Pergamum

So let’s look at some of the details of the church at Pergamum as far as the identity of Christ or what feature of Christ from chapter one the author draws on as it relates to the situation of the church. What was the situation of the church? What was the problem, the issue? What does the author tell them as his message to them? And then what is the eschatological promise if they overcome? And then again we will look a little bit at how they might have read Revelation and how the rest of Revelation, especially chapters 4 through 22 would have been relevant to their situation.

The church at Pergamum in chapter 2 verses 12 through 17 is one of the churches that receives both a positive and negative evaluation, or we could use the words commendation and condemnation. Christ is portrayed in the first couple verses as having a sharp double edged sword coming out of his mouth. We saw that was one of the features of Christ description back in chapter 1. We said probably the sword coming out of his mouth is a good example of how Revelation communicates primarily through symbolism. We are not obviously going to take this literally but the sword coming out of the mouth is actually a symbol that goes back to the Old Testament and a symbol that portrays Christ as one who judges. He is one who simply speaks the word and issues judgment on his people. Now Christ is portrayed as having this double edged sword preceding from his mouth from chapter 1. In other words, Christ now comes to the church of Pergamum primarily as a warrior; primarily as one who will judge. When you jump forward and read verse 16 in the message to the church of Pergamum it says, “Repent therefore, otherwise I will come to you and fight against you with the sword of my mouth.” Though the message of Pergamum is primarily going to be a negative one and Christ’s portrayal of having a sword indicates this, that he is primarily coming in
terms of judgment if they refuse to repent for whatever it is that they are doing that we will look at in just a moment.

First of all, it is important to see the church at Pergamum is commended. They are commended because they live in a tough and hostile environment. In fact when you begin in verse 14, you begin with the message after the description of Christ, Jesus tells the church through John, “I know where you live, where Satan has his throne.” Now there has been a lot of speculation about what Satan’s throne is. The most common suggestion is this would have been a reference to the altar of Zeus, one of the primary and major gods that Pergamum celebrated and that altar which was conspicuous in the city was in John’s mind when he writes this, when he gives this message from Jesus to the church that the throne of Satan would have been a reference to or an illusion to the altar of Zeus.

There have actually been a number of other explanations such as a throne, like a bema seat or other temples or memorials to gods and things like that in Pergamum that this could have referred to. First of all, I am not certain that we can be certain exactly what that may of corresponded to or if John had in mind some specific entity such as the altar of Zeus. In fact, I would suspect rather that John does not have a specific reference to anything and that the throne of Satan is simply meant to contrast with God’s throne that he has introduced us to in the first chapter. So that the throne of Satan simply means this is Satan’s domain. Satan rules here, this is his realm that he has control of. Again this sort of introduces what we will read in Revelations chapter 12. We said the messages to the churches also are a forward to the events in chapters 4 through 22 so that chapters 4 through 22 are more of a symbolic apocalyptic portrayal of the exact same thing John is doing in chapters 2 and 3. And in chapter 12 we are introduced to the dragon, Satan, who comes to deceive and to persecute God’s people. We see that happening already in chapter 2 in the message to Pergamum. So again, I think throne of Satan probably should not be too closely related to the altar of Zeus but then again it could just be another metaphorical way of John’s saying this is the domain of Satan. This is where Satan rules in this city of Pergamum.
So the Christians find themselves in a rather tough and hostile environment. Yet the condemnation rather commendation reminds us that they have in the face of this, they have actually maintained their faithful witness. So apparently here, at least by and large, the church has maintained its witness for the person of Jesus Christ even in an environment where Satan has his throne and Satan rules and Satan is able to deceive. In fact John tells us, this is the message where he tells us at least one person in this environment has died for his faith and that is a man named Antipas. This is the only person John specifically tells us has died, he does not tell us whether others have. But when you read Revelation, especially when you get into chapters 4 through 22 we will see that persecution and martyrdom for witness and testimony to the point of death is a common theme. That is, John seems to expect that what happened with Antipas and especially what happened with Jesus Christ is sort of a harbinger of more to come. John expects that the clash between Rome and the evil world system and God’s people and their faithful witness will result in more who will give up their lives for their testimony and their witness. So that is John’s commendation of the church in this environment where Satan rules and has his throne and holds sway they have maintained their faithful witness and one person, Antipas, has even died for that witness.

