

The Book of Revelation

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THE PROPHETIC UTTERANCES TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES

Revelation 2 - 3

In the next 2 chapters, there are seven prophetic messages that each have a similar form. There is an introduction, followed by a description of Christ emphasizing a unique aspect of the Lord's glory as mentioned in chapter one.

Note:

Ephesus 2:1compare 1:13,16

Smyrna - 2:8 compare 1:17,18

Pergamos - 2:12 ...compare 1:16

Thyatira - 2:18 compare 1:14,15

Sardis - 3:1 compare 1:4,16

Philadelphia - 3:7..compare 1:18

Laodicia 3:14compare 1:5

Individual attributes of Jesus Christ are manifest in vision form to each church, attributes given to remedy each church's unique difficulties. As the rest of Scripture teaches us, the Lord's fullness meets our every need, a truth which is readily seen in the way needs are met for each of the seven churches. Each assembly, prior to the Lord's words to them as a church, is first shown something of the fullness of our Lord in a personal way to let that church understand that Christ meets the needs of their particular trial or situation. Indeed the Lord meets our every need!

Following the description of Christ, there is a message of encouragement and in five of the seven cases, there is rebuke. Then at the end, there is an individualizing of the message (i.e. to him who has an ear to hear). Therefore, regardless what the church as a whole does, you have a responsibility here. You can't just say, "Well, our church doesn't evangelize and we need to reach out...etc." No, **you** evangelize; **you** reach out; **you** love; **you** minister ...etc. Finally our gracious and most faithful Lord lays out a promise to "him who overcomes".

I prefer to call these prophetic messages rather than letters, because they each begin with a "These things says [the Lord]". In other words, this is the familiar, "thus says the Lord" kind of statement as used by the Old Testament prophets.

The Message to the church of Ephesus (Rev. 2:1-7)

- **A View of the King**

The risen Lord Jesus is sovereign over the churches, and He knows what is going on in Ephesus and in our church! It may not appear that the Lord is in sovereign control of all things, but He is. (Matt. 28:18-20)

- **The Issue**

The church is commended for their labor and perseverance, and for not tolerating those who practice evil. We are not sure who the Nicolaitans are, but Christ hates their practices and these Christians are commended for hating them too. This is a reminder that there are some practices that we are to hate because Christ hates them. They were also a discerning church in that they tested out teachers and their doctrine. They did not tolerate false doctrine.

- **The Problem**

The believers at Ephesus had lost their first love. This is not a church that is back-slidden morally or doctrinally or short on zeal, but they have lost their joy of the Lord Himself. Christ calls them to repent of such a prideful attitude or He'll snuff out the flame of their lampstand. Real Christianity does include labor, perseverance, sound doctrine, moral issues and discipline, but also a passionate delight in and love of Christ – a love that abounds and thus spreads the gospel. A lampstand is to be a witness. Believers are to maintain and grow in that first fervency of affection and thankfulness to our dear Savior as that first encounter and first love found in Luke 7:36ff. (See also Luke 8:38; 17:15-16) This is first (preeminent) love! Passion for God leads to witness (Psalm 96:2-3). We naturally praise what we prize. Cold, loveless orthodoxy does not honor or glorify the incredible and amazing God of grace. If you don't shine your light out of a love for the glory of Christ – it will be removed. (Compare Mark 4:21-25; Luke 8:4-18). In the words of John Piper, "God is most glorified in you, when you are most satisfied in Him."

- **The Solution**

The Christian life begins with repentance and continues with repentance. Repentance is the evidence of the work of the Spirit in the life of the believer (Acts 26:20; 2 Cor. 7:8-11).

There are three imperatives (Divine commands) to the Ephesians in this verse to reverse their problem:

- 1) "*Remember,*" present imperative (continual command)
- 2) "*Repent,*" aorist imperative (immediate command)
- 3) "*Do,*" aorist imperative (immediate command)

Do not wait for some impulse or feeling (which is supposed to be the 'Spirit leading') when you are given clear commands to obey.

The result of remembering the Lord and His great grace, and how far they had fallen from their original first love, should result in immediate repentance – of their hearts toward the Lord and His name (Psalm 51:10-13). Remembering how much we have been forgiven, leads to loving much (Luke 7:47). Finally, they need to do those things that stir up and reflect a love for God. You must keep working to keep your delight in the Lord fresh. Pray with someone. Prayerfully read your Bible, crying out to God to open your eyes, and satisfy and ravish your heart with His beauty and glory (Psalm 119:18) as you meditate upon His Word. Pray for the transformation of your own heart, as did the Psalmists, “Incline my heart to Your testimonies and not to covetousness ... revive me in Your way.” Read biographies of vibrant Christians who had the love of Christ that you want. Fellowship with God-saturated saints. Attend to your own soul and what it is that kindles delight for God in you and then share that with others.

