

# Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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## A Study of Scripture Sevens: Letters to the Seven Churches Part 1 - Revelation 2:1-17

I love these letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3. They are the words of the Lord Jesus Himself to us now, by which I mean the Church age in which we live. In each letter we read the words, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). This is an important call for our attention. Today there are many voices competing for our attention. We have a huge amount of background distraction aiming to fill our minds. But, if we pay attention to these letters, I believe that the Lord will have a word for each of us, wherever we are. Our concern is to discern what that word from the Lord is. Today, we will be looking at the first three letters, that is, the letters to the churches at Ephesus (Revelation 2:1-7), Smyrna (Revelation 2:8-11), and Pergamos (Revelation 2:12-17).

I am going to start with a few introductory points. They will help us to better understand the seven letters. Revelation is principally a book of judgment. In it we read of the judgments of God. He will finally control and direct events so that His chosen King, the Lord Jesus, will reign over this world. Now in Revelation 1-3 we do not see the Lord Jesus judging the world yet. Rather, we see Him acting as judge over the churches. We have the same principle in 1 Peter 4:17. We read there, "For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God". In Revelation 1:13, we see the Lord Jesus walking in the midst of the seven lampstands. We are told that the seven lampstands represent the seven churches (Revelation 1:20). The Lord Jesus discerns what the state of each church is. He says what He approves of, and He also speaks about that of which He does not approve. This is very helpful for us. It means that we now have a golden opportunity to prepare for the judgment seat of Christ (see Romans 14:10, 2 Corinthians 5:10). The world talks about "making hay while the sun shines". We rather want to make "gold, silver and precious stones" while the sun shines - see 1 Corinthians 3:10-15. If we pay careful attention to these seven letters, we can seek to be pleasing to the Lord as a local company of Christians, wherever we are.

The letters are addressed to the angels of the churches. These angels are symbolised as stars: Revelation 1:20 tells us that, "The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches". We need to work out what this means. The word "angel" could mean "messenger", or it might mean "representative". In Matthew 18:10, the Lord Jesus says that little children have angels in heaven who see the face of God the Father. This use of the word "angel" carries the idea of a representative. We can see a similar use of the word in Acts 12:15. This is the passage where Peter had been released from prison (Acts 12:5-19). When Peter knocked on the door where the Christians were, and Rhoda told them that Peter was there, they did not believe her. They said that it must be his angel (Acts 12:15). I would tend to think that the word "angel" also suggests a representative here in Revelation chapter 1. The best explanation that I have seen is in a commentary on Revelation written by a certain TB Baines over 100 years ago, (TB Baines, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*). He says in his commentary that "the word 'angel' carries the idea of representation, and seems to be here used figuratively to describe those who are responsible, from their gift or influence, for the condition of the Church." This is worth repeating - "those who are responsible, from their gift or influence, for the condition of the Church".

The seven letters therefore place considerable responsibility on such persons. They are to take special notice of what the Lord says in these letters. But God always gives help and strength for every responsibility. Here we see that the angels are strengthened and upheld by the Lord. We can see this in Revelation 1:16, 20, where in both verses the stars (which symbolise the angels) are said to be in the Lord's right hand.

### Ephesus (Revelation 2:1-7)

Now we turn to the letter to the church at Ephesus. Straight away, we read once again about the Lord holding the stars. Revelation 2:1 says, "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'". What does this tell us? The Lord is presenting Himself to Ephesus as the judge. The point is, therefore, that His opinion is the one that counts. It is what **He** has to say that we want to hear - the opinions of others are just a distraction.

When we look at Ephesus, what do we see? We see works, that is, service, patience and endurance, separation from evil, discernment, and a holy walk. There were many good things at Ephesus, and the Lord Jesus commended the

Ephesians for these. However love seemed to be missing, and this was the first priority for the Lord. Revelation 2:4-5 state: "Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Remember 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." A husband and wife, or parents and children, for instance, would not look primarily for service from each other, but rather for love. Of course, love will express itself in service, and true love is active. The point here however seems to be that love was not the first motivation for the Ephesians. It is easy to forget the great love that the Lord has for us, and He desires to see a response.

In Revelation 2:6 we read, "But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate." Why are the deeds of the Nicolaitans mentioned at the end of the letter, after the comment on losing their first love? Perhaps it is because hating what the Lord hates is an evidence of love for Him. It is not clear exactly who the Nicolaitans were. What we can tell is that their practices evidently were a particular insult to God and His grace. The Ephesians hated these deeds. This is an evidence of feeling what the Lord felt, which the Lord approved of. One important thing to point out is that it was the deeds of the Nicolaitans that the Ephesians hated, not the Nicolaitans themselves. As Christians we are not to hate people - the Lord Jesus taught us to love our enemies (Matthew 5:44). We are told in Ephesians 6:12 that our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but rather that it is against spiritual forces of evil. Thus we should hate false teachings that dishonour God and the Lord, even as we pray that those who teach them may repent. I remember when I was a child, a brother in the church used to say, "God loves sinners, although He does not love what they do." It's a good point to remember!