However, John’s commendation is tempered by condemnation or tempered by a negative evaluation as Jesus diagnoses the situation at the church of Pergamum. Basically, what John tells us is the church of Pergamum, starting with verse 14, the church of Pergamum has people, “there are those who hold the teaching of Balaam who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food offered to idols and by committing sexual immorality. Likewise you have those who hold to the teachings of Nicolaitans, repent therefore.” So the problem with the church is they are allowing or they have some people, though the church at large is maintaining their faithful witness, they are permitting some people who hold to the teaching of Balaam and the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Now the difficulty is who or what are these people. Who are these people who hold to the teaching of Balaam? Who are the Nicolaitans that John criticizes the
church for sort of giving a foot hold to?

Balaam

First of all, Balaam, this is another example of the author alluding to the Old Testament and what the author is going to do in a couple of places in Revelation 2 and 3 is already an example. We have already seen John use the ten days of testing in the previous message to Smyrna where John uses the example from Daniel and his three friends as sort of a model to and a connection to the situation that the readers are facing. Also we seen John using the Old Testament in the sense negatively, that is to demonstrate that in the same way God’s people were tempted by false teaching and by idolatry etcetera, in the Old Testament. In the same way, his readers are now susceptible to the same error. And so he will use Old Testament labels, persons, and titles to refer to certain persons or groups or entities that are promoting a similar type of false teaching.

So, if you were to turn back to the Old Testament in Numbers chapters 22 to 24, you read the account of Balaam. Balaam was a Gentile prophet who the king of Moab called upon to try to pronounce a curse over the nation of Israel. Instead, he pronounces a blessing. In chapter 25 of Numbers, the Israelites then end up straying into idolatry and into sexual immorality with the women of Moab, which was a foreign nation. Now interestingly, to move on to Numbers in chapter 31 Moses attributes this to Balaam himself. He was responsible then, apparently, for leading Israel into immorality and into idolatry. So Balaam may in a sense have become proverbial for false teaching which leads people astray, as he apparently led the Israelites astray into immorality and false teaching and into compromising with idolatry. Now also John is aware of a group or even a person that he can label as Balaam because Balaam provides a model or maybe proverbial for one who leads God’s people astray by false teaching. So it is a fitting title, a fitting designation for now what is going on in the city of Pergamum. Apparently the church in Pergamum is allowing this Balaam to do the same thing that he did in the Old Testament, that is, to lead some of God’s people astray into idolatry and sexual immorality.

Now one of the questions is who is this Balaam? Is Balaam a specific person in the
church at Pergamum? Does Balaam refer to a certain group of people? We cannot be sure whether Balaam is just a certain individual who is head over a group or refers mainly to a group, John is not specific. But the main point is whoever this Balaam is, he or she or they are teaching the church that it is alright to compromise with the Roman system of commerce, economy and worship. Remember all these things are closely intertwined. This person was teaching the church that it is acceptable for Christians to compromise with Roman empire and to engage in emperor worship, to engage in idolatrous worship of pagan gods especially perhaps in connection with some of their commercial activities and feasts and festivals and things like that. That is they were tempted to idolatry and fornication or immorality in the same way that Balaam had tempted the Israelites.

This idea suggest some continuity between in Old Testament and the New Testament people of God. That is John is doing more than just, providing an illustration. Saying this illustrates what is going on now. But instead there is a continuity, it is in the same way that this happened to the old covenant people of God, now the new people of God, the church consisting of Jew and Gentile, now is tempted by the same thing and faces the same situation. So there is a continuity between the old and new people of God in terms of unfaithfulness and idolatry.

Nicolaitans

The second group that is listed besides Balaam, Balaam being an Old Testament figure, the second group is called the Nicolaitans. One of the questions is: Is this the exact same group as the group or person represented by Balaam or is this a different group from the first one? Whatever the case, it is apparent, that whether this is a similar or different group, this group called the Nicolaitans are teaching the same thing. They are trying to get the church to compromise with their pagan surroundings. They are trying to get the church to compromise with the pagan culture, with the Roman empire, by actually eating meat offered to idols and committing adultery.

