

Revelation Chapter 2

The Mystery of the Seven Churches Revealed

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Revelation Chapter 2 begins a series of messages to the seven churches. In chapter 1, John is given a vision of Jesus walking among seven lampstands which represent the seven churches. Ephesians 5:25 tells us that Jesus “loved the church and gave Himself for her.” At the time John saw Him in vision, Jesus was no longer on earth; He was in heaven – the risen, glorified Christ. But Jesus is still the same loving Shepherd that He was when He was on earth. He still loves and cares for His church. He is still vitally concerned with her wellbeing.

Chapters 2 and 3 contain Jesus’ messages to these seven churches. The seven churches were actual groups of Christian believers located in these seven cities in Asia Minor in John’s Day. Geographically, the seven were in a roughly circular pattern, following an established trade route that connected the most populous and influential cities and areas of the province.

Notice, too, that each of the “letters” or messages Jesus gives to these seven churches follows a similar pattern. There is:

- a salutation: “To the angel of the church at _____, write . . .”
- a description of Jesus that relates to that particular church.
- an “I know” statement in which Jesus points out something about that church that He wants to emphasize.
- A reproof or rebuke regarding some shortcoming in that church.
- an admonition to pay attention to the message.
- the promise of a blessing or reward if the church continues to be faithful.

There is another aspect of the messages to the seven churches that we need to be aware of before we examine each of the messages individually. Each message was intended for the specific group of Christian believers who made up the “church” in that city. Its content related to their situation and experience as it existed in John’s Day. When the believers in Ephesus, for example, read Jesus’ message to them, they could see that

He was speaking directly to them and their experience. But there is a wider significance to these messages as well.

Many Bible students have recognized that the seven churches are representative of the history of the Christian church down through the ages from John's time to the end of time. The characteristics of each of the seven churches correspond to a particular period from the first century to the very end of earth's history. You will recall that the angel instructed John to "write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after this." (Revelation 1:19) This provides a prophetic pattern. The message to the seven churches applies to the church in John's time, the church down through the ages, as well as providing practical lessons for each of our lives.

Ephesus—the Loveless Church (A.D. 31-100)

To the angel of the church of Ephesus write, "These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands: I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not and have found them liars; and you have persevered and have patience and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary. Nevertheless, I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent. But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God" (Revelation 2:1-7).

In the first century after Jesus ascended to heaven the early Christian church was faithful to Jesus Christ. Its doctrine was pure, and these early Christians rejected false teachings. They shared Christ freely. Jesus commended them for their labors.

"Nevertheless," Jesus says, "I have something against you. You have left your first love." Gradually, even in those early years, duty began to take the place of devotion. The

Christians in Ephesus were working hard for Jesus, but at the same time they were losing sight of the Jesus they were working for. They were losing their first-love relationship with Him. In His message to the church at Ephesus, Jesus calls them back to loving Him again as they had at the beginning.

The Nicolaitans, mentioned in these verses, claimed to be Christians but believed that it was not necessary to obey God's law. His Word says, "He who says, 'I know Him [Jesus],' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him" (1 John 2:4). His Word should be important to us because we love Him and have chosen to have a relationship with Him—not because we feel that *we have* to obey. When we love someone, we *want* to do the things that please them.

Jesus closes His message to the Ephesus church with this promise: "To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God" (verse 7).

Smyrna—the Persecuted Church (A.D. 100-313)

"To the angel of the church in Smyrna write, . . . "I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich) . . . Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. H who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death" (verses 8-11).

The devil decided he needed to do something to stop the progress of the early church. He unleashed a storm of persecution. During the time of the Smyrna church, the Roman government began to actively persecute Christians. *Smyrna* means "sweet-smelling incense." The lives of the martyrs were a sweet-smelling incense that rose to heaven. Jesus tells the persecuted church of Smyrna, "I know your tribulation. I know the trouble you are going through. I know how poor you are, but you are rich in faith. The devil will persecute you, and you will suffer severe tribulation for ten days. Your faith will be tested. But do not be afraid. I will be with you."

