

Wandering Stars Part II

Jesus' Message to Smyrna and Philadelphia

Rev 2:8 "And to the angel of the **church in Smyrna** write: 'The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life.

⁹ "I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

¹⁰ Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.

¹¹ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.'

⁷ "And to the angel of the **church in Philadelphia** write: 'The words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens.

⁸ "I know your works. Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name.

⁹ Behold, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie-- behold, I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and they will learn that I have loved you.

¹⁰ Because you have kept my word about patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth.

¹¹ I am coming soon. Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown.

¹² The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. Never shall he go out of it, and I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name.

¹³ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'

(Revelation 2:8-11; 3:7-13)

Synagogue of Satan

We talked last time about “[wanderings stars](#),” those seven “[planets](#)” visible to the naked eyes which regularly move around the night (and day) sky doing their own thing. We saw that Jude uses this exact language and applies it directly to [false teachers](#). These were people who crept in unaware, that is, they fooled most of the Christians with their smooth talk. Over time, they began to seduce them.

It is the [seduction of these false teachers](#) that in many ways [stands at the center of the negative evaluation](#) that Jesus gives us of these seven churches. When read in order, we find a couple of groups of [Gentile](#) false teachers at Ephesus, then [Jewish](#) false teachers at Smyrna, then [Gentile](#) false teachers in Pergamum and Thyatira, an unspecified threat at Sardis, [Jewish](#) false teachers in Philadelphia, and the [conclusion](#) in Laodicea that Jesus Christ is the faithful and

True Witness and we must listen to him alone. There seems little by way of purpose here, save that Jesus reserves himself for last—as the remedy to false teaching in the church.

Warnings Against Following False Teachers in the Letters to the Seven Churches		
Church	Warning	Passage
Ephesus:	False Apostles	2:2
	Nicolaitans	2:6
Smyrna:	Jewish synagogue of Satan	2:9
Pergamum:	Dwell near Satan's throne	2:12
	Teaching of Balaam	2:14
	Nicolaitans	2:15
Thyatira:	Jezebel the prophetess	2:20
	Deep things of Satan	2:24
Sardis:	Remember what you have received and heard	3:3
Philadelphia:	Denied my Name	3:8
	Jewish Synagogue of Satan	3:9
Laodicea:	The Faithful and True Witness	3:14

When we read the churches *chiastically* however, we can see that our Lord is **comparing and contrasting**, as he makes his way to the central point of this evaluation. The first church (Ephesus) teaches us about the **general threat** of false teachers while the last church (Laodicea) shows us the only **solution** to their confused and twisted words is Christ. The second (Smyrna) and sixth (Philadelphia) churches focus in on the **Jewish twisting of false teachers**, using the common

phrase found only in them, “The synagogue of Satan” (2:9; 3:9). The third (Pergamum) and fifth (Sardis) churches do something similar to the first and last in that they teach us about some specific false teachers and then warn us to “remember what you have received and heard” without giving any specifics. The central church (Thyatira) hits the seriousness of it all by referring to the “deep things of Satan” (2:24), using one of the vilest people in the OT as an example—the prophetess queen of darkness: Jezebel.

Today we will focus on Smyrna and Philadelphia and their common foil—“Those who say they are Jews but really are not” (cf. Rev 2:9). There is a lot of theology packed into that statement. But to get at it, I want us to do a little thinking about this shared phrase, the “synagogue of Satan.”

The word *synagogue* is a synonym of our English word “church,” which we derive from the Greek *ekklesia*, which means an “assembly” (from the roots “ek” meaning “out of” and the verb “kaleo” meaning “to call;” i.e. the called out ones). Synagogue is very similar meaning “to bring together” or “a place of assembly” (from *synagein* meaning “to gather, bring together, assemble”). Of course, we know the phrase because the Jews began to form them as a teaching replacement for the

destroyed temple (they never replaced the formal sacrificial purpose of the temple, only its function as the center of instruction). In this way, we are not surprised to find the term “Jew” appear in both of these churches (2:9; 3:9).

But *why a synagogue of Satan?* This phrase is unique in the Bible. The idea, however, is not. Recall the *Pharisees*, the teachers of Israel. They were the archenemies of Jesus on this earth, always seeking a way to trick him, to trap him, and eventually to kill him. John records how one day Jesus was teaching, and a group of Pharisees were listening in. Jesus famously said, “to the Jews who had believed in him, ‘If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free’” (John 8:31-32).

