commentators have debated the intended sense here. Some would argue that the reference is to angels of God appointed as the guardian spirits of each congregation. While this view is not impossible, there is no indication anywhere else in Scripture of the existence of such ecclesiastical guardian angels. At the same time, it does not seem to fit the context. Why would Christ reveal His message to John, a man, who would then convey that message to seven angels, so that they, in turn, could take the message back to the people of the churches. Others argue more convincingly that the messengers in question are the pastors of the respective churches. This view makes better sense in the context, and is completely consistent with a Biblical view of the pastor’s role and responsibility. Conservative Lutheran scholar Siegbert Becker contends:

“The messenger of the church is the man who delivers the Lord’s message to the church. He is the pastor of the congregation...If we understand the messenger of the church to be the pastor of the congregation, then we can in a very natural way look upon the pastors of each of the seven congregations as the messenger through whom the message intended for each congregation is conveyed from Jesus to the people of God.” (Becker, p. 41)



"The Letters to the Seven Churches" by Heinrich Vogtherr

Introduction: The Letters to the Seven Churches (Revelation 2:1- 3:22)

The typical pattern of the epistles of the New Testament is to present the doctrinal teaching first and follow it with practical application to the life of the church. In the Book of Revelation, that pattern is reversed. The practical application comes first, in the form of the letters to the seven churches of Asia.

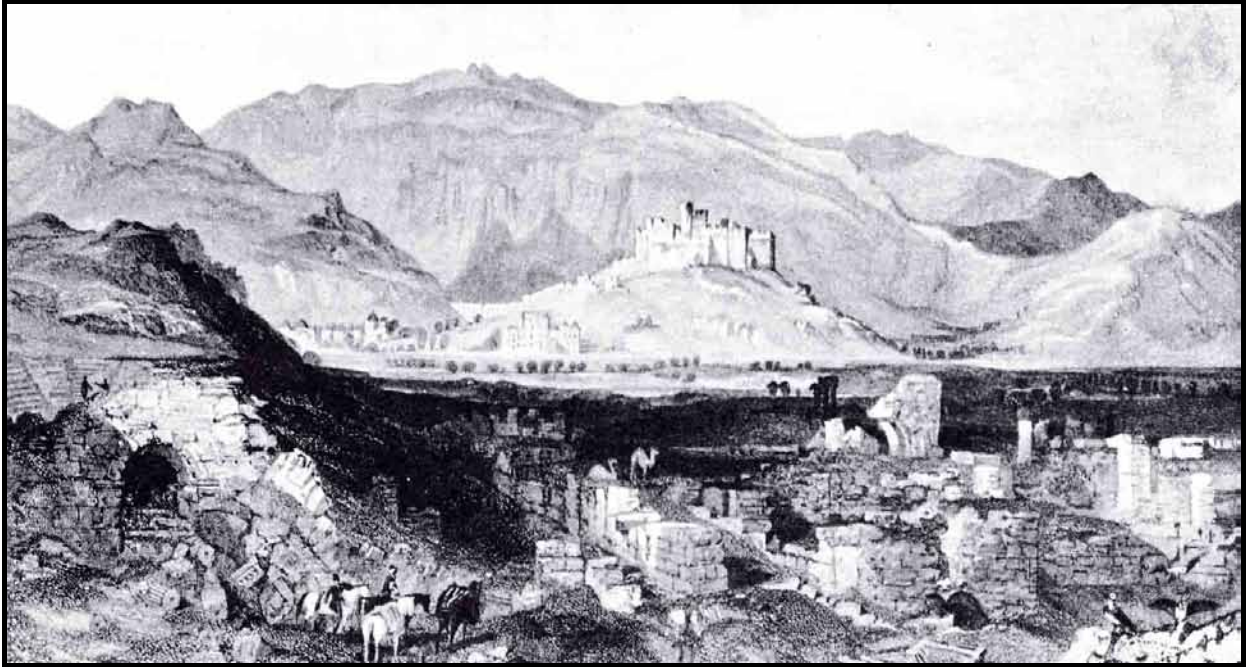
The letters to the seven churches are in the first instance actual descriptions of the historical situations of a cluster of congregations that existed in the Roman Province

of Asia at the end of the First Century. To be sure, there is much that can be learned for the church in every time and place from these letters, for the characteristics, both positive and negative, that they reflect are in no way unique to these seven churches. That universal application may well explain why “seven” churches were chosen, utilizing the Biblical number for completion or perfection. There are those who chose to ignore this historical context and its obvious importance in the text of Revelation and arbitrarily reduce the seven letters to a symbolic representation of seven different periods of future church history. It is ironic that this view has been largely popularized by the Scofield Reference Bible and those who most vehemently insist upon a literal interpretation of the Book of Revelation. R.C.H. Lenski says it well in his classic commentary:

*“The order in which the letters are dictated is that found in 1:11; it is geographical and has nothing to do with a prophetic, chronological succession of churches and church conditions to the end of time. The seven churches and their varying conditions existed **simultaneously** when Jesus dictated these letters in the year 95. They are typical of the conditions obtaining in the churches of all time irrespective to the number that at any time may belong to one type or to another.”* (Lenski, p. 82)

The letters follow the same general pattern including the following seven components: 1. The address with the command to write; 2. The description of the Speaker; 3. The assertion of complete knowledge about each congregation; 4. The word of commendation and/or the word of criticism; 5. The admonition; 6. The call to hear and heed; and, 7. The promise of blessing. Thus, generally, the seven letters consist of seven parts and conform to the overall sevenfold pattern of the entire Book of Revelation. In each letter, the description of the Speaker correlates to the content of the message to the church. The various details of the vision of Christ amid the golden lampstands in Chapter 1 provide the substance of the descriptions. The same type of pattern is also evident in the seven promises of blessings that conclude the letters. In this case, however, the blessing is formulated in terms of topics that will later be repeated in the closing chapters of the Book.

Ephesus - the Tree of Life (22:2)
Smyrna - the Second Death (20:6)
Pergamum - a New Name (22:4)
Thyatira - the Morning Star (22:16)
Sardis - the White Robe (19:8)
Philadelphia - the New Jerusalem (21:2)
Laodicea - Christ Upon His Throne (20:4, 22:1,3)



"The Ruins of Ephesus in 1830" by T. Allom

The Letter to the Church in Ephesus

The Loveless Church

(Revelation 2:1-7)

To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are the words of Him who holds the seven stars in His right hand and walks among the seven lampstands: I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for My name and have not grown weary. Yet I hold this against you: You have forgotten your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and will remove your lampstand from its place. But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.

"To the angel of the church in Ephesus write:" - The city of Ephesus was one of



“Great Artemis of Ephesus”

the three major commercial and cultural centers of the eastern Mediterranean. The other two were Antioch in Syria and Alexandria in Egypt. St Paul visited this strategic city during his second missionary journey in 52 AD. He returned on his third missionary journey and spent three years in the city as Ephesus became his base for the mission to the province of Asia (Acts 18:23-20:38; Ephesians 1-6). The port of Ephesus was situated on one of the major trade routes between the Aegean Sea and the plateau of Asia Minor thus bringing immense wealth to the city. It was culturally and commercially the most important city in the province. At the center of the city’s religious life was the magnificent temple of the Greek goddess Artemis (Latin - Diana). The Temple of Artemis in Ephesus, 425 feet long by 220 feet wide with 120 gold covered marble columns, was considered to be one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Thousands of pilgrims traveled to the city each year for the great festivals and a flourishing industry in silver artifacts and images was established around the temple. Diana of the Ephesians was a mother goddess, representing the power of fertility and life. The worship of her cult in Ephesus involved the most flagrant

immorality with droves of temple prostitutes dedicated to her service. Her grotesque multi-breasted images are among the most common surviving artworks of the period.

“These are the words of Him who holds the seven stars...” - The description is intended to highlight Christ’s care and concern for His church. He stands in the midst of His people and holds them safe and secure in His loving hand. (Cf. John 10:28-29)

The image of Christ walking among the golden lampstands also serves to emphasize His role as a powerful and watchful guardian over the church.

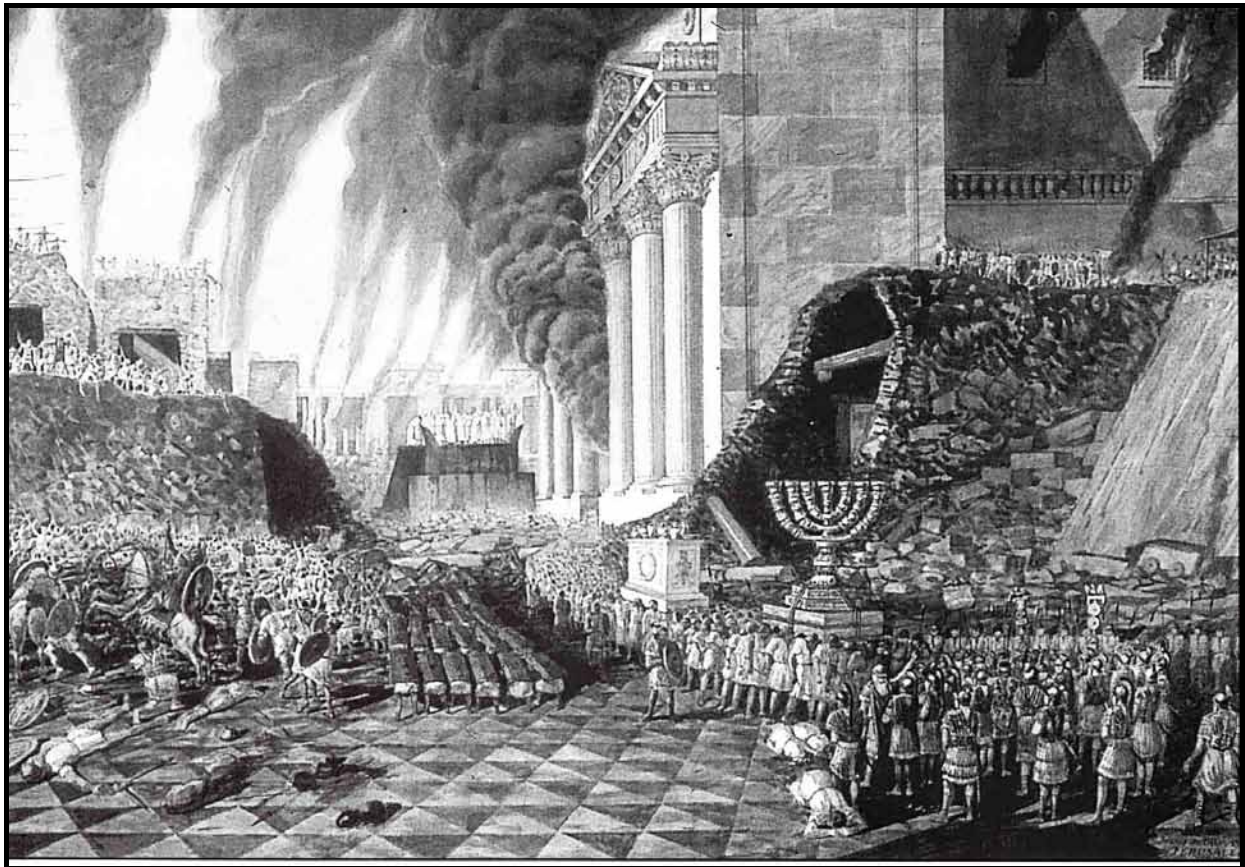
“I know your deeds, your hard work...” - The commendation begins with the assertion of Christ’s intimate knowledge of the people and their spiritual achievements. The Greek verb indicates a knowledge that is perfect and complete - I know everything there is to know about you. This is a congregation which understood duty and responsibility. They have worked hard and persevered in the face of overwhelming opposition over a long period of time - ***“and have not grown weary.”*** They have been faithful in matters of doctrine carefully testing the claims of those who falsely asserted apostolic authority (cf. 1 John 4:1) and ***“found them to be false”*** (literally - *“found them to be liars.”*) In the face of false teaching they have diligently attempted to ***“contend for the faith once delivered to the saints.”*** (Jude 6) They have been absolutely intolerant of wickedness, and properly so. Our tolerance obsessed church would do well to note this commendation for intolerance. In all this, the Lord acknowledges that the Ephesians have been acting ***“for My name”*** and He commends them.

“Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love.” - The tone of the letter abruptly changes in Verse 4. In one pointed sentence Christ summarizes the critical problem in the church - ***“You have forsaken your first love.”*** This is a very strong statement, a severe word of criticism. Despite a consistent concern for moral



“Christ or Diana?” by Alwin Long

and theological purity the Ephesian church was lacking in love. This is both love for Christ and love for the brethren for these two can never be separated from one another (1 John 4:20) That which had in the beginning been a spontaneous, joyful response to the love of God in Christ had gradually degenerated into duty and routine. The amazing grace of God came to be taken for granted and consciences grew dull and insensitive to the incisive demands of the law and our desperate need for forgiveness.



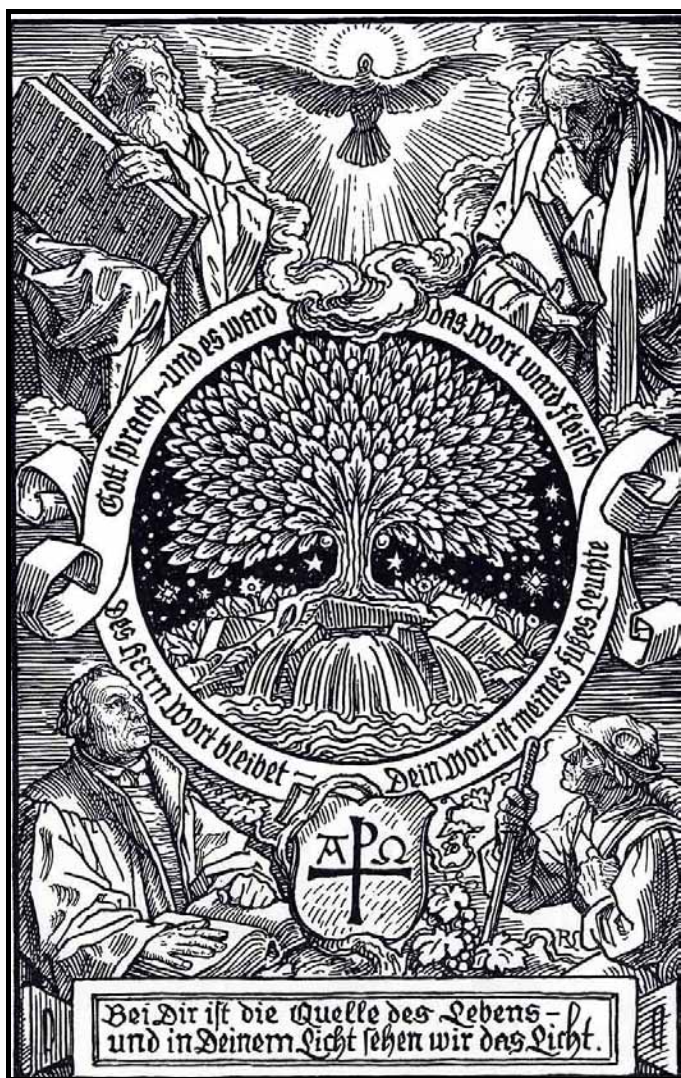
“The Roman Sack of the Temple Sanctuary and Removal of the Golden Lamp”

Orthodoxy had become dead orthodoxy, the evidence of self-righteous superiority and legalistic judge mentalism rather than a loving concern for sound doctrine and saving truth. The externals were maintained. The Ephesians continued to go through the motions. But the motive had subtly changed. The love which ought to naturally flow from our experience of the love of Christ was being slowly replaced by legalistic compulsion. Genuine love was not yet completely absent, but it was diminishing instead of growing. If this trend was not reversed, the critical moment would soon be at hand when the Lord would ***“come and remove your lampstand from its place.”***

This vivid symbol represents the complete loss of faith and the apostasy of the church.

