



THE REVELATION OF JESUS CHRIST

LESSON 2 – The Things Which Are - Part 1

LESSON OBJECTIVE

The goal of this lesson is to understand the interpretation of the first four of the seven letters to the seven churches in their proper cultural and historical contexts, and to consider the resulting theological implications and personal applications.

GENERAL OUTLINE OF THE SEVEN LETTERS

- A. For the most part, the letters present the following seven-part organization
 - i. Each letter is opened with an address
 - ii. Citation of certain attributes of Jesus Christ (generally alluding back to chapter 1)
 - iii. An assertion of complete knowledge of the people addressed
 - iv. A description of the overall state of the church addressed (this can include praise, promise, censure, or warning)
 - v. A promise of the Lord's return
 - vi. A command to hear (i.e., listen and respond)
 - vii. A promise to the overcomers
 - B. The last two elements are reversed in the last four letters
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EPHESUS

Cultural and historical background

- i. A commercially thriving city, the largest in the Roman province of Asia
- ii. Originally a seaport, but silt from the Cayster River gradually filled the harbor
- iii. Very accessible by major highways
- iv. A "free city" under Roman law, which allowed a measure of self-governance and meant there was not a Roman military garrison there
- v. Annual athletic games were a big draw
- vi. Primary worship was the Greek "goddess" Artemis (also identified with the Roman "goddess" Diana) (see Acts 19:24-35)
- vii. Artemis' 425 feet long by 220 feet wide temple is considered one of the seven wonders of the ancient world; it had 120 columns
- viii. Temple was a gathering place for criminals and prostitutes (considered priestesses)
- ix. Population was very diverse, including original natives, descendants from the original colonists from Athens, three other tribes of Greek lineage, and a Jewish population
- x. Today, the city is in ruins, having died out because the harbor moved six miles away, but the ruins remain one of the world's greatest archaeological sites

Biblical background

- i. Paul founded the church in A.D. 52 on his 2nd missionary journey and left Priscilla and Aquila there (Acts 18:19-26)
- ii. Apollos also ministered there
- iii. Paul returned to the city on his 3rd missionary journey and spent 3 years there (Acts 19:1 ff. and 20:31)
- iv. The union uprising caused Paul to leave, but only after the church was strong
- v. Paul wrote the letter (or epistle) that we call “Ephesians” to them later on from prison in Rome and may have visited after his release
- vi. Timothy was likely left in Ephesus by Paul to minister there (1 Timothy 1:3)
- vii. Apostle John probably arrived in A.D. 66 and remained ministering in the area until his exile to Patmos

Notes on Revelation 2:1-7

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;”

Notice the description of Jesus as the one holding the seven stars (i.e., the seven pastors) in his right hand and walking among the seven golden candlesticks (i.e., the seven churches). This description from chapter 1 will tie into the message to the Ephesians. They will be rebuked for leaving their “first love,” and the rebuke does not come from just anyone, but from Jesus Christ, who walks in their midst and holds them (and their pastor) close.

2:2 “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:”

Because Jesus is so intimately related to his church at Ephesus and its pastor, he is well aware of their activities and character. They are doctrinally solid, well able to test those claiming to be apostles. The Ephesians remind us of the Bereans in Acts 17:10-12. They search the scriptures and test the teachings they hear.

2:3 “And hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name's sake hast laboured, and hast not fainted.”

The Ephesians have labored and patiently endured for Jesus Christ. For many churches, tribulations and set backs would lead to “fainting,” that is, giving up, but not the Ephesians. They have withstood the challenges.

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

Jesus Christ has a personal rebuke in that the Ephesians have left their “first love” despite their works and scriptural soundness. We are not told what that “first love” is; this letter was to the Ephesians and no doubt, when they heard the letter read publicly, they were cut to the heart with conviction and each of them knew what their first love was that had been forsaken. I would suggest that despite the works and scriptural knowledge, the Ephesians had become cold-hearted and unloving, and that is why Jesus says they lost their first

love. A staple teaching in the 1st century churches was the command to love one another. (Matthew 28:19-20; 1 John 3:11) This is how the people of God demonstrate their love toward God (1 John 4:20), which they had lost sight of.

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.”

