

Revelation 2:8-11

If we were living in the days of the Apostle John and we left Ephesus and traveled northwest for about 35-40 miles, we would come to the most beautiful city in Asia known in John's day by the name Smyrna and in our day by the name Izmir.

Smyrna was considered to be the most exquisite city the Greeks ever built. Alexander the Great was really the reason the city was so magnificent. Apollonius called Smyrna "the most beautiful city under the sun." It is said that when you looked at Smyrna from a distance it had the appearance of a shining gold crown.

Smyrna was a port city that sat at the end of a long arm of the Aegean Sea. All the trade of the Aegean flowed into the city. It had security and it had beauty. It is said that in Smyrna there was always a very gentle wind blowing that constantly made the city smell fresh.

Smyrna was a loyal city to Rome. In fact, when all of the cities were competing for the right to erect a temple to the Roman emperor for worship, it was Smyrna that won the right even over Ephesus. Coins have been found boasting that Smyrna was "the first city of Asia in size and beauty."

Smyrna was a city of education and the arts. It held games yearly in a magnificent stadium. There was a massive public library and many musicians were headquartered in Smyrna and it had one of the largest theaters in all of Asia. It had an amphitheater that could seat over 20,000 people. From the world's standpoint, Smyrna was a very successful and very classy city.

Smyrna was a very religious city. Its temples of worship were masterpieces of architecture. There were temples of Zeus, Diana, Aphrodite, Apollo and Asclepius. Many Jews had moved to Smyrna, which is very evident from **Revelation 2:9**, because they had their own synagogue. The Jews were numerous and influential. Judaism was viewed very favorably by the leaders of the city of Smyrna, primarily because this religion was responsible for making a large donation to the city's fund for the further beautification of the city. William Barclay said they made a \$2000 contribution to the city for this purpose (*The Revelation of John*, Vol. 1, p. 76).

The religious Jews were hostile and hateful against Christianity. They, along with many unbelieving Gentiles, falsely accused the Christians of at least six crimes:

1. Cannibalism - because of the Lord's Supper that said "this is My body"
2. Sensualism - because they called their feasts "love feasts"
3. Atheism - because they would not worship some false, man-made idol
4. Insurrectionism - because they would not worship the emperor
5. Arsonism - because they would speak of the world ending in flames of fire
6. Defamilism - because Christianity often split families

These false allegations put tremendous pressure and persecution on Christians living in Smyrna. Jesus Christ had a special, timely message for the people in this church.

(84)

This is the shortest message given to the seven churches and the only grammatical difference between the beginning of the messages to the churches of Ephesus and Smyrna, is the coordinating conjunction “and” which starts the message and will begin every church address from now on. This links all of these church messages together as being coordinate and coequal in importance.

There are eight specific points of communication given by Jesus Christ to this church:

POINT OF COMMUNICATION #1 – Christ’s address to the specific angel and church .
2:8a

Again notice that the letter is addressed to a specific angel, “the angel” of a specific church, “the church in Smyrna.” Both nouns “angel” and “church” have an article “the” which immediately tells us that the church in Smyrna is specifically different from Ephesus. It has a different angel and it had a different location and it has different problems and pressures.

There is no such thing as a problem-free church. Each church has its specific needs and circumstances. Each church has its peculiar sets of problems, people, leadership and solutions. If a church is truly doing what is right before God, it will face its share of hardships. Hardships for one will not be the same as hardships for another.

POINT OF COMMUNICATION #2 – Christ’s command for John to write to the specific church. **2:8b**

No two churches are alike in location and problems, but **every church is alike in that it needs its focus to be on the written Word of God.** In every one of these church addresses, Jesus Christ repeats the point that each church needs the written Word of God. It is the written Word that can comfort a church and straighten it out.

As the last book in the Bible is Revelation, what Jesus Christ is doing is showing His churches, by way of repeated emphasis, how important His written Word actually is. If we keep in mind that the people of this church were hurting and suffering, we may conclude that the best encourager is the written Word of God. People do not need counseling sessions or seminars or medication to survive emotional setbacks; they need the written Word of God. That is precisely the point that Christ is making here.

POINT OF COMMUNICATION #3 – Christ’s identification of the specific feature concerning Himself. **2:8c**

Christ identifies Himself as being “the first and the last” which is a title that refers to His Eternal Deity. In the O.T., God was identified by this name - Isaiah 41:4; 44:6; 48:12. By using this title, Christ is identifying Himself as being the first and last of all things and is preeminent over all things. **This realization about Jesus Christ has great meaning when you are suffering because it informs the believer that He controls everything, which means He may permit suffering to start and He can also make the suffering end.**

The second title “who was dead and has come to life” is one that connects us to Christ’s humanity and particularly His suffering. This title would remind the believers in Smyrna that Christ, Himself, who is God, suffered Himself and was alive and survived the greatest suffering of all - death on a cross.

When you first read this title, it appears to be identical to the one Christ uses in Revelation 1:18, but there is a difference. In 1:18 the word “alive” is present tense (ζων) and in 2:8 the word “life” is aorist tense (εζησεν). The reason for this is because in 1:18 the emphasis is on the fact that Christ is contrasting His one moment of death with His continual eternity, whereas **in Revelation 2:8 Christ is contrasting two specific moments in history; the moment He died and the moment He came back to life at His resurrection.**

The reason He does this is because the believers in Smyrna needed to realize that even though there may be moments in history when you suffer, there will also be a moment . (aorist tense) when you get out of it and are victorious.

