

Letters to the 7 Churches

– Revelation 2

After the introduction of **chapter 1**, now we move into the letters to the individual churches:–

Ephesus (Revelation 2:1-7)

This is the only one of the seven churches about which we can read anywhere else in the New Testament, so we have some useful and significant background to this letter ¹. There was direct input from Paul for at least 2 years (**Acts 19**), his farewell encouragement to the Ephesian elders (**Acts 20:17-38**) and his letter from house arrest in Rome some years later, to say nothing of consistent support and encouragement from Priscilla and Aquila. However, as John records the message from the Lord Jesus in this chapter, a further 30 years or so have passed, so there may have only been a few (if any) of those original believers from those early days.

First of all, a reminder to the ‘messenger’ (Greek *angelos*) of the church there in Ephesus. Two of the characteristics of the glorified Lord Jesus: 1) He holds the seven stars in his right hand, and we know that those stars are the messengers of all the seven churches (**ch. 1:20**). ‘So, you there in Ephesus, he also holds **you** in his right hand!’ 2) He walks among the seven lampstands, which we know are the seven churches. Walking, caring and seeing all that is going on in each church – including you in Ephesus!

Much of what he sees is good. He can see what they are doing; they are working hard and possibly ‘going through it’ (the word translated ‘hard work’ is translated in another passage as ‘trouble’!) but holding on. It does sound a bit tough there, doesn’t it? (It wasn’t easy back in **Acts 19**!) They encounter ‘evil men’ and false apostles, check them out and do **not** put up with them. You can’t do that without being pretty sure of your own solid foundations in the Lord. How many present-day church fellowships would be ready to do that – or even capable of doing it?

He commends them twice for their perseverance / steadfastness (**vv.2&3**), so it sounds like a big issue.² It’s a hard slog and they have kept on going and have not become weary (this word is closely linked with the earlier word for ‘hard work’). And why? “*For my name’s sake.*” The Greek is literally ‘through my name’, so there are at least three possible meanings here, probably all valid! 1) They have suffered because of his name – in other words, they have been persecuted for following Jesus. 2) They have endured in order to uphold his name – they have demonstrated their faithful loyalty to the name of Jesus. 3) They have persevered and endured – sustained by his name – and have not grown weary. These all seem to fit the situation there.

Ephesus was a tough place! See **1 Corinthians 4:9 & 16:9** (written when Paul was at Ephesus) and **2 Corinthians 1:8**. If Paul had trouble 30 years earlier, it’s not surprising that it was still the same in AD 95 or so, so the Lord’s repeated commendation is very apt.

BUT – and we easily remember this ‘but’ – in spite of all their remarkable perseverance, loyalty and hard work, he says there is something missing: their first love. Is that their love for him, or for each other? *Agape*, self-giving love, expresses itself in both directions.

¹ See **Acts 16:6, 18:19, 18:24-26, 19:1-41, 20:17-38**, plus all of **Ephesians** !

² The Greek word for ‘perseverance’ here is *hupomone*, meaning ‘staying or remaining under’. Sounds like we could translate it ‘hanging on in there’ !

There is no doubt that their faith was real, their zeal was real and their loyalty was certainly not in question. Somehow the warmth had cooled in their relationships, and that was enough for the Lord Jesus to issue a warning:— to remember, repent and go back to doing those things they did at first, the deeds that demonstrated real love. Otherwise, he says, he will ‘remove the lampstand’ – they will cease to exist as a church! In spite of all the good that they have done, their ‘hanging on in there’ and their zeal! Real love was much more vital. Wow, this is serious stuff!

One major ‘redeeming factor’ in their favour, though, is their hatred of the deeds of the ‘Nicolaitans’. To judge by the information in the letter to Pergamum (**2:14-15**), these people led believers astray into immorality and idolatry, as Balaam had done back in ancient Jewish history. Though Paul did not mention the Nicolaitans by name, his words in **Ephesians 5:1-14** sound like a warning against precisely this sort of dangerous persuasion, which the Lord Jesus says he also hates!

