

Dr. Dave Mathewson, Revelation, Lecture 5, Revelation 2

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This is Dr. Dave Mathewson in his course on the book of Revelation. This is session 5, on Revelation 2.

In chapters two and three of Revelation, then, Jesus, through John, is now ready to and prepared to address, diagnose, and evaluate the seven churches that John now is specifically writing this apocalyptic prophecy in the form of a letter to.

A couple of things to discuss before we look at the seven letters themselves. First of all, one issue is that sort of goes back to the end of chapter one, where John identified, or Jesus speaking to John, identifies the seven stars as the angels of the seven churches. One of the questions is, who are these seven angels of the seven churches? There are basically two ways this has been understood.

One is that they are to be understood, the word angel, as many understand, as many of you may know, can be used more generally to refer to a messenger or something like that. Some have understood these seven angels as seven messengers, that is, actually human beings. One commentary I read actually envisioned seven messengers traveling together and dropping off the messages to each of the seven churches.

So, it's possible that they could be seven messengers. Some have suggested they are the seven leaders of the churches, or elders, something like that, of each of the churches. The other possibility, the second one, is that these are to be understood as supernatural beings, that is, as actually angelic beings.

How I think they should probably be understood is, that one of the things you find in apocalyptic literature, and find this going on in Daniel a little bit, but some of the apocalypses like 1 Enoch and other apocalyptic, Jewish apocalyptic works, is that you frequently find, and this is part of the understanding of an apocalypse as unveiling, we said, it's like watching a play. All you see when you look out at the world and at history is what goes on the stage. You don't see what goes on behind the scenes that influences what goes on the stage.

An apocalypse lifts the curtain so that you can see behind history to a whole new reality, a heavenly world, a heavenly reality in the future that influences how you look at what goes on, but also how you interpret and respond to the present. Keeping that in mind, one of the things you find in apocalypses is often earthly persons and institutions often have an angelic, heavenly representative behind them. You find this going on in the book of Daniel in a couple of places.

So, I think that probably we should understand these angels as the heavenly counterparts or heavenly representatives of the earthly church. The idea is not that each church, every church has a heavenly guardian or something like that. It's just in apocalyptic fashion you find that what goes on in earth has a counterpart and is reflected in a heavenly reality.

So, I take it that probably these seven angels of the churches are the heavenly representatives or the heavenly counterparts, as part of the apocalyptic perspective, the heavenly counterparts of the seven earthly churches in Asia Minor that John addresses. The other thing to comment upon is that this is only the beginning of a series of observations we'll make on the people of God throughout the apocalypse, but by calling or identifying the seven lampstands as the seven churches. This is another example, in Revelation, but we find this elsewhere in the New Testament, of taking temple imagery from the Old Testament and now applying it to the church.

So, a feature of the temple, which is the seven lampstands, part of the tabernacle in the temple, now gets our representative of or now symbolizes the church. So, in a sense, John is already describing the church as God's temple. We've already seen that they're the kingdom and priest from Revelation chapter 1, but now they are also the temple, who are to represent God's presence in the world, they are to represent God in the world, to be his witness, to be his light in the world, as his temple, represented and symbolized by the seven lampstands.

So, let's move on to chapters 2 and 3, having kind of drawn that connection back to chapter 1. Now it's chapters 2 and 3, John speaking for the exalted, resurrected Son of Man, heavenly Son of Man, now Christ, through John, will address the seven churches with an authoritative message from Christ to his people. We've already seen Christ do this as the one who walks in the midst of the lampstands, Christ does this as the one who holds the stars in his hands, the one who is sovereign over his churches, the one who stands in authority over his churches, but the one who also is present in the midst of the church. As represented by the fact that he walks in the midst of the lampstands.

Because of this, he is now in a position to evaluate his church, he is present with it, and his presence with his church, as we've already seen, will result in and mean either comfort and encouragement for the churches, or warning and exhortation, a warning of judgment for those who are compromising and who refuse to repent and who refuse to maintain their faithful witness for the person of Jesus Christ. And we've said these seven churches are seven literal and historical churches in Asia Minor, in the western part of Asia Minor or modern-day Turkey, that now Jesus will address. Before we look specifically at the seven churches themselves and the messages delivered through John by the risen Christ to these churches, I want to make several observations.

