

Revelation 2 – Chapter Study

INTRODUCTION

When I was about 8, we lived in the City of Park Forest, IL; one of the suburbs of Chicago.

There was a Montgomery Wards not too far from our house and one day my Dad took me shopping.

It was that time of year when they put up the Christmas decorations and Wards had set up a fake living room scene.

There was a little fireplace made out of cardboard, and inside the fireplace, a spinning cylinder wrapped with aluminum foil and an orange light shining on it.

It was supposed to look like fire but it just looked like orange foil.

Anyway – I was intrigued; I'd never seen anything like that before and just stood there watching it.

There was light, but no heat.

Tonight, we read a Letter Jesus wrote to a church that had light, but no heat.

Actually, we're going to be taking a look at 4 letters Jesus dictated to the Apostle John to send to churches located in the Roman province of Asia; today we know the region as the nation of Turkey.

Jesus dictated a total of 7 letters, the last three we'll take a look at next Wednesday.

But the question is – why *these* 7 churches?

There were many other churches Jesus could have written to.

There were dozens of churches by this time around the Mediterranean, and these were certainly not the most influential.

Even in the region these letters were sent to there were other churches; so why does Jesus single them out?

To be frank – we can't say with *all certainty* because no *explicit* explanation to that question is given.

But we do have some *clues* that can guide us to an answer.

First of all, *seven* is the number of *completion or fulfillment*.

Over and over in scripture we see 7 connected to the idea of *completion*.

The earth was created in 6 days, and God rested on the 7th.

The Hebrew word for seven, (shevah) comes from the root (savah) which means *to be full*.^[1]

Revelation, as the last book of the Bible, shows the completion of creation, and so is replete with things listed in 7's.

7 Seals, 7 Trumpets, 7 Bowls

As we look at a map of where these 7 churches are located in Asia Minor, we see that they make a rough circle and are on the circuit a postal carrier would travel.

Following the idea that 7 is the number of completion, and that Jesus singled out *these specific churches*, Bible students have pondered if what we find here is God's message to the *complete church*.

And if maybe these churches, given in the order they are, don't in fact lay out the entire history of the church age.

In other words, starting with the first church, Ephesus, and ending with the last church, Laodicea, what we have is a description of what the church will be like in sequential periods of history from the time of the Apostles, right up to the Return of Christ.

What's fascinating is that as you examine the messages to the 7 churches and compare it to church history, there are indeed some eerie parallels, as we will see in a couple weeks.

CHAPTER 2

¹“To the angel of the church of Ephesus write, ‘These things says He who holds the

seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands:

Each of the 7 letters has 7 parts.

- 1) There's an opening greeting to a specific church
- 2) This is followed by a description of Christ using images drawn from the vision John had in Ch. 1. This description is linked to what He goes on to say to that particular church.
- 3) There's a commendation that begins with "I know your works."
- 4) Then there's a criticism, a rebuke for some error in their practice or theology.
- 5) Jesus then gives them a warning that comes in the form of a call to repent.
- 6) He exhorts them to hearken to the words of the Spirit.
- 7) And finally, there's a promise to those who overcome.

He begins here – **"To the angel of the church of Ephesus"**

As we've already seen, the word **"angel"** is the English translation of the Greek word *angelos*, which simply means messenger.

It's probably best to understand this person, not as a spiritual angel, but as the pastor of the church.

After all, why would Jesus dictate a literal, physical letter to a heavenly angel?

Jesus dictated this letter to John to send to the pastor who was the messenger of God's word and will to the people at Ephesus.

The Pastor is the one the postal carrier would deliver the message to and then he would read it to the church.

As the God-ordained leader of the church, the pastor was also the one responsible to initiate whatever directions were given.

The description Jesus gives of Himself here, reminds the Ephesians that He is the Head of the church.

He holds the 7 stars in His right hand and walks in the midst of the 7 golden lampstands.

In ch. 1 we saw that the lampstands represent the 7 churches while the stars represent the 7 messengers of those churches. ^[2]

When Jesus says, **"I hold the seven stars in My right hand,"** He means that He is in control; He holds the reins.

When He says, **"I walk in the midst of the lampstands,"** He means He's *active* in His church and knows what's going on.

Friends, as messed up as the Church may appear at times to be, we must never forget that it's the blood-bought body and bride of Jesus Christ!

The Church belongs to Him and answers to Him.

He loves her – and we must be ultra careful about our attitude toward her.

Men, what would you do to the guy who started criticizing your wife and called her names and said she was a horrible person?

I hope you stand up and defend her – in fact, I suspect you'd get downright hot and bothered and take some action to show your displeasure with his comments and attitude!