“Remember the height from which you have fallen. Repent and do the things you did at first.” - The first verb in this sentence is a present imperative indicating ongoing activity - *“keep on remembering!”* The church at Ephesus has existed for over a generation, and they are urged to recall the way it had been in the beginning. The decline of the present would only be evident in comparison to the lofty heights of the past. The next two verbs, ***“Repent and do”*** are imperatives in the aorist tense, peremptory commands for immediate, decisive action. *“Repentance”* (Greek - *“metanoia”*) is the change of heart and mind that turns away from sin and returns to God. It is not merely external action but internal transformation. The change of heart, of course, must always result in a life that is transformed, thus the combination ***“repent and do the things you did at first.”*** (Cf. Luke 3:8) The consequences of a failure to repent at this point would be catastrophic - ***“If you do not repent, I will come to you and will remove your lampstand from its place.”*** This is not the final judgement of the world but a specific act of judgement in time upon the apostate Ephesian church. John’s metaphor may well have been chosen with the grim events of 70 A.D. in mind when the Roman legions forced their way into the temple and removed the golden seven-branched lampstand from its place in the sanctuary. The light of a Judaism that had rejected its Messiah was literally taken away and extinguished. This tragic event was immortalized on the great Arch of Titus, erected in Rome to commemorate the emperor’s decisive victory over the Jewish revolt and his conquest of the city of Jerusalem. The Romans soldiers are depicted carrying off the great golden Menorah which had stood with the Holy Place of the Temple.

“But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans...” - An additional word of commendation now follows. There is still cause for hope in that the Ephesians still love the Lord enough to hate that which is hateful to God. Indifference in the face of sin and error is not a sign of love’s presence, but its absence. The fathers of the early church identify the *“Nicolaitans”* as followers of Nicholas of Antioch, a Jewish proselyte who was one of the original seven deacons (cf. Acts 6:5). Irenaeus tells us that Nicolas fell away from the true faith and became the leader of a heretical sect which rejected the law and indulged in the flagrant immorality characteristic of paganism. Like many other Gnostic groups of the time they claimed special knowledge from which authorized their aberrant behavior. Note that it is the ***“practices of the Nicolaitans”*** that are properly to be hated, not the Nicolaitans themselves. Hate the sin. Love the sinner.



"The Tree of Life" by Rudolf Schäfer

"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." - This admonition to hear and heed is identical in all of the seven letters. The message is identified as having come from the *"Spirit"* of God, thus reinforcing the divine inspiration of this book. Jesus and the Holy Spirit speak as one within the unity of the Trinity. The message is clearly intelligible and available to anyone who cares to listen. Not hearing in this context is an act of willful deliberate disobedience. The admonition of the text is reminiscent of the often repeated words of Jesus during His teaching ministry - *"He who has ears to hear, let him hear."* (I.e. Matthew 11:15; 13:9) The Lord laments the unbelief of Israel with the words of Isaiah the prophet:

"You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people's heart has become

calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn, and I would heal them." (Matthew 13:14-15)

"To him who overcomes I will give the right to eat from the tree of life..." - The letter concludes with a promise drawn from the closing visions of the book. In Revelation 22:2 we are told that in the midst of the heavenly New Jerusalem there *"stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month."* The obvious reference is to the Garden of Eden and the tree of life which once stood within it. The believer who repents and perseveres in the faith will be restored to the perfection for which mankind was created in the beginning. Life with God in eternity

will be life as it was meant to be by our loving Creator. The text uses the Persian loan word “*paradise*” to describe heaven. In the original, the word referred to a pleasure garden or park with wild animals built for the kings and emperors of Persia. It is an appropriate term to indicate that heaven will be a return to the perfection of Eden, the Garden of God. The word occurs only three times in the New Testament: here, in our Lord’s words to the repentant thief on the cross (Luke 23:43), and in St. Paul’s description of his own vision of heaven (2 Corinthians 12:4).

The Letter to the Church in Smyrna

The Persecuted Church

(Revelation 2:8-11)

To the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These are the words of Him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. I know your afflictions and your poverty - yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.

“To the angel of the church in Smyrna...” - The city of Smyrna is located about 35 miles north of Ephesus. It was also a prosperous trading center and was renowned throughout the ancient world for the beauty of its architecture. The ornate buildings of the town’s acropolis high on Mt. Pagus were referred to throughout the ancient world as “*the crown of Smyrna.*” Smyrna was the birthplace of Homer, the greatest of the Greek poets. It is the only one of the seven cities of Revelation which has functioned continuously since ancient times. It is presently the Turkish city of Izmir, a focal point of the country’s tourist industry specializing in antiquities and pristine white sand beaches. Ancient Smyrna was a town noted for its exceptional loyalty to Rome and the emperor. A temple dedicated to the worship of the divine Tiberius was erected there early in the First Century. During the reign of Domitian, the current emperor, emperor worship was made compulsory. Every year, every citizen had to burn incense on Caesar’s altar after which he was issued a certificate. To be without such a certificate was to risk imprisonment or death. The city also included an unusually large Jewish population. The combination of these two factors,

exceptional dedication to the cult of the emperor and a large Jewish population, may well explain the letter's emphasis on courage in the face of persecution. The story of the martyrdom of Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna, in 155 A.D. was one of the best known and most popular historical tales of the early church. Polycarp, the *"Twelfth Martyr in Smyrna,"* was burned at the stake at age 86 because of his steadfast refusal to betray his Lord.

"These are the words of Him who is the First and the Last..." - Christ's identification in this letter stresses His crucial role as the divine Sovereign who is



"Bishop Polycarp and St. Sebastian Smashing Idols In the Home of Christian Convert" by Pedro Garcia de Benabarre

the Victor over the power of death. This would have been a most pertinent message for a church confronting bitter persecution. This congregation hears no word of criticism, but only commendation and encouragement.

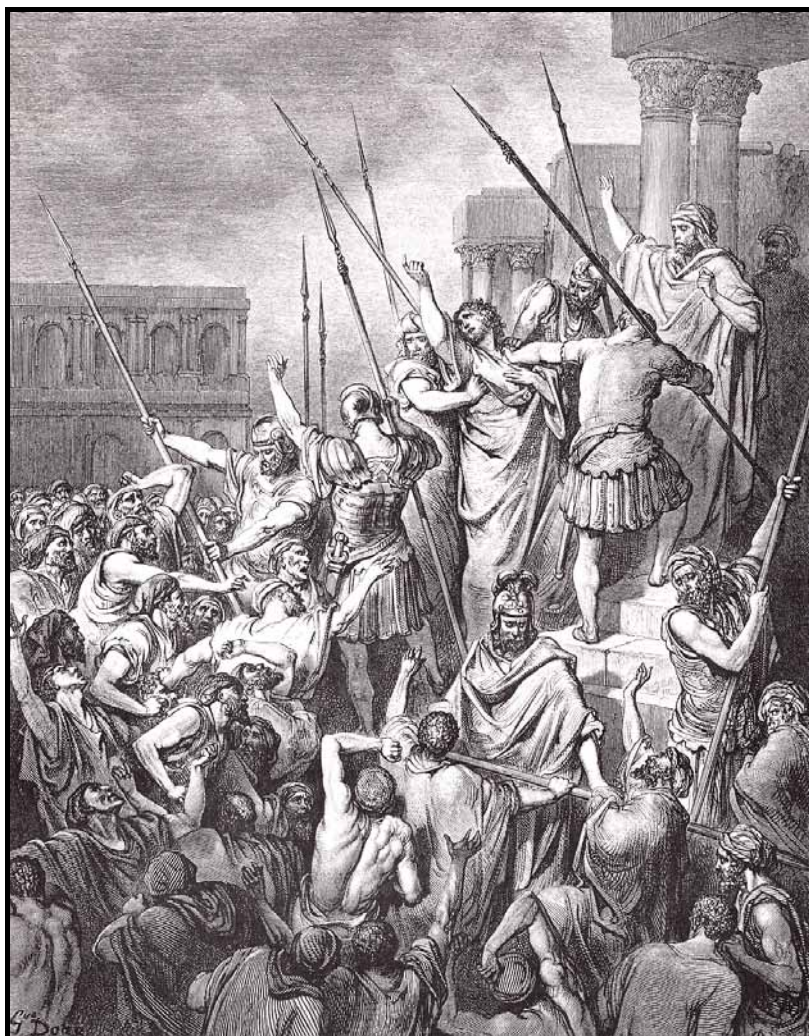
“I know of your afflictions and your poverty - yet you are rich!”

- Three terms summarize the condition of the church in Smyrna: ***“afflictions,” “poverty,”*** and ***“slander.”*** This is a congregation struggling to survive in a most hostile environment. ***“Afflictions”*** is a general term which refers to persecution of suffering of every sort. ***“Poverty”*** in this prosperous and wealthy city suggests that the Christians of Smyrna have endured economic hardship as a result of their loyalty to Christ. Yet despite



“The Risen Christ -Triumphant Over Death, the Devil and the World” by Martin Knoller - 1771

that poverty, comes the assertion - ***“You are rich!”*** We are reminded of the Beatitude: ***“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.”*** (Luke 6:20) Like the great missionary apostle Paul, the Christians of Smyrna were ***“Poor, yet making many rich.”*** (2 Corinthians 6:10). While poor in the temporary material things of this world, the faithful believers of Smyrna were rich indeed in the eternal riches of the Spirit of God. The third condition of the church in this city is ***“slander”*** (Greek - *“blasphemian”*). During the first century Christians were falsely accused of the most vile and immoral activities including cannibalism, lust and sexual immorality, home-breaking, atheism, sedition, and incendiarism. The source of the slander in this instance is ***“those who say they are Jews and are not.”*** These physical descendants of Abraham proudly consider themselves to be the chosen



*“Paul Rescued from the Mob in Jerusalem”
by Gustav Dore*

people of God but they are not. They have failed to recognize that descent from Abraham is a matter of faith, not of blood (Romans 2:28-29; 9:6 Galatians 3:7). They call themselves Jews. They believe themselves to be Jews, but they are wrong. The book of Acts documents repeated instances where the local Jewish population would aggressively and maliciously incite the Gentile authorities to action against the Christian church (i.e. Acts 13:50; 14:2,5,19; 17:5;26:2). Like the Jewish leaders who confronted Jesus in John 8:31-47 claiming to be descendants of Abraham, these slanderers are instead children of the devil. They are not a church of God, but instead a **“synagogue of Satan.”** They may have claimed to be an assembly of the Lord, but in fact, they have placed themselves at the disposal of the Accuser, the Prince of

Darkness, the Father of the Lie. The Hebrew title “*Satan*” literally means “*Slanderer*” or “*Accuser*.” Its Greek equivalent is the more familiar “*diabolos*” or “*devil*.”

“Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer...” - Christ does not offer this long-suffering church an easy way out. There is no prescription here as to how persecution may be avoided. Things are bad and they are going to get worse. The mounting intensity of that persecution is described in all of its grim reality. ***“I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days.”*** The Lord of the Church knows what is going to happen and remains in control of everything that is taking place. Even the activities of His most bitter enemies serve to accomplish His plan and His purpose. The faith of the church in Smyrna in the face of persecution, as one after another they were killed and cast into prison, would become an inspiration for the church throughout the world. The ***“ten days”*** of testing may be an allusion to Daniel 1:12-15 and the testing of Daniel and his three companions. In the numerology of Revelation, ten is the ordinal number, the number upon which the whole system of enumeration is based. In

this instance it refers to a complete time period ordered by the purpose and plan of



***“Satan and the Jaws of Hell”
by Francesca Romana - 1430***

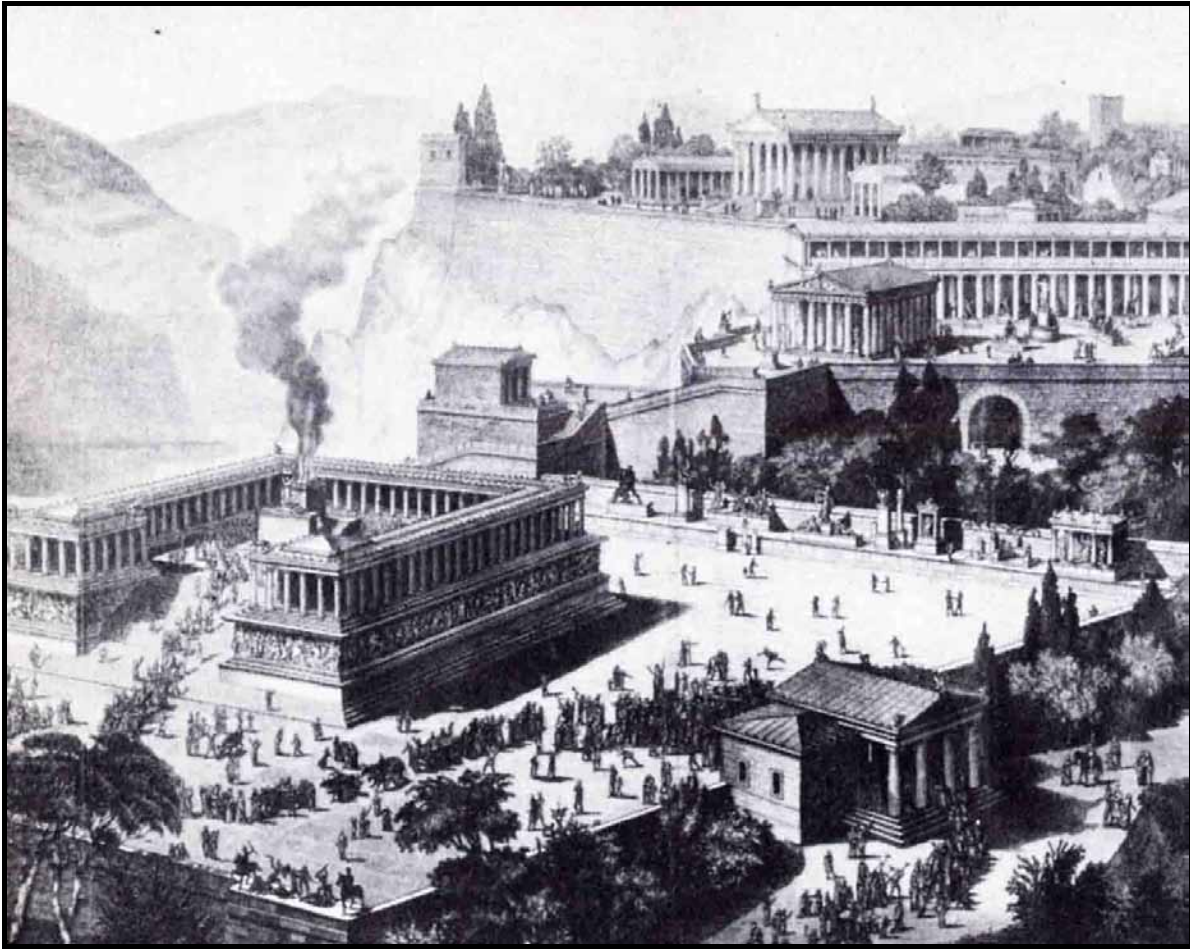
God. This persecution will continue, but it will not continue forever. God remains in control.

“Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.” - The Lord’s encouraging promise to the church in Smyrna to look beyond suffering, and even death itself to the prospect of life eternal. He who has Himself overcome death now promises His people a share in his victory. The ***“crown of life”*** is the laurel wreath awarded to the victorious athletes of the Olympic games (cf. 1 Corinthians 9:24-25; Galatians 2:2; Philippians 3:14; 2 Timothy 2:5; 1 Peter 5:4). Those who die in the faith and for the faith have not truly died at all but have passed from life in time to life in a glorious eternity.

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.” The promise of life eternal is repeated after the admonition to hear and heed. The ***“second death”*** is eternal death and damnation in Hell (cf. Revelation 20:14).



“The Crown of Life” by Rudolf Schärer



“The Acropolis of Pergamum” - 19th Century Engraving

The Letter to the Church in Pergamum

The Permissive Church

(2:12-16)

To the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of Him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. I know where you live - where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to My name. You did not renounce your faith in Me even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city - where Satan lives. Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality. Likewise, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the

sword of My mouth. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it.

