

Messages to the Churches of Ephesus and Smyrna

Revelation 2:1-11

Revelation 2:1-11 - *“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 lamp stands: 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; ³ and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name’s sake and have not become weary. ⁴ Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love. ⁵ Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lamp stand from its place—unless you repent. ⁶ But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. ⁷ ‘He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God.’”*

⁸ “And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write, ‘These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life: ⁹ ‘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. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ ‘He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death.’”

Background Notes

Revelation 1 introduced us to the vision about the future that the Lord Jesus gave to the Apostle John. In the vision, John saw the Lord standing in the midst of seven golden lamp stands, which represent seven 1st century churches in Asia Minor, where Turkey is today. John described the awesome appearance of the Lord in the vision: *“Then I turned to see the voice that spoke with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lamp stands, ¹³ and in the midst of the seven lamp stands One like the Son of Man, clothed with a garment down to the feet and girded about the chest with a golden band. ¹⁴ His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and His eyes like a flame of fire; ¹⁵ His feet were like fine brass, as if refined in a furnace, and His voice as the sound of many waters; ¹⁶ He had in His right hand seven stars, out of His mouth went a sharp two-edged sword, and His countenance was like the sun shining in its strength.”* This description conveyed the truth that the Lord has total authority. Nothing escapes His notice! He will judge everyone on the basis of His Word, described as a two-edged sword.

After our talk on Revelation 1, someone asked me if the Lord would literally look like this when we get to heaven. No, I don't think so! This was the appearance of the Lord in the vision that was given to the apostle John, and it contains a number of symbols. A lot of symbols are used throughout the Book of Revelation -- because it's a vision!

A general outline of the Book of Revelation is given in Revelation 1:19: “*Write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after this.*” Most of the Book of Revelation doesn’t deal with “the things which are,” or the present time. Most of the book deals with future events that will take place after the present time. In fact, we believe that everything from Revelation 4 on to the end of the book refers to the future – all the way to the eternal state. In Revelation 2 and 3 we have the messages or letters to the seven churches of Asia. The messages in Revelation 2 and 3 refer to “the things which are” -- the present time, the Church Age.

So that brings us to the interpretation and application of these messages to the seven churches of Asia. We believe that there are at least three ways, and maybe four ways, in which these messages to the seven churches can be applied. First of all, the messages describe the conditions that literally existed in those seven 1st century churches of the Roman province of Asia, so primarily they’re messages to those churches at that time in the 1st century. However, these messages to the seven churches can be applied to any church at any time. There is challenge and exhortation, along with comfort and encouragement, in these messages that can certainly be applied to churches today. At the end of each of the seven letters, the exhortation is given, “*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*” The word “churches” is plural, not singular. This is certainly an indication that these seven messages are for all churches.

A third possible view of the messages to the seven churches is that each church represents a stage of Church history. First comes Ephesus. Ephesus represents the early Church. Next comes Smyrna, the persecuted church, and it represents the Church during the times of the Roman persecutions. We move on to Pergamum, the church that represents the stage of Church history after the Roman persecutions. The church at Thyatira represents the “pre-Reformation” Church. Then on to Sardis, representing the post-Reformation Church. Then comes Philadelphia, the Church of the 18th and 19th century, the time of the Great Awakenings, the great revivals and missionary movements. Finally, in this view, we come to Laodicea, the present-day lukewarm, complacent stage of Church history. If the view that the seven churches represent stages of Church history is correct, we definitely are now in the last days of the Church Age, and the Lord’s return for His Church is near.

This interpretation of seven churches has a lot going for it, in view of the fact that Revelation is a vision of the future given to the Apostle John. In addition, the seven consecutive messages do parallel the way Church history has unfolded in consecutive stages. However, it’s not wise to be dogmatic about this interpretation.

A fourth way to apply the letters to the seven churches is personal application -- which should be obvious. The rebukes and commendations in each of these letters can certainly be applied in a personal way. As we go through the seven messages, we will emphasize both the personal application and the practical application for local churches today.

Doctrinal Points

1. The church of Ephesus represents the church that has left its first love.

In verses 2-3, the church of Ephesus was commended for its labor, its perseverance and its sound doctrine. These believers didn't tolerate false teachers or false doctrine, such as that promoted by the sect of the Nicolaitans. The Lord said to the church at Ephesus, "*But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate*" (v6). We don't know exactly what the false teaching and activity of the Nicolaitans was, but the church at Ephesus was commended for hating it.

God hates false teaching and false doctrine, both then and today. That's why it's so important to know God's Word! You can't detect false teaching if you don't know what the Bible says (and what it doesn't say) -- including what's in the Book of Revelation!

So, the church at Ephesus had a lot going for it. However, they were rebuked for having "left their first love." The church at Ephesus is the church where the Apostle Paul taught for 2 ½ years on his third missionary journey. Timothy was shepherding this church when Paul wrote his first letter to Timothy. This is the church where the Apostle John taught before he was exiled to the island of Patmos. Ephesus had been a vibrant, on-fire church for the Lord! What happened? Their love had grown cold! That can happen churches and individuals today. Is your love for the Lord just as strong as when you were first saved, or have you become complacent and blasé? Are you more interested in the things this world can offer than in your love for the Lord? The church of Ephesus represents the church or the believer that has left its first love.

2. The Church of Smyrna represents the persecuted church.

Verses 9-11: "*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.* ¹⁰ *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.* ¹¹ *He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death.*"

Smyrna was about 35 miles north of Ephesus. It is the modern city of Izmir in Turkey today. Smyrna is the only one of the seven churches where a continuous Christian testimony has been maintained since the church was established in the first century! As we saw in verse 5, the light of Ephesus was removed because they didn't repent and return to their first love -- but the light of Smyrna never went out. There is a Christian community in Izmir today, and I had the privilege of meeting with these Christians a few years ago. What a blessing!

There is no rebuke given in the message to the church at Smyrna. They were commended for their faithfulness in the midst of tribulation and poverty, and for their faithfulness in spite of persecution. Polycarp, an early Christian, was martyred at Smyrna. History records us that the Jews of Smyrna were all too willing to join in the effort of getting Polycarp killed, and the Lord referred here to the blasphemous Jews of Smyrna as a “synagogue of Satan.” They had forsaken the faith of their fathers!

The church of Smyrna was about to undergo “ten days of tribulation” (v10). This either refers to ten literal days of intense persecution, or to the coming waves of the Roman persecution. Those who were faithful unto death, like Polycarp, would receive the special reward for martyrs, the crown of life. The church at Smyrna is a model for Christians today who are undergoing persecution. Be faithful! Think of and pray for the Christians around the world today who are being persecuted by radical Islamists. The church of Smyrna represents the persecuted Church.

Practical Application

Let’s be overcomers!

In the messages to Ephesus (v7) and to Smyrna (v11), a promise is made to the “overcomers.” Who are the “overcomers”? Overcomers are Christians who prove that they’re true believers by being faithful, no matter what happens. Overcomers don’t throw in the towel when the going gets rough and tough! Overcomers don’t fall for false doctrine, which might indicate that they never were believers – that they were never truly saved at all.

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God” (v7). Overcomers will eat from the tree of life that is in the midst of the paradise of God. They can be sure that they will enjoy their eternal life in heaven to the fullest! Overcomers can be sure that they will not be hurt by the second death: *“He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death.”* Overcomers can be sure they have eternal life and will never be separated from the Lord. So, let’s prove that we are believers by being faithful. Let’s be overcomers!