Jesus Christ was God, the first and the last of everything and yet He did truly suffer and die, but He conquered death by coming back to life. This is encouraging to believers who are hurting because we may know that we have a “high priest” who knows what it is like to suffer infirmities. We have a high priest who knows what it is like to endure hardships and come out victorious.

POINT OF COMMUNICATION #4 – Christ’s assessment of things positive in the church.
2:9

The verb “I know” (οιδα) which begins **verse 9** means that Jesus Christ saw everything and had a full and complete knowledge of everything that was happening in and to this church. He had all knowledge and was not seeking to gain knowledge (γινωσκω). **There were three positive realities of which Christ was fully aware, which appeared to be negatives to the people in the church:**

Positive Reality #1 - Jesus Christ had full knowledge of their tribulation . **2:9a**

The word “tribulation” (θλιψις) is one that means that Jesus Christ had full knowledge of all of the pressures, afflictions and distresses that this church was experiencing (Smith, pp. 207-208). It is contextually evident that one of the big pressures on this church was one of finances . This church was financially struggling and Jesus Christ took special notice of that. If we keep in mind that Smyrna was one of the wealthiest port cities in the world, this would certainly add an additional strain and pressure to this church.

Jesus Christ sees the pressures and distresses that His church is under. He is fully aware of every hardship and struggle. He has full and complete knowledge. He sees everything and knows everything. **It means much to Jesus Christ when He sees His people stay faithful when they are hurting.**

No matter what our present hardship, Christ knows all about it and when we stay faithful, He is honored by that. Truth is, our character is developed best when we are suffering, not succeeding.

Positive Reality #2 - Jesus Christ had full knowledge of their poverty. **2:9b**

The Greek word “poverty” (πτωχειν) literally means that this church was so poor financially and so destitute that at times it reached a point where it needed to beg for help (Smith, p. 393). In fact, you may legitimately translate this word “beggary.” This was not superfluous rhetoric; it was real. This poverty was due to their faith in Jesus Christ.

The early church was largely comprised of poor people - slaves, ex-slaves, run away slaves, freed slaves and those looking for work or those out of work. Christians were denied jobs and the Christian businesses that were in existence were often boycotted and shut down.

Not all churches in this list in Revelation had this problem, but this one did and the truth is the vast majority of God’s people are not multi-millionaire entrepreneurs. As Dr. Walter Scott said, “Not many grandees are numbered amongst the Lord’s people” (*Exposition of the Revelation of Jesus Christ*, p. 67).

Here was a church located in the big, prestigious and wealthy city of Smyrna. The Christians looked at the Jews who were caught up in their false religion and they saw all the false religions of the city that had so much money that it could make financial contributions to the city for beautification purposes. Yet this true church of God was barely surviving. Everyone around them was thriving, but this little group of believers were barely making ends meet and at times they were so poor that they needed to beg for help. It was to this church that Christ said, “I have full knowledge of your poverty.” It was to this specific church in this specific shape that Jesus Christ gave two direct messages:

Message #1 - I want you to know that I have full knowledge of your earthly poverty.

Message #2 - I want you to have a complete knowledge of your heavenly wealth.

Jesus says, I have full knowledge of your earthly poverty state, but I want you to have knowledge of your heavenly wealth state, “you are rich.” The phrase “but you are rich” (αλλα πλουσιος ει) is grammatically revealing:

1) The conjunction “but” (αλλα) is one that expresses a contrast and an opposing thought to which the idea is connected (Daniel B. Wallace, *The Basics of New Testament Syntax*, p. 297). What this means is that the believers in the church of Smyrna thought one way - that they were poor, which was actually the opposite of their real status.

2) The word “rich” (πλουσιος) is one that refers to an abundant level of riches. This word refers to wealth that is at the highest possible level (Smith, pp. 366-367).

3) The verb “are” is present tense, indicative mood which means it is a fact (indicative mood) that you are continually (present tense) rich at the highest possible level.

(87)

What Christ is telling this church is that you may appear to be a bunch of poor beggars as a church on earth, but in contrast to this in heaven you are the richest of the rich.

Not every church will have a lot of money to work with. Truth is, the two most esteemed churches of these seven churches in Revelation were financially the poorest churches.

There are two very practical observations we may make from this:

(Observation #1) - Temporal earthly wealth has nothing to do with eternal heavenly wealth.

We must not ever be duped into believing that a lot of money means we have a great status in heaven. Nothing could be further from the truth. The fact is, earthly wealth is very often a sign of eternal poverty, for it is very rare when one with great wealth is truly Biblically spiritually-minded.

(Observation #2) - Those with earthly wealth need to think very seriously about investing it in the church of God and the work of God (I Timothy 6:17-19).

Positive Reality #3 - Christ had full knowledge of the blasphemy. **2:9c**

The word “blasphemy” (την βλασφημιαν) refers to speaking things that are against God. Such things as slander and speaking in an impious or irreverent way about God is blasphemy (Smith, p. 82). The article “the” which precedes the noun blasphemy indicates that this was a very specific action.

