

## 2. Letters to Three Churches

Revelation 2:1-17

The Book of Revelation

YouTube Video link: <https://youtu.be/y4-zvzYCDsM>

We come now to each of the seven letters that the Lord instructed John the Apostle to write to the seven churches in the province of Asia, the location of which is now in Southwest Turkey. We will be looking at the first three messages to the churches in our study today and look at the other four in our next study. Each of us must consider how the Lord's message applies to the Body of Christ universally and to us personally as believers. It is my intent that we will come away with a renewed commitment to follow the Lord with all our heart and a fresh realization of the close fellowship the Lord wants with us and how committed He is to His Church. In these seven letters, Christ reminds us that just as the heartaches, suffering, and pain of this life are real, so are the heavenly rewards that await the believer who overcomes them.

Some scholars believe that each church represents different periods in church history, starting with the church of Ephesus representing the first epoch and the seventh church, Laodicea, being the present time before the coming of the Lord. There are problems with that interpretation, though, one being that we have no indication of the cut-off period for each period of church history. Also, if we believe that view, that makes the first six churches not applicable to us today. It is this writer's view that what John wrote down were actual situations in different churches at the time of the Revelation and that the corrections and affirmations of each church have lessons relevant to churches and believers throughout the world today: **Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this (Revelation 1:19).**

Like a performance review, all believers today are to examine themselves from the words given to the seven churches. The seven lampstands stand for the seven churches. Christians are referred to in Scripture as the light of the world (Matt. 5:14, Philippians 2:15), but one of the old Greek commentators has a penetrating word on this; he says that the churches are called, not the light itself, but the lampstand on which the Light is set. It is not the churches themselves that produce the light; the giver of light is Jesus Christ; and the churches are only vessels within which the light shines.<sup>1</sup>

### Why These Seven Churches?

At the time of John's banishment and revelation on the island of Patmos, John the Apostle had been a leader at the church in Ephesus, with some scholars suggesting that, as an Apostle, he also had some level of responsibility to the other six churches. It was the Apostle Paul who spent three years planting and growing the church at Ephesus more than forty years earlier (Acts 20:31), and as an equipper of the saints, much of his ministry was in training and sending others out from there to plant other churches in the smaller towns. Some scholars suggest that the seven churches were on a postal route and that each of the seven churches was responsible for getting the letter to other churches, such as Hierapolis and Colossae, churches not on the postal road.

---

<sup>1</sup> William Barclay. *The Daily Study Bible: The Revelation of John*. Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh, 1976. Page 53

Pergamum was the official capital of the province of Asia, but Ephesus was by far its most magnificent city, and it was called the “first and greatest metropolis of Asia.”<sup>2</sup> In Ephesus was the great temple of Artemis, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world with the image of Artemis, the many-breasted figure in black that people came from far and wide to worship. As well as being a center of worship, the temple was a center of crime and immorality due to having the right of asylum; any criminal was safe if he could reach it. Along with so many criminals, the temple also had hundreds of priestesses who were sacred prostitutes.<sup>3</sup> Paul was undoubtedly courageous to plant a church among so much evil, and it was his protégé, Timothy, who took over leadership for a time (1 Timothy 1:3). Aquila, Priscilla, and Apollos also served the church (Acts 18:19, 24, 26). Paul stayed longer in Ephesus than in any other city (Acts 20:31), and God did many wonderful miracles amid such darkness, so much so that it stirred up demonic powers to motivate Demetrius, the silversmith, to cause a riot of several thousand people (Acts 19:24-41). Whenever God moves with great grace in a city or a life, the enemy will always try to oppose the work. We should expect opposition. Now, more than thirty years after the church was planted, John the Apostle had a message to the believers in Ephesus:

### To the Church in Ephesus

<sup>1</sup>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. <sup>2</sup>I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. <sup>3</sup>You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. <sup>4</sup>Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first. <sup>5</sup>Consider how far 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. <sup>6</sup>But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. <sup>7</sup>Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God (Revelation 2:1-7).

John was told to write to seven angels, the first being the angel at Ephesus. The Lord said that He holds the seven stars in His right hand. To hold is the Greek word, *kratein*, and means a firm grasp rather than just a slight grip with the fingers. It reminds us of Jesus’ words, “I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand” (John 10:28). Even though the church is amid wolves, the Lord is well able to keep those committed to Him and not let them go.

In the ancient world, it was believed that each person had a guardian angel (Hebrews 1:14, Matthew 18:10). When Peter was released from jail by an angel, he went to a home meeting where people were praying for him. When the people were told that Peter was at the door, they said that it had to be his angel (Acts 14:12-15). Perhaps they thought that he had died and that his angel had come to let them know. The Scriptures record Michael, the archangel, being the protector of the nation of Israel (Daniel 10:13, 20-21), so if individuals and countries had angels watching over them, it is possible that each church also has angelic protection. There are two places in the

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, Page 58

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, Page 60.

