

## Revelation 2 – The Letters To the Churches

Each Letter Consists of

1. The Speaker Addresses Himself (with a description from Chapter 1)
2. Commendations and/or Chastisement
3. The Promise For the Conqueror (Each speaking of Eternal life with different pictures)

### I. Ephesus – The Loveless Church (1-7)

#### A. From Jesus The High Priest Of the Churches (1)

1. He Holds The Seven Stars In His Right Hand
  - a. The seven stars from chapter one are the seven “angels/messengers” of the churches
  - b. Whether you take them as divine beings guarding each, or the human shepherds pastoring each, the point is that they are in Jesus’ Sovereign hand
  - c. Jesus is head of the Church
2. He Walks Among The Seven Golden Lampstands
  - a. The OT Priest was tasked with caring and keeping the lampstands burning
  - b. Jesus is seen here among the Lampstands (churches) as a Priest, caring and keeping them

#### B. The Church is Commended For Doctrinal Purity (2-3)

1. The Church Has Endured With Toil (2a)
  - a. They have endured in Sound doctrine continuously
  - b. They have fought to keep the truth
  - c. They endured the attacks of false doctrine for the sake of Jesus’ name
2. The Church Does Not Tolerate Evil Teaching (2b)
  - a. Paul commanded that they Ephesians beware of false teachers (Acts. 20:28-31)
  - b. Ignatius (a church father writing in late first century) praised the Ephesians for their stance on doctrine
3. The Church Has Rooted Out False Teachers (2c)
  - a. It seems this was the main activity in which the church engaged – and they did it well
4. The Church Has Fought For Jesus’ Name Faithfully (3)
  - a. They refused to let any falsehood or error be connected with the name of Christ
  - b. They were not just winning arguments, but upholding truth for the sake of Christ

#### C. The Church is Chastised For Failing In Love (4-5)

1. The Church Has Left Her First Love (4)
  - a. Jesus is ambiguous here about whether they left their love for Christ or love for people
    - i. He may be leaving non specific on purpose

- ii. We cannot separate love for God without love for those made in God's image – the two are inseparable
- b. The Ephesians are said to endure for the sake of Jesus' name, so we should assume that their commitment to Christ is not the primary issue
- c. Perhaps they were all about right doctrine but in some way they had forsaken the mission to which Christ called the church
- d. In Acts 19:10, Paul and the Ephesian believers were instrumental in bringing the gospel to all of Asia minor – but their love for mission and people had faded

2. The Church is Warned To Repent Or Be Judged (5)

- a. The Remedy – Remember
  - i. They are to remember the purpose of their call
  - ii. They are to remember the pursuit of their mission
  - iii. They are to remember their first works
- b. The Remedy – Repent
  - i. They are to turn from what is happening
  - ii. They are to turn from the lazy, indifference
- c. The Remedy – Do your first works
  - i. Notice that the “love” they are to get back to is not a feeling or emotion
  - ii. The love they are called to return to is associated with doing the works they used to do
- d. The Warning – If they fail to Repent and return, Jesus will come in judgment and remove their lampstand
  - i. Both Israel in the OT and the church in the NT are represented as lamps because they are God's light bearers that witness to the world
  - ii. In Mark 4 and Luke 8 Jesus says they are the light of the world and a lamp should not be hidden under a bushel
  - iii. Jesus, because he is walking among the lampstands, tending to them, will remove theirs unless in starts shining

D. The Conqueror is Promised Life (6-7)

1. The Church is Commended For Hating Error (6)

- a. They are once again commended for hating the Nicolaitans
  - i. Some speculate these are people who follow Nicolas, who was made a deacon in Acts 6 and later apostatized. (We don't know)
  - ii. Later we will see that this group was also a problem in Pergamum

- iii. They are also associated with the error of Balaam who tried to dilute Israel by introducing foreign wives among them (more on that in Pergamum)
    - iv. The name Nicolas means conqueror of the people in Greek; The name Balaam means conqueror of the people in Hebrew
  - b. The Nicolaitans therefore probably taught that some blending of the cultural religion in Ephesus with Christianity was justified
    - i. The Economy in Ephesus thrived around temple cults
    - ii. Temples to Artemis (Diana) and Caesar were there (See Acts 19:23-41)
    - iii. The Ephesians rejected and hated this doctrine of error.
- 2. The Conqueror is Promised Eternal Life (7)
  - a. The one who conquers is not a special form of strong Christian, but those who's faith proves to be genuine through being tested and persevering
  - b. 1 John 5:4 (the same John who authored Revelation) says that everyone who is born of God "conquers" (overcomes = νικᾶω) the world
  - c. The Reward For the Conqueror
    - i. To Eat of the Tree of Life in God's Paradise
      - In Gen. 2-3, the tree of life represents eternity in the presence of God
      - The perfection of creation is being reestablished through the defeat of death and the curse

