



The First Three Churches

Lesson2: Ephesus, Smyrna, and Pergamum (Revelation 2:1-17)

INTRODUCTION

How to Read the Letters to the Churches

Before examining the individual churches, it is important to understand **why** the Book of Revelation begins as it does. Jesus does not immediately reveal global judgments, cosmic warfare, or end-time events. Instead, He begins by **addressing His churches**. This reminds us that judgment begins with **evaluation**, and that Christ is deeply concerned with the spiritual condition of His people before the world is judged.

Each of the seven letters follows a recognizable pattern:

1. **A description of Christ** — tailored to the church's condition
2. **A commendation** — if faithfulness exists (not always present)
3. **A rebuke** — if correction is needed (not always present)
4. **A call to repent or remain faithful (Exhortation)**
5. **A promise to the overcomer**

These letters operate on **four levels simultaneously**:

1. **Local** — real historical churches in Asia Minor.
2. **Personal** — application to each believer in all churches.
3. **Church-wide** — recurring strengths and failures across all congregations.
4. **Prophetic** — They represent unique eras in the history of the Church (in a certain order).



All four layers remain active throughout the study.

The **first three churches** form a natural unit bundled this way by the Holy Spirit. Together, they show a progression that repeats throughout church history and individual Christian life:

Devotion cooling → Pressure increasing → Compromise tolerated





Ephesus



The Church That Lost Its First Love (Revelation 2:1–7)

Local (Historical Context)

Ephesus was an ancient and important city. It began long before Bible times and later became a major Greek and Roman city near the sea. Because ships could easily come and go, Ephesus grew rich and powerful and was called the “Queen of Asia.” It was a main travel and trade hub connecting Rome to the eastern world, making it one of the busiest and most impressive cities of its day.

Ephesus was famous for the huge Temple of Diana, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. It was enormous, beautifully built, and also deeply corrupt. Pagan worship there involved immoral practices and even served as a hiding place for criminals. The city was also known for magic, spells, and occult books. When Paul preached Christ there, many people turned away from idols and burned their magic books, which angered those who made money from false religion.



Over time, Ephesus slowly died—not from war at first, but from geography. The harbor filled with silt, becoming unusable, cutting the city off from the sea and trade. Though it played a major role in early Christianity—hosting Paul, Timothy, Aquila, and Priscilla, and later the apostle John—it eventually faded into ruins. By the time Jesus addressed the church in Revelation, the city's glory was already slipping away, making it a powerful backdrop for Christ's warning about spiritual decline. Let's look at Ephesus:

Title of Christ



Revelation 2:1] *Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus write; These things saith he that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand, who walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks;*



Christ addresses this church as the One who **walks among the lampstands** and **holds the stars**. This emphasizes His **active presence** and **authority** over church leadership.

Commendation



Revelation 2:2,3] *I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil: and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars: And hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name's sake hast laboured, and hast not fainted.*



God sees and knows everything: “*I know thy works*” (Matt 6:2, 5, 16-18). God wants us to test the doctrines that are taught to us, “*thou has tried them... and found them liars.*” (Paul’s farewell warnings to the Ephesian Elders about **false teachers**, Acts 20:25-31; 2 Cor 11:14-15; 1 Thess 5:20-21; John’s warnings against **false teachers**, 1 John 4:1-3; 2 John 9-10).

Jesus praises Ephesus for:

- ✓ Hard work and perseverance
- ✓ Discernment against false apostles
- ✓ Hatred of the deeds of the Nicolaitans (v. 6)

This was a doctrinally vigilant church. Truth mattered. Error was confronted.

Rebuke



Revelation 2:4] *Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love.*



Lost Devotion. Yet Christ says: “*Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love.*” This is not the loss of salvation or truth, but the loss of **affection and devotion**. Duty replaced delight. Orthodoxy remained, but intimacy faded.

Exhortation



Revelation 2:5] *Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent.*



They are commanded to:

- ✓ **Remember** where they fell
- ✓ **Repent** of their condition
- ✓ **Return** to their former devotion

Failure would result in the removal of their lampstand—loss of testimony.

Our Personal Application

It is possible to be:

- ✓ Theologically correct
- ✓ Morally upright
- ✓ Actively serving

...and yet emotionally distant from Christ.



Devotion must be guarded as carefully as doctrine.