The Ephesians were not always unloving. They started out right and then fell. They are commanded (not requested) to remember how they formerly were and return to it. To repent means to change one’s thinking. They are to change their thinking, to change their hearts from unloving to loving, and accordingly to return to their “first works” (behavior born out of love). The Lord’s churches are not free to do their own thing. After a time has passed without change, the church ceases to be a church. Men can neither make nor unmake a church because it is in the Lord’s sovereign hands. Jesus is warning Ephesus that they will cease to be a church. Please note if that occurs (and it does occur in churches today), the Ephesians would likely still meet on Sundays, sing hymns and hear sermons. Those are things churches do; however, those things do not make a group of people a church. These can be the activities of a dead church. How can you tell a church from a group of people that gather to do “church” activities?

2:6 “But this thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.”

Jesus praised the Ephesians in v. 2 for their willingness to apply the Scripture to what they saw and heard and resist that which is “evil.” The Nicolaitans are a case in point. We cannot be certain who they were, other than we know they were an unscriptural sect and the Ephesians resisted them. Though not accepted by all commentators, early church history identifies the Nicolaitans with Nicolaus of Antioch (Acts 6:5) (Irenaeus, Tertullian, Hippolytus, Dorotheus of Tyre, Jerome, Augustine, Eusebius and others). All of these men saw the Nicolaitans as “a sect of licentious antinomian Gnostics who lapsed into their antinomian license because of an overstrained asceticism.” (Thomas, p. 148) Hippolytus recorded that Nicolaus was a forerunner of Hymenaeus and Philetus who are rebuked in 2 Timothy 2:17. Eusebius (the church historian) records that the Nicolaitans died out shortly after this letter was delivered.

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.”

Jesus ends the letter by saying listen and do it. Note that the “churches” are to listen, indicating that although each of seven church is specifically addressed, the messages are intended to be studied by and have application to other churches. He closes with a reminder (or “P.S.”) that the overcomer (or victor) will enjoy the fruit of the tree of life. Note in 1 John 5:4-5 that the term “overcomer” refers to all Christians. Overcomer comes from the Greek word *nikao*, meaning to conquer or have victory over (Nike shoes takes their name from this word; it does not mean “just do it”). Jesus is not saying that people must work to earn the right to eat from the tree of life. Instead, he is giving assurance of salvation to the “overcomers,” those who have overcome by faith. The tree of life alludes back to the Garden of Eden (recall our introduction to the garden theme in Lesson 1) and points forward to the new Garden. (Revelation 22:2, 14) Satan brought sin into the Garden of Eden, but Jesus overcame Satan, and those who identify with Jesus by faith are likewise victors who will enjoy the new Garden.

Discussion questions

- i. For us as Berean Baptist Church, what are the implications of Jesus' threat to come to the church at Ephesus and remove its candlestick?
 - ii. If a church's candlestick were removed, in what ways would it look different than before?
 - iii. What are the two qualities Jesus wants to see in the church at Ephesus (one quality is already present, one is lacking)?
 - iv. If you were to give a description title for the church at Ephesus, what would it be? The church of _____.
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SMYRNA

Cultural and historical background

- i. Smyrna means "bitter"
- ii. Began as a Greek colony before 1000 B.C.
- iii. Destroyed in 627 B.C. by Alyattes, the king of Lydia
- iv. Re-established by Lysimachus and Antigonos, two of Alexander the Great's successors in 290 B.C.
- v. New city was placed on flat land about 2 miles from the old location (on a hilltop)
- vi. Was a port city with a large harbor and a smaller, inner port with a narrow entrance
- vii. Close Roman ally, having entered into an alliance with the Romans against the Mithradites, Carthage, and the Seleucid kingdom
- viii. Temple honoring Rome was built in 195 B.C.
- ix. In 26 B.C., Rome picked Smyrna for the location of a new temple to be dedicated to Tiberius
- x. City known for its enthusiastic emperor worship
 - a. emperor worship became compulsory on all Roman citizens under Domitian's rule (A.D. 81-96), and failure to comply meant death
 - b. a citizen received a certificate after he fulfilled his annual duty by burning incense on Caesar's altar
 - c. to be without the certificate was to risk the death penalty
 - d. Polycarp, one of John's pupils, was burnt at the stake at the age of 86 as the "twelfth martyr in Smyrna"
- xi. City had temples to Apollo, Asklepios, and Aphrodite
- xii. Protecting deities of the city was an adaptation of Cybele, known as the "Sybeline Mother"; the Greeks identified her with Nemesis, the Greek goddess of retributive justice
- xiii. Jewish population joined with the Romans in persecuting Christians
- xiv. A noted center of science and medicine
- xv. Destroyed by an earthquake in A.D. 177, but later rebuilt
- xvi. City continues today, but is named Izmir

Notes on Revelation 2:8-11

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;”

As with the letter to the church at Ephesus, Jesus introduces himself as the author using a description that alludes back to chapter one. Jesus emphasizes his sovereignty and resurrection. These things about Jesus give assurance and comfort to the heavily persecuted Christians at Smyrna. No matter what they experience at the hands of the persecutors, they can have peace knowing that, at the end of the day, it is Jesus Christ who is the first and the last, who died for their sins and rose again, and thus they are assured of their eternal life and future resurrection.