## II. Smyrna – The Faithful Church (8-11)

### A. From Jesus The Almighty God (8)

- 1. He is The First and The Last
  - a. A Reference to Yahweh in Isa. 44:6 and 48:12 (see chapter 1)
  - b. Jesus uses this description to show His sovereign control over history
    - i. The Smyrna church will need faith and perseverance to overcome the trials they will face
    - ii. They need to know that Christ is still in Control
- 2. He Died and Rose From the Grave
  - a. Jesus vindicated Himself as Lord through the resurrection
  - b. Death no longer has power over Christ and His church

B. The Church is Not Abandoned In Their Hardships (9-10a)

1. Jesus is Aware of the Church's Trials (9)

a. Jesus Sees the Church's Poverty and Tribulation (9a)

i. They Lost Protected Status

- The Jews were free to worship their God exclusively under Roman rule
- As long as Rome saw Christians as a sect of Judaism, they were protected from being forced to worship other Gods
- As they were increasingly rejected by the Jews and Rome saw them as a different religion, they lost that protection and were subject to punishment for failing to worship other Gods

ii. They Lost Economic Opportunity

- Most cities in Asia minor were filled with trade guilds – these were societies including members of a particular trade, devoted to the god supposedly prospering that trade
- Christians could not participate in the worship feasts to these gods and were ostracized from the economic community
- This led to poverty and enormous trials

iii. Although they dwelt in earthly poverty, they were indeed rich in God's eyes because of their faithfulness to Christ

b. Jesus Sees the Attacks of Satan (9b)

i. The Jews (the synagogue of Satan that claimed to be Jews but are not) were more than happy to tell Rome that Christians were not part of their religion

ii. The Jews also slandered (blasphemed) the Christians, calling them cannibals, and idolaters.

iii. These accusations led to greater persecutions of Christians by the state

iv. Tacitus' Annales (4.55-56) tells us that the city of Smyrna was loyal to Rome and built many temples dedicated to Emperor worship

- Failing to sacrifice (make homage) to the emperor was seen as treason

2. Jesus Commands Faithfulness Through Testing (10)

a. They Are commanded not to Fear persecution by the state (what you are about to suffer)

b. Satan himself will bring about persecution in the form of being imprisoned by the Roman state

- i. Prison was not a punishment in itself in the first century
    - ii. Prison was a temporary holding until trial or execution could be carried out.
  - c. But God Himself will use their Tribulation to Test their Faith ("that you may be tested")
    - i. There is a reason Satan is allowed to do such things
    - ii. Their faith would be tested in the fire of adversity
  - d. Why Ten Days?
    - i. We can't be certain, but given John's propensity to use imagery from Daniel, he is probably using an allusion from Daniel 1:12-13
    - ii. Here Daniel and his 3 friends ask to be tested for 10 days as they eat vegetables rather than the king's food
    - iii. The Hebrew boys were being tempted to compromise with the culture and so was the church at Smyrna
  - e. Example:
    - i. Polycarp, who was the bishop of Smyrna in the early second century could have very well heard this letter read aloud to the church at Smyrna
    - ii. Polycarp was commanded to affirm that "Caesar is Lord" by the Roman governor and chose to die rather than submit.
    - iii. The Church must be faithful unto death in order to receive the crown of life (i.e. eternal life)

### C. The Conqueror is Promised Eternal Life (11)

#### 1. A True Faith Will Always Endure

- a. Those whose faith is genuine and proven to be genuine will receive eternal life
- b. The "being faithful" is not a work that must be accomplished by the force of will.
- c. The purpose of their trial is stated "that you may be tested"
- d. Endurance and faithfulness to Christ is the evidence that one has true saving faith.

#### 2. Not Harmed by the Second Death

- a. This is the final judgment where souls are thrown into the lake of fire
- b. The believer need not fear this "death"

