

TO THE CONQUERORS

OCTOBER 11, 2026 / CLASS 5 / STUDENT HANDOUT

Revelation 2 – Four letters to four real churches

Part I. The classroom argument

1. Jesus writes to each church

Revelation 1:12–20; 2:1, 8, 12, 18.

Each letter opens with a piece of the vision from chapter 1. Ephesus hears from the One Who holds the seven stars and walks among the lampstands (1:13, 16, 20). Smyrna hears from the First and the Last, Who was dead and came to life (1:17–18). Pergamum hears from the One with the sharp two-edged sword (1:16), and Thyatira from the One Whose eyes are like fire and Whose feet are like burnished bronze (1:14–15). The four titles take the vision in reverse, from the last thing Jesus said about Himself back to His eyes and feet.

Every letter follows the same shape. Jesus says, "I know," and tells the church the truth about itself: what He commends, what He holds against them, and what they are to do. Then comes the call, "Let him who has ears hear what the Spirit says to the churches," and a promise to the one who conquers. The opening words, "says these things," are the prophets' formula, "Thus says the LORD." These are prophetic words from Christ to congregations in real cities.

Each promise to the conqueror is kept later in the book. The tree of life stands in the holy city (22:2). The second death has no power over those who share the first resurrection (20:6). The conquerors reign with Christ (20:4; 22:5), and Jesus calls Himself "the bright morning star" (22:16).

2. Ephesus had left its first love

Revelation 2:1–7; Acts 20:17–31.

Ephesus was the leading city of Asia, home to the great temple of Artemis. Paul worked there for about three years (Acts 19:8–10; 20:31). When he said goodbye to the Ephesian elders at Miletus, he warned them: "fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things" (Acts 20:29–30).

The wolves came, and Ephesus caught them. Jesus commends their works, labor, and endurance, their refusal to bear evil men, and their testing of "those who call themselves apostles and are not." They have carried on for the sake of His Name and have not grown weary. The commendation is long and it is real.

"But I have this against you: you have left your first love." The cure Jesus gives is to "remember where you have fallen from, and repent and do the works you did at first." The first love and the first works go together. The trouble is inside the church, and so is the cure: remember, and repent. If they don't, the consequence comes from outside: Jesus will move their lampstand. Paul's last word to this church was "Grace be with all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with love incorruptible" (Ephesians 6:24).

3. "I will move your lampstand out of its place"

Revelation 2:5; Jeremiah 7:12–14.

"If not, I am coming to you, and I will move your lampstand out of its place, unless you repent." Last week we saw that every church is a lampstand because the Spirit is wherever Christ's people are. A church can lose its place as His lampstand.

Israel had seen it before. Jeremiah stood in the Temple gate and told Jerusalem to go to Shiloh, "where I made My name dwell at first, and see what I did to it," and warned that God would do the same to the Temple (Jeremiah 7:12–14). A few years after John wrote, in AD 70, the Temple's own lampstand was taken from its place and paraded through the streets of Rome. The Arch of Titus still shows it.

The warning comes with time to repent. Jesus tells Ephesus where it stands while there is still time to come back.

4. The tree of life in the paradise of God

Revelation 2:1, 7; Genesis 2:8–9; 3:8, 22–24.

The letter to Ephesus opens and closes in the garden. Jesus "walks in the middle of the seven golden lampstands" (2:1), as the LORD God walked in the garden of Eden (Genesis 3:8). The lampstand itself was made like a flowering almond tree (Exodus 25:31–36). And the letter ends with a promise: "To him who conquers I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God" (2:7).

After Adam sinned, God placed the cherubim and a flaming sword "to guard the way to the tree of life" (Genesis 3:24). Jesus is Adam glorified, walking in power in the garden of God, and He opens the way the cherubim guarded. The tree appears again in the holy city, "for the healing of the nations" (22:2).

5. "I know your poverty — but you are rich"

Revelation 2:8–9; Romans 2:28–29; John 8:39–44.

Smyrna, a harbor city about 35 miles north of Ephesus, had built the first temple in Asia to the goddess Roma and won the honor of building a temple to the emperor Tiberius. Its church was poor and slandered. Jesus speaks to it as "the First and the Last, Who was dead and came to life again," and says, "I know your tribulation and your poverty — but you are rich."