Church-Wide Pattern Application

Churches often drift toward:

- ✓ Programs without passion
- ✓ Correctness without closeness



Revelation 2:6] *But this thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the **Nicolaitans**, which I also hate.*



Revelation 2:7] *He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God.*



Prophetic Picture

Ephesus represents the **apostolic and post-apostolic church** (AD 33–150): strong in truth but gradually losing warmth of devotion.





Who were the Nicolaitans mentioned in Ephesus and later in Pergamum?

Most scholars explain the Nicolaitans by looking at the meaning of the word itself. It appears to come from two Greek words: *nikos*, meaning “to conquer or rule,” and *laos*, meaning “the common people” or laity. Taken together, the term can suggest a group that rules over ordinary believers, creating a spiritual hierarchy where certain leaders stand between people and God.



This idea runs directly against the heart of the gospel. Jesus died so that all believers could go directly to God, without a human mediator. When Christ died, the veil in the temple was torn from top to bottom, showing that access to God was now open to everyone—not just a priestly class. Any system that restores spiritual gatekeepers contradicts that truth.

Jesus Himself showed what true leadership looks like. Instead of ruling over others, He washed His disciples’ feet (John 13), teaching that Christian leaders are to serve, not dominate, demand worship, or recognition. If the Nicolaitans promoted spiritual control over the laity, it explains why Jesus strongly opposed their teaching.



The Church Under Persecution (Revelation 2:8–11)

Local (Historical Context)

Smyrna gets its name from *myrrh*, a bitter substance used in perfume, medicine, and burial, and the name fits the city’s story well. Myrrh only gives off its fragrance when it is crushed, which makes it a fitting picture for suffering. In the Bible, myrrh is connected with death and sacrifice: it was given to Jesus at His birth, offered to Him at the cross, and used in His burial. This “death and suffering” theme closely matches Jesus’ message to the church in Smyrna, which focused on persecution, endurance, and faithfulness even unto death.

Smyrna was an ancient and beautiful city located on a natural harbor, making it an important trade center between Europe and Asia. It rose to greatness, was completely destroyed, and then rebuilt centuries later into one of the most impressive cities of the Roman world—earning the nickname “*the Flower of Ionia*.” By the time of the New Testament, Smyrna was wealthy, well-planned, and fiercely loyal to Rome. Its long history of destruction and rebirth made it a city that understood suffering followed by restoration.

Spiritually, Smyrna was saturated with pagan worship. Temples to many gods lined its streets, and the city proudly practiced emperor worship. Every citizen was required to burn incense to Caesar and declare him lord, receiving a certificate as proof. For Christians, this was a life-or-death test. Refusing meant prison, loss of livelihood, or execution. Against this backdrop, Jesus’ promise of a “*crown of life*” in Revelation 2:10 carried special meaning—contrasting the temporary crowns of pagan priests with the eternal reward given to faithful believers who endured suffering for Christ.



Title of Christ



Revelation 2:8] *And unto the angel of the church in Smyrna write; These things saith the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive;*



Christ identifies Himself as the One “*which was dead and is alive*”—a message of hope to a suffering church. The concept of death is in this letter. Smyrna faced martyrdom daily. “*First and last*” occurs seven times in the Bible. In two of the references, Christ says He was dead and now is alive.

Commendation



Revelation 2:9] *I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich) and I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan.*



They are commended for being faithful in suffering.

Christ acknowledges:

- ✓ Tribulation (ordinary suffering)
- ✓ Poverty (yet spiritual riches)
- ✓ Faithfulness under pressure

Smyrna receives no rebuke!

Tribulation: The tribulation mentioned here refers to **trials and persecution**, not **The Tribulation**, which is a future period of divine wrath.

Exhortation & Promise



Revelation 2:10] *Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.*



Encouragement and Promise: Believers are warned of further suffering, but told: “*Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.*” They are promised exemption from the second death.



Revelation 2:11] *He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death.*



Our Personal Application

Faithfulness is not measured by comfort or success, but by **endurance**.



Church-Wide Pattern Application

Persecution often strengthens the church, while comfort can weaken it.



Prophetic Picture

Smyrna represents the **persecuted church** (AD 150–312), marked by suffering, martyrdom, and spiritual purity.





Who are the “Jews who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan”?