The Pharisees then reply, “We are the *offspring of Abraham* and have never been enslaved to anyone” (33). Jesus said, “Everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever” (34-35). He knew that they were seeking to kill him (37) and while acknowledging that in the flesh “you are *offspring of Abraham*,” they are therefore filled with unregenerate, sinful hearts. He knows this because he has seen it from his Father, but they sin because of what they

hear from **their father** (38). They get angrier, “**Abraham is our father!**” (39). But Jesus said, “**If you were Abraham’s children, you would be doing the works Abraham did, but now you seek to kill me**” (39-40).

Then comes the clincher. “**You are doing the works your father did**” (41). They take him literally and miss his point. “**We were not born of sexual immorality. We have one Father—even God**” (41). Jesus said, “**If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here ... he sent me**” (42). But they could not bear to hear his word (43). So he concludes, “**You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires**” (44). And that’s your direct connection to the synagogue of Satan.

Who is Satan? Satan is the **prince of this world** (John 12:31), the tempter (Matt 4, 1Co 7:5), the **father of lies** (John 8:44), the **deceiver of the whole world** (Rev 12:9), the **accuser of Christians** (Rev 12:10), who **schemes** against the church (Eph 6:11), disguising himself as **an angel of light** (2Co 11:14), and **prowling around like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour** (1Pe 5:8), for he has **the power of death** (Heb 2:14).

He is the **great first enemy of God’s people**, there in the Garden of Eden, the mighty Seraphim. There he tempted

our first parents to sin, but God judged the old snake and promised that one of the woman's seed would crush his head ([Gen 3:15](#)). However, not before a history-long battle that would be waged between her seed and his seed.

The Old Testament is, in some ways, the story of whether or not [the newest heroes](#) to come along would be that Seed of the woman who would finally win the war and defeat the ancient foe. But none were found worthy. All fell short. As those ancient believers were coming on the scene, the [prophets of old](#) foretold of a coming Seed, the Messiah of Israel who would finally defeat him. They told of his miraculous birth, its place, the flight to Egypt, his return to Israel, his ministry, his works, his sacrificial death, his resurrection from the dead, his full humanity, his full deity, and so much more. In the NT, we learn that this person was Jesus Christ.

The thing is, all of these details were being looked at by the ancient Jews and [each of them was believed in](#) one way or another by someone back then, just not all at the same time. This is why Jews like Simeon and Anna were able to acknowledge King Jesus at his birth and why so many Jews converted to Christianity even though they were monotheistic. They had a place in their theology for a coming God-man. All were confused to one degree or

another, because if they weren't, the plan would never have unfolded as it had to.

But there was always a certain segment of the Jewish population that was **looking entirely in the wrong place**. The Pharisees exemplified this more than any other. But Jesus called them out, because they totally missed him—their own Messiah. And he told them that they did this because they were not children of Abraham, not true-Jews, but instead their **father was Satan**. They were not spiritually reborn, and therefore they belonged to the wrong seed, the **seed of the serpent**, like Cain their father (**1Jn 3:12**), not biologically (in either case), but spiritually. All of those traits just mentioned of this evil creature, they exemplified. And their spiritually evil father manifested all his unholy dark fruit through the physical words and actions of his followers.

What Jesus is showing us here is **a profound theology** that many today get badly confused. It is the difference between being **a biological Jew** and **a spiritual Jew**, a Jew outwardly (through circumcision) or inwardly (through the circumcision of the heart; **Rom 2:28-29**). It was a difference he told **Nicodemus** that came not through physical birth, but rebirth by the Holy Spirit of God. And, he said, the

spiritual birth only comes through believing that Jesus Christ is the Messiah that was to come.

It was a difference that was so profoundly upsetting to the Jewish religious establishment over the course of the decades, as so very many **Jews were converting** to Christianity, that the rabbis took away the theological key that had been given to them all which made conversion to a God-man logically possible. They made it an official heresy to teach or believe that their OT Scripture taught that there was one God who manifested himself in more than one person, the Father, the Word and Name, the Spirit, something many were teaching prior even to the coming of Jesus. This in turn created **increasing animosity towards Christians** who were claiming to be true Jews. A kind of war was brewing. This is **the context into which we have to understand Jesus' words to Smyrna and Philadelphia.**

Smyrna and Philadelphia

Since I'm looking at the churches through the chiasm, let's begin by noting the **structure and the parallels** of these two churches. **First**, as we saw with Ephesus and Laodicea which each had chiasms to the fifth (E) place, Smyrna and Philadelphia each have chiasms to **the fourth (D) place.**

Curiously, the center of each is great suffering that is soon to come for the church.