The slander came "from those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan." The Greek Old Testament called Israel's assembly "the synagogue of the LORD" (Numbers 16:3; 27:17). Jesus gives the assembly that slanders His church the opposite name. Being God's people is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit (Romans 2:28–29). Whoever rejects Jesus is not Israel. Jesus' people are.

Jesus had warned His disciples that they would be handed over "to the synagogues and prisons" (Luke 21:12). Smyrna faced both. The church was poor, and Jesus said it was rich. The people slandering it said they were Jews, and Jesus said they were not.

6. "Be faithful to the point of death"

Revelation 2:10–11; Daniel 1:8–20.

"Don't fear what you are about to suffer. Behold! the devil is about to throw some of you into prison in order that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days." Jesus sets the limits: **some** of you, for **ten** days.

The ten days point back to Daniel. Daniel and his friends refused the Babylonian king's food, and Daniel asked, "Test your servants for ten days" (Daniel 1:12). At the end of ten days they were stronger than everyone who ate at the king's table, and they went into the king's service ten times better than the rest (1:15, 20). In Greek, Daniel 1:12 and Revelation 2:10 share the same two words: "test" and "ten days." And the letters on either side of Smyrna's are about food sacrificed to idols.

"Be faithful to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life." The command is to be faithful. Death is how far it may have to go. Christ "was dead and came to life," and He gives the faithful the crown of life. The crown was the wreath a city gave its champions. "He who conquers will never be harmed by the second death."

7. Pergamum held fast to His Name, and some there held the teaching of Balaam

Revelation 2:12–17; Numbers 22:21–35; 25:1–3; 31:8, 16.

Pergamum stood on a high hill about 15 miles inland. It was the first city in Asia to build a temple to a living Roman ruler, it had the great altar of Zeus on its acropolis, and it was home to Asklepios, the healing god whose emblem was a serpent and who was called "savior." Jesus says, "I know where you dwell — where Satan's throne is."

Satan has no rule except what people give him. Psalm 22:3 says God is "enthroned on the praises of Israel," and in Pergamum the city's worship went to the emperor's temple, to Zeus, and to a serpent called savior. That is where Satan's throne stood. Revelation 13 shows how it worked: the dragon gives the beast "his throne" (13:2), and a second beast makes people worship the first (13:12). In Pergamum that was Rome's power, with accusers bringing Christians before Roman officials, as they did in city after city in Acts (Acts 17:5–8; 18:12–13). Antipas was killed there.

The church there held fast. "You hold fast to My Name, and you didn't deny your faith in Me even in the days of Antipas, My witness, My faithful one, who was killed among you." Antipas is called by the words of Jesus' own title in 1:5, "the faithful witness." The Greek word for witness, *martyr*, is where our word "martyr" comes from. What Jesus commends is that the church held fast and did not deny Him.

"But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam." Balak, king of Moab, hired the prophet Balaam to curse Israel, and God made him bless them instead (Numbers 22–24). So Balaam taught Balak another way in: Moabite women invited Israel to the sacrifices of their gods, "and the people ate and bowed down to their gods" (Numbers 25:1–3; 31:16). Some at Pergamum held that same teaching, and so did the Nicolaitans Ephesus hated (2:6, 15). The church held fast to His Name, and some in it held Balaam's teaching. The same Greek verb names both.

The One Who speaks has "the sharp two-edged sword." When Balaam set out to curse Israel, the angel of the LORD stood in his way "with his drawn sword in his hand" (Numbers 22:31), and Israel later killed Balaam with the sword (31:8). Jesus warns that He will make war against Balaam's followers "by the sword of My mouth" (2:16). To the one who conquers He promises "hidden manna," the bread God had kept before Him in the ark (Exodus 16:33; Hebrews 9:4), and a white stone with a new name.

Why "hidden"? By John's day no one had seen that jar of manna for centuries: the ark held only the tablets by Solomon's time (1 Kings 8:9), and the Holy of Holies of Herod's Temple stood empty. Jews spoke of the ark and the manna as hidden away by God until the Messiah came. Jesus promises the conqueror a share of it: food from God's own presence instead of the idols' table, and He is Himself the bread from heaven (John 6:32–35).