To each church, Jesus introduces Himself before giving it His message. Notice how He introduces Himself to the suffering, persecuted Smyrna church. He says, “These things say the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life” (verse 8). Jesus promised He can give eternal life to those martyrs who gave up their lives to remain faithful to Him.

Notice, too, the promises Jesus makes to the suffering Smyrna church, filled with so many of those who gave up their lives for Him. He says, “Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of *life*” (verse 10).

Pergamos—the Compromising Church (A.D. 313-538)

Pergamos was located on a mountain ridge and was known for its many pagan temples and its great library of 200,000 scrolls. Pergamos created a cult worship of a living emperor. That is why it is referred to as the place “where Satan has his throne.”

In the Pergamos period Christianity became recognized and popular. As a result, the church made compromises. It allowed pagan doctrines to come into the church. It relaxed its standards to appeal to non-Christians.

During this time, the church adopted pagan deities and renamed them for Christian saints. The pagans were used to worshipping idols, so images of the saints were brought into the church for worship. False doctrines were adopted, including the influence of sun worship.

That is why Jesus addressed Pergamos in these words: “These things says He who has the sharp two-edged sword” (Revelation 2:12). Hebrews 4:12 compares the Word of God to a sharp two-edged sword. The church at Pergamos allowed God’s Word to be diluted by pagan doctrines and practices.

Church and state united to cause faith in God’s Word to be compromised. Tradition and human doctrines were accepted into the church in the place of Bible truth. That is why Jesus says,

Repent, or else I will come to you quickly and will fight against them with the sword of My mouth. He who has an ear let him hear what the

Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna to eat (verses 15, 17).

Jesus says, “I want to give you the hidden manna of my Word. I want you to feast on my Word. Jeremiah wrote, “Your words were found, and I ate them, and Your word was to me the joy and rejoicing of my heart” (Jeremiah 15:16). “Leave false doctrines,” Jesus urges the Pergamos church, “and feast on My Word.”

Thyatira—the Corrupt Church (A.D. 538-1500s)

The city of Thyatira lay between two valleys on a principal trading route. It was a flourishing craft center and was famous for its weavers and guilds and its beautiful purple dye used to color cloth. Thyatira was where Lydia, one of Paul’s early converts, bought her dyes (Acts 16:14). Thyatira represents the church in the period known as the Dark Ages (A.D. 538-1500s). Jesus says to this church,

“I know your works, love, service, faith, and your patience. . . . Nevertheless, I have a few things against you, because you allow that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, to teach and seduce my servants to commit sexual immorality. . . . I gave her time to repent of her sexual immorality, and she did not repent. Indeed, I will cast her into a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of their deeds (Revelation 2:19-22).

The Thyatira church is guilty of spiritual adultery. Throughout Scripture we find the relationship between God and His people illustrated by the marriage relationship (Isaiah 54:5; Jeremiah 31:32; Ephesians 5:23, etc.). God is always faithful to us, but when we are unfaithful to Him, it is spiritual adultery.

Jezebel was a wicked queen of Israel, wife of King Ahab (1 Kings 21). She withstood the prophet Elijah and fought against his efforts to bring Israel back to God. She appears here in Revelation as a symbol of spiritual adultery—apostasy and unfaithfulness. She is the embodiment of the false church. During this period of the Dark Ages all kinds of myths and falsehoods flooded into the church. The church combined its authority with that of the political power to coerce people into believing and following human traditions rather than the pure teachings of the Bible. During these Dark Ages, the light of God’s

truth almost went out. But even in these centuries of apostasy, some remained faithful to Him against all the temptations and forces of Satan and an apostate church. He says, “Now to you I say, and to the rest in Thyatira, as many as do not have this doctrine, who have not known the depths of Satan, . . . I will put on you no other burden but hold fast what you have till I come (verses 24, 25).

Jesus saw some even in Thyatira who had not compromised the truth. God has always had His faithful people. In the last days, when all the world is following the beast power that opposes God, there will still be those who “keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus” (Revelation 14:12).

Next week we will continue this fascinating study of the seven churches of Revelation and explore the mystery of three additional church, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.