

To this church Christ comes with “eyes like unto a flame of fire,” for He says, “all the churches shall know that I am He who searches the minds and the hearts. And I will give to each one of you according to your works” (Revelation 2:23, NKJV). He warns here of a time of judgment when “we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ” (2 Corinthians 5:10). Even amid terrible errors and persecution, Christ reads every heart and knows who truly belongs to Him. They will be judged worthy of eternal life, while the pretenders who have played church for power and wealth will be condemned.

During the dark period of papal supremacy, it seemed that pure Christian faith was almost entirely extinguished. The papal arms encompassed much of the world, and it appeared that none would escape her delusive doctrine except by falling prey to her sharp sword. But there were faithful little lights in the darkness, though flickering in dungeons and caves at times. The message to Thyatira tells the story of this time.

### *A Church of Works*

“I know thy works,” Jesus says to Thyatira. The church of the Dark Ages was, without question, a church of works. The diligence of the common people to engage in good works was increased by the tragic teaching of popes and priests that sinners are saved by works. Penance (acts of self-abasement to earn forgiveness). Indulgences (the payment of money to earn forgiveness). Pilgrimages (long journeys to places designated sacred by the church). The confessional (confessing sins to a human priest). Image worship. The Rosary. Praying to saints. The list goes on. The people were taught of a vengeful God who would exact all He could squeeze from them to purchase His distant favor. Graciously, Jesus looked with pity upon the countless honest men and women and children who ignorantly tried so hard to gain His smile by multiplied deeds. He commended them for their diligence. But for the church leaders He had a severe rebuke.

### *The Church Likened to Jezebel*

As the Nicolaitans and Balaam were used to describe problems existing in former periods of the church’s history, so now Jezebel is figuratively employed to relate the condition of the church during the Thyatira period.

Jezebel was a prophetess of the pagan god, Baal. Ahab, king of Israel, married her for influence but got more than he bargained for. As queen of Israel she led almost the whole nation into the immoral and idolatrous worship of Baal. The true prophets of God were put to death and the false prophets of Baal were exalted. Those prophets of Jehovah who escaped her wrath fled to the mountains to hide. Among

them was Elijah. Under her wicked influence Israel suffered a three and one-half-year drought with no rain (see 1 Kings 16-31).

The terrible reign of Jezebel is a striking mirror image of the church during the Dark Ages:

- Jezebel sought to lead Israel into pagan worship. The papacy introduced a strange mixture of pagan worship with Christianity.
- Jezebel sought to execute all who opposed her. The papacy executed some 50 million Christians who chose to resist her supremacy.
- Many true worshipers of God went into hiding from Jezebel. Many maintained their faith in Christ in mountain hideouts during the papal reign.
- Under Jezebel’s rule there were three and one-half years of drought. The papacy reigned for a period of three and one-half prophetic years and thus imposed a spiritual drought on the world (see Revelation 12:14).

While it is true that the church of the Dark Ages, like Israel in the days of Jezebel, was largely corrupt, Christ recognized that there were those who remained true to Him in those difficult circumstances.

The name *Thyatira* means “sacrifice of contrition,” a fitting way to describe those who were deemed outlaws and heretics by the church while standing true to their Lord. Theirs was certainly a contrite sacrifice as they grieved over the state of their church and their own frailty to withstand her mighty influence.

### *The Overcomer’s Reward*

The Bible is replete with promises that the children of God will eventually judge their enemies and eternally possess the kingdom of this world. The oppressed will rise up and pass sentence upon the oppressors (see Psalm 2:8, 9). When the Savior who is King performs His work of judgment against the wicked, His redeemed saints will sit with Him in this capacity (see Revelation 20:4; Daniel 7:14, 18, 21, 22).

The promise of the Morning Star is precious. It is Jesus saying, “I will give you Myself,” as if a pledge of eternal friendship and love, for He is Himself “the bright and Morning Star” (Revelation 22:16).

# Unlocking Revelation

## *The Seven Churches, Part Two*

*Smyrna, Pergamos and Thyatira*

### *Smyrna*

And unto the angel of the church in Smyrna write; These things saith the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive; I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich) and I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan. Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death” (Revelation 2:8-11).

Smyrna represents the church from about A.D. 100 to 313. This was a period of severe persecution for the people of God. Therefore, Smyrna has been called the “persecuted church.” The word *Smyrna* means “sweet smelling.” It is one of the two churches among the seven for which Jesus has no words of reproof or correction. Christ was well-pleased with the faithfulness of His people during this trying period of time.

### *Tribulation for Ten Days*

It is not God’s will that His people suffer, but He is greatly honored if they remain faithful in the midst of trial. Jesus warned that the church of Smyrna would suffer imprisonment and even death. But He promised them a crown of eternal life if they would maintain their loyalty to Him.

There would be one period of tribulation that would be especially severe and would last for ten days, or ten years, given a day for a year as is the rule in prophecy (see Numbers 14:34 and Ezekiel 4:6). From A.D. 303 to 313 we find the fulfillment of this ten-year period of severe persecution. In 303 Diocletian and his assistant, Galerius, passed what

has been called the “Edict of Persecution.”

