

04. Apocalypse 2:8 – 3:6 : Scene I continued

Letters to the churches of Smyrna , Pergamum, Thyatira and Sardis



## Apocalypse 2:8

reputed home of Homer

1. The glorified Christ addresses the community

And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write:

These are the words of the first and the last,  
who was dead and came to life:

Those in positions of power in the cities of Asia Minor vied with each other to obtain Roman approval. Ephesus was the seat of the proconsul. Smyrna had a temple to Roma (erected in 195BC) and a temple to Tiberius (erected in 26AD). 'Smyrna' is Greek for myrrh, the aromatic ointment used for anointing the dead. John reminds the Christians there that it is Jesus who, having died, 'is alive for ever' (1:17-18).



## Apocalypse 2:9

### 2. Christ's judgment of the community

I know your affliction and your poverty, even though you are rich.  
I know the slander on the part of those who say that they are Jews  
and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

Some Jewish communities were responsible for accusing the Christians before the civil authorities and thus causing them to be persecuted. John declares that the Jews who are persecuting their Christian brothers and sisters are acting not as a spiritual faith community, but as instruments of Satan (the 'accuser').

## Apocalypse 2:10

3. Appeal addressed to the particular community

Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Beware, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison so that you may be tested, and for **ten** days you will have affliction. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the **crown** [στέφανος] of life.

The number **ten** will recur in the Apocalypse as a symbol for something which is limited, despite appearing complete [Daniel 1:12-15]

The image of a **victory crown** is especially appropriate for Smyrna, known throughout the ancient world as the jewelled crown of Asia because of its outstanding architectural beauty.

Like Christ himself they may suffer death for their faith. But like him also they will be raised to life if they remain faithful.

## Apocalypse 2:11

4. General appeal and promise of victory if appeal is heeded

Let anyone who has an ear, listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. Whoever conquers will not be harmed by the second death.

[the death of separation from God]

There seems to be no end to the difficulties and even persecution experienced by the Christians in Smyrna. They are being reminded that there is a power active among them that transcends the slander of the synagogue and the oppression of the Roman state - the power of the exalted Christ, who will see that they receive the recognition of victory achieved: the crown of life, a sharing in the life of him 'who was dead and came to life.'

We recall the words of James (1:12): 'Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. Such a one has stood the test he will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him'.

## Apocalypse 2:12

1. The glorified Christ addresses the community

**And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write:**

**These are the words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword:**

Pergamum was the ancient religious capital of Asia Minor. The Roman governor resident in Pergamum had the right of the sword (*ius gladii*): the authority to inflict the death penalty. Real power, however, lies, not with the Roman governor, but with the glorified Jesus. It is his sword that achieves true justice, and, as we have already learned, it is the sharp two-edged sword of God's word (1:16).



# Apocalypse 2:13

## 2. Christ's judgment of the community

I know where you are living, where Satan's throne is [emperor cult]. Yet you are holding fast to my name, and you did not deny your faith in me even in the days of Antipas my witness, my faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.

In 29AD a temple dedicated to Rome and to the Emperor Augustus was erected, making Pergamum the centre of Emperor cult. Domitian was addressed in cult as 'Lord and God.' Hence John's referring to the temple as Satan's throne.

Antipas was probably a local martyr outstanding for his fidelity to Christ.

It was the imperial cult that held the diverse empire together. To stay away from the temple was to put oneself outside the local society which looked on the Christians as antisocial, as atheists, and as undermining the prosperity which was understood as coming from the gods.

The temples functioned also as banks and as marketplaces.

## Apocalypse 2:14-16

### 2. Christ's judgment of the community

But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold to the teaching of **Balaam**, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the people of Israel, so that they would eat food sacrificed to idols and practise fornication ['love' of false gods]. So you also have some who hold to the teaching of the **Nicolaitans** ['Baal-am'].

### 3. Appeal addressed to the particular community

Repent, then. If not, I will come to you soon and make war against them with the **sword of my mouth**.

There seems also to be a play on the similarity of Balaam and 'Baal-am'. As in the letter to Ephesus (2:6) the Nicolaitans are mentioned. The same kind of compromise was being suggested in Pergamum as we noted in Ephesus. Some in the community were counselling accommodation with the imperial cult in order to avoid persecution.

## Apocalypse 2:17

4. General appeal and promise of victory if appeal is heeded

Let anyone who has an ear,

listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

To everyone who conquers I will give some of the **hidden manna**

[Psalm 78:24-25; 2Maccabees 2:4-8 (Jeremiah hides the ark with the manna)]

and I will give a **white stone** [a white stone meant acquittal]

and on the white stone is written a new name that no one knows  
except the one who receives it.

[a token with the name Asklepios, the healer and saviour]

Those who are faithful to Christ will find eternal salvation and will live under his name, experiencing his special patronage.

# Apocalypse 2:18

1. The glorified Christ addresses the community

To the angel of the church in Thyatira write: These are the words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like brass.



Thyatira was an important trading centre, set in the midst of a fertile plain. It was famous for its weaving and dyeing, and also for its work-guilds, especially those attached to the local zinc mines. John picks up these local allusions in selecting from his earlier description of the risen Jesus the 'flame of fire'(see 1:14) and 'brass'(see 1:15). The local Roman temple acclaimed the emperor Domitian as the Son of God.

## Apocalypse 2:19-21

### 2. Christ's judgment of the community

I know your works -your love, faith, service, and patient endurance.

I know that your last works are greater than the first.

But I have this against you: you tolerate that woman Jezebel [Ahab's wife from Tyre], who calls herself a prophet and is teaching and beguiling my servants to practise fornication and to eat food sacrificed to idols. I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her fornication.