Now two issues relating to eating meat offered to idols and committing adultery. First of all, that, especially in 1 Corinthians chapters 8 through 10, we find Paul addressing a similar situation of eating meat offered to idols and there Paul does not
outright condemn eating meat offered to idols, he does condemn doing that in such a way to cause another brother or sister to actually violate their conscience by entering into that relationship by eating meat when they think it is wrong in their own mind. Paul does seem to draw the line at participating in situations where they would worship foreign pagan gods. But what is John doing in his complete prohibition, against eating meat offered to idols. Most likely John is envisioning a situation where the eating meat offered idols is not done simply in someone’s private home but probably the eating meat offered to idols would have been taken place, in this context, during certain occasions where they would have participated in feast and festivals in honor of the emperor or in honor of the pagan gods to which this meat had been sacrificed.

So in other words I think that John is condemning a situation that verges on overt idolatry. Overt worship of pagan gods and eating meat in such a context is what John is forbidding. Again this could have been part of the trade guilds where as part of their commerce and part of their job they would have participated in these guilds and participated in certain feast and festivals in honor of the gods and so what John may be condemning then is overt actions of worship by eating meat in certain context.

What about the adultery that he warns them against? Again is this physical or spiritual? It is possible, especially in connection with some of the pagan worship, it is well known that in some context of the Greco-Roman world that participating in temple worship would also afford opportunity to be involved with temple prostitutes, that may be what John has in mind. But perhaps more explicitly and probably John’s main point is to use idolatry or immorality in the same way it was often used in the Old Testament. And that is the assumption behind this is that God was the husband of his people, His people were the wife, and to go after idols, to go after other gods, to forsake the covenant with God was to commit spiritual adultery. So I wonder if John is using this in terms of not condemning to much physical and sexual immorality and idolatry, although that could be implied, but primarily he is using this in terms of his Old Testament background to imply by going after idolatry, by worshiping the emperor or other pagan gods, they are spiritually committing adultery by being unfaithful to Jesus Christ.
In fact, later on in the book we will see, especially in chapter 19 and chapter 21, we will see the theme of the people of God as the bride of Jesus Christ, as the bride of the lamb, and here is the metaphor that lies behind it that they are committing spiritual adultery. So John’s response to this is that they repent, that the church stops permitting this teaching in the church that is leading the people to compromise with the pagan idolatrous immoral society in which they live, where Satan’s throne is and where he rules and instead they are to maintain their faithful witness. Otherwise, the image used to describe Christ in the first couple verses, sword coming out of his mouth, will come into play and Christ will come and battle with them and war with them, which interestingly is another metaphor, one finds throughout chapters 4 to 22, the metaphor of a battle or a war, especially in chapter 19. But Christ will come and fight with them with a sword that comes out his mouth, if they refuse to repent. But if they do overcome, Christ promises eschatological or future blessing.

Again, by the way, we have already mentioned for each church, the idea of overcoming or conquering will look a little bit different. For the church in Pergamum to overcome would mean then to repent and to refuse to compromise, to refuse to allow these teachers and the church that is teaching the people of God, leading them astray by saying that it is alright to compromise with the pagan Roman environment and society and instead to refuse that and to repent would be what it means for that church to overcome.

Hidden Manna

Now the promises that Jesus holds out for the church, the eschatological future blessings if they overcome, are interesting. First of all, Jesus promises them the hidden manna. Notice starting in verse 17, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says of the churches, To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna.” Now the issue is what is the hidden manna because interestingly as we have mentioned already, most of the blessings that Christ promises to the one who overcomes are found at the very end of Revelations in chapters 20, 21, and 22, the blessings that are associated with Christ’s kingdom, his rule, his establishment of the new creation. In chapters 21 and 22,
those get picked up in the promises to the overcomer. But it is intriguing that at least one or two of these here do not appear in chapters 20 through 22, and so the question is: What is the promise of this hidden manna that the author promises to the one who overcomes?

Now as you recall from your Old Testament understanding and recollection manna is often associated with the wilderness generation of Israelites as God brought them out of Egypt and they made their trek across the wilderness, on the way to the promise land. One of God’s provisions for his people was the manna that came down from heaven as a gift from God to sustain the people. We read about that through various places throughout the Old Testament in the accounts of the Israelites as they wondered through the wilderness or made their trek throughout the wilderness and came to the promise land.

