

Revelation 2:1-7

The letter to the church in Ephesus

(*The People's Bible*, Revelation, pages 24-29)

Look

Verse 1

"Angel"—The church's overseer or elder, what we would call the pastor. In Greek, *angel* means "messenger." The angels of the church were the men who served as God's messengers, teaching God's revealed Word.

"Ephesus"—At this time it was one of the greatest cities of the world having more Jews than any city outside Israel, except Alexandria, Egypt. Its temple of Diana (mentioned in Acts 19:21-41) was world famous and the altar of that temple carved in the fourth century B.C. was one of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world. The Ephesian culture was very sex oriented, centering as it did around the worship of Diana. Prostitution was part of the worship of this famous goddess. Ephesus also gained revenue by selling Ephesian Letters which were good luck charms for travelers, the sick, and those having difficulty having children. This was a busy city situated on several trade routes. Its port handled more trade than any other city in Asia Minor. It was 1,000 years old by the time John arrived. With the spread of Christianity the city became the third most important Christian city after Jerusalem and Antioch. The church there was founded by St. Paul. Mary, the Mother of our Lord, is buried there according to tradition. The city's grand boulevard to the sea became known as the highway for martyrs as thousands of Christians in chains were led down the great street to ships waiting to take them to the Colosseum in Rome. Today Ephesus is a small depressed village situated on swamp land called *Aysalook*. There is no trace of the Ephesian church today.

Verse 6

"Nicolaitans"—We know very little about the Nicolaitans. From what we read in verses 14 and 15, they seem to have taught sexual license. They may have reasoned that since we are saved by grace and since the body is already corrupt, it is all right to use the body to engage in sin. The church fathers described them as shamelessly self-indulgent.

Verse 7

"Paradise"—A word that reminds us of the perfect Garden of Eden.

Discuss

1. What word of commendation does Jesus give the church members in Ephesus?

2. What word of criticism does Jesus give the church in Ephesus?

Apply

3. What element in the description of Jesus (1:12-16) does Jesus refer to in this letter? How does this fit into the content of the letter to Ephesus? What impact should it have on our church?

4. Just as each letter looks back to one or two elements of Jesus' glory, so each letter looks ahead to blessings Jesus will give his faithful. Which blessing is promised in this letter? What does this mean for us?

5. What is the first love spoken of in verse 4? How do we keep this first love first in all things?

6. What are some examples of people in our own day who, like the Nicolaitans, use Christian freedom as an excuse to claim that they can be immoral and yet truly Christian? Who are they?

7. A great deal is involved in being steadfast in the faith or persevering, depending on the challenge. But in verse 7 a great blessing is promised to those who persevere. Read I Corinthians 9:24-10:13 and list some things we need to do if we are to persevere in faithfulness.

The Lord commended the Ephesians for being faithful to his Word, and he rebuked them for their lack of love. He urged them to repent and promises to give his faithful followers access to the tree of life.

Revelation 2:8-11

The letter to the church in Smyrna (*The People's Bible, Revelation, pages 29-33*)

Look

Verse 8

Smyrna – today a city of 250,000 which the Turkish call Izmer, is full of life, brightness and activity. At St. John's time the city was well over 1,000 years old and its coins boasted that it was the first of Asia in beauty and size. It was already a city of 200,000 at the time of this letter. Smyrna has always been situated on productive trade routes and continues to be a major port today. This city, situated 35 miles north of Ephesus, is currently the southeastern headquarters of NATO. In this letter Christ encourages this church, "Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer." In 155, just about 60 years after this letter, the bishop of Smyrna, Polycarp, was martyred at the hands of the Romans. Surely the words of this letter were in Polycarp's mind as he made his bold witness for the Lord, for as a boy, Polycarp had studied at the feet of St. John. According to tradition, it was Polycarp who read this letter to the church at Smyrna when it arrived. Much of this letter concerns itself with the cost of following Christ. Eleven cities had applied for the honor of building a new temple to honor and worship the Roman Emperor. Out of them Smyrna was chosen. The people considered it a great honor to receive permission to build one of the most splendid temples ever for the worship of the Emperor. As a key center of religious allegiance to Rome, Smyrna received both status and wealth. Out of gratitude to Rome, Smyrna's leaders began a persecution of local Christians. The Roman's greatest prize in these persecutions was Polycarp, the leader of the great city's Christians. The church there began as a product of St. Paul's preaching and continues strong to our own day. (Paul converted Polycarp's parents.) About half of the population is considered Christian even though the Muslims have dominated the area for over 1100 years -- a witness of the Lord's blessing of this church for which Christ had only praise in this letter in Revelation.