Smyrna

A. ²⁻⁸ To the angel of the church in Smyrna write:

B. "The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life.

C. ⁹ I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

D. ¹⁰ Do not fear what you are about to suffer.

C'. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation.

B'. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.

A'. ¹¹ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death."

Philadelphia

A. ³⁻⁷ And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: "The words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens.

B. ⁸ I know your works. Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name.

C. ⁹ Behold, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie-- behold, I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and they will learn that I have loved you.

D. ¹⁰ Because you have kept my word about patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth.

D'. ¹¹ I am coming soon. Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown.

C'. ¹² The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. Never shall he go out of it,

B' and I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name.

A'. ¹³ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'

We have already noted that both contain the phrase "the synagogue of Satan," which is the only two places in the Bible it is used. As such, the particular focus of both is the Jews who think they are Jews but aren't. Furthermore, these are the only two churches of which nothing negative is stated. Someone has summarized it all this way, "Two churches were singled out by John for their faithfulness, Smyrna and Philadelphia. Both were poor and weak, both had suffered tribulation, and yet both were full of life and vigor."¹

Thinking about the names of the churches is interesting and I thought this would be an appropriate sermon to do it

¹ Otto F. A. Meinardus, "The Christian Remains of the Seven Churches of the Apocalypse," *The Biblical Archaeologist* 37.3 (Sept 1974): 80-81. https://www.jstor.org/stable/3210966?read-now=1&refreqid=excelsior%3Af3dd8213864145f11810673951054985&seq=13#page_scan_tab_contents.

since we are looking at **Philadelphia**, which everyone knows means, “**The City of Brotherly Love**.” Jesus singles out Philadelphia saying, “**I have loved you**” (**Rev 3:9**). It is interesting in this regard that **Ephesus** means “**Desirable; beloved**,” but this is the church Christ said has “**lost its first love**” (**2:4**). In fact, there seems to be some kind of a **play on the names of all the churches** with something of Christ’s message to them.

Smyrna means “**Bitterness; suffering**,” and this is a church singled out for great suffering and “**tribulation**” (**2:10**). **Pergamum** means “**Citadel; capitol**,” and Jesus tells them, “**I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is**” (**12**). **Thyatira** means, “**High Tower**.” Jesus singles out the false teachings of **Jezebel** (**2:20**) to this church and curiously, when you read of Jezebel’s death, you find that she was thrown down out of a high window and her blood spilled on the walls. Artists often depicted her as being thrown out of a tower. **Sardis** means “**Remnant**,” and Jesus tells this church, “**You have still a few names ... people who have not soiled their garments**” (**3:5**). **Laodicea** means “**People of common fairness or Justice**” and it is to them that Jesus reveals himself as “**the faithful and true witness**” (**3:14**).

What kind of a judgment will they make? That’s what I call tailoring your message to your audience.

Church	Meaning
Ephesus	Desirable; beloved
Smyrna	Bitterness; suffering
Pergamum	Citadel; capitol
Thyatira	High tower; odor of affliction
Sardis	Remnant
Philadelphia	Place of Brotherly Love
Laodicea	People of Common Fairness

Smyrna

As we move into the two passages, we will begin each with a [short tour of the city](#).² Smyrna was a rival city to Ephesus—the largest city in Asia Minor, but with virtually the same population, around 250,000. It was built next to Mt. Pagus, which one archeologist calls the “[crown of Smyrna](#).” A major seaport 35 miles to the north of Ephesus, Smyrna inscribed its coins with the “[first of Asia in beauty and size, and the most brilliant, and Metropolis of Asia...](#)”

² The following information (including later with Philadelphia) is from [David E. Graves](#), “Jesus Speaks to Seven of His Churches, Part 1,” *Bible and Spade* 23.2 (Spring 2010): 45-56; [David E. Graves](#), “Jesus Speaks to Seven of His Churches, Part 2,” *Bible and Spade* 23.3 (Summer 2010): 66-74. [Clinton E. Arnold](#), *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Hebrews to Revelation.*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002); [David E. Graves](#), “Local References in the Letter to Smyrna (Rev 2:8-11), Part 1: Archaeological Background,” *Bible and Spade* 18.4 (Fall 2005): 113-24; [David E. Graves](#), “Local References in the Letter of Smyrna (Rev 2:8-11), Part 2: Historical Background,” *Bible and Spade* 19.1 (Winter 2006): 23-29.

