Revelation

Lesson #4

"What Is," the Seven Churches (Part 1)

(2: 1 - 17)

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Review

Having introduced Revelation in Lessons 1 & 2, Lesson #3 took us directly into the text.

In Revelation 1: 19 the risen and glorified Christ commanded John: *"Write down, therefore, what you have seen, and what is happening, and what will happen afterwards."* With that, we learned the basic 3-part structure of Revelation: 1) what *was* (past, chapter 1); 2) what *is* (present, chapters 2-3); and 3) what *will be* (future, chapters 4-22).

In Lesson #3 we focused on what *was*; that is, what prompted John to write Revelation to begin with.

Preview

The risen and glorified Christ commands John to write a letter to each of seven churches in Asia Minor: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea. If, as tradition claims, our Apostle John is the leader of the church at Ephesus and the author of Revelation, then all six of the other churches are within John's geographical sphere of influence, and the letters are to serve as "cover letters" for the vision that John will receive and that he will transmit in writing to the churches in Revelation 4-22.

In Lesson #4 we examine the first three of the seven churches and John's letters to them: Ephesus, Smyrna and Pergamum.

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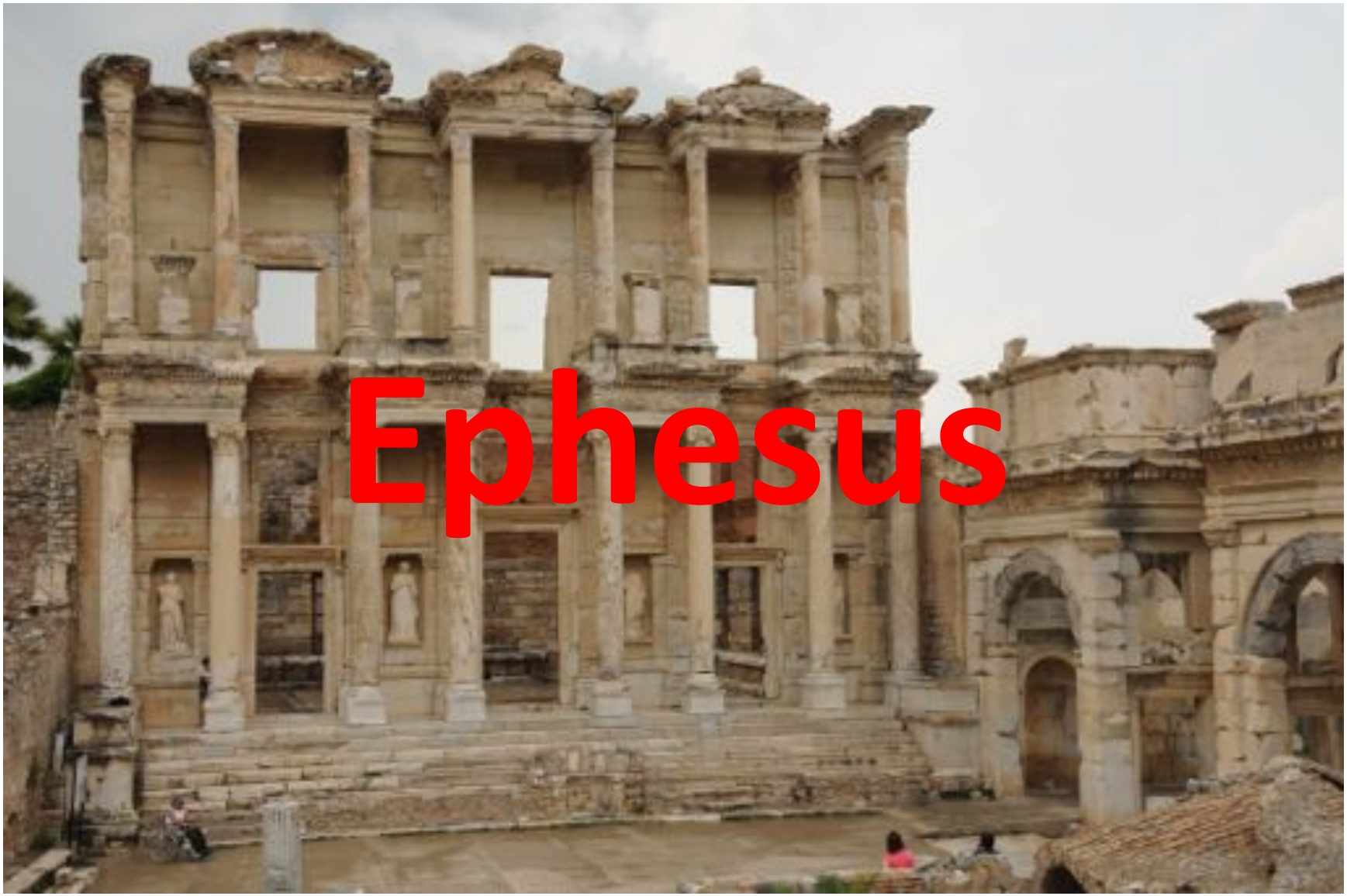

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Ephesus was fabulous in every way. Founded as an Attic-Ionian colony in the 10th century B.C., Ephesus was a natural deep-water port and one of twelve cities in the Ionian League during the classical Greek period.

Under Roman rule – in St. Paul's day – Ephesus was the second largest city in the Roman Empire, with a population of around 250,000. Only Rome surpassed its size and grandeur.

Along with Rome and Syrian Antioch (which became St. Paul's home church), Ephesus was one of only three cities in the Empire with street lighting at night!

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The Cardo, “Main Street” in Ephesus. A city made entirely of marble, the Cardo hosted magnificent public buildings, lush private residences and high-end shops.

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The Cardo, looking up the street.

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The fountain of Memnius on the Cardo.

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The terraces along the west side of the Cardo boasted beautiful homes for the very wealthy.

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The library of Celsus, one of the three great libraries of the ancient world, along with Alexandria, Egypt and Pergamum.

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The Cardo, leading to the Theater (bottom right) and Harbor Street (turn left at the Theater). The Ephesus business district is to the left, in the foreground.

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The famous theater of Ephesus seated 25,000 people!

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Around 550 B.C. the Temple of Artemis (or Diana) was completed in Ephesus. This staggering structure was one of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world. Antipater of Sidon compiled the Seven Wonders. Here is what he had to say of the Temple of Artemis:

"I have set eyes on the wall of lofty Babylon on which is a road for chariots, and the statue of Zeus by Alpheus, and the hanging gardens, and the colossus of the sun, and the labor of the great pyramids, and the vast tomb of Mausolus, but when I saw the house of Artemis **[in Ephesus]** ***that mounted to the clouds, those other marvels lost their brilliance, and I said, 'Lo, apart from Olympus, the sun never looked on anything so grand."***

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Sadly, twenty-one years after Theodosius I made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire, the Temple of Artemis was destroyed in A.D. 401 by a mob led by St. John Chrysostom, who was then Bishop of Ephesus. This is all that remains.

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With a stork's nest on top!

The sole standing pillar from the Temple of Artemis.

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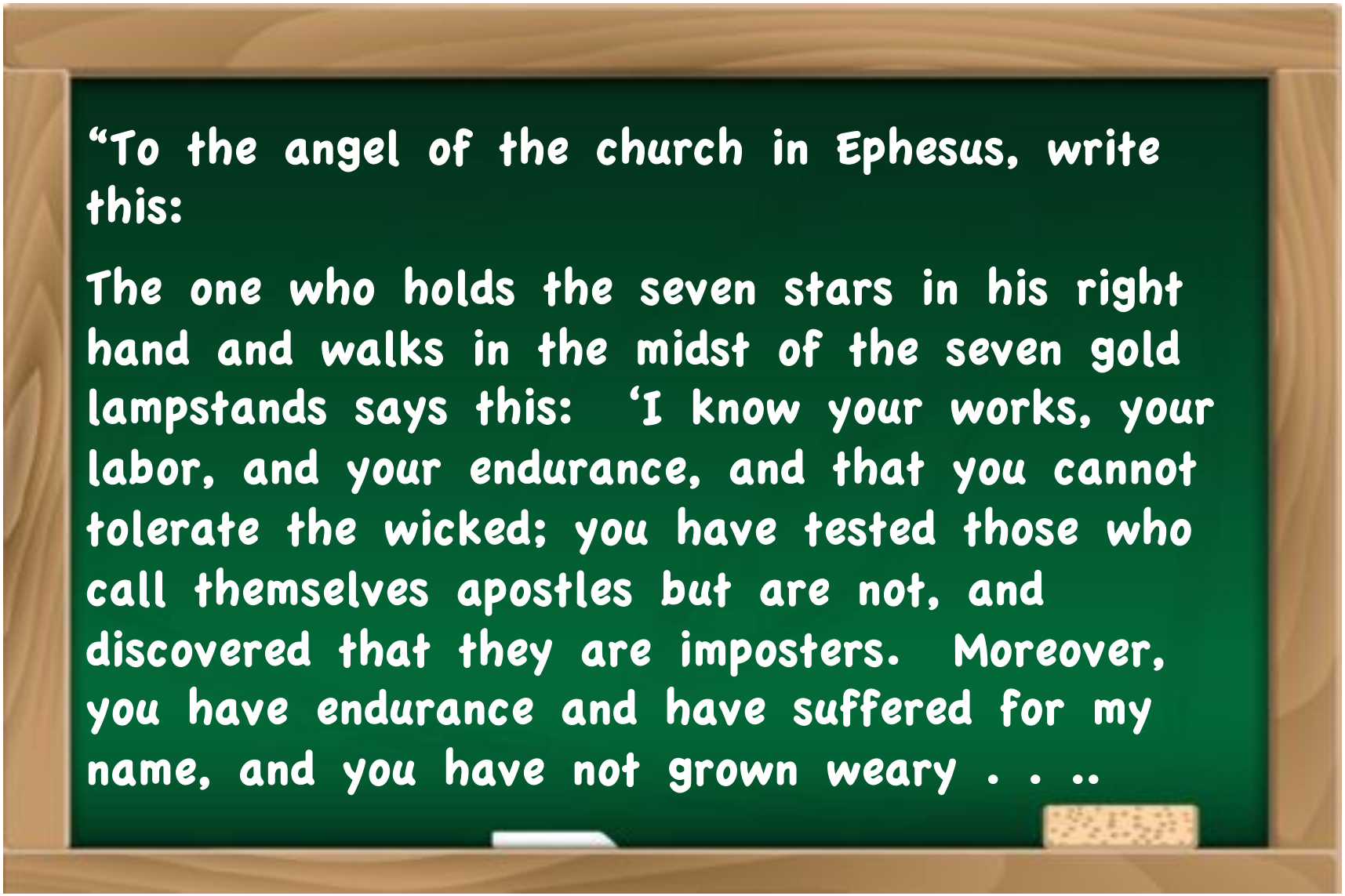