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” This echoes one of the earlier sayings of the Lord Jesus, repeated several times in his 3 years of earthly ministry, and compared to the devastating opposite of hearing but **not** hearing, seeing but **not** seeing.¹ Not attending to what the Spirit says to the churches carries its own judgment!

But here is the real bonus – the first of the promises to those who overcome: *“I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God”*. The fruit of the tree that was denied to Adam and Eve because of their disobedience and desire to ‘be like God’, wise in their own way (**Genesis 3**). The whole chapter of human rebellion and alienation from God will be closed and the tree of life will be freely accessible to the inhabitants of the new Jerusalem! See **Revelation 22:2 & 14**.

Smyrna (*Revelation 2:8-11*)

Again, the Lord Jesus highlights some of his specific characteristics: He is the first and last. This refers to his first place in God’s plan and his key role in creation (**Colossians 1:13-20**), plus everything is to be summed up in him (**Ephesians 1:7-12**). **And** he (literally) ‘became dead’ and then came to life (at a point in time), obviously referring to his earthly death and resurrection. The true nature of the Lord Jesus, triumphant **life**, both in eternity and in time! ‘This is who is speaking with you, messenger of the church in Smyrna!’

This two-sided perspective of life is vital for the church in Smyrna. They are undergoing pressure and persecution; they are poor in material possessions (though evidently spiritually wealthy) and there are false believers who make claims to being part of the Israel of God but who are actually a gathering of Satan’s! Again, similar to Ephesus, this is a tough situation and the Lord warns them that it is going to get tougher: some of them will be imprisoned by the devil, they will be tested, and there will be more pressure and persecution, though only for a limited period.

The testing will prove their faithfulness. Result: He will give them the crown of life. (**1 Corinthians 9:25**)

Again, the exhortation to those who ‘have an ear’ is to hear what the Spirit says to the churches, and the promise to overcomers is once again themed on LIFE : *“He who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death.”*

¹ **Matthew 11:15, 13:9, Mark 4:9,23, Luke 8:8, 14:35**. Compare with **Matthew 13:10-17**, where Jesus quotes **Isaiah 6:9-10**.

Pergamum (*Revelation 2:12-17*)

The Greek says 'Pergamos' (where did we get 'Pergamum' from?). Literally, a fortress or castle, and it seems to be a stronghold of Satan! His 'throne' is there and he seems to be specially present ¹. The church there dwells in the same place where Satan makes his home (**2:13**).

The chosen characteristic of the Lord Jesus for this letter is that he has the sharp two-edged sword which comes out of his mouth (**Revelation 1:16**), a clear reference to the powerful word of God (**Hebrews 4:12**). 'The one who is speaking to Pergamos is the One who speaks the word of God.'

In this evil-infested place, the church has held fast to the Name of Jesus and they have not denied their faith in him, even in the face of the martyrdom of one of their number, Antipas, who was killed right there among (literally 'beside') them. They had been face to face with evil and its deadly effects, and still proved faithful.

But that sneaky persuasion to abandon all restraint had crept in among them, as it had threatened to do in Ephesus. Here in Pergamos, some had given in to it. Perhaps they had celebrated that they were free from slavery to law (Jewish or otherwise), just as Paul had written to the Galatian churches, but then had overstepped into immorality and idolatry, following the Old Testament example of Balaam, who brought judgment on the people of Israel by leading them into idolatry and immorality ². The teaching of the Nicolaitans took them along this same route.

So, an urgent need for repentance – a radical change of heart, a total rethink! Otherwise, the Lord Jesus says he will come **to them** quickly and "*will make war against them with the sword of my mouth.*" This is not the Lord Jesus returning to the earth in glory; this is him coming to the church in Pergamos in 'attack mode' ! Drifting off into idolatry and immorality is very dangerous!

'If you have an ear, listen!'

