

Study 3: Revelation Chapter 2

Introduction

This study is usually taught in conjunction with the videos *The Seven Churches of Asia* produced by Abilene Christian University, and published by Gospel Advocate Co. If you can't see the video, then a copy of Dr Bill Humble's book gives the outline.

The seven churches in Asia might just be names in our bible, but they were real churches in real places. The description in the letters describes things that characterise those cities, and would have made John's letter particularly pertinent to each of them.

Body of the Study

The Region

Ephesus

The Characteristics of the Ephesian Church

Smyrna

The Characteristics of the Smyrna Church

Pergamum

The Characteristics of the Pergamum Church

Thyatira

The Characteristics of the Thyatira Church

Homework and preparation for next week:

Re-read chapter 2

Read the notes as a review of the study

Read chapter three in preparation for the next study.

How would God describe the church where you are a member? There are some aspects of the seven churches in churches of every generation – so don't be surprised at what you see!

What can we do (practically) to change the situation?

Notes for study 3: Revelation Chapter 2

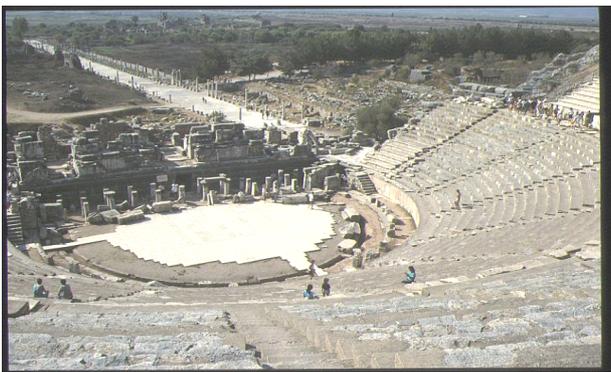
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The Region

The region called "Asia" is more properly described as the Roman Province of "Asia Minor" and extended in an area of what is now western Turkey from the Aegean Sea to Galatia (approx 400 km to the west) and from Bithynia in the north to Lycia in the south (approx 360 km).

The area had earlier come completely under Greek governance under Alexander the Great (325 BC), and after his death in 323 BC Asia Minor was ruled by a line of Greek Kings, the Seleucids. The Romans overthrew the Seleucids, and by 116 BC the area was totally under Roman control. So, by the time of the New Testament, the area had Roman rule, with a Greek culture.



The theatre at Ephesus held 24,000 people.
“...so the whole city was filled with confusion,
and rushed into the theatre...” (Acts 19:29).

Ephesus was the leading city in the area, and the fourth largest city in the world in the time of the New Testament (after Rome, Alexandria, and Byzantium (Istanbul)). It would be the natural place to commence (or end) a “tour” of the region, and is the first church that John addresses in the letters to the seven churches. In New Testament times, the population of Ephesus is estimated to have been around 200 thousand – a big city for the time, and no small town even by today's standards.

The famous historian and archaeologist Sir William Ramsay noted that the order in which John addresses the churches is the natural order in which someone delivering the letter would progress around the area. Beginning with the

major city of Ephesus, he would then travel north to Smyrna and Pergamum, then head southeast to Thyatira and Sardis, then to Philadelphia and Laodicea, before heading back to Ephesus again.

The culture was geared around the Roman governance of the area as a pro-consulate, and the Greek culture that had inhabited the site for hundreds of years. The area is not far from the narrow straits between the Aegean and Black seas known as the Dardenelles – major theatres of war during the first and second world wars, near which was the famed Gallipoli peninsular.

Ephesus

The city of Ephesus was especially famous for two things: The huge theatre with a seating capacity of 25,000 and the Temple of Diana (or Artemis) which was



The library of Celsus was one of the great libraries of the ancient world.