“To the angel of the church in Pergamum write:” - Pergamum was the official capital of the Roman province of Asia, the seat of Roman authority and power in the region. The city was built on a 1,000 foot high cone-shaped mountain. Situated fifty-five miles north of Smyrna and twenty miles inland from the Aegean Sea, it was a city with a rich cultural past. Under the Greek King Eumenes (197-159 B.C.) Pergamum became one of the intellectual centers of the ancient world. Eumenes established a magnificent library with some 200,000 books and sought to outshine the great library of Alexandria in Egypt. In order to frustrate his rival, Ptolemy, the

Greek King of Egypt, prohibited the sale of papyrus paper to Pergamum. Forced to find an alternative writing material, the use of vellum, a fine parchment made from animal skins was developed in Pergamum and eventually replaced papyrus as the basic material for scrolls and books. As the provincial capital, Pergamum was an important center for the official state cult of the emperor. The massive Pergamum Altar, 125 feet long and 115 feet wide, from the Temple of Zeus, was surrounded by beautiful statuary and carved reliefs. The altar has now been rebuilt in a Berlin Museum, and is one of the ancient world’s most impressive works of art. Pergamum was also well known as a center of medicine. The cult of the Greek god of healing Asclepius, whose symbol was the serpent was based in the city. The sick came from all over the world to spend the



“The Pergamum Altar of Zeus”

night in the Temple of Asclepius which swarmed with hundreds of snakes . Those who fondled or fed these serpents thereby worshiped the god and sought his favor. The famed Greek physician Galen came from Pergamum.

“These are the words of Him who has the sharp, double-edged sword.”

- The reference is to Revelation 1:16.

The image of Christ the threatening Judge permeates the letter to the church in Pergamum. This is a place of great evil and corruption - ***“where Satan lives”*** (Verse 13) and the Lord sternly warns His people to recognize the deadly dangers that they face. The Roman governor in Pergamum exercised the *“right of the sword”* (Latin - *“ius gladii”*) in that he alone had the power to administer capital punishment. The ***“sharp double-edged sword”*** serves as a reminder that even in the face of the mightiest powers of this world, the Lord retains the ultimate authority.



“Christ the Judge” 13th Century Mural

“I know where you live - where Satan has his throne.” - John describes this city as the throne of Satan presumably because of its role as a prominent center of Roman government and pagan religion. The power of the enemy is unusually strong in this place. The particular reference may be to the serpent cult of Asclepius which would remind Christians of the Satanic serpent through whom the Tempter beguiled Eve in Eden. The congregation is commended because despite this evil environment ***“You remain true to My Name.”*** To remain true to the Name of Jesus means to hold fast to the truth of the Gospel and to refuse to deny or abandon the Lord even in the face of overwhelming pressure. The Roman government demanded that every citizen acknowledge the emperor as divine and participate in the worship of the official cult. The pagan culture was more subtle, but every bit as dangerous, urging conformity and



“Eve and the Serpent” by Lucien Levy-Dhurmer - 1896

compromise. To yield in either case would have required the Christians in Pergamum to ***“renounce your faith in Me,”*** and this they consistently had refused to do. Little is known of ***“Antipas, my faithful witness who was put to death in your city - where Satan lives.”*** An early church tradition indicates that he was burned to death in a bronze bull during the persecution of Domitian, and that he was not a native of Pergamum but had been brought to the capital for execution from a small town nearby. The Greek word ***“witness”*** is ***“martys.”*** The term gradually took on the significance of one who is willing to die for his beliefs and was carried over into the English language in the word ***“martyr.”***

“Nevertheless, I have a few things against you:..” - Once again, as in the letter to Ephesus, the tone abruptly shifts from commendation to condemnation with the adversative conjunction ***“Nevertheless”*** (Greek - ***“all”***). Despite their faithful resistance to Satanic pressure from the government and the culture, the congregation is guilty of harboring and tolerating false teachers in its midst. The problem is the

opposite of that in Ephesus, where doctrinal discipline was practiced in the absence of love. John identifies the nature of the threat by reference to the Old Testament incident of Balaam and Balak (Number 22:5-25:3, 31:8,16). ***“You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality.”*** Balaam was the Sumerian prophet/magician hired by the Moabites to curse the nation of Israel. When God frustrated this attempt, Balaam advised Balak, the Moabite king, to lure the men of Israel into participation in the idolatrous rites of Moab which involved feasting, drunkenness, and sexual orgies. This effort was successful and

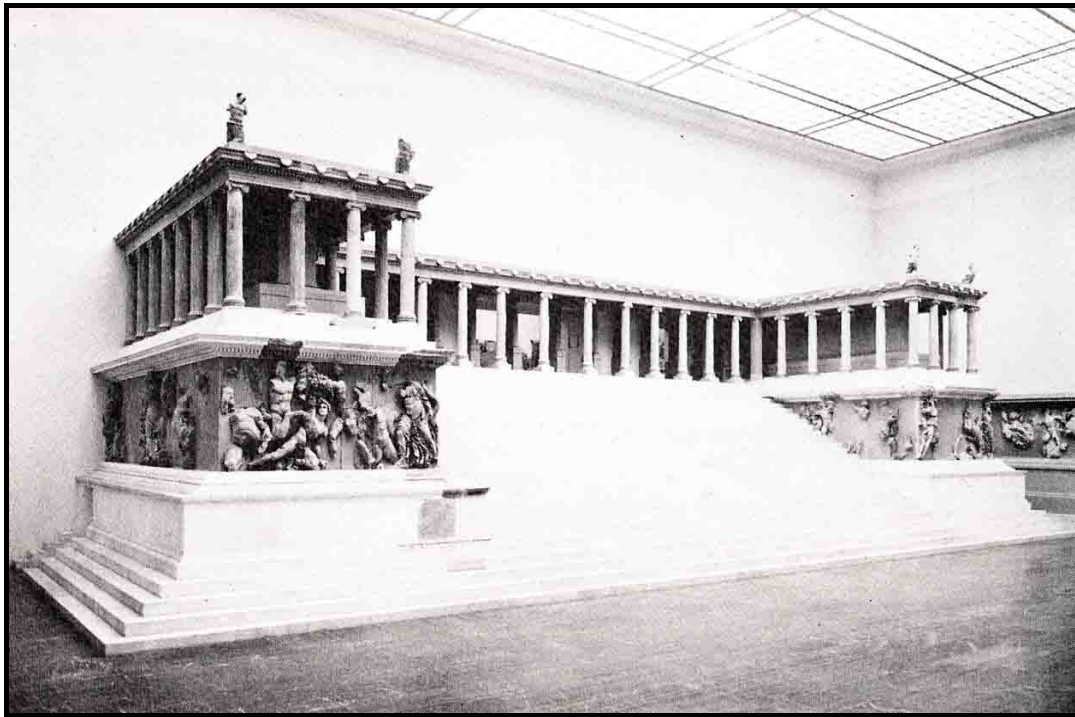


“The Oracle of Balaam” by J. James Tissot

brought God’s judgement upon Israel. Evidently there were those in Pergamum who saw nothing improper in Christians taking part in pagan celebrations and ceremonies, many of which involved feasting, drunkenness, and sexual orgies. These may have included the festivals of the various trade guilds held in honor of their patron deities. To refuse to participate would have resulted in economic and social ostracism. It has always been difficult to resist the temptation to try and have it both ways. The Nicolaitan heresy, denounced in Ephesus, with its similar involvement in sexual immorality, was also present in Pergamum - ***“Likewise, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.”*** The willingness of the congregation to tolerate these false teachers and their failure to discipline and remove them from their

midst is firmly condemned.

“Repent therefore! Otherwise I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of My mouth.” - The Lord urges this permissive church to repent and return to the conscientious practice of doctrinal discipline. To His admonition is added the threat that if the congregation fails to act, the Judge Himself will come to Pergamum to deal with the false teachers and with the church itself. The NIV’s translation weakens the force of the original text which literally says - *“Otherwise I will soon come for you.”* The weapon of His warfare with these false teachers and those who tolerate them will be the mighty Word of God which is sharper than any two edged sword.



The Altar of Zeus at Pergamum

“He who has an ear let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it.” - The promised blessing is carefully designed to match the circumstances of the congregation. They were tolerating those who had yielded to the temptation to participate in the heathen festival banquets of their city. Christ offers them a place at an infinitely superior banquet, the eternal marriage feast of the Lamb in heaven. ***“Manna”*** was the

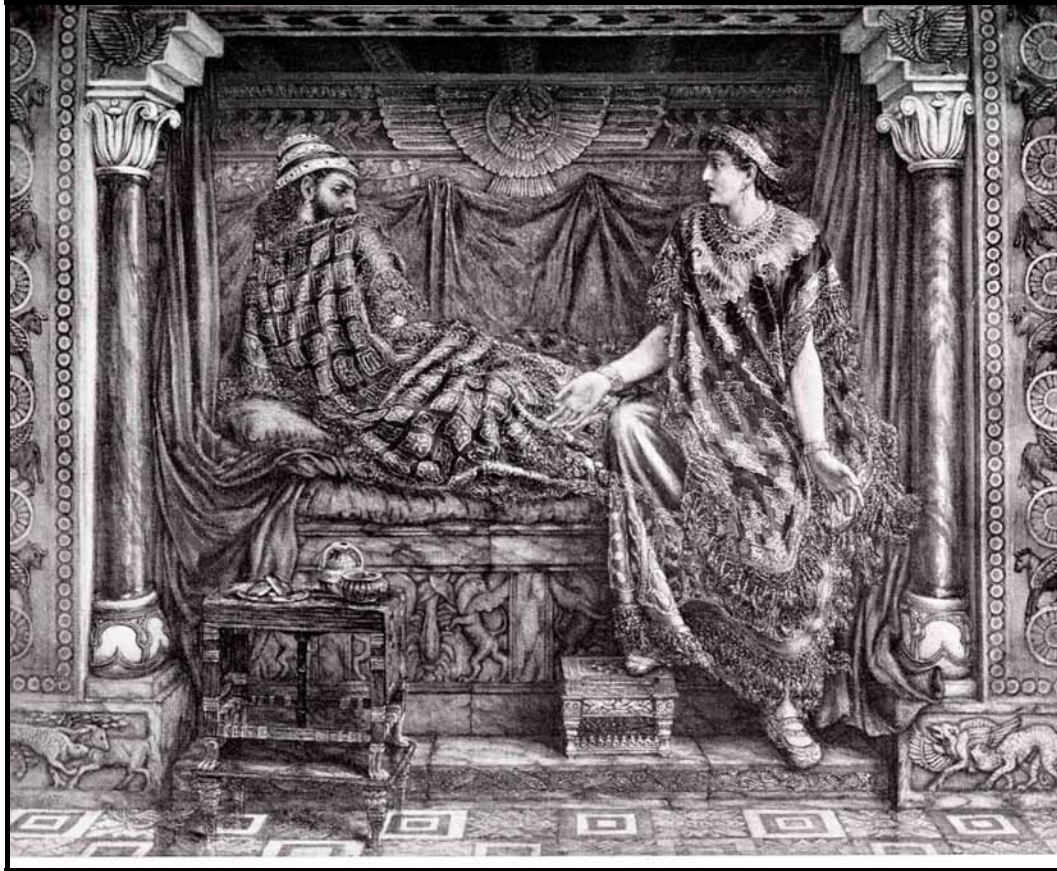
heavenly food provided to the Children of Israel by God during their forty years of wandering in the wilderness. They grew weary and unappreciative of that food and thus fell easy prey to Balaam's trickery. They should have relied upon what God had given them instead of feasting on the food of idolatry. The church in Pergamum now faces the same temptation and the Lord promises **"him who overcomes"** an eternal place at the heavenly feast. The **"manna"** is **"hidden"** now in that here in time, surrounded by this life's trials and temptations, the joys of the heavenly banquet cannot yet be seen. We look forward to them by faith. They will be revealed at the end of time, or at the time of death, which ever precedes for the individual believer. The **"white stone"** further reinforces the idea of admission to the eternal feast. In the Roman world it was a well established custom to reward victorious athletes or heroes with a **"tessara,"** that is a personalized pass or ticket to special feasts and celebrations. That **"tessara"** came in the form of a white stone with the victor's name inscribed upon it. White, in this case, is the color of victory. **"To him who overcomes"** the Lord promises to present such a stone guarantying admission to the heavenly banquet. The name to be inscribed upon that stone is **"a new name...known only to him who receives it."** The new name, and the secrecy that surrounds it signifies the unique intimacy of the believer with His Lord. G.K. Beale correctly notes:



"The Prophecy of Balaam"
19th Century Bible Illustration

"In the ancient world and the Old Testament, to know someone's name, especially that of God, often meant to enter into an intimate relationship with that person and to share in that person's character or power. To be given a new name was an indication of a new status." (Beale, p. 254)

Those who here in time **"remain true to My Name"** (Verse 13) will receive in eternity a new name indicative of their close and intimate fellowship with the Lord Jesus, who will raise them up to dwell within His presence throughout all eternity.



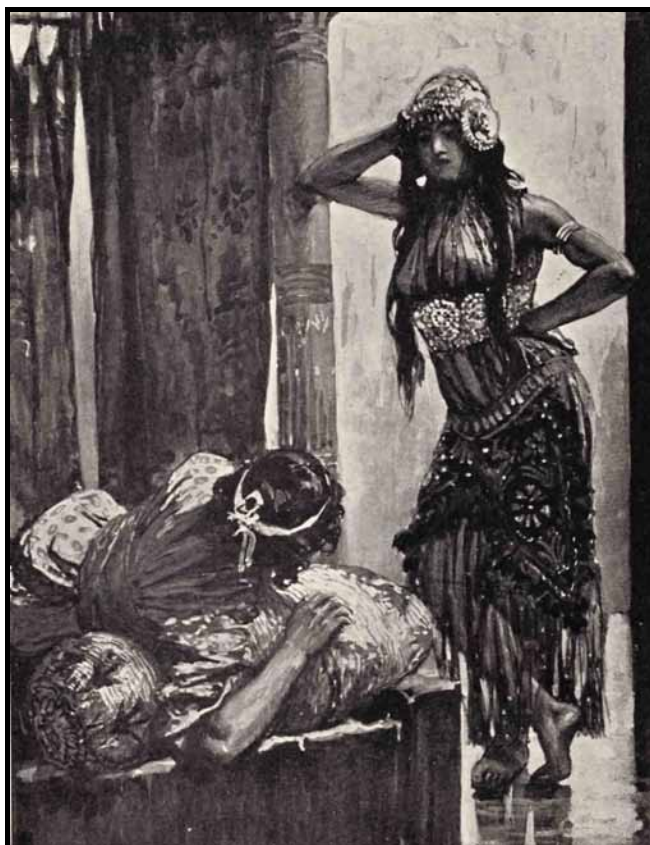
"Ahab and Jezebel" by T. M. Rooke

The Letter to the Church in Thyatira The Compromising Church (2:18-29)

To the angel of the church in Thyatira write: These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze. I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first. Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess. By her teaching she misleads My servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling. So I will cast her on a bed of suffering, and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely, unless they repent of her ways. I will strike her children dead. Then all the churches will know that I am He who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds. Now I say to the rest

of you in Thyatira, to you who do not hold to her teaching and have not learned Satan's so-called deep secrets (I will not impose any other burden on you): Only hold on to what you have until I come. To him who overcomes and does My will to the end, I will give authority over the nations - "He will rule them with an iron scepter; He will dash them to pieces like pottery" - just as I have received authority from My Father. I will also give him the morning star. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

"To the angel of the church in Thyatira write:" - Thyatira was the smallest of the seven cities, although it received the longest of the seven letters. It was a military base and trading center located in the middle of a fertile valley which connected two of the major river valleys of the region and linked the cities of Ephesus and Sardis. Thyatira remained primarily a garrison town, although the trade guilds, with all of the idolatrous practices associated with them, were very prominent here. Thyatira was the home of Lydia, the seller of purple whom Paul met in Philippi (Acts 16:14). One of its primary industries was the manufacture of bronze armor which was exported throughout Asia Minor and beyond.