Perhaps this notion of hidden manna, and we have to talk about where that concept might come from, but perhaps the reason the author refers to hidden manna maybe because of the Balaam story which was part of the story during the time of Moses. So it is possible that the Balaam story that the author has referred to evokes the broader narrative and so he recalls the manna that God provided for his people. However, this idea of hidden manna may also recall the idea that the manna played a role in expectations of future eschatological salvation. In fact some Jewish writers were convinced that when the temple was destroyed, the manna that was hidden in the ark would be revealed at the coming of the Messiah. So here John may have that idea in mind of this hidden manna that will be revealed when the Messiah comes, as found in some literature.

Again John uses a symbol of end time salvation, the end time eschatological salvation that God’s people will participate in and enjoy if they remain faithful. So John has taken a common image from the Old Testament, perhaps as it has been interpreted in other literature to refer to manna that would be revealed in the end time and now uses it symbolically as another way of saying the same thing that he says in other promises, the tree of life, and the paradise of God, and participating in the temple of God, being a pillar in God’s temple is another image he will use later. All of these are simply different metaphoric ways of describing the salvation that God will provide in the end when God
comes to defeat evil and set up his kingdom and inaugurate his new creation in Revelation chapters 20 through 22. So the hidden manna probably has its background in Old Testament Jewish understanding of the manna.

**White Stone**

What about the second component in verse 17, he goes on and says to the one who overcomes not only will I give the hidden manna, I will also give him a white stone with the new name written on it. Now the question is: what in the world is this white stone, because again we don’t find, like the hidden manna, a white stone specifically anywhere else in Revelation especially in 20 through 22 where the text John draws on the blessings that he promises to the churches that overcome.

So what is this white stone? Obviously, two thousand years distance has made it very very difficult, and I think almost impossible to be certain exactly what John was intending. Although there have been numerous proposals and I just want to look at a couple of them. There have been several but for example it is well known that a white stone could indicate in the court system a vote of an acquittal, a vote of not guilty. A white stone could also be used as a pass to get into certain events, especially a banquet for example. So you get into a banquet, your white stone would kind of be like your RSVP or whatever you have to show in order to get into the banquet. Third, a white stone could also be worn on an amulet to ward off demons. There are other possible proposals, but these are three major ones that have often surfaced in discussions of the white stone. But it is almost impossible to tell exactly what John had in mind as far as the background. John may have had all of these in mind, I don’t think that is the case. John may have had one or two of these in mind. Often John uses imagery we will see, John may use imagery because it is evocative of more than one meaning. Sometimes John’s imagery comes to us with a richness that refuses to be pinned down to just one meaning, without suggesting it can mean everything. It is to be aware sometimes John’s images are evocative more than one meaning. So it is possible that John had one or more ideas in mind although at the end of the day.

I don’t think we can be certain exactly was John referring to getting into a vote of
acquittal, for example. Back then that would make sense against the background of Satan being the accuser and now God’s people go free and they are acquitted, vindicated which is another important theme in Revelation. A pass to get into a banquet, that would certainly make sense. In chapter 19 when God’s people enter into the banquet of the lamb, does it refer to warding off demons? That is also possible given the influence of demonic beings and given the role that Satan plays even in this text, it is possible that that could come into play. We simply can’t be certain. What we can be certain of is that the white stone symbolizes the heavenly eschatological reward and their heavenly salvation. So the manna and the white stone are simply two images that describe the same thing from different perspectives: they are eschatological salvation.

New Name

The new name, again it is difficult to tell exactly what is this new name that the author has in mind but the idea of a new name actually has again Old Testament precedents. If you go back to the book of Isaiah which is a book that plays very crucial role in John’s writings. There is a book entitled by an author named John Facus, a book entitled basically the use of Isaiah in the book of Revelation and has to do with the prophetic and antecedents to the book of Revelation. He surveys in detail how John uses Isaiah in numerous texts and so the new name actually is one that is found in a couple of places in Isaiah, for example, in chapter 62. Most of these texts are anticipations of in the future God restoring. So the new name actually is one that is found in a couple of places in Isaiah, for example, in chapter 62. Most of these texts are anticipations of in the future God restoring his people. And in chapter 62 verse 2, the author says, “The nations will see your righteousness, and all the kings your glory; you will be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will bestow.” You also find the similar idea in chapter 65. Isaiah chapter 65 in verse 15, again this is in the context of the new creation that in a couple verses later in Isaiah chapter 65, a text that gets picked up in chapter 21 of Revelation, “I saw a new heaven and a new earth.” In chapter 65 in verse 15 of Isaiah, “You will leave your name to my chosen ones as a curse; the Sovereign Lord will put you to death, but to his servants he will give another name.”
So this concept of a new name, it is hard to tell what is the new name John has in mind but maybe he is simply alluding or referring back to Old Testament texts again to say now Isaiah’s anticipation of a new creation that gets picked up in Revelation 21 is the promise that lies in store for the church of Pergamum if they will repent and if they will overcome and refuse to compromise with the pagan world.