- **The Reward**

Only those who overcome get to eat of the tree of life in the paradise of God. All true believers will persevere in their faith until they die. Perseverance is the evidence of saving faith (Heb. 3:14; Phil. 1:6; Rom. 8:30; Phil. 2:12-13). Overcome is a word found pertaining to all seven churches. There is also a relationship between this word and martyrdom (i.e. Rev. 11:7; 13:7-10; 14:12; compare Rev. 2:13 with 12:11). Overcoming is contrasted with denying the faith. It is an enduring faith

The tree of life in the paradise of God is a figure for eternal life. The imagery that is used is that of the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2:8-9, 3:22-24; Rev. 22:1-5,14).

“He who has an ear” is an exhortation used to divide the true saint from the imposter (Matt. 7:21-27).

The Message to the church of Smyrna (Rev. 2:8-11)

- **A View of the King**

The trials for Smyrna included tribulation and trials even unto death (v. 8-10). Therefore the Lord reveals Himself as the One who is victorious over death as an encouragement and example for these saints who shall also pass through those same fires. They must know that though they die, like the Lord Himself as well as His promise, they shall live (John 11:25). Again remember that the way the Lord reveals Himself to each of the churches is to show them that HE is their guide and stay, and they must rest In Him (Isaiah 26:3). This means in every trial they are confronted with, they must put the Lord before them and then they shall not be moved (Psalm 16:8). We must also always remember that God uses difficult times and suffering for the good of the believer. There are no exceptions to this truth (1 Peter 1:6-7).

- **The Issue**

1 – their poverty –

It seems that their poverty (perhaps due to losing their employment) was a direct result of their profession of faith in Christ. However, Christ reminds them that He **knows**. He is not a distant king. He is near and He knows and all serves His purposes for His glory and the ultimate joy of His people. Believe it! He tells them that they are rich – even in poverty – even in prison – even in death – they are rich! (Rom. 8:15-18)

2 – their afflictions –

The believers at Smyrna were about to undergo a time of persecution. Believers are called to suffer since our Savior suffered on our behalf. To be identified with Jesus Christ in suffering to testify of the priceless treasure we have in Christ ought to be an honor for the believer (1 Peter 2:18-23; Heb. 10:32-39; 11:24-26).

There was a strong Jewish community in the city of Smyrna that came into bitter conflict with the Christians (the true people of God). The Jewish synagogue, though believing themselves to be the synagogue of God, were of their father, the devil (John 8:44). They were not true Jews (Rom. 2:28-29). The people of God are ones born not of blood, nor of flesh, but born of God (John 1:12-13). Though the Jews were their most aggressive persecutors (1 Thessalonians 2:14-16), yet the apostles, like Paul, did not hate them, but desired their salvation; (Rom. 9:1-5; 10:1).

- **The Problem**

There is no inner problem or sin mentioned in this letter, only the warning to the believers to persevere. Our Father in heaven never puts the believer in a situation that is too difficult for him or that makes sin inevitable (Phil. 2:12-13; 1 Cor. 10:13).

- **The Solution**

Perseverance is the mark of true belief. Only those who overcome will enter life eternal. Everyone for whom Jesus died on the cross will persevere in their faith until the end. Lack of perseverance is a sure sign of a lack of saving faith (Rom. 8:28-30; Heb. 3:14; John 6:44). The saints are told not to fear, for as revealed in verse 8, Christ is the first and the last, and He will have the last word! Christ, not the blasphemy or slander or persecution of the devil and his followers, will be last. Christ, who has conquered and triumphed over death is our ever-living Shepherd. The “ten days” reveals the set and brief period of time. Thus, the short season of trial is given as an encouragement to endurance (i.e. Isaiah 54:7-8; 2 Cor. 4:17; 1 Peter 1:6-9). Perhaps the time given is an allusion to Daniel 1:12-15, where Daniel and the other three youths were tested ten days. There, as in Smyrna, God’s people were tempted to compromise, and there in Babylon, true belief shone in persevering faith.

- **The Reward**

Those who hear become a great contrast to those mentioned by Isaiah and quoted by Paul in Acts 28:23-28.

Only those who overcome will not be hurt by the second death. It is in difficult times that believers shine. Suffering or physical death can be the gateway for the believer to eternity with the One they love the most (Rev. 20:14; Rom. 8:10-11). There is something far worse than death – namely the second death. God is not mainly in the business of sparing us from the first death, or the pain that leads to it. He is utterly devoted to rescuing us from the second death!