There were Jews who were claiming they were right with God and they were verbally speaking against believers who really were right with God and Jesus Christ said these people are blasphemous and they are from the synagogue of Satan.

Their verbal attacks against this church of Smyrna were satanic. They were not Jews in the sense of being right with God and their synagogue was a satanic meeting place. Here was a real church of Satan. It was a religious place that featured the O.T. law and said some things that were true, but it did not present the whole truth of God and when these religious people started verbally assaulting the church of Smyrna, their work was blasphemous and satanic.

There are four observations we need to make from this:

(Observation #1) - Satanic attack is verbal and false.

Twice Jesus Christ connects Satan to liars who claim they are right with God (**Rev. 2:9**; 3:9). Satan does his best work in attacking God’s people by using his demons to work in people to lie and present what is false. They may attack your character, your beliefs and even your relationship with God.

(Observation #2) - Satanic work is not limited to one city.

Satan was specifically said to be active in Smyrna (**Rev. 2:9**); Pergamum (Rev. 2:13); Thyatira (Rev. 2:24); and Philadelphia (Rev. 3:9).

(Observation #3) - Satanic work is aimed against a true church of God and against those truly right with God.

It is clear from this context that Satan will work through pressure, poverty and blasphemy. Satan will see that those who are really right with God are verbally accused and verbally and physically assaulted. Satan may even cause one right with God to end up in jail or even dead. Those led by Satan will invent lies against those right with God.

(Observation #4) - Satan's greatest work is found in religion and doctrine.

Satan will twist truths of Scripture to confuse people and get them to believe things false: Judaism versus true Christianity; faith versus works; legalism versus grace. Satan does his finest work in religious doctrine that attacks the pure grace of God which is found in Jesus Christ and promotes a religious works system (II Corinthians 11:13-15).

One key text to always remember when under satanic attack is James 4:7 - "Submit therefore to God, resist the Devil and he will flee from you."

POINT OF COMMUNICATION #5 – Christ's command to the church. **2:10**

Christ's command to the church of Smyrna is, "Do not fear." The Greek text literally reads "you fear nothing" (μηδεν φοβου). We could actually understand this as Jesus commanding this church to stop being afraid. **The verb "fear" is in the imperative mood, meaning this is a command that Jesus Christ is giving to this church and it is action that needed to be stopped because it was already in progress (present tense).**

The actual Greek verb "fear" (phobeo), from which we get our English word "phobia," means to be so terrified and frightened that one is put to flight or runs away (Smith, pp. 471-472).

Now the verb "fear" is passive and what I understand this to mean, is that God would be the One who would perform the action of stopping the fear, and the thing that the people of the church needed to know, that causes God to eliminate the fear were two points of knowledge:

Point of Knowledge #1 - Jesus Christ knows and controls the future time of trouble. **2:10a**

Point of Knowledge #2 - Jesus Christ will reward those faithful in the future. **2:10b**

In other words, if we do not run when under satanic attack because we realize God is in this every step of the way and will reward us for our faithfulness, then we can stop being afraid no matter what we face.

There are three very specific future predictions that Christ makes concerning this church:

Prediction #1 - You are about to suffer and be attacked by the Devil . **2:10a**

The proper noun “Satan” means adversary and the proper noun “Devil” means slanderer or false accuser. Satan loves to oppose God’s people through false slander and he can make them suffer.

The word “suffer” (πασχω) means the Devil was about to attack with a string of things that would not be pleasant. This word can refer to physical, mental and emotional anguish (Smith, p. 348).

What Christ specifically mentions is that the Devil was going to put many of these believers into prison. Christ is telling these believers what was going to happen before it happened. The purpose of this was to “test” them or “trap” them to see if he could get them to turn away from God (*Ibid.*, p. 351).

The Devil will allow things to hit a believer that are not pleasant for the believer. They may be physical, mental or emotional and his goal is to get the believer to turn away from God. In this case it would be via a loss of freedom; he would put some of the Christians in jail. But it may come in other ways too.

He may cause a loss of reputation, or a loss of health, or a loss of possessions, or a loss of wealth, or a loss of a relationship, or even a loss of life. Those were the very tactics he used against Jesus, Paul, John, Peter and Job.

In fact, the apostle who is penning Revelation had lost his freedom and was on a prison island of Patmos because the Devil raised up forces against him. These were people who had been raised up by the Devil to do negative things to John. What the Devil is trying to do in this is to get the believer to turn from God and to turn from His precious Word. He is out to make us run, give up, and turn from the Word and will of God.

Christ’s challenge is don’t be afraid, I know everything and I control everything.

Prediction #2 - You are about to be attacked temporarily . **2:10b**

Now we may notice that the trials and pressures that will come against these believers are time regulated; they will last for “ten days.” There have been three views for interpreting this:

(View #1) - You will be tested for ten days literally (i.e. Sunday - Tuesday of the following week).

(View #2) - You will be tested for ten days historically - Church Age will go through ten different satanic attacks in its history and so will each local church.

(View #3) - You will be tested for ten days symbolically - the church will go through a period of time of trouble called “ten days,” which is not a real short time or a real long time.

(View #1) - You will be tested for ten days literally .

This interpretation would mean that the church of Smyrna was about to undergo an intense literal ten day ordeal of persecution and pressure. It is true that in Scripture there are specific limitations pertaining to literal days (Gen. 7:4; 40:12, 13, 20; Num. 14:33; Esther 3:13; Ezekiel 4:1-8; Matt. 12:40).