### III. Pergamum – The Compromising Church (12-17)

#### A. From Jesus, The Judge of All (12)

##### 1. His Word is the Double Edge Sword

2. He has the Right To Bring Judgment
- B. The Church is Commended For Withstanding Assault (13)
  1. They Dwell Among Wickedness (Satan's Throne) (13a)
    - a. Pagan Worship Center
      - i. There were Temples dedicated to Zeus, Dionysis, and Asklepius
      - ii. Asklepius (who resembles a snake) would perhaps most likely be associated with Satan's throne to early Christians
      - iii. Asklepius is a god of healing. His symbol (The rod of Asklepius) became a prominent feature throughout the city
      - iv. Modern readers still see the rod of Asklepius used today as a symbol for healing. It is used in the symbol of the American Medical Association, the United States Air Force medical corps, many med schools and associations, and the World Health organization
    - b. Imperial Worship Center
      - i. Pergamum was the first city in Asia minor to build a temple to a Roman ruler (Augustus)
      - ii. Pergamum was the central location in the region for the cult of the Emperor
      - iii. Refusing to pay homage to the Emperor was considered treason against the state
    - c. There would have been enormous amounts of pressure exerted upon the Christians to conform to the cultural and religious practices of the city
  2. They Were Faithful Through Persecution (13b)
    - a. The Church "held fast to His name" despite the central location of pagan gods
    - b. The Church even held to Christ's name when Antipas was killed for the faith
      - i. We don't know who Antipas was or what the details of his martyrdom are but the mention of him with no clarification points to the fact that the original audience would have known
      - ii. It isn't hard to imagine the Caesar cult putting someone to death for refusing to worship the Emperor



C. The Church is Chastised For Compromising With The World (14-16)

1. Jesus Rebukes Them For Allowing Compromise (14-15)

a. Some members of the Church hold to the teaching of Balaam

- i. This means they are allowing corruption from the inside although protecting it from the outside
- ii. The account of Balaam and Balak is given in Numbers 22:5-25:3.
- iii. Balaam is kept from cursing Israel by God and instead suggests to Balak that the way to deal with them is using internal corruption – they introduce foreign wives among them to lead them astray
- iv. We are not explicitly told there that Balaam gave Balak this advice, but later in Numbers 31:16 we are told that he did.
- v. Like Balaam, certain members of the church in Pergamum pushed for the church to be more compliant with the culture and not so exclusive. They could mingle Christianity with the other religions (emperor worship, etc.)
- vi. The Reference to eating food sacrificed to idols here (v. 14) is not like Paul saying that food was used in pagan service and then sold in the marketplace. The idea here is that some people were eating food in the context of idolatrous worship (fellowship meal with the false gods)
- vii. To eat things sacrificed to idols and to fornicate is associated here with Balaam and the Nicolaitans (and we will also see that the same phrase is used of Jezebel in Thyatira
  - We are justified then in seeing internal corruption of the church as the focus of the three heresies condemned by Jesus in these letters

2. Jesus Warns Of Judgment Unless They Repent (16)

a. Jesus tells them to repent of allowing this teaching to flourish among them

- i. False doctrine and error must be addressed by the Church, especially when it is internal
- ii. Notice that the followers of Balaam's teaching are not the only ones called to repent. Those who allow it in the church are also culpable

b. Jesus warns them of Judgment with the Sword

- i. Balaam was threatened to be killed by the sword of the angel of God if he tried to oppose Israel (Num. 22:23)
- ii. When Balaam did not heed the warning, he was killed with the sword (Num. 31:8)
- iii. Jesus here says the same fate will come upon the false brethren unless they repent

D. The Conqueror Is Promised Eternal Life (17)

1. He will be Given Hidden Manna

- a. They need not worry about provision, they will be fed by God
- b. They need not fear destruction or starvation if they reject the pagan practices, God is their provider

2. He will be Given A white Stone

- a. The white stone is difficult to interpret, many possible backgrounds could be cited.
  - i. The white stone was used to show a favorable vote and a black stone and unfavorable one
  - ii. White stones were also used to gain admission to special occasions like festivals, banquets and such

- Some therefore see, that this is an invitation to the marriage supper of the lamb
- Some see it as a symbol of justification

iii. The White Stone has OT significance

- Some connect the white stone here with the OT stone called Bdeh
- In Numbers 11:7, the manna from heaven is compared to the appearance of Bdeh
- Exodus 16:31 says that the manna (which looks like Bdeh) is white in color
- Also Bdeh is connected with the paradise of God (garden) in Gen. 2:12
- All this lends some to think that the white stone points to a restoration of relationship and paradise with God

3. He will be Given A New Name

a. The New Name

- i. The new name in Rev. 3:12 is a reference to the name of God, and the name of His city. So we see that it is not some secret name but the Conqueror will be called by His name
- ii. Rev. 14:1-4 says that his servants will see his face and his name will be on their foreheads –



the name is the new status and standing with God – it is redemption – the mark of the genuine community of God

- iii. This language is taken from Isa. 62:2 and 54:15 where the OT saints are prophesied to be called by a new name at the coming kingdom (62:4-5 also mention that those called by this new name will be a bride and God the bridegroom)
- b. The New Name Written On the Stone
  - i. No one can know the name doesn't mean that it is a secret codename
    - In the OT, "Know" has a large semantic domain, including to experience or be in relationship with.
    - The idea is one of coming into personal experiential knowledge. To know another's name is not just to understand facts but an announcement of access in the authority of that name
  - ii. Why written on the Stone?
    - In Ex. 28:9-12, the High Priest was to go before God in his priestly attire which included two onyx stones on each shoulder inscribed with the names of Israel's tribes. He represents them before God
    - Although onyx stones are black, the idea of the stones combined (onyx and Bdellium) demonstrates that the names are brought before God in a reestablished righteousness. – The white stone (Bedellium) is associated with the onyx stone at the Garden of Eden in Gen. 2:12 and it is also mentioned with the manna in Num. 11:7 – all these images are combined by John to show the fulfillment of the New Creation for the Conqueror.