When the fight is fought and the race is run and you die at the finish line, the wreath that will be put on your head will be the crown of eternal life – no more pain, no more slander, no more shame, no more tears, no more depression, no more frustration and discouragement; only life and light and joy and God forever!

The Message to the church of Pergamos (Rev. 2:12-17)

- **A View of the King**

The Redeemer is viewed as the one “*who has the sharp two-edged sword.*” This is a picture of judgment and conquest. The book of Revelation shows Jesus Christ as the conqueror over the realm of Satan (1 John 3:8). Judgment is also connected with the Word of God (Heb. 4:12-13). The Spirit of truth (John 14:17, 15:26, 16:13) uses the Word as the primary means of sanctifying His church (John 17:17, 2 Tim. 3:10-4:4).

- **The Issue**

The believers at Pergamos lived in a very difficult situation. Living in the very center of emperor worship, as well as other pagan worship, meant that the believers would be in constant peril. Yet, they have remained faithful to their Lord and they are commended for this.

- **The Problem**

Even though they are willing to stand fast for their faith, Christ has something against them. The basic gist of the problem seems to be that this church has not been disciplined in what it allowed in the realm of teaching. Satan is the father of lies (John 8:44) and he works through deceived men.

#1 – Toleration of those who held to the doctrine of Balaam

In Numbers 22-25, we read about Balaam. He had been hired by Balak to curse the Jews during the time of their wanderings. Balaam was known as some kind of prophet and thus, was offered a large sum to put a curse on the people of Israel. So Balaam goes, but God stops him and warns him not to do this. Eventually, God allows him to go but to only say what God tells him to say. When Balaam looks over the valley of Jews, out comes an oracle of praise. Balak, who, of course, wants a curse on Israel, ups the ante, but Balaam is unable to curse a people that God will not curse. At this point, Balaam does something despicable. He does not overtly curse them. What he does, however, is tell Balak to befriend them and send his most attractive women and men into their midst that they might intermarry and compromise their religion. Balaam knows that since God is a jealous God, and if they mix their worship, Balak won't have to worry about calling down a curse on them, because God will be so angry with them, He'll curse them Himself! And that's what happened.

#2 – Toleration of those who held to the doctrine of the Nicolaitans

Though we do not know exactly what this doctrine was, they put up with those in the church who held it. The church at Ephesus had this for them, in that they hated the doctrine of the Nicolaitans (Rev. 2:6). The Pergamum church had this against them, that they didn't hate the doctrine of the Nicolaitans. They allowed them to continue in the church.

- **The Solution**

Christ calls this church to an immediate repentance. They need to deal with these doctrinal compromises. This is extremely important (2 Peter 2:1 – 3:2 note: the apostle's doctrine). It is possible to be narrow and hateful and judgmental. However, the church must not give a teaching voice to just anyone and any doctrine. The church must guard its teaching ministry, so that it is biblically faithful. The cost of not doing so is too high.

Israel serves as an example of the great suffering that happens when an assembly does not discipline the idolaters and compromisers. Note the similarity of Josh. 13:22 and Num. 31:8 with Rev. 2:16 and 19:21. The church need to repent and stop tolerating these two sects. Though they themselves held the truth, they tolerated others to spread their falsehoods. You can notice in v. 16 that Jesus will come “*to you*” and fight “*against them*”.

- **The Reward**

#1 – Hidden manna – is Christ Himself. He is hidden from the world but open to the eyes of those who have eyes to see (John 6:32-35, 54).

#2 – White stone - A dark stone and white stone were used in court cases. If the dark stone was presented, you were declared guilty. If a white stone was presented, you were declared not guilty, but righteous. Thus the white stone signified that you were acquitted – absolved of all guilt (Jer. 50:20). (The same word used in Acts 26:10 where it is translated “voice” in the NKJV, but it means literally a pebble or stone, which was used for voting.)

What is that new name? See Jer. 23:6 and 33:16. We get the white stone because the Lord is our righteousness! The Lord our righteousness will be our everlasting name (Isa. 56:5; 62:2-5)! A new name goes with new character. His name will be intimately connected to us and our “white stone” of righteousness – justification (Rev. 19:12-16). Knowing a name is not just cognitive but experiential (Luke 10:22). The ungodly are unable to either know or experience the reality of His name!