Some difficulties with this view are that many were imprisoned and persecuted for a much greater period than just ten days. John, himself, who is writing Revelation, spent much longer than ten days on Patmos and Nero had launched a four year attack against Christians (A.D. 64-68).

(View #2) - You will be tested ten days historically .

If we assume that the seven churches represent the Church Age in its entirety, it is quite logical to assume that this would represent the number of severe persecutions launched against Christianity by Roman Emperors. The Church would have ten intense periods of persecution.

Philip Schaff, who, next to Eusebius, is probably the greatest historical scholar to ever write on the Christian church, does acknowledge that there were ten major historical periods of persecution against the church that came out of Rome: 1) Nero (A.D. 64ff); 2) Domitian (A.D. 81ff); 3) Trajan (A.D. 104 ff); 4) Marcus Aurelius Verus (or Antoninus) (A.D. 161ff) who killed Polycarp; 5) Septimius Severus (A.D. 200ff); 6) Maximinus (A.D. 235ff); 7) Decius (A.D. 250ff); 8) Valerian (A.D. 257ff); 9) Aurelian (A.D. 270ff); 10) Diocletian (A.D. 303ff). Dr. Schaff is quick to point out that the most severe forms of persecution came at the hands of Nero and Domitian. He says the others were not motivated as much by their hatred of Christianity as their zeal for maintenance of the laws and power of government (*History of the Christian Church*, Vol. 2, p. 18) (A. C. Gaebelien; Charles Ryrie; J. Vernon McGee).

One problem with this interpretation is that when Revelation was written, we would already be in the second period of time of the ten, which would make it difficult to connect this to a futuristic number of ten.

(View #3) - You will be tested ten days symbolically .

The number ten is a Biblical number that is not too short and not too long (Genesis 24:55; Acts 25:6). The emphasis of this is that the Church will go through time-regulated trials and pressures. Satan is only permitted by God to attack for so long and then his time of attack ends. The time of trouble is not forever but rather a shorter limited time. This is the position toward which many scholars lean: Dr. Walvoord, Dr. Ryrie, Dr. Alford, Dr. Swete, Dr. Wiersbe and Dr. Scott.

I believe this final view is the best. Whenever we come under attack, we need to remember that it is time-regulated by God, and in the not too distant future the attacks will end.

Prediction #3 - Your faithfulness will be rewarded. **2:10c**

Jesus says to be faithful until the end of the trial, even until death, and He will reward one with “the crown of life,” literally “the crown of the life (τον στεφανον της ζωης).

These believers were already faithful, but Christ is challenging them to remain faithful in the midst of satanic attack and they can earn this special crown.

Now the two articles “the” which appear before crown and life make this a very specific crown. The word “crown” is the word stephanos (στεφανος) and not diadem (διαδημα). **The stephanos crown was a crown given for victory and the diadem crown was a crown given for royalty.** This is a crown given to a believer for victory, which means it is not a crown of royalty or crown of salvation.

Now there are at least seven specifically named stephanos crowns that a believer may win:

- (**Crown #1**) - The incorruptible or imperishable crown given to one disciplined.
I Corinthians 9:25
- (**Crown #2**) - The influence crown given for influencing others. Philippians 4:1
- (**Crown #3**) - The rejoicing crown given for evangelistic work.
I Thessalonians 2:2, 13-14, 19*
- (**Crown #4**) - The righteous crown give to one pursuing Biblical righteousness.
II Timothy 4:8
- (**Crown #5**) - The glory crown given to faithful leaders of a flock. I Peter 5:4
- (**Crown #6**) - The revelation crown given to one who carefully guarded God’s Word.
Revelation 3:11
- (**Crown #7**) - The life crown given for one who is faithful in severe trials.
Revelation 2:10; James 1:12

In James 1:12 the identical construction “the crown of the life” occurs in the same context as **Revelation 2:10. From these two different contexts we may conclude that “the crown of the life” is a specific victors crown given to believers of a church who have remained faithful in the midst of satanic persecution which may even include death.**

A most interesting phenomenon of the Greek text is that this word “stephanos” is spelled and pronounced exactly the same way as the name “Stephen” who was martyred (Acts 7:59).

The most famous martyr of the church of Smyrna was Polycarp, who was the pastor of the church and one who had been a companion and student of the apostles. In fact, according to a letter written by Irenaeus, the apostles actually appointed Polycarp to be their pastor (Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, p. 167). Polycarp was careful to transmit the truth of the apostles to the church and ultimately he was arrested and told to denounce Christ and they would let him go. He said, “For eighty-six years, I have been His servant and He has never done me wrong; how can I blaspheme my King who saved me?” Polycarp was taken and burned as a martyr in A.D. 154.

Eusebius claims that many martyrdoms did occur in Smyrna, which would mean this place seemed to be specifically targeted for this kind of satanic attack and a special crown was promised for those who remained faithful (*Ibid.*, pp. 174-175).