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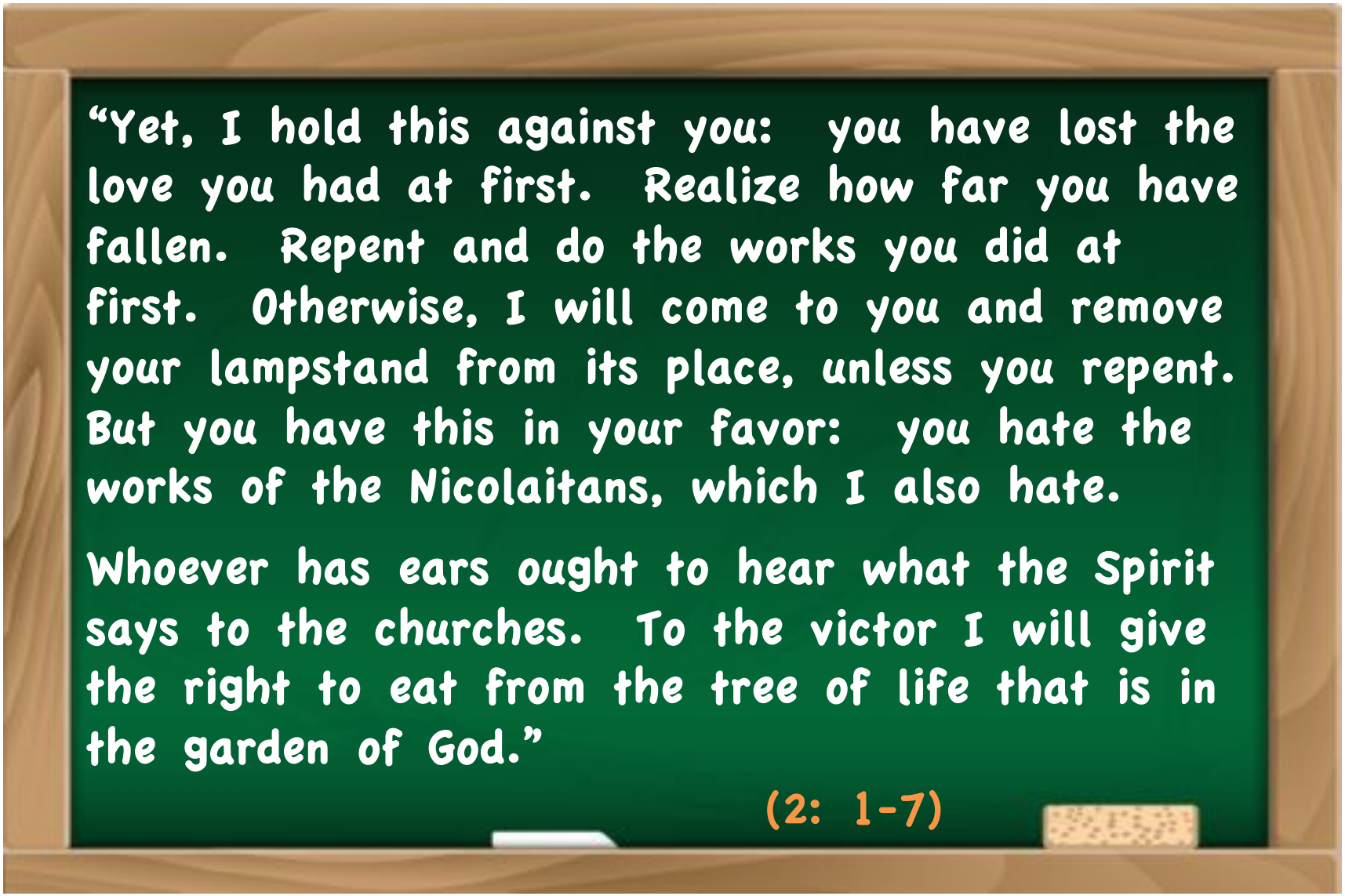

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Typically, each of the 7 letters in Revelation follows the same pattern:

1. **Greeting**
2. **Words of commendation**
3. **Words of condemnation**
4. **Admonition**

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Ephesus:

1. Greeting
2. Words of commendation
3. Words of condemnation
4. Admonition

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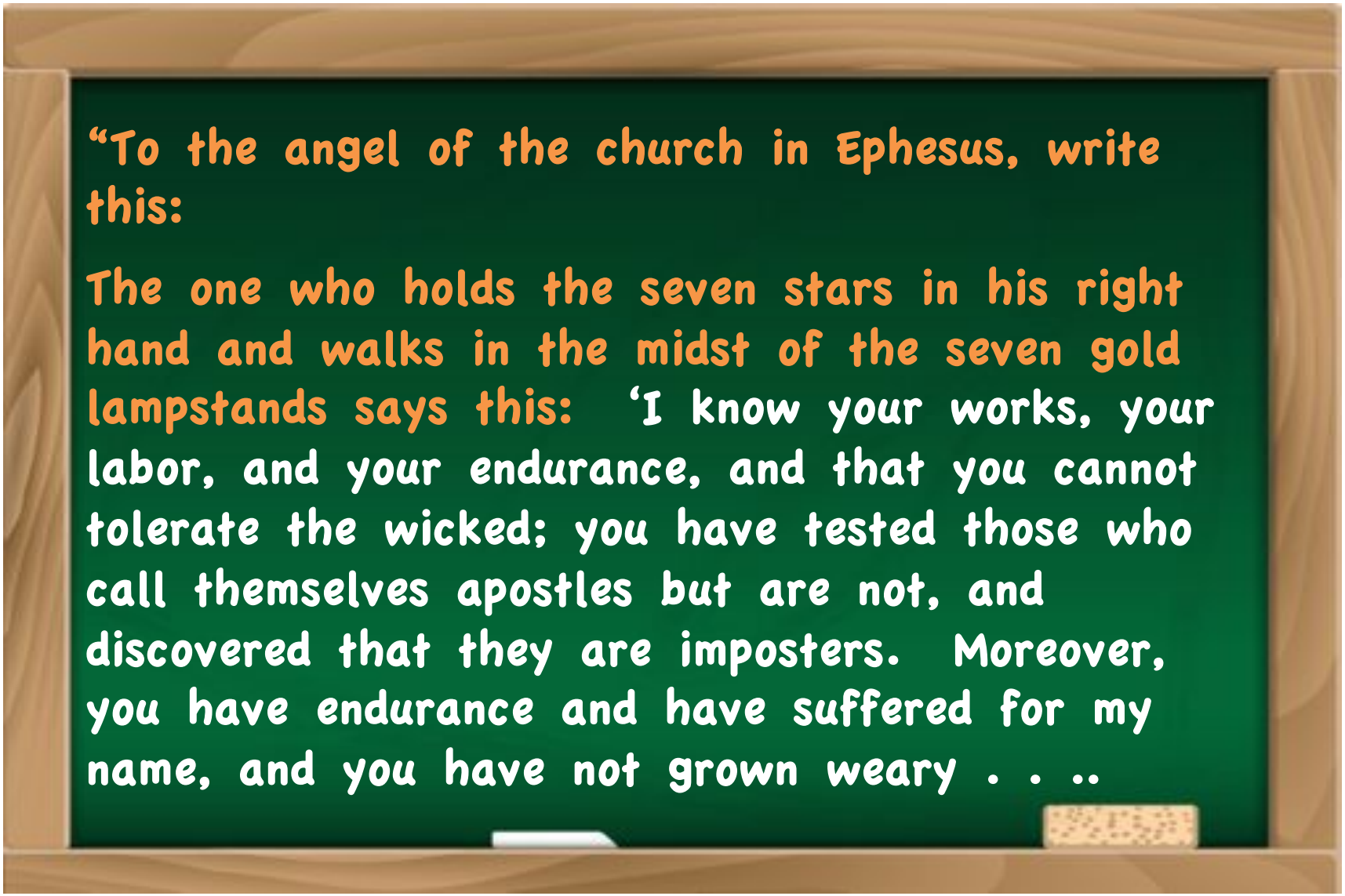

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- **As we learned earlier, ἄγγελος [an'-ge-los] is the Greek word translated "angel"; it means literally "messenger." In Scripture "angels" are messengers sent by God to speak to or to interact with humanity. It's nice to think that God has assigned an "angel" to watch over each church (and he may well have), but more likely the "angel" of the church in Ephesus is the leader of that Christian community, the messenger of the Gospel.**
- **If our Apostle John is the leader of the church in Ephesus, then the 1st letter in Revelation is addressed to him!**
- **Jesus holds the 7 stars in his right hand (the 7 leaders of the 7 churches) and he walks among the 7 lamp stands (the 7 churches, themselves).**

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We should recognize the intimacy of this greeting. The risen and glorified Christ walks among us. He knows every detail of our lives, commending us for our successes and admonishing us for our faults.

He holds us in the very palm of his hand as both our protector and our guide.

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Ephesus:

1. Greeting
2. **Words of commendation**
3. Words of condemnation
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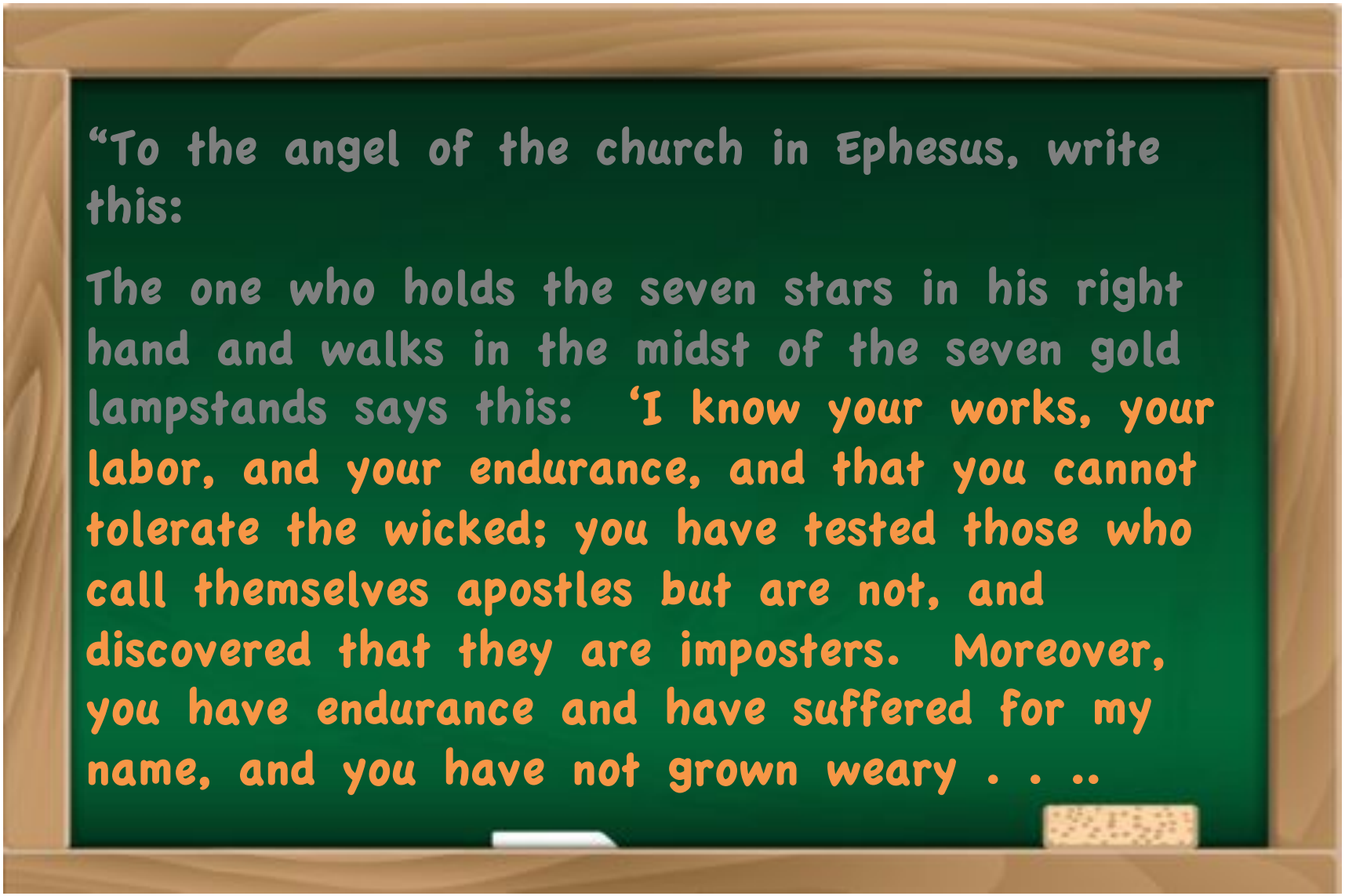

