

# Dr. Dave Mathewson, Revelation, Lecture 6, Revelation 2

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This is Dr. Dave Mathewson's course on the book of Revelation. Session 6, The Seven Churches: Pergamum, Thyatira, and Sardis.

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 or the issue? And what does he tell them as his message to them? And then what is the eschatological promise if they overcome? And then again, we'll look a little bit at how they might have read Revelation, and how the rest of Revelation, especially four through 22, would have been relevant to their situation. The church at Pergamum in chapter two, 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 of verses as having a sharp double-edged sword coming out of his mouth.

And we saw that was one of the features of Christ's description back in chapter one. And we said probably the sword coming out of his mouth is a good example of how Revelation communicates primarily through symbolism. We're not obviously to take this literally, but the sword coming out of the mouth is actually an old symbol that goes back to the Old Testament and portrays Christ as one who judges, one who simply speaks the word, which issues judgment on his people.

Now Christ is portrayed as having this double-edged sword proceeding from his mouth from chapter one. 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.

So the message of Pergamum is primarily going to be a negative one. And Christ's portrayal as having a sword indicates this, that he's primarily coming in terms of judgment if they refuse to repent for whatever it is they're doing, which we'll look at in just a moment. First of all, it's important to see the church at Pergamum is commended.

They are commended because they live in a rather tough and hostile environment. In fact, when you begin in verse 13, you begin 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's 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 that altar that was conspicuous in the city was in John's mind when he writes this or when he gives this message from Jesus to the church, that the throne of Satan would have been a reference to or an allusion to the altar of Zeus.

There have actually been a number of other explanations as far as other thrones like Abimelech or other temples or memorials to gods and things like that in Pergamum that this could have referred to. First of all, I'm not certain that we can be certain exactly what that may have corresponded to or if John had some specific entity such as the altar of Zeus. In fact, I would suspect rather that John doesn't have a specific reference to anything and that the throne of Satan is simply meant to contrast with God's throne that he's introduced us to in the first chapter.

So the throne of Satan simply means this is Satan's domain. Satan rules over this is his realm that he has control of. And again, this sort of introduces what we will read in Revelation chapter 12.

We said the messages to the churches also have references forward to events in chapters 4 through 22. So 4 through 22 is more of a symbolic apocalyptic portrayal of the exact same thing John is doing in 2 and 3. And in chapter 12, we're introduced to the dragon, Satan, who comes to deceive and persecute God's people. We see that happening already in chapter 2 in the message of Pergamum.

So again, I think the throne of Satan probably should not be too closely equated with the altar of Zeus or any other thing. But again, maybe just be another metaphorical way of John saying this is the domain of Satan. This is where Satan rules in this city, in the city of Pergamum.

And so the Christians find themselves in a rather tough and hostile environment. Yet the condemnation, and commendation, remind 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, Satan rules, and Satan is able to deceive.

In fact, John tells us, this is the message where John tells us at least one person in this environment has died for his faith. And that is a man named Antipas. And this is the only person John specifically tells us has died.

He doesn't 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 or 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.

And 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. And basically what John tells us is the church of Pergamum, starting with verse 14, the church of Pergamum has people, in verse 14, there 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 teaching of the 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 foothold to? 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, we've already seen John using the example of 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 for or a connection to the situation that his readers are facing.

Also, we see John using the Old Testament in a sense negatively, that is to demonstrate that in the same way, God's people were tempted by false teaching and by idolatry, etc. in the Old Testament, in the same way, his readers are now susceptible to the same era. And so, he'll use Old Testament persons and titles now to refer to certain persons or groups or entities that are promoting a similar type of false teaching.

And so if you were to turn back to the Old Testament in Numbers chapters 22 and 24, you read the account of Balaam. Balaam was a Gentile prophet whom the king of Moab called upon to try to pronounce a curse over the nation of Israel. Instead, he pronounces a blessing.

In chapter 5 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 in Numbers in chapter 31, Moses attributes this to Balaam himself. He was responsible then apparently for leading Israel into immorality and into idolatry.

And 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's a fitting title, a fitting designation for now what's going on in the city of Pergamon.

