

## Session 04 Letters to the Churches Ephesus, Smyrna, and Pergamos

Revelation 2:1-17

- **Each is from the glorified Jesus**, emphasizing one aspect of the vision in chapter 1. He has been walking among the lamp stands, and inspecting them concerning the quality of their lives and consequent witness.
- **Positive features, where present, are first identified and commended.**
- **Negative features are highlighted and rebuked.**
- **Suitable encouragement, censure, advice, or warning then follows.**
- **Each closes with a call to hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches and an appeal to each individual to hear and obey**
- **Each closes with a promise to those who overcome.**

### Remember the context:

- **Pagan society – idolatry, immoral worship practices, trade guilds**
- **Cult of Emperor worship**
- **False teachers/prophets**
- **Persecution, poverty, social exclusion**
- **Hostile Jewish non-believers**
- **The unfulfilled promises**

### 1) **Ephesus 2:1-7 A very orthodox and correct church - but fatally flawed.**

**We know most about this church**, Acts 18:18-20, 19:1-41, 20:16-38, Ephesians, 1Tim 1:3-7.

Ephesus was the premier port, a free city within the empire, and had a major stadium, theatre and marketplace. There were a number of temples, notably to Artemis, one of the Seven Wonders of the World. It was extremely large and ornate. The imperial cult was also honoured.

- **Jesus is walking among them**, inspecting their way of life.
- **There are good features** – hard work and patience in a hostile culture – **work ethic and perseverance**. They were motivated by a zeal for the Lord's name – to honour His word and ways. Many people passed through Ephesus on major roads, including itinerant preachers. They have recognized false apostles, Acts 20:29, and dealt with them – **orthodoxy**.
- **The fatal flaw** – maybe the reverse side of the coin of hard work and keeping a close eye on doctrine. They have lost their first love in the midst of all the activity and concern for correct teaching. They have not noticed the insidious process eating away at the heart. Christian life has become a grim duty, a keeping of rules, perhaps over sensitive to the possibility that someone is not quite "sound". Maybe it reminds us of the Pharisees, who were very eager to live in a righteous and orthodox way but had no heart for people who did not quite "come up to the mark".

**God spoke about the same problem in Israel**, Jer. 2:2-3. He wanted a love relationship with His people, Jer. 31:3, and that they would live as a caring and loving community.

- **The requirement – remember and repent.**

Go back to where you lost the path and refresh the relationship – with God and with His people.

Do the first works – it's not a matter of stirring emotions but of recognizing the problem, admitting that

motivation has flipped while the activity has gone on apace, and renewing relationship.

Remember Mary and Martha? Luke 10:38-42.

Begin again to prioritize people rather than programs.

- **It is serious and urgent.** The light is already failing through lack of fresh oil. The church may continue for a while and nobody notice anything wrong but it is heading for death. Jesus apparently is not interested in successful and businesslike churches without love, 1Cor. 13

- **A commendation** – maybe placed here to encourage them. They have something in common with Him.

**They hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans.** Pergamum and Thyatira were similarly affected by this type of sect. It seems to be akin to the teaching of Balaam. The main features were compromise with pagan idolatry and immorality. We will consider this in more detail when we look at the other two letters. The rigid orthodoxy and

determined activity in Ephesus had acted as a protection against this heresy but they should not think that this is enough, in itself, to save the church from extinction.

- **An appeal to individuals to listen and obey** even if the corporate body resists the message. Our primary loyalty is to Jesus, not the visible church.
- **A promise for the over comers.** The Tree of Life symbolized feeding on the life of God – very much about the relationship that sustains our life. Disobedience brought exclusion from Paradise. Obedience will bring the blessing of His presence among them, Gen. 2:9, 3:22-24, rev. 22:1-4.

## 2) **Smyrna** 2:8-11 **A poor and persecuted church, but rich in faith.**

Smyrna (modern Ismir) was a port city on a major trade route. It was described as "First of Asia in beauty and size" with a population estimated at 200,000. It had the largest public theatre in Asia and a famous thoroughfare, The Street of Gold, curved around Mt. Pagus, towering 500 feet above the harbour. It contained temples to the emperor and to Rome. The imperial cult meant that Christians were very vulnerable to persecution. Polycarp (69-156 CE) was subsequently martyred there. Jews were very hostile to Christians and joined the pagans, even gathering wood on the Sabbath for the execution pyre of Polycarp.

- **Jesus is the First and the Last, who was dead and came to life.** This is designed to encourage them - they are vulnerable and may also suffer death. He is in control and has conquered death.

- **"I know your works" - this can be negative or positive. Jesus is pleased** - an implied contrast with Ephesus; their works are motivated by love. **These believers are already under pressure, (tribulation). Their choices have resulted in material poverty but they have riches that are more valuable,** Heb. 10:32-35, 11:24-26, James 2:5. **We need to take the long view in a world where short term gains are appealing.** It defines the reality of our faith, what we really believe, Matt. 5:11-12, 6:1-6, 10:37-42, Mark 10:28-31. There is a very different situation in Laodicea, 3:17. **Many Christians are suffering in this way** - refugees, deprived of work opportunities and education, ejected from homes.

- **"I know their works" (unbelieving and hostile Jews)** - religious people who should be their supporters. **Jesus had experienced this,** Luke 4:28-29, 6:6-11, 22:1-6. Their hostility to Jesus continued, **now focused on His disciples,** Luke 21:12, Acts 5:17-18, 40-42, 6:8-15, 7:54-8:3, 9:1-5, 22:3-8, 26:9-11, 2Cor. 11:24-26. **Their hostility led them to blaspheme,** Matt. 12:24-32, Luke 22:63-65, 1Tim. 1:12-13. **and they continued to do so,** Acts 13:44-46. 18:5-7. **They are not true Jews,** Romans 2:28-29, Phil. 3:3. **These Jews are "a synagogue of Satan",** John 8:42-45, 11:47-53. When the Jews rejected Jesus and blasphemed Paul left them and went to the Gentiles. Acts 13:46, 18:6-7.

