

3. Warnings against Immorality and False Teaching at Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, and Thyatira: Revelation 2

The seven churches receive individual messages via their angels (messengers) in chapters 2 and 3. Just as the seven spirits (or sevenfold spirit) represent the full limit of the Holy Spirit of God, so the seven churches represent the nature of all churches for all time. This is the measure of the Holy Spirit given to Jesus, the Christ in John 3:33-34, "33 The man who has accepted it has certified that God is truthful. 34 For the one whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God gives the Spirit without limit." SYNECDOCHE is the figure of speech used here:

syn'ec'do'che: a figure of speech by which a part is put for the whole (as fifty sail for fifty ships), the whole for a part (as society for high society), the species for the genus (as cutthroat for assassin), the genus for the species (as a creature for a man), or the name of the material for the thing made (as boards for stage). Merriam Webster Online Dictionary. 2005.

By the very nature of the figure, some churches may be composites of some or all the churches in both their strengths and/or their weaknesses. The meaning for us is clear: we must take to heart the commands of the Lord to these churches as they apply to our congregation.

To the Church in Ephesus: a Loveless Church (Revelation 2:1-7)

2:1 "To the angel of the church in Ephesus write:

These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands: 2 I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. 3 You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.

4 Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. 5 Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. 6 But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

7 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.

The first letter is to the messenger of the church of Ephesus. The Lord identifies himself as the speaker by selecting one of the identifying phrases used in the vivid description of him in chapter 1:12-15. For the church of Ephesus, he uses, "These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands." He begins, "I know your deeds." Some of the deeds are good:

- Your hard work
- Your perseverance
- Your intolerance of wicked men
- Your testing of false apostles
- Your perseverance and endurance of hardships for my name
- Your not growing weary

First blush provokes, "What a church." How can this not be a sound congregation? Yet, they had forsaken their first love ascribed to them by the Lord himself:

"42 Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now am here. I have not come on my own; but he sent me." John 8:42.

"15 "If you love me, you will obey what I command." John 14:15.

"23 Jesus replied, "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him." John 14:23.

John explains how we must live in love in 1 John 4:16-17: "God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God lives in him. 17 In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the Day of Judgment." First love is the love of espousal. The church as the bride of Christ extends throughout the Revelation:

23 The light of a lamp will never shine in you again. The voice of bridegroom and bride will never be heard in you again. Your merchants were the world's great men. By your magic spell all the nations were led astray. Revelation 18:23.

7 Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. Revelation 19:7.

2 I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. Revelation 21:2.

9 One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb." Revelation 21:9.

17 The Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let him who hears say, "Come!" Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life. Revelation 22:17.

The Lord gives them a choice. Repent and do the things that they did from the beginning or he will remove their lampstand from its place. In their favor was their hate of the practices of the Nicolaitans.

NICOLAITANS: (nik-o-la'-i-tanz) Nikolaitai): A sect or party of evil influence in early Christianity, especially in the 7 churches of Asia.

1. The Sect: Their doctrine was similar to that of Balaam, "who taught Balak to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit fornication" (Rev 2:14-15). Their practices were strongly condemned [the Lord], who praised the church in Ephesus for "hating their works" (Rev 2:6), and blamed the church in Pergamum for accepting in some measure their teaching (Rev 2:15). . . . Reference is probably made to their influence in the church at Thyatira also, where their leader was "the woman Jezebel, who calleth herself a prophetess" (Rev 2:20; compare verse 14). No further direct information regarding them is given in Scripture.

3. Nicolaitan Controversy: The problem underlying the Nicolaitan controversy . . . concerned the whole relation of Christianity to paganism and its usages. The Nicolaitans disobeyed the command issued to the Gentile churches, by the apostolic council held at Jerusalem in 49 AD - 50 AD, that they should refrain from the eating of "things sacrificed to idols" (Acts 15:29). Such a restriction . . . was yet necessary to prevent a return to a pagan laxity of morals. To this danger the Nicolaitans were themselves a glaring witness, and therefore John was justified in condemning them. In writing to the Corinthians, Paul gives warning against the same evil practices, basing his arguments on consideration for the weaker brethren (compare 1 Cor 8). *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* from Simcox, "Revelation" in the Cambridge Bible; H.