Interestingly, Jesus calls himself “the first and the last” (Rev 2:8). Cicero (106-44 BC) called Smyrna “the city of our most faithful and most ancient allies.” Jesus tells this church, “Be faithful unto death” (2:10).

Its origins trace back 3000 years according to the traditions of the Amazons (Hittites). The city was the first to be dedicated to the goddess Roma which demonstrated its allegiance dating back to 195 BC with Rome. This allegiance seems to provide an historical parallel with the Christian allegiance in the church to Jesus. Smyrna was known for its gymnasium, reported to be the most beautiful in all Asia. Along with its stadium, this was a place that celebrated athleticism, holding festivals and games in honor of Augustus and Olympia Hadriana. In those games, runners would receive laurel wreaths or crowns around their heads. These “crown” themes may play a part in Jesus telling them, “I will give you the crown of life” (2:10).



Mt. Pagus, "Crown of Smyrna"
as seen from the western Corinthian
columns of the agora
In Graves (2005).



Crowned bronze runner
Found in the Aegean Sea off the coast
In Graves (2010)

Smyrna was also the home of the Greek poet **Homer**. But more importantly for us was its Christian influence. Founded no earlier than 61-64 AD, the churches first Bishop was either **Apelles** (**Rom 16:10**) or **Ariston**, who was followed by **Strateas**, brother of Lois and therefore the **uncle of Timothy**, who was followed by **Boucolus**, a **disciple of John**.³ **Clement of Rome** (writing 90-100AD) and **Ignatius of Antioch** (d. 110 AD) both wrote letters to Smyrna. **Irenaeus**, bishop of Lyons was born here, as was **Polycarp**, who was also a disciple of John.

Most importantly, **Polycarp** (155AD), **Pionius** (160-180 AD or 250 AD), and many others were **martyred** in Smyrna. The accounts of **Polycarp** and **Pionius** are riveting and

³ This information is summarized in **Meinardus**, 75.

should be read by all Christians,⁴ as the latter itself explains, “The Apostle urges us to share in the remembrances of the saints, fully aware that to call to mind those who have passed their lives in the faith wisely with all their hearts gives strength to those who are striving to imitate the better things.” It is into this that we now turn to Jesus’ letter to Smyrna.

He *addresses* it in the same format as all the others. “To the angel of the church in Smyrna write...” (Eph 2:8). Christ then *identifies* himself. “The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life.” The full idea is found in the titles of Christ in Rev 1:17-18. This is the same person whom John fell on the ground to worship. We have already addressed the reference to the first and last. The dying and rising seems to fit well with the idea of the wandering star that we call *the moon*, for it waxes and wanes from full to crescent on a monthly basis. Christ’s people must not find themselves falling into their own wanderings and meanderings, like the seven stars of heaven.

What is Jesus *claim of knowledge* for Smyrna? “I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the

⁴ See *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/martyrdompoly carp.html>; and *The Martyrdom of Pionius*, <https://www.cogwriter.com/martyrdom-of-pionius.htm>.

slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan” (2:9). It is fascinating to read the *Martyrdom of Pionius* in this regard. Anywhere from 50-150 years after John pens these words (we do not know the exact time frame of his death), the old Presbyter of the church addresses his accusers. And he says,

(13) I understand also that the Jews have been inviting some of you to their synagogues. Beware lest you fall into a greater, more deliberate sin ... Do not become with them rulers of Sodom and people of Gomorrha, whose hands are tainted with blood ... (14) Whenever anyone revolts from God he is followed by the rebel angels, and demonic ministers assist him with every sort of drug, magician, priest, and wizard. *And no wonder: for the Apostle says: Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is not strange if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness?* (2 Cor 11:14-15).

My guess is that Poinius is remembering these very words of Jesus in Revelation 2. The battles between the two seeds did not end with Christ's First Coming, though he did win the war.

In both accounts of martyrdom, the saint is **told beforehand** in a vision that people are coming to put them to death. This allows them to **prepare themselves**—to gird up their loins and face it like the Savior who went willingly, in emulation of their Master. The same thing holds true here, except that it is not a vision to any specific individual, but rather **to those saints who are in this city and church**.