Actually, I am going to try to make seven of them. I don't know if that was intentional or not, but that's how many I have and certainly fitting for an apocalypse and for the seven churches. But that's beside the point.

The first observation I want to make overall in reading these is, first of all, the seven churches are all actual historical churches situated within the heart of imperial Roman rule. All of these churches belong to and are situated in one of the Roman provinces and at the heart of emperor worship. We talked a little bit about this in the introduction, so I'd refer you back to that for some of the issues that this raised for churches and Christians living in an environment dominated by Roman rule, imperial Roman rule, in the context of Roman commerce and Roman politics and religion that were all intricately intertwined and joined and the temptations and the issues that caused for Christians who were convinced that only Jesus Christ, only God and the Lamb are worthy of worship.

Some of the issues that living in the imperial Roman context and rule, the issues that that caused for them. But that's the first point. All these seven churches are situated right at the heart of imperial Roman rule and in the heart of the emperor cult and emperor worship.

The second thing to say is, interestingly, these seven so-called letters, although they're often labeled letters, are probably not technically letters at all. It's interesting when you read them, they don't begin or end like a letter. They begin sort of like a letter when they introduce to the angel of the church at Pergamum or to the angel at the church of Smyrna or to the angel of the church of Ephesus, write this.

That could resemble a letter. But it's interesting that these really don't resemble the format of a letter. Instead, I would go along with those who think these actually resemble more closely prophetic proclamations or prophetic messages.

Even some of this material, when he says, these are the words of him, some of this language resembles Old Testament prophetic texts. And the message of warning or the message of comfort resembles what one finds in Old Testament prophetic texts. So, I think that more accurate than letters, although they function similarly to letters, more accurate than letters is that John is proclaiming a prophetic message or bringing a prophetic proclamation or message to the seven churches after the manner or resembling closely the prophetic proclamations or prophetic messages from Old Testament prophetic texts.

Interestingly, along with this, David Ani, actually in an article or two and also in his recent commentary on Revelation in the three-volume commentary in the Word Biblical Commentary series, David Aune suggests that these letters also resemble very closely royal or imperial edicts found in other cultures, but even in the Roman

Empire. A royal edict or imperial edict was an edict or message that a king, a ruler, or an emperor would issue to the people. And so, the idea here may be now that Jesus as king, King Jesus as exalted ruler and king now issues an edict or an imperial edict or proclamation to his subjects, to his people, that is, these seven churches.

So, technically, it might not be best to label these as seven letters, but as seven prophetic messages issued to the church and perhaps in the form of an imperial edict or royal edict that a king or ruler would give to his people that now Jesus gives to the churches. The third thing to say about these letters in general is that they are also well known, but just to remind you of, to look for as you read the seven letters, and I will read them individually. Remember, and by the way, I will be reading large sections of Revelation as we move through it because back in chapter 1, Revelation was meant to be heard by the readers, and I think there's something in reading Revelation and letting its images kind of roll over us and letting them pass before our eyes and our minds to get a sense, not just to analyze the details, but to kind of get a sense of the effect that Revelation is trying to create.

So, I will read the seven messages to the churches as well, but as I read them, my third point is, to be alert to the similar structure that they reveal. First of all, all of them begin by addressing a church to the angel of the church of fill-in-the-blank, Smyrna, Ephesus, Laodicea, Philadelphia, whatever. Second, they then are followed by an identification of Christ.

A character quality from Chapter 1 then is used to identify Christ at the beginning of each of the letters. This is then followed by an I know section. I know, and then the situation that Jesus knows about the church is then described.

Then this is followed by either commendation or condemnation. And sometimes a little bit of both is mixed. Sometimes the church is commended for, yes, you're doing this well, but I have this against you.

Two of the churches receive no condemnation, no judgment at all, because they are the only two that are suffering because of their faithful witness. At least one church receives no commendation. Everything is negative.

That is the church of Laodicea, the very last one. So, commendation or condemnation. The fifth thing is, that there are different ways to divide it.

I'm just following a simple and common way. The fifth thing is a promise to the overcomer in terms of a future blessing. So, every one of the letters ends, to the one who overcomes, I will give.