So for the church at Pergamum, the rest of Revelation would function for them as a call to persevere. It would function as a call not only to persevere, but to those who are compromising or who are permitting people into the church who are compromising, the rest of the book of Revelation will function as a word of exhortation. They will read the battle scenes in Revelation as something that they are in danger of being at the wrong end of, if they refuse to repent. Jesus promised to come to them with a sword, what will be flashed out and become more of a reality, when they read chapters 4 through 22 and the depictions of battle, the depictions of Christ, for example, in chapter 19, coming on a white horse to do battle. So once again, depending on whether those in the church are maintaining their faithful witness or whether they are tempted to compromise, they will read the rest of the book of Revelation in a different way, whether they repent or whether they refuse to repent.

Thyatira

The next church, in chapter 2, the last church mentioned in Revelation chapter two is the church of Thyatira. Thyatira, in chapter 2, verses 18 through 29. This would be the next city on a circular route that again possibly John himself had a ministry among these churches. That would be the next city and the natural route that would encompass these seven churches. Thyatira was known as being a commercial town, but at the same time perhaps it was the least significant of the seven cities politically and commercially but it would attain greater status and greater prosperity by the second and third century, a little bit later on. It was known for its trade guilds. We talked a little bit about that, to participate in the trade guilds would also mean participating in the social and religious life of the trade guilds connected with your commerce and the social and religious life of Thyatira. Most of the guilds would have had a patron deity, a god that was sort of
responsible for their prosperity and for their success. To refuse to participate in these
guilds and refuse to acknowledge the debt of gratitude you owe to the gods, let alone to
the Roman empire, would have been seen as an extreme sign of refusal to conform and an
extreme sign of ingratitude to the gods and to those who were responsible for your
success.

Also Thyatira was kind of a hot bed in the sense of emperor worship. So once
again the city of Thyatira would have provided a context where Christians were tempted
to compromise and to accommodate to not only pagan worship but to also worship of the
emperor as well.

So here is what Jesus says to this church in Thyatira, “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. I know your deeds, your love and your faith,
your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more then you did at first.
Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that women Jezebel, who calls herself
a prophet.” By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the
eating of food sacrificed to idols. I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but
she is unwilling. So I will cast her on a bed of suffering, and I will make those who lay
with her suffer intensely, unless they repent of her ways. I will strike her children dead.
Then all of the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will
repay each of you according to your deeds. 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): Only hold on to what you have until I come.
To him who overcomes and does my will until the end, I will give authority over the
nations—‘He will rule them with an iron scepter; he will dash them to pieces like pottery’
just as I received authority from my Father. I will also give him the morning star. He who
has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

Now as we read this section you will realize that like the previous churches, like
Pergamum, Thyatira receives both a positive and a negative evaluation, though the
negative evaluation far outweighs in the space devoted to it, the positive evaluation. But
this is a church that receives both commination and condemnation. But notice how Christ is described, the feature attributed to him, from chapter 1, he is described as the one who has eyes like blazing fire and the feet are like burnished bronze back from chapter 1, the description of the son of man in the starting of verse 9 and following. This suggests that Christ primary posture towards the church in Thyatira is again one of a judge. As one who has blazing eyes like fire, notice how Jesus describes himself in verse 23, “I will strike her children dead. Then all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds.” That is with eyes blazing like fire Christ is able to look into the minds and hearts of his church and of his people and evaluate their true condition. So even though he will commend them, Christ’s primary posture will be eyes blazing with fire who is able to pierce into their beings and see their minds and hearts and who will come to them in judgment if they refuse to repent. It is interesting here, Christ in all these letters gives his churches time to repent of what they are doing. So he does not just come and say I am coming now to destroy you but he calls on them and persists with them in order that they might repent of their ways so that they can enter into their eschatological blessing so that they can overcome and inherit the promises that God has for his people.