Scriptures where the Greek word *angelos*, customarily translated as angels, was spoken of as human messengers (Matthew 11:7-10, Luke 9:52). It could be that the seven angels were the primary human messengers that had the responsibility for the teaching and oversight of the churches, often called the senior pastor in many larger churches today.

The Lord said that He knew their deeds, their hard work, and their perseverance. God sees all labor of love for Christ as a precious thing, and His people's devotion to the Kingdom of God is not forgotten and will be rewarded when the end of the age comes, and Jesus sits on His throne. In a day in which it is pressed upon us to be tolerant of others, in this letter, the Lord affirmed the church for not being tolerant of wickedness and for testing those who claimed that they came with the Lord's authority and finding them false leaders. How are leaders tested? We compare the things they speak to the plumb line of God's Word, as well as look for the fruit of the Spirit in their lives. Do they exhibit love, joy, peace, etc? (Galatians 5:22-24). The Lord then pointed out an area of correction to the church: they had forsaken the love they had at first (v. 4).

[If you are married or have been in a romance, what were the early expressions of love you showed to your loved one? What does the Lord command the Ephesian church to do to halt the slide of their devotion to love Him as they did at first?](#)

First, He told them to consider their lives before and to compare where they were at present (v. 5). Many of us can remember the early days of our romance with our spouses and the expressions of our love that we no longer practice. The Lord here is yearning for that pure romance of when we first fell in love with Him—the expressions of love and obedience we once had for Him. Secondly, He instructs us to repent, to change our minds, to live our lives in obedience, and to love Him. The third thing is for us to express our love to Him in ways that we did at first. He warns this church, and perhaps us, too, that if we don't turn the direction of our lives, the light that used to shine from us will be removed, and we will descend into doing things by rote and without the heart. We will be just going through the motions. The brightness of the testimony of our lamps will grow dim.

Christ then affirmed them for their hatred of the practices of the Nicolaitans, not the hatred of the people, but what they were doing. Who were the Nicolaitans? The Greek word is comprised of two words: *nico*, meaning conquest over others, and the second part, *lai*, means people. The last part, *tes*, represents the word "the." Nicolaitans are defined as those who conquer or rule over people. Even in those days and today, too, some religious leaders put themselves higher than the people they serve but let us remember Jesus' teaching that leaders are but greater servants (Matthew 20:26, Mark 9:35) and must not be put on a pedestal as super saints. Here's how Jesus put it:

<sup>8</sup>But you are not to be called 'Rabbi,' for you have one Teacher, and you are all brothers. <sup>9</sup>And do not call anyone on earth 'father,' for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. <sup>10</sup>Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one Instructor, the Messiah. <sup>11</sup>The greatest among you will be your servant (Matthew 23:8-11).

Jesus said we are brothers (v. 8), not bosses and servants, nor even fathers and children; no, we are all on the same level as equals. The greatest leaders are the greatest servants, i.e., the ones willing to do the dirty work. Let's now look at the letter to the church at Smyrna.

## To the Church in Smyrna

<sup>8</sup>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. <sup>9</sup>I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich! I know about the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. <sup>10</sup>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 life as your victor’s crown. <sup>11</sup>Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who is victorious will not be hurt at all by the second death (Revelation 2:8-11).

In the letter to the church in Smyrna, John writes that it is the Lord giving the words to write down: “These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again.” In each of the first six letters to the churches, the Lord gives us an introductory description of Himself that takes the reader back to the first chapter. The Smyrna letter’s description of Jesus is that He is the First and the Last, the One who died and came to life again (Revelation 1:17). Only the letter to the Laodicean church is without mention of a word picture of Jesus. These self-descriptions of the Lord serve to identify with each church. In this word picture, Jesus presents Himself to the church in Smyrna as the One who conquered death and the grave.

The Lord says that He knew their afflictions. The Greek word (*thlipsis*) is generally translated as *tribulation*, but here, it is translated as affliction. The word means to be crushed under a weight; such was the affliction and persecution the believers at Smyrna were enduring due to the Roman emperor Domitian’s demanding that believers, at least once a year, burn incense to Domitian and confess that Caesar was god. It is likely that because they refused to acknowledge that Domitian was divine, they endured poverty (“I know your afflictions and poverty”) because of their stand. Perhaps they were being singled out of commercial opportunities in the city because of their desire to be a separate and holy people. Jesus sees differently than this world system does. To Christ, they were rich in faith. The Jewish community had managed to get a pass on this once-a-year act of devotion to Caesar, but they stirred up the civil authorities against the Christians, believing the Christians to have departed from the Law of God. The Lord said they were the ones who had departed from God and had become a synagogue, an assembly of Satan (v. 9). The enemy was the one who was directing the persecution of believers in Christ by using the Jewish community.

