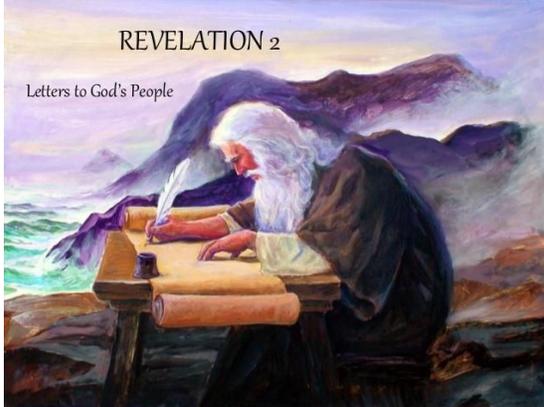


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Compiled and written by Theresa Lisiecki

What is Happening

Last week we heard in Revelation 1:19 that Jesus wanted John to write down *what is happening and what will happen afterwards*. We have discussed in the Introduction that the Book of Revelation is St. John's receiving of a vision of Jesus showing him, telling him of events that were to take place in three different time periods:

- What is happening: This we will begin to study today as we look at the letter written to the seven Churches in Asia Minor.
- What will happen #1: Most biblical scholars today will say that the visions St. John has in 4:1-18:24 will be focused on the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple that occurred in 70 AD
- What will happen #2: 19:1-22:21 focuses on what will happen at the end of time.

In today's study as we begin to look at the messages to the seven Churches please note that the form of these letters is very similar to the oracles found in the prophetic writings of the Old Testament. The word "oracle" basically means the Word of God. What we will be reading and studying in chapters two and three are important in they help us understand that the challenges that faced the 1st century Christians are not that different from today's challenges... suffering persecution, apathy and indifference to our faith, false teachers and much more. With each of the seven letters it will end with words similar to: *whoever has ears ought to hear*. This means you and me as well. We would be wise to see our lives in the challenges of these churches and to heed the instructions of God.

Please notice that there is a common structure to the messages to the seven churches;

1. **Introduction:** *To the angel of the church of (Church Name), write...*
2. **Name of Christ:** Jesus announcing Himself with image from chapter one
3. **Positive Aspects and Failures of Church:** Jesus reveals the situation in each of the Churches beginning with, "I know..." You could think of it as a mid-term exam. If they have done good Jesus affirms that, and where they are failing Jesus points that out. See themselves through the eyes of "the Judge", they can make whatever changes need to be made before their final judgement.
4. **REPENT:** Jesus gives a specific appeal to each Church given their present live practices
5. **"Curses" should they not respond:** General call to listen to what is Spirit is saying to all the Churches and to you and I.
6. **BLESSING:** A promise "to the victor" given they live in the way Christ calls us to.

Scholars suggest that the public nature of these letters, given that all seven Churches would read the message to the other six, was to instruct all seven. How can we be better should always be in the hearts of Christians. Here Jesus is telling them the “best practices” of the other six churches, as well as how they have failed. In regard to this last element, the Churches, and each one of us, may be saying that the failure of the other Churches is not their failure but all Christians would be wise to recognize it could eventually be if they/we are not careful.

Church in Ephesus 2:1-7

Church tradition has it that St. John settled in Ephesus from there ministering to the churches throughout Asia Minor and writing his letters and gospel until his death.

2:1 church in Ephesus: The city of Ephesus was built in the 10th century BC and was THE major port city for centuries and in the time of Christ was considered the second largest city next to Rome. It was famous as the home of the Temple of Artemis, one of the seven Wonders of the Ancient World. St. Paul established the church here (Acts 19:1-10) and then later called St. Timothy to build up the Church in Ephesus on the foundation he had laid (1 Timothy 1:3). St. Paul lived in the city for over three years teaching and preaching. This city, while the first city on the Roman mail route also was considered the “mother-church” of those churches in Asia minor so it would be expected that the communications to the seven churches would begin here.