¹ Humble, *The Seven Churches of Asia*
Study of Revelation (Revised 2010) by Graeme Offer

one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. [The others were the Great Pyramid at Giza, The hanging gardens of Babylon, The lighthouse at Alexandria, The Collosus of Rhodes, Statue of Zeuss at Olympia, and the Mausoleum of Maussollos at Halicarnassus.] The ancient theatre is still very much like it would have been when the city revolted against Paul's teaching as recorded in the latter part of Acts 19. In the time of Paul, a harbour existed near the city, but it has since silted up and is now 3 miles (5 km) away. Great wide paved roads such as the Arcadian way went through the city linking the centres of trade of the harbour and the Agora (marketplace). Today, the ruins of Ephesus are one of the greatest places to visit to understand what life would have been like in ancient times. Much of the commerce in Ephesus centred around the worship of the God Artemis, (also called Diana). Whole industries had developed making silver "charms" with Diana engraved on them. The practice of "magical arts" was also a major industry in the city.

The Characteristics of the Ephesian Church

"...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 golden lampstands: ² 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. ³ You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. ^{REV 2:4} Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. ⁵ 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 remove your lampstand from its place. ⁶ But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. ^{REV 2:7} 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..." (2:1-7 NIV).

They were **working** for the Lord. They were not inactive, but were "out there" spreading the gospel.

They were **patient**. James tells us: "...Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³ because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance (patience NKJV). ⁴ Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything..." (Js 1:2-4 NIV)

Peter says: "...For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; ⁶ and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance (patience KJV); and to perseverance, godliness; ⁷ and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. ⁸ For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ..." (2 Pet 1:5-8 NIV)

The Ephesian church had grown and developed. They had some **roots** in the faith. Their faith had been tested, and they had withstood the temptation and **grown** through it.

They **could not stand evil people**, and they have **tested** those who were **falsely claiming to be apostles**.

We see here a **discerning** church. They tested the claims that some people made about their authority (as being apostles). They also found some people who on the surface were claiming to be Christians, but underneath they were evil. The Ephesians were able to discern the true from the false and the truly good from the facade of good.

This raises an interesting question: Some claimed to be apostles, but were not. If there were only 12 apostles (the original 12, take out Jude, add Matthias take out James and add Paul), then why was there a need for "testing"? The answer would be obvious as to who they were! Were there then other apostles who were "chosen" in the same manner as Paul? The bible tells us nothing of these people (if they existed). Given the **authority** that the apostles had, it would be (in my

opinion) most unlikely that God would leave us with people having such authority but not telling us who they were.

A more plausible explanation is that there *were* only the 12, but some people had come along and were *claiming* that they had been called like Paul had, and that they therefore had authority. The Ephesians *tested them*, and found them to be false and to be liars.

They had *not become weary*.

They were *fired up for the Lord*, and were *enthusiastic* about the work for the kingdom. They had stick-to-it-ness. They were not going to give up.

But, there is another side to the coin:

They had *left their first love*. They had become caught up in the “mechanics” of what they were doing, and to some extent had forgotten *why* they were doing it. Does this sound like some churches you know? They have a real zeal for God, and are enthusiastic for the work. But most of the teaching is on the “mechanics” and not on Jesus. They *love to do things right*, but have *lost their love for Jesus* who made us right!!! They have a strong focus on the *internal* of the congregation, but have forgotten about the lost who are *outside* of Christ. Jesus said “*GO* into the world and make disciples”. Evangelism (outreach) is just something that they don’t have time to do. Sometimes we just “*lose the plot*”!!!

Paul told them to “...*Remember the words of the Lord Jesus...*”, (Acts 20:35), but according to John they had “...*Forgotten their first love...*” (2:5)

They need to *remember*, and *repent*, and *do* the first works. They need to get things back into perspective again. Firstly, by *remembering* where they had come from, and the first place and pre-eminent position that Jesus has in their lives and in their teaching. Secondly, they need to *put things right* by repenting of what they had done. They need to recognise that it was not right. They need to turn around and don’t go that way anymore. They need to determine never to go that way again. Thirdly, they need to *do* the things that having Jesus as the forefront of their focus requires.