8. "You tolerate the woman Jezebel"

Revelation 2:18–29; 1 Kings 16:29–33; 2 Kings 9:22; Psalm 2.

Thyatira was the smallest of the seven cities, a garrison town full of trade guilds. Lydia, the seller of purple cloth Paul met at Philippi, came from there (Acts 16:14). Guild life met at the guild god's table, and a Christian who stayed away could lose his trade.

Jesus speaks as "the Son of God," the only time Revelation uses the title. It comes from Psalm 2, where God says to His King, "You are My Son." The emperor claimed that title too. Thyatira's commendation is warm: "your love and faith and service and your endurance, and that you are doing more works now than you did at first."

Then: "you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess." The first Jezebel was Ahab's queen, who brought Baal worship into Israel and killed the LORD's prophets (1 Kings 16:31; 18:4); Jehu named her "whorings and sorceries" (2 Kings 9:22). Thyatira's Jezebel taught what Balaam taught: eat the food sacrificed to idols and play the whore. Jesus gave her time to repent, and she would not.

Ephesus and Thyatira are opposites. Revelation uses the word "love" only twice: Ephesus left it (2:4), and Thyatira has it (2:19). Ephesus is told to "do the works you did at first"; Thyatira is "doing more works now than you did at first." Ephesus tested "those who call themselves apostles"; Thyatira tolerates the woman "who calls herself a prophetess." In Greek, the verb for Ephesus *leaving* its love is the verb for Thyatira *tolerating* Jezebel. One church held the truth and left its love; the other grew in love and let the false prophetess stay. The One "Whose eyes are like a flame of fire" searches "minds and hearts" (2:23; Jeremiah 17:10), and He wants both.

To the faithful in Thyatira He says, "I'm not putting any other burden on you. Only hold fast to what you have until I come." The promise to the one who conquers and keeps His works is the rest of Psalm 2: "authority over the nations," shepherding them "with an iron rod," "as I also have received authority from My Father." The Son of God shares His rule with His people. And He promises "the morning star." The hired prophet Balaam had foretold, "a star shall come out of Jacob" (Numbers 24:17), and at the end of the book Jesus says, "I am ... the bright morning star" (22:16). He gives the conqueror Himself.

9. Jesus is the One Who says how each church is doing

Revelation 2:1–29.

Ephesus looked like the strongest church in Asia, and Jesus told it that it had fallen. Smyrna looked like the weakest, and He told it that it was rich. Pergamum held fast at Satan's address and had people inside who held Balaam's teaching. Thyatira was doing more works than at first, and it tolerated Jezebel. Jesus told each church what He knew about it, told each one what to do, and made a promise to the one who conquers.

Part II. Background and further study

1. The four cities

The four cities, with their maps, are in the separate sheet "The World of the Seven Churches" and in the church app.

Smyrna's name is the Greek word for myrrh, the spice of the Magi's gift and of Jesus' burial (Matthew 2:11; John 19:39). Jesus speaks to this church as "the First and the Last, Who was dead and came to life again" (2:8).

2. Paul's farewell and Jesus' letter to Ephesus

Acts 20:17–31; 1 Thessalonians 1:3; Deuteronomy 13:1–5; 1 Timothy 1:3–7.

Paul's last words to the Ephesian elders and Jesus' letter to the same church share their words. Paul: "remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears" (Acts 20:31). Jesus: "I know ... your labor ... You haven't grown weary ... So remember where you have fallen from" (2:2–5).

Paul thanked God for the Thessalonians' "work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope" (1 Thessalonians 1:3). Jesus knows Ephesus's "works, and your labor and your endurance": the same three Greek words. In Paul each has its source: faith, love, hope. At Ephesus the labor is there, and the love is gone.

Moses told Israel why God lets a false prophet appear: "the LORD your God is testing you, to know whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul" (Deuteronomy 13:3). Testing prophets was always a test of love.

3. The paradise of God

Ezekiel 28:12–16; 31:1–18; Genesis 2:8–9; Exodus 25:31–36.