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- **"I know [οἶδα] your works, your labor, and your endurance." Jesus addresses not only the "angel" of the church at Ephesus, but the entire community, so "your" is grammatically singular throughout the 7 letters [σου].**

- **Jesus said: *"If you love me, you will keep my commands"* (John 14: 15). Emphatically, "we are saved by grace through faith," but a genuine saving faith will *always* manifest itself in a life of active love, a life of good works. As James said: *"What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works"* (3: 14); such a faith is shallow at best, self-delusion at worst.**

- **The Christian community at Ephesus not only has copious works to show for their faith, but they also labor hard and they don't give up.**

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- **"You cannot tolerate the wicked." The word "wicked" is κακός [kah-kahs']. "Wicked" refers to the false teachers that John so opposes in his three letters, men such as Diotrophese (3 John 9).**

- **"You have tested those who call themselves apostles but are not, and discovered that they are imposters." There were many people traveling about in John's day claiming to be Apostles, but they were phonies, charlatans, and religious opportunists. At Ephesus they were exposed for what they are!**

- **"You have endurance and have suffered for my name, and you have not grown weary." The Lord again emphasizes how hardworking and steadfast the Christians at Ephesus are, and he commends it.**

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Ephesus:

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2. Words of commendation
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4. **Admonition**

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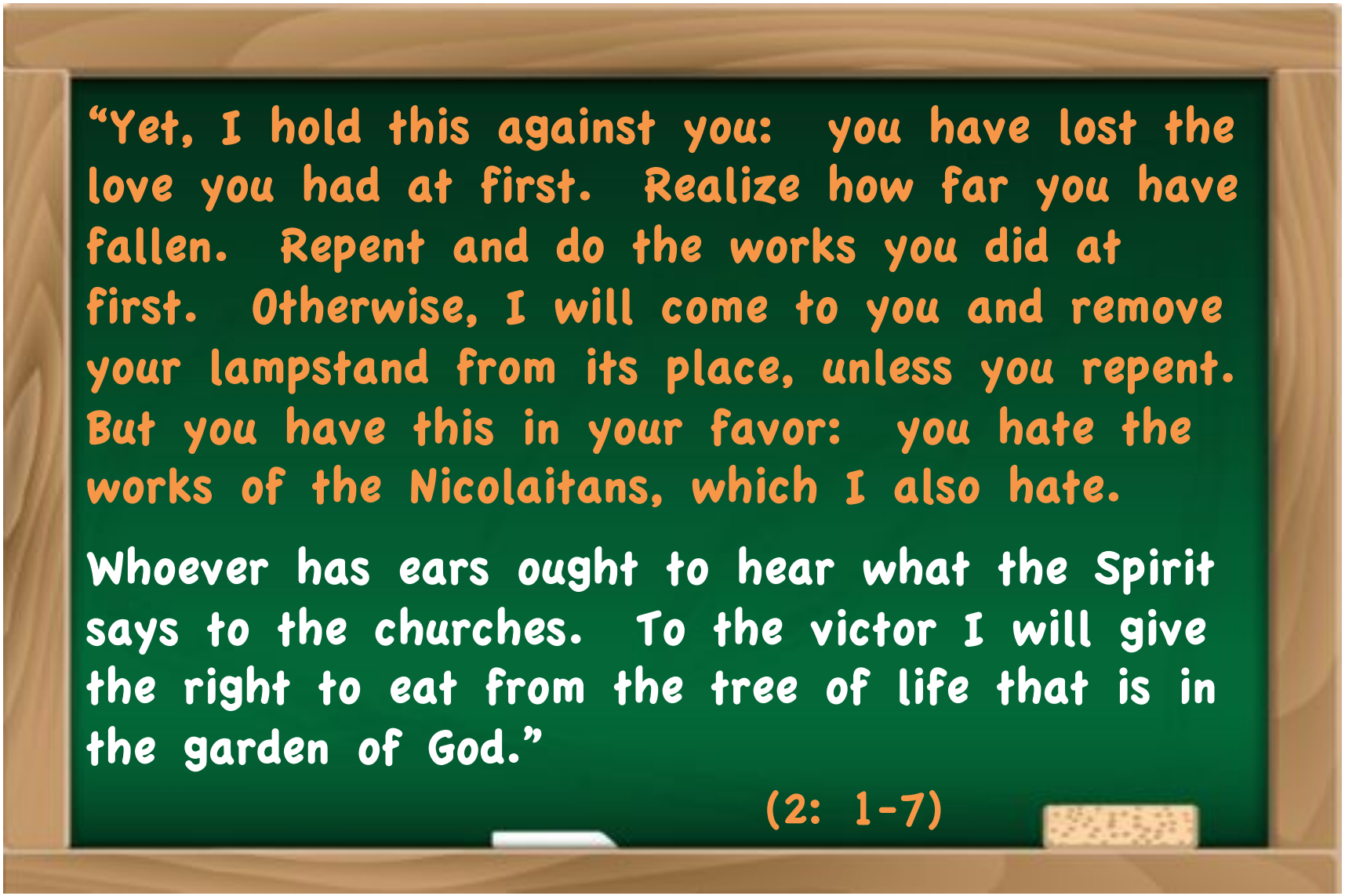

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- **"Yet, I hold this against you: you have lost the love you had at first. Realize how far you have fallen." Although the Christians at Ephesus have worked hard, suffered and persevered, they have lost the fervor of their initial faith, the inner fire they first had when they fell in love with Christ.**
- **"Repent and do the works you did at first." The word "repent" is μετανοέω [meh-tah-no-a'-o], literally "to turn around," 180 degrees; to get back to where you were at the start.**
- **"Otherwise, I will come to you and remove your lampstand." That is, the Lord will remove your church!**

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The churches in Asia Minor were the engine powering the early church: consider St. Paul's three missionary journeys; the church of Syrian Antioch, home church of Paul and Barnabas; the Council of Nicaea . . ..

Today, Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey), although a constitutionally secular state, has a population of nearly 80 million people, 99.8% of whom are Muslim. Christians and "others" are only .2%.

There are only 11 diocesan priests in Turkey and 50 religious priests.

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Antakya Katolik Killsese, the *only* Roman Catholic Church in Antakya (Antioch), Turkey.

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Dr. Creasy and his small band of adventurers celebrate Mass in Antioch with Fr. Domenico Bertogli.

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- **“You hate the works of the Nicolaitans.” “Nicolaitans” are followers of Nicholas, but it’s not certain who he was or what he taught. The church at Pergamum is also infested with “Nicolaitans” (2: 15). Whatever the teaching was, it falls into the same category as that of the “deceivers” and “antichrists” that John abhors in 2 John 7-8.**

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Ephesus:

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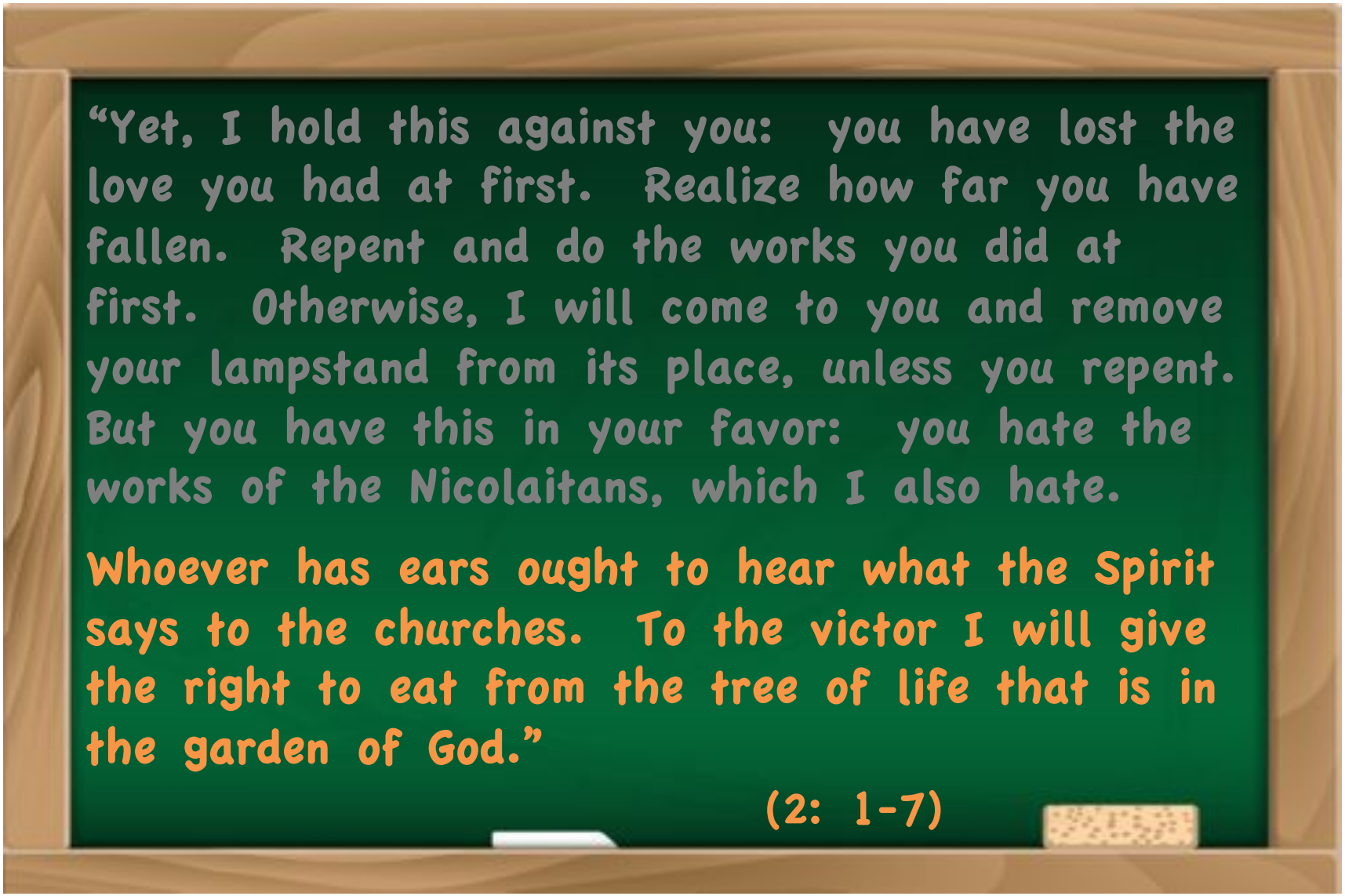

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Lucas Cranach the Elder. *Paradise* (oil on lime), 1530. Museum of Art History, Vienna.

The Lord closes the letter to the church at Ephesus by telling them to pay attention, and then he promises that if they do they will be rewarded with fruit from the *"tree of life that is in the garden of God"* (2: 7).

We saw this tree in Genesis 2: 19 and 3: 22, and we will see it again in Revelation 22: 2.

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As we've noted, tradition claims that our Apostle John was leader of the church in Ephesus, and that tradition manifests itself in Ephesus with the remains of the Basilica of St. John, constructed by Justinian I in the 6th century.

It was built over what was believed to be the burial site of our Apostle John.

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Remains of the Basilica of St. John, Ephesus.

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Interior walls of the Basilica of St. John.

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Tomb of St. John the Apostle, Ephesus.