Just here, I think we need to recognize that Polycarp and Poinius would have especially believed that **Jesus was talking to them**, because they were both from *Smyrna*. If we had some kind of revelation in the Bible that the people of the Reformed Baptist Church of Northern Colorado were, as our Lord continues, **“about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death...”** (**Rev 2:10**), I’m guessing we would take it personally too.

But this leads me to consider how we are to **apply this letter today**. As we saw in the introduction to Revelation, there are four basic views of interpretation regarding the book. *Preterists* see most of it as applying to these churches and being fulfilled in 70 AD. *Historicists* see it as unfolding a long history of the church. *Futurists* see it as dealing mostly

with our own future. And *Idealists* see it as applying in all ages. Each has their strengths; each has their own weaknesses. Each has a long history of interpretation; each continues to be defended in modern times. Here is a brief summary of the four views as they regard the church letters.

In the view of the *historicists*, the letters contain a cryptic reference to the conditions in which the whole church would be found at varying times in her history. The church of Ephesus represents the church in John's own day, while the church in Laodicea stands for the church in the end times.

The *preterists* consider the letters to apply to little else than the contemporary situation of the seven churches as they existed in John's time. As with all biblical epistles, however, application to similar churches of any time is acknowledged.

Futurists may side with the *historicists* or, alternatively, with the *preterists* and the *spiritual* interpreters as to the application of the letters, though they see the reference to the "things which shall take place after this" (1:19) as referring to the end of the present age.

Spiritual interpreters see ... The seven churches symboliz[ing] the church of all times, and the letters apply to any churches in which the relevant circumstances prevail.⁵

⁵ Steve Gregg, *Revelation Four Views: A Parallel Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 81.

I bring this up because there is a **difficulty** that many Christians have had with this idea that saints should just **go willingly to their deaths** like Polycarp and Poinius did. It seems to me that those two would have been interpreting the letter as a mixture of preterism and historicism, as both of those views would have overlapped in their day and in that particular city. And I mean, if I received a personal vision that the next day someone would come to my door and arrest me and I was to die a martyr, despite being essentially cessationist in my theology, I would probably listen to it.

But **here's the problem**. While Jesus says this about Smyrna and Philadelphia, and there are general principles throughout much of the NT that reflect the same idea, there are also other passages throughout the Bible that do not necessitate dying as a martyr. **Joshua** didn't just walk into Canaan and say, "**I worship Yahweh, please burn me at the stake.**" (And remember, Revelation is actually patterned after that book). Sometimes it almost seems like the earliest fathers were **volunteering** in mass to see who would be the next to die on purpose. I think that's probably polemical on the part of the authors to encourage Christians who were undergoing intense persecution. Someone sent me an

interesting quote from Gandhi this week. “Let us all be brave enough to die the death of a martyr, but let no one lust for martyrdom.” I agree. Even Jesus didn’t lust to die a martyr. But at the same time, if we are unwilling to heed the message of Sardis and Philadelphia today and say that it was only for that city, what’s the point of even having it as God’s word? I’ll leave you to work that out in your own liberty of conscience. So back to the passage.

The situation is that there will be Jews who never converted to Christianity, that would bring such terrible persecution upon the church that many would be tempted to be in fear. So Jesus says, “Do not fear what you are about to suffer” (10). But they would suffer it nonetheless. The Lord had ordained it. The devil would inspire wicked men to throw some in prison. That’s nothing less than what the Apostles themselves had to undergo on account of Jesus’ name.

He says this is being done “that you may be tested.” This is the refining of faith in the fires of suffering that our culture still knows precious little about, but saints throughout the centuries, down into our own, have understood well. I pray we won’t have to know here. Yet,

blessed are they for it, blessed in ways those of us who never go through it will never know—for better or for worse.

It says it will be “for ten days.” Many have noticed that there is an echo here of Daniel and his friends who asked the king, “Please test your servants for ten days...” (Dan 1:12). At first, that testing involved simply a change of diet. Eventually, it would be being thrown into a fiery furnace and plunged into a den full of blood-thirsty lions. But the ten days here is not to be taken literally. Very few of the numbers in this book are. There is no record of any kind of a ten-day massive persecution of the church of Sardis and since that church isn’t even there today, it almost certainly doesn’t refer to a literal 10-day persecution of them in the future. Rather, 10 days is a short period of time in relation to a man’s life. Beeke says, “The Lord knows exactly how long we must suffer. Though ten is a symbolic number here, its specificity indicates to the Smyrnian church that her suffering is limited. Satan is on a leash and is allowed to attack the church only so far or so long as it pleases God.”⁶

Jesus has no negative evaluation of this church, which good, since he is preparing them for persecution. They have

⁶ Joel Beeke, *Revelation*, The Lectio Continua Expository Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2016), 87.

enough on their plate as it is. So he leaves them with a *promise*. “Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life” (10). As we have seen, crowns were objects well known and greatly admired and desired to Smyrnaeans. How much more if it comes from the living God who has been raised from the dead. For this crown is *the crown of eternal life*.

