

CHAPTERS 2 AND 3

***"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."
(2:29)***

Before delving into the messages to the seven churches, let us focus briefly once again on Christ's second coming. In chapter 1 verse 7 we read of Christ coming in the clouds, and here in 2:25 this same coming is again mentioned: *"But hold fast what you have till I come. And he who overcomes and keeps My works until the end, to him I will give power over the nations."* Revelation 1:7 must be admitted by all as Christ's second advent in glory (it is based on Dan. 7:13-14 and Zech. 12:10). Contextually, Revelation 2:25 must be the same "coming," and it is addressed, in the first place, to John's contemporary "churches." It is not some "secret" coming as espoused by those who promote a pre-trib rapture.

Going back now to verse 1, we read: *"To the angel of the church of Ephesus write . . ."* The first question that comes to mind is whether John is writing to an angelic being or simply to another human.

First, let us observe that John is told to write to the angel of the church in Ephesus. The address is no longer to "the saints which are at Ephesus, and to the faithful in Christ Jesus." Nor is it to the saints with the bishops and deacons, as the word was to the Philippian church. . . The angels spoken of in these epistles were men, and must not be confounded with the class of spiritual beings called angels. The apostle John is employed by the Lord to send a message to them, and it would be contrary to all the ways of God to use man as a messenger to angels in the ordinary meaning of the word. Angels often acted between God and man, but not men between Him and angels.

But, further, there is no sufficient ground to affirm that the angel here addressed, though a man, is in such an official place necessarily as a bishop or elder. He might have such a charge, or he might not. "The angel" always gives the thought of representation.¹

Walvoord essentially agrees, stating, "These messengers were probably the pastors of these churches or prophets through whom the message was to be delivered to the congregation."²

It would seem apparent from these seven letters that the believers in John's day were to prepare to "overcome" until the end, that end being Christ's second coming. But at the time John is writing, the church is not living according to God's commandments. In such a state, how can they possibly overcome? Thus they are being warned as to what will happen should they not repent. Although John addresses his letters, apparently, to seven historical churches of his own day, it will suffice to say that there is much in them not only to warn but encourage every church up to the present day. According to Milligan,

We have good ground for believing that, besides these seven churches of Asia, there

1 Kelly, *Lectures on the Book of Revelation*, pp. 29-30.

2 John Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, pg. 53.

were other churches in existence in the same district at the time when the Apostle wrote. . . . Yet St. John addressed himself not to [just] seven, but to "the seven churches which are in Asia," as if there were not more churches in the province. More, however, there certainly were; and he cannot therefore have intended to address them all. He makes a selection, without saying that he does so; and it is a natural supposition that his selection is designed to represent the universal Church.³

Frost's comments concerning these seven churches are as follows:

As an indication that the seven churches of the apostolic time did not altogether fulfill the prophecies of the letters addressed to them, and hence, that other churches of a future time--and this time immediately preceding Christ's coming--must do this, the following facts are to be noted: First, there is no historical evidence that there was in the past a church at Thyatira, Tertullianus (160-230 A.D.) and Epiphanius (310-403 A.D.) affirming that there was none; which, if it is true, means that this particular church must yet be established in order that the prophecy spoken of it may be brought to pass. Second, there is no proof either in the Scripture or in the patristic writings to the effect that all of the prophecies concerning the six remaining churches were fulfilled, that is, literally and in detail; which implies that the experiences prophesied in the letters to those churches are to have another and more exact fulfillment in the days to come. And third, it is manifest that certain divine warnings given in the letters to the churches, which were to be made effective if certain spiritual conditions were to remain, were never, in spite of the continuance of these conditions, brought to pass; which undoubtedly indicates that the warnings were given to the apostolic churches in a representative manner, that is, to them as representing other churches like them which should have existence at a later time, and in such conditions as would make possible the bringing to pass of every warning which had been uttered.⁴

Frost also suggests a three-fold approach to the seven churches:

These letters are to be regarded as presenting three different views; first, the historic, the seven portraying actually, seven Asiatic churches which had existence in apostolic times, and thus representatively, the whole church of the apostolic period; second, the prophetic, the seven portraying the church as it will be found in the seven-year period of the Antichrist, in Asia and elsewhere; and third, the progressive, the seven portraying the course of the church in both of the above periods, from the beginning to the end, the first letter representing the

3 Milligan, *The Book of Revelation*, pg. 28.

4 Frost, *Matthew Twenty-Four and the Revelation*, pp. 156-157. Note: no modern scholar questions the existence of a church at Thyatira in ca. A.D. 95 (see, e.g., *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 4, p. 846; *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 4, pp. 638-39; and Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. I, pp. 453-54). Also, Lydia was from Thyatira, a Gentile attracted to Judaism but who became a Christian under Paul's ministry in Acts 16:11-15. Although it is not known when the church was founded in Thyatira, one theory suggests that it might have occurred during the two year period in Acts 19:10, which states that "all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord."

commencement of the church in those periods and the last one its conclusion.⁵

However, in regard to the view that the seven churches represent successive eras in the life of the church, McClain offers the following:

In the seven churches we have both every kind of church and also every kind of member, which not only existed on earth in John's generation but also will exist throughout all ecclesiastical history. In other words, we have in the seven selected local churches a composite picture of *all* local churches on earth at any particular time. . . .