God has a very special reward for those who suffer and remain faithful to Him even to the point of death. All of these will receive a special crown of life presented at an award ceremony by Jesus Christ. We know of several who will receive this crown: 1) Stephen who was stoned; 2) Paul who was beheaded; 3) Peter who was crucified; 4) Polycarp who was burned in A.D. 154; 5) William Tyndale who was strangled and burned in 1536; 6) Deitrich Bonhoeffer who was hanged in 1945; 7) Jim Elliott, Nate Saint, T. Edward McCully, Peter Fleming, Roger Youderian who were all killed by Auca Indians in 1956; 8) Chet Bitterman who was shot in the heart and killed in Bogotá, Columbia for translating the Bible for Wycliffe in 1981.

This is not a crown that every believer will be given. This will be a specific crown given to those believers who remained faithful in real satanic attack, even to the point of death.

POINT OF COMMUNICATION #6 – Christ’s message to the believer . **2:11a**

The believer is one who is able to hear what the Spirit of God says; specifically that Satan will attack you at times through poverty and persecution. His attack is time-controlled so don’t be afraid but remain faithful and you will survive it and be rewarded for it.

POINT OF COMMUNICATION #7 – The message to the unbeliever . **2:11b**

The “overcomer” is one who believes on Jesus Christ (I John 5:4-5). The promise to one who will believe on Jesus Christ is that he will not be hurt “by the second death.” In other words, one who believes on Jesus Christ may face death in this life, but in eternity he will be highly honored and not face eternal condemnation and eternal death. D. L. Moody used to say, “He who is born once will die twice; he who is born twice will die once.”

We may examine Smyrna from four perspectives:

Historically - Smyrna represents a literal church that was under a literal satanic attack. This church did remain faithful and one of the great names of history, Polycarp, was executed in Smyrna for his faith. Smyrna is still a large seaport (named Izmir) with a population of about 200,000. There still exists a church in Smyrna called “St. Polycarp.” Dr. Merrill Unger said that one third of the people of the city are Christians even to this day.

Prophetically - **Smyrna represents the suffering church dating from the time of Nero (A.D. 64) to the time of Diocletian (A.D. 311).** This would be the church of the first four centuries A.D. It was during this era that Satan launched one of his most severe attacks against Christianity through ten different emperors. According to *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs* about five million Christians were killed during this time and undoubtedly there will be many in heaven who will receive “the crown of the life.”

(93)

Representatively - Smyrna represents any church in any age that is under satanic attack through poverty and persecution. False doctrine will always surround the church and Satan will put the church under a time-controlled test through various forms of pressures. If the church stands strong, God will honor it and bless it. It is interesting that the word "Smyrna" comes from the word "myrrh" which is a sweet fragrance to God (Exodus 30:23). The suffering church is a church of sweet fragrance in the sight of God.

Individually - Smyrna represents the poor, suffering believer who is being attacked by Satan. It is good to remember that Jesus Christ personally knows the time frame of our test and He personally monitors our faithfulness through the test.

Revelation 2:12-17

If we were to leave Smyrna and travel 45-50 miles to the north and a little to the west, we would come to the capital city of Asia and the third church addressed by Jesus Christ. Today the city has lost its grandeur and goes by the name of Bergama, a city of about 20,000 people. But in John's day it was one of the most spectacular cities in the world and it was known by the name of Pergamum. This city was built on a cone shaped hill which sat inland from the Aegean Sea about 15-20 miles.

At the time John wrote this, Pergamum was an esteemed city in the world for three reasons:

- 1) It was esteemed for its culture.
- 2) It was esteemed for its politics.
- 3) It was esteemed for its religion.

Culturally, Pergamum surpassed both Ephesus and Smyrna. There was a library in Pergamum which was the second largest library in the world. It contained over 200,000 parchment rolls and was second only to the library in Alexandria. It was this very library that Mark Anthony gave to his girlfriend Cleopatra, who took it to Alexandria where it was destroyed in A.D. 642.

In fact, the word "parchment" actually comes from the word "Pergamum." According to history, Pergamum tried to lure a librarian from Alexandria, so the king of Alexandria stopped exporting papyrus paper to Pergamum, so they developed and manufactured their own "parchment paper," a writing material that comes from animal skins. Plus they also developed their own library. Pergamum featured theaters and gymnasiums and was a cultural masterpiece of a city.

Politically, since it was the capital city of Asia, it featured all of the big names of the political world. In fact, it is said that Augustus once went to Pergamum to dry out from his alcoholism.

Religiously, Pergamum was a religious mess. The city contained a 40 foot high altar dedicated to Zeus, the Greek "god" of weather and all other "gods." It also contained a temple to Asklepius, the Greek "god" of healing. Many people of poor health worshipped Asklepius and went to the hot pools, which supposedly had medicinal powers. In fact, one historian noted that the temples of Pergamum were the nearest form of hospitals in the ancient world. It is also interesting that the sign used to convey this Greek "god" was the sign of the serpent, which is still used by the medical world today; a sign in a city where the satanic throne was located. The sick people spent the night in the darkness of the temple and nonpoisonous snakes were allowed to roam and if a person were touched by one of the snakes, he thought he had been touched by "god" and healed. Pergamum also featured emperor worship. In fact, a temple had been constructed by Augustus solely for this purpose. In 29 B.C., Pergamum was given permission to build a temple and as Robert Thomas said, "Caesar worship was the most intense here" (*Revelation 1-7 An Exegetical Commentary*, Vol. 1, p. 180). Also it is interesting to note that priests of these false religions used "psychology" as a means of giving people hope. If this is true, then the real roots of psychology lie in false religion which would explain why so much in the world of psychology is pro-drugs and anti-God and anti the Bible.