Apparently, the church in Pergamon is allowing this Balaam to do the same thing that Balaam did in the Old Testament, which is now 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 Pergamon? Does Balaam refer to a certain group of people? We cannot be sure whether Balaam is just a single 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, they are teaching the church that it is okay to compromise with the Roman system of commerce and economy and worship. Remember, all these things are closely intertwined. That is, this person was teaching the church that it was okay for Christians to compromise with the 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 likewise. This idea suggests some continuity between the Old Testament and New Testament people of God. That is, John is doing more, I think, than just providing an illustration, saying this illustrates what is going on now.

But instead, there's a continuity. It's in the same way that this happened to the people of God. Now, the new people of God, the church consisting of Jews and Gentiles, is tempted by the same thing and now faces the same similar situation.

So, there's a continuity between the old and the new people of God in terms of unfaithfulness and idolatry. 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 or person represented by Balaam or is this

a different group from the first one? Whatever the case, it's apparent, I think, 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, of the Roman Empire, by actually eating meat offered to idols and committing adultery. Now, two issues related to eating meat are offered to idols and committing adultery.

First of all, especially since in 1 Corinthians chapters 8 through 10, we find Paul addressing a similar situation of eating meat offered to idols. 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 actually eating meat.

When they think it's wrong in their own mind, Paul does seem to draw the line at actually participating in situations where they would worship foreign pagan gods. But, what is John doing in his complete prohibition, apparently, against eating meat offered to idols? Most likely, John is envisioning a situation where the eating meat offered to idols is not done simply in someone's private home. But, probably, the eating meat offered to idols would have taken place, in this context, on certain occasions where they would have participated in feasts 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. And, 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 feasts and festivals in honor of the gods.

And so, what John may be condemning, then, is overt acts of worship by eating meat in certain contexts. What about the adultery that he warns them against? Again, is this physical or spiritual? It's possible, especially in connection with some of the pagan worship. It's well known that, in some contexts in the Greco-Roman world, participating in temple worship would also afford the opportunity to be involved with temple prostitutes.

That may be what John has in mind. But I think, perhaps more explicitly, and probably John's main point is to use adultery 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 other idols, to go after other gods, to forsake the covenant with God, was to commit spiritual adultery. And so, I wonder if

John is using this in terms not so much of committing physical sexual immorality and adultery, although that could be implied, but primarily he's using this in terms of its Old Testament background to imply, by going after idolatry, by worshipping 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, perhaps, this is the metaphor that lies behind it, that they are committing spiritual adultery. So, John's response to this is that they repent, that they stop, that the church stops permitting this teaching in the church, that is leading God's people to compromise with the pagan, idolatrous, immoral society in which they live, where Satan's throne is and where he rules.

Instead, they maintain their faithful witness. Otherwise, the image used to describe Christ in the first couple of verses, a 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 chapter 4 through 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 of his mouth if they refuse to repent.

But if they do overcome, Christ promises eschatological or future blessings. And again, by the way, we've already mentioned, that 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 in their church that are teaching the people of God, leading them astray by saying that it is okay to compromise with the pagan Roman environment and society.

And instead, to refuse that and to repent would be what it means for the church to overcome. Now, the promises that Jesus holds out for the church, the eschatological future blessings, if they are 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? Interestingly, as we've mentioned already, most of the blessings that Christ promises to the one who overcomes are found at the very end of Revelation in chapters 20, 21, and 22.

The blessings that are associated with Christ's kingdom, His rule, and His establishment of the new creation in chapters 21 and 22, get picked up in the promises to the overcomer. But it's 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 this hidden

manna that the author promises to the one who overcomes? Now, as you recall from your Old Testament understanding and recollection, hopefully, manna is obviously associated with the wilderness generation of the Israelites.

As God brought them out of Egypt and they made their trek across the wilderness on the way to the Promised 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 in numerous places throughout the Old Testament account of the Israelites as they wandered through the wilderness or made their trek through the wilderness up into the Promised Land. So 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 may be because of the Balaam story, which was part of the story during the time of Moses.

So, it's possible that the Balaam story now 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 was hidden in the ark and it would be revealed at the coming of the Messiah.

And 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. And now John uses it again as 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's 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 he does in other promises.

The tree of life in the paradise of God and participating in the temple of God, being a pillar in God's temple, another image you'll use later, all of these are simply different metaphorical 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, Revelation chapter 20 through 22. So, the hidden manna probably has its background in Old Testament Jewish understanding of the manna. What about the second component in 17? He goes on and says, to the one or whoever comes, not only will I give the hidden manna, I will also give him a white stone with a 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, we don't find reference to a white stone specifically anywhere else in Revelation, especially in 20 through 22 where the text John draws on for the blessings that he promises to the churches that overcome. So, what is this white stone? Obviously 2,000 years of 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's well known that a white stone could indicate in the court system a vote of 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 had to show when you get into the banquet. Third, a white stone could also be worn on an amulet to ward off demons.