Since to the Church, from the day of its birth on Pentecost, the coming of the Lord is always imminent, obviously there could be no chronological chart of ecclesiastical history given in advance. This one fact stands opposed to any interpretation which finds in the seven churches of the Apocalypse any rigid prophetic system of successive church eras sufficiently well defined to read in advance of the history. All such schemes applied to the present age raise an eschatological dilemma from which there is no escape except by erasing the sign, "Till He come," under which the churches must live in every moment of their existence upon earth. The logic of the matter is quite simple: If in the seven churches there was prophetically revealed the entire history of the Church in seven successive eras, and if these eras could be identified with certainty in advance of the history, then it is obvious that the coming of the Lord could not occur at any point short of the seventh era. On the other hand, if the eras could *not* thus be identified, then there was no such revelation.⁶

Before looking at the churches individually, I would like to point out an interesting view of Milligan. He believes that the seven churches should be divided into two separate groups, the first composed of the first three churches (Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos), and the last composed of the remaining four (Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea). He writes,

There are two aspects of the Church which may be said to pervade the whole Apocalypse: first, as she is in herself, in her own true nature; and secondly, as she is engaged in, and affected by, a struggle with the world. The distinction between the two may be traced in the grouping of which we speak. The first three epistles lead us to the thought of the Church in the former, the remaining four to the thought of her in the latter, aspect. In the first three she is the pure bride of Christ; in the last four she has yielded to the influences of the world, and the faithful remnant within her is separated from her professing but unfaithful members. . . .

In none of the three cases [the first group] is the church perfect, but in none is she really faithless to her trust. She is in danger; she needs to be perfected by suffering; by suffering she is perfected: but she knows that he who will be the friend of the world is the enemy of God, and the enemies of God are her enemies.

5 Ibid., pg. 141.

6 McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, pp. 446-447, 449.

When we turn to the second group of the seven epistles, we at once breathe a different atmosphere; and the contrast is rendered more striking by the fact that in the first of the four we have the very sins spoken of which have already twice crossed our path in the epistles to Ephesus and to Pergamum. . . . In all these four churches, in short, we have an entirely different relation between the Church and the world from that set before us in the first three. There is not simply danger of decay within, and the need of trial with the benefit resulting from it. There is actual conflict with the world; sometimes, it may be, a victory over it, at other times a yielding to its influences and an adoption of its spirit. In the first three churches all, or all with few exceptions, are on the side of Christ; in the last four the "remnant" alone is true to Him. . . .

All the promises of the second group of epistles are clearly distinguished in tone and spirit from those of the first group. They presuppose a fiercer struggle, a hotter conflict; and they are therefore full of a more glorious reward.

Such seems to be the relation to one another of the two groups into which the seven epistles naturally divide themselves. In the first group the Church has stood firm against the world. She is full of toil and endurance; in her poverty she is rich; and the troubles of the future she does not fear. She holds fast the name of Christ, and openly confesses Him. Seeds of evil are indeed within her, which will too soon develop themselves; but she has the Divine life within her in as much perfection as can be expected amidst the infirmities of our present state. She walks with God and hears His voice in her earthly paradise. In the second group the evil seed sown by the enemy has sprung up. The Church tolerates the sins that are around her, makes her league with the world, and yields to its influence. She rallies indeed at times to her new and higher life, but she finally submits to the world and is satisfied with its goods. There are many faithful ones, it is true, in her midst. As in the Jewish Church there was a "remnant according to the election of grace," so in her there are those who listen to the Saviour's voice and follow Him. Yet they are the smaller portion of her members, and they shall eventually come forth out of her.⁷

In a similar vein Kelly writes:

There is an important change of arrangement that occurs in this chapter, beginning with the epistle to Thyatira. In the first three churches the warning word ("He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches") comes before the promise; but all the four concluding churches have the promise before the call to hear. These at least will be found to be the representatives of states of the church which go down to the end.

Now there must be a reason for such a change--a sufficient reason why the Holy Ghost should uniformly adopt one arrangement in the three earlier epistles, and as uniformly depart from this and adopt another arrangement in the four last. . . .

⁷ Milligan, *The Book of Revelation*, pp. 37-43.

In the first three churches, then, the call to hear is addressed formally to the whole assembly concerned; but in the last four the change of situation appears to mark greater reserve. It seems to be intimated by this, that none is expected to hear but he who overcomes. Therefore this class is thenceforth, in a manner, singled out from the rest. Evil has now set in over the professing body; so that the promise is not, and could no longer be, held out in the old indiscriminate way. From this distinction we gather a remnant begins to be more and more clearly indicated.

Something analogous to this appears elsewhere. Thus in the seven parables of Matt. xiii. the last three were unquestionably marked off from their predecessors, and were addressed to a higher degree of spirituality . . . This is strikingly true of these Apocalyptic epistles, the last four of which sever the overcomer from the unfaithful surrounding mass. In short the formation of a faithful remnant, who were at first, I suppose, only morally separate from the mass which bore the Lord's name . . . becomes increasingly distinct.⁸

The reader is encouraged to read Appendix 4 by Alexander Keith on these seven historical churches.

THE CHURCH AT EPHEBUS

Those in Ephesus who overcome are promised that God will give them "*to eat of the tree of life which is in the midst of the paradise of God.*" John Walvoord thinks this refers merely to ordinary--but genuine--Christians who have overcome the unbelief and sin of the world.⁹ This, however, seems a rather tame explanation in view of the nature of the revelation given to John. In Revelation we have recorded great trials that must be overcome, and for those who persevere, they are to partake of the tree of life in the New Jerusalem.

We read of the Nicolaitans' appearance first at the church in Ephesus, then in the church of Pergamos. Who were they?