The immorality associated with Tyre was the immorality of injustice, of wealth built up from violence.

John follows the Old Testament practice of describing idolatry in terms of sexual immorality. To worship idols (including the idol of unjustly acquired wealth) is to be unfaithful to God's loving covenant. John is referring to those who would compromise Christianity by attaching themselves to the false values of the Roman state.

## Apocalypse 2:22-23

Beware, I am throwing her on a bed, and those who commit adultery with her I am throwing into great distress, unless they repent of her doings; and I will strike her children dead. And all the churches will know that I am the one who searches affections and hearts, and I will give to each of you as your works deserve.

The exalted Christ who has eyes like a flame of fire ‘**searches affections and hearts**’. He shares in the power of God to penetrate to the inner truth of human feelings and intentions. He cannot be deceived. For him it is the truth that matters, and his judgment of human behaviour is clear and accurate, giving ‘**to each of you as your works deserve.**’

## Apocalypse 2:21-22 to Thyatira

'I gave her (Jezebel) time to repent, but she refuses to repent. Those who commit adultery with her (continue to serve false gods) I am throwing into great distress, unless they repent of her doings; and I will strike her children dead.

## Matthew 25:41-43, 46

'The king will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' ... and they will go away into eternal punishment.'

## Hell – Catholic Catechism

‘To die in mortal sin without repenting and accepting God’s merciful love means remaining separated from God for ever by our own free choice. This state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed is called “hell” (n.1033).

‘The chief punishment of hell is eternal separation from God in whom alone we human beings can possess the life and happiness for which we were created and for which we long’(n.1035).

‘God predestines no one to go to hell [= It is not God's prior will for anyone to go to hell]. To go to hell, a wilful turning away from God (mortal sin) is necessary, and persistence in it until the end ... The Church implores the mercy of God who does not want “any to perish, but all to come to repentance”(2Peter 3:9).’(n.1037)

## Apocalypse 2:21-22 to Thyatira

'I gave her (Jezebel) time to repent, but she refuses to repent. Those who commit adultery with her (continue to serve false gods) I am throwing into great distress, unless they repent of her doings; and I will strike her children dead.

1. What we do matters  
and has consequences that we cannot pretend away
2. Jezebel and her followers will suffer the second death  
if they do not repent.

## Apocalypse 2:24-25

3. Appeal addressed to the particular community

But to the rest of you in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not learned what some call 'the deep things of Satan', to you I say, I do not lay on you any other burden; only hold fast to what you have until I come.

## Apocalypse 2:26-28

4. General appeal and promise of victory if appeal is heeded

To everyone who conquers and continues to do my works to the end, I will give authority over the nations; to shepherd them with an iron rod, as when clay pots are shattered even as I also received authority from my Father.

The reward offered to the faithful is a share in the kingly power of Jesus, the 'Son of God' (2:18). The language echoes Psalm 2:7-9: 'You are my son; today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron, and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.' To rule is to shepherd (like David). Those who continue Jesus' mission share in the work of the Good Shepherd. The image had a special appeal to the citizens of Thyatira because of their special interest in weaving and dyeing.

## Apocalypse 2:28-29

4. General appeal and promise of victory if appeal is heeded

To the one who conquers, I will also give the morning star. Let anyone who has an ear, listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

The morning star is the harbinger of the sun, heralding the end of the night and the dawning of a new day. We find the same image in 2 Peter 1:19-21: 'We have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.'

# Apocalypse 3:1: Sardis

1. The glorified Christ addresses the community

To the angel of the church in Sardis write: These are the words of him who has the seven spirits of God (1:4) and the seven stars (1:16):

2. Christ's judgment

I know your works; you have a name of being alive, and you are dead.

Because the Christian community had fallen into complacency and had accommodated to the pagan values of the citizens of Sardis, John highlights the fullness of the Spirit which the glorified Jesus has and wishes to pour out upon them if only they would recognise their plight and repent.



## Apocalypse 3:2

3. Appeal addressed to the particular community

Rouse yourselves, **stay alert**, and strengthen what remains and is on the point of death, for I have not found your works perfect in the sight of my God.

Under king Croesus (6th century BC) Sardis boasted an impregnable acropolis. However it was penetrated by king Cyrus of Persia and the city captured because of the carelessness of those guarding the acropolis. They were so confident that they failed to remain vigilant. Their failure became proverbial. Hence John's warning to the Christian community of Sardis to rouse themselves before it was too late and to stay alert.

## Apocalypse 3:3-4

### 3. Appeal addressed to the particular community

Remember and keep in mind then what you received and heard; obey it, and set about repenting. If you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you. Yet you have still a few persons in Sardis, who have not soiled their clothes; they will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy.

‘his head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow’ (1:14)

Jesus reminds them that they do not know the time of his coming (see Matthew 24:42). If they fail to be attentive they will miss the grace which he is offering them. Clothes symbolise the way we are seen by others, and so the witness which we offer. Fortunately, there are still some of the Christian community in Sardis who are faithful to the mission of the risen Christ: they ‘walk with me in white’, sharing in the luminous glory of the risen Jesus.

## Apocalypse 3:5-6

4. General appeal and promise of victory if appeal is heeded

If you conquer, you will be clothed like them in white robes,  
and I will not blot your name out of the **book of life**;

I will confess your name before my Father  
and before his angels. [see Matthew 10:32]

Let anyone who has an ear listen to what  
the Spirit is saying to the churches.

The **book of life** is a common image in the Old Testament. It is probable that Christians had their names struck from the register of citizens in Sardis, and also from the register in the synagogue from which they had been excommunicated. John is reassuring them that they are written in God's register .