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.”

Jesus is intimately familiar with their works done for God, their suffering at the hands of persecutors, and their poverty (which may be connected with the persecution). Jesus also knows about their Jewish persecutors, who are not doing the will of God, but Satan, and whose very words are blasphemous. Notwithstanding what the members of the church at Smyrna could see, Jesus assures them that they are rich. This points ahead to their inheritance in Christ. We are not told what the inheritance is, but as the book unfolds, we will see that Jesus Christ will inherit all creation. Faithful Christians, like those at Smyrna, will be joint-heirs with Christ (Romans 8:17). Note that the Jews are a “synagogue of Satan.” They are under the influence of Satan and do his will. Whatever they might look like to the world around them, Jesus assesses them as a “synagogue of Satan.” When the Scripture says that Satan can make himself an angel of light, this has to do with his working in and through individuals who themselves have a good disguise. (2 Corinthians 11:14)

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.”

Jesus tells them not to fear. This is not a detached theological statement, for Jesus is well aware of precisely what they have and will endure. He tells them that they will go to prison and have tribulation for ten days. His statement, “be faithful unto death” suggests that some of them may be martyred; the sense is “even unto death,” and thus it does not mean necessarily that any (or all) will die, but that certainly seems like a possibility. They are told to be faithful, being assured they will receive a crown of life. The crown is the Greek word *stephanos*, the crown worn by the victor at the athletic games, an image familiar to these believers. The Greek construction here can be understood as “the crown which is life.” (Thomas, p. 173). There is a tendency to read too much into this statement. Jesus does not say, if you have faith unto death you will get a crown of life. Instead, after praising these people for their faithful endurance, he tells them to persevere even unto death, knowing that while their persecutors might deliver them death, he (Jesus) assures them a crown of life.

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.”

The letter ends the same way as the letter to the Ephesians, with Jesus in effect saying, listen and do it. And note that the “churches” are to listen, indicating that although each of seven church is specifically addressed, the messages are intended to be studied by and

have application to other churches. He closes with a reminder that the overcome (or victor) will not suffer the second death. The “second death” will come up again later in the book (Revelation 20:6, 14; 21:8). It is the eternal separation from God experienced by all unsaved persons who spend eternity in the lake of fire. Jesus is not telling those at Smyrna to overcome (i.e., do some work) in order to be saved. Instead, he is again (as in verse 10) assuring them of their salvation to comfort them in their time of trial. Note in 1 John 5:4-5 that the term “overcomer” refers to all Christians.

Discussion questions

- i. Was there a rebuke of the church at Smyrna?
 - ii. How does Satan work against a church?
 - iii. If you were to give a description title for the church at Smyrna, what would it be? The church of _____.
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PERGAMUM

Cultural and historical background

- i. City’s history goes back to the fifth century B.C.
- ii. Became a Roman city in 133 B.C.
- iii. Designated as the capital of the Roman province of Asia and remained so for two and a half centuries
- iv. Wealthy city that built many temples
- v. The earliest site of the city was on a 1,000 foot high hill, which was covered with temples and altars
- vi. Primary deities who had temples were Zeus (savior-god), Athena (goddess of victory), Dionysos (god of the royal family, also had the name “Bull”), and Asklepios (god of healing; was worshiped by feeding a live serpent in the temple, and sick remained in a dark room overnight with non-poisonous snakes on the belief that if a snake touched them it was the god healing them)
- vii. Intense emperor worship, which threatened safety of Christians
- viii. First city in Asia with a temple devoted to emperor worship, which was built in 29 B.C. in honor of Emperor Augustus and the “goddess” Roma
- ix. Birthplace of Galen, a famous physician
- x. Was home to a famous and large library; it eventually grew to 200,000 volumes, which Cleopatra took to Alexandria, where they remained until destroyed in A.D. 642
- xi. City continues today, but is named Bergama

Notes on Revelation 2:12-17

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

Jesus again describes himself with an allusion to chapter one. He has the two-edged sword, which indicates his preparedness to come in judgment to the church at Pergamos.