The Nicolaitans were a sect of Antinomians who, under the notion of Christian liberty, pleaded for a licentious *community of wives*. Such a hateful sect existed, and were here, by the Head of the church, condemned. . . .

Tradition has branded Nicholas, one of the seven deacons, as the infamous leader of this sect. It seems probable that this is incorrect, and very injurious. Those seven deacons were said to have been "*full of the Holy Ghost.*" Could one of them, then, be guilty of such enormity? No doubt there were different men of this name. It does not follow that because one by the name of Nicholas, led in this error, it hence must be this *pious deacon*. This is not to be admitted without positive proof.¹⁰

8 Kelly, *Lectures*, pp. 45-47.

9 Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, pg. 59.

10 Ethan Smith, *Key to the Revelation*, p. 44.

According to Zahn,

A comparison of Rev. 2:2 and 2:6 leaves no doubt that emissaries of this party had come to Ephesus some time before, and, after being turned away by the bishop of that place, had moved on to Pergamum and Thyatira, where they met with better success. The fact that they represented themselves to be apostles, and were declared to be false apostles, makes them itinerant teachers who roamed about, like the followers of Peter in Corinth, but does not necessitate the assumption that, like these, they originated in Palestine and taught a doctrine more or less Judaistic.

But the tradition that Nicolaus, the proselyte of Antioch (Acts 6:5), later went astray as a libertine deserves to be believed . . . If, then, this Nicolaus himself, like Philip his former companion in office, emigrated to the province of Asia, or if adherents of his came to that place--which is more likely--it is quite conceivable that the representatives of this doctrine, because of its outward connection with the primitive Church, introduced themselves as apostles of a true gospel.¹¹

THE CHURCH AT SMYRNA

Here there is no word of reproach; the church has been faithful in the midst of her suffering. And even so, there is no indication that her sufferings are drawing to an end. *"Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life."*

How often does it happen in the Christian's experience that one burden is laid upon another, and that one wave succeeds another, till he seems left desolate and alone upon the earth. Yet even then he has no assurance that his sufferings are at a close. The consolation afforded to him is, not that there shall be a short campaign, but only that, whether long or short, he shall be more than conqueror through Him that loved him.¹²

It is thought by many that Polycarp was this angel of the church of Smyrna. Speaking of Polycarp, C. J. Vaughan writes:

It is interesting to be able to give any personal application to one of these messages to the churches. In the case of Smyrna, alone perhaps of all, we can do this. We know the name of an early angel of the church of Smyrna; his name, his character, and his end. He may have been the very person to whom St John here writes. Certainly St John had seen him, and spoken with him. We still possess both a letter of his writing, a description of his character, and a detailed record of his

¹¹ Zahn, *Introduction to the New Testament*, vol. III, pp. 419-420.

¹² Milligan, *The Book of Revelation*, pg. 48.

martyrdom.¹³

THE CHURCH AT PERGAMOS

We meet here with an unknown martyr, Antipas: *"I know your works, and where you dwell, where Satan's throne is. And you hold fast to My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days in which Antipas was My faithful martyr, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells (vs. 13).* John Mason Neale gives us some helpful insight:

Now, is it not most remarkable that this glorious title, *My martyr, My faithful martyr*, given to no other Saint, should not for ever have kept alive the memory of Antipas, what he did, how he suffered? And yet absolutely nothing is known of him. In the later martyrologies, indeed, we have a long history of his passion; but clearly only as a legend, written by one who knew no more of the facts than ourselves. Now, if you like to take this as a proof that GOD'S greatest Saints are often those of whom the world knows least,--so it undoubtedly is, and this may be another proof of it. But I am inclined to think that this is not the true explanation. I do not believe that Antipas was the name of any individual martyr. The word $\pi\tilde{\alpha}\zeta$ in Greek means *every one*. As Antichrist, being interpreted, is He that resists CHRIST, so Antipas means He that resists every one; that is, who, simply, by himself, stands up against a world of evil-doers. . . . Antipas, then, in this sense, every martyr of every age has been and must be.¹⁴

To those in Pergamos who overcome, Christ says, *"I will give some of the hidden manna to eat."* Zahn writes,

The angel in that place is subject to a special temptation to deny Jesus and belief in Him, because he lives where Satan's throne is . . . it is not something external, like a prominent building or work of art, which is meant, but an institution or custom there prevalent in which the Christians recognized a striking embodiment and activity of the dominion of Satan. This is the cause of the martyrdom of Antipas, and of the continued danger in which the confessors of Christ are placed. It cannot well be doubted that the author means the cult of \tilde{A} Esculapius, the God of healing, in Pergamum, which flourished there as nowhere else. . . . How easily it might have happened that in daily life, or at the celebration of the feast of \tilde{A} Esculapius, Christians in Pergamum came into conflict with the heathen population, and that a Christian who openly expressed his abhorrence of this cult might have been killed by fanatical worshippers of the divinity!¹⁵

In our day we probably will not be confronted with pagan or cultic festivals. But still there will be numerous opportunities to overcome.

13 C. J. Vaughan, *Lectures on the Revelation of St John*, pg. 38.

14 John Mason Neale, *Sermons on the Apocalypse*, pp. 7, 8.

15 Zahn, *Introduction*, vol. III, pp. 410-411.

Our risk is, that in order to avoid the odium of what is bigoted in the eyes of men, we shall sacrifice, or at least compromise, what is faithful and true in the sight of God. We have deceitful hearts, evermore betraying us into pride, and self-dependence, and self-righteousness, and hypocrisy. We are in an evil world, abounding with temptations, varying with our varying weaknesses. Here are blandishments and allurements to flatter us into forgetfulness of God and eternity. Here are sneers and mockings, to deter us from holy boldness. Here also are disappointments, falsehoods, treacheries, to damp our confidence, and wither up our affection. We are exposed to the malice of the devil and his angels, the rulers of the darkness of this world, spiritual wickedness in high places. It is no easy matter to hold fast in the Lord, and *overcome*; neither worshipping the image of the beast, nor receiving his mark.