(95)

One can clearly see that being a believer going to church in this city could be a very lonely experience and existence. To maintain a consistent testimony in this kind of environment could be very difficult. **But it was right here in this environment that God placed His church and it was to this church in Pergamum that Jesus Christ sent His third specific message comprised of nine points of communication:**

POINT OF COMMUNICATION #1 – Christ’s address to the specific angel and church.
2:12a

Pergamum was obviously a city of satanic presence (2:13), but this church was a place of God’s angelic presence. **We again must observe that this portion of the letter is addressed to a specific angel and a specific church.** The church in Pergamum was very unique. It had a different location, a different angel, and different problems. It was not the same as the churches in Ephesus and Smyrna and Christ specifically targets Pergamum and its specific needs.

It is a mistake to think all churches must be addressed the same way. One church may need a stinging rebuke and another church may need comforting encouragement. Each church is very special and very specific and Jesus Christ is very aware of exactly what the church needs, and through the Word of God every church will receive exactly what it needs.

POINT OF COMMUNICATION #2 – Christ’s command for John to write to the specific church. **2:12b**

Jesus Christ did not write the Word of God to a bunch of professors who were drawn to the Pergamum library; **He wrote His Word for His church.** This was a city of books with over 200,000 and it was a city of religion, **but what it really needed was the written Word of God.**

Jesus Christ does not challenge John to try to become scholarly and creative and innovative so he would impress the educated philosophers and doctors; He commands him to write the Word of God and send it to the church in Pergamum.

The thing to see here is that what any church needs and what every city needs is the written Word of God. What a church needs to continually do, no matter what its location, is to fire the written Scriptures. What the educated philosophers and doctors really need is to go to a church where they can actually hear the written Word of God expounded.

POINT OF COMMUNICATION #3 – Christ’s identification of a specific feature concerning Himself. **2:12c**

Jesus Christ specifically identifies Himself as “the One who has the sharp two-edged sword.” The grammatical difference between this construction in **Revelation 2:12** and Revelation 1:16 is that every word in 2:12 “sword, “sharp” and “two-edged” has an article “the” before it and none has it in 1:16 (2:12 = την ρομφαιαν - the sword, την διστομον - the two-edged, την οξειαν - the sharp, versus 1:16 = ρομφια - sword, διστομος - two-edged, οξεια - sharp).

The point of using the article is to stress that this is the same specific attribute that John saw previously in 1:16, and this is the same specific person that will be seen in Revelation 19:15 and 21. **The point of this is to communicate to the church that this is the one who has the ability to carry out fatal capital punishment at will simply by what He says.**

The sword, according to Gerhard Kittel, is a sword so large that it actually could touch the ground (*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 6, pp. 993-998). This was a powerful deadly sword capable of wounding and destroying anyone. Jesus wants this church in Pergamum to know this. He can finish a man or a church with one blow. He has the authority and power with His words to punish.

This is a very sober and intimidating portrait Christ paints for the church. He is the Savior of the church, but he is also the judge of the church. He will judge everyone and everything by the Word of God. As Robert Thomas said, “The ultimate meaning of the sharp, two-edged sword goes far beyond just Pergamum in its significance. It denotes Christ’s ultimate conquers of all the world powers, not just Rome” (*Revelation*, p. 181).

POINT OF COMMUNICATION #4 – Christ assesses things positive in the church. **2:13**

The verb “I know” (οἶδα) which begins the verse indicates that God has full and complete knowledge of everything and everyone in this church of Pergamum. There are two main positive realities for which Christ praised this church:

Positive Reality #1 - Jesus Christ had full knowledge of the difficulties of their location .
2:13a

Jesus Christ knew all of the difficulties of where these believers lived. He was fully aware that this was not an easy city to have a church or to minister. These people lived in and had a church in a city that featured “Satan’s throne” or literally “The throne of the Satan” (ο θρονος του Σατανα). **This is the only place in the New Testament where this phrase occurs.** There is a similar phrase in Revelation 13:2, but it is not as emphatic as it is here.

What we immediately see from this is that Jesus Christ has such a full knowledge of everything that He is able to actually pinpoint where Satan’s throne is located and where he is headquartered.

The noun “throne” is one that speaks of a place of central authority or kingly power (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, p. 14). From the construction used here and the repetition of the point used later in this same verse, we must conclude that **when John wrote Revelation, Satan literally headquartered himself in Pergamum.**

Satan is not omnipresent and can only be one place at one time, and apparently he was operating from his unseen headquarters in Pergamum. **What we learn from this is the kind of place in which Satan, himself, actually resides. What we also learn is that presently he is not headquartered in hell and he is not bound, but he headquartered in some city.**

(97)

I doubt seriously that you actually find Satan, himself, out in some field with a bunch of weirdoes, standing around a bonfire, wearing robes, chanting bizarre things. You may find some demons there, but not Satan, himself.