Jesus says that those who engage in blasphemy are from the “Synagogue of Satan.”

First, John knows about the blasphemy of Jews. In John 8:44, he records an intense exchange between Jesus and the Pharisees, in which they cast aspersions on Him, calling Him illegitimate.

Some scholars say that this is a metaphor for legalism. The Judaizers were the leaven of Galatians. They held to legalistic rituals such as the demand of Gentile circumcision to prove their covenant with Abraham (Acts 15:1, 10). Peter is rebuked by Paul for being sympathetic to the legalists (Galatians 2:11f; 3:1-3), and Peter admits he was wrong and agrees with Paul (2 Peter 3:15-16).

Early persecution against the Christians was brought on by the Jews, not the Romans. This occurred in Antioch (Acts 13:50), Iconium (Acts 14:2, 5), Lystra (Acts 14:19), and in Thessalonica (Acts 17:5).



What does “you will have tribulation ten days” mean?

The term “*ten days*” is not universally accepted among scholars. Some scholars believe it is a Hebrew idiom for a short period of time. We find it used this way in Genesis 24:55, Job 19:3, and Daniel 1:12 as a figure of speech. But there is another, more speculative view that it could mean ten periods of ten Roman emperors were mainly responsible for the Christian persecutions in Rome.



The Church That Compromised (Revelation 2:12-17)

Local (Historical Context)

Pergamos (also called *Pergamum*—both names refer to the same city) was located about forty-eight miles north of Smyrna. While Ephesus was known as a political center and Smyrna as a commercial center, Pergamos stood out as the **region's religious center**. It began as little more than a fortress on a high hill, but its strong location allowed it to grow into a powerful and influential city.

Over time, Pergamos became wealthy and important by forming smart alliances, especially with Rome. For nearly two centuries, it served as the **capital of the Roman province of Asia**, despite not being on major trade routes. Eventually, cities like Ephesus surpassed it economically, but Pergamos retained enormous religious and cultural influence. Built high above the surrounding area, the city projected power, authority, and prestige.

Pergamos was famous for its intense **pagan worship**. It housed massive temples, including a huge altar to Zeus that some believe Jesus referred to as “*Satan's throne*” (Revelation 2:13). The city also worshiped **Aesculapius**, the god of healing, symbolized by a serpent—the emblem later associated with medicine. This mix of political loyalty, religious power, and idolatry made Pergamos a place where faith in Christ meant living “where Satan dwells,” under constant spiritual pressure.

The actual word ‘Pergamos’ is translated from two Greek words, ‘per’ meaning mixed or objectionable, and ‘gamo’ meaning marriage. So, the word Pergamos literally means ‘mixed marriage’ or objectionable marriage.

Title of Christ



Revelation 2:12] *And to the angel of the church in Pergamos write; These things saith he which hath the sharp sword with two edges;*



Christ presents Himself as the One with the **sharp two-edged sword**—the authority of His Word (Heb 4:12). Under Roman rule, the “Right of the Sword” (Jus gladii) is the highest official authority and contains the power of life and death. In this situation, Jesus says the Word of God is the primary remedy for Pergamos.

Commendation



Revelation 2:13] *I know thy works, and where thou dwellest, even where Satan's seat is: and thou holdest fast my name, and hast not denied my faith, even in those days wherein **Antipas** was my faithful martyr, who was slain among you, where **Satan dwelleth**.*



Pergamos is commended for Holding the Name

Pergamum held fast to Christ’s name and did not deny the faith, even under pressure.

Rebuke



Revelation 2:14, 15] *But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the **doctrine of Balaam**, who taught Balac to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication. So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate.*



Their Rebuke is that they Tolerated Corruption. They tolerated:

- The doctrine of Balaam — corruption through compromise
- The doctrine of the Nicolaitans — abuse of spiritual authority (as in Ephesus)

What Ephesus rejected in **practice**, Pergamum accepted as **teaching (doctrine)**.

Exhortation & Promise



Revelation 2:16] *Repent; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.*

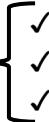


Revelation 2:17] *He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna, and will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it.*



Christ gives Pergamos a Warning and Promise:

Christ calls for repentance, or judgment will come through His Word.

The overcomer is promised: 

- ✓ Hidden manna
- ✓ A white stone
- ✓ A new name

These speak of provision, acceptance, and relationship.