Who can sustain us in the battle? Who can give us the victory? Only the Lord Jesus. He is our strength, he teaches our hands to war and our fingers to fight, he subdueth our enemies under us, and makes us conquerors, yea, and more than conquerors in him that loved us. Only he can open our understanding to perceive the iniquity of the system around us: to detect its compromising hollowness: to see how it carries on its deceitful work, without proclaiming its true character; and so to be upon our guard against enticements into an alliance with a false world in opposition to the truth, and holiness, and glory of God.¹⁶

Those in Pergamos who overcome are promised "*a white stone, and on the stone a new name written which no one knows except him who receives it*" (2:17). Gleason Archer remarks that this stone is a symbol of acquittal in a court trial.¹⁷ Neale believes that it refers to a diamond:

Next, the word here translated *stone* may just as well mean *gem*; and *white* is more than merely white; it is glistening or sparkling: but a white glistening gem is surely a diamond.

Now, for a moment, think of the Tabernacle service, and of the High Priest's vestments. The most famous of these, you know, was the breastplate. Attend now; for the whole point lies in what follows. The breastplate was a piece of linen, exactly twice as long as it was broad. Folded in the middle, then, it became square; the sides were sewn together; and it became a square bag. Now the Jews are agreed that, in this bag, the Urim and Thummin was kept. *Was* kept; for they were one and the same thing; and hence sometimes called Urim only. The two words by interpretation mean Light and Illumination. Whatever it was, it was something at which the High priest, and he only looked when consulting the oracle. And what was it? There is a very old tradition that it was a stone on which the incommunicable Name of GOD--JEHOVAH--was engraved. But what kind of stone?

On the outside of the breastplate were fastened twelve precious stones, the names of which you may read in Exodus. It is to be supposed that whatever was kept in

16 Henry Woodward, *Essays on the Millennium*, pg. 116.-

17 Gleason Archer, unpublished class notes.

the purse was more valuable than anything that formed the outside of the purse. Now,--most remarkably,--among the twelve stones, the diamond is not mentioned: although the Jews were very well acquainted with it. Urim and Thummim, then, was probably a peerless diamond, engraved with JEHOVAH'S Name.

And now, my Sisters, do you see how beautifully the two work in together? It is the great promise to him that overcomes, that he shall be made, in the highest and most glorious sense, a Priest in that Heavenly Temple where is the Beatific Vision.¹⁸

THE CHURCH AT THYATIRA

"I know your works, love, service, faith, and your patience; and as for your works, the last are more than the first" (2:19).

Happy is he of whom it can be said by the Searcher of hearts, that his latest works are more than his earliest. Let each ask himself, Can this be said of me? However far I may now be from Christian perfection, or even from a Christian maturity, yet can I hope that I am getting forward, that I am, in the highest sense of all, improving? Does the word of Christ come to me with a little more of power and of reality than it once did? Is my attention more firmly fixed in reading or listening to it? Have I more interest in the things of God and Christ and the soul? Then again, Am I a little more successful in the struggle with my sins, and with my besetting sin most of all? Am I a little less selfish, or a little less proud, or a little less irritable, or a little less passionate, or a little less perverse, than I once was? Is my heart, with its affections and lusts, at all more under my control? Is my life at all more useful, more diligent, more self-denying, in things small or great, than once it was? O I need not enumerate all these particulars: which of us does not know whether the life of his soul is healthy or sickly, improving, standing still, or going backward? Then carry the question home: Can Christ say of me, that my last works are more than the first?¹⁹

"Nevertheless I have (a few things)²⁰ against you, because you allow that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, to teach and seduce My servants to commit sexual immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols" (v. 20). Zahn states that this Jezebel is definitely the wife of the pastor, and from the manner in which Christ describes himself in verse 23 (*"I am He who searches the minds and hearts"*), Jezebel knew how to conceal her actions even from her own husband.²¹ Milligan takes the opposite view, that "Jezebel" is clearly a symbolical name. He also states, "For the first time in these epistles we meet with those who are spoken of as 'the rest,' the remnant, who are to be carefully distinguished from the great body of the Church's professing members."²²

18 Neale, *Sermons on the Apocalypse*, pp. 23, 24.

19 C. J. Vaughan, *Lectures on the Revelation of St John*, pp. 66-67.

20 "A few things" is omitted in the best manuscripts.

21 Zahn, *Introduction*, vol. III, pg. 424.

22 Milligan, *The Book of Revelation*, pp. 54, 55.

We note in particular the Lord's closing words to this church: "***But hold fast what you have till I come.***" Overcoming believers will continue until the coming of Christ at "the end," when He will give them "power over the nations."

THE CHURCH AT SARDIS

Here we read of a church that apparently has a good reputation but in reality is dead. Who can say how many of our churches today fall into this category? Let us be on our guard so as not to become part of one. This will entail strong resolve to stand by the doctrines of the faith and not become lazy. There is much "social" gospel that has crept into, and in many cases permeated, the mainline denominations. "*Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God*" (3:2):

Now *perfect* is not the right translation. It means literally, not having been filled up to the brim; that is, not thorough. You know how small a thing this appears to us. I say *us*, because I am to blame in that sense as much as any of you. "*That will do.*" I doubt if that sentence has not done as much harm in the English language.²³

And now a dire warning comes: "*Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent. Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you.*" It depended on the overseer's attitude whether Christ's coming would have the character of blessing or judgment. The same will be true of us.