The Message to the church of Thyatira (Rev. 2:18-29)

- **A View of the King**

“This allusion to 1:14 designates Christ as the one whose eyes flash with anger and who is prepared to tread under his feet the enemies of the Christian faith. This stern portrayal prepares us for the equally stern words in verses 26-27.” (Ladd, page 50) (Heb. 10:31)

- **The Issue**

Thyatira is distinguished among the seven churches as being the only one commended for both love and service (John 13:35).

- **The Problem**

The church at Thyatira was committing the sin of tolerating the sin of a certain propheticess. Jezebel was the name of the Phoenician wife of Ahab (1 Kings 16:31) who sought to carry the Northern Kingdom of Israel into the worship of Baal and Astarte (2 Kings 9:22) and to engage in associated immoralities and occult practices.

The problem in Thyatira was an unhealthy tolerance. They recognized the presence of the false propheticess; they recognized also the evil character of her teaching, but they refused to deal with her. Here is the opposite situation from that in Ephesus. The Ephesians had tested those who called themselves apostles and had rejected those who were false-apostles. Here the church was tolerant of false prophets to her own detriment.

- **The Solution**

#1 Repent

Faithfulness is the only thing that matters to the believer. There is never an occasion when failure to obey is ever acceptable (Matt. 7:21-23; 1 Cor. 5:9-13).

#2 Hold on

Perseverance is the responsibility of the believer. Our Father in heaven has promised to keep us, but we must exercise effort in staying faithful to our Lord (Heb. 12:4-11; John 10:27-30).

- **The Reward**

#1 – Authority over the nations (i.e. judge with Christ at the end)

#2 – Given the morning star (reference to Jesus Christ – see Rev. 22:16).

The Message to the church of Sardis (Rev. 3:1-6)

“Sardis, the impregnable, was situated upon a nearly inaccessible hill, overseer of the Hermus Valley, and in ancient times the proud capital of Lydia. Its people were arrogant, over-confident. They were sure – too sure, alas! – that no-one could scale this hill with its perpendicular sides. There was only one point of access; a very narrow neck of land toward the south and this could easily be fortified. But the enemy came, in 549 B.C. and again in 218 B.C., and...took Sardis. One unobserved, unguarded weak point, an oblique crack in the rockwall, the one chance in a thousand for a night attack by skillful mountain-climbers, was all that was necessary to deal a crushing blow to the arrogance of the over-confident citizens of this proud capital. The hill upon which Sardis stood was too small for a growing city. Therefore the ancient Sardis, the acropolis, began to be deserted and a new city arose in its vicinity. When the Apolcalypse was written, Sardis was facing decay, a slow but sure death. In the year AD 17 the city was partly destroyed by an earthquake. Thus, again and again, the self-satisfied and boastful inhabitants of Sardis had seen destruction coming upon them ‘as a thief in the night,’ most suddenly and unexpectedly.” (Hendricksen, page 73)

- **A View of the King**

These are the words of Him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. The Lord Jesus Christ does not function as the god of the Diests who creates and then sits back to let the creation go its own way (Matt. 28:18-20).

- **The Issue**

“Sardis was sinking into spiritual stupor...Whereas in Pergamum and Thyatira a small element of the congregation had fallen into the temptation of the world, in Sardis the congregation as a whole had defiled its garments. Sardis, too, was in the world. It should have been a light bearer. It failed in its duty. Neither the Jews nor the Gentiles seem greatly to have troubled the poor people of Sardis. Sardis was a very ‘peaceful’ church, it enjoyed peace, but it was the peace of the cemetery.” (Hendricksen, page 73)

- **The Problem**

The church at Sardis was a living corpse. The church had become caught up in the world. The sin of compromise characterized the church as a whole (1 John 2:15-17; Matt. 23:25-29; Gal. 1:10).

- **The Solution**

#1 Remember

Those who profess to believe are called to remember what it means to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. When you receive Jesus, you embrace Him for all that He is. It is all or nothing (Joshua 22; 1 Cor. 11:23-26).

#2 Repent

True saving faith will always result in a life that lives for Jesus Christ. Every true believer is a God-lover (Matt. 3:1-10; James 2:14-24).

- **The Reward**

#1 – To be with Christ clothed in white garments

To be truly righteous and to be with our Lord is the best of all worlds (Rom. 3:21-26; 5:1)

#2 – Kept in the Book of Life

True believers always heed the warning and persevere in the faith (Heb. 10:26-31; Phil. 2:12-13; Matt. 10:32-33; 1 Tim. 2:11-13).

The Message to the church of Philadelphia (Rev. 3:7-13)

- **A View of the King**

Jesus is described as the one who holds the keys of David.

