

The SCROLL
of REVELATION
given to the
Apostle JOHN

explained by
a servant of God

PART TWO:
“The Things Which Are...”(on earth):
Letters to the seven Asian Churches
(2:1-3:22)
January, 2003

2a. The things which are (on earth).

(2-3)

The communication to the seven churches of Asia is **just what it appears to be**: seven letters addressed to seven real churches, blessing them and warning them. All the fantasies of theologians through the years attempting to make these churches into church “ages” have failed. These seven churches, however, do represent problems and principles by which the Church universal has been edified in every age, and so it will be until Jesus comes. These congregations were chosen because churches like them will always exist. They exist today. Loveless, persecuted, compromising churches. Corrupt, dead, faithful churches. And the lukewarm church. They’re around, like the poor, “always with us.”

In the above sense, the seven churches of John are no different than **the seven churches to which Paul wrote letters**: Rome, Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus, Philippi, Colosse, Thessalonica. Thankfully, no one –that I have read– tries to weave tales about the mysterious epochs that those letters represent. They are simply congregations that had problems and graces worthy of our consideration. It can be argued, as it is by some, that most of the New Testament was written in response to difficulties that arose in that early church. The Spirit-sent responses serve as the basis for the normalizing of the Christian Church of all time.

The letters follow a **set format** of five parts:

- 1) **Address of destination**: “To the angel of the church of _____, write.” We discussed above the role of angels in the writing and preservation of these letters.
- 2) Personal **description of Jesus** as He relates to this particular Church.
- 3) **The condition** of the church as viewed by the Only One who can truly know it. Seven times God says, “I know your works.” Seven times He proceeds to prove that fact.
- 4) Then comes a **recommended course of action**. Five of the seven are told to repent! The other two are comforted and blessed.
- 5) Finally comes the **promise** to the overcomers, the obedient, coupled to an **invitation**: “He that has ears, let him hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches.”

Within that context of sameness, let us look at the letter’s variations:

Ephesus. (2:1-7) Jesus is seen here (2:1-2) as the One Who knows all about them, the One from Whom they can hide nothing. Most persons looking at the Ephesian Church probably praised it, based on the very catalogue of good things that Jesus saw, too. (2:2-3). But Jesus knows their need and addresses it.

The city of Ephesus was the largest and most prosperous of the seven addressed. As Paul discovered (Acts 18), its prominence was further enhanced by its devotion to the goddess Diana. Nevertheless the Gospel prospered greatly here, after the initial struggles. Following Paul’s work there, Timothy ministered to the dynamic church. Later still **John himself** was an elder in this congregation. One can only speculate what went through John’s heart as he sees his own people being rebuked so in the Spirit’s words. The great love of God which permeated the congregation at one time, due to the ministry of 40 years of work by Paul, Timothy and the apostle of love, is now fallen from its first intensity (2:4-5). Though this is the “only” charge against it, the sentence is clear: repent, or else!

Here we are introduced (2:6) to the **Nicolaitans**. It would seem that their identity

must remain one of the unsolved mysteries of Revelation. In verses 14-15, speaking to the church at Pergamos, there is a possible link to the teachers of the “doctrine of Balaam”, those in the early days and our own who put stumbling blocks in front of God’s people, such as sexual issues and participating in the idolatry of this world. And, based on the name, some have speculated that they were followers of one Nicolas. Did the deacon of Acts 6 fall away, or is there another Nicolas?

Since this party is no longer with us, it is just as well that we do not know who they were. One thing is certain: the *Ephesians* knew who they were, and knew how to hate their deeds. The lesson for us is clear. **Hate what God hates.** Enemies of God are our enemies. With David we can pray the prayers of vengeance on these enemies. However, in Christ, there is the balance of mercy, whereby we pray that those enemies will not remain inimical to God. It would seem that the Church at Ephesus had left behind its compassion for the lost. Without this, it is fit to be removed.

Overcomers in this church are promised greater things than the prosperity of Ephesus can produce: nourishment from the tree of life in Paradise itself (2:7). The “stick” of having the lampstand removed from its place coupled to the “carrot” of eternal pleasure ought to be enough to entice the true believer to carry on to the end.

Smyrna. (2:8-11). Here they are again. We’ve met John already. Now here is a whole church full of **suffering saints**, pastored by an appointee of the apostle John named Polycarp, one who was burned alive for his faith. *Christians suffer.* Christians die at the hands of anti-christs. We simply must see and believe this. And the greatest encouragement given is that if we overcome, that is, stay faithful until death, we will not be hurt by the second death. (2:10-11) In fact, Jesus’ personal i.d. here is “the One Who was dead, and came to life.” (2:8)

The “**synagogue of Satan**” is mentioned here (2:9) and in 3:9, and seems to refer to Jews who, as the ones mentioned by Paul in Romans 2:17, want to claim the blessings of being Jewish, but take no delight in that which is Israel’s true glory, the Messiah. Any congregation of people, Jewish or so-called “Christian” who openly deny the Person and work of Jesus are in Satan’s camp.