Cowan in Hastings, Dictionary of the Bible (five volumes), article "Nicolaitans"; H.B. Swete, The Apocalypse of St. John, lxx ff, 27, 28, 37. (from International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia, Electronic Database Copyright ©1996 by BibleSoft).

In verse seven, the spirit becomes the spokesperson, where before the speaker was clearly the Lord. The unity of the godhead is evident: John had written in John 1:1-2, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was with God in the beginning. Paul added in Eph 6:17, "Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God."

The ones who overcome receive the right to eat from the tree of life which God placed in the middle of the garden in Genesis 2:9, and guarded from man in Genesis 3:22-24. In Revelation the tree of life becomes central to the Lord's promise to the saved:

2 down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Revelation 22:2.

14 "Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city. Revelation 22:14.

19 And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book. Revelation 22:19.

The Bible uses the word *paradise* three times. Jesus answered the thief on the cross in Luke 23:43, "43 Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise." Paul said, "4 was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell. [Described by Paul as being in the third heaven]. Hebrews 4:14 similarly describes the ascended savior: "14 Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens." Corinthians 12:4.

In Revelation 2:7, the Lord said, "7 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God. Paradise is a word of Persian origin and means garden. Paradise is the antitype to the Garden of Eden:

8 Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. 9 And the LORD God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." Gen 2:8-9.

To the Church in Smyrna: a Persecuted Church (Revelation 2:8-11)

8 "To the angel of the church in Smyrna write:

These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. 9 I know your afflictions and your poverty – yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. 10 Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.

11 *He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.*

The Lord describes himself as the first and the last, who died and came to life again. The main characteristic of this church was their persecution from both afflictions and poverty. Yet they were rich. The reference was to spiritual riches. In chapter 3:17, the church at Laodicea was poor and naked—just the opposite. Their persecution came from “those who say they are Jews and are not.” They were of the synagogue of Satan. Synagogue is an assembly. The phrase repeats in chapter 3:9 to the church in Philadelphia. Satan is a word found most often in Job of the Old Testament and throughout the books of the New Testament. The meaning of the word Satan is very clear in the Revelation:

9 The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him. Rev 12:9.

2 He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. Rev 20:2-3.

Satan, devil, dragon, and serpent all refer to the same evil being. In the face of the devil, suffering, and imprisonment, they are not to be afraid but suffer even unto death. The ten days indicates a limited time for the persecution. Their reward is the crown of life. James 1:12 describes this blessing: “12 Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.” Paul looked forward to the same crown in 2 Timothy 4:8: “8 Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing. The crown can be lost as in Revelation 3:11: “11 I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown.”

Finally, he who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death:

11 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death. Revelation 2:11.

6 Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years. Revelation 20:6.

14 Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. Revelation 20:14.

8 But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars—their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death." Revelation 21:8.

To the Church in Pergamum: a Compromising Church (Revelation) 2:12-17)

12 "To the angel of the church in Pergamum write:

These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. 13 I know where you live – where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city – where Satan lives.

14 Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality. 15 Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. 16 Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.

17 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. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it.

The Lord describes himself with the figure of “him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. An ancient writer described Pergamum as being “given to idolatry more than all Asia. The Wycliffe Bible Commentary speaks of the city:

The high hill behind it was adorned with numerous temples, among which was the great temple to Zeus, who was called Soter Theos, the Saviour God. Pergamum was the first city in Asia to erect a temple to Augustus. It was famous for its medical schools; and Asclepius, god of health, symbolized by a serpent, was worshiped there. Ramsay says, "Beyond all cities in Asia Minor, it gives the traveler the impression of being the home of authority. How appropriate, then, that here, as we are told, was Satan's throne. (from, Electronic Database. Copyright (c) 1962 by Moody Press).

Pergamum had good things to their account:

- You remain true to my name.
- You did not renounce your faith in me.

They were faithful in spite of persecution that led to the death of the faithful servant Antipas. The city where Satan lives and where Satan has his throne emphasizes the total desecration of the people. Their compromising nature is apparent in the things the Lord had against them—things with which they went along:

- You have people who hold the teaching of Balaam (eating food sacrificed to idols and committing immorality. Numbers 23; 2 Peter 2:15; Jude 17).
- You have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.
- Repent or I will come with the sword of my mouth (the word of God as in Hebrews 4:12 and Revelation 1:16).

The Lord promises a reward for overcoming: “I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it.” The Lord made the hidden manna figure very clear in John 6:31-35:

31 Our forefathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is written: 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'"

32 Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. 33 For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."