Satan has more class than that. Pergamum was Satan's headquarters and if we analyze his headquarters, we may assume the following:

- 1) Satan would headquarter himself in a city of great culture.
- 2) Satan would headquarter himself in a city that featured a variety of religions.
- 3) Satan would headquarter himself in a city of great education with a great library.
- 4) Satan would headquarter himself in a city of great political leadership.
- 5) Satan would headquarter himself in a city that would exalt men.
- 6) Satan would headquarter himself in a city of great mental and medical treatments.
- 7) Satan would headquarter himself in a city that featured many serpentine images

Jesus Christ knew the difficulties of His church existing and living in a place like this. He knew Satan was actually there and He knew there was a high level of satanic activity and pressure against His people.

What we do learn from this is that Jesus Christ can and will put His impacting churches in satanic cities. He put His church in Geneva and put His man Calvin there. He put the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London and put His man Spurgeon there. He put Moody Memorial Church in Chicago and put His man Moody there. He put the Scofield Memorial Church in Dallas and put His man Scofield there. He put the Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia and put His man Barnhouse there. Jesus Christ is still in the business of putting His churches in cities and using them for great things.

One other point needs to be made on this. Jesus Christ does take Personal notice of the difficulties of the place where we live. He does differentiate between circumstances. Not all churches have the same satanic difficulties.

Positive Reality #2 - Jesus Christ had full knowledge of their testimony. **2:13b-d**

The believers in the church of Pergamum did have two very commendable traits:

(Commendable Trait #1) - They held fast to Jesus' name. **2:13c**

The word "hold fast" (κρατεω) means to take hold of something with all of your strength and might (*Greek Lexicon*, p. 256). These believers held tight to the name of Jesus Christ. In the midst of the satanic persecution and trouble, they maintained a strong commitment to Jesus Christ. They looked to His name for their salvation and for their life.

(Commendable Trait #2) - They did not deny their faith. **2:13d**

The verb “deny” (αρνεομαι) means they would not deny or disown their faith in Jesus Christ. The noun “faith” has an article so this is talking about the specific faith in Jesus Christ that saves a person. The believers of this church were doctrinally solid and they refused to deny the faith system. **The tense of the verb is aorist tense which means there was apparently a point in time when these believers had been asked to deny their faith in Jesus Christ.**

They refused to back down from the fact that faith in Jesus Christ was the only thing that could save you, and apparently there was a moment when they were asked to deny that, at a time when you could be executed if you did not deny it. Probably the moment was when Antipas was killed.

There was a believer whose name was Antipas who was actually killed for his faith in Jesus Christ in Pergamum and Satan was behind it. Not much is known about him except he was martyred. One historian, Yazan Sadan Gokovali, claims that Antipas was archbishop of the church and said he was burned to death inside the hide of a calf, by roasting him in a bronze kettle (*The Seven Churches*, p. 36). This was probably the moment Christ was referring to because even when the believers of Pergamum saw this, they still held to their faith in Jesus Christ. They trusted totally and only in Him for salvation.

Jesus Christ commends those individuals and those churches who hold fast to and defend His name and His faith system.

POINT OF COMMUNICATION #5 – Jesus Christ assesses things negative in the church.
2:14-15

Even though this church had some very positive things, it also had some very negative things that needed to be confronted. **The adjective “few” (ολιγα) is one that refers to a very small number as compared to a large number** (Smith, p. 315). We may recall that in the church in Ephesus there was one negative thing, but in the church in Pergamum there was more than one negative thing. **Specifically there were two negative actions in the church and both of them had to do with a doctrinal defection.**

Satan was not able to conquer this church through persecution, so he tried a new tactic or new method which was deceptive compromise. He was not able to physically destroy the church, but he was able to doctrinally deceive the church.

Doctrinal Negative #1 - Some in the church held to the false teaching of Balaam. **2:14**

The teaching or doctrine of Balaam caused the children of Israel to stumble through idolatry and immorality. Balaam taught King Balak that it was perfectly proper to be involved in idolatrous worship and perfectly proper to be involved in immorality with heathen foreign women (Numbers 31:15-16; also Numbers 22:1-25:9). Idolatry and immorality lured Israel

away from God and God destroy 24,000 by a plague (Numbers 24:9). The Apostle Peter linked this doctrine of Balaam with greed, adultery and sensual behavior (II Peter 2:14-15, 18) and Jude linked it to religious leaders who rejected the authority of God and led people into gross immorality (Jude 7, 8, 11).

Apparently, this same kind of thing was happening in this church of Pergamum. These people were becoming involved in the idolatrous worship services of the heathens and also in their immoral festivals. **The issue in verse 14 was not just eating meat sacrificed to idols; as Paul said there was nothing wrong with that (I Corinthians 8:4-8). The issue was the actual participation in the idolatrous worship that included immorality.**

Satan is out to destroy the church through false doctrine and through immorality. God's people need to be aware of this. Jesus Christ has His eye on the church and any person who is moving into an area of idolatrous false doctrine or toward the promotion and participation in immorality is in a dangerous state.

Doctrinal Negative #2 - Some in the church held to the false teaching of the Nicolaitans .
2:15

As we said earlier, there was a Nicolas in Acts 6:5 who may have become a libertine. Also there was a Nicolas who surfaced in A.D. 300 who is called St. Nick, from whom Santa Claus is derived. Also the word Nicolaitans comes from two Greek words meaning to conquer the people. Whatever this doctrine was, it had infiltrated the church. This priestly instruction and domination was hated in the church in Ephesus but it was tolerated in the church in Pergamum and Jesus Christ wanted it stopped.