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.”

As with Ephesus and Smyrna, Jesus knows right where they are at, not only physically (the seat of Satan), but in terms of their walk as a church. They have held fast to the faith, even in light of persecution and the martyrdom of Antipas. The persecution seems to have to do with the prominent emperor worship in this town, which would make it very difficult to be a faithful Christian. Antipas was killed precisely because he was a faithful witness. The reference to “Satan’s seat” probably has in mind the heavy Roman influence in town and the emperor worship required. Satan works through people, and in this case, it is the Roman Empire generally, and many of the people in Pergamos specifically.

2:14 “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.”

Despite their past perseverance against the emperor worship, they have permitted the teaching of Balaam in their church. The reference to Balaam is a reference to the prophet for hire that worked for Balak in the Book of Numbers. Because God would not permit this prophet to curse Israel, the prophet told Balak (king of Moab) that he should send over Moabite women to lead Israel’s young men astray, both sexually and religiously. (Numbers 22-24, 25:1-3, 31:7-16) Thus, the church at Pergamos is allowing false teaching that involves idolatry and sexual immorality related to the idolatrous religious practices.

2:15 “So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate.”

They also allow in their church Nicolaitans (see 2:6 notes). This church will no longer take a doctrinal stand. They allow it all to come in.

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

Jesus tells them to repent, which in context means that certain persons teaching bad doctrine (and practice) must be expelled from the church. If that is not done, Jesus will do it himself.

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*.”

Again Jesus ends by saying, understand what you have heard and act on it. And note that the “churches” are to listen, indicating that although each of the seven churches are specifically addressed, the messages are intended to be studied by and have application to other churches. Those who overcome (i.e., are saved) will partake of the hidden manna. Of course, manna refers to that food God gave Israel in the wilderness to sustain them (see Numbers 11), but it was only a picture of the true manna or bread, namely Jesus (John 6:29-35). Jesus ended the first two letters with express statements of the salvation of those in the churches that are overcomers, that is, that came to him by faith for the forgiveness of sins. These overcomers will also get a white stone with a name written on it that no one knows except Jesus and the recipient. There is much debate about the reference to the white stone; white stones were given to victors of athletic contests and also used by juries to indicate acquittal. Whatever the reference, the important point is the

name on it. Married couples sometimes use pet names for one another, personal names that indicate a level of intimacy and these names are kept solely within the marriage. In that way, each believer will have a name that only Jesus and that believer knows, indicating the level of intimacy of the relationship to our Lord we will have.

Discussion questions

- i. What do we learn about church discipline from the letter to the church at Pergamos?
 - ii. What will happen to a church that refuses to do church discipline when gross sin or doctrinal error is introduced into the church?
 - iii. In thinking about the white rock of verse 17, can you think of examples from the Bible of persons' names being changed to indicate a change of relationship?
 - iv. If you were to give a description title for the church at Pergamos, what would it be? The church of _____.
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THYATIRA

Cultural and historical background

- i. Founded by Seleucus I, Alexander the Great's general
- ii. Control of the city assumed by Rome in 190 B.C., making it part of the Roman province of Asia
- iii. Important trade center, with a major road running from Pergamum, through Thyatira, then to Sardis, through Philadelphia, and to Laodicea
- iv. Destroyed and rebuilt numerous times since the first century due to war (it was an outpost city)
- v. Areas of commerce included clothing (recall Lydia, Acts 16:14), dyers, leather products, potters, slave dealers, and bronze smiths
- vi. Population was predominantly Gentile
- vii. Chief deity was Apollo, though each trade guild had its own "god" and required festivals that included practice of gross immorality
- viii. Temples to Apollo, Artemis, and Tyrimnaios
- ix. That church probably died out in the second century

Notes on Revelation 2:18-29

2:18 "And unto the angel of the church in Thyatira write; These things saith the Son of God, who hath his eyes like unto a flame of fire, and his feet are like fine brass;"

Jesus again introduces himself with reference to chapter one. Here, the reference gives indication of strength and judgment, which is appropriate to the rest of the message delivered to Thyatira.

2:19 "I know thy works, and charity, and service, and faith, and thy patience, and thy works; and the last to be more than the first."