The one who is watchful pays close attention to the signs, and in his case the Lord's coming will not be unexpected. However, the Lord's day will come as a thief in the night to the man who does not watch. The signs will be signs only to those who are watchful; those who sleep will not see them and will therefore be surprised when the day comes.²⁴

John Newman gives an excellent description of what is meant by "watching." Surely this is an attitude we must all strive to have.

Now what is watching?

I conceive it may be explained as follows:--Do you know the feeling in matters of this life, of expecting a friend, expecting him to come, and he delays? Do you know what it is to be in unpleasant company, and to wish for the time to pass away, and the hour strike when you may be at liberty? Do you know what it is to be in anxiety lest something should happen which may happen or may not, or to be in suspense about some important event, which makes your heart beat when you are reminded of it, and of which you think the first thing in the morning? Do you know what it is to have a friend in a distant country, to expect news of him, and to wonder from day to day what he is now doing, and whether he is well? Do you

²³ Neale, *Sermons on the Apocalypse*, pp. 42, 43.

²⁴ Olaf Moe, *The Apostle Paul, His Life and His Work*, pg. 312.

know what it is so to live upon a person who is present with you, that your eyes follow his, that you read his soul, that you see all its changes in his countenance, that you anticipate his wishes, that you smile in his smile, and are sad in his sadness, and are downcast when he is vexed, and rejoice in his successes? To watch for Christ is a feeling such as all these; as far as feelings of this world are fit to shadow out those of another.

He watches for Christ who has a sensitive, eager, apprehensive mind; who is awake, alive, quick-sighted, zealous in seeking and honouring Him; who looks out for Him in all that happens, and who would not be surprised, who would not be over-agitated or overwhelmed, if he found that He was coming at once.²⁵

THE CHURCH AT PHILADELPHIA

"Because you have kept My command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth" (v. 10). All those in the seven churches are told that they are to "overcome." Even those in Philadelphia who have "persevered" and will be "kept from the hour of trial" are still told to overcome something. "Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown. He who overcomes . . ." (vs. 11-12). These are the words recorded, but verse 10 is often used to support the theory of a pretribulational rapture of the church. It is true that Christ "keeps" us from falling, but this does not mean we have only to sit back and do nothing. "Watch and pray lest you enter into temptation" is Christ's command throughout the New Testament. And besides, common sense alone tells us that they would not have been warned of such a possibility of losing their crown if they were to be taken before that time by some "secret rapture." Rather, John would have comforted them with the thought that they would be spared such temptation.²⁶ This is one of the greatest weaknesses of the pretribulational rapture theory--there is not one comforting or encouraging word in any didactic passage of Scripture that God's saints will be spared suffering! There is nothing in this letter to make any Christian think that he will be raptured from the earth in order to be spared the trials and suffering of the Tribulation period. As to the meaning of ΕΚ, the preferred meaning is "through," to be delivered "out of," not to exempt from (see John 17:15, Heb. 5:7, Gal. 1:4).²⁷

Essentially, ΕΚ, a preposition of motion concerning thought or physical direction, means *out from within*. ΕΚ does not denote a stationary position outside its object, as some have mistakenly supposed in thinking that the ΕΚ of Revelation 3:10 refers to a position *already* taken outside the earthly sphere of tribulation. Other

25 John Henry Newman, *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, pp. 322-323.

26 This point is missed by John MacArthur when he argues, "The verb 'keep' is followed by a preposition whose normal meaning is 'from' or 'out of'--this phrase, 'keep . . . from' supports the pretribulational rapture of the church" (*The MacArthur Study Bible*, commenting on Rev. 3:10).

27 In Heb. 5:7, speaking of Christ, we read: "Who, in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from (εκ) death, and was heard because of His godly fear." "Here is a case where we know that the Lord suffered and passed through death, and yet was saved out of it. Anything more decisive than this passage could not be wished for." See Alexander Reese, *The Approaching Advent of Christ*, pp. 204-205.

prepositions--ΕΚΤΟΣ, ΕΞΩ, ΕΞΩΘΕΝ, ΑΝΕΥ, and ΧΩΡΙΣ--would have properly denoted a place apart from the hour of testing. . . . The basic idea of emergence from within is illustrated by usages in other verses of similar expression. The large host of tribulational saints will be "the ones who come out of the great tribulation" (Rev. 7:14). "The Lord knows how to deliver the godly out of temptation" (2 Pet. 2:9 AV). The primary sense of emergence in ΕΚ would therefore seem to thwart a pretribulational interpretation of the verse, for emergence from within could only mean that the Church had been within the hour of testing.²⁸

Tenney notes that "The Greek phrase, *tereo ek*, is used elsewhere only in John 17:15, and means to preserve from the attack of evil rather than to remove from it by physical separation."²⁹

The church at Philadelphia was suffering while they awaited Christ's coming in power and great glory. They are admonished to continue doing so, for in that they have shown patience ("*because you have kept the word of my patience*"), Christ, therefore, will keep them during the greater tribulation that is to come upon the whole world ("*I will also keep you*").