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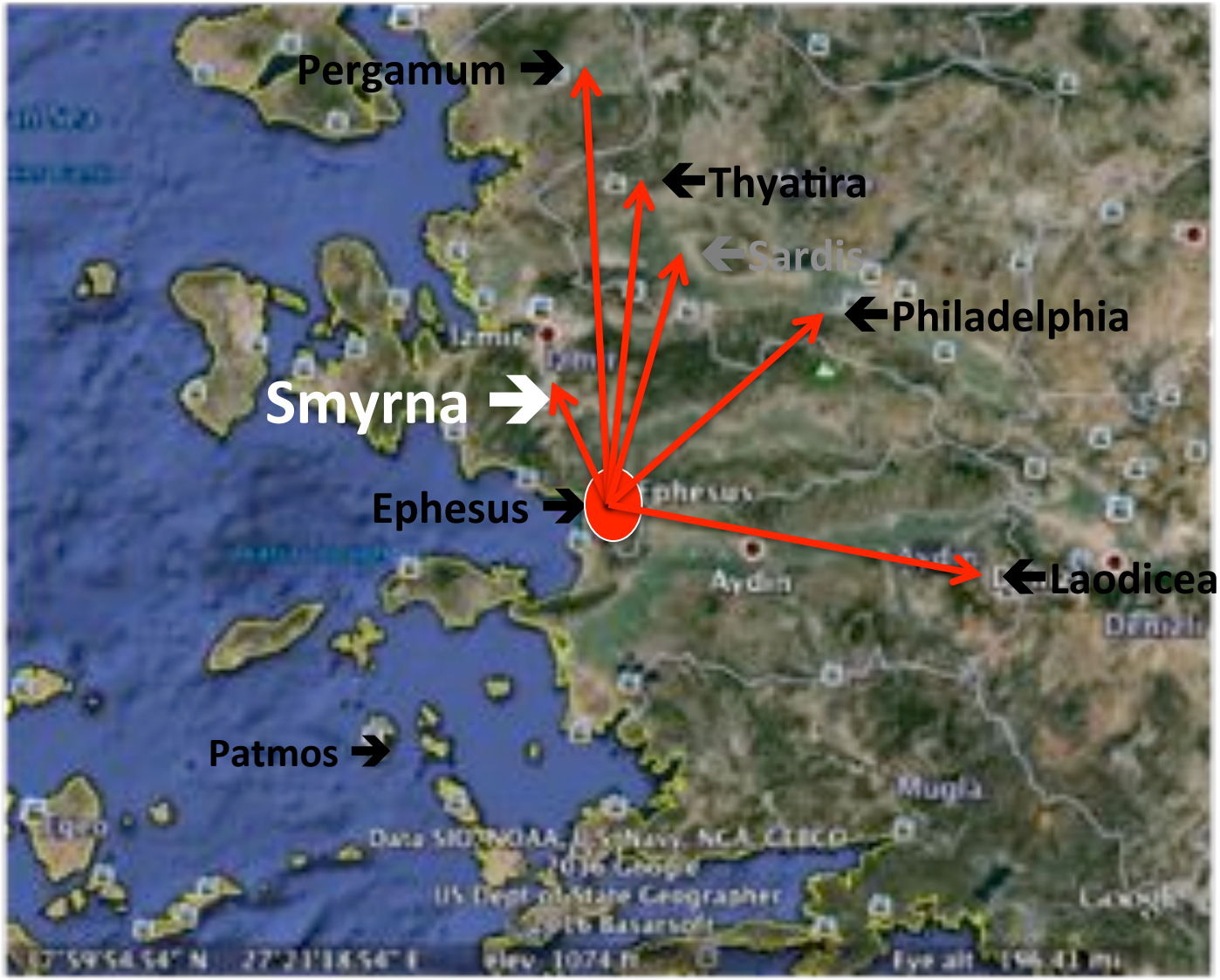

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Smyrna is today's Izmir, the 3rd largest city in modern-day Turkey, with 3.3 million people.

Smyrna began as an Aeolian settlement in the 11th century B.C., but the "New City" developed in the 4th century B.C. in the wake of Alexander the Great's conquests. In New Testament times, Smyrna vied with Ephesus and Pergamum for the title of "First City of Asia," a truly beautiful and influential city.

The church at Smyrna was founded during the first century A.D., but we don't know by whom. One of its early Bishops, Polycarp (who lived from A.D. 69 – 155), was martyred here in A.D. 155, at 86 years old.

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As a young man living in the city, Polycarp may have heard Revelation read from the actual manuscript in John's handwriting, delivered fresh from Patmos.

The church historian Eusebius recounts the martyrdom of Polycarp: he was told that if he renounced Christ, he would be set free. The Proconsul said, "Take the oath and I will let you go. Revile Christ!" To which Polycarp is said to have replied, "For 86 years I have been his servant, and he has never reviled me; how can I revile my king and my savior?"

At which point he was set on fire.

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Excavations of "New Smyrna" in Izmir began in 2002; they are sponsored by the Izmir Archaeology Museum and the Metropolitan Municipality of Izmir.

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas

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The hard work of sorting and cataloguing artifacts in the Agora.

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A vast network of vaulted Roman arches created a multi-level "shopping mall," both below and above ground. The arch network also reduced the impact of frequent earthquakes.

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Lower level of the “shopping mall.”

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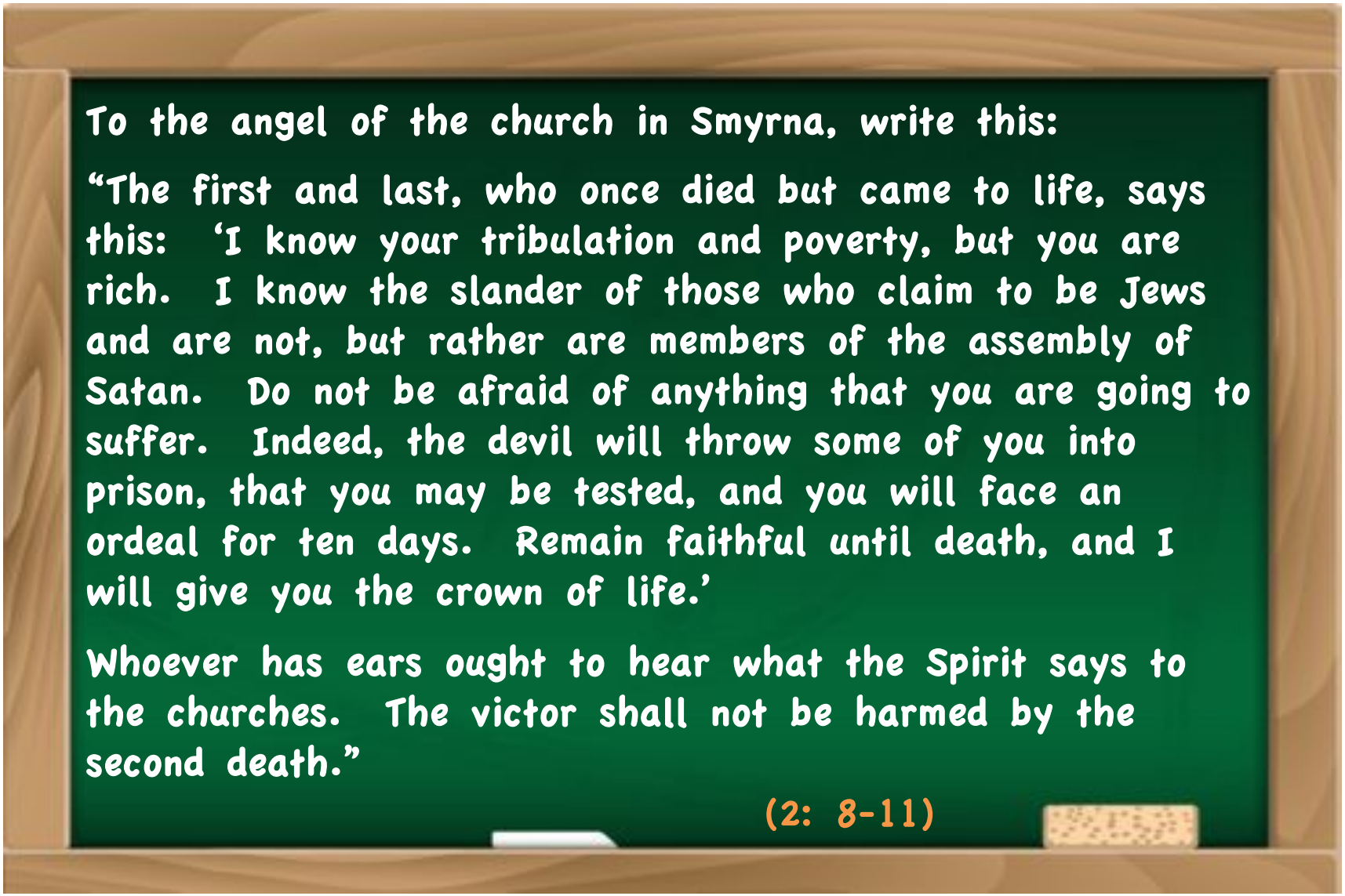

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Smyrna:

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2. Words of commendation
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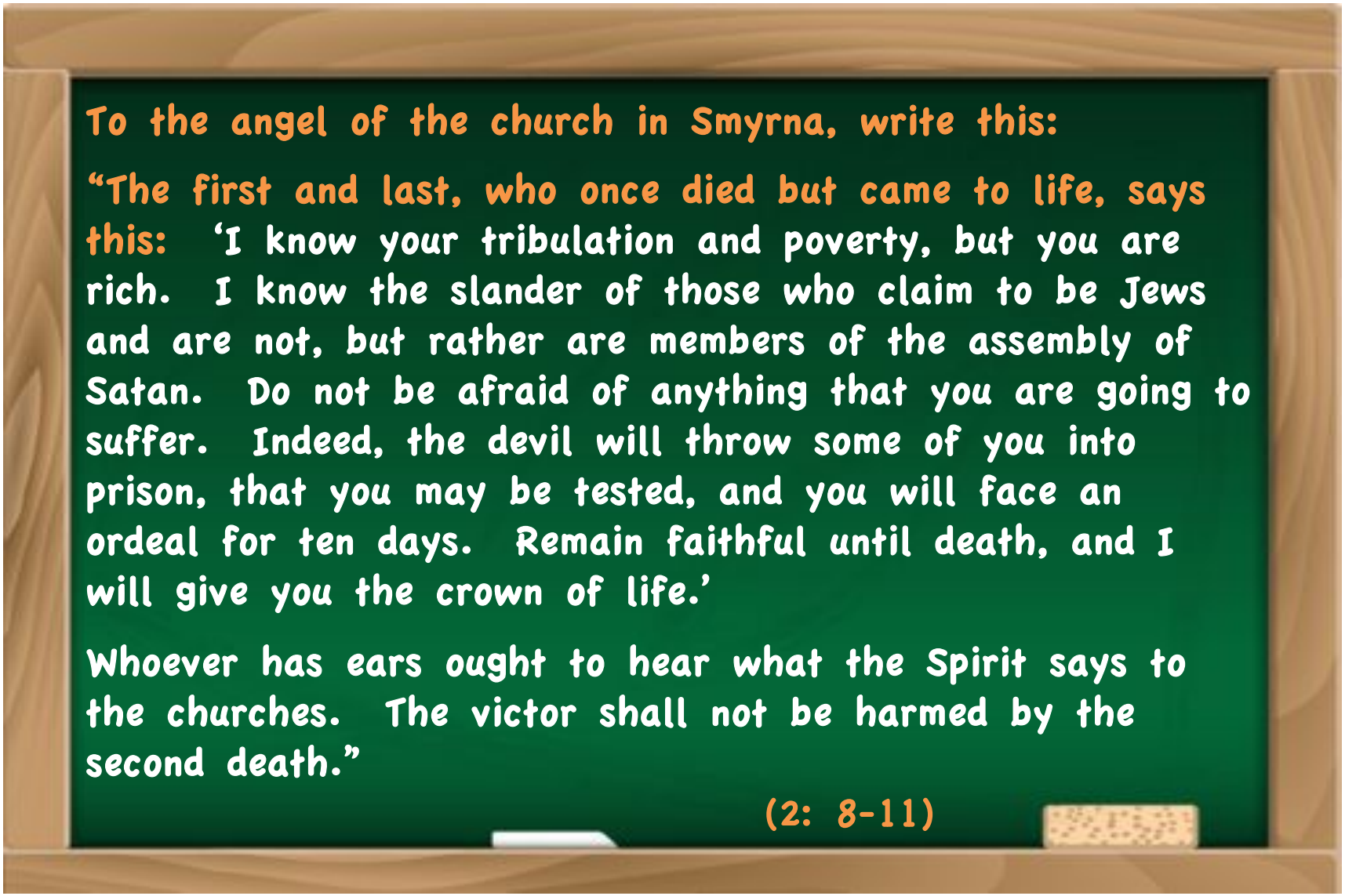