When we're critical and demeaning to the Body of Christ, aren't we provoking the Lord?

In Lev. 26:12, God says this about His covenant people -

I will walk among you and be your God, and you shall be My people.

Jesus walks among the churches – He knows what's going on, and He holds the leaders of the churches in His hand.

²"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; ³and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary.

Since we covered this letter in great detail two Sundays ago, I'll be more summary with it tonight.

If you weren't here, I'd encourage you to get a copy of the tape because what Jesus says to this church is a crucial message to all Christians and all churches.

Jesus says, **"I know your works."** He says this to all 7 churches!

Jesus knows what's going on & WHY! ^[3]

He commends the Ephesians for their diligent & enduring labor for His name's sake.

Notice the repetition, **"You labor; you endure, you persevere, you're patient, and work hard."**

The word "labor" means *to exert one's self to the point of exhaustion*.

These are great words of praise!

This was a **Busy Church**, they had a lot going on. There was something for everyone.

This was also a **Faithful Church**

They were enduring in the face of hardship & opposition.

At this time all Asia Minor was hostile to Christians due to the Edicts of Emperor Domitian.

Many of the believers had lost their jobs, had been boycotted, & faced social rejection.

In the book of Acts we learn that Paul had spent nearly 3 years in Ephesus and while there had made it a center of missionary activity that influenced that entire region.

The revival was so strong that the worship of Diana, the major deity of that area, went into serious decline.

The temple to Diana at Ephesus was one of the wonders of the ancient world and people traveled from all over to worship there.

But many of them, once in Ephesus, were converted to Christ and the trade in Diana trinkets dropped off dramatically.

The manufacturers of these trinkets grew hostile toward Paul and the Christian community and raised a stink, eventually fomenting a riot that saw Paul expelled from the city.

But Paul's departure didn't end the problems of the Church in Ephesus.

They continued to bear the brunt of the hostility of their pagan neighbors.

Despite this, they'd kept up their labors for the Lord and Jesus commends them for it.

It's one thing to take an *initial stand* for Christ; it's an altogether different thing to remain standing in the face of persistent opposition.

This was also a **Pure Church**. Jesus said, **"You cannot bear those who are evil."**

They were careful about their moral standing and tolerated no sin in their midst.

Finally, this was an **Orthodox Church**. Jesus said, **"you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not and have found them liars."**

In Acts 20, Paul had warned the Ephesian elders that some would come from their own ranks, teaching damnable heresies and they needed to deal with such wolves quickly lest they damage the flock.

In the early church of that time, there were many itinerant teachers who made the rounds of the churches. Some claimed to be apostles.

The Ephesians 'tested' what they heard from these guys by holding up their words to the Word of God.

Please note that Jesus commends the Ephesians for not being *tolerant*, but for being *discerning*

and for making the hard choice of *rejecting* what they found in error. ^[4]

From praise & commendation, Jesus turns to rebuke.

⁴Nevertheless I have *this* against you, that you have left your first love.

It wasn't that they had NO love but they had left their most important love - *the first one!*

What is the first love of the believer? Love for Christ.

It's born of His love for us.

This is the essence of Christianity - a love relationship between God and us.

What all too often happens is that the first passionate love of the new believer cools with the passage

of time – just like in a marriage.

Christ is here the heavenly Bridegroom lamenting his bride's cooled affection. [5]

Outwardly, the Ephesians appear like everything is peachy.

They're busy, patient, pure, doctrinally right on.

But inwardly, they're lacking the most important thing - love for Christ.

They were busy but there was little *passion* in their labor.

They had a *tradition of busyness* but they lacked a *heart of devotion*.

⁵Remember 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.

Jesus says that if they don't reclaim their first love, they will cease to be a church in His eyes.

They can keep up their busyness, they can keep the name on the marquee, but from Christ's perspective, they are no longer a church - they are merely *impersonating* one.

At first reading, this seems like an awfully severe and drastic step!

The loss of the first love is a serious and dangerous thing for Jesus will not stay around a loveless church.

Beloved - an abundance of work can never substitute for love.

It's easy to keep up appearances but we have to ask – do we do what we do because of love?

I was talking with Adriane recently and she pointed out something about this passage.

Some of you may be able to relate to this – just as Jesus said He would remove the Ephesian lampstand from its place among the churches, when a church loses its first love, those members who are in love with Christ sense that something's wrong.

And after a while, if the first love of that church isn't renewed, the heart and life of the church seems to go out.

The church may be big and busy, and it may be difficult to put the finger on precisely what's wrong, but there's the subtle sense that something crucial, something vital is lacking.