Personal Application

Compromise rarely begins with denial—it begins with tolerance.



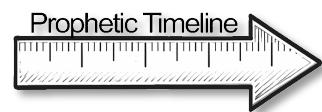
Church-Wide Pattern

Alliance with the world is more dangerous than persecution by it.



Prophetic Picture

Pergamum represents the **imperial or “married” church** (AD 312–600), when Christianity gained power but lost purity.



Who is Antipas mentioned by Jesus in Rev. 2:13?

Antipas is identified by Jesus as **“My faithful witness,”** who was put to death in Pergamum for his loyalty to Christ. Scripture intentionally gives no further biographical details, although there are legends. What matters is not his rank, office, or fame, but his **faithfulness in a hostile environment.**

Historically, Pergamum was a center of emperor worship, and refusing to honor Caesar as lord could result in execution. Antipas likely represents a believer who openly confessed Christ and paid for that confession with his life.

Jesus mentions Antipas by name to make a point: **He knows His martyrs personally.** Even when the world forgets them, Christ does not.



What is the Doctrine of Balaam as mentioned by Jesus in Rev. 2:14?

Balaam was a very unusual figure in the Bible. He claimed to be a prophet, but he was **not Jewish**—he was a Gentile from Mesopotamia near the Euphrates River (Deut. 23:4–5; Num. 22:5; 23:7). Scripture even calls him a **soothsayer** (Josh. 13:22). Balaam was hired by **Balak, king of Moab**, an enemy of Israel, to curse God’s people. Balak kept offering Balaam more money and rewards if he would do it. God clearly told Balaam **not** to curse Israel, and although Balaam kept pressing the issue, God would only allow him to go if he spoke blessings instead. Along the way, Balaam was rebuked by his own donkey and confronted by an angel (Num. 22). In the end, Balaam did not directly curse Israel (Num. 23–24). But because he still wanted the reward Balak promised, he came up with a **different plan**. Balaam advised the Moabites to tempt Israel into sin by using Moabite women, knowing this would pull Israel away from obedience to God (Num. 31:16).



The plan worked—Israel sinned, God was displeased, and judgment followed. Balaam managed to profit financially while keeping his hands clean on the surface, teaching others how to corrupt God’s people instead of doing it himself.

The New Testament refers to Balaam three times as a warning. The “**doctrine of Balaam**” is teaching God’s people to do what God has forbidden in order to gain advantage (Rev. 2:14). The “**way of Balaam**” is selling spiritual gifts for money and choosing wealth over truth (2 Pet. 2:15). The “**error of Balaam**” is believing there will be no consequences for abandoning God’s ways in pursuit of temporary gain (Jude 11). Together, Balaam becomes a picture of religious compromise, greed, and hidden corruption.



Who is Satan?

The Bible is clear that **Satan is a real being**, not just a symbol for evil. Jesus describes him as a **murderer and a liar** (John 8:44), a **deceiver** who leads people away from the truth (Rev. 12:9; 2 Cor. 11:3), and a **sinner from the beginning** (1 John 3:8). Satan also has a real sphere of influence: he leads a fallen angelic kingdom (Matt. 25:41; Rev. 12:7) and operates within the world system that opposes God (1 John 5:19). However, Satan is **not omnipresent**—he can only be in one place at a time.



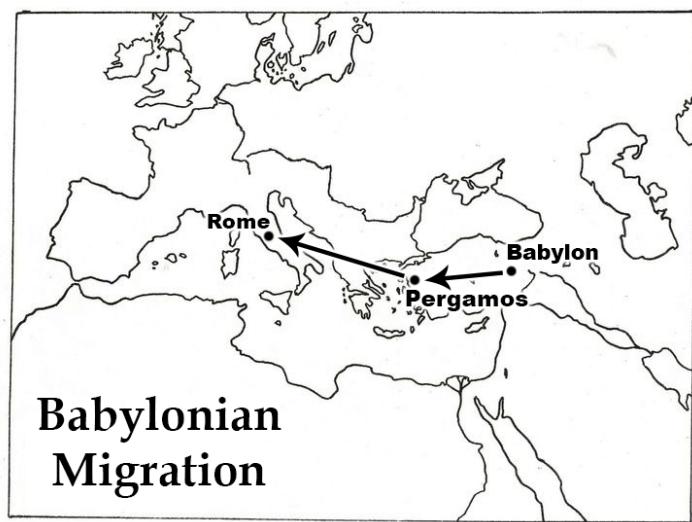
The Bible also gives Satan many **titles** that describe how he works. He is called the **adversary**, because he actively opposes believers (1 Tim. 5:14; 1 Pet. 5:8). He is the **accuser of the brethren**, constantly attacking God’s people (Rev. 12:10). He is the **god of this world**, blinding unbelievers (2 Cor. 4:4), and the **prince of the power of the air**, influencing disobedient humanity (Eph. 2:2). Jesus also calls him the **enemy who sowed the tares** (Matt. 13:39), and Scripture repeatedly refers to him simply as **the wicked one**.