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- **As the Lord greeted the church at Ephesus with *"The one who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks in the midst of the seven gold lampstands says this . . ."*, so does he greet the church at Smryna with *"The first and the last, who once died but came to life, says this . . .."***
- **In both instances the greeting recalls attributes of Christ that were mentioned previously in the Prologue of chapter 1.**

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Smyrna:

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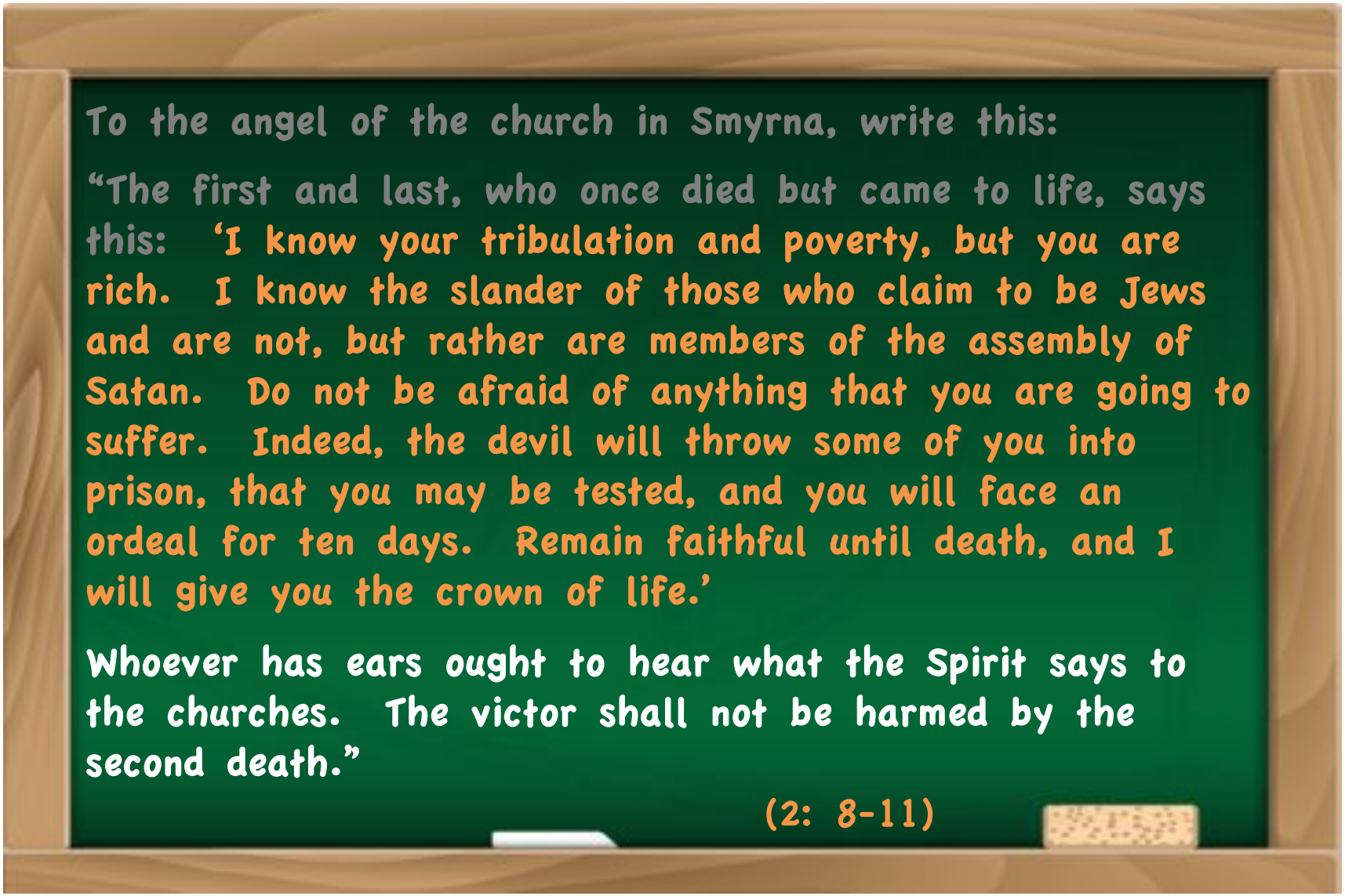

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- **"I know your tribulation and poverty, but you are rich." Smyrna was a wealthy, influential city in John's day, but the church felt the brunt of persecution, including arrest, punishment, confiscation of property and the poverty that followed. Yet, the Lord reminds them, they are spiritually rich, even as they suffer persecution.**

- **"I know the slander of those who claim to be Jews and are not, but rather are members of the assembly of Satan." The Roman Empire recognized Judaism as an ancient indigenous religion, and it was protected under Roman law. But when tensions between Judaism and Christianity worsened, Christians lost their protection as a minor sect under the umbrella of Judaism. Apparently, the large Jewish population in Smyrna actively persecuted the church, as well.**

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- **“The devil will throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will face an ordeal for ten days.” Both the civil authorities and the Jews persecuted the church in Smyrna, but ultimately it was Satan working behind the scenes. Some people, indeed, will be imprisoned and their faith will be tested severely for “ten days,” a number signifying a transient period, not finality, not “to death.” The word translated “ordeal” is θλῖψις [th-lee’-pthis], “tribulation,” “affliction,” or “anguish.”**

- **“Remain faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.” The Lord encourages those in Smyrna to remain faithful, even if it means unto death, for “the crown of life” awaits them.**

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Smyrna:

1. Greeting
2. Words of commendation
3. **Words of condemnation**
4. **Admonition**

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Notice, there are no words of condemnation for the church at Smyrna, perhaps because the Lord saw Smyrna as a martyr church, one that was shedding its blood for him.

The Greek word μάρτυς [mar'-toos] means "witness," one whose death for Christ spoke boldly and with ultimate conviction. Indeed, the 2nd-century church father Tertullian wrote that "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church,"[1] implying that martyrdom is the strongest witness one can make to lead others to Christ.

In Revelation 6: 9 we will meet an army of such martyrs beneath God's altar in heaven, *"those who had been slaughtered because of the witness they bore to the word of God."*

[1] *Apologeticus*, chapter 50.

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Smyrna:

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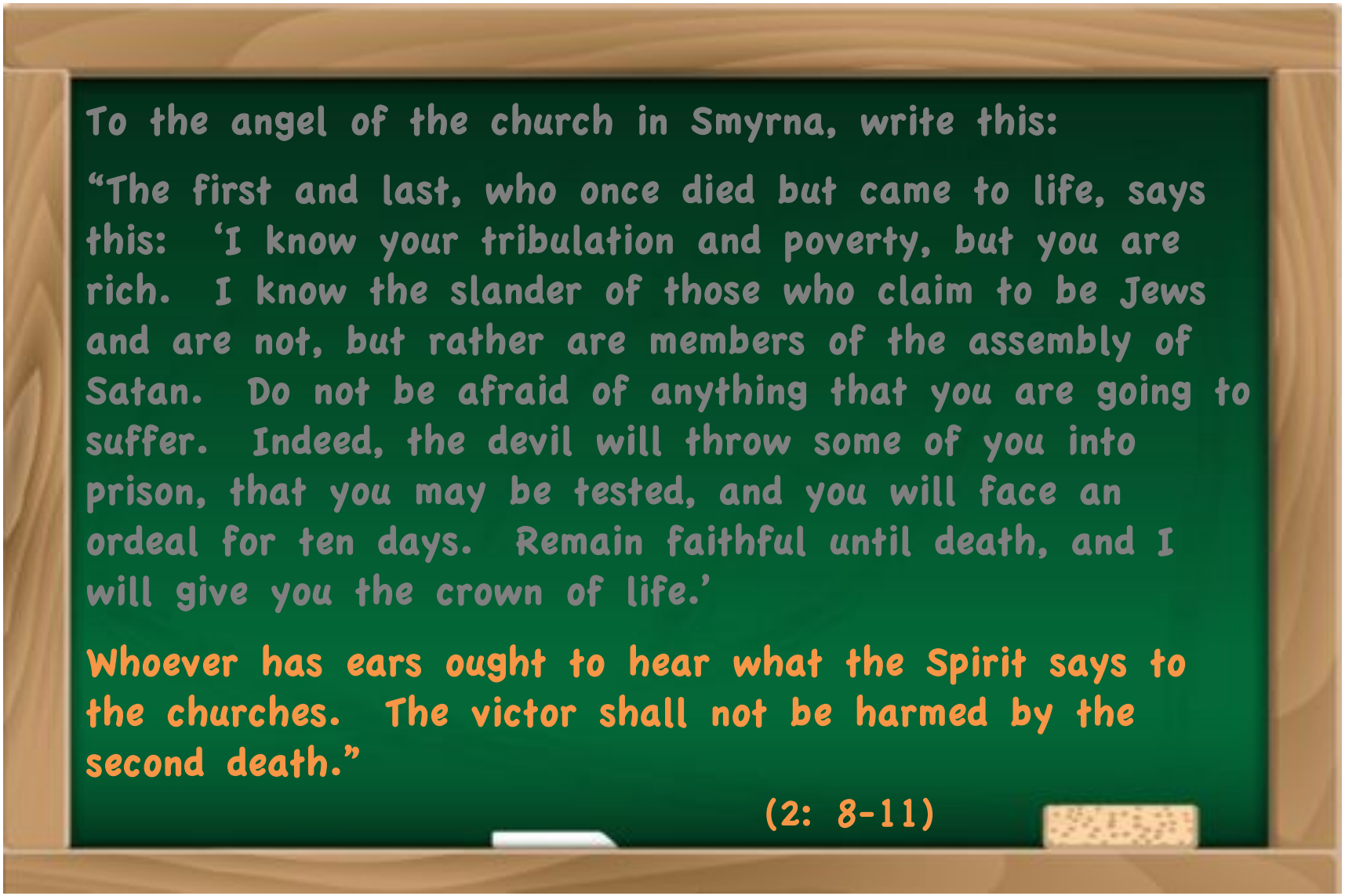

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- **“The victor shall not be harmed by the second death.” As in his letter to the church in Ephesus, Jesus encourages those in Smyrna to pay attention to what he has said, with the assurance that those who persevere to the end —the “victors” [νικάω, neh-ka’-o, one who “overcomes” or “prevails”]—shall not be harmed by the “second death.”**

The “second death” is the “pool of fire,” the final abode for *“anyone whose name [is] not found written in the book of life”* (22: 15).