Next comes Jesus naming himself. In this first message Jesus shows how close He is with His people by identifying Himself as ***The one who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks in the midst of the seven gold lampstands.*** Remember from last week that the *seven stars* means the seven bishops or guardians of the seven Churches, and the *seven gold lampstands* is an image for the seven churches these letters are written to.

2:2-3 I know your works: An ominous statement that each of us should take to heart. Christ knows us better than we do ourselves. Each of the seven letter includes a section where Jesus speaks as a judge towards the church. Christ begins by commending the church in Ephesus for several things:

- ***your labor*** – scholars believe this phrase speaks to the every day work or ministry of the entire church community. It is most likely they have worked hard in all ministries: education, liturgical and service.
- ***your endurance*** – to endure means to persist through a difficult process or situation without giving in. This is a general theme in many of St. Paul’s letters (Hebrews 10:36, Romans 5:3-4, 2 Corinthians 6:4), as well as there seven times in the book of Revelation that the word *endurance* occurs (1:9; 2:2, 3, 19;3:10; 13:10; 14:12).
- ***that you cannot tolerate the wicked*** – we must remember that while tolerance is a virtue, to tolerate evil is wrong.
- ***tested those who call themselves apostles but are not*** – just like today, in the time of Christ there were many charlatans. Some were well intention but poorly catechized in

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the faith, but most were offering false teachings. Jesus himself called believers to *Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves* (Matt 7:15). St. John tells us: *test the spirits to see whether they belong to God* (1 John 4:1-5).

- **Endurance...suffered for my name and not grown weary** – Because endurance in the face of hardship is so important Christ repeats his praise of the Church in Ephesus for remaining steadfast in the face of persecution.

2:4 I hold this against you: Now we hear where the membership has gone wrong. As we walk through each of the seven Churches we would be wise to use these statements of condemnation as a measure of our own walk in Christ, as an examination of conscience. And what is their sin? They have **lost the love** they had **at first**, when they first believed. Passion and excitement is a hard passion to maintain. It ebbs and wanes. We can deduce since they are doing such good work that the criticism comes because those involved are doing the work out of obligation or without truly investing themselves. This can be a fatal affliction if left unchecked (1 Cor. 13:1-3).

2:5 Realize how far you have fallen: One of the gifts of regular participation in the Sacrament of Reconciliation is, if done right, helps us to remain aware of just how intentional we are living our live of faith. Christ is asking the Ephesians to stop and look at their personal investment in faith now as compared to when they first began. Christ is calling them (and us) to ongoing renewal in the Holy Spirit, the same Spirit that gave them the excitement and direction to do **the works** (they)**did at first**. Just as any relationship, it takes ongoing committed work to not be distracted and to be as, if not more, invested as when we first begin. Should they choose to ignore Jesus' command or call? **I will...remove your lampstand from its place**. In other words, the community will be destroyed. Scholars suggest that Jesus uses this image of destruction because the Ephesians understand the problem of letting sin build up. It removes you from the life you want to live. Theologian David Chilton in his book on Revelation called The Day of Vengeance suggest that St. John was using an important and current event in the life of the city of Ephesus to inspire his challenge. The city is a the mouth of the River Cayster which brought down to the sea coast a great deal of silt and sediment. There was so much that would build up that eventually the boats could not get into the harbor. If the city wanted to remain a major port they needed to do something. So, at first they built an extended boardwalk but eventually they took the time to dredge the harbor. This was done at great expense and labor. This was done not just once but several times, the last being in 64 AD. Had the city committed to a routine cleaning of the harbor there would have been no problem. As it is, today the archeological dig site for the city of Ephesus is six miles from the coastline. St. John is reminding the Ephesians (and you and I) to do the work regularly to remain committed to Christ. (Revelation: The Kingdom Yet to Come)

2:6 Nicolaitans: Before moving on Christ offers one more compliment to the Church in Ephesus. *You hate the work of the Nicolaitans*. The Nicolaitans were followers of the heretic

Nicolaus. He was one of the original seven chosen by the Church in Jerusalem to become the first deacons of the Church there (Acts 6:5). Those who followed Nicolaus (who became a heretic) were said to have a casual attitude toward idolatry and sexual immorality.