This coming shall be sudden, that is, occur quickly once it finally comes. "*Behold, I am coming quickly! Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown.*"

Now, at first sight, this seems one of those disappointing verses, of which I have spoken to you before, where, after some great grace or blessing is pronounced, the duty or consequence of it is so much less--to say it with all reverence--so much poorer, than we might have expected. For example: "Take unto you the whole armour of GOD, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all to" --what? Having done all, to *stand*; and that is all. "Therefore, seeing that we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we" --what? "We faint not." And now, again: "Behold, I come quickly"--and how might we have expected the verse to conclude? Would it not have been: "And we know that when He shall appear we shall be like Him; for we shall see Him as He is." . . . And yet you see how much less, how much tamer, the exhortation at first sight seems. "Hold fast that thou hast!" What! we might ask, is this all? . . . Only to hold fast that we have? Only not to go backward? Yes; but this is not all the sense, as we shall see presently; yet still, in that sense, there is a great lesson for us. Not to go back in anything is to advance most surely. . . .

But after all, "Hold fast that thou hast," is best explained by the latter part of the verse, "That no man take thy crown." The crown then *is* yours already, only hold it fast. It may well be called "that thou hast," because nothing else is worth having at all. But the very expression, "hold it fast," shows what a struggle you must expect for it.³⁰

THE CHURCH AT LAODICEA

28 Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, pg. 55.

29 Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation*, pg. 65.

30 Neale, *Sermons on the Apocalypse*, pp. 65-67.

In his commentary on Colossians, Daniel Wilson writes,

We hear of one of the churches mentioned in this Epistle, Laodicea, once again before the close of the sacred canon, about thirty years from this time amongst the seven Asiatic churches; and the state of deathlike lukewarmness and torpor, together with conceit of their own attainments into which they were then sunk, may illustrate the danger of the admission of any admixtures, however plausible, or however apparently trifling, with the unadulterated doctrine of Christ Jesus.

And we further learn that though the worship of angels was repressed for a time by this Epistle, yet it afterwards prevailed to such a degree that the council of Laodicea in the fourth century were compelled to condemn it by an express canon--such is the tenacity of error when once received into the corrupt heart of man, and so wide its diffusion even among distant generations.³¹

What are we to understand by the phrase "the lukewarm church"--the one neither hot nor cold? In his commentary, *Revelation*, Alan Johnson comments as follows:

There is good reason why we should not try to take both of these words as if Christ meant I wish you were either spiritually cold (i.e., unsaved or hostile) or spiritually hot (i.e., alive and fervent). In the first place, it is inconceivable that Christ would wish that people were spiritually cold, or unsaved and hostile. Furthermore, the application of "hot" and "cold" to spiritual temperature, though familiar to us, would have been completely foreign to first-century Christians. The two adjectives in "neither hot nor cold" should be understood together as equivalent to "lukewarmness" (v. 16). That is to say, they were useless to Christ because they were complacent, self-satisfied, and indifferent to the real issues of faith in him and of discipleship.³²

He goes on to say that lukewarmness is the condition of those who do not really know Christ as Savior and Lord, and that "Origen likewise understood the passage to refer not to lapsed Christians but to the unregenerate."³³

Thomas Gisborne's comments are noteworthy:

The lukewarm Christian, if, according to popular language, he is to be called by the name of Christian, reduces religion to a ceremonial service, devoid of warmth, animation, and spirituality. . . . Outward observances he substitutes for ardent piety, and moral decorum for *the fruits of the spirit*. . . . All religious warmth, all active zeal for the glory of God, he decries as enthusiasm; and vindicates his coldness by declaiming against fanatics. Every degree of exertion for the salvation of men which surpasses the scantiness of his own standard, he eyes with suspicion, as the symptom of a heated brain; and eagerly seizes every pretence for censuring

31 Daniel Wilson, *Expository Lectures on St. Paul's Epistle to the Colossians*, pp. 16-17.

32 Alan Johnson, *Revelation*, pg. 457.

33 *Ibid.*, pg. 458.

the strenuous and faithful Christ, in whose affectionate diligence he reads a reproach of his own inactivity and deadness. In lukewarmness, every thing tends to deterioration: the heart grows inert, the conscience dull of feeling; penitence becomes shallow, prayer languid, religious meditation uninteresting, faith feeble, indistinct, and unproductive; sin loses its heinousness. Every thing is stagnant, and verges towards corruption:--the vivifying principle seems extinguished!³⁴

Smith notes that the word lukewarm alludes to that state of water which is most offensive to the stomach, and Christ is essentially saying, "Be one thing or another. Either be zealous Christians or make no pretence."³⁵

Nevertheless, the church in Laodicea is counseled "*to buy from me gold refined in the fire . . . white garments that you may be clothed . . . eye salve that you may see.*" The next verse reads, "*As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent.*" We read in 1 Peter 1:7 "*that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ.*" And Job states, "*When he has tried me, I shall come forth as gold*" (Job 23:10). Perhaps those in the church of Laodicea are truly saved but are being admonished because of their earthly comfort and ease. They are so lukewarm due to the lack of any trials that even Satan is not concerned about them. Could it be that Christ is telling them that they should be praying for those tests that prove faithfulness (buying gold and wearing white garments)?

The only cure for poverty-stricken disciples was to purchase from Christ gold which is refined in the agonies of the shared passion. For their nakedness . . . the only recourse was to buy such clothes as the naked Christ had worn on the cross. The blindness of self-deception could be cured only by understanding the correlation between Christ's love and his discipline. These three purchases constitute a substantial definition of the kind of zeal and repentance which was the burden of all John's prophecies. The thrust of these commands moves in the direction of rigorous warning. They are tantamount to saying "Open your eyes" and "Carry your cross." This letter argues against the widespread assertion of many interpreters to the effect that John's chief concern was to provide consolation to a persecuted church. Nearer the mark would be the opposite assertion; that John, like Jesus, was concerned to bring not peace but a sword.³⁶

In any event trials will be coming, and they will come as chastisement for those who do not have an attitude which pleases God. However, "if they hear his voice," he will come in and "sup with them," that is, be their strength.³⁷ We have here in the church at Laodicea both the lukewarm and those who shall overcome.