And there's a reference to a future eschatological blessing that is promised, usually a blessing taken from chapters 20 through 22 of Revelation. And then finally, there is a

call to the one who hears. Resembling, perhaps depending on Jesus' use of this phrase in his parables, to the one who has an ear, let that person hear.

To the churches who have an ear, let them hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches. So, again, this is a prophetic warning and exhortation. It's not something just to speculate about or to try to figure out what will happen in the future, but this is a prophetic warning that the church is to listen to and take heed, that the church is to attempt to understand and attempt to appropriate and to respond in obedience.

So, be alert to those five things, the address to the church, the identification of Christ, and I know the situation, or I know the section that describes a situation, commendation or condemnation, one of those or both of those, and then a promise to the one who overcomes of a future eschatological blessing, and then, finally, a call to the one who hears. Some variation of most or all of those occurs in each of the seven letters. A fourth thing comes out of number three, and that is the seven messages are clearly integrated, and this will lead to a couple of other important conclusions, I think.

The seven messages to the churches are clearly integrated into the rest of the book of Revelation, both what comes before it, or what comes before chapters two and three, and what comes after. First of all, with what comes before, the seven messages all begin, as we've already said, with some aspect of the Christ description in chapter one, 12 through 16. Some aspect of the description of the exalted risen Christ as the Son of Man in chapter one now is applied to each of the churches in chapters two and three.

As you read them, it becomes clear that each of the features, the specific feature chosen for each church, as we're going to show, is directly relevant to the problem or situation of each of those churches. So, again, if you go back and read verses 12 through 16 and the description of Christ as the feet of burnished bronze and the eyes like flames of fire and having a sword coming out of his mouth, walking among the lampstands, et cetera, et cetera, one of those features gets picked up in each of the letters, a feature that is specifically relevant to the problem or issue that Christ is addressing. The other thing that we already also saw is that it's connected with what comes after it in that the promises of blessing, of future eschatological blessing to the one who overcomes, comes right out of chapters 20 through 22.

References to reigning with Christ, overcoming the second death, the new Jerusalem, the tree of life, et cetera, et cetera. All of those images and some other ones, but some of those images get picked up as what is promised to the churches if they overcome. And there's actually some other language as well.

For example, the language of faithful witness, the language of deceiving, and other types of language also is reflected later on in chapters 4 through 22. So, chapters 2

and 3 are intricately connected back with chapter 1 through the images of Christ and also chapters 4 through 22, especially the latter chapters with the promises to those who overcome. A fifth thing is we've already seen the number seven is important.

The number seven is important not only or specifically for the literal number seven, seven in a sequence or seven in a series, but for its symbolic value. We've seen that the number seven connotes perfection and completeness. So here is one example prior to the actual vision itself.

Here is one example where the number seven does, first of all, refer to seven literal historical churches in Asia Minor located in Ephesus, Thyatira, Smyrna, Pergamum, Philadelphia, etc., etc. But at the same time, probably the number seven is deliberate because the number seven symbolizes completeness, and perfection is meant to represent churches more broadly. Now, some have taken this to suggest, although I don't find this happening a lot anymore, it used to be popular to read Revelation 2 and 3 as the seven churches actually predicting seven stages or seven periods of church history.

Then obviously our modern-day church in the 20th and now 21st century would be predicted by Laodicea. So, the seven churches starting with Ephesus are meant to predict seven successive periods of the church's history leading up to our modern day. Now, the difficulty with that is at least twofold.

Number one is I don't see any hint that that's what John is doing, that he is actually linking or predicting by the messages. There is a prediction, but it is for the overcomer that they will receive a blessing. Outside of that, I'm not sure I see any hint that John is actually forecasting or predicting future periods of church history.

Instead, it becomes clear to me, the second point is that all of these seven churches and the problems that surround them are actually things that were taking place already in the first century. So, they're not limited to future periods of church history. These were events already taking place in the first century.

These are seven churches and seven specific situations, problems, and issues that the historical churches were already facing in the first century. Therefore, I think precluding seeing these as only a forecast of what's going to happen in the future. They are already taking place in these churches in the first century.