For ten years the edict was enforced. Many Christians suffered imprisonment and death.

### *Poor Yet Rich*

During this time the church was made up largely of those who were poor in this world’s estimation. But Jesus reminds the church of Smyrna that they are rich spiritually. Solomon struck a high note of wisdom when he said, “There is that maketh himself rich, yet hath nothing: there is that maketh himself poor, yet hath great riches” (Proverbs 13:7). The apostle Paul speaks of being “poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing and yet possessing all things” (2 Corinthians 6:10).

Those who are rich in this earth’s goods are often self-confident to such an extent that they feel no need of a Savior. On the other hand, poverty instills in the human heart a great sense of need. The riches of this world will fade away and be worth nothing someday. But there is another kind of wealth that is eternal:

“Hearken, my beloved brethren, Hath not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which He hath promised to them that love Him?” (James 2:5).

It is the faith by which we receive eternal life that constitutes the true riches that will endure forever.

### *The Second Death*

Jesus promises His people that they will not be hurt of the second death. According to Revelation 20:6, 14, 15, and Revelation 21:8, the second death is the final destruction of unrepentant sinners, as well as the devil. As believers in Christ, we need not fear the second death. Jesus tasted “death for every man” (Hebrews 2:9). When, upon the cross, Jesus cried out in despair, “My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken Me?” (Matthew 27:46), He was enduring the full penalty of sin on our behalf. He suffered the second death



for us so that through faith in Him we might escape its power over us.

## ***Pergamos***

“And to the angel of the church in Pergamos write; These things saith He which hath the sharp sword with two edges; I know thy works and where thou dwellest, even where Satan’s seat is: and thou holdest fast My name, and hast not denied My faith, even in those days wherein Antipas was my faithful martyr, who was slain among you, where Satan dwelleth. But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balac to cast a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication. So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate. Repent; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of My mouth. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna, and will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it” (Revelation 2:12-17).

The word *Pergamos* means “high” or “exalted.” The ancient city of Pergamos was situated on a plateau that rose approximately 1,000 feet above its surrounding valley. At the time John wrote Revelation, the city was a popular cultural center, boasting various pagan temples and an illustrious library containing some 200,000 scrolls.

The period of Christian history represented by Pergamos extended from around A.D. 313 to 538. As Pergamos means “exalted,” so the church began to be highly esteemed by the world during this juncture of its journey through time. Whereas the Smyrna period offered persecution to the people of Christ, the Pergamos period gave them popularity. While that may sound good, it actually proved to be perilous. Under persecution the church of Smyrna was “rich” in spiritual treasure. Under the influence of the world’s praise, the church began to weaken. Large numbers of half-converted pagans began to flood in, not leaving behind all their superstitions and corrupt theology. Even Emperor Constantine professed himself to be a Christian, along with his whole army, after marching them through a river and declaring them baptized. The purity of the persecuted church gave way to the many evils that flooded into the “popular church.” It is at this point in history that we witness the first mixture of paganism with the pure worship of Christianity.

## ***Satan’s Seat***

In His message to Pergamos, Christ recognized that the church was now at a dangerous place in its existence. I know “where thou dwellest, even where Satan’s seat is,” He said (Revelation 2:13).

As we look to this period of the church’s history (between A.D. 313 and 538), what is here meant by “Satan’s

seat” is clear. This was the time when the obvious evil of pagan Rome was giving way to the subtle yet more deadly deception of the Papal Roman Church.

Paul had warned that the church would face serious danger in the future. He foretold a major apostasy from the pure faith of Christ which he called “the falling away” (2 Thessalonians 2:3, NKJV).

One power would lead out in this downward course of corruption, referred to by the apostle as “the man of sin . . . the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God” (2 Thessalonians 2:3, 4, NKJV).

Here Paul pointed to a power that would rise future to his day that would lead many people into a large-scale departure from the truth of Christ. The apostasy would involve the distinct leadership of a “man” who would promote disobedience to God’s law (“man of *sin*”) and exalt himself to a status of Godhood, establishing himself in the temple of God to receive worship.

Words could not better describe the apostasy embodied in the papal church. During the Pergamos period, bishops and popes assumed more and more authority until finally they were worshipped as God, receiving the awesome title, “Holy Father,” and claiming the power to forgive sins.

Continuing on with his warning, Paul described pagan Rome as an obstacle that would eventually be moved out of the way and give its place to the papacy:

“The mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he [the pagan empire] who now restrains [the papal empire] will do so until he is taken out of the way. And then the lawless one [the papal church] will be revealed, whom the Lord will consume with the breath of His mouth and destroy with the brightness of His coming” (2 Thessalonians 2:7, 8, NKJV).

Satan’s masterpiece of deception would take shape in the form of a counterfeit religious system that would claim to be the true church of Christ. It was already developing in Paul’s and John’s time. The subtle mixture of pagan philosophy with Christian principles was underway and would eventually find mature manifestation as an organized counterfeit of the faith first delivered to the apostles by the Lord Jesus.