In the Ephesian letter, Paul sent out *a call to faithfulness*. They heard the message loud and clear, and had *understood the mechanics*, but *lost sight of the reason* why they were doing these things. They were *faithful to the church*, but were *not faithful to the Lord* as they had lost their first love (for Him).

Christ adds a further commendation concerning the Ephesians' hatred of the practices of the Nicolaitans (cf. 2:15)--a hatred directed at the practices of these people, not the people themselves (cf. Ps 139:21). It is difficult to determine exactly who the Nicolaitans were and what they taught. Etymologically the name means "to conquer the people." Did they call themselves by this name, or is it a derogatory title Christ applied to them? The close association of the name with the Balaamites in vv. 14-15 (see comments) may suggest either identity with this group or similarity to their teachings.

Information about the Nicolaitans is limited, ambiguous, and based on John's references here in Revelation. Irenaeus claims that John wrote his Gospel to thwart the teaching of the Gnostic Cerinthus whose error was similar to the earlier offshoot of the same kind of teaching known as Nicolaitanism. Eusebius mentions that the Nicolaitans lasted only a short time. Seeing the sect as a heresy would agree with the references in vv. 14, 20, which warn against mixing Christian faith with idolatry and cult prostitution. The Nicolaitans claimed to have insight into the divine or, more probably, into the demonic. They lived immoral lives, which allowed them to become part of the syncretism of pagan society and to participate in the Roman civil religion. Others understand the Nicolaitans as Christians who still showed devotion to the emperor by burning incense to his image. (NIVBC)

Tradition identifies these people with Nicolas, the proselyte of Antioch who was one of the seven deacons, however the evidence is purely circumstantial and based on the name “Nicolas”. The implication is that they had worked out a compromise between the pagan practices and Christianity. Jesus said that *he hates their practices*.

With the culture, trades, and commerce based around the temple of Diana in Ephesus, it was no wonder that a riot erupted forcing Paul to have to leave the city. It was inevitable that some “compromise” would be worked out to allow co-existence between the Christians and the worshippers of Diana. This co-existence resulted in the Christians embracing the culture of temple worship. They had forgotten the examples of the Jews when they came into the Promised Land – to remain separate from the other people in the land, and not to intermarry. But many of them did, resulting in the God’s people being drawn into idolatry.

God does not condemn the co-existence, but warns against the interaction and compromise.

The Ephesians are called to *Heed* the warnings. If they *overcome* (the temptations, practices and false doctrines) then they will receive their reward of being faithful to God. If not, God will count them unfaithful, unworthy, and remove their place as one of His churches (2:5).

Smyrna

Smyrna was about 70 km north of Ephesus, was the birthplace of Homer, and also the city of Polycarp. It was regarded as an exceptionally beautiful and large city at the mouth of the Hermus River, and was a wealthy city where learning, especially in the sciences and medicine, flourished. In New testament times the city had a population of 100,000.

The city had sided with Rome on several occasions, and was granted the status of a free city, with citizenship in such being greatly prized.

However, it was also the centre of Emperor worship, and had built the first temple in honour of Tiberius. It was chosen over ten other cities who competed for the honour of having the first temple. Emperor worship flourished during the reign of Domitian, and became compulsory for a Roman Citizen under punishment of death.

In AD 155 Polycarp was brought before the Roman proconsul, and urged to reproach Christ. He replied “Eighty and six years have I served him, and he never once wronged me; how then shall I blaspheme my King, Who hath saved me?”²

The Characteristics of the Smyrna Church

“...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. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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.

^{REV 2:11} 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....” (2:8-11 NIV)

The letter to Smyrna is one of the two letters that has only positive comments and no condemnation. The letter begins with Jesus “...*Him who is the first and the last, who was dead and came to life again...*” (2:8). In the face of persecution, this was a strong message of encouragement to the brethren. Jesus had faced death, and like Him, we can be assured that there is life on the other side of it.