Smyrna competed with Ephesus and Pergamum for the title “first city of Asia”. But included in its growing power was the resultant faithfulness to Rome and Rome’s religion, expressed in **emperor worship**. The church’s rejection of this devotion brought on the persecution alluded to in the letter. The comfort given by the Spirit is that, although believers are not promised exemption from the first death, the second death will not be an issue. (2:11)

Pergamos (2:12-17). Pergamos is said to be the place of “Satan’s throne.” (2:13) Here, Satan actually “dwells”. Halley (*Halley’s Bible Handbook, 24th edition, p. 704*) explains:

“**Pergamum** was a seat of Emperor Worship, where incense was offered before the statue of the Emperor as to God... also, an altar to Jupiter. And a Temple of Esculapius, a healing god, worshiped in the form of a serpent, one of the names of Satan. Besides these, it was also a stronghold of Balaamite and Nicolaitan Teachers. Thus, as a notorious center of heathenism and wickedness, it was called ‘Satan’s Throne’ ”

And, as stated above, Pergamos was the capital city of the province known as *Asia*. Talk of a **dwelling place** for Satan is in antithesis to the reality of a future time when

God Himself will dwell with us, Throne and all, as described later (21: 3 , 22:3). Here in Pergamos, further, is more talk of Christians *dying the martyr's death*, as will be spoken of in greater detail in chapters 6 and 7. These deaths come about because of refusal to participate in the falseness going on around the believers.

The “doctrine” or teaching, of **Balaam** (2:14) is that line of thinking whereby evil (worshipping idols) is mixed with good (sacrificing, eating). Balaam himself was a study in this “mixture.” He was a man for all seasons, for all religions, for all philosophies. His bottom line was not prophet but *profit*. His tribe has increased and is with us still in the Church. The first 16 verses of chapter 31 of Numbers will explain the incident to which the Lord is referring, and how it all ties in with sexual immorality.

As to the **Nicolaitans**, see under Ephesus.

Also in this passage is a mention of a local situation that seems to have an **end-time** fulfillment. Follow the logic: Jesus says to the church here that unrepentant sinners are going to have to deal with the sword coming out of Jesus’ mouth. (2:16) That is even the way He *introduces* Himself to this Church (2:12). This seems to be a reference to the events of chapter 19 detailing the coming of Jesus. Chapter 3 contains a similar description, where Jesus promises the (local) church of Philadelphia that they will be kept from the tribulation because of their perseverance. In both churches, an end-of-the-world scenario is placed before a church living far from that end.

I am sure that passages such as these are what helped give rise to the **church-age theories**. Yet I also believe there is a better understanding of what is being said, one that fits with other Scriptures that are more defining by nature. We all know that the early church lived in the daily expectation of the return of Christ. It is an attitude that should be with us still. The time is even now “at hand”. Unrepentant sinners, as in Pergamos, even today are called upon to repent, or deal with a living God. And faithful believers today, as in Philadelphia, will be kept from the wrath of God, to which we were not appointed. That is not to say, however, that Christians are to be exempt from all tribulation (trouble), as we have seen already in the Book, and will see in a much greater fashion as we continue on our way.

What is **hidden manna** ? (2:17). When the Israelites first saw the bread from Heaven, they said “What is it?” In Hebrew they were saying words that sound very much like our English word *manna*. Now at the other end of the Book we are confronted with some new “manna” in our future, and we, like them, want to know what it is. Good question. Commendable curiosity. Keep asking! Keep looking forward to it. We know for sure that when it comes to us it will be delicious, abundant, delightful.

As to the **white stone** also promised, Matthew Henry’s Revelation commentary suggests that it was an ancient custom to give those acquitted at a trial, a white stone, as opposed to a black one for those condemned. This may or may not be the case on that day, but there is a ring of truth to it. Then comes the **new name** written on the stone, which speaks of our adoption, also per Henry. At birth we are given our parents’ name but if we are “adopted” we are given a “new name”. So it was with us, adopted into the family of God, given His own special name. See also 3:12, where we read that the very name of God will be written on us, along with the name of the City, and a special new name of the Lord, according to 19:12. We will certainly be well identified in that day when He claims us for His own, puts His “brand” on us and says, “This is mine.” (See Hebrews 12:23 regarding our “registration” and Romans 8:15, 23 about

“adoption.”)