This is a good place to look at some of our parallels with John’s Gospel. I’ll give you three of them to consider. These all come at the end of the Gospel, though one also hints at things in the beginning. First, this verse has a parallel in Jesus telling Peter, “by what death he would glorify God” (John 21:19). The lives of the saints will follow after the lives of the Apostles, and God himself will prepare them by letting them know beforehand.

Second, the same verse has a parallel in Jesus’ death. “The soldiers twisted a crown of thorns ... Then Jesus came out wearing the crown of thorns” (John 19:2, 5). Not only will our lives emulate the Apostles, but they will emulate our Lord Jesus himself. But this crown is the polar opposite of Christ’s, even though both come from suffering. His was a mockery, a joke, blasphemously taunting the King of kings. But this very King gives to his saints who overcome

even unto death **the crown of life, not death**. Crowns are objects of royalty. When an athlete received one, he was king for a day, worshiped and admired by the throngs of pagans. When we receive our crowns from Christ, they are from Brother to brother, King to princes and princesses of the royal palace, showing us that our authority and rule in the new heavens and earth has only just begun.

Finally, recall that I brought up **Nicodemus** earlier. We also saw him last week in the parallels with Ephesus and Laodicea. There is also something of a parallel with him here, though not in John 3. **The word “Smyrna”** is used only by Matthew and John. It is used twice in Revelation for this city and only one other time in all of his writings. This is when Nicodemus brings “**a mixture of myrrh (*smurna*) and aloes**” to anoint the dead body of Jesus. This appears right where we would expect it to in a chiasm of the two books. Smyrna, remember, means “**bitter**” and “**suffering**,” and it is pictured greatly in that kind act of this former Pharisee who had been turned by the Word from the synagogue of Satan to the friend of Christ.⁷ As Nicodemus anoints the dead body of Jesus with the bitter herbs, so the living Christ

⁷ I found an interesting discussion of this in the dictionary entry at “Nicodemus Meaning,” *Abarim Publications*, https://www.abarim-publications.com/Meaning/Nicodemus.html#X_Tw8WRKhLB.

anoints his saints in Smyrna with eternal life through suffering.

To reassure his friends in this church whom he had called by name, our Lord *concludes*, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death” (Rev 2:11). As the old saying goes, he who is born once must die twice. He who is born twice will only die once. This second death will return later in the *chiastic parallels at the end of the book* when we learn about the eternal fires of hell reserved for the wicked who have rejected Christ and his Law.

Philadelphia

Philadelphia was *founded last among the seven*, between 189-138 BC. It was called, “*The Gateway to the East*,” as it established at this place along the road that ran from Rome to Tarsus (home of Saul/Paul) in order to spread Greek language and culture. It means *City of Brotherly Love*, named after *Attalus II*, king of Pergamum (220-138 BC) and his brother Eumenes. We, of course, resonate with this city in America, not necessarily because of the content of the letter, but because its namesake was placed upon our earliest

nation's capital, which people still know as the City of Brotherly Love.

Like Laodicea, it was riddled with earthquakes. The city was destroyed in 17 AD. The securest building in the city was the temple. “Their foundations were laid on beds of charcoal covered with fleeces, which caused the structure to ‘float’ on the soil like a raft. Each block was joined to another by metal cramps, so the platform was a unity.”⁸ Jesus said he would never leave the city, a nod back to the ruined city devastated by the quakes, they would never have to leave the temple or flee for their lives. As someone says, “Eternal security is certainly a comfort for believers living under constant fear of seismic destruction.”⁹ But eternal security is not for this life. It is for the life to come. And the church at Philadelphia, which was the last of the seven to remain on earth, was destroyed in the 13th century by the Seljuk Turks who murdered all the believers left in it.¹⁰ And all the Philadelphian Christians have long since gone to be with their Savior. Yet, they are still with him and will be forever.