The christians would have to make a choice for Jesus and choose Him even if it meant death. The Jews were apparently also condemning the christians, and claiming to be doing God’s will. Jesus

² “Foxes Book of Martyrs”, John C Winston Company, Philadelphia; p. 9

says “...I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan...”.

"Synagogue of Satan" refers, then, to certain Jews in ancient Smyrna who, motivated by Satan, slandered the church there. (NIVBC).

Despite the wealth of the city, the Christians there were poor “...I know your...poverty – yet you are rich...” (2:9). The reference must have been to their monetary poverty, because the Lord says that they are rich spiritually in spite of it. There is a lesson here for us – we must not think that by serving God that He will bless us with earthly wealth – the Christians in Smyrna were praised for their faithfulness, and yet they were poor. The important wealth is the spiritual blessings we receive from faithfully serving Him. This is emphasised in the next verse “...Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life...” (2:10).

The suffering would happen for – ten days – which indicates *a short time*, however “...He who overcomes...” will not be hurt by the second death. *He who overcomes* is John’s favourite term for martyrdom. If they remained faithful – even in the face of being put to death because of their faith – then they will be blessed in two ways:

- *They will receive the crown of life*, which is the blessings that we receive eternally in heaven
- *They will escape the second death*, which is not to receive the eternal punishment that we deserve because of our sin.

As Christians, we can stand confidently before God as His faithful servants.

Pergamum

Pergamum was a city set on a hill about 160 km north of Ephesus. The library in Pergamum was the second greatest library in the ancient world, and second only to the library in Alexandria. There were many temples in Pergamum that were set on top of the hill, the acropolis, that towered 300m above the rest of the city. Pergamum became the centre of Emperor worship in Asia. Whilst the Romans rewarded the city, and it meant prosperity, for the Christians it meant suffering and persecution.

The Germans excavated Pergamum in the 1870’s, and much of the discovered city was removed to the Pergamum museum in Berlin. Temples were built in Pergamum to many gods, including Zeus, Athena, Asklepios, and a series of temples dedicated to the Roman Emperors. Whilst the Christians could ignore the temples erected to the Greek gods, they could not ignore the ones erected to the Emperors. Either they would have to confess “Caesar is Lord” or face persecution.

The Characteristics of the Pergamum Church

“...To the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. ¹³ 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. ^{REV 2:14} 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. ¹⁵ Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. ¹⁶ Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth. ^{REV 2:17} 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...” (2:12-17 NIV)

Jesus is the one *who has the sharp, two edged sword*. The letter is addressed to *where Satan has his throne*. Pergamum was the centre of Emperor worship, and the reference is most likely to this centre of worship. Despite the problems in the city, the disciples were faithful and “...remain true

to my name...”. Even when their faith was tested, they “...did not renounce their faith...”. One of the brethren was named Antipas, and he had already been martyred at the time that John wrote the letter “...in your city – where Satan lives...”

Despite the praise, there is also condemnation “...You have people who hold to the teaching of Balaam...” This is then immediately connected to *eating food sacrificed to idols, and to committing fornication*, and is also linked the sect of the Nicolaitans.

The OT names Balaam and Jezebel serve to alert the church community to the insidious nature of the teaching that was not until now recognized as overtly evil. Since Satan's chief method is deception, his devices are not known until they are clearly pointed out. Christ exposes error here by identifying the false teaching in Pergamum with clear-cut evil such as that of Balaam and Jezebel. Balaam, who found he could not curse the Israelites (Nu 22-24), devised a plan whereby the daughters of the Moabites seduced the Israelite men and led them to sacrifice to their god Baal-peor and worship him (Nu 25:1ff.; 31:16; cf. 2Pe 2:15; Jude 11). So through Balaam's deception, God's judgment fell on Israel because of fornication and idolatry. What Satan could not accomplish at Smyrna or Pergamum through intimidation, suffering, and death from outside the church, he achieved from within through unconscious subversion. (NIVBC)

So, whilst the church was strong in standing against the outward attacks, on the inside they were succumbing to sinful practices. They needed to repent. *Those who overcome will be fed with hidden manna* which is probably a reference to their poverty (and maybe starvation) in the face of their trials. Again, *he who overcomes* is a euphemism for martyrdom.