Revelation 3:20 is a verse with which we are all familiar. Many take it as an invitation to lost sinners. One such scholar is Richard Trench, who offers the following analysis:

34 Thomas Gisborne, *Sermons*, pp. 370-372.

35 Smith, pp. 61,62.

36 Paul S. Minear, *I Saw a New Earth: An Introduction to the Visions of the Apocalypse*, p. 57, quoted by Alan Johnson, *Revelation*, pp. 458-459.

37 Rev. 3:20.

We have in these gracious words the long-suffering of Christ as He waits for the conversion of sinners (1 Pet. 3:20); and not alone the long-suffering which waits, but the love which seeks to bring that conversion about, which knocks. . . .

Christ does not knock only; He also speaks; makes his "*voice*" to be heard--a more precious benefit still! It is true indeed that we cannot in our interpretation draw any strict line of distinction between Christ's knocking and Christ's speaking. They both represent his dealings of infinite love with souls, for the winning them to receive Him; yet at the same time, considering that in this natural world a knock may be any one's and on any errand, while the voice accompanying it would at once designate who it was that was knocking, and with what intention (Acts 12:13, 14), we have a right, so far as we may venture to distinguish between the two, to see in the voice the more inward appeal, the closer dealing of Christ with the soul, speaking directly by his Spirit to the spirit of the man; in the knocking those more outward gracious dealings, of sorrow and joy, of sickness and health, and the like, which He sends, and sending uses for the bringing of his elect, in one way or another, by smooth paths or by rough, to Himself. The "*voice*" very often will interpret and make intelligible the purpose of the "*knock*."

But that "*knock*" and this "*voice*" may both remain unheard and unheeded. It is in the power of every man to close his ear to them; therefore the hypothetical form which this gracious promise takes: "*if any man hear my voice, and open the door.*" There is no *gratia irresistibilis* here. It is the man himself who must open the door. Christ indeed knocks, claims admittance as to his own; so lifts up his voice that it may be heard, in one sense *must* be heard, by him; but He does not break open the door, or force an entrance by violence. There is a sense in which man is lord of the house of his own heart; it is for him to open, and unless he does so, Christ cannot enter. And, as a necessary complement of this power to open, there belongs also to man the mournful prerogative and privilege of refusing to open: he may keep the door shut, even to the end. He may thus continue to the last blindly at strife with his own blessedness; a miserable conqueror, who conquers to his own everlasting loss and defeat.

At the same time these words of Christ, decisive testimony as they yield against that scheme of irresistible grace which would turn men into mere machines, and take away all moral value from the victories which Christ obtains over the sullenness, the pride, the obstinacy, the rebellion of men, must not be pushed, as some have pushed them, in the other direction, into Pelagian error and excess; as though men could open the door of their heart when they would; as though repentance was not itself a gift of the exalted Saviour (Acts 5:31). They can only open when Christ knocks; and they would have no desire at all to open unless He knocked, and unless, together with the external knocking of the Word, or of sorrow, or of pain, or whatever other shape it might assume, there went also the inward voice of the Spirit. All which one would affirm is that this is a *drawing*, not a *dragging*--a knocking at the door, not a breaking open of the door.³⁸

38 Richard Chenevix Trench, *Commentary on the Epistles to the Seven Churches in Asia: Revelation II. III*, (1861),

However, it would appear doubtful, at least to me, that Jesus here addresses his invitation to lost sinners. "*Behold, I stand at the door and knock*" is addressed to the Christians in the church at Laodicea. This church is being admonished for their lukewarmness, being warned that they are about to be spewed out. In verse 19 the Lord says that he rebukes and chastens, and in verse 21 he tells what will be rewarded to those who overcome. Verse 20 comes between them. It tells us that Jesus will come to the aid of him who is zealous and repents of his lukewarmness. It hardly seems, in this context, a plea for unbelievers "to open the door" of their heart.³⁹

Tenney has an interesting comment on the letters to the seven churches which includes this particular verse:

The letters to the seven churches close the section of Revelation that relates to the immediate present of the author. To what extent they forecast the development of the historic church may be debatable. The probability that they have a meaning for the church of all times is enhanced by one prominent factor: the increasing imminence of the Lord's coming is reflected in His utterances of correction to these churches.

Ephesus: ". . . or else I come to thee, and will move thy candlestick . . ." (2:5)

Smyrna: (None)

Pergamum: ". . . or else I come to thee quickly . . ." (2:16)

Thyatira: "Hold fast till I come . . ." (2:25)

Sardis: ". . . I will come as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee." (3:3)

Philadelphia: "I come quickly." (3:11)

Laodicea: "I stand at the door and knock." (3:20)⁴⁰

McClain offers his insight on Revelation 3:21 while commenting on the Universal Kingdom:

Following His incarnation and death and resurrection, He was exalted *as Man* to sit down "on the right hand of the Majesty on high." This was not the throne of

pp. 279-282.