Now the commendation is that he commends them for their good works and it is interesting to see that it says your later works are even greater than your first. So apparently their works, and their obedience and their faithful witness has increased and is even greater now than it was at first. Yet the commendation is short lived because immediately in verse 20 Jesus turns to the condemnation and the condemnation in this chapter seems to be very very similar to the one in Pergamum, that is, the church in Thyatira is in danger of compromising with their pagan surroundings. They are compromising their faithful witness by permitting teaching in the church that is basically leading the church astray and saying it is alright to compromise with your pagan environment. It’s alright to worship gods and to worship Caesar and to eat meat offered to idols and to engage in sexual immorality or spiritual idolatry as a result of idolatry and still worship Jesus Christ. Now Christ condemns the church, or gives them a negative
evaluation because they have tolerated this teaching to the church.

Jezebel

The image that John uses in this section--I use John and Jesus almost interchangeably because John is writing this obviously but he is recording the words of Jesus so I don’t want you to confuse that. Sometimes I will refer to it as this is Jesus speaking and other times I will refer to it as John because he is the one writing it down to address the churches. He is the one who has been commissioned in chapter 1, to address the churches. But now John uses an image from the Old Testament again, this time it is the image of a women named Jezebel. John gets this from the Old Testament, back in 1 Kings chapter 16 and also chapter 21 we read of this Jezebel who is the wife of king Ahab. It was Jezebel who led Israel into worship of the foreign god Baal. John now uses that story once again, much like he did Balaam, John uses that story now to help the church preserve of a similar threat. Again he is assuming there is continuity between the old covenant people of God and now the new people of God in the same way that they were led astray into idolatry in the Old Testament, now, once again, God’s people are faced with a teaching that would lead them astray into worshiping idols by getting them to accommodate with their pagan surrounding and cultures and worship of pagan gods and worship the emperor as well. So Jezebel becomes kind of a fitting code for what now is going on in the church in Thyatira.

Once again it is difficult to be certain whether Jezebel refers to a specific individual or refers to a group. The way the author describes her here it does appear that he may have in mind a specific female prophet, a prophetess that is the one who is infiltrating the church and is teaching the church or leading them astray and deceiving them, trying to get them to again accommodate by participating in idolatrous practices in Thyatira. It is interesting that what Jezebel does and how she is described here is in verse 20, “By her teaching she misleads or deceives my servants into sexual immorality.” Interestingly, this concept of deceiving is the exact language that crops up again in chapter 12 and 13 of Revelation. It is Satan, in chapter 12, and the two beasts who are guilty of deceiving the whole world and leading them astray. Getting them, in chapter 13,
the second beast tries to get them to worship the first beast and in fact that has been Satan’s pose since Genesis chapter 3, where Satan deceived Adam and Eve. So this notion of Jezebel deceiving, or this female prophetess, if that is how we are to understand it, in Thyatira, deceiving the people of God, that will get described later on in Revelation chapter 13, in 12 and 13, where the two beasts are the ones guilty of deceiving the whole world and deceiving God’s people. Now in more straight forward language, John describes this female prophetess, this Jezebel, as leading the church astray into idolatry. Again we said in chapters 4 through 22 of Revelation is a more of an apocalyptic view or an apocalyptic description of what John is already describing in chapter 2 and chapter 3.

Well in verses 22 and 23 of the message of Thyatira the author says, “I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling. 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.” So again I think this warning to those who participate with Jezebel. Notice the symbolic imagery he is not talking about literally throwing her on a bed and again notice the use of adultery and fornication and immorality language, probably again mainly metaphorically to refer to unfaithfulness to Jesus Christ and participating in idol worship and idolatry.

Now I think that what is described in these verses once again anticipates the different plagues and the different judgments that chapters 4 through 22 will spell out in more detail. So already John is warning the church that by participating in Jezebel and her teaching, and by participating in her teaching that leads them astray to engage in idolatry they will be the recipients of the plagues and the tribulations that one finds in chapters 4 through 22 if they refuse to repent.