Thyatira. (2:18-29) This church, spoken to by One who sees right through them with eyes like a flame of fire (2:18) is with us today and in all ages, as are all seven churches: the **corrupt** church, being corrupted by a woman who “calls herself” a prophetess (2:20). Great “tribulation” is promised the unrepentant who follow her, also. (2:22)

There is a growing presence of **female leadership** in today’s church. Paul forbade women to lead men, and that was that. But here already in Thyatira, was not only a woman, but an evil woman, teaching immoral doctrines in the first century church. Why is no one stopping her? Here is a church of love, service, faith, and patience. Here is a church that has grown better, not worse (2:19). But Jezebel prospers (2:20).

God’s remedy for His people, after giving the woman ample time to change her ways (2:21) is **separated living**. He Himself will cause a division between the immoral and moral in the church of Thyatira. (2:22-23) The one segment is encouraged to hold fast (2:25), and overcome (2:25-26). The other is to be judged, and soon, if repentance does not follow.

And so the Word must go out to faithful believers today, not that they are to try to take the reins of the Church, but rather that they should **take to the knees**, to be faithful, be consistent, and allow God to do what He must. “Have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them,” says the apostle. (Ephesians 5:11) Yet we are not to be pulling weeds, either (Matthew 13:29). Not before the time.

In 2:27 we have a promise to overcomers that they will **rule the nations** with a rod of iron. The coming Kingdom of Jesus will be a kingdom of laws and rules. It will be a time of perfect government. The planet will function as it was meant to from the beginning. How incredible that we shall actually reign side by side with God Himself in a world being made perfect by the Son of God.

Sardis. (3:1-6) From One Who by His Spirit and angels is and gives life, and knows what’s going on in Sardis comes the message, “You have a name that you live.” (3:1) A reputation in the city. A history. A fine building. Nice people. Your sign says “church”. And church means “called out.” Surely you must be alive, recognized by God. But no, only death here. You have long forsaken the call. You have heard instead the call of the world, and you have responded to it. Your music, your mission, your messengers, are all of this world. The “mixture” is lord in your church, the desire to conform, the flow of ecumenicity. “All things to all men” has turned into bald-faced idolatry and man-pleasing.

God tells the sleeping, nearly dead, church, to wake up (3:2), to repent, and that to it He will come like a thief. (3:3) The idea of a **secret, startling coming** is always in the context of a church like Sardis, in need of repentance, never a church that is watching and waiting for Christ. “You are not in darkness that that day should overtake you as a thief” (I Thessalonians 5:4) *See notes above on “imminence”, part one.*

Notice that even in this saddest of churches there are a **“few names”**. (3:4) These folk are not encouraged to come out of the Sardis congregation, but to continue on to their certain reward.

The Book of Life (3:5) is certainly a Revelation theme, although it appears in other portions of Scripture from Moses to Paul. (Exodus 32:32, Daniel 12:1, Galatians 3:10) .

More of interest here, though, is the idea of “blotting out” . Is it possible, then, for a man to lose his place in the Book? God says to Moses (Exodus 32:32) that anyone who sins against God will indeed be blotted out! Then are we being led to believe that every man who is born is put into the Book to begin with, then “blotted out” when sin occurs, then placed into the “Lamb’s” Book of Life (21:27) upon repentance and true conversion to Jesus? And out of that Book, listing all the “overcomers” there is no blotting out? I believe this is a valid understanding. I imagine, though, that both camps of the “Eternal Security” issue will find a way to make the “Book” fit their view! For now, I will leave that issue with them, with the suggestion that my readers be encouraged to study this further.

Philadelphia (3:7-13) The “door opener” (3:7) has set before the church an open door (3:8). How wonderful when situations in our ministrings become so obvious. We have prayed. We have waited. Then one day it happens. Note how Jesus praises the little-but-pure strength of Philadelphia over the little-and-waning love of Ephesus. God tells us here that He desires quality in what we do, not just quantity.

Possession of the “**Key of David**” (3:7) brings us to Isaiah, in 22:22, where the Spirit is talking to Eliakim, the Son of Hilkiah. Eliakim is in the process of taking the place of another servant of the Kingdom, Shebna, who was seeking his own glory. Eliakim is to be placed over the household, and given a sure position of honor and responsibility. Talk of his coming “throne” and the key to the Kingdom seems to blend into Messianic predictions. Eliakim was at the very least a beautiful picture of things to come. His name means “God will establish.” In this case, the establishment of God’s Kingdom is predicted. Jesus of course has inherited the Throne and the Key of David, temporarily presided over by then-king Hezekiah and his worthy servant Eliakim.