2:7 He who has an ear, let him hear: As this letter draws to a close Jesus offers eternal life as the reward for heeding the warning and returning themselves to a life of faithfulness. In this case the image Jesus uses is **the tree of life**. Jesus uses the word **conquer** (some translations will have *victor*). The Greek word used here is *nikao* which can be translated either way). Even today we recognize that to live a true Christian life is often a battle. If we remain faithful, he who is victorious wins eternal life. St. John will use the Greek word *nikao* six times in his first letter, 1 John (2:13, 14; 4:4; 5:4-5). And what is the particular promise in this letter? **The right to eat from the tree of life**, the tree found in the **paradise of God**. Adam and Eve were not to eat of this tree (Gen 2:16) which symbolizes immortality. So here, Jesus is promising eternal life and communion with Him to those who work hard, endure persecution and remain faithful. We will see later that the *tree of life* will appear in the final vision of the New Jerusalem (22:2).

Church in Smyrna 2:8-11

2:8 Church in Smyrna: To look at a map, Smyrna would be located in what is present day Izmir, Turkey. There were deep ties between Rome and Smyrna not only as a wealthy trading partner but also in Smyrna's desire to fulfill Rome's expectation of emperor worship. The city fathers built a temple to the goddess Roma in 195 BC and for many reasons, Smyrna remained a center for the imperial cult. It is a short leap to understand that the persecution that the Church in Smyrna felt came from this strong counterculture brought about by the city's worship of the emperor and all things Rome. As if persecution from those committed to Roman worship was not enough, there was a hostile Jewish community in Smyrna making the life of the Christians difficult as well. St. Polycarp, a student of St. John's became a Bishop of Smyrna and was later martyred for the faith.

In addressing Himself to the Church in Smyrna, Jesus offers His title as God – **first and the last**, as well as His role as the Son of God – **who died but came to life**.

2:9 I know: As with all the letters Jesus first offers comfort to the community by letting them know He understands their hardships. First is their **tribulation**. The Greek word used (*thlipsis*) could also be translated "affliction," "hardship," or "distress." These are words that are often used in the New Testament for the suffering that Christians undergo because of their faith. Some scholars suggest because *tribulation* is coupled with **poverty** that the financial struggles of this Christian community are tied into their faith. Membership being boycotted and not hired because of their known affiliation with Christ. But Christ goes on to recognize, that while they may be poor financially, they are **rich** in faith.

Jesus goes on to recognize another challenge that faces the community (which also may be a cause of their poverty). Jesus also knows the **slander of those who claim to be Jew and are not**. We must remember that it was not only Rome who persecuted the Christian because of

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their unwillingness to worship Caesar as a god; but, there was also active persecution from those Jews who denied Jesus as being the Messiah and felt that this Christian “sect” were defiling the true faith, were heretics and needed to be put down. For support of this read Acts 13:50; 14:2, 19; 17:5; 18:12, and Romans 11:28. A truce had been established long ago between Rome and the Jews exempting them from emperor worship but all else must bow before Rome and Caesar as god. It is very probably that the Jews of Smyrna took advantage of their position by exploiting the vulnerabilities of the Christians by testifying against them, and in fact Jesus Himself foretold of such persecution (Matthew 10:17-18). Maybe this is what lies behind Jesus using the word *slander* which simply means to speak against.

Jesus goes on to call these Jews of Smyrna, ***the assembly of Satan***. A literal translation of the Greek would better read: *synagogue of Satan*. This is very strong language but we can see similar language coming from the mouth of Jesus as he challenges the Jewish leadership for their efforts in putting Him to death (John 8:39-59). We must keep in mind there were those Jesus who were against Jesus and participated in putting Him to death, but there also were many, many good Jews (the Twelve Apostles) who recognized Jesus as the Messiah and gave their lives to follow Him.