The Bible teaches that Satan and his demons operate within **spiritual geography**. They are limited, assigned to specific regions and tasks, and act within those boundaries (Dan. 10; Rev. 9:14; 16:12). Historically, centers of false worship and spiritual rebellion shifted—from Babylon, the original source of Pagan religions, to **Pergamos** and later to Rome. This is why Jesus told the church in Pergamos to “**hold fast My name**” (Rev. 2:13). God’s name is singular and represents loyalty and authority, reminding believers that they serve as His ambassadors under His name, not Satan’s influence.



The Migrating Priesthood

When Cyrus conquered Babylon in 539 B.C., the Babylonian priests founded a new center at **Pergamos**, and their religious leader was called the Pontifex Maximus, the high priest of that pagan system. Then, the cult was transferred from Pergamos to Rome.



Successive Roman Emperors (Caesars) appointed themselves as high priests or Pontifex Maximus. By A.D. 378, Damasus, the Bishop of Rome, completed the absorption of Babylonianism into the Roman Church. [Alexander Hislop, G. H. Pember].

- ✓ Babylon's pagan religious authority was dismantled, not erased, after being conquered by Cyrus.
- ✓ Pergamos rose as a major pagan religious power shortly afterward.
- ✓ Rome systematically absorbed and repackaged earlier pagan systems into its religious and political systems.
- ✓ Scripture itself identifies Pergamos as a unique center of satanic authority, inferring this shift in central Satanic authority.



Babylonian Priest



Roman Catholic Priest

SYNTHESIS: SEEING THE PATTERN

Across these three churches, we see a clear movement:

- **Ephesus** — truth without love
- **Smyrna** — faith under fire
- **Pergamum** — faith compromised by comfort

Persecution purifies. Comfort corrupts.

These patterns repeat:

- In church history
- In congregations
- In individual believers

Christ's concern is not merely belief, but **faithfulness**.



TRANSITION: The remaining four churches represent **conditions that persist until Christ's return**. They exist simultaneously, not sequentially.

Next Lesson: Read Revelation 2:18–29 and Revelation 3. Note contrasts between faithfulness, compromise, and complacency.

Appendix A: The First Three Churches in Revelation (2:1-17)

This appendix provides summary tools and reference material to reinforce the key themes of **Ephesus**, **Smyrna**, and **Pergamum**, with special attention to patterns that will reappear later in Revelation.

1. At-a-Glance Comparison Chart: The First Three Churches

Church	Christ's Title	Commendation	Rebuke	Exhortation
Ephesus (Rev 2:1–7)	Holds the seven stars; walks among the lampstands	Works, perseverance, doctrinal discernment	Left first love	Remember, repent, return to first works
Smyrna (Rev 2:8–11)	The First and the Last was dead and lives	Faithfulness under persecution	None	Do not fear; be faithful unto death
Pergamum (Rev 2:12–17)	He who has the sharp two-edged sword	Held fast Christ's name; did not deny the faith	Tolerated false doctrine	Repent or face discipline by the Word

2. The Three-Church Progression Pattern

The first three churches reveal a **clear spiritual progression**:

- Ephesus** — Right doctrine, declining devotion
- Smyrna** — Faithfulness refined through suffering
- Pergamum** — Confession maintained, compromise tolerated

This pattern shows how the church moves from **internal cooling** to external pressure to **internal compromise**.