The Lord warned them about a future time, ten days of persecution of believers in Smyrna, saying that some would be put into prison for a time of testing (v. 10). We should not take the mention of ten days at face value, for it was used to describe a short period of testing, but it is possible that the persecution for believers in Smyrna did last just ten days. There are some teachers today who say that believers in Christ won’t have to go through the Great Tribulation. Still, in this passage, the Lord was letting the believers know ahead of time that they would endure suffering, persecution, and testing (v. 10). In the same way, the Lord has warned us in the Scriptures about a time of persecution of God’s people before Christ’s coming (Matthew 24:9-10, Matthew 24:15-22).

Why would God allow a time of testing for believers? What does the word *testing* mean, and what are the spiritual benefits of being tested?

The English word *test* comes from the making of swords or plowshares. The test was to put the sword through the fire and harden it by hammering the metal on an anvil to strengthen it. The word came to mean a procedure for critical evaluation, a means of determining the presence, quality, or truth of something, a trial.<sup>4</sup> While we live in this world system, there will always be times of high stress or even war where a person's life is threatened, causing us to lean deeply on God and those closest to us in troubling times. This kind of stress creates deep bonding relationships in believers and churches that go through persecution and trials.

Like them, we may also endure persecution for Christ, and we are to be faithful even to death, for the Lord's promise is the crown of the victor or overcomer. The second death will not hurt those who are victorious over this world and Satan's world system. Those who the second death will hurt speak of all those who refuse God's offer of a free pardon for their sins. They will be judged at the Great White Throne judgment and cast into the Lake of Fire (Revelation 20:12-15). Believers in Christ have eternal life and will not be judged at this judgment. **Jesus said, "Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life" (John 5:24).** When John spoke of the faithful being unharmed by the second death, he meant precisely the same as Paul when he said that "nothing in life or in death can separate those who love Him from Jesus Christ. Such a (person) is safe from all that life or death can do to them (Romans 8:38-39). Let's now turn our attention to the letter to Pergamum.

### **To the Church in Pergamum**

<sup>12</sup>To the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. <sup>13</sup>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, not even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city—where Satan lives. <sup>14</sup>Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: There are some among you who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin so that they ate food sacrificed to idols and committed sexual immorality. <sup>15</sup>Likewise, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. <sup>16</sup>Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth. <sup>17</sup>Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give that person a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it (Revelation 2:12-17).

Pergamum was not on any of the great roads, as Ephesus and Smyrna were, but historically, it was the greatest city in Asia. By the time John was writing, Pergamum had been a capital city for almost 400 years. It was known as a center of culture and one of the great religious centers. When we hear Jesus address this city, we see that He has complete knowledge of all the things the church was enduring for His sake. What does it mean that Satan had his throne there? (v. 13). The city of Pergamum had a temple to Zeus along with an altar and steps thirty feet high. This altar was possibly the seat of Satan mentioned in v. 13. The altar of Zeus at Pergamum, where Satan had his throne, was excavated, and brought stone by stone to Germany in the early 1900s. It is an

---

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.wordnik.com/words/test>

interesting side thought that Adolf Hitler had his chief architect, Albert Speer, create stairs and an altar similar to the Altar of Zeus, and Hitler came down the stairs of the altar of Pergamum as a savior to Germany on to the parade grounds of Nuremberg, bewitching Germany with occult power to deceive that nation. The stairs and the altar of Pergamum are now at Berlin's Museum Island.<sup>5</sup>

There was also a temple devoted to the worship of the god *Asclepios*, the god of healing. The emblem of Asclepios was the serpent on a pole—I wonder where they got that image? In the Old Testament, when the Israelites came out of Egypt and were forty years in the desert, they encountered poisonous snakes that killed many of them. When they cried out to the Lord, He instructed them to set up a bronze snake on a pole, and whoever looked to the bronze snake was healed (Numbers 21: 9). Jesus used the picture as an example of Himself lifted on a cross for His people to be healed of the poison of sin: “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, <sup>15</sup>that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him” (John 3:14-15). Satan, “that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan” (Revelation 20:2), took this image of sin being judged and twisted the meaning for people to look to the false god Asclepios.