Jesus, who took upon Him the **form of a Servant**, like Eliakim, has been given the Key to the Kingdom, the position of highest honor, and through Him, God will establish the very reign of God on the earth. Jesus gives the Key to whomever He will. Peter was given a Key for the Jews and a Key for the Gentiles. His message of introduction of God’s forgiveness opened to them eternal life forever. The Key has been passed down to all believers willing to use it in the proclaiming of the Good News. To this end, doors open and close, as predicted here to the Philadelphia Church, and thence to believers of all ages.

For comments on the **Synagogue of Satan**, (3:9) see under “Smyrna.” It is in both of the “faithful” churches that this enemy of the saints tried to have a perverse effect on God’s chosen. The passing of this “test” by both churches has certainly been one factor of their strength.

(3:10) There is no *direct* evidence anywhere in Scripture for a **pre-tribulation rapture**. But passages like 3:10 are used as *indirect* proof. Here the “hour of trial” is called the Great Tribulation, the Philadelphia Church becomes the end-time church in the church-age theory, and the faithful are thus promised they will not have to go through this Tribulation because, it is further assumed, they will be here “caught up” before that time comes.

Problems with that view: 1. Can we prove that the “hour of trial” is the full three and one half years? Could it not just as easily be the terrible day of His coming ? Then indeed the saved will be caught up to be with Jesus. 2. To make Philadelphia the end-time church is to make Laodicea the church of the Tribulation, a group of “losers” who suddenly turn into martyrs for the cause of Christ. 3. Is it not possible that this message is indeed given to a church

known in the days of John, and that the promise was kept? Did not Philadelphia escape the last times altogether? 4. Are there not churches in every generation who can claim this promise of escaping the judgment of God if they are faithful? 5. Is it not possible at the very least, that God is able to keep His People from harm in the midst of judgment? Was either Noah or Lot removed from the earth? Do not the 144,000 escape Satan's plan? When the bowl judgments fall, is it not stated explicitly who is being targeted? Other than persecutions allowed, are God's people ever harmed when God is pouring wrath on His enemies?

(3:11) He comes quickly. **Suddenly**. Be ready at a second's notice! Your very **crown** is at stake! Now there is an interesting study. What crown could be taken away by letting up? What crown is available to the believer? Paul, Peter, James, and John all talk of a crown that is ours. From them we learn:

1. That Jesus promised a **"crown of life" to those who love Him** (James 1:12). Now, we have no record of such a saying of Jesus in the Gospels, but it is loud and clear in Revelation 2:10: "Be faithful unto death and I will give you a crown of life". John may have received this message before and perhaps James heard it from him. Or Jesus may have spoken this directly to James as he walked closer and closer to Him after His resurrection.

2. That this crown will be given to, not only those that love Him, but to those who **love His appearing**. (II Timothy 4:8) Those who pray for and long for the return of Christ are obviously walking in such a way as not to be ashamed at His coming.

3. This crown is **permanent** (I Peter 5:4), incorruptible (I Corinthians 9:25), unlike the fleeting glories of this life.

4. The 24 elders, seeming representatives of the saints before and after Jesus' Incarnation, all have crowns, but they quickly remove them and **cast them before Jesus**. We will soon realize the inappropriateness of wielding "power" in the light of the greatness of this Lord, Who wore a crown *of thorns* on our behalf. We will know that it is pure grace that we even *have* a crown to throw at His feet.

So I ask you again, **is it possible to "lose" the crown?** If indeed there are a set number of crowns, one for every elect child of God, how could someone take mine? I submit that warnings such as this fit into the same category as things Paul said to the churches he wrote. Immediately there comes to mind II Corinthians 13:5, "Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Prove yourselves... Jesus Christ is in you unless indeed you are disqualified." Disqualified? Someone else take my crown? That is, the crown I thought was mine? Is it possible that members of the congregation, upon taking Paul's simple test, will find that they are *not* members of the *church*, and do something about it?

It is not my desire to use John, or Paul for that matter, to demand a **Calvinist interpretation** of all Scriptures. The security of each believer is as strong as the promises of God, but when warnings are given, the godliest in the church need to examine themselves. The rest God will take care of.