And there are other possible proposals. These are three major ones that often surface in discussions of the white stone. But it's 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's the case. John may have had one or two of these.

Often John uses imagery. We'll see. John may use imagery because it's 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 that sometimes John's images are evocative of more than one meaning. So, it's 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 what was John referring to when getting into a vote of acquittal, for example. That would make sense against the background of Satan being the accuser. And now God's people go free and they're acquitted and vindicated, which is another important theme in Revelation.

A path to get into a banquet, would certainly make sense. In chapter 19, God's people enter into the banquet of the Lamb. Does it refer to warding off demons? That's also possible given the influence of demonic beings and given the role that Satan plays.

Even in this text, it's possible that that could come into play. We simply can't be certain. What we can be certain is that the white stone symbolizes their 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, their eschatological salvation. The new name, again, it's difficult to tell exactly what is this new name the author has in mind. But the idea of a new name actually has, again, Old Testament precedence.



If you go back to the book of Isaiah, which is a book that plays a very crucial role in John's writings. There is a book entitled by an author named John Ficus. Basically, it's the use of Isaiah in the book of Revelation and has to do with the prophetic antecedents to the book of Revelation.

He surveys in detail how John uses Isaiah in numerous texts. So the new name actually is one that is found in a couple of places in Isaiah. For example, in chapter 62.

And most of these texts are anticipations of the future, God restoring his people. In chapter 62 and 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 a similar idea in chapter 65. Isaiah chapter 65 and verse 15. Again, this is in the context of the new creation.

A couple of verses later in Isaiah chapter 65, a text that gets picked up in chapter 21 of Revelation. I saw a new heavens and a new earth. In chapter 65 and 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's hard to tell exactly what name John has in mind. But maybe he's simply referring or alluding 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 at 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 though, not only to persevere, but to those who are compromising or who are permitting people in 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 fleshed out and become more of a reality when they read chapters 4-22 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.

The next church in chapter 2 and the last church mentioned in Revelation chapter 2 is the church of Thyatira. Thyatira in chapter 2 verses 18-29 This would be the next city on a circular route. Again, possibly John himself had a ministry among these churches.

But it would be the next city in a natural route that encompassed 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.

As far as political and commercial. But it would attain greater status and greater prosperity by the 2nd and 3rd centuries. A little bit later on.

It was known for its trade guilds. We've 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 kind of seen as responsible for their prosperity and for their success.

And to refuse to participate in these guilds. And to refuse to acknowledge the debt of gratitude that you owe to the gods. Let alone the Roman Empire.

Would have been seen as an extreme sign of refusal to conform. And an extreme sign of ungratitude to the gods. And to those who were responsible for your success.

Also, Thyatira was kind of a hotbed in the sense of emperor worship. So once again the town or the city of Thyatira would have provided a context where Christians were tempted to compromise and to accommodate not only pagan worship but also worship of the emperor as well. So, here's 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 than you did at first. Nevertheless, I have this against you.

You tolerate that woman 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 commit adultery with her suffer intensely unless they repent of her ways. I will strike her children dead then all 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 to 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. And 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 church Pergamum, Thyatira receives both a positive and a negative evaluation though the negative evaluation far outweighs the space devoted to it the positive evaluation.

But this is a church that receives both commendation and condemnation. But notice how Christ has described the feature attributed to him from chapter 1 he's described as the one who has eyes like blazing fire and feet like burnished bronze back from chapter 1 the description of the son of man at the starting of verse 9 and following. This suggests obviously that Christ's primary posture towards the church in Thyatira is again one of a judge.

As one who has blazing eyes like fire notice how he describes himself 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 his eyes blazing with 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 posture will primarily be one who comes with 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 again if they refuse to repent.

And it's interesting here Christ in all these letters gives his church time to repent of what they're doing. So, he doesn't just come and say I'm 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 blessings 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's interesting he says your later works are even greater than your first.

So apparently their works and their obedience and their faithful witness have 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 okay to compromise with your pagan environment it's okay to worship gods and to worship Caesar and to eat meat offered to idols and to engage in sexual immorality or spiritual adultery as a result of idolatry and still worship Jesus Christ.