- **Advance warning - greater trouble is coming (imprisonment and death).** This is an attack by the devil himself. His purpose is to destroy them, Luke 22:31, 1Peter 5:8.

- **Encouragement - "Do not be afraid" - Jesus is in control,** John 12:31, 16:33. **The period of suffering is limited.** What the devil intends for destruction God will use for blessing - **they are being tested so that they can rise to a higher level of faith and authority,** Gen. 22:1-2, 12, 15-18, Luke 4:13-14, 22:32, James 1:2-4, 1Peter 5:6-11.

- **Exhortation - "Be faithful unto death".** This is normal Biblical faith, not some extreme, exotic, and unusual variety, Luke 21:12, 16-17, 1Peter 4:12, 5:9, Rev. 12:11. **There are many martyrs in the world of today.**

- **Promise to the over comers - "I will give you the crown of life" (victory wreath),** c.f. 2Tim. 4:6-8, Heb. 12:2-3, James 1:12, 1Peter 4:13. **"You will not be hurt by the second death"**, 20:14-15, 21:8. You will never die again.

- **Challenge - "He who has an ear let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches".**

## 3) **Pergamos** 2:12-17 **A brave but excessively tolerant church**

Pergamos (citadel) was built on a hill 1000 feet in height; the temple of Zeus projected from near the top, and the city was a centre for four different pagan cults, including Asklepios the god of healing. It was also the

official centre of the imperial cult - to Rome and to Caesar - and was the provincial capital. It was also a centre of Greek civilization with a huge library.

- **Jesus has the sharp two-edged sword. The proconsul had the authority to execute offenders but ultimate power of life and death flows from the word of Jesus.**

- **Jesus began with high appreciation and commendation.**

- **He knew where these believers lived - in a very perilous situation. They lived in the same location as satan** (the accuser, 12:10) **and it was where he had his throne**, his headquarters in the eastern empire, as Rome was in the west. The dragon exercised his power through the beast (currently Rome), 13:1-7. These Christians were at the epicenter of the conflict about emperor worship (like being in Beijing during the Cultural Revolution).

- **He knew the history of persecution** and about a particularly severe period when at least one of their number had been martyred in the city.

- **He knew Antipas by name** and shared one of His own names with him **My "Faithful Witness"**, c.f. 1:5.

- **He knew their works - unflinching loyalty to His Name and steadfast witness to their faith in Him.**

- **Serious criticism.** The Ephesians had recognized the corrosive potential of the **deeds of the Nicolaitans**, v6 and hated what they saw, perhaps lacking compassion in the process, Jude v22-23.

- **In Pergamos some were attracted to the doctrine of the Nicolaitans**, presumably because it would ease the pressure and avoid social isolation, allowing them to fit in with surrounding culture. They may even have seen it as a means of evangelism - after all was not Jesus the friend of tax collectors and sinners, and criticized for it? Luke 5:27-32. Most "modern" heresies are, in fact, revivals of ancient ones, in modern garb.

This one was a recurrence of the Balaam/Balak story, Num. 25:1-13, 31:16, c.f. 2Peter 2:12-22, Jude v11. **Balaam** gave true and wonderful prophecies but his heart was corrupt. He failed to destroy Israel by direct methods and switched to subterfuge realizing that, if he could corrupt the nation from within God would act in judgement. Satan acts not only through the beast but also through the false prophet, 13:11-12, 19:20. Accommodation with society meant participation in pagan festivities and the immoral practices that formed an integral part of the proceedings. Christians in Pergamos had resisted the frontal attack but some were succumbing to this subtle teaching of accommodation "If you want to influence them you have to join the party!" Yes, but only if you have the same motivation and approach as Jesus. **Wrong doctrine leads to bad deeds, false belief to corrupt behaviour.** "Evil company corrupts good habits", 1Cor. 15:33.

- **Jesus also criticized the lack of church discipline.** It seems that this situation was tolerated by the others, c.f. 1Cor. 5:1-13.

- **Repent!** This is the command to both groups, participants and those who tolerated the situation. There is no compromise or discussion. This is the Kingdom of God, not a democracy! The command is from the One with the double edged sword.

- **Warning. "I will come to you quickly and fight against them with the sword of My mouth".** The change in pronoun may be significance - Jesus intends to cleanse this church, not destroy the light.

- **The urgent need to hear the message and act on it**, c.f. Jer. 5:20-25, 6:10, 7:12-15, 23-26.

- **Promise to the over comers.**

**The hidden manna.** This may be in contrast to the pagan temple food. Manna was a prophetic symbol of Jesus - the Bread that came down from Heaven, John 6:30-35, 46-58. His words could come as judgement - a sword - or as life, John 6:63. It all depends on our response to the word, Heb. 4:11-13.

**The white stone with a new name written that no one knows except him who receives it**, c.f. 3:12, 7:3, 19:12, 22:4. It is probably best interpreted as a token for admission to a banquet. These tokens were also given to the poor to allow a supply of food and to those who had triumphed at the games. It is also a symbol of identity and intimacy - knowledge in the Bible has to do with relationship, deep understanding between two people. Jesus gives the Manna and the Stone, both speaking of that relationship.