So, slowly but surely, those whose hearts are passionate about Jesus slip away to find a church where the first love is still burning brightly.

Jesus give the *Road Back* to the first love in v. 5

Remember –Repent –Redo

“Remember from where you have fallen”

Notice that they *left* their first love; they didn't *lose* it.

There was a point when the Holy Spirit was warning them they were getting off track, but they'd not heeded the warning and gotten off into mere religious routine.

They needed to remember what it was like in the early days when love for the Lord was the main thing.

Then Jesus said **“repent and redo the first works.”**

They must turn around and go back and do what they did before.

The first works are works prompted by and an expression of love!

After this serious rebuke, Jesus returns to commendation -

⁶But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

The *Nicolaitans* were a heretical group who encouraged Christians to adopt a more *compromising* stance with the world.

Their reasoning and teaching went like this: “Since we're saved by grace, apart from works, what you do doesn't matter, so you can do what you like.”

It was the holy lifestyle of the Christians that was getting them into so much trouble and persecution, so the Nicolaitans said that all believers needed to do was blend in a bit more

with the culture and they wouldn't have such a rough go of it.
This led to people who professed to be Christians living morally bankrupt lives.

This idea is alive and well in the church today. You've probably heard it before.

It comes in the form of a thought that says, "Go ahead, do it. God will forgive you."

You find yourself facing the thought that compromising here and there will give you a better opportunity to witness to others.

So you go to Happy Hour and hoist a few brews.

Or you go to a lecherous bachelor or bachelorette party.

Moral compromise does NOT win you a hearing with the lost – it makes them despise you because they KNOW those who profess to follow Christ ought not participate in such things.

Notice what Jesus says about the deeds of the Nicolaitans - "**I hate this.**"

7 "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

From a message to the *entire* church at Ephesus, Jesus now makes this *personal* and *individual*.

The call for revival has been given to the church but it's applied *one person at a time*.

And what Jesus says to one church, the rest must heed as well!

To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God."

Each letter ends with a promise to the one who overcomes.

Overcomers are those who maintain their faith In Christ.

In 1 John 5:4-5 we read

Whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that overcomes the world - our faith. Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

The tree of life is mentioned in Gen. 2:9 & 3:22. It was one of the trees in the Garden of Eden.

After the Fall, God banished man from the Garden, lest he eat of the Tree of Life and live forever in a state of sin and separation from God.

God wants us to have access to the Tree of Life, but only under the right circumstances – and that being free from sin.

So He transplanted the Tree of Life in heaven - one day, we will eat of its fruit.

[Picture of Ephesian Theater]

Now, the second letter – to the church of Smyrna.

It was Saturday morning, Feb. 23rd. The people of Smyrna rose with excitement; this was a big day.

The regional games would begin with a renewal of their allegiance to Rome.

The Smyrnians took great pride in their loyalty to Rome and celebrated their favored status by a fierce devotion to Caesar.

As the crowds made their way to the theater, a patriotic cheer was raised. But the cheer soon turned to an angry cry of "Away with the atheists! Let Polycarp be punished."

Polycarp was the leader of the Christians in Smyrna.

For years he had led them as their faithful pastor and now the crowds wanted him to be brought forth as a *traitor* to Rome.

Once a year, the Smyrnians demonstrated their loyalty to Rome by burning a pinch of incense to Caesar as a god and saying, "Caesar is Lord."

The magistrates of the city would witness this and issue each person a certificate saying they were loyal citizens of Rome.

But the Christians had always balked at this, saying their faith didn't permit them to honor anyone but Jesus as God.

They weren't being *disloyal* – only faithful.

In fact, no one could really fault the Christians for being anything less than *exemplary citizens* in

every other area.

Nevertheless, they were branded as traitors and had been the brunt of the wrath of the rest of the town. On this particular day, the wrath of the crowd grew to the point of calling for the leader of the church – Polycarp, to be publicly made an example of.

So the city police were dispatched to search for him.

They soon found a slave who was known to be a Christian. They tortured him till he told them where Polycarp was staying.

The police arrived at the house and knocked at the door. The people inside tried to convince Polycarp to escape out a back door, but the old man refused.

He told them the night before he had had a dream in which his pillow caught fire and burned. “My time has come,” he told them. “Let them in.”

Polycarp gave instructions that the Police ought to be fed and then he asked the captain if he could have an hour for prayer before they led him away.

The captain was so struck by Polycarp's peace and kindness he gave permission.

An hour later, Polycarp joined them and they left for the theater.

On the way, the captain tried to convince him to simply ascend the steps to the altar of Caesar and say the words, “Caesar is Lord.”