“The key of David can be understood only in its Old Testament setting. In Isaiah 22:22, Eliakim received the key of the chief steward of the king’s household, and as the representative of the king, he was authorized to exercise full administrative authority in the king’s name. The key of David is the key to David’s house – the messianic kingdom. The immediate background of the phrase was the claim of the Jews in Philadelphia that they were the true people of God who hold the key to the kingdom of God. John contradicts this claim by asserting that the key to the kingdom which had belonged to Israel really belongs to Jesus as the Davidic Messiah (Rev. 5:5; 22:16) and had been forfeited by Israel because she had rejected her Messiah. It is Christ alone and no longer Israel who can give men entrance to the messianic Kingdom.” (Ladd, pages 58-59)

- **The Issue**

Open door – Two options:

#1 – The more common interpretation is that it denotes a great opportunity for missionary activity. Paul uses the metaphor in this way. He writes to the Corinthians of his plans to stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, “for a wide door for effective work has opened to me” (1 Cor. 16:9; 2 Cor. 2:12; Col. 4:3).

#2 – The open door seems to be referring to the issue of salvation and more specifically to the promise of God to save completely those who come to Jesus in repentance and faith. The synagogue of Satan will not keep believers from entering into the presence of the Lord (Phil. 1:6).

Jews at your feet –

Christ will make those who think they understand truth to come and profess that the saints at Philadelphia know the Living God, the God who has revealed Himself in Christ.

- **The Problem**

It is only the churches of Smyrna and Philadelphia that receive no rebukes. There is no specific sin for which they are called to repent.

- **The Solution**

The hour of trial seems to be referring to a time of persecution that the Lord will keep the church in Philadelphia from experiencing.

- **The Reward** (Figures for eternal life)

#1 – Pillar in the temple

Believers are described as living stones making up a spiritual temple (1 Peter 2:4-10). A pillar is something permanent. The place of the believer in God's temple is permanent, lasting into eternity (Rom. 8:30).

#2 – Write on him the new name of God

“When Christ comes as the mighty conqueror, he has a name inscribed which no one knows but Himself (Rev. 19:12). This is a symbolic way of suggesting the glory and majesty of Christ at His revelation, which will be shared by His followers.” (Ladd, pages 63-64)

The Message to the church of Laodicea (Rev. 3:14-22)

“Laodicea was situated in the neighborhood of hot springs. Emitting lukewarm water from the mouth was a figure which its citizens could easily understand. A famous school of medicine grew up here, producing, among other things, a remedy for weak eyes. In this city the soft black wool for the sheep of the valley was woven into garments. But Laodicea was especially famous for its wealth. Located at the confluence of three great highways – be sure to consult a map- it grew rapidly into a great commercial and financial center. It was the home of the millionaires. There were, of course, theatres, a stadium, and a gymnasium equipped with baths. It was a city of bankers and finance. So wealthy was this city that its inhabitants declined to receive aid from the government after the place had been partly wrecked by an earthquake.” (Hendricksen, page 76)

- **A View of the King**

The Amen and faithful and true witness – In John 18:37, Jesus states that He came into the world to testify to the truth. Unlike the Laodiceans, Jesus was faithful to His Father and all that He said and did reflected this. Faithfulness is the only thing that counts for the believer.

- **The Issue**

Nearby to Laodicea were two locations that provided hot springs that had medicinal value and cold springs that provided refreshing drinking water. By the time the water from both sources reached Laodicea, the temperature of water would have been lukewarm.

The Laodiceans are accused of having lukewarm hearts that are not fit for the kingdom of God. Their deeds were spiritually indifferent and therefore merited the divine judgment for their deeds which gave evidence of those not redeemed (Rom. 6:17).

- **The Problem**

The church at Laodicea was self-satisfied and did not need the Lord. They saw themselves as having it all, when, if truth were to be told, they were spiritually poor and in need of everything (Luke 18:9-14).

- **The Solution**

Revelation 3:20 calls all professed believers to bring the Lordship of Christ to every part of their lives. Believers are to have Jesus Christ as the focal point of their lives. True faith always brings about a changed life. Saving faith is then described in three different ways.

#1 – buy from Me gold refined in the fire so you can become rich

A believer values what His Savior and Lord values (Matt. 6:33)

#2 – white clothes to wear so that you can cover your shameful nakedness

A believer has a new heart and desires to live for Jesus (Titus 3:3-7)

#3 – salve to put on your eyes, so that you can see

A believer has the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:14-16)

- **The Reward**

If we persevere until the end, we will be with our Lord and will reign with Him for all eternity. Although the details of this are not clear, it is clear that we will be in Christ for all of eternity (2 Tim. 2:12).