34 "Sir," they said, "from now on give us this bread."

35 Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty."

Isaiah prophesied about a new name: “2 The nations will see your righteousness, and all kings your glory; you will be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will bestow.” Isaiah 62:2. In Revelation 3:12, the Lord promises the church of Philadelphia: “I will also write on him my new name.” Was the new name *Christian* (slave or servant of Christ)? The New Testament uses the word only three times in -- Acts 11:26, Acts 26:28, and 1 Peter 4:16 (see also Phil. 1:1). By now, *Christian* has lost its specific meaning and finds only general use; i.e., a *Christian* nation. Religious individuals go by denominational names and not the general name *Christian*. Receiving the name,

Christian, means that we are uncompromising slaves of Christ. Only members of the Lord's church so faithfully go by this name, Christian. The idea that it was given as a derogatory name is inconsistent with the facts, since neither Jews nor Gentiles would so elevate Jesus as the Christ.

To the Church in Thyatira: a Corrupt Church (Revelation 2:18-29)

18 "To the angel of the church in Thyatira write:

These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze. 19 I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first.

20 Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. 21 I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling. 22 So I will cast her on a bed of suffering, and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely, unless they repent of her ways. 23 I will strike her children dead. Then all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds. 24 Now I say to the rest of you in Thyatira, to you who do not hold to her teaching and have not learned Satan's so-called deep secrets (I will not impose any other burden on you): 25 Only hold on to what you have until I come.

26 To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations –

27 He will rule them with an iron scepter;

he will dash them to pieces like pottery' -

just as I have received authority from my Father. 28 I will also give him the morning star. 29 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

The Lord addresses the church in Thyatira with words of the Son of God whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze. As in the previous letters, this letter begins with the strengths of the church, recognizing love, faith, service, and perseverance. They are doing more than they did at first.

However, they tolerate Jezebel, who like her Old Testament namesake misled the church into sexual immorality and idolatry:

JEZEBEL: In Rev 2:20, we read of Jezebel, "the woman Jezebel, who calleth herself a prophetess"; . . . as Moffat (Expositor's Greek Testament) aptly renders, "that Jezebel of a woman alleging herself a prophetess." Some members of the church at Thyatira "under the sway of an influential woman refused to separate from the local guilds where moral interests, though not ostensibly defied, were often seriously compromised. Her lax principles or tendencies made for a connection with foreign and compromising associations which evidently exerted a dangerous influence upon some weaker Christians in the city." (from International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia, Electronic Database Copyright (c)1996 by Biblesoft)

"That woman Jezebel" might be translated "that Jezebel like woman," creating a figurative connection to the Old Testament Jezebel (1 Kings 16-21). Jezebel of the Old Testament killed God's prophets and led the people into idolatry and immorality. Having given her time to repent, the Lord promises:

- He will cast her on "a bed of intense suffering."
- He will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely.

- He will strike her children dead.

The result of the Lord's actions will be a message to all the churches, illustrating that this and other lessons are to all churches. All the churches now know that the Lord will repay each according to their deeds.

There were those in Thyatira that did not hold to her teaching. Associated with her teaching are Satan's deep secrets (things). One commentator observed: "Her followers 'prided themselves upon their enlightened liberalism (verse 24).'" Many today still think that they can commune with false religion and immorality and maintain their spiritual connection to the Lord.

He, who overcomes and does the Lord's will, will receive his blessing of authority over nations—an authority described by David:

4 The One enthroned in heaven laughs;
the Lord scoffs at them.
5 Then he rebukes them in his anger
and terrifies them in his wrath, saying,
6 "I have installed my Kingdom Zion, my holy hill."
7 I will proclaim the decree of the LORD:
He said to me, "You are my Son;
today I have become your Father.
8 Ask of me,
and I will make the nations your inheritance,
the ends of the earth your possession.
9 You will rule them with an iron scepter;
you will dash them to pieces like pottery." Ps 2:4-9.

He will receive the morning star:

12 How you have fallen from heaven, morning star, son of the dawn!
You have been cast down to the earth, you who once laid low the nations! Isaiah 14:12
19 And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. 2 Peter 1:19
28 I will also give him the morning star. Revelation 2:28
16 "I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star." Revelation 22:16