Revelation 2:7 speaks about the one who overcomes. The overcomer is presumably one who seeks to recover his or her first love. The overcomer is promised to eat from the tree of life, in the paradise of God. Perhaps as TB Baines suggests, this could mean that the overcomer will be "seeking those things that are above", rather than seeking to make a paradise down here. I need to ask myself the question: Have I have lost my first love for the Lord? If so, do I recognise this and am I seeking to be an overcomer?

### **Smyrna (Revelation 2:8-11)**

Now we come to the letter to the church at Smyrna. Smyrna speaks of the suffering church. There are plenty of resources for us to find out about the suffering church today, and there are many places in the world where Christians suffer. How do we deal with these things? What is the Lord's word for us? We can look at this letter, and consider the Lord's presentation of Himself, His estimation of the situation, His commendation, His reward and His solemn judgment.

An important point is that no immediate solution to the suffering is offered! This is helpful, because we can easily feel helpless and discouraged when we read about some of the abuses that some of the Lord's servants suffer. We may feel, what can I do about it? Of course there are many practical things that we can do, but the epistle to Smyrna helps us to relate to the suffering church.

#### **1. The Lord's presentation of Himself.**

He knows. We see this in Revelation 2:9: "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." Even if we may not be able to sympathise properly, we can commend suffering saints to the Lord's care. We know that He is fully aware of what they are going through. We often read that suffering Christians particularly appreciate the prayers of others for them. Let us be encouraged to pray for our suffering brothers and sisters.

#### **2. The Lord's estimation.**

The Lord says that He knows their tribulation and their poverty, as I quoted earlier from Revelation 2:9. Tribulation and poverty are strong words. But the Lord says, "You are rich". They were poor and suffering as far as this world was concerned, but the Lord knew the reward that they would have. Suffering believers will be richly rewarded in heaven - "great is your reward in heaven" as we read in Matthew 5:12.

#### **3. The Lord's commendation.**

There is no criticism! The churches at Smyrna and at Philadelphia were the only two for which there was nothing to criticise.

#### **4. The Lord's reward.**

The crown of life is promised. In the last part Revelation 2:10, the Lord says, "Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life." Many, many believers have suffered and do suffer so much for the Lord. It is good to think of

the Lord Himself giving them that crown. What a rich reward for them! The Apostle Paul tells us in Romans 8:18 that the sufferings of the present time are not worthy to be compared to the glory that will be revealed. Now, what some Christians have suffered and do suffer are not trivial by any means - and if this is not worthy to be compared to the coming glory, what must that reward be like?

## 5. The Lord's solemn judgment.

He calls the persecutors "a synagogue of Satan" (Revelation 2:9). It would not be right for us to call a group of persecutors "a synagogue of Satan". We could not brand them as such on our own authority. However, the Lord is the perfect Judge, and this is His estimation of the persecutors of His church. This is a solemn point. The enemies of God's people may feel that they have the upper hand. What a terrible thing it is if the Judge's verdict of them is that they are "a synagogue of Satan".

### Pergamos (Revelation 2:12-17)

Finally for today, we come to the letter to the church at Pergamos. In this letter the Lord presents Himself as having a sharp, two-edged sword. Revelation 2:12 says, "And to the angel of the church in Pergamos write, 'These things says He who has the sharp two-edged sword'". What is this sword? I believe that this sword is a picture, or a symbol, of the Word of God. The reason I say this is based on Hebrews 4:12. This tells us that the Word of God is sharper than a two-edged sword. Ephesians 6:17 also tells us that the sword of the Spirit is the Word of God. Furthermore, both Revelation 1:16 and Revelation 2:16 speak of the sword as coming from the Lord's mouth. This also fits in with the thought that the sword is a symbol of God's word. Hebrews 4:12 tells us more: it tells us that the Word of God is able to discriminate and to discern; it can cut through difficult situations to give us guidance. This was what the church at Pergamos was lacking. It is very important to remember that the Bible is God's Word when we study it. We need to know how to handle God's Word, so that we can apply it to difficult situations.

