

THE REVELATION

THE EDICTS TO THE 7 CHURCHES – Chapter 2:1-11

Context: In ancient times (and even up through the Middle Ages), communication between a king/ruler and his subjects “in faraway lands” was much more of a process. When a ruler wanted to make an official proclamation (edict), he would dictate it to a scribe. The scribe would then give it to a messenger who would take it to the destination and serve as the herald of the information to the king’s citizens. What do we see at the beginning of each of the 7 churches? “To the *messenger* of the church at _____, *write* _____.”

THE 1st of the 7 CHURCHES: Ephesus (Chapter 2:1-7)

1. **Church:** To a group of believers, those who had qualified to be citizens
2. **City (Destination):** *Ephesus* was a major seaport and the capital of the Roman province of Asia. Paul was its evangelist, and he was there for at least 3 years. Both Timothy and the Apostle John had worked with the church there. Ephesus was the largest city in Asia Minor, and something like New York City is in the United States in terms of influence... The letter of 1 Corinthians was written by Paul from Ephesus, and Ephesus not only received the letter of Revelation, but Ephesians and 1st and 2nd Timothy were sent to the church there as well.
3. **Critic/Caesar/Christ (Author’s (Jesus’) Self-Description):** “*These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands:*” Here Jesus points not only to His authority over the churches and their leaders, but how highly He regards them. He was right there in their midst, and their leaders were in His right hand, a sign of honor and intimacy (think of the name *Benjamin*, which means “son of my right hand”).
4. **Commendation:** “*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.*” What you’ll notice here is that Jesus commends the Ephesian believers for their *actions* and the firmness of their *beliefs*. When Revelation was written, the church would have been around for about forty years. Jesus points to their consistent perseverance in doing good (and “abhorring evil”), as well as the fact that they had no tolerance for false teachers. Apparently, people were coming to Ephesus and claiming to have apostolic authority, which even the early apostolic fathers limited to the apostles mentioned in the book of Acts. The believers in Ephesus were careful to compare those false apostles’ teaching to the “doctrine of the Apostles,” and so were firm in their beliefs.
5. **Criticism (Rebuke):** “*Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love.*” While the Ephesian church was faithful in their *actions* (works) and firm in their *beliefs* (doctrine), Jesus points them to their weakness in their relationship with Him: their *emotions*. In using the expression “first love,” Jesus gives us a picture of marriage as if to say, “For you, the honeymoon is over.” Jesus’ chastisement is out of His desire to have His love returned! He wants His Bride, the church, to live in a relationship of love with Him. The Ephesian church had fallen into the rut of tradition, both in their actions and beliefs,

and had lost the original motivation that is naturally true when a couple is still in their “honeymoon stage”: love!

But there is something more here, something deeper... think for a moment about who is writing Revelation. John refers to himself in the Gospel of John as “the disciple who Jesus loved.” If you read the letter of 1st John, the theme of LOVE is found in every chapter, and it’s all about our relationship with Jesus! The Ephesian church was John’s home church. Jesus is saying through the Apostle John, “I want your love!” Who better to know what that looked like than the Apostle?!

- 6. Correction (Exhortation):** *“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.”* Jesus gives the Ephesians a 3-step remedy for their issue. First, he asks them to remember their honeymoon...a lot of husbands (including me) would do well to listen to His words here! Then he tells them to repent. “Repent” means “to change your thinking,” changing the way you think about something. Jesus is telling them (and us) that if we remember what the honeymoon was like, we need to change the way we think about our relationship with Him, because it isn’t just about doing right and believing the right things; *it’s about a living relationship with Jesus!* If our thinking is straight, it will bring us back to that honeymoon, so to speak, where we will “do the first works”.

Jesus’ warning is sometimes debated, as though he is saying that believers might lose their salvation (“remove your lampstand”). Remember, however, that the symbol of the lampstand represents a local church as a whole, as a *body* of believers. The idea is that the “light will go out,” that the church would die as a result of failure to listen to Jesus’ instruction. When churches today descend into tradition and/or dogmatism, it’s easy to see why they lose their “life” and eventually fade out... The Ephesian believers, however, seem to have listened to Jesus, because their church didn’t fade out until the 11th century!

Jesus’ final word of encouragement is that the Ephesian believers hated “the deeds of the Nicolaitans.” While not much is known for certain about this sect, it is clear from Revelation that this group taught their followers to eat food dedicated to idols, and also that there was no problem with immorality. Most writers see this group as an early group of Gnostics who tied pagan ideas together with Christianity.