Third, when you read them closely, and if you study church history closely, it becomes evident that it's hard to limit any one of these letter messages to any one period of church history. Instead, what you find is, I think it's better to see these seven messages of the churches as representing issues and problems already taking place in these seven churches and other churches in the first century, but also problems that can be reflected in nearly any period of church history leading up until

the present day. So, I think the number seven is intentional not because it predicts seven periods of church history.

It's intentional because it represents the full range of faithfulness and unfaithfulness that characterizes churches and any period of church history leading up to the present day. Though the one thing I would agree with, at least in North American reading it in the context of the United States of America, I think you could make a good case that probably the church in America most closely resembles the Laodicean church, the seventh one, and we'll talk about that more later. So, number five then.

The number seven is probably important. It does refer to seven specific literal historical churches in Asia Minor, but they are probably meant to represent the church more broadly in the first century, but also until Christ comes back, representing the full spectrum of faithfulness and faithlessness represented in the churches in different times and different places throughout church history. The sixth thing to say about the seven churches that we've already hinted at is it's interesting when you read it closely you find that five of the churches were actually faithless and suffered rather serious problems, usually related to compromise and or complacency.

That is, for various reasons that we talked about in surveying the historical background. For various reasons, some of these churches, maybe some of them, not all of them, some of them to avoid persecution, some of them were willing to compromise their faithfulness to Jesus Christ and were willing to immerse themselves fully in Roman culture and Roman commerce and religion, including emperor worship, thus violating the exclusive worship and allegiance that belongs to Jesus Christ. Five of the churches seem to fall into that category.

Five of them had serious problems. Five of them received negative evaluations. And only two of the churches are suffering and are recipients of any kind of persecution.

Only these two churches receive a positive evaluation with no condemnation or no negative evaluation. So again, that says something about the way we read Revelation. Revelation is not, despite the popularity of this approach, Revelation is not primarily, although it does this at least for two of the churches, it's not primarily or exclusively for comfort and encouraging persecuted Christians.

It's more so, it's meant as a wake-up call and a warning to churches that are willing to compromise and become so complacent that they're in danger of losing their witness. The seventh and last thing I want to say by way of introduction is it's important to understand how chapters 2 and 3, how the seven churches relate to chapters 4 through 22. Chapter 4, as we'll see in a moment, chapter 4, as we'll see later on, chapter 4 introduces kind of the visionary section proper or the apocalypse proper, one might say, following the messages of the seven churches that in a little

bit more straightforward manner diagnose and describe the issues in the seven churches.

Chapter 4 then sort of begins the vision itself where John actually, heavens are open in true apocalyptic fashion like one finds in Jewish apocalypses like one finds in Ezekiel 1 and 2. Heaven is open and John is invited to go into heaven to see the heavenly environs and the heavenly realms and the rest of Revelation then records the visions that result from that all the way through most of chapter 22. Now, how we're to understand that is this, I'm afraid that many times we've been too keen to separate the two sections. What I think is going on is this, what John says in a more straightforward manner in 2 and 3, he now says in a more symbolic way in chapters 4 through 22.

In other words, I think that chapters 4 through 22, the visionary section is another way of saying the exact same thing and referring to the exact same things as John refers to in chapters 2 and 3 in the messages of the seven churches. It's just that what John says in chapters 2 and 3, he now says in a more symbolic and more metaphorical way but I think referring to the exact same things. So, chapters 4 through 22 will further interpret the situation of the churches in chapters 2 and 3. That is by providing an apocalyptic and prophetic visionary perspective on the situation of the churches in chapters 2 and 3. And so, each church from chapters 2 and 3 will see their situation from chapters 2 and 3 revealed in symbolic form in chapters 4 through 22.

And they will, each church will see 4 through 22 applying to their specific situation in different ways. They will read the rest of Revelation in different ways depending on their specific situation and circumstances and their spiritual condition. Whether they are complacent and compromising, whether they are suffering for their faith, Revelation 4 through 22 will be seen as applying to them differently depending on their situation as revealed and embodied in chapters 4 through 22.

We'll also see as we work through 4 through 22, as I've already said, the promises to the churches, those who overcome will receive an eschatological promise in the form of blessings of salvation. Those often are taken right out of chapters 20 through 22. And we're going to see some of the terms and themes in chapters 2 and 3 get developed more fully in chapters 4 through 22.