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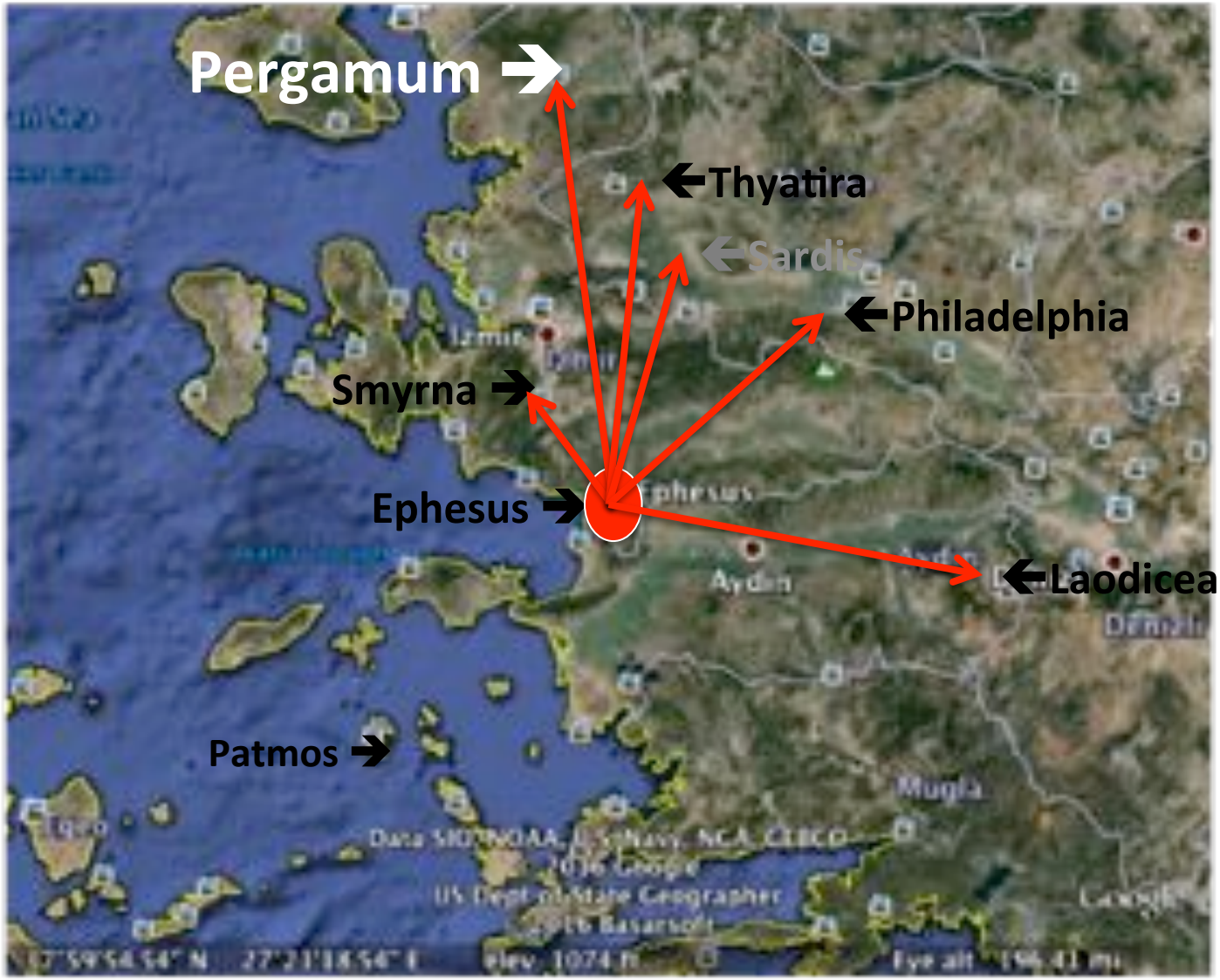

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Located 16 miles from the Aegean Sea on a promontory on the north side of the Caicus River, Pergamum was founded in the 3rd century B.C. It was the capital of the Kingdom of Pergamum during the Hellenistic period. At its peak, Pergamum was home to 200,000 people and boasted one of the three great libraries of the ancient world, along with Alexandria, Egypt and Ephesus.

The Asclepeion sits at the foot of Pergamum's Acropolis—the most famous healing center of its day. Hippocrates is said to have received his medical training here, and the famed physician and philosopher, Galen, studied and worked here.

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Approaching the Acropolis of Pergamum from the lush plain below.

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Atop the Acropolis marble columns glisten in the sunlight.

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The Temple of Trajan attests to the strength of the Roman imperial cult in the city.

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Pergamum boasted two theaters. This one is the steepest theater in the Greco-Roman world. But what a view!

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Beneath the Acropolis of Pergamum a monumental road leads to the Asclepeion.

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The serpent is a traditional symbol of medicine and healing.

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The Asclepeion's Courtyard.

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The “meditation tunnel” that led to healing rooms.

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A healing room at the Asclepeion.

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The Asclepeion also boasted medicinal healing pools and a beautiful theater.

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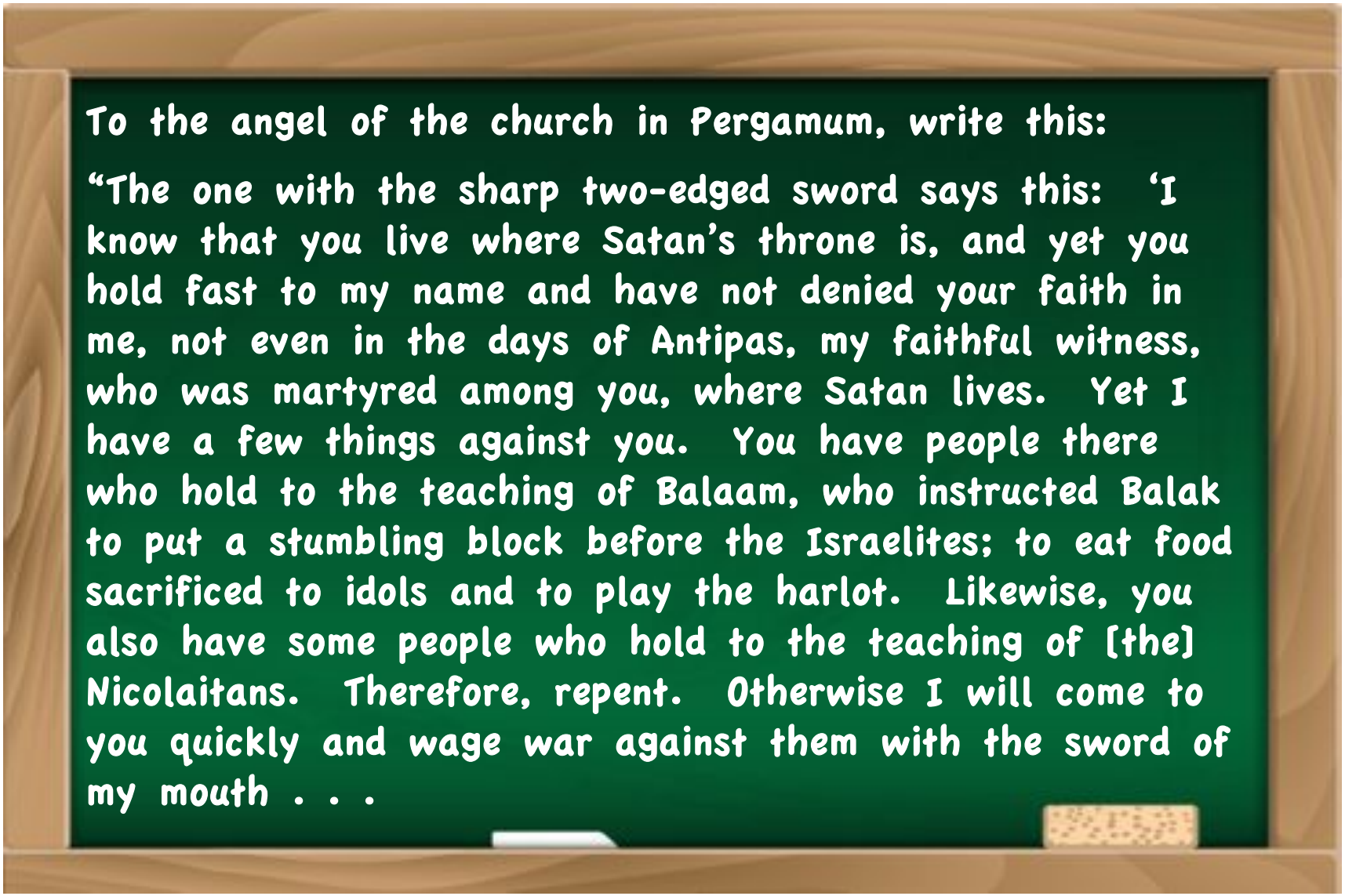
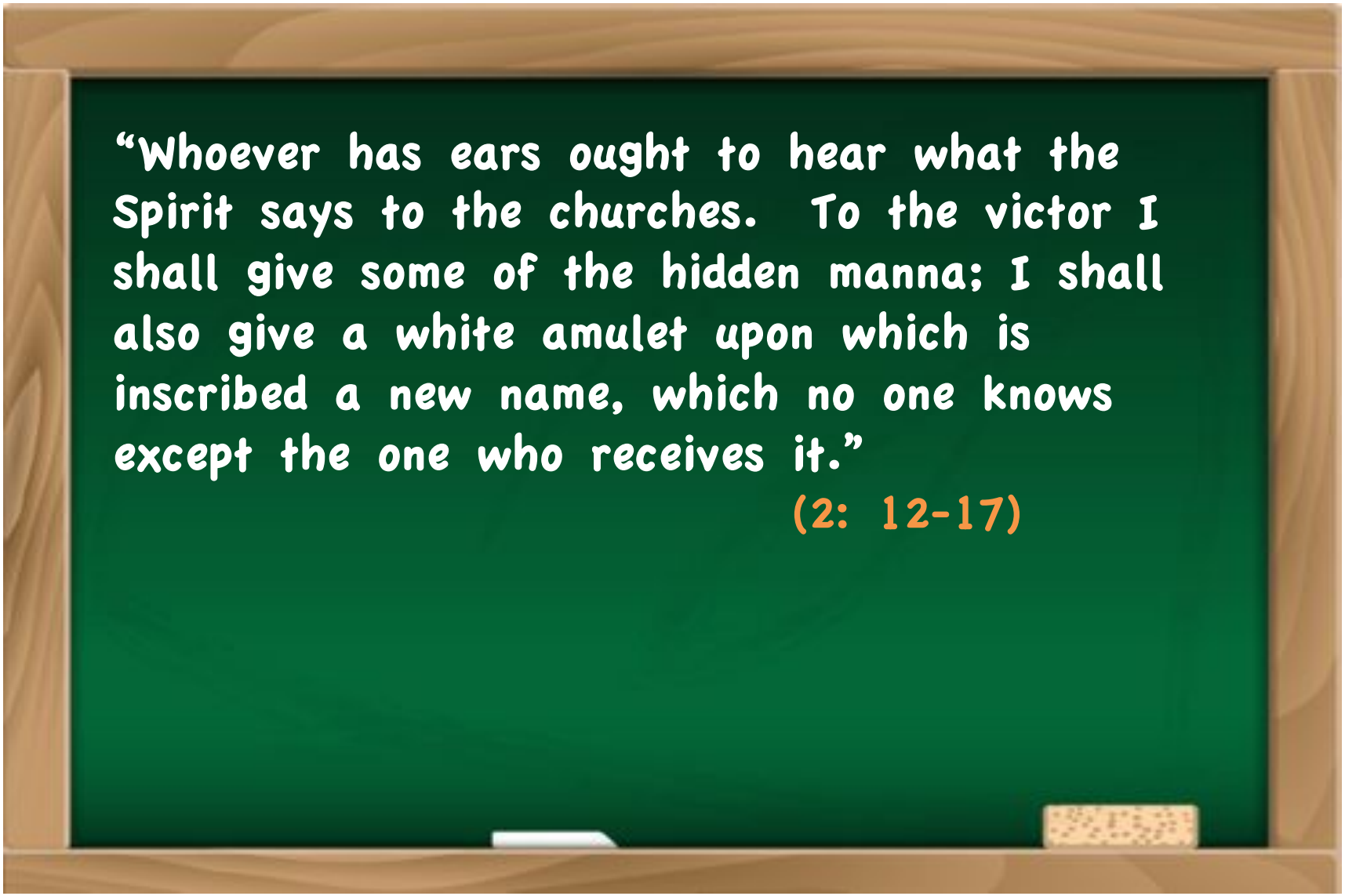

To the angel of the church in Pergamum, write this:
"The one with the sharp two-edged sword says this: 'I know that you live where Satan's throne is, and yet you hold fast to my name and have not denied your faith in me, not even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was martyred among you, where Satan lives. Yet I have a few things against you. You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who instructed Balak to put a stumbling block before the Israelites; to eat food sacrificed to idols and to play the harlot. Likewise, you also have some people who hold to the teaching of [the] Nicolaitans. Therefore, repent. Otherwise I will come to you quickly and wage war against them with the sword of my mouth . . .