3. Nicolaitans & Balaam — Quick Summary

Both the **Nicolaitans** and **Balaam** represent strategies of **compromise from within**:

- Encouraging God's people to blend with the surrounding culture
- Justifying moral or spiritual compromise
- Teaching accommodation rather than separation

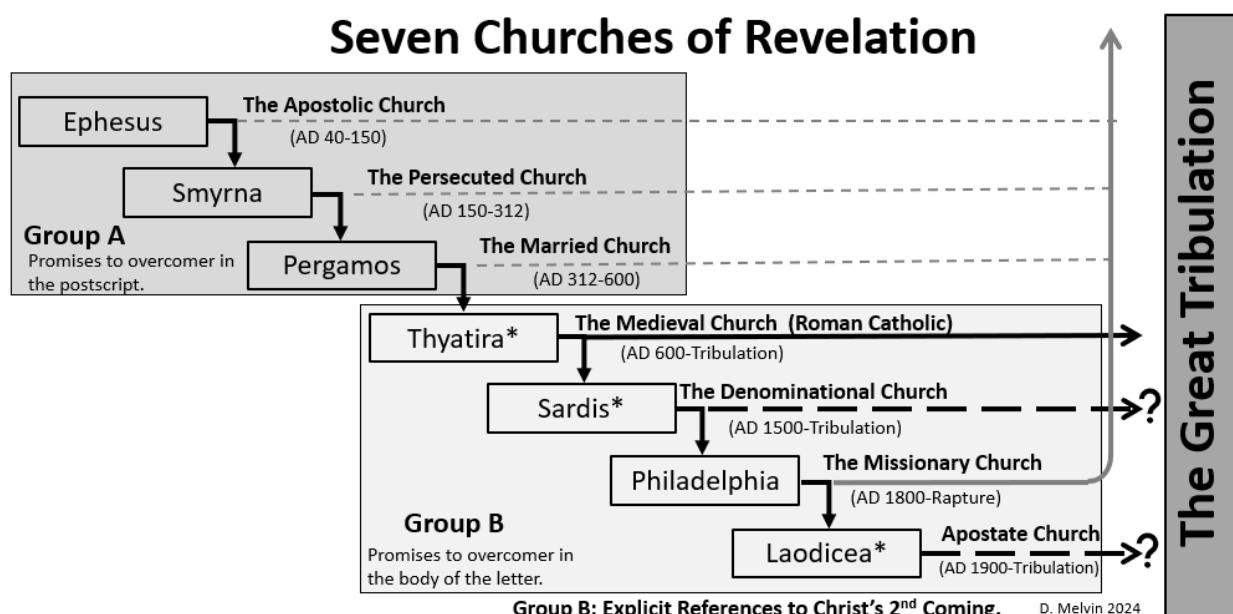
In Ephesus, these errors were rejected as **deeds**. In Pergamum, they were tolerated as **doctrine**.