"Jezebel" by J. James Tissot

"These are the words of the Son of God whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze." - The speaker identifies Himself as ***"the Son of God,"*** a title not found in the original description of Chapter 1. In fact, this is the only time in the Book of Revelation that Jesus is called the Son of God, although John repeatedly used the title in his Gospel. Its use here serves to emphasize the profound seriousness of the judgement pronounced upon the congregation. The Speaker's blazing eyes and gleaming feet depict the fearsome judgement of the holy and righteous God from whom nothing can be hidden. Thyatira with its numerous forges and armor industry would be most familiar with the image.

“I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first.” - A brief word of commendation now follows. The situation in Thyatira is the reverse of that in Ephesus where the congregation’s first love had grown cold. The all-seeing eyes of the Lord note that in Thyatira love had continued to grow and increase. The Son of God is well aware of the ***“deeds”*** (Greek *“erga”* - literally - *“works”*) and the text specifies four categories of those works - ***“your love and faith, your service and perseverance.”*** Love (Greek - *“agape”*) comes first for it is the basis of all that follows and faith follows closely thereafter. Love and faith are accompanied, as they must always be, by ***“service”*** (Greek *“diakonia”*), that is voluntary ministry to the needs of others (cf. Acts 11:29; 1 Corinthians 16:15) and ***“perseverance,”*** the willingness to endure

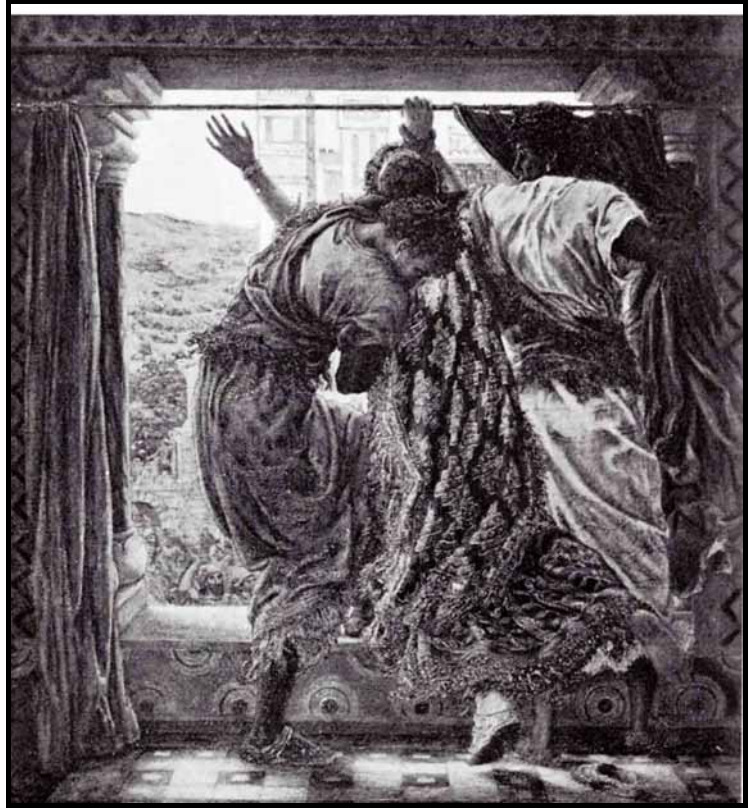
hardship and persecution. The natural dynamic of a living relationship with Christ in which faith and love and the evidence thereof in works are consistently increasing is evident and commendable in the congregation in Thyatira.



“The Death of Jezebel” by J. James Tissot

“Nevertheless, I have this against you...” - Words of high praise quickly give way to most severe criticism. The verb ***“tolerate”*** defines the essence of the problem. The danger to this church was not from the outside. No external enemy threatened Thyatira. The foe was already inside the church itself and the congregation was guilty of permitting and approving this most dangerous false teaching. The false teacher is identified with Jezebel, the infamous Sidonian princess who became the wife of Ahab and queen over Israel. Jezebel was a fanatical devotee of the Canaanite fertility cult of Baal and Astarte. She made it her life’s goal to establish the worship of Baal as the official religion of Israel. She was the nemesis of

the prophet Elijah and all who sought to remain faithful to the Lord. Jezebel was murdered by Jehu in the purge which followed the death of Ahab. To this day, her name personifies feminine wickedness and evil. (Cf. 1 Kings 16:29-33; 19:1-3; 2 Kings 9:30-37). The allusion to the notorious Old Testament queen would seem to suggest that the false teacher in Thyatira was a prominent woman of the congregation, perhaps the wife of one of the pastors or leaders of the church. Thus, like Jezebel of old, she was in a position to use her influence, based on her husband's position, to further her own false doctrine. This woman actually claimed to be a ***"prophetess,"*** that is, an inspired

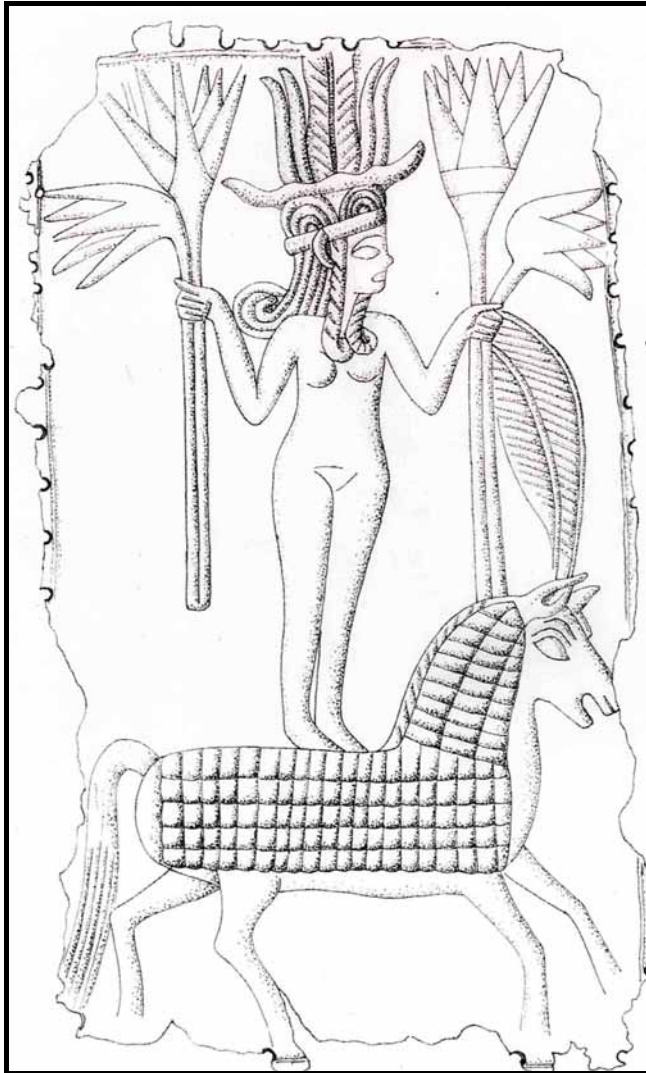


"The Death of Jezebel" by T. S. Rooke

spokesman of God. Female prophets were not unknown in the New Testament (i.e. Anna in Luke 2:36 and the daughters of Philip in Acts 21:9). In claiming the gift of special revelation from God, this evil woman assumed for herself a position of authority and power within the church. However, her claim to speak for God was false, and the doctrine she put forward misled the people into error and sin. The specific nature of the error involved ***"sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols,"*** in a manner similar to the Nicolaitans and the Balaamites present in Ephesus and Pergamum. Given the prominence of the various trade guilds in Thyatira, it may well be that this false prophetess claimed special revelation from God which authorized participation in the idolatrous rites and immoral ceremonies of the guilds. This would have been a most attractive and profitable teaching since those who refused to take part in the ceremonies were excluded from any participation in the work of the trade. The severity of the warning indicates how pervasive this falsehood had become within the congregation.

"I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling." - Christ's past dealings with this woman and her impending punishment are described in

unusual detail. This is a long standing error. Jezebel has been given ample time to repent but she has obstinately refused to do so. She has hardened her heart and is immovably set in the wicked course that she has chosen for herself and those foolish enough to follow her. Evidently the prophetess herself had indulged in the sexual immorality which she commended to others. The Greek text uses the word “*pornias*”



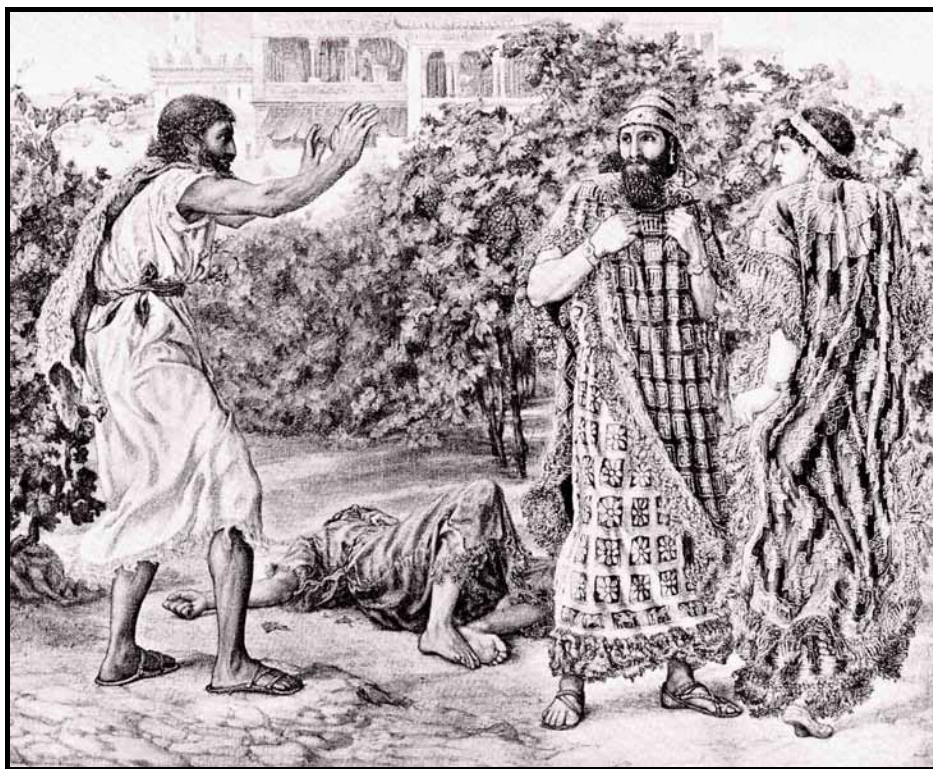
“Astarte” 13th Century B.C. Plaque

which refers specifically to illicit sexual activity. Now the time for punishment has come, and yet the hope remains that the punishment itself will drive her and her followers to repentance. ***“I will cast her on a bed of suffering and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely...I will strike her children dead.”*** The Baal/Astarte cult of Jezebel was notorious for the perverse sexual excesses which surrounded their worship of the god/goddess. Now that very place where she had reveled in her passion and pleasure will become for her and those who follow her a place of torment and suffering instead. Sickness, suffering, and ultimately death are the punishments which the Judge has prepared for this wanton, wicked temptress. The “*children*” of Jezebel are not physical offspring, but those who have followed her in her falsehood and shared in her immorality.

“Then all the churches will know that I am He who searches hearts and minds and I will repay each of you according to your deeds.” - Christ’s judgement upon Jezebel and her children will serve as a lesson to the whole church so that all may recognize His omniscience and His righteousness. He is the one God “*who searches hearts and minds.*” Nothing can be concealed or hidden from His gaze. Evil motives and false intent may often be concealed from other men, but no one will

ever evade or escape the judgement of God. God will not and cannot allow sin to go unpunished. Churches may grow indifferent and permissive, but the righteous judgement of God will stand nonetheless. That judgement will be absolutely fair and completely just - ***“I will repay each of you according to your deeds.”***

“Now I say to the rest of you in Thyatira, to you who do not hold to her teaching and have not learned Satan’s so-called deep secrets...” - A word of encouragement is offered to the godly remnant in this troubled congregation. The false teachers boasted of their knowledge of the *“deep secrets of God,”* a common slogan among the gnostic sects of the period. The Lord contemptuously dismisses such pretension for what it really is ***“Satan’s so-called deep secrets.”*** Not all have been taken in. Some still remain faithful - there are yet 7,000 in Israel who have not bowed the knee to Baal. To this godly remnant come the comforting promise - ***“I will not impose any other burden on you.”*** They will be spared the judgement that is about to fall upon Jezebel and her followers. The Lord is coming soon. The day of deliverance is at hand - ***“Only hold on to what you have until I come.”*** ***“What you have”*** is the faith and that faith will sustain and strengthen the faithful until the end.

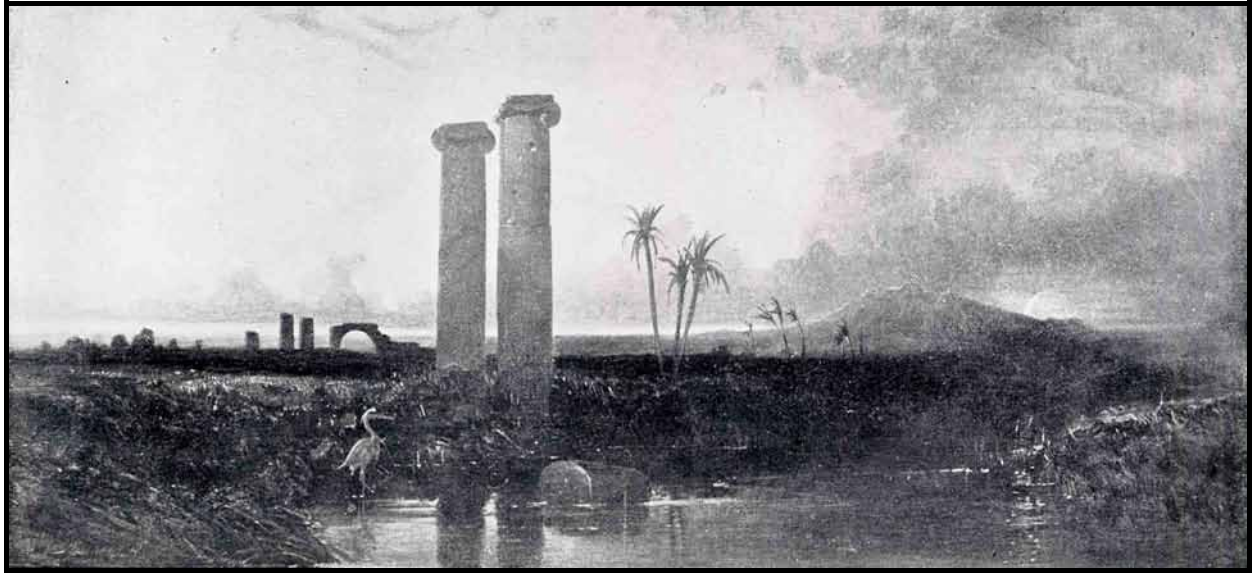


“Elijah Denounces Ahab and Jezebel” by T. M. Rooke

“To him who overcomes and does My will to the end, I will give authority over the nations...” - The sequence of the promise and the command to hear and heed is reversed in this letter and in the three that follow. Thyatira is the only church to receive a double promise - ***“authority over the nations,”*** and ***“the morning star.”*** The promise of ***“authority over the nations”*** is based on the messianic prophecy of Psalm 2:8-9 which is quoted in the text. The psalm predicts that the coming kingdom of the Messiah shall utterly destroy the kingdoms of this world. ***“As vessels of a potter are dashed to pieces.”*** Those who are now oppressed and persecuted by worldly kings and powers will reign one day with the Lord. As St. Paul promised in 2 Timothy 2:12 - ***“If we suffer, we shall also reign with Him.”*** This glorious reign of the saints is promised on the authority of the Father Himself - ***“just as I have received authority from My Father.”***