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Pergamum:

1. Greeting
2. Words of commendation
3. Words of condemnation
4. Admonition

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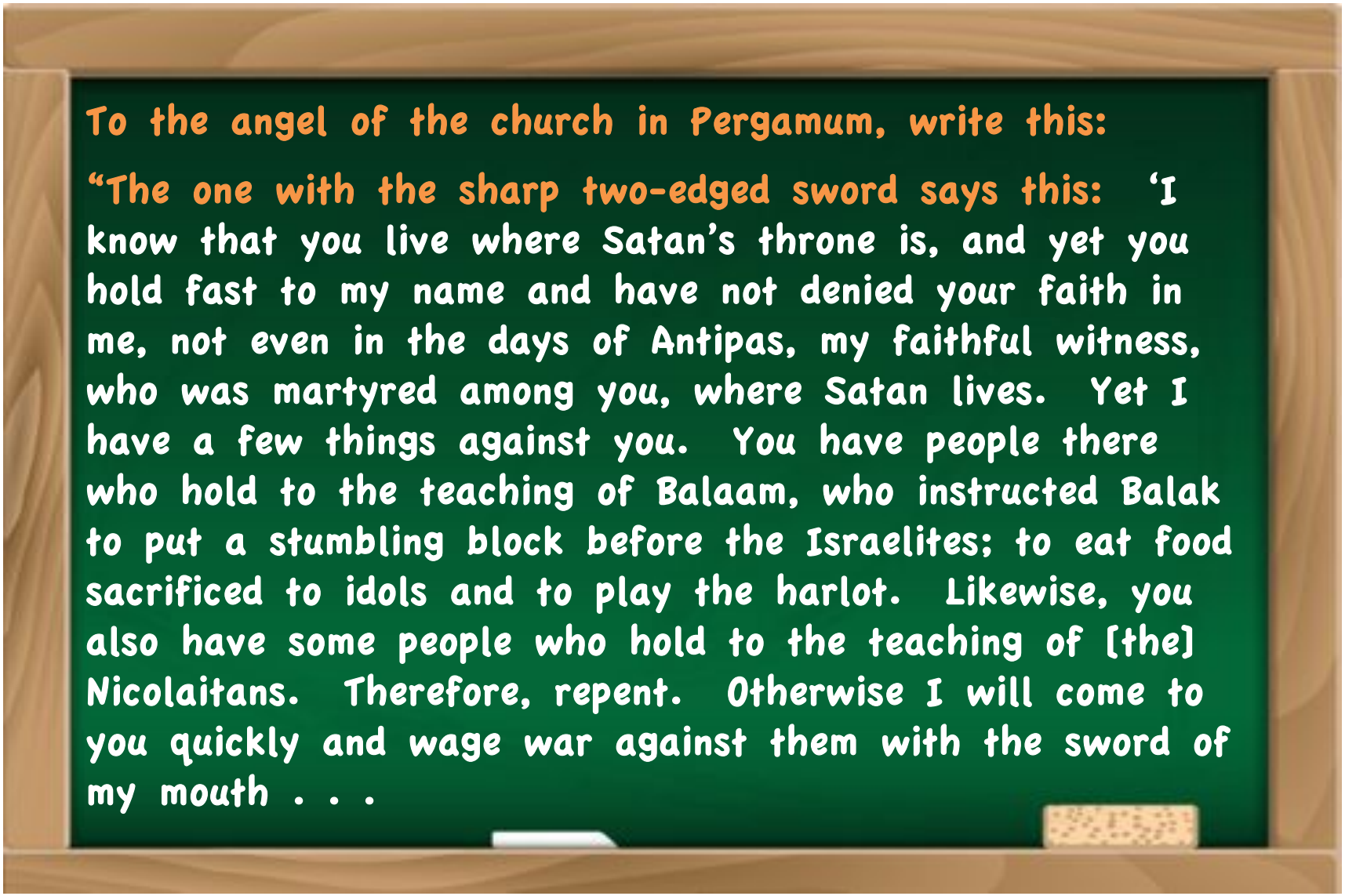

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- **Once again the Lord's greeting refers to attributes of Christ from the Prologue, this time to the sharp, two-edged sword coming from his mouth, the sword of commendation and condemnation.**

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Pergamum:

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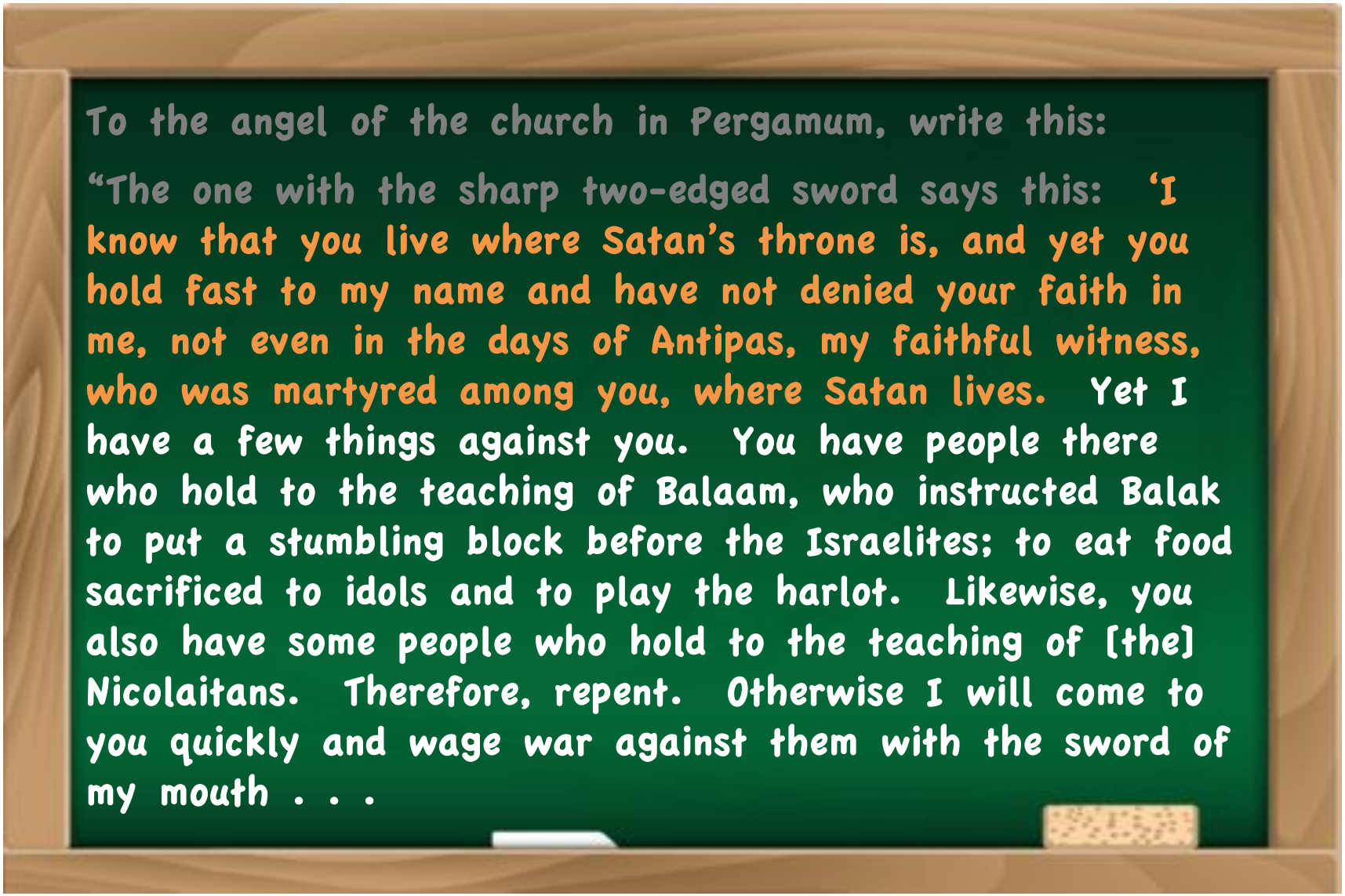
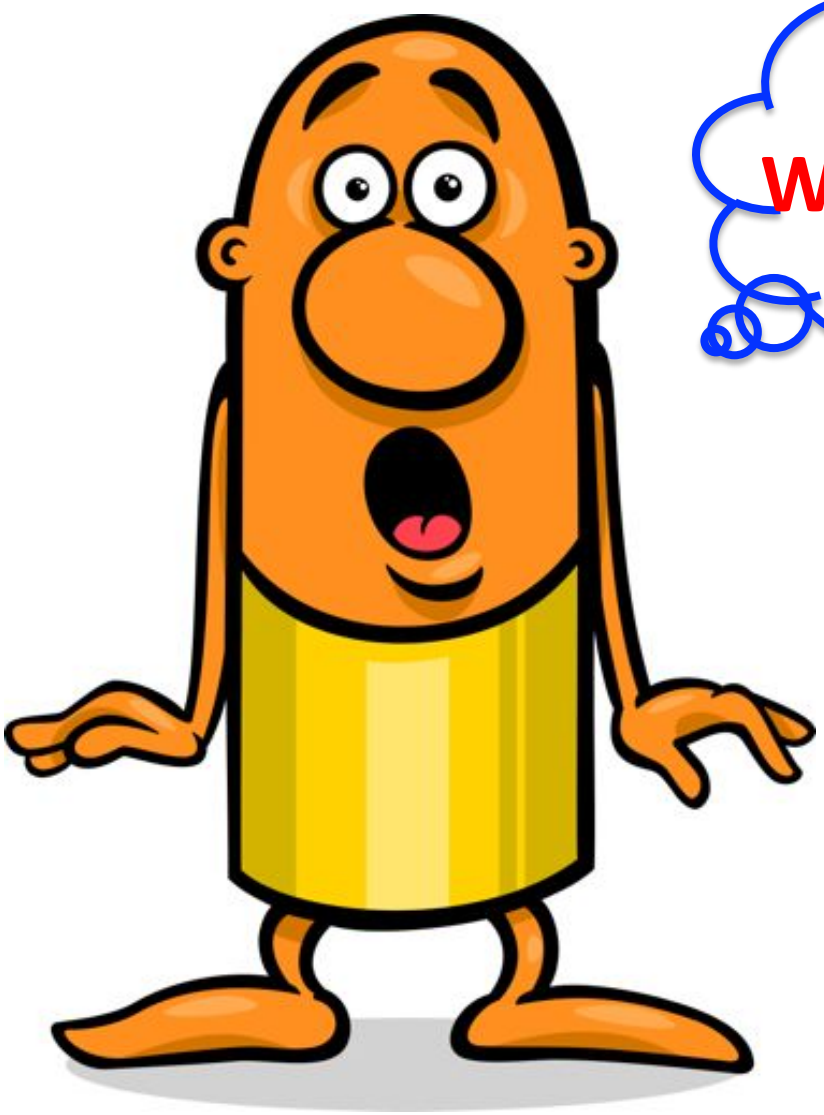

To the angel of the church in Pergamum, write this:
"The one with the sharp two-edged sword says this: 'I know that you live where Satan's throne is, and yet you hold fast to my name and have not denied your faith in me, not even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was martyred among you, where Satan lives. Yet I have a few things against you. You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who instructed Balak to put a stumbling block before the Israelites; to eat food sacrificed to idols and to play the harlot. Likewise, you also have some people who hold to the teaching of [the] Nicolaitans. Therefore, repent. Otherwise I will come to you quickly and wage war against them with the sword of my mouth . . .