⁸ Graves, Summer 2010, 68.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Jim MacGregor, “letter to the Church at Philadelphia,” (2019), https://www.academia.edu/38246185/Letter_to_the_Church_at_Philadelphia.

The Lord Jesus *addresses* the church, “To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write...” (Rev 3:7). He then *identifies* himself: “The words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens.” The key of David fits the wandering star theme with Jupiter, the king star. Of the seven stars, only Zeus has been found on coins in the city, which are our main source of understanding its religious traditions. There were, however, many other deities worshiped here and inscriptions indicate that Philadelphia had a priest of Rome and Augustus as early as 27 BC.

After Revelation was written, in 214 AD, the city was granted permission to change its name to *Neokoros*, “temple warden.” The *Apostolic Constitutions* tells us that its first Bishop was Demetrius, appointed by John. Ignatius visited the city around 100 on his way to die. He wrote a letter to them and warned them not to listen to anyone expounding Judaism.¹¹ This is important, because it shows that Jesus’ focus on the same group had not diminished in the 10-40 years since he told it to John.

¹¹ Letter to the Philadelphians 6. See Mark Wilson, “The Social and Geographical World of Philadelphia (Revelation 1:11; 3:7–13),” in *Lexham Geographic Commentary on Acts through Revelation*, ed. Barry J. Beitzel, Jessica Parks, and Doug Mangum, Lexham Geographic Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2019), 680.

Jesus tells them what he *knows* about them. “I know your works” (3:8). Jesus gives no negative evaluation of their works. They and Smyrna are the only two churches like this. He highly encourages them for having “kept my word” and “not denied my name” (8c). Note the words “Word” and “Name,” both of which are often used in the OT to personify Jesus. This is the kind of thing you would expect to be applauded in the midst of great persecution and temptation to do that very thing.

This suffering is hinted at in the “Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut.” It is interesting to compare this door to the one in the next church—Laodicea where Jesus stands at the door and knocks. The door for that church is their own church door. Here, the door is the door of the eternal temple of God, which is called in vs. 7 as David’s house. It will appear later on at the end of the letter. The promise he is holding out is the right to walk through that door.

But what about hinting at suffering? This door serves as a transition of comparison to the return of the synagogue of Satan. “Behold, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie—behold, I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and

they will learn that I have loved you” (9). Beale explains that these Jews, “claimed that they represented a part of true Israel. But this claim was a **lie**. Even latter Rabbinic authorities condemned the Jewish community in Philadelphia for its compromise with the pagan culture. Their wealth gave them added weight with which to attack the Christians. Christ reassures these believers that He has the key which alone provides entry into God’s kingdom.”¹²

This takes us back to that **very confused doctrine** that so many Christians today have. The idea is that simply by being born Jews, they are God’s people. We see this manifested in **Zionism** and its idea that so many have that today’s nation of Israel can do no wrong. This is patently absurd and unbiblical. The modern state of Israel is not the theocracy of old. God did not found it; the United Nations did. And it was wholly political at that. Jesus tells these Christians that **these Jews are not true Jews**. Like so many other places in the NT (and, quite frankly, the OT, e.g. **Hos 1:9**), while **affirming outward biological Jewishness**, being a true Jew is and always was **a matter of the heart**. As the Apostle says, “**For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is**

¹² **G. K. Beale** and David H. Campbell, *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), 84.

circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God” (Rom 2:28-29).

These Christians are therefore true Jews, even though many of them (presumably not all) are Gentiles by birth. This is the great mystery that Paul unfolds in places like Romans 9-11. The natural branches are cut off of the vine; while wild olive shoots are grafted into it. Jesus is telling them precisely what he tells his disciples. The vine is not the physical nation of Israel. “*I am the Vine ... as the Father has loved me, so have I loved you*” (John 15:5, 9; cf. John 3:16; 1Jn 4:10, 18). Christians are Jews! That’s Jesus’ point. We inherit the promises of Abraham, because all the promises are *Yes and Amen* in Christ (2Co 1:20).

