

A. To Ephesus (2:1–7)

2:1 The Lord introduces Himself to **the church of Ephesus** as the One **who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands**. Most of the descriptions of the Lord in these letters are similar to that which is found in chapter 1.

2:2 This church was outstanding for its plentiful **works**, its strenuous **labor**, and its patient endurance. It did not tolerate **evil** men in its midst. It had the ability to discern false apostles and to deal with them accordingly.

2:3, 4 For the sake of Christ's name, the Church had endured trial and adversity with **patience** and had **labored** tirelessly. But the tragedy of Ephesus was that it had **left its first love**. The fire of its affection had died down. The glowing enthusiasm of its early days had disappeared. The Christians could look back to better days when their bridal love for Christ flowed warm, full, and free. They were still sound in doctrine and active in service, but the true motive of all worship and service was missing.

2:5 They should **remember** the good days of their early faith, **repent** of their diminishing of **first love**, and repeat the devoted service which characterized the outset of their Christian life. Otherwise He would **remove the lampstand** at Ephesus, that is, the assembly would cease to exist. Its testimony would die out.

2:6 A further word of commendation concerns their hatred of **the deeds of the Nicolaitans**. We cannot be positive who these people were. Some think they were followers of a religious leader named Nicolas. Others point out that the name means "rule over the laity" and see in this a reference to the rise of the clerical system.

2:7 Those who have ears to hear God's word are encouraged to listen to **what the Spirit says to the churches**.

Then a promise is held out to the overcomer. In general, an overcomer in the NT is one who believes that Jesus Christ is the Son of God (1 Jn. 5:5), in other words, a true believer. His faith enables him to overcome the world with all its temptations and allurements. Perhaps in each of the letters the word has an additional thought, connected with the condition in that particular church. Thus an overcomer in Ephesus may be one who shows the genuineness of his faith by repenting when he has backslidden from his first love. All such **will . . . eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God**. This does not imply that they are saved by overcoming, but that their overcoming proves the reality of their conversion experience. The only way men are saved is by grace through faith in Christ. All who are saved will **eat from the tree of life**, that is, they will enter into eternal life in its fullness in heaven.

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Ephesus is often taken to describe the condition of the church soon after the death of the apostles.

B. To Smyrna (2:8–11)

2:8 **Smyrna** means *myrrh* or *bitterness*. Here Christ presents Himself as **the First and the Last, who was dead and came to life**. This description would be particularly comforting to those who faced the threat of death daily.

2:9 With special tenderness, the Lord tells His suffering saints that He knows their **tribulation** thoroughly. To outward appearances, they might be **poverty**-stricken, but as far as spiritual things were concerned, they were **rich**. As Charles Stanley said, “There was peculiar honor in being near and like Himself, who had nowhere to lay His head. I have learned this: Jesus is specially the partner of His poor servants.”

The saints at Smyrna were being bitterly attacked by the Jews. Historians tell of the eagerness with which these Jews sought to aid in the martyrdom of Polycarp, for instance. As **Jews**, they claimed to be God’s chosen people, but by their blasphemous behavior they showed that they were a **synagogue of Satan**.

2:10 The Christians should **not fear any of those things** they would soon **suffer**. Some of them would be imprisoned and **tested by tribulation for ten days**. This time period may refer to **ten literal days**; to **ten** distinct persecutions under the Roman emperors who preceded Constantine; or to **ten** years of persecution under Diocletian.

The believers were encouraged to **be faithful until death**, that is, to be willing to die rather than renounce their faith in Christ. They would receive **the crown of life**, a special reward for martyrs.

2:11 Again the willing hearer is encouraged to listen to the Spirit’s voice. The overcomer is promised exemption from **the second death**. Here an overcomer is one who proves the reality of his faith by choosing to go to heaven with a good conscience rather than stay on earth with a bad one. He will not be affected by **the second death**, the doom of all unbelievers (20:6, 14).

C. To Pergamos (2:12–17)

2:12 **Pergamos** (or Pergamum) means *high tower* or *thoroughly married*. This letter presents the Lord as the One **who has the sharp two-edged sword**. This is the word of God (Heb. 4:12) with which He will judge evildoers in the assembly (see v. 16).

2:13 Pergamos was the Asian headquarters for the cult of emperor-worship: hence it is called the place of **Satan’s throne**. In spite of the surrounding paganism, the church had remained loyal to Christ, even though one of its members, **Antipas**, had been martyred for his confession of the Lord Jesus. He was the first known Asian to die for refusing to worship the emperor.

2:14, 15 **But** the Lord must reprove the church for permitting men with evil doctrine to continue in the Christian fellowship. There were **those who held the doctrine of Balaam and of**

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the Nicolaitans. The doctrine of Balaam sanctioned eating **things sacrificed to idols** and **sexual immorality**. It also refers to the practice of preaching for hire (Num. 22–25; 31).

The doctrine of the Nicolaitans is not defined. Many Bible scholars feel that these were libertines, teaching that those under grace were free to practice idolatry and sexual sins.