39 Even if this is an "invitation" for lost sinners to accept Christ as Savior, Trench's statement that "there is no *gratia irresistibilis* [irresistible grace] here" is a denial of one of the fundamental components of Calvinistic soteriology--the "I," for *irresistible grace*, in the famous TULIP. However, in the final paragraph cited, Trench sounds much like a Calvinist, so there is confusion here. Well known Calvinist, William Hendriksen, clarifies the issue in commenting on Revelation 3:20: "This passage does full justice both to divine, sovereign grace and to human responsibility." He further explains, "When the heart has been opened by the voice of the Lord, this principle of regeneration now becomes active so that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, the regenerated individual opens the door and receives the Christ. This opening of the door is what is generally called *conversion*. Do not confuse regeneration, John 3:3 ff.; Acts 16:14, and conversion. Here, in the expression, 'If any man opens the door,' the reference is to conversion, *to repentance and faith in Christ*, as the context clearly indicates" (emphasis original). The doctrine of irresistible grace affirms that all those elected to salvation in eternity past and then regenerated by the Holy Spirit at some point in their lives will most certainly respond in repentance and faith. See Hendriksen's commentary on Revelation, *More Than Conquerors*, p. 97.

40 Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation*, pg. 68.

David transferred somehow from earth to heaven, as some have mistakenly supposed, but God the Father's own throne in the Universal Kingdom. The distinction is made very clear by our Lord Himself when, speaking to the Church on earth from His throne in the heavens, He promises, "To him that overcomes will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne" (Rev. 3:21). These are two thrones, not one. The former is distinctly Messianic; the latter is the throne of God alone upon which "none may sit but God, and the God-Man Jesus Christ."⁴¹

I wish now to close this discussion of the letters to the seven churches with an interesting and relevant observation by Henry Melvill--one we should all take to heart:

But we turn from the exhortation to the threatening contained in our text, "I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent [Rev. 2:5]." It is not difficult to determine what the calamity is which is figuratively denoted by the removal of the candlestick. . . . The evangelist is expressly informed that the seven stars are the angels, or bishops, of the seven churches; and that the seven candlesticks are those churches themselves. Hence the candlestick represents the christian church as erected in any land; and therefore the removing the candlestick out of his place can mean nothing less than the unchurching a nation, the so with-drawing from them the Gospel that they shall lose the distinctive marks of a christian community. We need not be over-careful as to the exactness with which we preserve the metaphor. If the candlestick be removed, the meaning must be that the spiritual light is removed; or that a land which has been blessed with a knowledge of christianity, and thereby brought specially into covenant with God, is deprived of the advantages which it has failed to improve, and dislodged from the relationship into which it had been admitted.

And this may take place, for undoubtedly this has taken place. There are indeed clear and encouraging promises in Scripture, sufficient to assure us that neither outward opposition, nor inward corruption, shall prevail to the extinction of Christ's church upon earth. But these promises refer generally to the church, and not to this or that of its sections. They give no ground for expecting that the church, for example, of England, or the church of Rome, will never cease to be a church--on the contrary, their tenor is quite compatible with the supposition, that England or Rome may so pervert, or abuse, the Gospel, as to provoke God to withdraw it, and give it to lands now overrun with heathenism. . . .

Where are the Seven Churches of Asia, respecting which we are assured that they were once strenuous in piety, and gave promise of permanence in christian profession and privilege? Alas, how true is it that the candlesticks have been removed. Countries in which the Gospel was first planted, cities where it took earliest root, from these have all traces of christianity long ago disappeared, and in these has the cross been supplanted by the crescent [Islam]. . . . And what are we to say of such facts, except that they prove--prove with a clearness and awfulness of

41 McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, pg. 34.

demonstration, which leave ignorance inexcusable, and indifference self-condemned--that the blessings of christianity are deposited with a nation to be valued and improved, and that to despise or misuse them is to provoke their withdrawal? . . .

And never let it be thought that such sentence is of no very terrible and desolating character. Come foreign invasion, come domestic insubordination, come famine, come pestilence. Come any evil rather than the unchurching which is threatened in our text. It is the sorest thing which God can do against a land. He himself represents it as such, when sending messages of wo [woe] by the mouth of his servant Amos. "Behold the days come, saith the Lord God, that I will send a famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord." . . . Every other calamity may be sent in mercy, and have for its design the correction, and not the destruction, of its subjects. But this calamity has none of the character of a fatherly chastisement. It shows that God has done with a people; that he will no longer strive with them; but that henceforwards he gives them up to their own wretched devices.

And, therefore, with the removal of the Gospel must be the departure of whatever is most precious in the possessions of a people. It is not merely that christianity is taken away--though who shall measure, who imagine, the loss, if this were indeed all?--but it is that God must frown on a land from which he hath been provoked to withdraw his Gospel; and that, if the frown of the Almighty rest on a country, the sun of that country's greatness goes rapidly down, and the dreariness of a moral midnight fast gathers above it, and around it. . . .

But if we were once deprived of the Gospel; if the Bible ceased to circulate amongst our people; if there were no longer the preaching of Christ in our churches; if we were left to set up reason instead of revelation, to bow the knee to the God of our own imaginations, and to burn unhallowed incense before the idols which the madness of speculation would erect--then farewell, a long farewell, to all that has given dignity to our state, and happiness to our homes; the true foundations of true greatness would be all undermined, the bulwarks of real liberty shaken, the springs of peace poisoned, the sources of prosperity dried up; and a coming generation would have to add our name to those of countries whose national decline has kept pace with their religious [decline], and to point to our fate as exhibiting the awful comprehensiveness of the threat, "I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent."⁴²

42 Henry Melvill, *Sermons*, pp. 165-168.