So, I think that is a crucial principle for reading Revelation in chapters 2 and 3 and that is to understand 4 through 22 is not different material. It's not referring to a different time period. It's not referring to different events.

You don't have John doing one thing in chapters 2 and 3 and then jumping to do something else in 4 through 22. Instead, again, chapters 4 through 22 says in symbolic apocalyptic imagery the exact same thing that he says in a little bit more

straightforward way in chapters 2 and 3. Again, depending on the situation and spiritual condition of the church, each of the churches will read 4 through 22 as addressing their own unique situation and will read it in a little bit different light. Again, depending on whether they're complacent or depending on whether they are suffering for their faithfulness and their faithful witness to Jesus Christ.

Now, to look at chapters 2 and 3 in a little bit more detail. Now, what we're going to do again is I want to proceed by not examining every single image, verse, or text, part of the text in Revelation 2 and 3. But, number one, I want to begin by talking a little bit about the significance of the cities in relation to their role within the Roman Empire. I want to look at the situation and the background of each letter and that is what problem the author was addressing.

And then, again, what is the main message to each of the churches? What is it that the author says by way of commendation, by way of condemnation? And maybe draw some conclusions and make some hints as to how each of the churches may have read the remaining of Revelation in chapters 4 through 22. So, beginning in chapter 2, in chapter 1, the risen Christ is now prepared, now commissions John to address these churches with the prophetic messages. Here, now, we begin to read the messages of the seven churches.

And the first church that we encounter in chapter 2 is the church in the city of Ephesus. So, the author begins, with the angel of the church in Ephesus, again, the angel perhaps being the heavenly counterpart, the heavenly representative of the earthly church rather than a human messenger or human leader. Another important thing to understand about the seven messages is that this is common knowledge and you can see this very easily if you look at any map of ancient Asia Minor, Western Asia Minor.

Ephesus, if you look at the church, Ephesus is the first church on a circular route that encompasses all seven churches. That is, it's interesting, that starting with Ephesus, the churches in Revelation 2 and 3 are listed in the order in which they would have been visited in a typical circular route. And it's possible that this is the route John may have taken at times in visiting the churches.

It appears that John may have had a prophetic ministry among these churches and this may represent the route he took. But the order in which the churches are addressed appears to represent the order in which they would have been visited on a circuit, in a circular route. Ephesus, as we'll see, Ephesus may be first because of its significance in the Roman Empire in the provinces of Asia Minor and the significant role that Ephesus played may be reflected in the fact that it occurs first.

Ephesus was probably the most important and powerful city in Asia Minor, in this part of Asia Minor, in the provinces of Roman provinces. It boasted a population of

about 250,000 or a quarter of a million at this time. As most of you recognize, one of the things Ephesus is known for, and if you've studied Ephesus at all, this is probably one of the things that pops into your mind first, is the goddess Artemis or Diana, depending on whether you use the Roman or the Greek name Artemis or Diana.

You read in Acts 18, and in that context, you read of Paul's confrontation with and issues with Artemis. When Paul visited Ephesus, Artemis was simply the goddess of fertility, and another example of how what happened commercially or in your prosperity was to be attributed to a patron goddess that belonged to that.

Interestingly though, Ephesus was not only known for the goddess Diana or Artemis and for its pagan religion, but Ephesus was also the hotbed of the imperial cult.

It had a temple erected in honor of the emperor Domitian, who was probably the emperor ruling at the time when Revelation was written, in the middle of the last decade of the first century. But here's what, in that context, here's what Jesus, speaking now through John and John writing to the seven churches, here's how Jesus addresses the church at Ephesus. To the angel of the church in Ephesus, write this, these are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and who walks among the seven gold lampstands.

I know your deeds, your hard work, and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardship for my name and have not grown weary.

So apparently this is one church that has undergone some persecution and hardship. But, verse four, yet I hold this against you. You have forsaken your first love.

Remember the height from which you have fallen. Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.

But you have this in your favor. You hate the practice of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says of the churches.

To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise or the garden of God. First of all, notice how Christ is identified in the message to the church at Ephesus. Christ is identified as the one who holds the seven lampstands and the seven stars and he walks in their midst.