People came to Pergamum from all over the known world for the healing of their sicknesses. Patients would approach the healing temple *via* the Sacred Way, a path into the temple that led to an underground passage wherein there were cubicles where patients slept lying on the floor among non-venomous snakes. If the snake touched their bodies, they were said to be healed by Asclepios.<sup>6</sup> Satan, our invisible enemy, tries to mimic our God and seeks to be worshiped as God (2 Thessalonians 2:4). The most common name for this false god was *Asclepios Sôtér*, which means Asclepios, the Savior. What an abomination it is to the believer in Christ for this demon to be called savior! There is only one Savior, and His name is Jesus. Yet, all over the world, the false god Asclepios on a pole is a universal symbol for healing.<sup>7</sup>

### Why might it have been difficult to be a Christian in Pergamum?

The Lord then spoke words of correction to the church at Pergamum, saying that there were some there who held to the teaching of Balaam, who, when God would not allow Balaam to curse Israel on behalf of Balak, the ruler of the country of Moab, he taught the women of Moab how to seduce the men of Israel and influence them to worship false gods (Numbers 22-24, Numbers 31:16). The Apostle Peter wrote about the error of Balaam, saying, “They have left the straight way and wandered off to follow the way of Balaam son of Bezer, who loved the wages of wickedness” (2 Peter 2:15). When Balaam could not get paid for cursing Israel, he turned to sinful methods so that he could be paid handsomely. Balaam knew that God would discipline the Israelites if he could lure them into immoral sex and idolatry. We get on the opposite side of the Lord if leaders begin to manipulate the flock of God for higher remuneration and teach for financial reward. The Lord calls His church to repentance from such behavior.

He also rebuked the Pergamum church for their holding to the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, i.e., the practices of which were hated by the church of Ephesus. What the Ephesian believers hated (2:6) was the same thing the believers at Pergamum were led into—a compromise of their faith. We

<sup>5</sup> <https://grandmageri422.me/2018/04/11/the-seat-of-satan-moved-from-pergamum-to-berlin-germany-connect-the-dots/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://the-end-time.org/2014/04/16/how-satan-twisted-moses-brazen-serpent-into-the-rod-of-asclepius/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.theshiftextension.org/blog/the-battle-of-the-snakes>



must be aware of the dangers of the things about which we compromise. Rather than go through persecution, the believers in Pergamum compromised their faith and saved themselves from persecution by bowing to the idols. “Compromise is like dry rot in the fabric of the Christian church; sooner or later, the structure will give way” (Mary S Wood).<sup>8</sup> Perhaps the greatest sin of the greatest number of Christians is putting God second in so many details of life. We are to be separate from this world system and hold fast to the Lord Jesus under trial or test.

The fault of the Nicolaitans was that they were following a policy of compromise solely to save themselves from trouble. It is the word of the Risen Christ that He will make war with them. We must note that He did not say, “I will go to war with you;” he said, “I will go to war with *them*.” The Lord’s wrath was not directed against the whole church but against those who were seducing her. The sword of His mouth refers to the Word of God, which is sharper than any two-edged sword.

In this letter, the Risen Christ makes a three-fold promise to those who would demonstrate their genuine nature as true believers, those who overcome. They will receive divine food (hidden manna) special favor (white stone), and a new character (new name). The hidden manna could refer to Christ Himself, the spiritual nourishment of believers both now and for eternity. In John 6:48-51, Christ likened Himself to the “bread from heaven,” the manna that came down from heaven and nourished the children of Israel during their wilderness wanderings. The meaning of the reference to the “white stone” inscribed with a new name is less certain. It may symbolize a believer’s special access to God because of their new identity in Christ, perhaps alluding to the white stone that was used as a “ticket” for admission into the theatre in Pergamum.<sup>9</sup> Also, in the ancient world, black or white stones were cast to indicate a decree of guilt or innocence. Regardless of how the Christians in Pergamum understood these symbols in their own historical context, we can understand the big picture: If you remain faithful and take a stand for truth and morality, the result will be a great reward from Christ upon His return. **“Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (v. 17).**

When we consider the words of praise and warning that the Lord gives His Church, we need to remember that those the Lord loves, He admonishes, He reproves. He is zealously guarding His Church, His Bride. I urge us all to consider these warnings given lovingly to us so that we may overcome in this life. Have you left your ‘first love?’ Ask the Lord to help you to return to your first works and rekindle your relationship with Him. He desires not just our works of service but our time, our worship, and our personal devotion to Him. Where we find a lack of love, we will find that there is a lack of the presence of God.

**“Search me, O God and know my heart. Try me and know my thoughts. And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting! (Psalm 139:23-24).**

Let this be the cry of our hearts while we hold fast to our first love, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Keith Thomas

Website: [www.groupbiblestudy.com](http://www.groupbiblestudy.com)

<sup>8</sup> Compiled by John Blanchard, *Gathered Gold*, Evangelical Press, Welwyn, Herts, England. Published in 1984. Page 44.

<sup>9</sup> Charles R. Swindoll, *Swindoll’s Living Insights, Revelation*, Volume 15, Tyndale Publishers, Page 52

YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/@keiththomas7/videos>  
Email: [keiththomas@groupbiblestudy.com](mailto:keiththomas@groupbiblestudy.com)