POINT OF COMMUNICATION #6 – Christ's command for obedience . **2:16a**

There is just one specific command that Christ gives to this church - “repent .” As we said, the word “repent” means to change your thinking right now.

He did not tell them to move away from this satanic city. He did not tell them to isolate themselves from all unbelievers. He did not tell them to try and change their satanic city by protests. **What He does tell this church to do is to repent; that is, they were immediately to change their thinking concerning the false teaching in the church that promoted idolatry and immorality.**

There was still time for these people in this church to repent. This is grace. God did not immediately strike them down like He did the Israelites, but He does command them to immediately repent.

There are times when we don't need to pray about something, we need to just change our thinking and act. This was one of those times for the people in this church of Pergamum.

POINT OF COMMUNICATION #7 – Christ promises a pending judgment for persistence in disobedience. **2:16b**

Jesus Christ was not giving this church a nice suggestion, but a serious command. They needed to repent and they needed to do it now. **If these believers in the church refused to repent, Christ said He would Personally come and wage war against “them” by the power of His Word** . By using the pronoun “them,” He knows everyone at church and He knows how to target those not really right with Him. Jesus Christ is promising that He will Personally come and use His word to hack them to pieces if they do not repent. **The fault of the church was in allowing this false doctrine to be taught.**

Now the statement “I am coming” I take to be literal. We know that Jesus Christ has His Spirit and His angels connected to a local church and He certainly is aware of everything via His omnipresence and omniscience. When He actually promises to pay a church a special visit, you may be certain it is very serious business. We would not actually see Him physically, but we would see the results of His visit.

The Word of God is sweet to those who are in a right relationship with Jesus Christ at church. But to one who is non-repentant, this same Word of God will cut and chop you to pieces. **One who hears God’s Word and rejects God’s Word will face a judgment from God’s Word.**

Now the warning given here is: 1) Aimed at believers ; 2) Is for disciplinary purposes. Jesus Christ will use His Word to discipline His own people if they do not repent. Now the question arises, What does Christ do with His Word for the non-repentant believer?

- 1) He will cause His Word to continually cut and convict the believer, not strengthen and bless. God’s Word will continually cut into a non-repentant believer’s soul like a knife. It will offer no encouragement, just cutting conviction. God’s Word will break one down and rip them apart.
- 2) God will cause one to lack strength - spiritually and emotionally. I Corinthians 11:30a
- 3) God will cause one to lose their health - some will become physically sick.
I Corinthians 11:30b
- 4) God will cause one to lose his life - some will physically die prematurely as judgment.
I Corinthians 11:30c; Revelation 2:23

A church can have Jesus Christ bless it through His Word or fight against it through His Word. When God’s people are confronted with God’s Word and it warns them to repent of idolatry and immorality, they had better take that warning seriously for Jesus Christ watches and will judge.

POINT OF COMMUNICATION #8 – Christ’s message to the believer . **2:17a**

The message to the believer is straight forward here - get away from false doctrine that promotes idolatry and immorality or else Jesus Christ will Personally wage a war against those who don’t.

POINT OF COMMUNICATION #9 – Christ’s message to the unbeliever. **2:17b**

Christ gives an amazing invitation to one who would believe on Him. He would give that person three wonderful things:

- 1) A new appetite - the ability to eat the hidden food of God, not physical, but spiritual.
- 2) A new identity - a new name as a child of God seen as a new creation in Christ.
- 3) A new judicial status - a justification that guarantees one has entrance into heaven.

A white stone was used in Pergamum for three things: 1) For writing, people wrote on white stones; 2) For judicial decisions used in ancient courts by a jury - white for acquittal and black for condemnation (i.e. Acts 26:10); 3) For admission into various things in the Roman Empire. A person was given a white stone with his name on it that became a ticket to get into a variety of things (For good discussion see Robert Thomas, *Revelation 1-7 An Exegetical Commentary*, pp. 199-202).

What Christ is promising is that if one will believe on Him, all of these blessings will be his.

We may analyze Pergamum from four perspectives:

Historically - Pergamum was a literal church with a real literal problem in that they allowed false doctrine to come into the church, which promoted idolatry and immorality. Christ demanded this doctrine be dealt with immediately or else He would Personally judge this church. The church existed until about A.D. 500 and then seemed to disappear.

Prophetically - There is a remarkable similarity between the church in Pergamum and the historical time frame of A.D. 313-590. This was the era when Constantine made Christianity a state religion (A.D. 313). He claimed he saw a large cross of fire which led him to support Christianity. During this period of Church History, doctrinal corruption infiltrated the church through two main ways - false teaching of priests that lead to idolatrous worship and immorality. The issues were popery and immorality. This was a marriage between church and state and it was a time when Satan tried to destroy the church through these two areas.

Representatively - Pergamum represents any church in any age that continually tolerates false doctrine. Any teaching which moves people away from pure worship of God and moves them toward immorality is false and it needs to be immediately stopped.

Individually - Pergamum represents individuals who go to church who have faith in Jesus Christ but who are moving into idolatry or immorality. This individual needs to carefully be taught God’s Word and needs to rightly divide what is true and what is false. If the believer refuses to respond when God’s Word is presented, Jesus Christ can pronounce a judgment on a believer of weakness, sickness and death.