That is, he is present with his people. Again, this probably suggests Christ is present with his people both to comfort them, but that he also exercises control over them. The reason I say that is notice in chapter two in verse five that when Christ begins to diagnose the situation in Ephesus, they are in danger of losing their lampstand.

That is, as the one who holds the stars, as the one who is present in the midst of the lampstand, Christ has the authority to remove it. That is, he has the authority to remove their lampstand, their faithful witness in the world if they do not repent. And notice that the issue or the church at Ephesus receives a message of both commendations.

At the very beginning, Christ commends them. That he is aware of their deeds. He is aware that they have refused to go to follow some who claim to be apostles, perhaps claim to be speaking with the authority of Christ's apostles, yet John says they are not.

They have endured hardship and suffering. So, Jesus has much to commend the church at Ephesus for yet at the same time, at the same time, Christ is convinced that they are lacking in something. That is, they have lost their first love and they are in danger of losing their witness.

Now, this seems to me to suggest that the church in Ephesus is probably the issue is, that while they are very orthodox in their belief and while they are even intent on resisting false teaching, the problem is they have lost their first love. And in a moment, we'll look at what is the first love for what or for whom. It's interesting, in verse 6, if I can jump ahead just a moment.

In verse 6, when John does, after a negative evaluation, he jumps back to a positive one. In verse 6, he says, you have this in your favor, you hate the practices of the Nicolaitans. Probably the Nicolaitans refer to a group that was teaching that it is okay to participate in the pagan idolatrous culture of the Roman Empire in the context of the city of Ephesus in the Roman province.

And that it was okay to participate in that. And so, that's why I say it appears that one of the issues, and the fact that they resisted those who claim to be apostles, but really were not, probably this is a church who is very orthodox in their belief and their teaching and are keen to and intent on refusing to compromise with pagan idolatrous society and a pagan idolatrous empire and are keen with retaining the doctrinal purity of their teaching. Yet, at the same time, they have lost their first love.

The question is, for what or whom? There are two options. Many have suggested this is love for the church, love for other Christians that they have lost, that they're so intent on their orthodoxy that they have lost their love for each other. The other view is that this is love for Christ.

A third view is we can't decide against combining both. It's love for both God's people and for Christ as well. I think the reason for taking the second view that this is

love for Christ that they've lost is because he is the one Jesus describes himself as the one who is in the midst of the lampstand.

He is the one who is holding the lampstand and in chapter 2, verse 5, he is the one who has the authority to remove it. So, I think what is going on is in the midst of retaining their concern for orthodox purity doctrinally and not compromising theologically and ethically with the world, at the same time, they have lost their love for Christ to the extent that they are no longer functioning as his faithful witness in the world. And because of that, because they have lost their first love, which motivated their witness in the world, they are now told to repent.

And that their doctrinal correctness cannot cover up or cannot provide a facade for their lack of love for Christ that should cause their faithful witness in the world. So, Christ's command for them is to repent, that is, to recover their first love and, therefore, to maintain and recover their faithful witness in the world. The promise, then, that they receive for overcoming is the Tree of Life.

Interestingly, the Tree of Life in the Paradise of God links this to Revelation 22 in verses 1 and 2, which describes the new creation as containing the Tree of Life which was originally in Paradise in the Garden of Eden. The new creation in chapter 22, as we'll see, is described as a Garden of Eden or as a return to the Garden of Eden. So, now, that is what is promised to the one who overcomes, a restoration of the conditions of Genesis 2 and 3 in the original creation in the Garden of Eden, which God will restore in Revelation 22.

So, that is held out as the promise for this church that is prizing doctrinal correctness, perhaps, over a love for Christ that motivates them for faithful witnesses. It's also important to understand what it means to overcome. When John calls on them to overcome, overcoming, again, for each church will mean something slightly different.

Overcoming here means a refusal to compromise and maintain their faithful witness, even to the point of death and suffering. That's probably, generally, what lies behind most of the commands to overcome for each of the seven churches. That is refusing to compromise with pagan society and, instead, maintaining one's faithful witness in the world, even to the point of death.