The second blessing promised the Overcomer is ***“I will also give to him the morning star.”*** This colorful image reinforces the initial promise of a part for every believer in Christ’s celestial reign. The morning star is the star whose appearance in the heavens signals the end of the darkness and the coming of the light. Balaam had prophesied the rising of a star out of Jacob, a Messianic King whose scepter would crush the princes of the nations (Numbers 24:14-20). Daniel promised that after the end times the people of God ***“will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.”*** (Daniel 12:3) Thus, to be given the morning star means to share in the imminent rule and reign of Christ, the Savior King. In the same way, the angels of heaven are called the ***“morning stars”*** who danced for joy at the unfolding wonder of divine creation (Job 38:7). That is the glorious title which the devil lost when he fell from heaven’s height: ***“How have you fallen from heaven, O morning star, son of the dawn!”*** (Isaiah 14:12). St. Peter describes the miracle of conversion in similar language: ***“Until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.”*** (2 Peter 1:19) Finally, in Revelation 22 the prophetic imagery comes to its triumphant conclusion as the Lord designates Himself as ***“the bright Morning Star.”*** (Revelation 22:16) The darkness of sin’s night is almost over. The dawn of heaven’s glorious light is drawing near. All who persevere and overcome share in glory of the Savior’s kingdom and will reign with him forever - ***“I give to him the morning star.”***

The letter concludes with the standard exhortation: ***“Let him who has an ear, hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”***



"Sardis" by Harry Johnston

The Letter to the Church in Sardis

The Dying Church

(Revelation 3:1-6)

To the angel of the church in Sardis write: These are the words of Him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of My God. Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you. Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never erase his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before My Father and His angels. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

"To the angel of the church in Sardis write:" - Sardis was located about thirty-three miles south of Thyatira at the western end of the King's Highway that ran from Susa the ancient capital of Persia. Sardis was situated on top of a high rocky plateau almost 1,500 feet high, a virtually impregnable fortress. It became the capital of the Greek Kingdom of Lydia and under the legendary king Croesus was renown throughout the ancient world for its abundant wealth. The phrase *"rich as Croesus"* became the proverbial way to describe someone who was immensely wealthy. The

theater in Sardis seated 20,000 people. By the Roman era in the First Century A.D. Sardis was past its prime, and lived, to a large extent on the reputation of its former glories. The major industry of the town was the production of woolen goods. The patron deity of Sardis was the Cybele (Artemis) the mother goddess. In conjunction with the worship of the goddess, a nearby group of hot springs were reputed to have not only healing powers but the capacity to raise the dead. There is no historical information about the founding of the Christian Church in Sardis. Archeologists have, however, determined that there was a Jewish Synagogue in the city during this period.



“Cybele, the Mother Goddess” by Jost Amman

“These are the words of Him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.” - This is the harshest and most negative of the letters thus far. The introduction is similar to that of the letter to the church in Ephesus. Jesus introduces Himself to the congregation in Sardis with reference to *“the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.”* The *“seven spirits of God”* were mentioned previously in 1:4 as the *“seven spirits before the throne.”* The Spirit of God is the source of life, that which is desperately needed by this dying church. This is the Spirit whose breath can rouse dead, dry bones to life again (Ezekiel 37:14). The life-giving Spirit is at Christ’s disposal, thus in the imagery of the text Christ *“holds the seven spirits of God.”* Christ is

the *“Living One”* (1:18) who bestows upon His people the *“Spirit of Life”* (Romans 8:2). Jesus had promised His disciples that He would send them the Holy Spirit as their *“Counselor”* who would truthfully testify about Him and empower their own testimony (John 15:26). At the same time, Christ also *“holds...the seven stars”*

which represent the angels of the seven churches, the pastors who proclaim the Word of God within the congregations. The Spirit conveys life by means of the Word and that Word has been entrusted to the office of the ministry which God has Himself established. Thus the conjunction of the “*stars*” and the “*spirits*” is most appropriate.

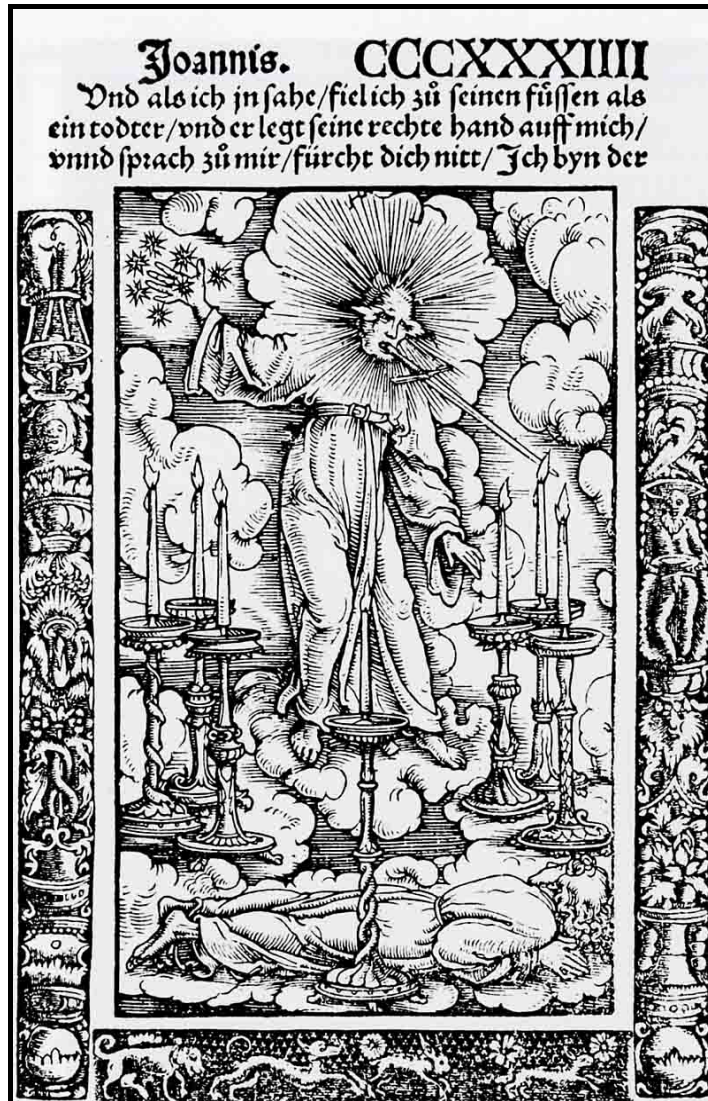
“I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead.” - Evidently, this congregation enjoyed a high reputation among the churches of the region. But the Lord knows better. He from whom no secrets are hidden sees beneath the outward appearance and the opinions of men to view things as they truly are. Despite the deceptive image of renown spiritual vitality this church is dead (Greek - “*nekros*”). A state of spiritual death permeated this congregation. Unlike her sister churches, Sardis is not threatened by enemies internal or external.

“Sardis had peace. We hear of no attack from the “synagogue of Satan” (2:9) in Sardis; no “throne of Satan” (2:13) was set up there to challenge the sole sovereignty of the throne of God; No “deep things of Satan” (2:24) lured them away with the seduction of Balaam (2:14) or a Jezebel (2:20) from the salubrious depths of God (1 Corinthians 2:10).” (Franzmann, p. 47)

The church in Sardis had peace, but it was a graveyard peace, the peace of death. This was a church complacently at ease resting upon the laurels of its glorious past. The church had taken on the character of its city. Ancient Sardis, as previously noted, was a virtually impregnable fortress, built on a high plateau which could only be approached on a narrow land bridge. And yet, the city had fallen twice, first in 540 B.C. to the Persian Cyrus, and then again in 218 B.C. to the Greek Antiochus the Great. In both cases, the citadel was unguarded because the inhabitants were convinced their city could not be taken. And so they slept securely while the enemy came upon them. So also the church in Sardis was complacent and at rest. They believed themselves to be secure. But this was a delusion. The sleep of the church of Sardis was the sleep of death from which only the voice of God could raise and rouse them.

“Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of My God.” - This is a most urgent summons to be roused before it is too late, a last minute appeal to a congregation that is on the verge of death itself. ***“Wake up!”*** (Greek - “*ginou gregoron*”) literally means to be aroused from drowsiness and sleep to a state of alert watchfulness. The Lord wants the church in Sardis to recognize the peril in which they stand, to see the true state of

their church, before it is too late. “Sardis is like a leaking, sinking ship, in which captain and crew are sunk in dull lethargy. They must wake up to the situation and thus must take measures to save the ship.” (Lenski, p. 128) The last spark of life



*“He Who Holds the Seven Stars”
 by Hans Holbein*

remains and it must be immediately fanned into flame or it flickers and go out. Decisive action is called for - **“Strengthen what remains and is about to die.”** There are still a few surviving vestiges of the congregation’s former spiritual life, these must now be revived. The phrase **“I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of My God,”** provides the basis for this stern warning. The NIV’s translation is somewhat misleading. The problem in Sardis is not merely the quantity of their works but the nature of the works themselves. Genuine good works are, and can only be, the fruit of a living faith. The church in Sardis continued to go through the motions, and this was enough to maintain their status in the eyes of the world. But God’s assessment is infinitely more penetrating than man’s. He searches the innermost hearts of men. In His sight the deeds of Sardis are revealed as empty and incomplete, in the absence of true faith and love.

“Persecution is dangerous - some turn apostate; heresy is worse- often many are deceived; worst of all is the dry rot from within- the whole church dying from the inside. Its membership may be large, it works may be great in number and in size, but the life is dying out or is already dead.” (Lenski, p. 129)

“Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard, obey it and repent.” - Now comes the threefold exhortation which provides God’s remedy for this nearly fatal crisis. First, ***“Remember what you have received and heard.”*** The verb is in the present tense, indicating ongoing action - *“keep on remembering.”* That which the church in Sardis had ***“received and heard”*** was the message of the Gospel, the Word of God by which their faith and their church had originally been called into being. To ***“obey”*** (Greek - *“terein”* - literally *“to keep”*) that Gospel and live according to it will require the total transformation of heart and life which is true repentance (Greek - *“metanoeson”*). Biblical repentance includes the following components: 1. Recognition of sin; 2. Contrition - sorrow for sin; 3. Faith in Christ’s forgiveness; 4. Willingness, wherever possible, to undo the damage of the sin; and, 5. Conscientious resolve not to repeat the sin in the future.

“But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know...” - The text warns of the dire consequences of failure to heed the Lord’s call to repentance. He who now addresses the church in Sardis as a loving Savior will return unexpectedly and without warning as a stern Judge. The coming of the judgment ***“as a thief”*** is a common simile in Scripture (cf. Matthew 24:43; Luke 12:39; 1 Thessalonians 5:2; 2 Peter 3:10; Revelation 16:15). Repentance may not be delayed because we never know when the hour of judgment will come for us or for the world. The Greek text is most emphatic on this point, using the strongest negative expression possible - *“ou me.”* The text could be translated *“There is absolutely no way for you to find out when I am coming.”* Those who delight in setting dates and establishing time tables would do well to note these words carefully.

“Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes.” - There remains even in dying Sardis a small remnant - ***“a few people”*** - who are still alive in the faith. The Greek text literally says *“You have a few names in Sardis.”* This terminology conforms to the following verse which will refer to the removal of names from the Book of Life in heaven. The righteousness or unrighteousness of men is frequently symbolized by clothing in Scripture. For instance, Isaiah declares: ***“All of us have become as one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags.”*** (Isaiah 64:11; cf. also Isaiah 61:10). Later in Revelation, John describes the redeemed in heaven as ***“those who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”*** (Revelation 7:14; cf. also 22:14) Hence, those in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes are the justified, those to whom the righteousness of God in Christ has been imputed by faith. They have remained in the faith despite the apostasy of the majority and have not been defiled by the corruption of the sinful

culture in which they live. The Greek word “*emolynon*” (“**soiled**”) is an intense word which means “*to smear with filth,*” “*to befoul,*” or “*to pollute.*” It is often used in a moral context with particular application to sexual immorality. Some commentators further suggest that the use of this clothing imagery in reference to Sardis is the an allusion to the prominence of the wool industry in the city. The faithful who remain in this dying church are promised deliverance in the coming judgment - “***They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy.***” The garment imagery continues. The color white in Scripture is typically the color of holiness and purity - “***Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.***” (Isaiah 1:18) This is also generally the usage in Revelation (cf. 7:9,13). To walk with the Lord, dressed in white, is the promise of eternal life in heaven where we will dwell in the presence of God forever in perfect holiness and blessedness. They will receive this gift because “***they are worthy.***” That is to say, they have been counted worthy by God’s grace, and that grace within them has enabled them to persevere where so many others have fallen away. As St. Paul declares: “***But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace to me was not without effect.***”

“He who overcomes will like them be dressed in white. I will never erase his name from the book of life...” - In the letter to Sardis the promise to the overcomer is pronounced in the context of the faithful remnant. The majority who have fallen may still have a part in the blessing promised to the faithful if only they will repent. They too may “***be dressed in white,***” justified before God in the shed blood of Jesus. The verb is passive indicating that the person does not dress himself, but that God acts to throw the white robe of righteousness around him. Their names will be inscribed forever in the “***book of life.***” The “***book of life***” appears seven times in the imagery of Revelation (3:5; 13:8; 17:8;20:12, 15; 21:27), although the image is not unique to this book. Jesus urges His disciples to “***rejoice that your names are written in heaven.***” (Luke 10:20). St Paul describes his co-workers in the Gospel as people “***whose names are in the book of life.***” (Philippians 4:3). The “***book of life***” is a figurative way of expressing the doctrine of election (Romans 8:28-30; Ephesians 1:3-6). The book contains the names of those whom God has predestined for eternal life through faith in the Lord Jesus. It is the census book of the heavenly Jerusalem, written before history began. To have one’s name written in the book of life is to have the assurance of a salvation which has been accomplished not by human effort but by God Himself. When the Savior says He will not erase their names out of the book, He is emphasizing the certainty of the salvation which God has prepared for the

elect. The same thought is expressed in another way in John 10:28 when the Good Shepherd promises that no one shall pluck His sheep out of His hand. Finally, the Lord promises those who persevere in the faith and overcome that He will ***“acknowledge his name before My Father and His angels.”*** To be acknowledged by Christ is to be identified and claimed as one of His own. The language is similar to that of Matthew 10:32 where Christ declares: ***“Everyone, therefore, who will confess Me before men, I will confess him before My Father who is in heaven.”*** The letter concludes with the standard appeal to hear and heed the Spirit’s message to the churches.



“The Ruins of Philadelphia

The Letter to the Church in Philadelphia
The Church of the Open Door
(Revelation 3:7-13)

To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: These are the words of Him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What He opens, no one can shut; and what He shuts, no one can open. I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept My word and have not denied My name. I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars - I will

make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you. Since you have kept My command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth. I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of My God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on him the name of My God and the name of the city of My God, the new Jerusalem which is coming down out of heaven from My God; and I will also write on him My new name. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

“To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write:” - The city of Philadelphia was located in a fertile valley about thirty miles southeast of Sardis. Philadelphia was the youngest of the seven cities, having been founded in the Second Century B.C. by the Greek King Eumenes II. It was named Philadelphia (Greek *“philia”* - love, *“adelphos”* - brother) in honor of the king’s brother, Attalus II, who was renown for his love and loyalty to his royal sibling. The city was designed to be an outpost of

Greek culture and civilization in Asia. It’s position on an important East-West trade route and the imperial postal road resulted in prosperity and prominence. In ancient times Philadelphia was known as *“the gateway to the East”* and *“the keeper of the gateway.”* Hence Revelation’s designation of Philadelphia as the church of the open door was historically most appropriate. The city was situated on the edge of a geologically unstable region known as the *“Katakekaumene”* (from the Greek verb which means *“to burn down”*), so designated because of its frequent earthquakes and regular volcanic activity. The city of Philadelphia, along with the other



“Dionysius - The God of Wine and Ecstasy”

cities in the valley, was devastated by a major earthquake in A.D. 17, and had not yet been fully rebuilt when John wrote the Book of Revelation. The imperial government provided substantial aid for reconstruction and accordingly, the cult of the emperor flourished in the city. The city took on a new name "*Neokaiseria*," the city of the new Caesar, as a demonstration of its gratitude for imperial patronage. The fertile volcanic soil of the region was well suited to the cultivation of vineyards and wine production was one of Philadelphia's major industries. Dionysius (Roman - Bacchus) the Greek god of wine and the vine was the most prominent deity of the city.