The Lord's comment is interesting - He knows where they are dwelling. This is the throne of Satan, and the Lord knows about its particular difficulty. The beginning of Revelation 2:13 says, "I know your works, and where you dwell, where Satan's throne is." What does the throne of Satan mean? In the Authorised version of the Bible, 2 Corinthians 4:4 speaks of the "god of this world" blinding the mind of unbelievers. We take it that "god [with a small 'g'] of this world" is an allusion to Satan. Again, 1 John 5:19 says that "the whole world lies in the power of the wicked one". So, the throne of Satan could mean the world. It could also mean a specific base of Satan's operations. Campbell Morgan suggested that Satan does have specific bases, and his agents everywhere. Campbell Morgan thought that Satan's bases were most likely places of worldly power and privilege, where he can best use his influence. (Morgan, GC: *The Letters of Our Lord: A First Century Message to Twentieth Century Christians*). This reminds us of the Lord's temptations in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-11, Luke 4:1-13). In Luke 4:5-8 we read that Satan made the glories of the kingdoms pass by, that is, their power and privilege.

I believe that these points have an important word for us. Some commentators take "I know your works, and where you dwell, where Satan's throne is" (Revelation 2:13) as a criticism. That is, the church had settled down in the world. But it is possible that from the context it may also be a commendation, or at any rate an encouragement, to the faithful believers there. In that case we would see that the Lord was recognising the place of peril that they were in.

We are in a place of peril, because we are in a place of worldly power and privilege. The Lord knows our difficulties. He understands the persecuted Christians such as those at Smyrna, and He also understands Christians like those at Pergamos! Let us be encouraged and strengthened by this!

What was good? They held fast His Name, and did not deny His faith. The end of Revelation 2:13 says, "And you hold fast to my name, and did not deny my faith even in the days in which Antipas was My faithful martyr, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells." The meaning of Antipas' name is apparently "against all", which is interesting (Potts, CA *Dictionary of Bible Proper Names*). To live by the Bible today will seem to be in the opposite direction to the world in general, like the direction in which Antipas went - and it isn't easy.

What was bad? They tolerated men holding and teaching false doctrines. In Revelation 2:14-15 we read, "But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality. Thus you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate." These false doctrines were those of Balaam, and of the Nicolaitans. What exactly was this doctrine, or teaching, of Balaam? We can read about Balaam in Numbers 22-24. Balaam was a false prophet who was hired by Balak, the king of Moab. Balak wanted Balaam to curse the children of Israel, but God prevented Balaam from doing so. Instead, Balaam was forced to bless them. But then, Balaam tried another wicked trick. When you have a moment, look at Numbers 25:1-3 and then compare this with Numbers 31:16. You will see that Balaam encouraged the children of Israel to commit sin, knowing that this would bring God's judgment on them. He had not been able to curse them, so he thought he would try to get them to

bring a curse on themselves. What then does this mean for the letter to Pergamos? At Pergamos, the doctrine of Balaam might have been something like "It's OK to do bad things if you are a Christian - it's OK to eat of idol sacrifices and to commit sexual immorality", as we can see in Revelation 2:14. And yet these very things were those specifically forbidden at the Jerusalem council. We can read about that in Acts 15:28-29.

Putting this together, I presume that the Nicolaitans were people who were acting like Balaam. If they couldn't do open evil, like when Balaam tried to curse the people but couldn't, then they would try to bring evil in by the back door. This must be resisted! The overcomer - the one who does not tolerate this kind of evil teaching and practice - will receive the hidden manna and the white stone (Revelation 2:17). The hidden manna is probably a reference to the manna that was in the golden pot within the ark of the covenant. This is spoken about in Hebrews 9:4. What does it mean? The manna was food for the Israelites when they were in the desert, travelling from Egypt to Canaan. It came down from heaven, and the Israelites fed on it daily. It symbolises daily spiritual feeding on Christ. Now the manna that was hidden in the golden pot, within the ark of the covenant, would only have been seen by God. It suggests God's appreciation of Christ. So, putting these symbols together, to receive the hidden manna may suggest considering what Christ was, as treasured by God. In other words, delighting in what God delights in, so that we become like Christ. What about the white stone? Some commentators suggest that it signified a sign of approval. God takes note of us personally. He loves to approve what is good in us.

So, we see that these first three letters are right up to date with encouragement and instructions for us now, even though they were written originally to Christians many hundreds of years ago.

We have seen:

- The importance of not losing our first love, as the principal motive for all that we do.
- How God understands those who are suffering for His sake, and how He will reward them; and
- How God takes account of us where we are, and the encouragements and warnings that we need to pay attention to.

Next week, God willing, Ernie Brown will take us through the remaining four letters, which again are full of blessing and encouragement for us today.

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