When you read this it also raises the question how many groups are involved here because you have a reference to Jezebel, you have a reference to her children, you have a reference to those who commit adultery with her. Probably, one way to look at it is the author may have simply two groups in mind here. Jezebel and her children would simply refer to those who are promoting this false teaching, that is, those who are trying to deceive God’s people into committing adultery and to committing idolatry, and then
those who commit adultery with her would be those members of the church who are in danger of following her.

But in any case, again the picture is clear, what has Jesus concerned about with this church is much like Pergamum and some of the other churches in chapters 2 and 3 that Christ addresses, is that they are guilty of permitting a teaching that would lead the people astray by getting them to accommodate or compromise their faithful witness to Jesus Christ by participating in idolatry through worshipping pagan gods and also emperor worship as well. So then Jesus calls on them to repent and also, in starting of verse 26, promises or provides a promise for those who overcome, that is, for those who repent and refuse to accommodate and refuse to give in to this teaching, that they can compromise their faith in Jesus Christ with idolatrous activity, for those who overcome Jesus’ promises that they will overcome and rule over the nations. So rather than being deceived by their pagan world and environment, in fact, they will rule over it. They are seen to conquer and rule over the nations.

Notice in verse 27 the author supports that by quoting from the Old Testament again by quoting from Psalm chapter 2, “He will rule them with an iron scepter, he will dash them to pieces like pottery.” Intriguingly this is a text elsewhere in the New Testament that gets applied to Jesus Christ and later on in chapter 12. We read and looked briefly at chapter 12 as an example of a passage that actually refers to a past event that is the birth of Christ. It is that narrative of a woman who is pregnant and a dragon waiting to devour her child. She gives birth to a son and he is quickly raised to heaven out of the grasp of the dragon. That son is described as one who rules with an iron scepter, as one who will shepherd his people with an iron rod coming out of Psalm chapter 2. Now it is interesting that that gets applied to the people of God. So not only is Christ the one who conquers and rules but his people share in that rule if they overcome. So again the irony is kind of interesting, instead of being deceived by and led astray by the nations and by the pagan environment, if they overcome they will actually rule over it. They will actually share in Christ rule of the nations and they will share in Jesus defeat of their enemies who are trying to deceive them and lead them astray.
So similar to the church in Pergamum, this is a call to the church to repent, that is they will read the rest of Revelation as a call to repent, as a warning of what will happen if they refuse to repent, and a call not to be deceived by Rome’s power. So again there are connections with the rest of chapters 4 through 22. So they will read Revelation primarily as a warning, a warning that if they refuse to repent, if they compromise, they will participate in the judgments and the plagues that is issued in the rest of the chapter but if they overcome, again, they will inherit the eschatological salvation, the blessing that God has in store for his people.

Sardis

The next church that Jesus addresses, that John addresses writing the words of Jesus, the message of Jesus to the church is a church in the city of Sardis, in chapter 3 and verses 1 through 6. This again would have been the next city on the circular route. It was south east of the city of Thyatira that we just looked at at the end of chapter 2. In the past, interestingly, Sardis was an important military strong hold and in fact Sardis almost became synonymous with military strength and with military might. Also it was a city of great wealth that it had gained through trade and commerce. One interesting story, at one point in the history of the city Antiochus III, years before John addresses the city here, a king named Antiochus III actually defeated it in a very important defeat. When a Cretan descended the cliffs, it was known for its fortress, when a Cretan actually descended the cliff on the acropolis of the city and found a spot that was unguarded and unoccupied he was able to get into the city and the city suffered one of its very few defeats, otherwise the city was known as a military stronghold and kind of had a reputation for that.

In about AD 17, again several years before John addresses the church here, the city of Sardis as well as a couple of other cities that we will see in the vicinity of Sardis, suffered a debilitating earthquake. It was rebuilt through the aid provided by the emperor Augustus. We will see in a moment another city actually suffered an earthquake but it was rebuilt by its own wealth, by the wealth of its own citizens, but here Augustus provided the aid that rebuilt the city after it suffered an earthquake in AD 17. It was also
the home of numerous pagan gods and interestingly it also contained a fairly substantial Jewish population and as well it was in the heart of emperor worship.