"These are the words of Him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David." - Christ's self-description

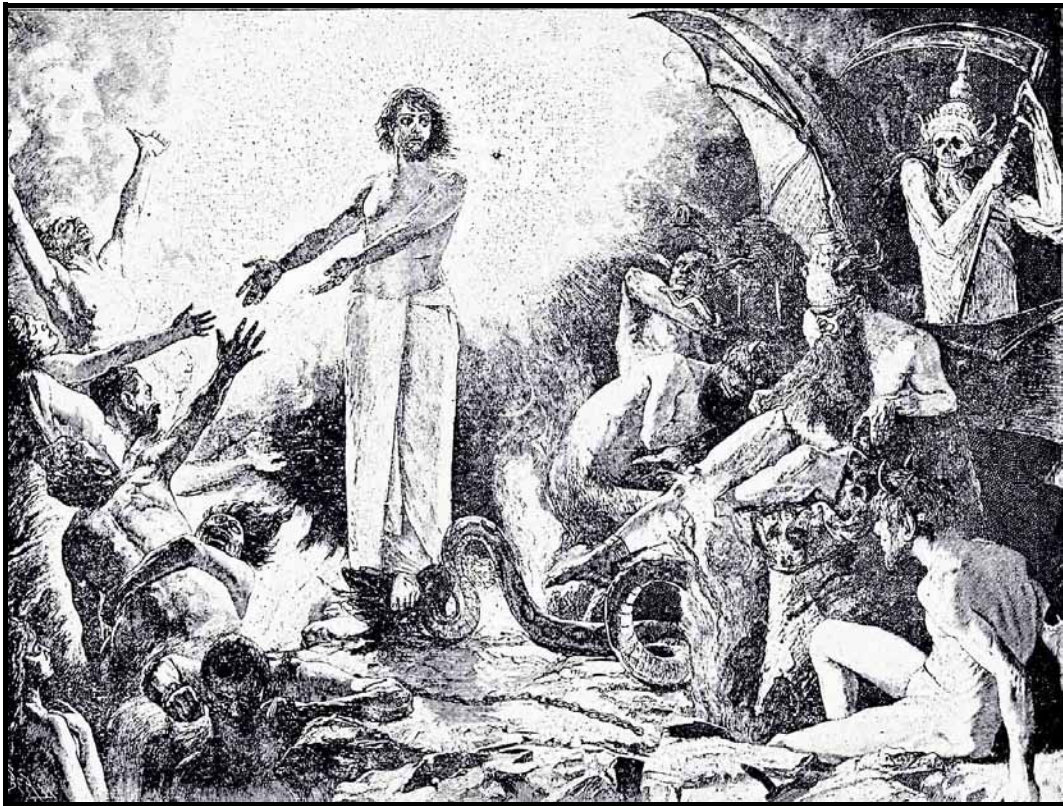
to the church of Philadelphia is not a verbatim development of material from Chapter 1 in the same way that those of previous letters have been. It is more a matter of allusion than quotation. Four identifying marks are cited. The designation of the Lord as ***"He who is holy and true"*** is evidently drawn from Chapter 1's description of Jesus as ***"the faithful witness"*** (1:5). Jesus is ***"the holy One"*** (Greek - "*ho hagios*"). The

title is used elsewhere in Revelation in reference to God the Father (cf. 4:8; 6:10). Elsewhere in Scripture this is a common title for the divine Messiah (cf. Psalm 16:10; Habakkuk 3:3; Isaiah 40:25; Mark 1:24; Luke 1:35; 4:34; John 6:69; Acts 4:27; 1 John 2:20). To be holy, is not merely to be without sin, but also to be set apart as the divine Son of God, commissioned by Him to be the Savior of the world. Jesus is also ***"the true One"*** (Greek - "*ho alethinos*"). He is the Truth personified (cf. John 14:6). He is genuine and real in contrast to all the false Messiahs who sought to foist themselves upon Israel. In Revelation 1:18 Christ had asserted: ***"I hold the keys of***



"David the King" by Rudolf Schäfer

death and Hades.” The imagery of the keys now recurs as the Lord is identified as *“Him...who holds the key of David.”* The language is drawn from Isaiah 22:22 where a man named Eliakim is chosen by God as the treasurer of the royal house. Of this faithful servant it is said, *“I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David; what he opens, no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open.”* Eliakim, as the Treasurer of the kingdom of Judah, had full control over all the resources of the kingdom with the authority to withhold or bestow the king’s treasure as he wished. In this sense, he was a type, a prefigure of the Messiah who was to come as a royal king of the House of David. In the case of Jesus, the treasure in question is not mere material wealth but the gift of life eternal for He *“holds the keys of death and Hades.”* He alone can open or close the door to heaven. His power and authority in this matter is absolute - *“What He opens no one can shut; and what He shuts no one can open.”*



“Christ - the Conqueror of Death and Hell” by Sasha Schneider

“I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut.” - In each of the other letters, the Lord’s assertion of complete knowledge about the congregation’s situation is immediately followed by a detailed description of that situation. The letter to the church in Philadelphia, perhaps the most positive

of the seven letters, digresses from the typical pattern at this point in that a word of encouragement precedes the specification of the congregation's deeds. Jesus assures the church that He has set before them ***"an open door that no one can shut."*** The ***"open door"*** which Christ graciously sets before the church in Philadelphia is the promise of life eternal and access to the endless joy and blessedness of heaven. The promise of the open door assures them of the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. None of their enemies or opponents can deprive them of this blessing. This is an open doorway ***"that no one can shut."*** There may also be a missionary connotation in this promise. Elsewhere in the New Testament, the open door terminology is used in connection with unusual evangelistic and ministry opportunities (cf. 1 Corinthians 16:9; 2 Corinthians 2:12; Colossians 4:3). What could be more fitting than for those who have been assured the promise of the open heaven, to also be given unique opportunities to share the wonderful Gospel of salvation?

"I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept My word and have not denied My name." - These three clauses explain the reason for the blessing of the open door. Unlike other larger and more powerful congregations in the region, the church in Philadelphia has only ***"little strength."*** This was evidently a small church with limited influence whose members probably came from the lower classes of society in contrast to the great wealth and influence of the church's Jewish enemies (cf. 1

Corinthians 1:26-27). The spiritual faithfulness of this congregation is in marked contrast to the church's small size and influence - ***"Yet you have kept My word and***



"Lord Keep Us Steadfast in Thy Word"
by Eduard Gebhardt

have not denied My name.” This is a church that has been faithful to Scripture, that has not tolerated false teaching, and has not yielded to the world’s relentless efforts



***“The Vision of the Golden Lamps”
from the Bamberg Apocalypse***

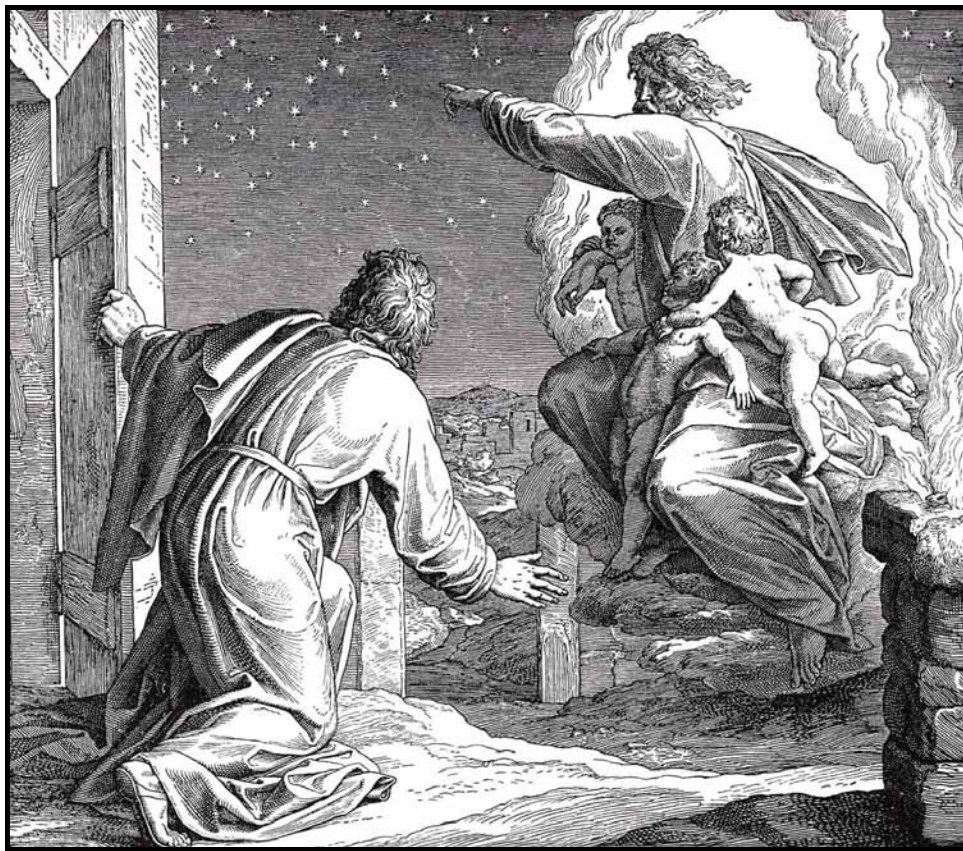
toward compromise and conformity. As Jesus declares in the Gospel of St. John: ***“If you continue in My Word, you are really My disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”*** (John 8:31; cf. also John 14:23,24). Faithfulness to the Word has been consistently demonstrated in the congregation by a refusal to deny ***“My name.”*** The open, joyful confession of Jesus Christ as Lord, even in the face of determined opposition, has characterized the life of the church in Philadelphia.

“I will make those who are the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars - I will make them come and fall down at your feet...”- Like the church in Smyrna (cf. Revelation 2:9), Philadelphia was being persecuted by Jews who

rejected Jesus as the Messiah. St. Ignatius, writing to the church in Philadelphia a few decades later, indicates that this conflict with Judaism continued into the Second Century:

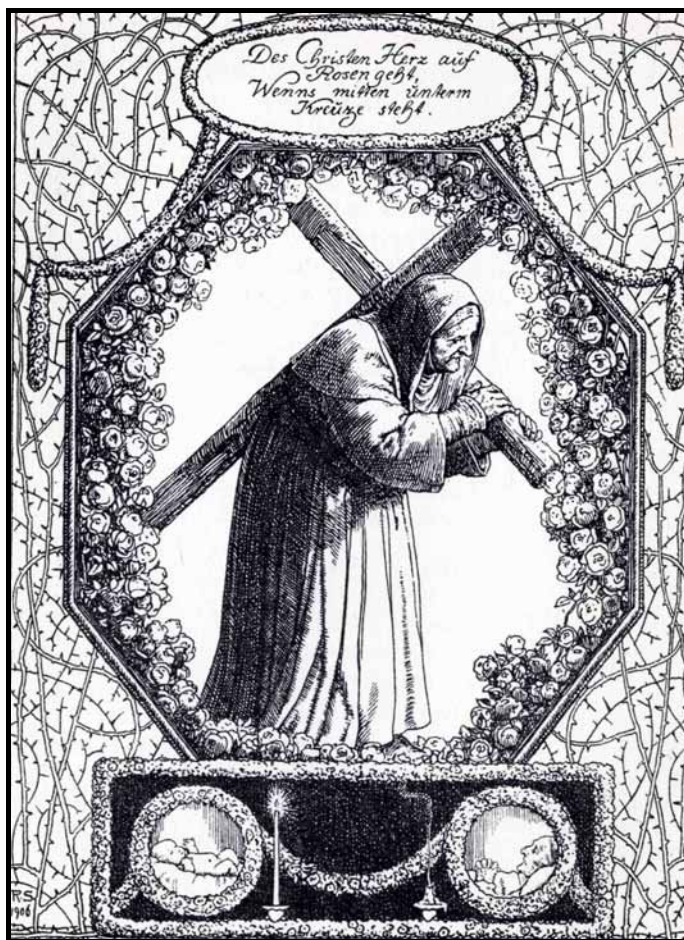
‘But if anyone preach the Jewish law unto you, listen not to him. For it is better to hearken to Christian doctrine from a man who has been circumcised, than to Judaism from one uncircumcised. But if either of such persons do not speak concerning Jesus Christ, they are in my judgment but as monuments and sepulchres of the dead, upon which are written only the names of men. Flee therefore the wicked devices and snares of the prince of this world, lest at any time, being conquered by his artifices ye grow weak in your love.’ (ANF, 1, p.82)

These people professed themselves to be the true Israel of God because of their physical descent from Abraham. They bitterly rejected Jesus and those who followed. In so doing, they have become *“the synagogue of Satan,”* and have forfeited the right to be called *“Jews.”* True descent from father Abraham is a matter of faith not blood (cf. Romans 2:28-29; 9:6-9). The Old Testament had promised that Gentiles from all across the world would one day come to bow down before the true Israel of God (cf. Isaiah 45:14; 49:23; 60:14; Psalm 86:9). Jesus now promises the beleaguered Christians in Philadelphia the fulfillment of those promises in a manner that confounds and contradicts all human expectation. The day will come when those who believe themselves to be Jews but who are not will be compelled to acknowledge that Jesus is, in fact, the promised Messiah, and that those who followed him are, in fact, the true Israel of God, those whom He has loved (cf. Isaiah 43:4). This text does not indicate the conversion of the Jews but the universal acknowledgment of the lordship of Jesus when He returns in might and majesty as the Judge of all mankind. In that sense, the passage is very similar to the prophecy of Revelation 1:7 (cf. also Philippians 2:10-11)



“God’s Promise to Abraham” - 19th Century Bible Illustration by Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld

“Since you have kept My command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial...” - The NIV’s translation muddles the Greek text in the opening phrase of Verse 10. The Greek literally says, *“Because you have kept the word of My patience.”* There is nothing here about divine commands or obedience to them. To insert this thought into the text is to distort what is essentially a Gospel concept into Law. The Gospel tells us of Christ’s patient endurance as our suffering Savior. That is *“the word of My patience.”* In fact, it was that very patient endurance, Christ’s willingness to submit to humiliation and death, that caused most men to reject and scorn Him. Thus, St. Paul declares that the cross of Christ is an offense (Greek - *“skandalon”* - literally a deathtrap) to the Jews and silliness to the Gentiles (1 Corinthians 1:23). Our Lord’s own example, held before us in the Gospel, encourages and strengthens us to endure persecution and pain with patience, just as Jesus did for us. The Christian who endures as Jesus did, remaining with Christ crucified, has truly *“kept My word of patience.”*



“Bearing our Crosses” by Rudolf Schäfer

“I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth.” Those who have *“kept My word of patience”* are now promised that the Lord will keep them in the time of testing. Those who fantasize a secret rapture of the church at the beginning of an imagined seven year tribulation period preceding a millennial reign of Christ on earth would like to appropriate this verse in support of their outlandish theories. To do so renders this promise irrelevant to the congregation in Philadelphia to whom the promise is given. Furthermore, the words and grammar of the passage itself clearly contradict this view. Rapturists argue that to kept ***“from the hour of trial”*** (Greek - *“tereso*