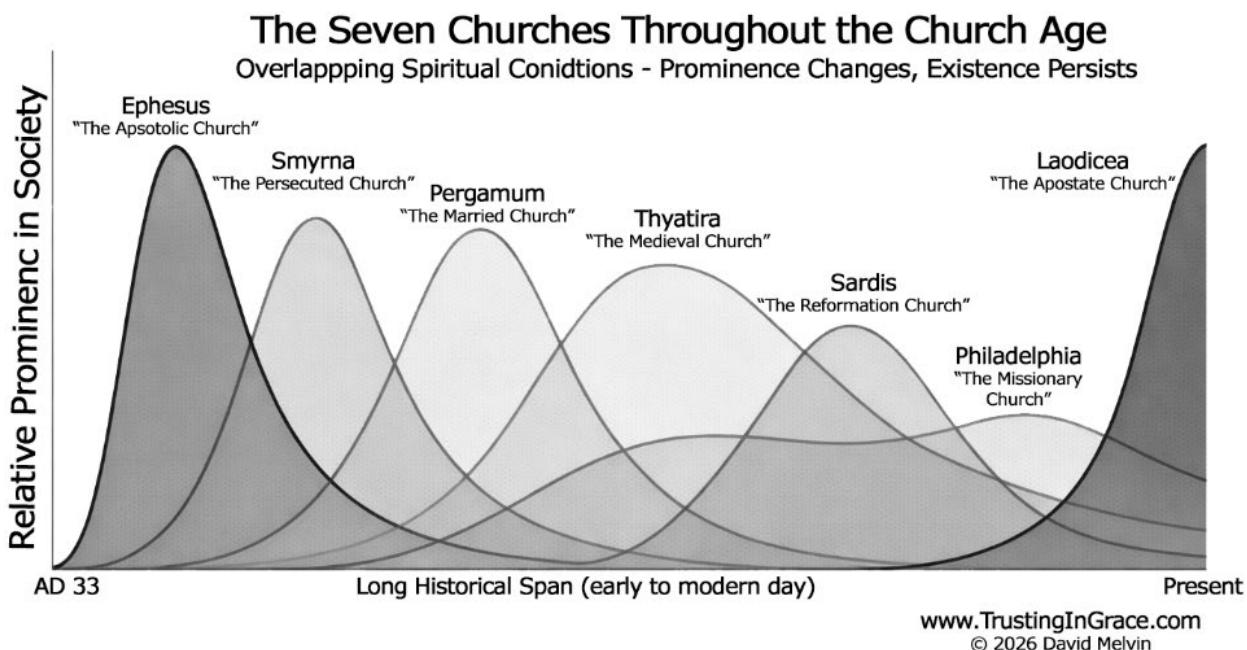
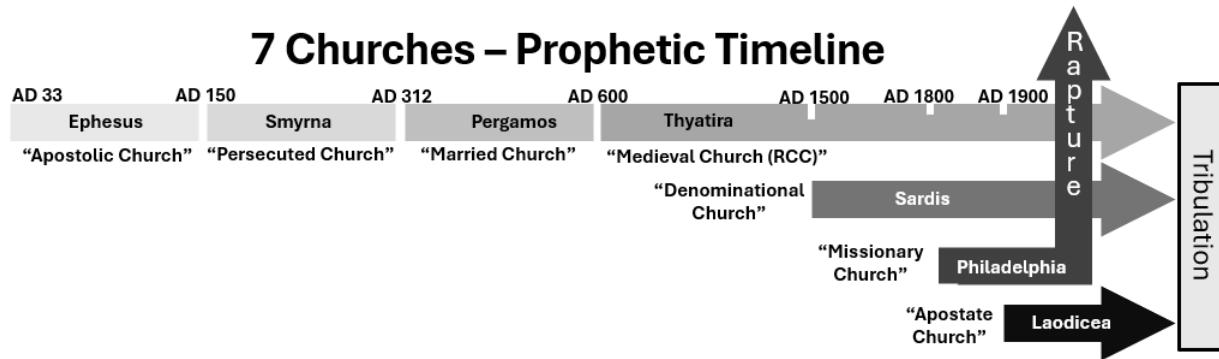
4. Prophetic Timeline Snapshot (Early Church)

The first three churches (Group A below) lay out the **early phases of church history**. The final four (next lesson) will lay out the middle to late phases of church history.

- **Ephesus** — Apostolic Church
- **Smyrna** — Persecuted Church
- **Pergamum** — Imperial / Married Church

This prophetic layer exists **alongside** the local, personal, and church-wide meanings. The **first three churches** and **the second four churches** form natural units uniquely bundled this way by the Holy Spirit. This grouping is a 'Remez'. A Remez is a symbolic clue, literary pattern, or Old Testament echo that hints at deeper meanings in the text.





Seven Churches Design Tally							
Name	Ephesus	Smyrna	Pergamos	Thyatira	Sardis	Philadelphia	Laodicea
Title	✓ Yes	✓ Yes	✓ Yes	✓ Yes	✓ Yes	✓ Yes	✓ Yes
Commendation	✓ Yes	✓ Yes	✓ Yes	✓ Yes	✗ No	✓ Yes	✗ No
Concern	✓ Yes	✗ No	✓ Yes	✓ Yes	✓ Yes	✗ No	✓ Yes
Exhortation	✓ Yes	✓ Yes	✓ Yes	✓ Yes	✓ Yes	✓ Yes	✓ Yes
Promise Before	✗ No	✗ No	✗ No	✓ Yes	✓ Yes	✓ Yes	✓ Yes
"He that hath an ear, hear what the Spirit says to the Churches."							
Promise After	✓ Yes	✓ Yes	✓ Yes	✗ No	✗ No	✗ No	✗ No

The prophetic understanding of the seven churches did not appear fully formed in the early church, but it was gradually recognized after the Reformation as scholars noticed clear patterns in the text and in church history.