

## I. Church of Smyrna (Rev. 2:8-11)

A. Historical Context - From as early as 195 BC it was a city very oriented and focused on the laws, ways, and worshiped the glory of Rome. The primary religion of this city was emperor worship. Their long-standing relationship with Rome also brought them a great amount of prosperity and wealth. Christians in the city faced unthinkable hardships and persecution due to the city's commitment to the Roman Caesar, who was known as the son of a god. Christianity's claim that a divine King is still to come, who is the true Son of God, was extremely contradictory to Roman law. It was under the reign of Domitian (AD 81-96) that emperor worship was made mandatory to every Roman citizen. Anyone not willing to worship the emperor and burn incense to him was considered disloyal and therefore persecuted and punished unto death by the government.

### B. The Letter to the Church in Smyrna

1. The Revelation of Jesus – First and Last and the One who was dead and came back to life. (Rev. 1:17-18)

a) *First and the Last* - Jesus is the “First” or the source of all blessing. He is the uncreated God who was before all things and is the source of all goodness. In other words, Jesus could easily restore those blessings lost in persecution to them again and again.

Jesus is the “Last.” He sees the end of all things. He can assure us that all His promises will come to pass. The end of His plan for our life is in His hands. Jesus, not man, sees and declares the end of the story. He assures us that there is something bigger going on than their current suffering. (Jas. 1:17)

b) *The One who was Dead and has come back to Life* - He revealed to a suffering church that He understands their suffering. He revealed Himself as a man who was dead who suffered through the painful processes involved in being killed in a cruel way. He understood what they were going through. He came to life and showed His power over death. He knows the way to victory. He experienced the worst that men and evil can do, and He triumphed over it.

2. Affirmation and Edification – Jesus recognized and commended their actions to grow in love for Him and the overflow of that love poured out upon others. He calls this our “works”. He affirmed them in their faithfulness to His name in the face of ongoing tribulation and suffering. History holds that Smyrna was a very wealthy city and so it is thought that the poverty that the church was suffering from was because of persecution. Jesus assures them that they are “rich,” and is calling them to set their minds on the things above. Poverty is not a sign of mature spirituality, and virtue is not found in poverty. However, virtue is found in generous giving or risking financial loss because of godly convictions. They are to understand and know they have an inheritance of great wealth in the coming kingdom and consider that their home. (Hag. 2:7-8, Mat. 19:21, Lk 12:21, 2 Cor. 6:10, Jam 2:5)
  
3. Correction provoking Love - The churches of Smyrna and Philadelphia were the only ones in (Rev. 2-3) that received no correction and were also the only ones persecuted by those described as a “synagogue of Satan.” I believe the pressure of a demonically energized attack against these believers was all they could bear. We know they were not perfect, yet Jesus in His flawless, patient, and merciful leadership brought no correction in this season of their lives.
  
4. Exhortation to Respond – Jesus calls them to stir up fearless resolve and faithfulness in the face of extreme suffering and death. He tells them what they will face so that when it happened they would not conclude that He had overlooked them or lacked power to deliver. They must interpret their sufferings through the lens of fullness of love rather than through fear, punishment, or neglect. (Jhn 15:13,16:1-4, Acts. 5:41, 2 Tim. 3:12, 1 Pet. 4:12-14)
  
5. Promise for Overcomers – Those who overcome through His grace will receive the “crown of life”. In the resurrection, we will all have different spiritual levels of authority and experience determined by our rewards for love based responses to Jesus. These responses are referred to biblically as our “works”. I believe the “crown of life” speaks of dimensions of experiential glory in the age to come. The Greek word for crown here refers not to authority “diadem” but rather a reward to a victor “stephanos”. (Mat. 5:12, Lk. 6:35, Rom. 8:18, 1 Cor. 15:41-42, 2 Cor. 4:16-17, 1 Pet. 1:6-7, Jas. 1:12)