The New Jerusalem (3:12) The Spirit here anticipates what shall not even be announced until the end of the Book, and which perhaps will not be revealed, at least as a city "coming down out of heaven", until 1000 years after Jesus comes. Here also is first mention of the "Temple." But in that final version of the City of God, there shall be no "Temple" as we know Temples, for the Lord God Himself is the Temple! (see more under *Temple*, 11:1)

The apostle Paul mentions **this wondrous City** 30-40 years earlier in (what we suppose

to be) his epistle to the Hebrews, 11:16, 12:22. And, this must be in Jesus' mind when He speaks those words of comfort to the disciples before leaving: (John 14:1 ff) "In My Father's house are many mansions... I go to prepare a place for you."

Laodicea. (3:14-22) The identification of Jesus here as **Faithful and True** (3:14) is clearly meant to let the Laodiceans know of His unerring diagnosis. He cannot be wrong about the assessment to follow. "May I have your attention please! I know what I am about to say is true..."

(3:15-16) Is it conceivable to comfortable Westerners that Jesus is saying here that He actually *prefers an enemy to a "sometime" friend*? How often we deceive ourselves into thinking that Jesus must be happy with whatever He can get from us. Ok, we reason, I'm not perfect, but I'm not as bad as I used to be, and look at all the folks in worse shape. Jesus ought to be so happy with me! This Pharisaical attitude brings on us the fires of purification if not something worse.

I suppose that the scariest part of this message is that Laodicea is **unaware** of its poverty (3:17) as much as - it seems- Smyrna is unaware of its riches (2:9).

(3:18) The counsel of **"buying" from God** brings us again back to Isaiah, in chapter 55. Here the prophet invites God's people to buy their necessities without money, and to listen to God for their needs to be met. In Revelation, God's gold is similarly offered, but the price for such gold may be the fire. The cost of fine spiritual clothing to cover our nakedness before Him is all-out commitment to Christ. The price of spiritual eyesight is a substance known only to Heaven and purchased there. We can only imagine how high that price is.

(3:19) We've heard **our parents** say things like this: "I only spank you because I love you!" We forget where they got this idea, and that it really is true. God the Father knows how to raise kids. These words to Laodicea echo the Hebrew letter, 12:5, "Whom the Lord loves He chastens," and this itself is a quote from Psalm 94:12.

As with all the other churches, *every age*, and not just our own, has a lukewarm type that needs addressing. Here are Christians who believe they have it all, but have nothing. Here are satisfied materialists who show up at church, but who seem absent from the Lord. Jesus stands at the door (3:20) of such a Church, pleading to come in. As always. Any member of the church that hears the pleading will be blessed.

The Laodicean Church, and all Laodicean types today, can be grateful that this letter amounts to a **severe warning** and not an announcement of a judgment to come "regardless." What starts out as that message of doom turns into a serious shaking into awareness, a pathway out for those who desire it.

Once more the **overcomer** is promised a reward, for even in Laodicea overcomers exist and get the message. Here the victorious one is actually promised a place on the Throne with Jesus (3:21). Did ever a people have more to look forward to? Think of it! Food from the tree of life (2:7), freedom from eternal death (2:11), personalized identification from God Himself (2:17), power over the nations with Jesus (2:26-28), an entry into the registry of Heaven (3:5), absolute sinless perfection as though sin had never spotted the garments (3:5), the security of being an actual "pillar" in God's Temple (3:12).

One final promise is made in 21:7: The overcomer will inherit *all things*. And that person will actually be called a son of the living God.

Oh! Then how shall I overcome, Lord? Show me the way! Let me not miss this! That way is begun in the Book of Revelation itself, 12:11. We “overcome” by the blood of the Lamb and the word of our testimony. That is, we overcome because of what Jesus did for us at the cross, and we overcome by telling *others* what Jesus did for us at the cross. And don’t forget the rest of that verse: “...they did not love their lives to the death.” For the overcomer it is *all for Jesus, all for Jesus, all my being’s ransomed powers...all my days and all my hours.* (from the Mary D. James hymn)

Overcoming, like many subjects in Revelation, is not new to this last book. In Romans 12:21, Paul tells us not to be overcome of evil, but to overcome evil with good. And in John’s first epistle, the “fathers” and the “young men” in Christ are told that they have *already* overcome the wicked one because the Word of God lives in them (I John 2:13-14). Even “little children”, in the Spirit, (I John 4:4) have overcome the world because the One in us is greater than the one in the world.

It is John again who lays the foundation for the “overcoming” doctrine of the believers in John 16:33, when he quotes Jesus as saying that we believers will have trouble, but we can be happy because Jesus “has overcome the world.”

In summary, Jesus is already the Overcomer. He, His Word, His Spirit are in me. As I continue in His life, I am an overcomer too. And if an overcomer, an heir to every promise given, that wonderful list of blessings handed down to us so forcefully in these seven up-to-date and very important letters.