So it was that the church began to dwell “where Satan’s seat is.” The faithful began to coexist with an increasingly more and more corrupt version of Christianity.

## ***Antipas, the Faithful Martyr***

It is possible that there was an individual by the name of “Antipas” who was martyred in the Pergamos period. However, there is no historical record of such a person. It is more likely, given the symbolic nature of Revelation, that

“Antipas” represents all those who were faithful unto death at this time. *Antipas* is a union of two words: *Anti*, which means “opposed,” and *papas*, which means “father” or “pope.” “Opposed to popery” is the meaning of the word.

There were many Christians who braced themselves against the influence and claims of the papal system, not a few of whom were hung, beheaded, or burned for their “antipas” convictions.

## ***The Doctrine of Balaam***

The Pergamos message contains a rebuke to the church for retaining members who “hold the doctrine of Balaam.” Here is an allusion to the Old Testament story of Balaam, obviously intended to engage our attention to discern a parallel to that episode of Israel’s history (see Numbers 22-25).

Balaam was a one-time true prophet of God who turned enemy to the Lord for money. He accepted a bribe offered by Balac, ruler of the Moabites, to curse Israel. God intervened so that Balaam could not speak a curse against them. In a secondary effort to gain the bribe, he suggested that Balac host a pagan party and tempt the men of Israel to engage in sexual immorality with the women of Moab. The plan was a success and resulted in the spread of idolatry throughout the camp of Israel. Because of their apostasy, the curse of God did, indeed, come upon Israel. Twenty-four thousand people died.

During the Pergamos period, many professed Christians began to engage in pagan rites, mingling idolatry with their worship of Christ. Image worship was introduced with statues of Mary and the saints. Many bowed and prayed to these as readily as the pagans worshipped idols of the goddess Diana and other heathen deities.

## ***The Doctrine of the Nicolaitans***

The Ephesus church was commended by Christ for hating “the deeds of the Nicolaitans” (Revelation 2:6). They had resisted this corrupting influence. But the Pergamos church was infected with many who had yielded themselves to it. The basic doctrine of this party was that God’s grace makes obedience to His law unnecessary (see previous study on Ephesus for greater detail).

## ***Repent, or Else***

The counsel of Christ to the Pergamos church is straight and to the point: “Repent; or else . . .” As the church began to stray from the path of pure truth through the fourth, fifth and sixth centuries, Jesus did fight against the falling away by raising up faithful men and women who wielded the sword of His Word to oppose the incoming tide of error and corruption. The church was seriously divided time and time again.

## ***The Overcomer’s Reward***

To the faithful of the Pergamos church period, Jesus promised “hidden manna” and “a white stone” engraved with a new name.

Manna was a mysterious, heaven-sent food provided morning by morning to Israel in the desert. It represented the coming Messiah who would feed the world with the spiri-

tual food of eternal truth (see John 6:48-51). The promise of “hidden manna” must mean a special spiritual feasting.

The “white stone” with the secret new name implies an intimate friendship unique to Jesus and each person. In Bible times names were far more significant than they are now. Names were chosen to correspond with character. Jesus changed one of His disciple’s names from *Simon* to *Peter*, the latter meaning “a rock,” to represent this man’s firm and determined purpose. *Jacob* means “supplanter,” “one who deceives.” God changed His name to *Israel* after a severe night of struggle in which he prevailed. *Israel* means “one who prevails with God.”

All who are on the Lord’s side will eventually receive a new name, representative of his or her new character in Christ. No one but Jesus and the one who bears the name will be able to fully appreciate its meaning, for the friendship of each saint with the Savior will be as personal as if they were the only two persons in all the universe.

## ***Thyatira***

“And unto the angel of the church in Thyatira write; These things saith the Son of God, who hath his eyes like unto a flame of fire, and his feet are like fine brass; I know thy works, and charity, and service, and faith, and thy patience, and thy works; and the last to be more than the first.

“Notwithstanding I have a few things against thee, because thou sufferest that woman Jezebel, which calleth herself a prophetess, to teach and to seduce My servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed unto idols. And I gave her space to repent of her fornication; and she repented not. Behold, I will cast her into a bed, and them that commit adultery with her into great tribulation, except they repent of their deeds. And I will kill her children with death; and all the churches shall know that I am He which searcheth the reins and hearts: and I will give unto every one of you according to your works.

“But unto you I say, and unto the rest in Thyatira, as many as have not this doctrine, and which have not known the depths of Satan, as they speak; I will put upon you none other burden. But that which ye have already hold fast till I come. And he that overcometh, and keepeth My works unto the end, to him will I give power over the nations: And he shall rule them with a rod of iron; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers: even as I received of My Father. And I will give him the morning star. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches” (Revelation 2:18-29).

In the message to Thyatira, Jesus addresses the church of the “Dark Ages.” Pergamos carries ecclesiastical history to the year A.D. 538, by which time the foundation was laid for the long, hard reign of the papacy. The evil monster of church-state union was alive and growing as the long history of Roman emperors gave way to the even longer history of Roman popes.