## II. Church of Pergamum – (Rev. 2:12-17)

- A. Historical Context – The city of Pergamum was *extremely* cult and idol worship oriented. They were the first city in Asia to construct a worship center to the roman emperor, they also built many other massive temples and centers to Greek gods. The worship practices in these temples involved gross sexual immorality and witchcraft of unimaginable darkness. One example of this was their worship of the serpent-god of healing. The common practice of worshiping this god was to eat live snakes and then spend the night laying naked in the dark of the temple where hundreds of nonpoisonous snakes were roaming freely. The worshiper would believe that the serpent god would heal and improve their body as these snakes slithered over them.
- B. Letter to the church of Pergamum
1. Revelation of Jesus – He calls this church to meditate upon His identity as the one who has the sharp two-edged sword. Scripture speaks of Jesus having a sword in His hand and mouth. Jesus is the Word of God and when He speaks it is the ultimate and transcendent truth. Just like a sword, it cannot strike with out effecting major change. Jesus uses the sword of His mouth to withstand all evil and darkness anywhere that it persists. It will overcome all that resists it, bringing devastation to the resistor whether it be spiritual or physical resistance. (Jer. 23:29, 2 Cor. 10:4-5, Eph 6:17, Heb. 4:12, Rev. 1:16)
  2. Affirmation and Edification – Jesus recognized them for their true activity of love for Him and others. They loved well and for real, they did not operate out of a religious spirit. He let them know He understood that they live in a tremendously spiritually dark city “where Satan’s throne is”. Amid darkness and persecution, they have stayed faithful to Jesus, even during a time of great fear in the light of one of their main leaders being cruelly martyred.
  3. Correction provoking Love – The church leadership in Pergamum held two similar core doctrines that were false and wicked. These doctrines encouraged lifestyles of moral compromise under the pretense of Christian liberty through grace. The teaching that the gospel of salvation by grace through faith frees us from obedience to God’s moral standards is a doctrine of demons.

The Seven Churches – Smyrna and Pergamum

(Rev. 2:8-17)

- a) The Doctrine of Balaam – Balaam taught King Balak to overcome the Israelites by involving them in Moabite idol worship and sexual immorality rendering them under the judgment of God. The doctrine of Balaam encourages God's people to pursue and worship other gods. There were church leaders in Pergamum encouraging believers in Jesus to join the idolatrous practices that were prominent in the city of Pergamum. Most idolatry throughout history and especially today is economically driven. (Mat. 6:24-30, 1 Cor. 10:20-22, Eph. 5:5, Col 3:5)
  
  - b) The Doctrine of Nicolaitans - Irenaeus in the second century taught that the Nicolaitans were without restraint in their indulgence of the flesh, especially with immorality. The church in Ephesus rejected those who promoted this doctrine and twisted the grace of God for salvation into moral lawlessness. Twice Jesus mentions His hatred of the Nicolaitans. What were deeds in Ephesus were doctrines in Pergamum. (See notes from church of Ephesus)
4. Exhortation to Respond – Jesus tells them to repent immediately from holding to and teaching these false doctrines. They must go back to the clarity of the Word of God under the unction of the Holy Spirit and renew their minds allowing the sword that proceeds from His mouth to cut off lies. Incidentally, Balaam was killed by the sword after being warned by the sword if he did not turn from his ways. Jesus warns them He will fight with His Sword against them “quickly” if they fail to respond to His correction. Many misinterpret His mercy and kindness as approval for their lifestyle and doctrine rather than His patience with them. In fighting for us He must sometimes fight against us in His zeal to cut off the things in our lives that agree with darkness. (Ecc. 8:11, Rom. 2:4, 1 Pet. 4:17)
5. Promise to Overcomers – To overcome in this context means to refuse to participate in idolatry or immorality and to stand against false teachings on grace that emboldened people to live in compromise.
- a) Hidden Manna - The "hidden manna" seems to be a reference to the manna that sustained the lives of the Israelites in the wilderness that lay "hidden" in the holy of holies. Jesus told us that He is the true manna from heaven. I believe this is a promise to give mysterious or hidden revelation of Himself to the believers who press into the unhidden revelation of Jesus that is available to all. (Ex. 16:32-36, Jhn. 6:48-51, Heb. 9:1-5)

- b) White Stone - White stones are precious stones given to the faithful as awards. In the ancient world they were given to honor those who offered valiant service to the community or in battle. Those receiving these stones were also given special privileges. A white stone gave them admission to special events, including the games and feasts hosted by the government of the Roman Empire. This is like receiving the gold medal. The stones that will be given to the saints are like the gems of those on the high priest's breastplate and those found in various places in the City of God. (Eze. 28:13, Rev. 21)
  
- c) A New Name - As parents may give a child a name of endearment, so Jesus gives His faithful names that reveal how He feels toward them. The new name reflects one's individual or unique relationship with Jesus. The new name may denote the overcomer's status in the age-to-come. It also reveals one's personality. This is an aspect of our intimacy with God and our unique calling or assignment in Him. Simon was renamed Peter to speak of his character and position as the rock. Abram's name was changed to Abraham to indicate that he was to be the father of a multitude. (Gen. 32:28, Is. 62:2, 65:15)