Verse 9

"*Synagogue of Satan*"—The Jewish synagogues should have been places where God's Word was taught and where people were prepared for the coming Messiah. But many Jewish people rejected Christ and used their synagogues as bases from which they persecuted the church, serving Satan and not God.

Verse 10 “*Ten days*”—The number 10 is a symbol of completeness. A day is a short period of time. The people in Smyrna would suffer. But God would shorten their period of suffering so they could endure.

Verse 11 *Second death* – eternal death. We are born into this life physically alive, but spiritually dead. Those who come to faith in Jesus Christ are given spiritual life, and therefore has a second life. When the believers life on earth ends, his spiritual life continues. However, the one who is spiritually dead, and then dies physically bears both spiritual and physical death – *a second death*. *He who overcomes* – i.e. perseveres in the faith, will not lose their spiritual life, even if they lose their physical life. The implied warning is that those of the household of faith who do not persevere in the faith (they either give up the faith, or lose it out of neglect to cultivate it) will be subject to the second, or eternal death.

Discuss

1. What word of commendation does Jesus give the church in Smyrna?
2. What word of criticism does Jesus give the church in Smyrna?

Apply

3. What element in the description of Jesus (1:12-16) does Jesus refer to in this letter? How does this fit into the content of the letter to Smyrna? What impact should it have on our church?
4. The Ephesian church which was chastised by Christ in his first letter is all but non-existent today. The church at Smyrna which was praised by Christ continues strong after almost two thousand years. What does this say about the future of a church which is not careful about error?
5. The Christians at Smyrna were poor in material things but rich spiritually. The wealthy at Smyrna had little time for non-productive (in this world) activities. Relate this to Matthew 19:16-30. Is this a universal principle?
6. (*For your personal consideration.*) If called upon to deny your Lord today or be burned alive (as was Polycarp) would you be able to remain faithful unto death? (*Perhaps it would be good if this kind of faith was the subject of our prayers more often.*)
7. Just as each letter looks back to one or two elements of Jesus’ glory, so each letter looks ahead to blessings Jesus will give his faithful. Which blessings are promised to the faithful in this letter? What does this mean for us?

The church members in Smyrna had been faithful to God. They would suffer persecution, but God would deliver them.

Revelation 2:12-17

The letter to the church in Pergamum

(*The People's Bible*, Revelation, pages 33-38)

Look

Verse 12

Pergamum —a royal city built on a 1,000 foot high rock rising like a mountain out of the plain, 50 miles north of Smyrna. In ancient times it was a city of size and importance. Today is a city of 14,000 called *Bergama*. It is situated on the north bank of the Caicus, a navigable river. As early as 241 B.C. it was a city of kings and later was the resident city of the Roman Proconsul. Pergamum was noted for its extensive library and paper production. The word "parchment" actually means "of, or pertaining to *Pergamum*". By the time of St. John, Marc Antony had moved the library of 250,000 volumes to Alexandria, Egypt, and the residence of the proconsul was moved to Ephesus. Pergamum was a center for Emperor worship. All Roman citizens were required to show their patriotism by burning incense at the foot of Caesars statue while saying, "**Caesar is lord!**" The penalty for refusing to do so was imprisonment or death. Worship of Athena was also common. Pergamum was also a center for the worship of Zeus. The four-story altar to Zeus could be seen from anywhere in the city. The worship of Asclepios (regarded as the god of medicine) was also centered there. People were attracted from all over the Mediterranean by stories of miraculous healings. A special part of the famous *Asclepion* was the healing tunnel. Those seeking treatment were given hallucinatory drugs and then led down the steps into the tunnel. The drugged patient was then to walk through the snake infested tunnel. As they did, whispered voices would come through the ceiling telling them, "*You will be healed.*" "*All praise to Asclepios who is healing you.*" "*Be healed.*" History tells us that some were healed, while some died from snake bites. Others emerged from the tunnel hopelessly insane. A small Christian church was founded there, but we don't know by whom.

Verse 13

"*Antipas*"—Other than his name, we know nothing about Antipas. He served, and he continues to serve as a witness to the truth.

Verse 14

"*Balaam*"—Balaam was the pagan prophet of the Old Testament who was commanded by Balak, king of Moab, to curse Israel. Instead he blessed Israel. (Numbers 22-24). He convinced the Israelites to eat things which had been sacrificed to idols and to commit fornication with the daughters of Moab (Numbers 25:1-2, Exodus 34:14-15). This stumbling block was also cast before the Christians at Pergamum who were eating food sacrificed to idols at social gatherings and taking part in the sex orgies that typified the religious worship of the pagan temples. The symbol of Asclepios was a serpent, the Biblical symbol for the devil. If Christians were not careful about the influence of the society around them on their lives, they might simply dismiss the worship of Asclepios as medical treatment.