2:10 Don't be afraid: This is an often-heard refrain throughout the pages of the bible. It is important to understand that this call to not be afraid has nothing to do with feelings. It is a call, an appeal to strengthen the believer in how they are to respond to the unknown as well as in this case danger and persecution. There are many variations of quotes about courage and fear but they all come down to this. Courage is not the absence of fear but the willingness to act in the face of fear for a greater good. As Christians we must trust that God is in control and we must entrust ourselves to His greater purpose.

Jesus goes one to be more specific about this tribulation. ***The devil will throw some of you into prison***. Who this *devil* is scholars do not offer any suggestions. Certainly we can assume it would be Rome because Smyrna, as a province of Rome, would have Roman security and military to keep the peace. The Christian Church in Smyrna is told that those thrown into prison must remain strong as they are being ***tested*** and that the ***ordeal*** will last for ***ten days***. As with all numbers in the Book of Revelation, the number ten here is symbolic and should be understood as meaning *only a short period of time*. The statement of *ten days* may be a reference to Daniel and his friends who were tested for ten days (Dan 1:12-15) by the king forcing them to eat unrighteous food. Daniel asks to be given only vegetables and comes out looking fatter and better than all the others. St. John is reminding the Christians of Smyrna to remain faithful to God because God will always have their backs.

If those Christians of the Church of Smyrna remain strong in the face of their trials and tribulations to their deaths the Jesus promises them ***the crown of life***. Once again, the phrase *crown of life* is another term for heaven. Interestingly, there is a mountain to the back of the city that was called the Crown of Smyrna. St. John was drawing on their every day culture to

give them strength and courage. (I can imagine a Christian of that time, after hearing St. John's letter, looking to the mountain to remain strong in the face of persecution.)

2:11 not hurt by second death: This letter ends by reminding the Church in Smyrna that for everyone who remains faithful throughout their struggles, they will only know the joys of heaven and not have to experience the eternal fire of hell (*second death*).

Church in Pergamum 2:12-17

2:12 Church in Pergamum: What is today, present day Bergama, Turkey; Pergamum would lie 45 miles north of Smyrna and fifteen miles inland. At one time, centuries earlier, Pergamum had been the proud city of the Attalid kingdom. At the time of St. John's writings, the city boasted of a library containing 200 thousand volumes second only to that of Alexandria. It was a city of many, many temples including on to Zeus and the Greek god of medicine, Asclepius whose symbol was the snake. The snake was also the symbol of the city. Worship of Caesar was also very prominent in Pergamum. We get a foretaste of what is to come for this city when Christ declares Himself ***the words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword***. The Jewish Christians would know this image as one coming from Christ mouth issuing power and judgement.

2:13 Satan's Throne: Scholars are unsure as to exactly what St. John is referring to here when he identifies *Satan's Throne*. Most believe that it is a reference to the massive altar of Zeus which certainly looked like a throne. We all know from our Greek mythology that Zeus was the king of the gods. Since Jews and Christian considered the pagan gods to be demons (1 Cor. 10:20), it would follow that Zeus as king of the demons would be called Satan. But there is another theory out there. Historians have found writings. In coming into the city from the south you would be facing a hill that resembled a giant throne. Finally, because Pergamum was a major center of pagan worship the city itself was called by Jews and Christians alike, Satan's Throne. Regardless of the exact location of this throne, to live in this city as a faith filled Jew or Christian would have been very difficult. They would have to contend with expectations to worship at the altars of pagan gods, sacrificial meat being sold in the public market and other such challenges.

Jesus goes on that in the face of all these challenges the Christian Church in Pergamum ***held fast*** to their faith not ***denying*** their commitment to Jesus Christ. The verse goes on to name one of their members, ***Antipas***. Very little is known of this Christian martyr (***who was martyred among you***) other than what we read here. Some suggest Antipas was the bishop of this Church. Whoever he was, we do know that his faith was great because Jesus bestows upon him a great compliment by sharing in the title Jesus gives himself as ***faithful witness*** (Rev 1:5).