That's how the church overcomes. And for those who do that, now, the Ephesian church has promised they will receive eschatological salvation. They will receive the new creation, the final, ultimate kingdom of God in the new creation from Revelation 21 and 22.

Church number two. Chapter 2, 8 through 11, the message of the church at Smyrna. The next city in a circular route after Ephesus would be the church going north to the church of Smyrna.

Smyrna was another center of the imperial cult. Also, Smyrna had a fairly large Jewish population as well, as most of these cities in Asia Minor did. It appears that this Jewish population is opposing God's people, is opposing the church in Smyrna, causing some of the problems.

It is one of the only two churches, along with Philadelphia, that does not receive a negative report, although it's apparently living out its life in a very hostile environment where not only are they in the center of imperial cult and worship, but they are also receiving pressure from a substantial Jewish population as well. And here's what Jesus, through John, says of the church at Smyrna. To the angel of the church at Smyrna write, These are the words of him who is, the first and the last, who died and came to life again.

I know your afflictions and your poverty, yet you are rich. I know the slander of those who say they are Jews, and they are not, but they are of the synagogue of Satan. Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer.

I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death. The issue in the church at Smyrna then was simply that the church was probably the closest thing in the seven churches to a church that was under some type of severe persecution. Though John does not clearly mention that any have yet died for their faith at this point, clearly they are suffering some type of persecution at the hands of, it may have been local authorities keen to make sure that everyone conformed to participating in the emperor cult and worship of pagan gods and things like that, but also especially at the hands of the Jews.

Paul talks about those who slander them, those who slander the church who are, he says, they are Jews, but they are really not. Their synagogue is one of Satan. In other words, in the first century, a possible scenario is this.

The Jews may have been very quick to point out Christians to distinguish them from Jews because Judaism in the first century, for the most part, seemed to enjoy protection under the Roman government and accepted as a valid religion, but the more Christianity, some of the Christians may have been seen as subversive and refusing to compromise, the more some of the Jewish consistency may have wanted to draw attention to them, and here maybe that's what the reference is to slandering them, so that not only will they be further distanced from Christians, but Rome will take action on Christians and not on them. So, this may have been an expediency for

the Jewish synagogue to separate, to draw attention to, it's these Christians who are refusing to compromise and acting subversively and that any persecution would be directed at them, and John says, no, actually this group is nothing less than the synagogue of Satan. The title that John uses, that Jesus uses from chapter one to apply to this persecuted church perhaps because of their refusal to compromise and also receiving slander at the hands of Jews who may have been intent on distancing themselves from other Christians, the title Jesus uses from chapter one is most relevant to the church.

Notice again he says that I am the first and the last, the one who died and came to life. That is, to a church that is suffering persecution because of their failure to compromise, because of maintaining their faithful witness, Jesus now is the one who is the first and the last, who is in control over all the affairs of history, and who is present with them in their situation and also is the one who has already died but who has come to life and defeated and conquered death. So again, what does the church have to fear? What does the church have to fear if they suffer persecution and perhaps even die as the ultimate cost for their faithful witness because Jesus now is the one who has overcome death through his faithful witness and the one who stands at the beginning and the end as the sovereign Lord over all history?

Notice three strategies the author uses in this chapter to encourage Christians to maintain their faithful witness and endure in the face of suffering at the hands of Roman citizens and perhaps also at the hands of the Jews in the Jewish synagogue first of all, John reminds them that they are the true people of God. Notice that he says he calls these Jews those who claim to be Jews but really are not. I think he is simply saying the fact that they slander and persecute the church of Jesus Christ is a demonstration that they are not the true people of God at all.

In fact, their claim to be the true people of God is a false one because they actually persecute the true people of God which is the church of Jesus Christ. Those who respond in faith to Jesus Christ and maintain their faithful witness are the true people of God. Second, he reminds them the true source of their suffering is ultimately Satan himself.

As we said, as an apocalypse, John is trying to unveil the true nature of their conflict. When they look out at their world, they see pressure from the Roman authorities, and they see pressure from the Jewish synagogue, but John reminds them in anticipation of chapter 12, John reminds them of the true nature of their struggle. He unveils the true nature of their struggle and that behind their struggle and behind their persecution lies the attempt of Satan himself to thwart God's people.

