

2. Letters to Three Churches

Revelation 2:1-17

We come now to the first three of seven letters the Lord instructed John the apostle to write to the seven churches in the province of Asia. 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 ourselves from the words given to the seven churches.

Why These Seven Churches?

At the time of his 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 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.

Pergamum was the official capital of the province of Asia, but Ephesus was by far its most magnificent city, and was called the "first and greatest metropolis of Asia."¹ In Ephesus was the great temple of Artemis, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world with the image of Artemis, the black many breasted figure 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.² Paul was undoubtedly courageous to plant a church among so much evil, and it was his protégé, Timothy, that took over leadership for a time (1 Timothy 1:3). Aquila, Priscilla and Apollos also served the church (Acts 18:19, 24, 26). 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 in 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

¹ William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible, The Revelation of John*, Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh, 1976. Page 58

² Ibid, Page 60.

¹To 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. ²I 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. ³You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. ⁴Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first. ⁵Consider 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. ⁶But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. ⁷Whoever 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 strong 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 in the midst of 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 his angel came 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 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. It could also be that the angel or messenger referred to the corporate body of the church.

The Lord said that He knew their deeds, their hard work, and their perseverance. It is a precious thing that all labor of love for Christ is seen by Him and 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 those who claim they came with the Lord's authority but when the Ephesian church put them to the test, they found them false. How are leaders tested? We 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 them; 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 three things was the Lord commanding the Ephesian church to do to halt the slide of their failure to love Him as they did at first?

First, He told them to consider their lives before and compare where they were at present (v. 5). Many of us can remember the early days of our romance with our spouses, 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 to Him. Secondly, he instructs us to repent, change our minds and live our lives in obedience and love to Christ. 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 indeed today, too, there are some religious leaders who 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 should not be put on a pedestal.

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

Jesus said we are brothers (v. 8), not bosses and servants, nor even father and children, no, we are all on the same level as equals. The greatest leaders are the greatest servants, 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

⁸To 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. ⁹I 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. ¹⁰Do 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. ¹¹Whoever 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 second letter, the Lord refers back to what we read in the first chapter, that He is the First and the Last, the One who died and came to life again (Revelation 1:17). In fact, in each of the seven letters except the last, there are names of Jesus that are also in the first chapter. The Lord says that He knew their afflictions. The Greek word is the word generally translated as *tribulation*, but here translated as affliction. The word means to be crushed under a weight; such was the affliction and persecution the believers at Ephesus were enduring due to the Roman

emperor Domitian demanding that believers at least once a year, burn incense to Domitian, and confess that Caesar was god. It is likely that because of refusing to confess Domitian as god, they were enduring poverty because of their stand. Perhaps they were being singled out of commercial opportunities in the city because of their desire to be separate and a holy people. Jesus sees differently than this world system. To Him, 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 that they were the ones who had departed from God and become a synagogue, an assembly, of Satan. The enemy was at work against the believers in Christ by using the Jewish community.

The Lord warned them against a further time of persecution of believers in Smyrna, saying that some would be put into prison for a time of testing (v. 10). Some would say that believers won't have to go through tribulation, but in this passage the Lord was letting them know ahead of time that they would endure suffering, persecution and testing (v. 10).

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

We get the English word *test* from the making of swords or plowshares; the test was to put the sword through the fire and harden it by hammering the steel 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.³ We should not take the mention of ten days at face value, for it was used to describe a short period of testing. Times of great stress or even war where a person's life is threatened cause us to lean deeply on God and those closest to us in troubling times. This kind of stress creates deep bonding relationships, and for churches who go through trials it creates deep bonds between believers. 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. Those who are victorious over this world, and Satan's world system, will not be hurt by the second death. Those who will be hurt by the second death speaks 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 at this judgment. Let's now turn our attention to the letter to Pergamum.

To the Church in Pergamum

¹²To the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. ¹³I 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. ¹⁴Nevertheless, 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. ¹⁵Likewise, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. ¹⁶Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.

³ <https://www.wordnik.com/words/test>

¹⁷Whoever 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).

Again, we hear of Jesus' complete knowledge of all the things the church was enduring for Christ. What does it mean that Satan had his throne there? (v. 13). This city had a temple to Zeus along with an altar and steps thirty foot high. This altar was possibly the seat of Satan mentioned (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 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 is now at Berlin's Museum Island.⁴

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. In the Old Testament, when the Israelites were 40 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 being lifted on a cross for us to be healed of the poison of sin (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 to be healed 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 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.⁵ 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*, 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, a universal symbol for healing is the false god Asclepios on a pole.

What two things was the Lord seeking to correct in the church of Pergamum?

The Lord then spoke some words of correction to the church, saying that there were some there who hold 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 to be paid. Balaam knew that God would discipline the Israelites if he could lure them into immoral

⁴ <https://grandmageri422.me/2018/04/11/the-seat-of-satan-moved-from-pergamum-to-berlin-germany-connect-the-dots/>

⁵ <https://the-end-time.org/2014/04/16/how-satan-twisted-moses-brzen-serpent-into-the-rod-of-asclepius/>

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 things.

He also rebuked the church at Pergamum for holding the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, the practices of which were hated by the church of Ephesus. What the Ephesian believers hated (2:6), the believers at Pergamum were led into compromising their faith. We must be aware of the dangers of the things we compromise about. The believers in Pergamum, rather than go through persecution, 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).⁶ It is perhaps the greatest sin of the greatest number of Christians that in so many details of life they put God second. We are to be separate from this world system and hold fast to the Lord Jesus under the trial or test. **“Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (v. 17).**

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⁶ Compiled by John Blanchard, *Gathered Gold*, Evangelical Press, Welwyn, Herts, England. Published 1984. Page 44.