Jesus says “...I will give him a white stone...” is a reference to a voting stone. A similar occurrence is in Acts 26:10 (the only other use of the word in the New Testament). In this case, the voting stone is white – it is a pure vote – a vote of innocence – a vote in our favour. But Jesus adds, that something is written on the stone “...a new name written, which is known only to him who receives it...” Humble notes³:

Only the martyr would know the mystery or significance of this name. This name apparently signified a new character for the martyr; one that only the martyr and Jesus would know or understand. The reference seems to be that by dying with Jesus as a martyr – as Jesus had died for His faith – the martyr would share in the character of Jesus.

Thyatira

Thyatira was an inland city about 100 km from Smyrna. It was the home of Lydia, the first convert in Philippi, who was a seller of purple dye. Homer informs us that the city of Thyatira was noted for the art of dyeing. Inscriptions found in the city show that trade guilds to many trades prospered in the city, and it was famous for its smelting works.

The trade guilds would have created many problems for Christians – either go along with the (possibly) immoral activities of the guild, or face the prospect of not being able to work, and then starving to death.

The Characteristics of the Thyatira Church

“...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. ¹⁹ I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first. ^{REV 2:20} 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. ²¹ I have given her time

³ Humble, p. 80

to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling. ²² 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. ²³ 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. ²⁴ 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): ²⁵ Only hold on to what you have until I come. ^{REV 2:26} To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations-- ^{REV 2:27} '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. ²⁸ I will also give him the morning star. ²⁹ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches..." (2:18-29 NIV).

Jesus describes himself as the one "...whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze..." (2:18). Those familiar with the metal workers in Thyatira would have understood the Jesus' message exactly.

The letter is the longest of the seven letters, even though the city was the least important. It begins with a message of praise "...I know your deeds, your love, and your faith, your service, and your perseverance..." (2:19). They were active and at work for the Lord, and in fact they had grown in their level of service "...that you are now doing more than you did at the first..."

But, they had the same problems that had invaded the church at Pergamum – food offered to idols, and sexual immorality. Apparently, they had decided to compromise what God said, and to continue to worship Him whilst giving lip-service to the worldly things going on around them. The leader of this was a woman named Jezebel, and she was misleading the brethren into these practices. Whilst eating food sacrificed to idols is not wrong in and of itself (see 1 Cor 8:1-13), it is wrong if it violates either our conscience or the conscience of others. However, sexual immorality is always wrong!

Jesus' *eyes are like flaming fire* – He can see right through what is going on, and right through our insincerity. We cannot serve God and compromise our faith. Jesus said that He will bring judgement and retribution on the leaders of such error and on those who practice it – unless they repent.

Some in the church had remained faithful "...and have not known the deep secrets of Satan..." which implies that some in the church had. We are not told what these *deep secrets* are, but it may be a reference to sexual immorality. In any case, we are told not to go there!

Those who overcome are promised:

- *Power over the nations* which is a reference to how Christians show God's rule through our lives and our ministry. Burgin⁴ says: "Each nation is ruled by the laws of that nation. The laws of Christ are God's laws for all nations (Mt 28:18-20). This was to be so until He comes again. Those who minister His laws to the nations share in His rule".
- *He shall rule them with a rod of iron* which is probably a reference to the metal and smelting industries in the area – by the rod cannot be bent! God's laws cannot be bent! Those who fight against God's laws will be broken *like a potter's vessel it shall be broken to pieces*.
- *I will give him the morning star* which is a reference to the brightest of the stars which announces the new day. Burgin says "The gospel is God's prophetic word for us – in it we have the promise of Christ – the morning star – if we are faithful."