Holy cow!
Where Satan lives?

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The great Altar of Zeus sat on this platform, “where Satan’s throne is” (2: 13).

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas

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Today the "Altar of Zeus" is in the Pergamum Museum in Berlin. It was one of the most beautiful altars of the ancient world.

- **Pergamum was another fabulous city in Asia Minor, with its stunning altar to Zeus, patron god of the city; temple of Athena, patron goddess of the city; and the temple of Dionysius, patron of the Roman royal dynasty. Three times Rome honored Pergamum as the temple-warden of the imperial cult. In addition, Pergamum's Asclepieion, with its beautiful shrine to the god Asclepius, was the most famous medical center in the world.**

- **Thus, the Lord commends Pergamum's Christians for not denying their faith and accommodating themselves to the very attractive pagan culture of the city, a city where Antipas (perhaps the church's leader) had been martyred.**

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Pergamum:

1. Greeting
2. Words of commendation
3. **Words of condemnation**
4. Admonition

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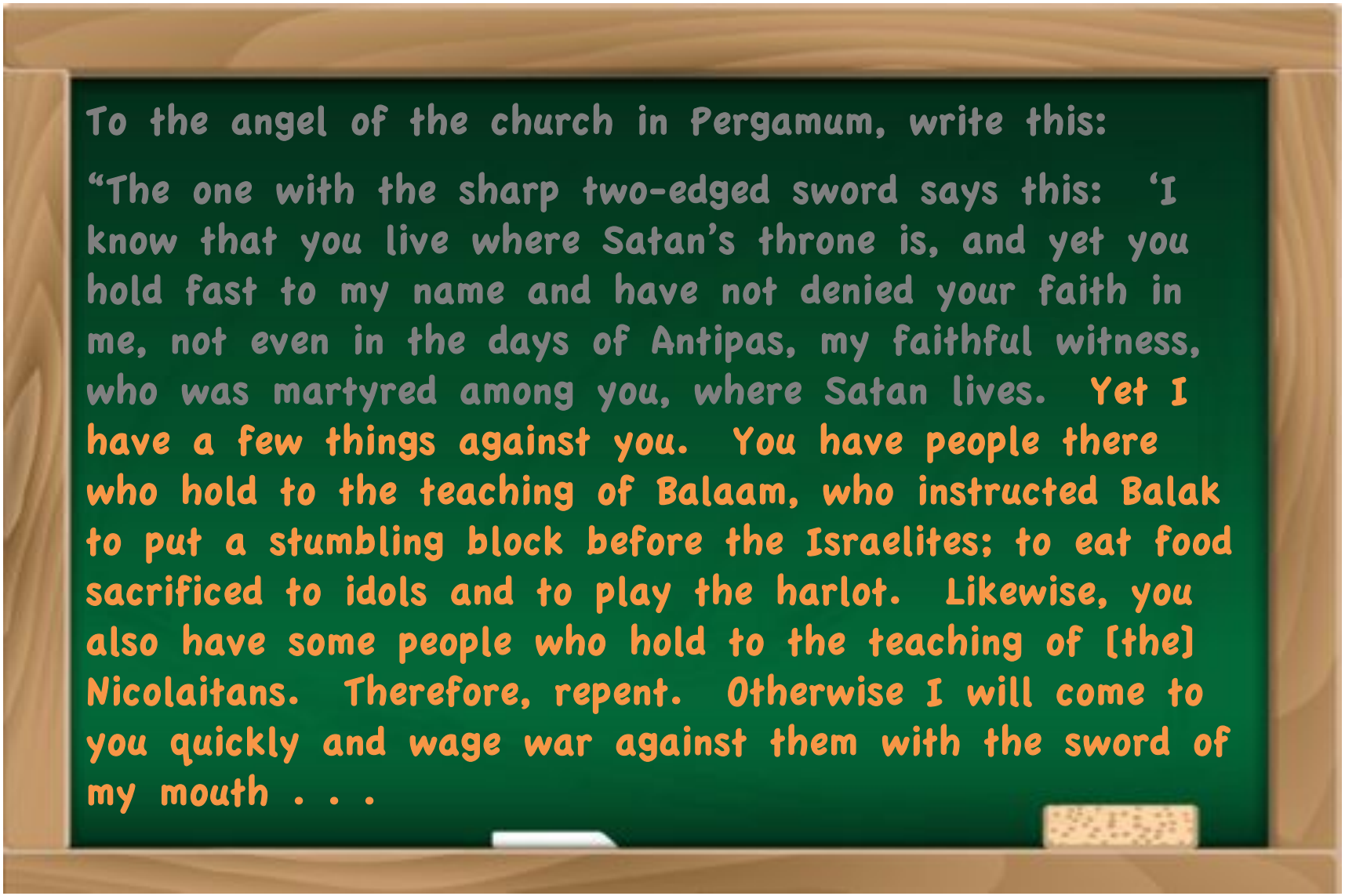

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• **"You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam."** **Recall our study of Numbers. When the Israelites are camped on the plains of Moab opposite Jericho, the king of Moab is terrified and seeks the help of the famous prophet Balaam to put a curse on the Israelites. After several tries, Balaam fails and the king of Moab fires him. But rather than returning home, Balaam initiates "Plan B": if you can't beat the Israelites, join them! We read that the Israelite men began "whoring" with the Moabite women, eating with them and worshiping their gods.**

That's the "teaching of Balaam": accommodation and assimilation into the dominant culture.

•As in Ephesus, many Christians in Pergamum are also following the teaching of the Nicolaitans.

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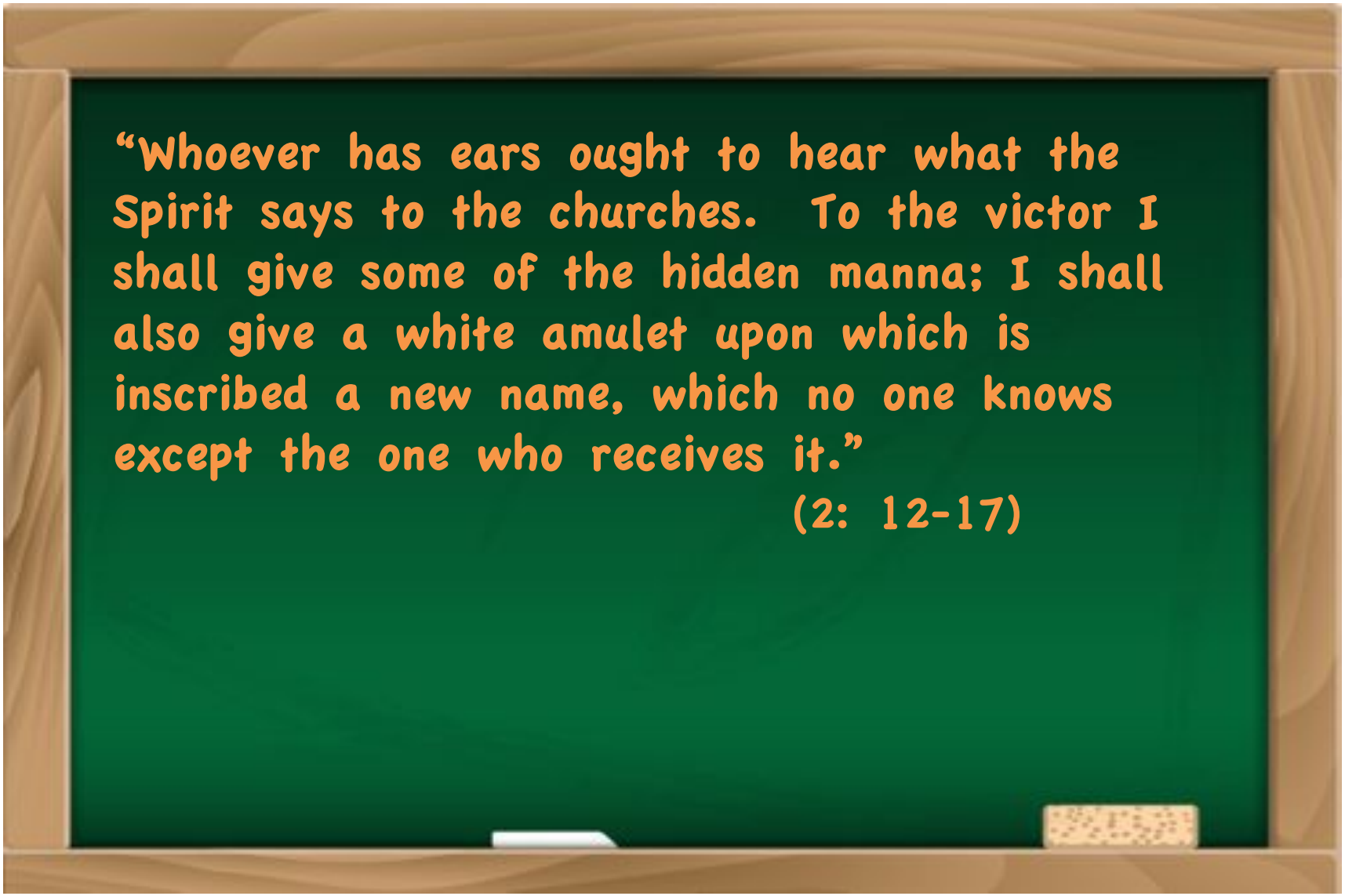

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• **“hidden manna” . . . “white amulet” . . . “a new name.”** **As we learned in our study of John’s Gospel, Jesus is the genuine manna, the *“bread of God . . . which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world”* (John 6: 33). Jesus promises to those who keep the faith that he will provide a deep, spiritual food to nourish their souls: the Eucharistic implications of Jesus’ statement are clear.**

•**The “white amulet” is ψηφθον λευκήν, literally a “white stone,” perhaps a type of admission ticket to “the wedding feast of the Lamb” (19: 9).**

•**The “new name” refers to a believer’s new identity in Christ. As St. Paul remarks: *“For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ your life appears, then you too will appear with him in glory”* (Colossians 3: 3).**

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In studying the first three of seven letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor, we find that they have similar opportunities and problems to those we have today.

With the vast array of opportunities the Church offers for serving others, for deepening our personal relationship with Christ and for putting our faith into action, we can work tirelessly—if we choose—to bring light into the world and to live a life that honors Christ.

But along the way we also stumble and fall, often wandering down the wrong paths and tumbling into thickets of weeds, some sown by others, some by ourselves.

We need to pay attention to where we're going and to how we get there, lest we become lost on our journey.

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Questions for discussion and thought

1. Why does the Lord begin this sequence of letters to the church at Ephesus?
2. When the Lord notes how far the church at Ephesus has fallen, what does he mean?
3. Why does the risen and glorified Christ not have any words of condemnation against the church in Smyrna?
4. In what sense is Pergamum the place “where Satan has his throne”?
5. What was being taught in Pergamum that was so objectionable?

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