"The Temptation of Jesus" by V. Leduc

ek") necessitates physical evacuation from the point of danger. That assertion is explicitly contradicted by the only other New Testament combination of these two Greek words in John 17:15. Here Jesus specifically rejects a physical removal from temptation while praying for spiritual protection in the midst of that temptation: ***"My prayer is not that you take them out of the world, but that you protect them from (Greek - *tereses autous ek*) the evil one."*** The church in Philadelphia was faithful to Christ in the time of trial and now Christ promises to be faithful to them in the greater trials to come. It is their preservation in trial that is promised, not their removal from it. They will be protected spiritually from any threats posed to their faith during the time of trial. The impending tribulation (Greek - *"peirasmos"*) is identified as ***"the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth."*** It is universal in scope in that it will come ***"upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth."*** This language is typically used in Revelation to refer negatively to unbelievers throughout the world (cf. Revelation 6:10; 8:13; 11:10; 13:8, 14; 17:8). The ongoing tribulation of the people of God throughout the New Testament era is to be one of the characteristic *"signs of the times,"* to serve as a constant reminder that we have entered upon the final era of human history, the end times. That tribulation will intensify in the period

immediately before the Lord returns in glory and power. This is the “**great tribulation**” of Revelation 7:14 (cf. Daniel 12:1; Matthew 24:15-31; Mark 13:7-20; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12). The promise to the Philadelphians, relevant in the first century and the twenty-first century is simply this:

“The church has kept her Lord’s Word, and has, in the strength of it, patiently endured; the Lord will keep this church; amid all those successive waves of preliminary judgments of God each more severe than the last, which shall sweep and sift the world, the church shall be safely kept.” (Franzmann, p. 49)



“The Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins” by J. M. Strudwick

“I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown.” - This emphasis on the urgency and imminence of the coming of Christ is characteristic of Revelation (cf. Revelation 2:5,16; 22:7,12,20). Behind the trials and sufferings of these last days there looms the decisive reality of the final judgment. To faithful Philadelphia these are words of encouragement and comfort. This is not a mere chronological calculation. It is a summons to live in eager anticipation of the return of Christ. Two thousand years have passed since Jesus promised His imminent return. Although ***“of that day and hour no one knows”*** (Matthew 24:36) the time has been determined, the Lord is coming. Nothing will delay or divert His arrival. From a human perspective we are to live in a state of constant readiness eagerly awaiting His return. We are to leave the date, ***“the times and the seasons”*** (Acts 1:7)

to God and be constantly prepared so that we will not be caught unaware when Christ returns. It is as St. Peter wrote:

“First of all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, “Where is this coming He promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes as it has since the beginning of creation. But they deliberately forget that long ago by God’s Word the heavens existed and the earth was formed out of water and with water...But do not forget this one thing, dear friends; With the Lord a day is like a thousand years and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping His promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” (2 Peter 3:3-9)

In the face of Christ’s imminent return, the admonition to the congregation is to stand firm and **“Hold on to what you have.”** They had been given the Truth of the Word of God and the wonderful Gospel of Salvation. They had been blessed by the Spirit with gifts and abilities to be used in the service of the Lord. The enemies of Christ and of His Church were constantly seeking to deprive them of that which they had been given. Their own sinful nature and the complacent indifference which lulled them into a false sense of security would also have robbed them of these precious gifts. These enemies of God, both internal and external, must be steadfastly and continuously resisted lest they **“take your crown.”** The Greek term - *“ton stephanon sou”* indicates the victor’s crown of laurel leaves presented to the winning athlete rather than the royal crown of a king. In Chapter 2, Christ used the same terminology to promise

“the crown of life” to those in Smyrna who were faithful unto death. Thus, to lose the crown means to lose life and eternal salvation, to be deprived of our place in the

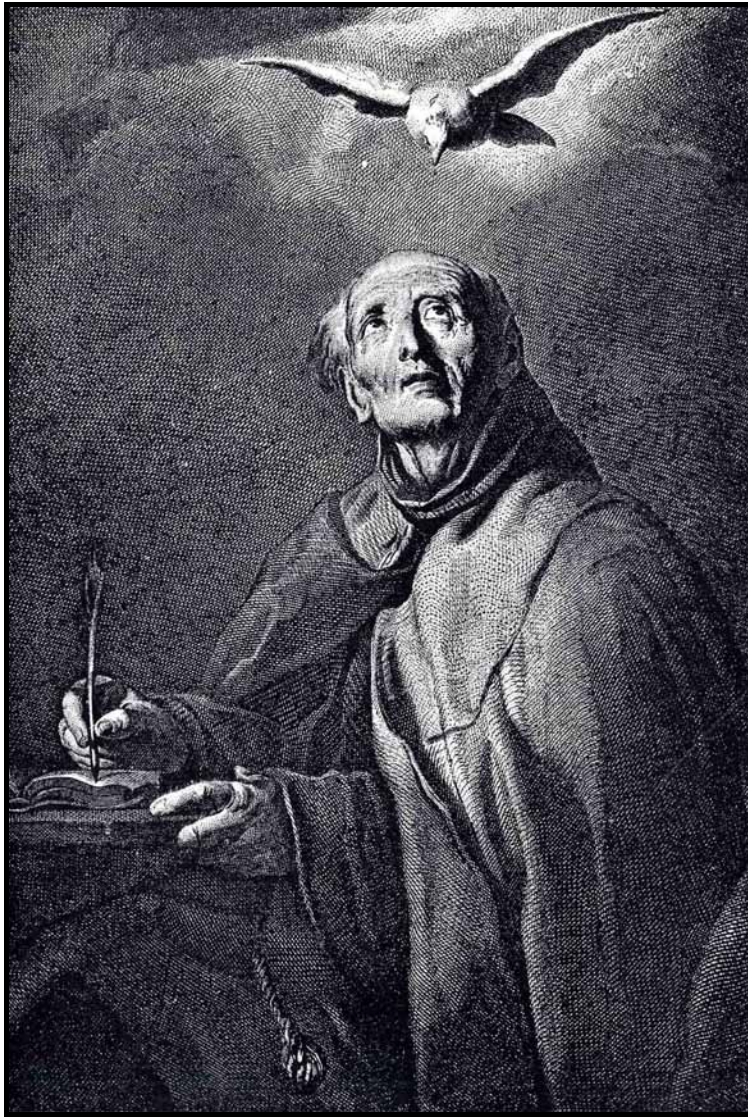


“The Crown of Life” by Rudolf Schäfer

kingdom. The robbers who seek to take the crown do not desire it for themselves. Their goal is to deprive the believer of the eternal life that Christ has won for him: to drag him down with them to perdition in the unending torment of hell.

“Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of My God. Never again will he leave it.” - The promise to the overcomer in this letter is shaped by the particular circumstances of the church in Philadelphia. To a city that had been shaken and destroyed by devastating earthquakes the assurance of salvation comes in the form of a promise of solid stability and permanence. They will stand forever (***“He will never leave it.”***) in the heavenly Jerusalem, the eternal temple of God as a mighty immovable pillar. They will remain in the blessed presence of God throughout all of eternity (cf. Ephesians 2:20-22). ***“I will write on him the name of My God and the name of the city of My God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from My God; and I will also write on him My new name.”*** - Three most sacred names are to be inscribed upon this pillar, thus marking and sealing the believer as the permanent possession of God (cf. Ezekiel 48:35). The noun ***“name”*** (Greek - *“onoma”*) is repeated three times for special emphasis. To be marked with ***“the name of My God”*** signifies belonging to God and being endowed with the power of God. To be marked with ***“the name of the city of My God”*** is a guarantee of irrevocable citizenship in the new Jerusalem, the eternal dwelling place of God (cf. Revelation 21:10ff.). The name of Jesus is ***“the name above every name”*** before which every knee shall bow as all of humanity confesses the Lordship of Christ (Philippians 2:10-11). The Lord declares His name, written upon the believer will be ***“My new name.”*** In the Bible, the bestowal of a new name generally indicated a change in status or character (cf. Isaiah 62:2 where Israel is promised that in the Messianic age - ***“You shall be called by a new name which the mouth of the Lord will give.”***) The new name of the glorified Christ indicates His exaltation to the right hand of God and the inscription of that new name upon the believer is the promise that he who overcomes will share in the Lord’s glory and power.

“He who has an ear, let him hear...” - The letter concludes with the customary admonition to hear and heed the message to the churches.



“St John the Revelator” by Francis Zurbaran - 1662

**The Letter to the Church in Laodicea
The Lukewarm-Compromising Church
(Revelation 3:14-22)**

To the angel of the church in Laodicea write: These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Ruler of God’s creation. I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot, I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm - neither hot nor cold - I am about to spit you out of My mouth. You say, “I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.” But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked. I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so

you can see. Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If any hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him and he with Me. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with Me on My throne, just as I overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.



*“The Faithful and True Witness”
“Liber Floridus” - A.D. 1120*

“To the angel of the church in Laodicea write:” - Laodicea was on the southeast corner of the circuit of the seven churches about a hundred miles east of Ephesus. It was situated in the Lycus Valley at the junction of strategic east - west and north - south highways. The town of Colosse, to which St. Paul addressed his New Testament letter to the Colossians, was at the opposite, upper end of the same valley. The city was founded in the third century B.C. by the Greek King Antiochus II and named for his wife Laodice. Because of its location it was a major commercial and financial center. Laodicea was renown for the manufacture of a particularly soft black woolen cloth. The Greek historian Strabo reports: *“Laodicea produces sheep that are excellent, not only for the softness of their wool, but also for its raven black color, so that the*

Laodiceans derive splendid revenue from it.” A major medical center was also located in Laodicea which specialized in the preparation of a salve for the treatment of diseases of the eye. There was a renown cluster of hot springs within a few miles at Hieropolis, attracting visitors from around the world who came to bathe in their

steamly soothing waters. The boiling mineral water that bubbled up from these thermal vents created crystal columns and cliffs that had the appearance of frozen white waterfalls. The hot water flowed over a 300 foot high cliff near the city, gradually cooling and growing tepid - lukewarm - as it came closer to Laodicea. The city was noted for its architecture with massive walls and towering gates. The triple arches of the “*Ephesus Gate*” still stand today. The great stadium of Laodicea was 900 feet long. Laodicea was a prosperous and economically well established community. It became a world center of banking and money lending. The Seleucid kings resettled about 2,000 Jews in this region after deporting them from Babylon. The Jewish community in the town was prominent and influential. They shared in the wealth of their city. The paramount god of Laodicea with a native Phrygian deity named “*Men Karou*”



*“Jesus the Amen”
Westminster Psalter - 12th Century*

identified in the minds of the people with Zeus, the father of the Greek gods. St. Paul had a hand in the foundation of the congregation in Laodicea (Colossians 1:6-7; 2:1). Tradition indicates that the congregation was established under the leadership of Archippus (Colossians 4:17), the son of Philemon. The church remained active in the city throughout the Roman era. Its bishop was martyred for the faith in 166 A.D. The city was abandoned early in the 14 century after having been repeatedly conquered by the Turks. Its ruins remain largely unexcavated today.

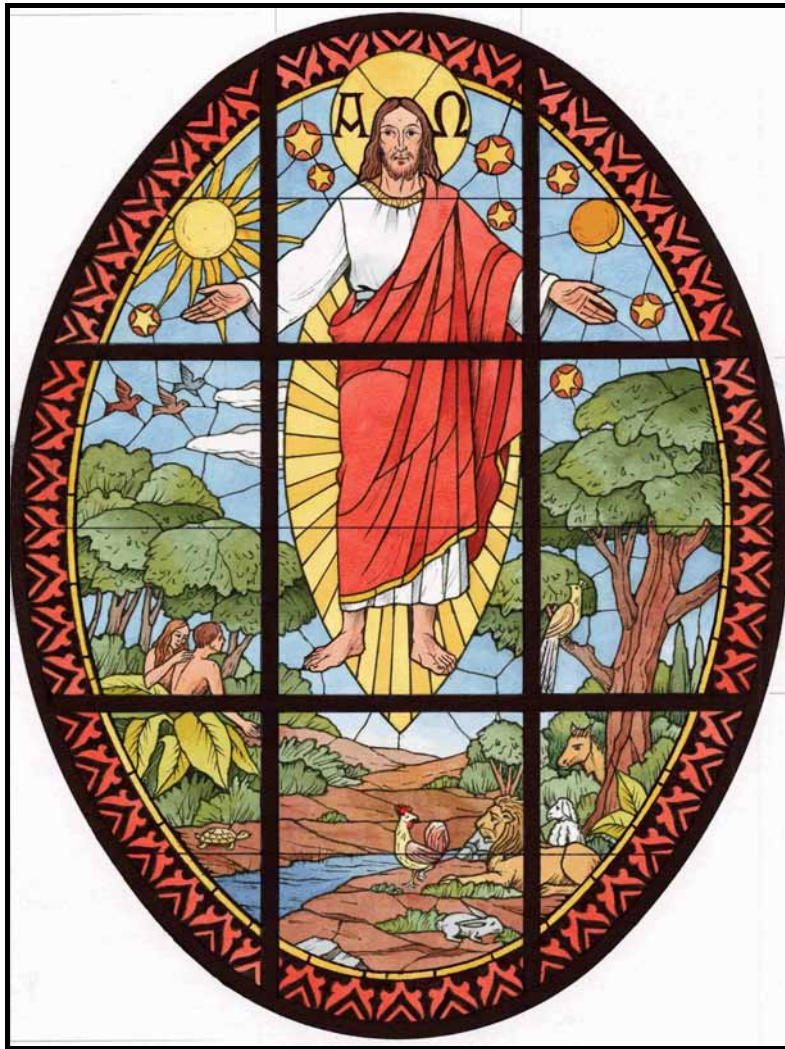
“These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Ruler of God’s creation.” - The threefold designation of Christ emphasizes his complete



"Christ the Divine Judge" - Jacobello Alberegno

truthfulness and absolute authority. This is the only instance in Scripture where the Greek transliteration of the Hebrew term "*Amen*" is used as a personal name for Christ. The Hebrew word literally means "*to be firm*" and is used to signify that which is fixed, true, and unchangeable. In the liturgical worship of Israel the "*Amen*" was used as both an affirmation ("*Thus it is!*") and a prayer ("*So let it be.*"). At times, the word is simply translated as "*truth*" in the Old Testament. To name Christ "*the Amen*" is to designate Him as the personification of Truth. All that which He says must most certainly be accomplished. This emphasis is continued in the second title, "*the faithful and true Witness.*" The Greek word "*martys*" was originally used in reference to one who offered testimony in the courtroom. In the