Now Christ addresses the church in Sardis starting in chapter 3 verse 1 with these words, “To the angel in the church of Sardis write: These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God. Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; hold it fast and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I come to you. Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their garments. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. He who overcomes will be like them, and be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

So the problem with the church of Sardis is, apparently, they have a reputation of being alive yet Christ as the one who walks in the midst of his people and notice he is the one who holds the seven spirits. He is the one who holds the seven stars in his hands. He is the one who is in the midst of his people, and is able to evaluate and see their situation. He evaluates them as actually being dead though they have a reputation of being alive. In other words, the evaluation of the Sardis in chapter 3 is primarily going to be negative though later on the author will say, “there are some in your midst who have not soiled their garments.” What that means is simply that they have not compromised with idolatry and the pagan environment. They have maintained their faithful witness and they have refused to compromise. Yet by and large most of the church has and because of that they have a reputation of being spiritually alive, yet at the same time they are actually spiritually dead.

Notice it is interesting, the fact that he holds the spirits, that he is described as the one who holds the seven spirits of God and we see that this is a description from chapter 1 as well. We said the seven spirits of God probably suggest the fullness of God’s Spirit,
seven being the number of perfection and completion. So we probably should not think in
terms of seven separate spirits but the fullness of God’s Spirit. The significance of that
then is again not only that Christ is present with his people and able to see their situation
and evaluate it, but it is only by the power of the Spirit that they are able to emerge from
their situation of appearing to be alive, but actually being spiritually dead. So Christ
comes as the one who holds exactly what they need to become spiritually alive again, as
those who are spiritually dead.

In reality then, although they appear to be alive in their own evaluation and in their
own estimation, they are dead. Again perhaps because they have refused to witness in
their sexual culture, they have refused to maintain their faithful witness, and instead they
are like the church of Pergamum, like the church in Thyatira, they are compromising and
facing the same pressure the other churches have faced, that is the temptation to be
involved in idolatry and idolatrous worship, the temptation to worship pagan gods and
emperor worship, the temptation to be involved in certain aspects of the life of Sardis that
would have caused them to be involved in idolatrous activities, just as the other churches
have faced as well. Perhaps to avoid those pressures, now they are willing to compromise
and accommodate with their surroundings in order to avoid the persecution that churches
like Smyrna and later on Philadelphia are facing because of their refusal to compromise
and because they have maintained their faithful witness.

The solution then for this situation where they appear to be alive but some how
they have accommodated to the extent that they are now effectively spiritually dead
because of accommodating and compromising with their surroundings. The solution to
this again like other churches is simply that they have to repent. That is they must live
consistently with their claims as the people of God. They must live consistently with their
reputation that they are spiritually alive.

Now notice Jesus’ words to them if they do not repent, if they do not wake up,
Jesus says to them, “I will come as a thief and you will not know at what time I will
come.” This is an interesting example of where the author does not draw on the Old
Testament but probably the teaching of Jesus from a text like Matthew 24. Back in
Matthew 24 and 25 where Jesus teaches about his second coming, in the so-called “Olivet Discourse” or so-called “Eschatological Discourse.” In one of Jesus’ parables he compares his coming to, “like a thief in the night.” And he also warns his disciples to remain awake and to be watchful. So most likely the author here is recalling the exact words of Jesus to his followers, to his disciples back in his teaching in Matthew 24 and 25. Whether the author, John, had access to that is not the point. The point is that John would have been aware of Jesus’ teaching and now Jesus addressing the church at Sardis draws on the teaching we find from Matthew 24 and 25 warning the church that if they do not repent and if they do not wake up from their spiritual stupor, that their reputation of being alive but actually being dead and perhaps they are sort of trying to maintain a low profile in Sardis so as not to attract attention and persecution, if they do not wake up from that, then Jesus will come as a thief. Instead of one who holds the spirit that is able to bring them out of death and into life, instead he will come as a thief unexpectedly to those who are not prepared. Probably this then is a reference to his second coming. The second coming of Christ we find later on in chapters 19 and 20. So if they do not wake up they will encounter Christ who comes, for example in chapter 19, as the one who comes to do battle and to defeat his enemies.

So what does it mean to overcome then to the church of Sardis, again it means to refuse to compromise. It means to maintain their faithful witness; to live consistently with their reputation and their claims of being alive especially in the midst of this hostile environment. The next section we will look at what are the promises that are given to the church at Sardis if they do overcome.

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