⁴ Burgin, LG "Studies in Revelation, #4" (from my personal study notes of Les's class)

EPHESUS

Faithful, but had lost their first love

The City

- Fourth largest city in the world at the time (pop ~200,000)
- Temple of Artemis one of “7 Wonders Of The Ancient World”
- Temple of Artemis produced great wealth, fame, and trade for city
- Theatre seated 24,000 people (some references say 44,000)
- Roman governance – made “Capital of Asia” by Hadrian
- Library of Celsus contained 12,000 volumes – third largest in the world

Strengths

- Faithful and hardworking
- Rejected false teachers / apostles
- Doctrinally pure
- Hated the practices of the Nicolaitans

Weaknesses

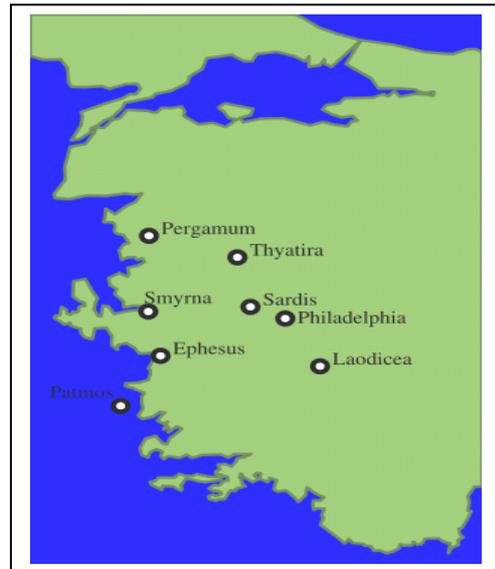
- Had lost their “first love”
- Doing the right things, but for the wrong reasons

Lord’s Instructions

- Remember the height you have fallen from!
- Repent and do the first things

He who Overcomes...

- Will have the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.



SMYRNA

Faithful and Spiritually Rich, but Physically Poor

The City

- Beautiful city (pop ~100,000)
- Sea port
- Home of Homer and Polycarp
- Persecution of Christians fuelled by the Jews
- Centre of Emperor worship – first temple built for Tiberius
- A “free city” status in gratitude for siding with Rome

Strengths

- Spiritually rich in spite of their physical poverty
- Steadfastness in the face of affliction

Weaknesses

- None

Lord’s Instructions

- Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer
- Be faithful, even to the point of death

He who Overcomes...

- Will have the crown of life
- Will not be hurt at all by the second death



PERGAMUM

Willing to compromise with idolatry and immorality & needed to repent

The City

- City given to the Romans without a fight by King Attalus (133 BC)
- City rewarded by Romans – prosperity for the city, but suffering and persecution for the Christians
- Many temples on the acropolis overlooking the city – three were dedicated to Emperor worship
- An early centre for Emperor worship
- Very idolatrous city “where Satan’s throne dwells”
- Library second largest in the world, contained 200,000 volumes – parchment invented in Pergamum

Strengths

- Faithful under persecution

Weaknesses

- Some were following idolatry and immorality
- Some supported the teachings of the Nicolaitans

Lord’s Instructions

- Repent or the Lord will fight against you with His word

He who Overcomes...

- I will give some of the hidden manna (spiritual food)
- I will give a white stone (a vote in your favour)



THYATIRA

Active but tolerate a false prophetess

The City

- The home of Lydia, the first convert in Europe (Philippi)
- Active trade guilds made some decisions hard for Christians
- Prosperous trading city – noted for the art of dyeing
- Famous for its metal smelting works

Strengths

- Working for the Lord
- Loving, faithful, and persevere
- Do more than they did at first

Weaknesses

- Tolerate false prophetess (Jezebel) – taught compromise with idolatry and immorality
- Compromised with “Satan’s deep secrets”

Lord’s Instructions

- Immoral must repent
- Remain faithful until the Lord returns

He who Overcomes...

- Will have authority over the nations
- Will have the morning star (the promise of Christ)