And now Christ condemns the church or gives them a negative evaluation because they have tolerated this teaching in the church. The image that John uses in this section, and at times 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'll refer to this as Jesus speaking, at other times I'll refer to 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 woman named Jezebel. And again, 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, and it was Jezebel who led Israel into worship of the foreign god Baal. And John now uses that story, once again, much like he did Balaam. John uses that story now to help the church perceive 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 and tempted to, 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 worshipping idols by getting them to accommodate their pagan surroundings and cultures and worship pagan gods and worship the emperor as well. And so, Jezebel becomes a fitting kind of code for what now is going on in the church in Thyatira.

Once again, it's 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 or 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 accommodate by participating in idolatrous practices in Thyatira. It's interesting that what Jezebel does and how she's 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 chapters 12 and 13 of Revelation. It's Satan in chapter 12 and the two beasts who are guilty of deceiving the whole world and leading them astray. And actually, in chapter 13, the second beast tries to get them to worship the first beast.

And in fact, that has been Satan's ploy since Genesis chapter 3 where Satan deceived Adam and so this notion of Jezebel deceiving or this female prophetess, if that's how we're to understand it in Thyatira, deceiving the people of God, that will get described later on in Revelation chapter 13 and 12 and 13 where Satan and the two beasts are the ones guilty of deceiving the whole world and deceiving God's people. Now, in more straightforward language, John describes this female prophetess, Jezebel, as leading the church astray into idolatry. And again, we said chapters 4 through 22 of Revelation is a more apocalyptic view or apocalyptic description of what John is already describing in chapters 2 through chapter 3. Now, 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 is a warning to those who participate with Jezebels. And again, notice the symbolic imagery. He's not talking about literally throwing her on a bed.

And again, notice the use of adultery and fornication, 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 then, once again anticipates the different plagues and the different judgments that chapters 4 through 22 will spell out in more detail. And 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, is they will be the recipients of the plagues and the tribulations that one finds in chapter 4 through 22 if they refuse to repent.

Also, notice 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 the church is, much like Pergamum and some of the other churches in chapters 2 and 3 that Christ addresses, 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, at the beginning 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, I think we looked briefly at chapter 12 as an example of a passage that actually refers to a past event that is the birth of Christ. 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's 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 as 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 issue 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. 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 southeast of the city of Thyatira that we just looked at the end of chapter 2. In the past, interestingly, Sardis was an important military stronghold. And, in fact, Sardis almost became synonymous with military strength and 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 and 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'll see in the vicinity of Sardis, suffered a debilitating earthquake. But it was rebuilt through the aid provided by the emperor Augustus.

We'll 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 to rebuild the city after it suffered that 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 as was in the heart of emperor worship. Now, Christ addresses the church in Sardis, starting in chapter 3 and verse 1 with these words. To the angel of the church in 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, obey it, and repent.

But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will 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 is the one who walks in the midst of people, and notice he's the one who holds the seven spirits, he's 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 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 the idolatry and the pagan environment. They have maintained their faithful witness.

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. And notice, it's interesting, the fact that he holds the spirits, that he's described as the one who holds the seven spirits of God, and 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 shouldn't 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's 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 their own estimation, they are dead, again, perhaps because they have refused to witness in their secular culture, they have refused to maintain their faithful witness, and instead they are, like the church in Pergamum, like the church in Thyatira, they are compromising and facing the same pressure the other churches have faced, that is, a temptation to be involved in idolatry and idolatrous worship, a temptation to worship pagan gods and emperor worship, a 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 is where they appear to be alive, but somehow 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, I will come as a thief and you will not know at what time you will come. This is an example, interestingly, 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, the so-called Olivet Discourse or so-called Eschatological Discourse, in one of Jesus' parables, he compares his coming to a thief in the night.

And he also warns his people, 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 John had access to that is not the point.

The point is that John would have been aware of Jesus' teaching. 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 is, their reputation of being alive, but actually being dead, and perhaps they are 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.

And instead of one who holds the spirit that is able to bring them out of death 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. Probably a reference to the second coming of Christ that, again, 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 them in the church at 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.

In the next section, we'll look at what are the promises that are given to the church at Sardis if they do overcome.

This is Dr. Dave Mathewson's course on the book of Revelation. Session 6, The Seven Churches: Pergamum, Thyatira, and Sardis.