This will be unpacked in even more detail in chapter 12. So, the author's second strategy is to enable them to endure and persevere is not only to remind them and assure them of their nature as the true people of God, but to remind them of the

true source of their persecution and that is Satan himself. And then third, the author appeals to an Old Testament example when he says in verse 10, Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer.

I tell you, either the devil or Satan, they are the true source of their conflict, will put some of you in prison to test you and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Now that phrase is interesting. When I first read that years ago, I wondered why ten days. What is this referring to? Does the author, does Jesus have insight and is he predicting a future period of time exactly, does he know of some ten-day period where they are going to undergo tense persecution? What is this ten-day period? When does it take place? Why does the author choose ten days? Does this happen, is something happened in the past? Is it something going to happen in the future? Which the text seems to suggest and why ten days? In his commentary on Revelation, I think Greg Beal has solved the mystery.

He has demonstrated that the ten days of testing is an intentional allusion to Daniel chapter 1 and verses 12-15 where Daniel and his three friends were tested for ten days. Let me read Daniel chapter 1 and verses 12-15 where Daniel and his three friends are tested in relationship to eating meat, refusing to eat meat offered to the king. Starting with verse 11, Daniel then said to the guard, the chief official who appointed Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, his three friends, please test your servants for ten days.

Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink, then compare your appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food, all the meat and wine that the king offers, and treat your servants in accordance with what you see. So, he agreed to do this and tested them for ten days. In the context of Daniel and his three friends who find themselves under the pressure of another pagan empire and pagan ruler, John now picks up this theme from Daniel chapter one of ten-days to describe a period of testing that he's ready to undergo.

In other words, I'm convinced that the number ten again is symbolic of completion, but primarily it's meant to recall Daniel. In the same way that Daniel and his friends were tested for ten days, but they endured and were rendered a favorable verdict, in the same way, God's people in Smyrna will suffer a limited persecution. They will be tested like Daniel and his friends were as well, giving them, therefore, the encouragement to endure.

So, I don't think the ten days is referring to ten literal twenty-four hour days, but instead symbolically is meant to recall the situation of Daniel and his three friends who were tested. And likewise, the church in Smyrna is in for a period of testing in a hostile pagan environment like Daniel and his friends were. Therefore, like Daniel, having recalled that story, like Daniel and his three friends, can take heart and endure and persevere through any period of testing that they will face.

The promise that they receive then is the crown of life and also that they will be spared from the second death. Again, relevant to persons who are undergoing persecution that may result in death. They are now promised life and preservation from the second death.

Both concepts occur in Revelation chapter 20. Revelation 20 where the saints who are beheaded come to life and reign with Christ for a thousand years and do not participate in the second death. That's what is now promised to a church that is undergoing persecution.

The next church that John addresses or that Jesus, the risen Lord, addresses through John is the church in Pergamum. In chapter 2 verses 12-17. This would have been next on a circular route of the seven churches further north of Smyrna.

Pergamum was an important city intellectually, culturally, and religiously. Now John goes after a church that is influenced by this culture. The city of Pergamum was well known for its library.

It was also well known for its shrines and its altars in honor of pagan gods. It was also known for gods such as the god Zeus. Also, Asclepius, is the god of healing.

The sign of Asclepius was a serpent. You still find that, especially in the United States, you find that symbol on ambulances and things like that in association with the medical field and hospitals. It was the first city to actually erect a temple to a living emperor.

Again, it was in the hotbed of the emperor cult. It erected the temple to Augustus in AD 29. It was an important center of emperor worship.

Let me just quickly read to 12-17 the message of the letter of Pergamum. To the angel of the church in Pergamum write, These are the words of him who has the sharp double-edged sword. I know where you live, where Satan has his throne, yet you remain true to my name.

You did not renounce your faith in me even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city where Satan lives. Nevertheless, I have a few things against you. You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality.

Likewise, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Repent, therefore, otherwise, I will come to you and will fight against you with the sword that

comes out of my mouth. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it. So next we'll look at what was the situation that the author was addressing in the church at Pergamum.

What is the unique title of Christ applied to that? What is the message that is given to the church at Pergamum in light of their situation?

This is Dr. Dave Mathewson in his course on the book of Revelation. This is session 5, on Revelation 2.