Dr. C. I. Scofield, however, links the doctrine with the rise of the clerical system:

It is the doctrine that God has instituted an order of “clergy” or priests, as distinguished from the “laity.” The word is formed from two Greek words, *niko*, conqueror or overcomer, and *laos*, the people. The New Testament knows nothing of a “clergyman,” still less of a priest, except as all sons of God in this dispensation are “a royal priesthood.” In the apostolic church there were offices: elders (or bishops) and deacons; and gifts: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers (Eph. 4:11). These might or might not be elders or deacons. But late in the apostolic period there emerged a disposition to arrogate to elders alone authority to administer ordinances, and, generally, to constitute themselves a class between God and the people; they were the Nicolaitans. You will observe that what were “deeds” in the Ephesus or late apostolic period, had become a “doctrine” two hundred years later in the Pergamos or Constantine period.⁸

2:16 True believers are called on to **repent**. If they did, they would presumably expel the evil teachers from their midst. Otherwise the Lord Himself would **fight against** these evil men.

2:17 Obedient saints should **hear what the Spirit says to the churches**. The overcomer would be given **hidden manna** and a **white stone**. The overcomer in Pergamos may be the child of God who refuses to tolerate evil teaching in the local church. But what are **the hidden manna** and the **white stone**?

Manna is a type of Christ Himself. It may speak of heavenly food in contrast to foods offered to idols (v. 14). **Hidden manna** may be “some sweet, secret communion with Himself, known in the glory as the One who suffered here.” The **white stone** has been explained in many ways. It was a token of acquittal in a legal case. It was a symbol of victory in an athletic contest. It was an expression of welcome given by a host to his guest. It seems clear that it is a reward given by the Lord to the overcomer and expressing individual approval by Him. Alford says that the **new name** indicates acceptance by God and title to glory.

Historically this church probably represents the time soon after Constantine, when the church was “thoroughly married” to the state. Thousands became nominal Christians, and the church tolerated pagan practices in its midst.

D. To Thyatira (2:18–29)

2:18 The name **Thyatira** means *perpetual sacrifice* or *continual offering*. In this letter the Son of God is seen as having **eyes like a flame of fire** and **feet like fine brass**. The **eyes** speak of piercing vision, and the brass **feet** speak of threatened judgment.

⁸ (2:14, 15) Ella E. Pohle, *Dr. C. I. Scofield's Question Box*, p. 89.

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2:19 This church was outstanding in several ways. It was not lacking in good **works, love, service, faith**, and patient endurance. In fact, its **works** were increasing in quantity rather than declining.

2:20 But impure doctrine had been tolerated in the assembly with the result that **immorality** and idolatry were being practiced. The church had permitted a self-styled **prophetess** named **Jezebel**⁹ to lead God's servants into sin. Just as Jezebel in the OT had corrupted God's people with fornication and idolatry, so this woman taught that Christians could engage in these practices without sinning. Perhaps she encouraged the believers to join the trade guilds of Thyatira, even though this involved honoring the guild god or goddess and participating in festivals where food was **sacrificed to idols**. She doubtless justified this compromise with the world on the ground that it would allegedly advance the cause of the church.

2:21–23 Because she refused **to repent**, the Lord was going to give her a **sick bed** of tribulation in place of her bed of lust. **Those who** committed **adultery** with her would be thrown into a bed of **great tribulation** and death **unless they** forsook her and escaped from her **deeds**. Then **all the churches** would **know** that the Lord is watching and that He rewards according to man's deeds. There was probably a literal prophetess in Thyatira named Jezebel. But Bible students have also seen here a reference to the rise of a false church system with its adoration of images, sale of indulgences, and priestly absolution from such sins as fornication.

2:24, 25 There was a faithful remnant in Thyatira (**the rest ... as many as do not have this doctrine**) which had not been initiated into the secret doctrines and rites of Jezebel, otherwise known as **the depths of Satan**. **No other burden** of responsibility was placed on them than to **hold fast** the truth until Christ's Coming.

2:26–28 The overcomer in Thyatira was the true believer who steadfastly maintained the **works** of genuine Christianity. His reward would be to reign with Christ during the Millennium. He would have authority **over the nations** and would **rule them with a rod of iron**. All sin and rebellion would be punished severely and promptly. The Lord promised to give to the overcomer **the morning star**. The Lord Jesus is the Bright and Morning Star (22:16). Just as the **morning star** appears in the heavens before the sun rises, so Christ will appear as the Morning Star to rapture His church to heaven before He appears as the Sun of Righteousness to reign over the earth (1 Thess. 4:13–18; Mal. 4:2). Thus the overcomer is promised a part in the Rapture. He does not earn this by his works, but his works demonstrate the reality of his faith. Because he is genuinely converted, he will be given **the morning star**.

2:29 In this and the following three letters, the formula "**He who has an ear, let him hear . . .**" follows the promise to the overcomer rather than preceding it. This may indicate that from this point on, only those who overcome are expected to have an ear to **hear what the Spirit says to the churches**.

⁹(2:20) The majority text reads, "your wife (or woman) Jezebel."