Polycarp told the young man that only Jesus Is Lord and he would not save himself by lying.

When he entered the arena, the chief magistrate saw his old age and said, “Look, just recant and proclaim Caesar, Lord and you'll be released, If you don't, I must put you to death.”

Polycarp looked at him and said, “For 86 years I served Him and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my king who saved me?”

The proconsul said, “Recant or I will call the beasts,” Polycarp said, “Go ahead, call them.”

The magistrate thought Polycarp was mocking him so he said, “If the beasts do not scare you I will have you burnt.”

Polycarp responded, “You threaten me with the fire that burns for a time and is quickly quenched, for you do not know the fire which awaits the wicked in the judgment to come and in everlasting punishment. Why are you waiting? Come, do what YOU will.”

He was led to the stake and wood was quickly gathered round him by the eager hands of those who hated Christ.

As the flames began to rise higher and burn him, he said not a word against his executioners but simply prayed that God would give him the grace to die like a man whom He had saved.

This is the man to whom this letter was addressed – this is the man who received this letter from Jesus and taught it to his congregation.

The day came when he was called to live it before the eyes of all of Smyrna.

8“And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write,

Smyrna is about 35 miles north of Ephesus.

It rivaled Ephesus in power and wealth and boasted a population of some 200,000, making it a very large city for that time.

It was a gorgeous city and was known as the “*The Crown of Asia.*”

The Smyrnians were extremely proud of themselves and their city.

The chief point of boasting lying in their fierce loyalty to Rome.

You see, long before Rome became a world empire, the Smyrnians had hitched their wagon to the City & people of Rome.

They had built a temple to the goddess of Rome, as well as a temple to Tiberius.

When Caesar worship became the official policy of the Empire, Smyrna had applied for and been granted the right and privilege of being the regional center of the cult of Caesar.

What's interesting about the Letter to this church is that it contains no rebuke.

It's one of only 2 in these 7 letters that aren't rebuked; Philadelphia is the other.

They aren't rebuked by Christ because they were suffering severely for their faith in Him.

All Jesus has for them is encouragement!

'These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life:

Jesus is the **First and the Last**; He knows the end from beginning.

He stands at both ends of time and is steering the course of history toward the end He ordains.

Jesus is in control regardless of how things may appear – He is the First and the Last.

In Smyrna, satan may be turning up the heat, but God has His hand on the switch.

Some of the Smyrnians were being put to death for their faith, but Jesus had **conquered death** and promised eternal life to all those who believe in Him.

9th "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.

Jesus doesn't talk about what they were *doing* but what they were *enduring*.

The word "**tribulation**" means a *crushing weight*.

They were under pressure; not the pressure of needing to meet a deadline but the pressure of merely trying to survive.

The word "**poverty**" speaks of being *completely destitute*.

This wasn't a case of them not being able to eat out. They were going hungry.

They had lost everything due to persecution.

Jesus says that He's aware of the "**blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.**"

There was a large population of powerful and influential Jews in Smyrna.

They opposed Christianity and raised the cry of civic outrage against them.

They slandered believers and circulate rumors about them and their activities.

History tells us there were 6 vicious rumors that were popular at this time about Christians.

- 1) Christians are cannibals (Lord's Supper)
- 2) Christians engage in orgies (love feasts)
- 3) Christians tampered with family relationships (told husbands to love their wives)
- 4) Christians are atheists (No images, only one god)
- 5) Christians are disloyal (Emperor worship)
- 6) Christians are arsonists (world would end by fire)

Jesus said these Jews constitute a "**synagogue of satan**" and though they may be **Jews by birth**, they're **not Jews of the heart**.

Actually, they had become the tools of satan who is the ultimate source of persecution of the people of God.

The church of Smyrna was an embattled minority, under pressure and being actively persecuted.

Their businesses had been boycotted, their possessions had been confiscated and some had lost their lives. [Picture of Smyrnan market]

None of this escaped Christ's attention; "I KNOW" He says.

"I know your poverty - but you are rich."

They may have lacked material things, but they were rich in heavenly things.

Yes, they were destitute of *worldly wealth* but they were rich in eternal treasure.

True wealth is not determined by your net worth; not by the abundance of your possessions and cash, but by the abundance of your love, joy, and peace in Christ.

10th 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 gives 2 commands to them -

1st = Do not fear & 2nd = Be faithful

He says, "**Do not fear any of those things you are about to suffer.**"

To a faithful church that was already suffering, He promises *more* suffering.

What?!? Didn't these people have enough faith?
Certainly if they had had more faith they would have been *prosperous & influential*.
No!!!!!! It was *precisely* their faith in Christ and being aligned with Him that resulted in their
tribulation and poverty.
Jesus tells them more suffering is coming.