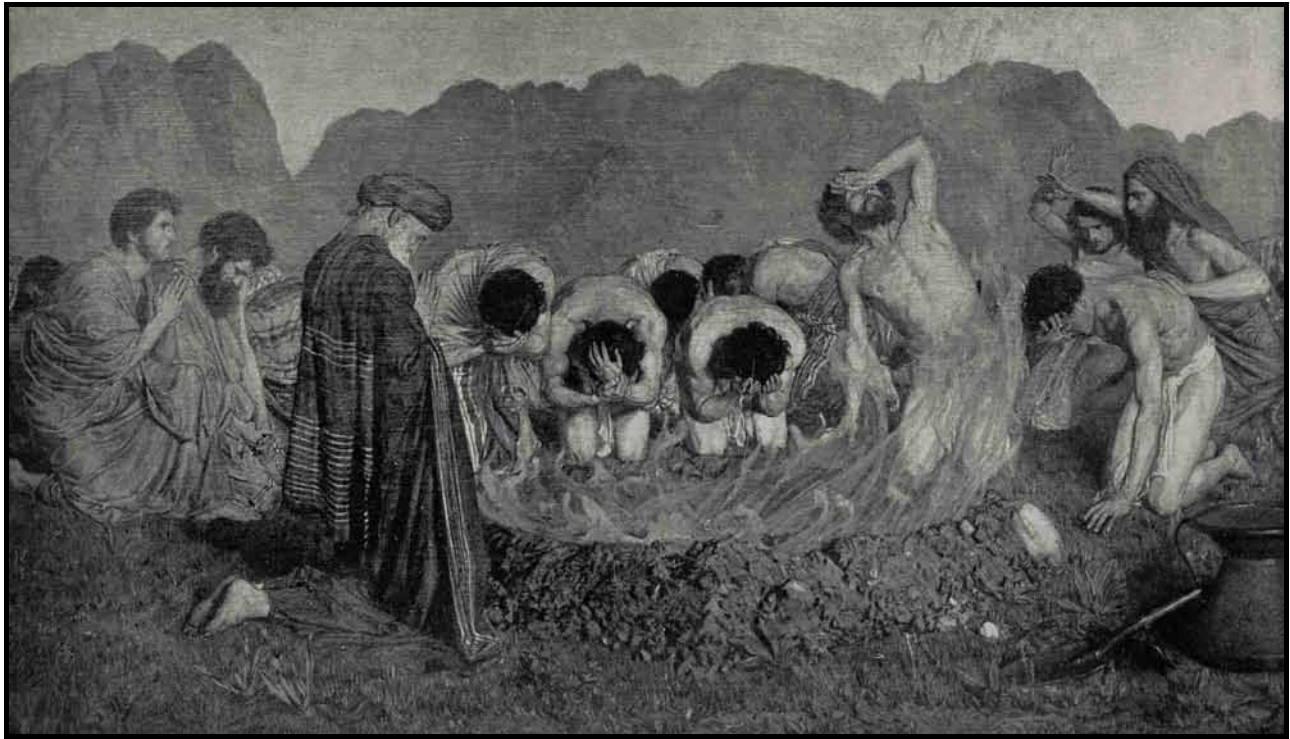
history of the church it came to refer particularly to those who gave their lives because of their testimony for Christ, thus the English word "*martyr.*" Jesus is "*the true and faithful Witness*" in that His testimony in revealing the will and purpose of God is totally true and reliable. The text repeats and expands the reference of Revelation 1:5 which described Jesus as "*the faithful Witness.*" The third title adopted by Christ in the letter to Laodicea is "*the Ruler of God's creation.*" In his letter to the nearby Colossians, thirty five years earlier, St. Paul had found it necessary to rebuke those who downgraded the divinity of Christ and rejected His identity as the eternal Son of God through whom all things were made (cf. Colossians 1:15-20). The use of this title suggests that a similar problem may also have existed in Laodicea. The language in this instance is strongly reminiscent of the opening words of John's Gospel: "*In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with*



“Christ the Creator” - Our Savior Lutheran Church

God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made by Him and without Him was not anything made which was made. (John 1:1-3) In a very similar way, the original text of the phrase here in Revelation literally says *“the Beginning of the creation of God.”* In this case the Greek noun *“he arche”* might be personified to read *“the Beginner of the creation of God.”* The Lord who now addresses the lukewarm church of Laodicea is not only the personification of all truth, He is the Source of all existence, the Beginning of all that is. The Arian heretics of the early centuries who denied the deity of Jesus twisted this phrase to conform to their error, rendering the text, *“the One begun at creation,”* thus reducing our Lord to the status of the first created being. This view is contrary to the language of this text and the overwhelming evidence of Scripture as a whole which emphatically asserts the deity of Christ.

“I know your deeds, that you are neither hot nor cold . I wish that you were either



“Elijah on Mt. Carmel ‘How long halt ye between two opinions?’” by Albert Moore

one or the other.” - Christ’s declaration of knowledge about this church is blunt and directly to the point. In the other letters if there was good to be commended, that commendation came first. There is no commendation here. He who is ***“the faithful and true witness”*** knows all there is to know about this tepid congregation and He will mince no words in asserting the truth. The condemnation of the church in Laodicea is the most scathing of any in the seven letters. The Lord not only knows external actions but His gaze penetrates into the innermost recesses of the heart to discern motivation and attitude. This is a church that has settled comfortably into the middle, indifferent and apathetic, avoiding a decisive stand in any direction. Like complacent Israel of old they are ***“limping along between two different opinions.”*** (1 Kings 18:21). To exist in such a state, satisfied with the semblance of faith without its substance, relying upon a false assurance of salvation, represents a condition of greater spiritual peril than outright unbelief. As Peter warns: ***“It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness than to have known it and then to turn their back on the sacred command that was passed on to them.”*** (2 Peter 2:21) Thus the Lord asserts - ***“I wish you were either one or the other!”*** The unbeliever may be more readily warned of his spiritual jeopardy, than one who wrongly believes that his outward acquaintance with the facts of Christianity will earn him salvation. The half and half position of the church in Laodicea is one of deadly danger.

The imagery of “**hot**,” “**cold**,” and “**lukewarm**” water is effectively drawn from local conditions in Laodicea.. As noted above (p. 66) the hot spring of Hieropolis, six miles to the north, were renown throughout the ancient world for their medicinal qualities. In the other direction lay the nearby city of Colossae, which was well supplied with pure cold water from deep subterranean wells. Laodicea had neither hot healing water nor cold refreshing water. It was in the middle - its water supply tepid and revolting. The Greek historian Strabo reports that the water of Laodicea had a distinct odor because of its high mineral content and was therefore barely drinkable. Robert Mounce describes Laodicea’s hydrological predicament in this way:

“Six miles north across the Lycus River was the city of Hieropolis, famous for its hot springs which, rising within the city, flowed across a wide plateau and spilled over a broad escarpment directly opposite Laodicea. The cliff was some 300 feet high and about a mile wide. Covered with a white incrustation of calcium carbonate, it formed a spectacular natural phenomenon, As the hot, mineral laden water traveled across the plateau, it gradually became lukewarm before cascading over the edge...As the letter was read to the congregation in Laodicea, did the eyes of the listeners seek through door and window the distant view of the lime and sulfur encrusted cliffs under Hieropolis, where the plumes of steam told of hot pools and sickly insipid water seeping over slimy rock, water rough with alum which the unsuspecting visitor drank only to spit out upon the ground in disgust?” (Mounce , p. 125)

Such was the Christianity of the church in Laodicea. They stood for nothing. They were willing to go along with anything. Easy, indifferent tolerance characterized this congregation. They had come to the self-serving conclusion that it was unnecessary to choose between truth and error, right and wrong. They would remain comfortably ensconced in the middle, neither hot nor cold, but lukewarm. Sadly, the allure of lukewarm religion has been a consistent problem in the history of God’s people despite constant warnings that it is impossible to have it both ways. Joshua had urged the children of Israel:

“Now fear the Lord and serve Him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshiped beyond the river and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.” (Joshua 24 14-15)



*“Elijah on Mt. Carmel”
by Frederic Shields*

On the summit of Mount Carmel, in dramatic confrontation with the heathen prophets of Baal, Elijah called the people of Israel to decision and reminded them that if the Lord is God, then He is God alone: ***“How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him; but if Baal is God follow him.”*** (1 Kings 18:21) Our Lord Himself declared that compromise and co-existence between the way of God and the way of the world was impossible: ***“No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.”*** (Luke 16:13)

“So because you are lukewarm - neither hot nor cold - I am about to spit you out of My mouth.” - The metaphor continues as Christ warns of impending judgment upon this church. The Lord threatens the lukewarm church with total and utter rejection. The Greek verb *“emesei”* literally means *“to vomit,”* the drastic physical response of the body to that which is nauseating, corrupt, or poisonous. The image serves here to describe the moral nausea provoked by tepid, stand for nothing religion. The same coarse imagery is used in the Old Testament to depict God’s judgment upon the Canaanites who are to be ***“vomited out”*** of the land of Palistine because of their corruption and their wickedness. God warns Israel that the same fate awaits them, if they allow themselves to be corrupted: ***“And if you defile the land, it will vomit you out like it vomited out the nations that were before you.”*** (Leviticus 18:28) Even this drastic warning is a call to

repentance. Judgment is very near but it has not yet come. Time is running out but there is still time - ***“I am about to spit you out of My mouth.”***



“Elijah on Mt. Carmel” by Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld

“You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing. But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.’ - The church of Laodicea is self-deluded. They are complacent, comfortable, and self-satisfied. Their assessment of their spiritual state has no basis in fact. It is a most dangerous illusion. The language of the text refers to spiritual conditions, not material wealth. Lenski aptly applies these attitudes to our contemporary church:

“In the church today, thousands are satisfied with their empty moralism, their arid rationalism, their pleasurable worldliness. This they have accumulated until they think, ‘I have need of nothing.’ They pity other churches. They have vastly improved the Christianity of their fathers. They have gone to the very top.” (Lenski, p. 156)

Their pretentious claim was not only that they were abundantly rich in the things of the Spirit but that they had achieved this status on their own - ***“I have acquired***

wealth and do not need a thing.” The reality of the situation, however, is exactly the opposite. In the Greek text, the pronoun **“you”** is positioned for particular emphasis like the pointing finger of the accusing Judge - *“It is you, the boastful one, who is...”*. Five adjectives are listed which detail the true situation - **“wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.”** The first two are more general. **“Wretched”** (Greek - *“talaiporos”*) is the same word used by St. Paul to describe the anguish of his inability to live by the will of God: **“O wretched man that I am...”** (Romans 7:24). **“Pitiful”** (Greek - *“eleeinos”*) pictures one who is worthy of extreme pity because he stands in peril of eternal death and damnation. The last three adjectives, **“poor, blind, and naked,”** are more specific and may well be an allusion to the specific conditions which prevailed in Laodicea.

“It is often noted that Laodicea prided itself on three things; financial wealth, an extensive textile industry, and a popular eye salve which was exported around the world. It is hard not to see here a direct allusion to Laodicea’s banking establishments, medical school, and textile industry.” (Mounce, p. 126)

The heart of Laodicea’s peril was that they **“do not realize”** this grim reality. They prefer to remain comfortably ensconced in their delusions. As the hymn reminds us, we must come to God as we truly are if we are to come to Him at all:

*“Just as I am, poor, wretched, blind; Sight, riches, healing of the mind,
Yea, all I need in Thee to find, O Lamb of God, I come, I come.”*
(TLH, # 388)

“I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich;” - In the face of the Laodiceans smug self-confidence the Lord offers sobering advice. These words constitute an invitation rather than a demand, and yet this is more than casual, take it or leave it, advice. There is a sense of life and death urgency involved here. The ironic sarcasm of Christ’s invitation is powerful and profound. You think that you have everything, but you have nothing. You confidently believe that you have provided for all of your own needs, but you must be completely dependent upon Me. Jesus urges the self-deluded church to cast aside the counterfeits upon which they have relied, and receive instead the reality that He alone can provide. The Lord highlights the folly of this city noted of its riches buy inviting them to buy that which cannot be purchased for money: **“I counsel you to buy from Me...”** The caustic sarcasm of the proposed transaction would not have been lost on the Laodiceans who were famous for their business acumen. The language is strongly reminiscent of the

invitation of Isaiah 55: ***“Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy?”*** (Isaiah 55:1-2) The text is most emphatic in its assertion that only Christ can provide that which is needed - ***“buy from Me.”*** The three suggested purchases - ***“gold,” “white clothes,”*** and ***“salve”*** reflect the threefold description of the Laodiceans’ actual condition in the previous phrase - ***“poor,” “naked,”*** and ***“blind.”*** In each instance the proposed item is infinitely more valuable than its counterfeit counterpart which the people had provided for themselves.

“Only one who has God’s creative omnipotence can offer the advice which He offers; to “buy without money and without price” (Isaiah 55:1) finer gold of greater value than wealthy Laodicea ever had, coin of God’s own realm; white clothing of the celestial, blessed ones, able to cover the evil nakedness which shames them in the sight of God; an eye salve more effective than the one compounded by the famous medics of Laodicea, to give men eyes for both the severity and the kindness of God. Their Creator Lord can give what He demands; His Spirit can make fervent men of these lukewarm saints (cf. Romans 12:11). As in the Old Testament, so in the New: the Lord can turn the hearts of His people back (cf. 1 Kings 18:37).” (Franzmann, p. 51)



“Luther Standing With the Word Alone Against the Arrayed Might of Church and State” - 15th Century Woodcut

“Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent!” - Lest the congregation misunderstand the purpose for these harsh words of rebuke, the Lord now adds an explanation and an invitation. ***“Rebuke and discipline”*** are demonstrations of love, the concrete applications of loving concern and compassion. This is tough, real love, not the superficial, permissive sentimentalism that most often passes for love among us. As wise Solomon advised centuries earlier in the Book of Proverbs: ***“My son, do not despise the Lord’s discipline and do not resent His rebuke, because the Lord disciplines those He loves, as a father the son he delights in.”*** (Proverbs 3:11-12; cf. Hebrews 12:5-13). The Lord is no soft Eli (1 Samuel 2:22-36) to the children whom He loves. The stern admonition addressed to Laodicea demonstrates how much He loves them as He now summons them to turn and repent. The new attitude which God urges upon the Laodiceans is the exact opposite of their lukewarm, apathetic indifference. ***“Be earnest”*** - the Greek text literally says *“be zealous”* (*“zeuleue”*). The verb is related to the adjective *“zestos”* (*“hot”*), used in verses 15 and 16 to condemn the congregation’s lukewarmness.

“Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him and he with Me.” - This is one of the best known texts in the Book of Revelation, immortalized by the classic William Holman Hunt painting, *“The Light of the World.”* While the imagery of Christ waiting at the door is often used in the Bible in the context of the imminence of the Final Judgment (cf. Matthew 24:33; Mark 13:29; Luke 12:36; James 5:9), the emphasis here appears to be more personal and immediate. This gentle, loving invitation represents the call of the Gospel to every sinner through the metaphor of the Savior standing at the door to each man’s heart. In the most incredible role reversal imaginable, the Almighty King comes down from His exalted throne (vs. 21) and patiently asks the beggar who has nothing (vs.17) to receive Him. ***“Here I am!”*** the Lord declares, focusing the reader’s attention immediately upon the person of the Savior. The verb tenses indicate continuous, ongoing action, thus highlighting the patience of the Lord. He not only knocks upon the door but also calls out to identify Himself, as was the custom in the ancient Near East - ***“if anyone hears My voice and opens the door.”*** This is the call of the Gospel. This often overlooked detail reveals the error of those who would misuse this text in support of *“synergism,”* the view that man must participate in his own conversion. Faith is always a free gift of God. It is never a work of man, the result of human decision or will. If any man opens the door to his heart, it is only because through the means of grace, the Gospel in Word and Sacrament, God has moved and enabled him to do so. Since the fall of our first father

Adam, the will of mankind is in bondage to sin. In the terms of this image, the doors to our hearts are barred and bolted . We cannot open those door nor do we have any desire to do so. Sinful man can and most often does spurn and reject the Gospel call, but he cannot accept it. That must be the work of God and of God alone (cf. Genesis 8:21; Jeremiah 17:9; 1 Corinthians 2:14; 12:3; 2 Corinthians 4:1-4; Ephesians 2:1-5; Romans 5:6-10; 7:14-23; Galatians 5:17). In Acts 16:14, Luke describes the conversion of Lydia in this way: ***“And the Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message.”*** This is the experience of each and every believer. Lenski offers this careful summary:

“The truth is that the King comes to the door, stands there, knocks, calls with His voice. In this lies the power that moves the will to open the door. The Lord’s power of love and grace in and by His Word, which is the power of God to save (Romans 1:16), reaches into the heart and moves it to open and to receive. This is the picture here presented.” (Lenski, p. 163)

“I will come in and eat with him and he with Me.” - The intimacy of the relationship between the believer and His Lord is presented in the image of table fellowship. In the culture of the ancient Near East to share a meal together indicated a strong bond of companionship and affection. Thus the eternal celebration of heaven is often depicted in Scripture as a sumptuous banquet (cf.



***“Christ the Light of the World”
by William Holeman Hunt***



***“Christ Upon His Throne”
From the Ghent Altarpiece
Jan and Hubert van Eyck***

Matthew 26:29; Revelation 19:9).

“To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with Me on My throne, just as I overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.” - The overcomer’s promise directs our attention beyond time toward the eternity that God has prepared in Christ for those who are His own. Note that the right to reign with Christ upon His throne is not earned - it is given. The exaltation of the believer was made possible and foreshadowed by the exaltation of our Lord Himself. As the hymn rejoices: *“To him that overcometh, the crown of life shall be. He with the King of Glory shall reign eternally.”*

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” - The last of the seven letters concludes with the now familiar call to hear and heed.