#### IV. Thyatira – The Tolerant Church (18-28)

##### A. From Jesus, The All Knowing God (18)

##### 1. He is the Son of God

- a. This is the only time in Revelation that Jesus is referred to as the Son of God (in Ch. 1, he is the Messianic Son of Man)
- b. At Thyatira, the local gods were Apollo Tyrimnaeus and Caesar – and both of these were called "sons of Zeus"

- c.
    - 2. He Has Eyes Like Flaming Fire (Dan. 10:6; Rev. 1)
    - 3. His Feet are Like Bronze (Dan. 10:6; Rev. 1)
- B. The Church's Works of Love Are Commended (19)
  - 1. They have persevered in their love, service, and faith
    - a. Thyatira had many trade guilds which would have put much pressure on the local Christians
    - b. Despite this, they held firm to their profession of Christ and their latter works exceeded their former works
  - 2. They were faithful to serve Christ in the midst of pagan culture
- C. The Church is Chastised For Tolerating Error (20-23)
  - 1. The Church Has Allowed False Doctrine (20)
    - a. Jesus Rebukes Them For Tolerating Jezebel (20a)
      - i. The church at Thyatira had not lost their first love, but they were tolerating false doctrine and moral impurity in their midst
      - ii. Jezebel was the wicked queen of Israel who led God's people into Idolatry and pagan worship (1 Kings 21:25-26)
      - iii. In 2 Kings 9:22, her actions are called harlotry and witchcraft
      - iv. Here we have the same problem as with the Nicolaitans and those following the ways of Balaam. – Allowing pagan culture to influence their doctrine and practice
      - v. Jezebel could be an actual woman in Thyatira or simply a characterization of the position
        - Remember that trade guilds were plentiful in Thyatira
        - Christians may go hungry and in poverty if they refused to worship the particular deity of their trade
      - vi. Orthodox Christianity is intolerant of mixing doctrine with other views
    - b. Jezebel is Leading People Into Idolatry (20b)
  - 2. The Church Will Experience A Righteous Judgment (21-23)
    - a. Jezebel Has Refused to Repent (21)
      - i. We aren't told how or when, but God offered Jezebel and her followers opportunities to turn from their wickedness
      - ii. Today, those opportunities are still available for people who have combined pagan culture with Christianity
    - b. Jesus Will Bring Judgment to The Idolaters (22-23a)
      - i. Jesus says he will cast her down on a sickbed

- Jezebel is portrayed as leading people into adultery so Jesus says, I will throw you into bed if that's what you want (but not the kind of bed she expects)
  - ii. Those who follow her will also be judged with great tribulation
    - This tribulation is described by being struck dead
    - They are guilty of a capital crime
    - Their tribulation will be so great that all the churches will know that Jesus sees the hearts of men (eyes like flaming fire?)
  - c. Jesus Will Repay Each According To His Works (23b)
    - i. Jer. 17:10 is the OT text where the phrases "I will give...to each according to his works"
    - ii. This refers to God's judgment on some of the Israelites who practice idolatry because of financial motivations (the same context as in the church of Thyatira)
- 3. The Faithful of The Church Are Commanded to Hold Fast (24-25)
  - a. But there is still a faithful remnant in the church that has not followed Jezebel
  - b. They reject the idea of walking in the pagan cultural practices while claiming to walk with Christ
  - c. They reject the "deep things of Satan"
    - i. This probably refers to an idea that came to be known as Gnosticism. – one could reach a higher spiritual level by finding secret knowledge.
    - ii. These things may simply be the inclusion of worldly religion with Christianity
  - d. They are commanded to hold fast to what they have
    - i. They are simply to persevere and continue
    - ii. Even in the face of persecution and hardship
- D. The Conqueror Is Promised Eternal Life (26-29)
  - 1. Jesus Will Give His Own Authority (26-27)
    - a. Authority over the nations is a quote from Ps. 2:8-9 where the Father promised the Son rule over the nations
    - b. Here the Son declares that he will share his reign with those who Conquer (i.e. persevere)
  - 2. Jesus Will Give Himself (28-29)
    - a. The morning star is a reference to Christ Himself
    - b. Jesus is the bright and morning star in Rev. 22:16

- c. This is a picture of salvation and eternal life – we have Christ as our sacrifice and our advocate. His righteousness is ours.