2:14 Yet I have a few things against you: We now turn to how this community is not living in the faith. To understand St. John's reference to the sin of the Church of Pergamum in that some ***hold to the teaching of Balaam***, we must go back into the Old Testament, to the book of Numbers (chapter 25). As the Israelites wandered in the desert they met other nations, some

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who wanted to destroy the Israelites. One such king was **Balak**. Balak consulted a prophet **Balaam** to curse the Israelites. Balaam advised the king that a sure way to destroy the Israelite nation would be to encourage and invite them into the life of their culture. The Israelites complied and *the people began to have sexual relations with the women of Moab. These invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods* (Num 25:1-2). So, it would appear that there are those within the Church of Pergamum who are involved in the same sins of immorality and idol worship as the ancient Israelites were back under the leadership of Moses. Jesus was pointing out their sin of ***eating the food sacrificed to the idols and to play the harlot.***

2:15 Nicolaitans: And if this were not enough, the ***teachings of the Nicolaitans*** have found their way into the Church of Pergamum. (For more information on the Nicolaitans SEE 2:6.) I can see why the teachings of this heretic would be appealing to those in the Church of Pergamum. Sexual immorality and idolatry was what the citizens of the city did. Christians and Jews stood out in their practice of moral purity and worshiping only the one true God. They would have stood out. Peer pressure can be very difficult to ignore.

2:16 Therefore, Repent: The ongoing challenge of any faithful Christian, to look not just at our words but our actions and attitude as well. The Church of Pergamum may not be denying the faith in their words but some of the membership is refuting God's ways by their actions and attitudes. Interestingly, it is the whole community being held accountable. Why do you think that is so? We could respond like Cain and say: *Am I my brother's keeper?* (Gen 4:9) Or, we could be inspired by the writings of St. Paul in 1 Corinthians (chap 12) and recognize that as believers we are all the body of Christ and if one part of the body is ill we do what we can to bring it back to health. And should the sinners continue in their idolatry and immorality? Jesus promised to ***I will come to you... and wage war.***

2:17 to the victor: To those who listen to the Word of God, to those who repent and put themselves back into right relationship with God Jesus promises three things. ***I shall give...***

- **Hidden Manna** -- Manna was a bread that God fed to the Israelites as they wandered through the desert. Scholars suggest there are two ways of possibly understanding this gift.
 - Liturgically, Jesus is promising the victorious Pergamum Church the spiritual nourishment of the Eucharist. It is "hidden" only in that only those with "eyes" to see believe in the presence of Christ in communion
 - Historically, the hidden manna refers to Christ himself presently unseen, hidden away in heaven.
- **White Amulet** – Amulet is better interpreted as stone. In ancient times a white stone was given as a ticket to those invited to an "invitation only" celebration or party. Therefore, this stone represents their eternal reward of admission to the heavenly banquet.

- **New Name** – This most probably refers to a believer’s new identity in Christ. *Christians discover their true identity in Christ, an identity that will be fully revealed in the life to come.* (Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture: Revelation)

Walking in faith is not an easy task, especially if one lives within a culture that is so different than the teachings of Christ. We would be wise to see ourselves in the lives of these 1st century churches and examine our own walk in faith in light of their calls to repent.

Reflection Questions:

1. Take a moment to reflect on your own faith life. In which Church do you think you would find yourself and why?
 - a. Ephesus –where their faith is flat and passionless. They do the right things but with no fervor or emotional connection to our Lord.
 - b. Smyrna – your life is filled with persecution and misunderstanding because of your faith but you remain strong and close to God.
 - c. Pergamum – you have gotten distracted by other teachers and their false ways.
2. How would you encourage a friend, relative or neighbor who was struggling with persecution in their faith and likely to have to endure more and greater?

Catechism of the Catholic Church

Christian Name: 2156-2167

Conversion of the Baptized: 1427-1429

Heaven: 1023-1028

Idolatry: 2112-2114

Particular Judgement: 1021-1022

Punishment for Sin: 1472-1473

To Judge the Living and the Dead: 678-682

Ways to Avoid Evil: 1806, 1889, 1950, 1962, 2527

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- Apocalypse Then and Now: A Companion to the Book of Revelation by Roland J Faley
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