In *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoffer wrote, "Suffering is the badge of the true Christian."
(He would know.)

Matthew 5: 10-12 Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

John 15:18-20 If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, 'A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. If they kept My word, they will keep yours also.

2 Timothy 3:12 All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.

This is contrary to the prosperity doctrines that abound today but faithful to the Bible and to the experience of the saints of God in all times.

"Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days."

The *real source* of persecution is revealed—the devil.

He's the one who instigates persecution.

But Jesus is the one who walk in the midst of the lampstands and holds the stars in His hand.

He is the First and the Last and is the one whose in control.

So while the devil may do his evil best to hinder and thwart the plan of God, he ends up only furthering the plan and purposes of God!

We see that when we see Jesus saying **"that you may be tested."**

The word "test" means "to prove & refine."

It's the process gold goes through when it's put in the fire.

The fire reveals the gold, but also purifies and refines it.

1 Peter 1:6-7 In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

The unbelievers in Smyrna showed their loyalty to Rome by reciting the formula, "Caesar is Lord" while burning a pinch of incense.

The Christians showed their loyalty to Christ by confessing Him as the only Lord and then offering themselves as incense to the Lord.

Our faithfulness and loyalty to Christ is tested in the midst of suffering.

When it remains intact, it challenges the shallowness of the commitments of an unbelieving and world and a compromising church.

They see that something is more important to us than *survival*.

Jesus said, **"you will have tribulation 10 days."**

The number means there's a limit to it.

It will not go on indefinitely.

It's interesting that there were 10 distinct periods of official persecution during the Roman empire.

"Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life."

Jesus calls them to maintain their faith in Him even though it may result in physical death.

As they remain faithful, He will give them the crown of life.

The best way to understand this is, the crown which IS life.

The death of the Christian is but the door we pass through to enter eternal life.

11“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

What Jesus said to the Smyrnan Christians He says to all believers at all times and in all places.

The prospect of suffering for Christ may seem distant to us tonight, but we mustn't forget the many places around the world where being a Christian is dangerous!

Sudan, Nigeria, West Bank and Iraq, Pakistan, Viet Nam, China, North Korea & India, to name a few.

Polycarp received this letter, read and taught it to his congregation, when things were bad, but they got worse, and there came a time when Polycarp lived out what Jesus enjoins here – to be faithful until death.

In all frankness, if our culture continues to go in the direction it's currently headed, within a generation or two, there's a good chance being a Christian in America could be a risky proposition.

Why even with the escalating rate of change, days of hostility and persecution could be in our own imminent future.

Will we *wimp out* or be like the Smyrnians and *tough it out*.

Christ promises suffering as we follow Him!

How many - if what was *promised* the church at Smyrna, were promised *us*, would pack it in and quit, saying, “Well, I didn't sign up for this!”?

What enabled the Smyrnians to remain faithful and endure the crushing weight of tribulation and abject poverty?

What makes them different from so many today who throw up their hands and want to call God's love into question just because they get a flat tire?

Well, the gospel has been repackaged and treated as a product to market to religious consumers.

We've been told that Christ is something we need to *make life better*, that if we will accept Jesus, life will be more fun and enjoyable.

But Christ did not come to make life more *fun*, He came to save us from sin and hell!

Look at the promise Jesus ends with here -

He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death.

As we read on in chs. 20 & 21 we learn that the Second Death is hell, which is the eternal destination of all who reject Christ.

The Modern gospel leaves out this part of the True Gospel.

It's offensive to people to hear they're sinners in need of a Savior; it insults them and wounds their pride - so it often gets left out of the gospel message.

We're left with trying to present Christ as some kind of helpful addition to life.

We say, “Accept Jesus and discover peace and joy.”

So they do and soon discover that instead of adding peace and joy they're facing the scorn of their friends and missing out on a lot of the so-called fun they once had.

Studies show that most modern evangelistic efforts result in 90 out of every 100 professions of faith backsliding within one year.

Something's wrong; something's missing

It may be missing from much of the preaching of today, but the Smyrnan Christians hadn't missed it.

They knew they were sinners saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ and that He was their only hope for salvation from hell.

This knowledge allowed them to face the wild beasts and the flames in the arena.

Bullinger, E.W. pg. 167

Eph. 1:22-23 4:15-16 Col. 1:18,24 2:9-10

Heb. 4: 13

| 1 John 4: 1 1 Thess. 5:21-22 2 Cor. 11 :13-15 1 John 2:18-19 & Jude 16-19

| Jer. 2:2 2 Cor. 11 :2-3