- 7. Citizen Promise/Close:** *“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.”* As in each of the letters, this is a promise of our King to His citizens, and we see it fulfilled in chapter 22, verse 2. This promise, like the others, points two directions: back to humanity’s fall and forward to our final redemption when things will be as God originally meant them to be. The tree of life points to God’s original design, where He is our Provider and Protector, and we are in intimate fellowship with our Creator. Knowing our future because of Christ’s love for us and His sacrifice for us should serve as motivation to love Him back!

THE 2nd of the 7 CHURCHES: Smyrna (Chapter 2:8-11)

1. **Church:** To a group of believers
2. **City (Destination):** *Smyrna* was also a seaport, and stood about 40 miles north of Ephesus. At the time Revelation was written, it was a large, wealthy city of about 100,000. It is now the city of Izmir on the Aegean Sea. As you'll see below, the name of the city of the city is significant. It means "bitter," and translates the Hebrew word for the perfume *Myrrh*. *Myrrh* was typically used in the embalming of dead bodies.
3. **Critic/Caesar/Christ (Author's (Jesus') Self-Description):** *"These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life:"* Here Jesus points not only His deity (and sovereignty), but also to His death, burial and resurrection. The church in Smyrna would have fully appreciated this, because many were dying for their faith, and Jesus' words would have given them hope in *their* future resurrection.
4. **Commendation:** *"I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich); and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan."* While living in a very wealthy city, it was also a city which required worship of the emperor and/or Roman gods. Financial success would have required involvement in the worship of false gods for the believers in Smyrna. In their pursuit of Christ, the church there was cut off from their incomes, thrown out of the Jewish synagogues (where they had been protected) and persecuted by both the people of the city and the Jews! The early church father Polycarp was burned at the stake in Smyrna in 168 A.D. Jesus tells them that they are to be commended for their faithfulness to Him in spite of the severe persecution they faced.
5. **Criticism (Rebuke):** The church in Smyrna is one of two in the 7 letters that receives NO CRITICISM. Enough said!
6. **Correction (Exhortation):** *"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 until death, and I will give you the crown of life."* Jesus does not promise the believers in Smyrna "health and wealth," contrary to much teaching today. These believers, while firm in their faith, were paying the price for their faith with their jobs and often their lives. Jesus doesn't promise to deliver them (or put a Mercedes in their driveway). Instead, he encourages them (as He did many times in the Gospels): "Do not fear." He lets them know that He is aware of what is happening, and that it will continue to happen in their world.

The expression "you will have tribulation ten days" is not completely clear, but most see it as an allusion to Old Testament passages which talk about a "short but fixed" period of time (i.e. Daniel 1:12). The idea here is that the persecution would have an end and would not last forever. His final encouragement is to promise that those who were faithful until death would obtain "the crown of life." This crown, also mentioned in the letter of James (chapter 1), is reserved as a *reward* for those who persevere in the face of trial and temptation.
7. **Citizen Promise/Close:** *"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death."* As in each of the letters, this is a promise of our King to His citizens, and we see it fulfilled at the end of Revelation. This promise would have spoken VOLUMES to the believers in Smyrna, many of whom were becoming familiar (both through seeing others die and being martyred

themselves) with the “first death,” which is *physical death*. Not only that, the believers in Smyrna would have seen the suffering and pain (hurt) inflicted by their enemies while killing their brothers and sisters.

The “second death,” as explained in Revelation 20, is the *spiritual death* of eternal separation from God in hell. *All believers will miss out on that (thank You Jesus!)*. This promise, like the others, points two directions: back to humanity’s fall (when Adam died spiritually immediately and physically later) and forward to our final redemption when we experience eternal life for the rest of eternity!

Many theologians argue that being an “overcomer” is based on our performance instead of Christ’s work on the cross and His resurrection. They base that on their theology, not the context of these 7 letters in Revelation. When they do that with the church at Smyrna, they take away from the work of Christ and make salvation dependent upon works. Would the believers at Smyrna have been “encouraged” if they were told, “Keep trying harder so that you don’t suffer TWO painful deaths!”? This is hard to imagine, and doesn’t need to happen if we are simply careful to observe the CONTEXT of the letters in the book (as explained above). If the idea of an “overcomer” is used consistently by John, it must refer to ALL who are IN CHRIST. Jesus alone has overcome through His death and resurrection, and we ARE overcomers if we are IN HIM because we trusted in His sacrifice for our sins. It is our IDENTITY. “If any man is in Christ, he is a new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17).

Let me say all that more simply... Either we are “not hurt by the second death”:

- because of what we do (*our performance*), *OR*
- because of what Jesus did (*His work*).

If Revelation is seen in context, we know it all points to JESUS, Our Lamb!! This was the *perfect promise* to the believers in Smyrna: As believers, they would only die *once*. Their enemies, on the other hand, would die *twice*...