"The paradise of God" (2:7) is a phrase from the Greek Old Testament. It names Eden in Ezekiel 28, where the king of Tyre is pictured in "Eden, the garden of God," and then cast down. It appears again in Ezekiel 31, a parable of a great tree in the garden of God, proud of its height, cut down so that the nations quake "at the sound of its fall" (31:16). Both passages tell of something great in God's garden that falls. Ephesus is told, "remember where you have fallen from."

The lampstand itself was made like a tree, with almond-blossom cups, buds, and flowers (Exodus 25:31–36). The church that is a lampstand is promised the tree of life.

4. The First and the Last in Isaiah

Isaiah 41:4, 10–13; 43:10; 44:2–8; 48:12.

"The First and the Last" is the LORD's title in Isaiah: "I am the first and I am the last; besides Me there is no god" (44:6). In the same chapter He says, "Fear not ... you are My witnesses!" (44:8), and earlier, "I, the LORD your God, hold your right hand; it is I Who say to you, 'Fear not'" (41:13). Revelation gives all of it to Jesus and His churches: He holds the stars in His right hand (2:1), He is the First and the Last (2:8), He says, "Don't fear" (2:10), and Antipas is "My witness" (2:13).

5. The synagogue of the LORD and the synagogue of Satan

Numbers 16:3; 27:17; 31:16; James 2:2; Luke 21:12; John 8:39–44; 16:2; Acts 17:5–7; 1 Thessalonians 2:14–16.

The Greek Old Testament calls Israel's assembly "the synagogue of the LORD." Jesus gives the assembly that slandered His church at Smyrna the opposite name. Christians still used the word "synagogue" for their own gatherings (James 2:2, in Greek), so the quarrel was over who owned the name. Jesus had told His disciples they would be handed over "to the synagogues and prisons" (Luke 21:12), and at Thessalonica opponents from the synagogue dragged believers before the city authorities, "saying that there is another king, Jesus" (Acts 17:7). Smyrna faced the same slander and the same prison.

6. Smyrna and the first resurrection

Revelation 2:8–11; 20:4–6.

Smyrna's letter and Revelation 20:4–6 share their key words in Greek: "first," the verb "came to life" (ζῆω), and "the second death." Christ "was dead and came to life" (2:8); the faithful "lived and reigned with Christ" (20:4, the same verb, ἐζησαν), and "over these the second death has no authority" (20:6). The devil throws some of Smyrna into prison (2:10); in chapter 20 the devil himself is seized and thrown into his own prison (20:2–3, 7).

7. One teaching through the letters

Exodus 34:15–16; Numbers 25:1–3; 31:16; Acts 15:28–29; 1 Corinthians 8–10; 2 Peter 2:15; Jude 11.

The Nicolaitans (2:6, 15), Balaam's followers (2:14), and Jezebel (2:20) teach one thing: eat the food sacrificed to idols and play the whore. Scripture names that pair from Moses on. The Jerusalem council asked the Gentile churches to "abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols ... and from sexual immorality," and laid on them "no greater burden" (Acts 15:28–29). Jesus tells

the faithful at Thyatira, "I'm not putting any other burden on you" (2:24). Paul read the same Numbers 25 story to the Corinthians: "You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons" (1 Corinthians 10:21).

8. Jezebel and the whore of Babylon

2 Kings 9:7, 22; Revelation 18:3, 23; 19:2.

Jehu charged Jezebel with "whorings and sorceries" (2 Kings 9:22), and God sent him "that I may avenge the blood of My servants the prophets ... at the hand of Jezebel" (9:7). Revelation brings the same two charges against Babylon: her whoredom (18:3) and her sorcery (18:23). When she falls, heaven sings that "He avenged the blood of His servants from her hand" (19:2). Thyatira's Jezebel is the book's first look at the whore.

9. The promises to the conqueror

Every letter's promise is kept later in the book:

- **Ephesus:** the tree of life (2:7) → 22:2, 14.
- **Smyrna:** the crown of life; never harmed by the second death (2:10–11) → 20:6; 21:7–8.
- **Pergamum:** hidden manna; a white stone with a new name (2:17) → 19:12; 22:4.
- **Thyatira:** authority over the nations; the iron rod; the morning star (2:26–28) → 19:15; 20:4; 22:5, 16.

"He who conquers will inherit these things, and I will be his God and he will be My son" (21:7).