Jesus is intimately familiar with their faith and works, which are growing. (1 John 4)

2:20 “Notwithstanding I have a few things against thee, because thou sufferest that woman Jezebel, which calleth herself a prophetess, to teach and to seduce my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed unto idols.”

“Jezebel” is a reference to King Ahab’s wife. (1 Kings 18 ff.) She was wicked to the core, completely ungodly, she killed God’s prophets and opposed Elijah, she introduced pagan idolatry, she would stop at nothing (e.g., the murder of Naboth to get his vineyard for Ahab) to get what she wanted, and she completely manipulated and domineered Ahab. The false teacher in the church is not literally named “Jezebel,” but she is like Jezebel. She claims to be a prophetess, but is really just leading the people into sexual sin and idolatry. The church is at fault for allowing her to continue. This is a church discipline issue. Rather than the pastor leading the flock, there is a sub-flock led by a woman that is being allowed to continue in the church.

2:21 “And I gave her space to repent of her fornication; and she repented not.”

Jesus gave the “Jezebel” opportunity to repent, but she refused. The Jezebel of the OT died violently and her body was eaten by dogs. The Jezebel at Thyatira will likewise be judged. (Hosea 1:2)

2:22 “Behold, I will cast her into a bed, and them that commit adultery with her into great tribulation, except they repent of their deeds.”

Throughout the Bible, the image of a prostitute or harlot is used for people or nations that are spiritually apostate. As the harlot does her business from a bed, this harlot will die there, and her followers (children) will undergo great tribulation. The tribulation is designed to cause repentance, and those that repent will be delivered.

2:23 “And I will kill her children with death; and all the churches shall know that I am he which searcheth the reins and hearts: and I will give unto every one of you according to your works.”

Jesus will kill Jezebel’s children, that is, those believers that have taken to her teaching. Jesus’ call for Jezebel to repent should be understood as a call for all those who follow her teachings to repent, consistent with the last verse. Likewise, I believe the judgment is to come upon her and her followers (that do not repent). The judgment, of course, is death. (cf. Acts 5:1-11; 1 Corinthians 11:30)

2:24 “But unto you I say, and unto the rest in Thyatira, as many as have not this doctrine, and which have not known the depths of Satan, as they speak; I will put upon you none other burden.”

This verse tells us that Jezebel’s doctrine is the “depths of Satan.” All false religion is of Satan. Those who have not followed her teaching will not be judged.

2:25 “But that which ye have *already* hold fast till I come.”

Jesus reminds them to hold fast till he comes. Our walking in a way that is obedient and brings honor and glory to God is always to be done in view of the imminent return of our Lord.

2:26 “And he that overcometh, and keepeth my works unto the end, to him will I give power over the nations:”

Those who are overcomers *and* do Jesus' works consistently (to the end) shall be given power over the nations. As we discussed in Lesson One, Jesus is the heir of all creation, and Christians are joint-heirs with him. This verse gives a good indication of what we may inherit. We will see, as the book unfolds, that Jesus will rule over all creation. The point here is that His rule is shared and delegated to certain Christians.

2:27 “And he shall rule them with a rod of iron; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers: even as I received of my Father.”

Jesus will rule over the nations with a rod of iron (see Psalm 2:9), an authority he received from God the Father (Psalm 2, 110). Because he is the ruler over all the nations, he can delegate authority to certain Christians (this is part of their inheritance received at the Bema), who in turn will also rule with a rod of iron. The rod of iron indicates a rule of absolute righteousness, contrary to all the governments of the world today. Those in opposition to Jesus will be utterly destroyed.

2:28 “And I will give him the morning star.”

After Jesus' victory, those on his side will also receive the “morning star.” This is likely a reference to righteousness (see, e.g., Daniel 12:3, Matthew 13:43). This promise, then, reinforces the first (ruling with Jesus with a rod of iron).

2:29 “He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.”

Again, the message is to be heard and responded to by all of the churches.

Discussion questions

- i. What is part of the inheritance of the saints?
- ii. If Christians are to rule and reign with Jesus Christ, when will it occur (we will get to this topic later in our study) and over who will they reign?
- iii. What does this letter say about church discipline?
- iv. Does Jesus still do church discipline today?
- v. If you were to give a description title for the church at Thyatira, what would it be? The church of _____.

COURSE BIBLIOGRAPHY

Henry M. Morris, *The Revelation Record*, Tyndale House Publishers (1983)

RECOMMENDATION

It is highly recommended that each person taking this course read chapter 2 for this lesson and chapter 3 for next week in Henry M. Morris' commentary.