Jesus introduces a *promise* at this point. “*Because you have kept my word about patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth*” (Rev 3:10). This verse has been the source of a lot of discussion. I grew up with the view of Dispensationalists represented by John MacArthur, “*Christ’s description—an even still future that for a short time severely tests the whole world—must refer to the time*

of tribulation, the seven-year period before Christ's earthly kingdom is consummated, featuring the unleashing of divine wrath in judgments expressed as seals, trumpets, and bowls.”¹³ The idea of keeping from this hour therefore applies, not to Philadelphia, but to (almost certainly) you and I in the Rapture of the church.¹⁴

While I am 100% convinced that **Dispensationalists** are **having a hay-day** with this verse right now, **Preterists** rightly note that this letter is in fact written to a church *in Asia Minor in the first century* and that Jesus was talking to them and he meant what he said to them. Therefore, they see this as being a prophecy **fulfilled in the 3.5 years prior to the destruction of the temple in 70 AD**, a time of massive persecution in the church throughout the Roman Empire. Obviously, as we have seen with Polycarp and other later martyrs, terrible persecution befell the church in those early centuries, even as the 20th century saw more Christian martyrs than all other combined.

¹³ **John MacArthur**, *MacArthur Study Bible: ESV* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), note on Revelation 3:10.

¹⁴ I believe an interesting problem develops with those who adhere to *both* Dispensationalism and historicism. The Historicist sees this as a period that goes from the time of the Great Awakening (notice the American-Centrism) through to (usually) whenever they happen to be living now. Most historicists love to think they are in the Laodicean time. Yet, it is the church at Philadelphia that sees the “rapture” come in this verse. Thus, we have the rapture taking place prior to the time of Laodicea in which they now live. Yet, they are still looking forward to the rapture!

I believe we need to **not be myopic about this verse**, which in some ways prepares us for the rest of the book's prophecies. These letters are simultaneously specific and generic, applying to them and timeless. They refer to their immediate specific situation of these churches, but I see no reason why later history would not be included as well. **History is in this sense cyclical and typological**. If there happens to be, as I think there will be without putting strict timelines on it all, a great persecution prior to Jesus' return, it fits that too. I don't think we have to choose between positions here. I do think we need to be careful not to eliminate multiple fulfillments.

This part of the promise concludes, **"I am coming soon"** (11). In light of what I just said, it seems to me that Jesus "comes" in many ways in the Bible. Those comings in judgment upon nations or to help his people through a terrible time are types of the great Second Coming to which the book ultimately points. So, Jesus did come soon for his people here, but how so?

He gives the duty which then leads to the great promise that answers this question. **"Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown"** (11b). Jesus is telling his church to **hold fast to his word and his name**. The

temptation during severe persecution is to recant. Polycarp and Poinius were both faced on multiple occasions with the promise that if they recanted, they would not be tortured. They refused under extreme duress and physical pain. The idea of the crown here connects us back to Smyrna. Jesus is holding out the crown of eternal life.

You must look inward in these days and ask yourself if you want this crown or a temporary one. If things get very bad very quickly in our nation and world, you want to *have your mind made up now*, like they did. You will not be able to stand later. Our nation is at war. These are scary days. Do you want the crown of eternal life, peace, joy, and comfort in these days? Or will you recant and turn away as so many have and will?

There are parallels with John and later in Revelation which give us a good way to begin wrapping up today. Jesus has referred to this synagogue of Satan. It is the same place it says, “I spoke openly to the world. I always taught in the synagogues and the temple” (John 18:20). Jesus never hid from Satan. But Peter did. In light of denying Christ, I want you to remember that Peter did this very thing. “Peter denied [that he knew Jesus] and said, “I am not [his disciple]” (John 18:25, 27). And yet, Jesus still held the door open to

him. “When the doors were shut” after the resurrection in that upper room, “Jesus came and stood in their midst” (20:19). He told them to look and see that it was really him. He came later to Peter. The threat of joining Jesus in suffering was enough to cause Peter to recant his faith for a time. But it was the grace of the gospel of reconciliation that restored him and he would not recant later, even knowing how God had ordained him to die.

What Jesus held out to him was **the same he holds out to these Philadelphians** who did not recant their faith in the face of great suffering—His own brotherly love towards them. “The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. Never shall he go out of it, and I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new Name” (12).

At **the end of Revelation**, we see this **new Jerusalem** coming down out of heaven and it is made up of the very pillars of the 12 Apostles, including Peter. Writing names of temple pillars was a way the ancients, even in Philadelphia’s pagan temples, would identify themselves sacramentally with the gods. But here, it is **Jesus writing our names on the**

eternal temple. This is his grace and mercy, and it lasts forever. No man can erase it.

Don't let the good days you have in this life blind you to your need for Christ. Prepare yourself for whatever God may bring your way. Emulate these churches who followed the Apostles who followed their Lord himself, even to death if it be his will. “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (Rev 3:13).

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