Verse 17

"*Hidden manna*"—God kept the Israelites alive in the wilderness by providing manna. Jesus and his Word are the manna that come down from heaven. This manna alone keeps us alive. (See John 6:49,58.)

"*White stone . . . new name*"—In John's day, when a jury gave an accused person a white stone, it meant the jury was acquitting that person. A name describes a person. God gives his faithful a new name that means righteousness and eternal life.

Discuss

1. What word of commendation does Jesus give the church in Pergamum?

2. What word of criticism does Jesus give the church in Pergamum?

Apply

3. What element in the description of Jesus (1:12-16) does Jesus refer to in this letter? How does this fit into the content of the letter to Pergamum? What impact should it have on our church?

4. The First Apostolic Council, convened in Jerusalem, sent out a letter which outlined the God-pleasing answers to several practical matters troubling the early church. This letter is recorded for us in Acts 15:22-29. Which one of these verses in Acts speaks directly to the problems in Pergamos and how does it address the problem?

5. The Christians at Pergamos were not careful about the influences of non-Christian society in their lives. Yet this is part of overcoming in v. 17. What are some of the non-Christian (*anti-Christian*) influences in your life and in what ways can you overcome these influences?

6. Just as each letter looks back to one or two elements of Jesus' glory, so each letter looks ahead to blessings Jesus will give his faithful. Which blessings are promised to the faithful in this letter? What does this mean for us?

Jesus commended the church members in Pergamum for their faithfulness under persecution, but he also warned them against harboring false teachers.

Revelation 2:18-29

The letter to the church in Thyatira

(*The People's Bible, Revelation, pages 38-44*)

Look

Verse 20

"*Thyatira*"— The origin of the church at Thyatira is unknown, but Lydia of Thyatira (Acts 16:14) may have helped Christians cause there. Thyatira, in what is today central Turkey, was the smallest of the seven cities written to, but we have no idea how large the church was. Its modern

name is *Akhisar*. Thyatira gained its economic prosperity through its location on the main trading route through the Hermes Valley. In addition, Thyatira had become an important manufacturing center, renowned for the quality of its goods. As a result, there were plenty of manufacturing jobs to be had, except if you were a Christian. To have a job in Thyatira's manufacturing trades, it was necessary for you to belong to a guild or union. To be a guild member meant that you had to attend banquets held in pagan temples, and eat meat that had first been offered as a sacrifice to the pagan idol of that temple. The surplus meat was also offered for sale in local meat markets. The Christians therefore faced some important questions. Could Christians attend guild banquets held in pagan temples, even if not doing so meant losing or never getting a job? Could Christians eat meat which had been offered to idols, even if they didn't believe in the idols, and needed the work?

This is the longest of the seven letters. The church there was faithful except on one point of error and apparently many followed this particular error. One called **Jezebel** in the text had encouraged Christians to compromise with the world. Therefore this letter deals with how Christians relate in and to the world. Today Christianity is not to be found in Thyatira at all. There is one ancient Christian church, but worship there consists of idolatry and worship of the dead who had the money to pay to be buried in the churchyard. The bones of these are taken from the ground after the decay process has been completed and stored in a vault under the church and prayed for.

Verse 20

"Jezebel"—The woman referred to here may have had the name Jezebel. More likely, Jesus is recalling a woman from the Old Testament—the wicked wife of king Ahab, who led God's people into idolatry.

Verse 24

"Satan's so-called deep secrets"—Satan tempted Adam and Eve by offering deeper knowledge if they ate of the forbidden tree. He was doing the same in the church at Thyatira, using a prophetess in its midst. Apparently Jezebel's religion was marketed as one of the mystery religions which were so popular in those days. As a follower worked his way through the religion he would be rewarded with deep and mysterious secrets which would better enable him to achieve some eternal goal (*as the Rosicrucians and many of the Lodges do today*).

Verse 28

"The morning star"—Later in Revelation, Jesus refers to himself as “the bright Morning Star” (22:16).

Discuss

1. What word of commendation does Jesus give the church in Thyatira?

2. What word of criticism does Jesus give the church members in Thyatira?

Apply

3. What element in the description of Jesus (1:12-16) does Jesus refer to in this letter? How does this fit into the content of the letter to Thyatira? What impact does it have on our church?
4. To the world the toleration of differing ideas is a virtue. What does God say of tolerating ideas which are different from his?

5. While the world demands toleration of its ideas, especially when those ideas are different than God's, in what ways does the world refuse to tolerate God's ideas?

6. Just as each letter looks back to one or two elements of Jesus' glory, so each letter looks ahead to blessings Jesus will give his faithful. Which blessings are promised to the faithful in this letter? What does this mean for us?

The church in Thyatira had grown, and it was doing more than it had done at first. But the congregation allowed a prophetess to lead some of its members astray.