The promises to those who overcome are related to the characteristics of the One with the word of God coming out of his mouth: 1) 'Hidden manna', that unseen inner sustenance from the Lord himself. Read **John 5:32-35, John 6:48-58, Matthew 4:4, Deuteronomy 8:3**. And 2) a white stone (pebble) which carries, written on it, a new name for the overcomer which is known to no-one else (except, of course, the one who gave the 'namestone')! ³

Thyatira (*Revelation 2:18-29*)

The only other reference to Thyatira in the Bible is in **Acts 16:14**, where Paul, Timothy, Luke and (probably) Silas come to Philippi in Macedonia and find Lydia, a businesswoman from Thyatira who lived there and very soon became a believer. There is no obvious connection between Lydia and the church in Thyatira.

Jesus speaks to the 'messenger' of the church in Thyatira as "*The Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and his feet are like burnished bronze*" (see **ch. 1:14-15**). This

¹ Apparently, Aesculapius (the Roman 'god' of medicine and health) was worshipped there in a cult that had spread across the Mediterranean from the 5th century BC, and one of his symbols was a serpent/snake coiled around a staff. The snake was sacred to Aesculapius, but we know who else took that form!! (This symbol is still associated with modern medicine.)

² **Numbers 31:16**, which refers back to **Numbers 25**.

³ See also 'Bedrock' from www.justonecandle.uk for a little more explanation!

is the first time in these letters that Jesus is referred to as the Son of God. Eyes like a flame of fire and feet glowing like shining bronze, fresh from the furnace, speak of discerning judgment and purity, and again these characteristics are very relevant for those receiving this letter in Thyatira: there is definitely impurity there and a need for judgment on the source of it!

Here is a church that is moving forwards! He speaks of their love, faith, service and perseverance and confirms that they are doing better now than they ever did before. Sounds great!

BUT there is a major problem. In the midst of this apparent success, there is someone who is controlling people to go the way that she wants. She calls herself a prophetess, and so tries to give divine authority to what she says and does. Have the church missed out on the instruction to judge what anyone may speak out as a prophecy (**1 Corinthians 14:29**)? Or have they just accepted what she says about herself and her words? This is the wrong sort of tolerance!

Jesus calls her Jezebel, the name of the infamous Sidonian princess who became the queen of the evil King Ahab of 'Israel' (the 10 tribes who had rebelled against Rehoboam in **1 Kings 12**), led them into Baal-worship and tried to kill the prophet Elijah. (See **1 Kings 16:31-33, 19:1-2**) It would be hard to find anyone in Jewish history with a worse history of opposition to the purposes of God.

Again, it is idolatry and immorality which are the danger areas, and some of the Thyatiran believers have fallen straight into them, following Jezebel's lead. She has already been warned and given the opportunity to change direction (**v.21**), but she has refused.

Judgment is coming her way in the shape of sickness, and to her followers ("*those who commit adultery with her*") as 'great tribulation' – great pressure and anguish – UNLESS they repent of **her** deeds! Her children will die and the word will spread to 'all the churches' that the Lord is the one who searches the minds and hearts – how they think and how they feel. "*I will give to each one of you according to your deeds.*" A terrifying prospect for those who have been led astray by Jezebel!

For the others, who have stayed clear of this corrupting manipulation, the Lord places on them no other burden. They have not been taken in by Jezebel's teaching and have not known the 'deep things of Satan' as the others have (they had really gone miles off track, hadn't they?)

But, the Lord says, hold on to what you have! Don't let it slip!

The promises to the overcomers (and to whoever "*keeps my deeds until the end*") are amazing. The Lord quotes **Psalms 2**, in which promises are clearly made to the LORD's Anointed One (= Messiah, Christ) and applies those promises to the overcomer(s). A clear promise to share in the coming rule of Christ on the earth! Wow! (See also **Daniel 7:13-14, 22, 27** & **Revelation 5:10**).

Yes, indeed, "*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches*"!

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