

What Can We Learn from The Seven Churches of Asia?

Ephesus

- 2:1 Each of the seven letters that follow begins with a reference to the scene described in 1:12-20. In this letter, the seven stars and seven lampstands refer to 1:12, 13, 16, and 20. Thus, each letter can be ascribed to Jesus. The church at **Ephesus** was established by Paul (with Priscilla and Aquila, and probably Timothy and Silas) in Acts 18:18. He returned to Ephesus in Acts 19:1, staying more than two years (Acts 19:10). Upon his final trip toward Jerusalem, Paul by-passed Ephesus so as not to spend too much time there, instead meeting with the elders of Ephesus at Miletus (Acts 20:17). Timothy may have remained in Ephesus at Paul's request (1 Tm 1:3) due to the strange doctrines that were arising even at that early date, unless that reference is to the time when Paul departed from Ephesus for Corinth as described in 2 Corinthians. The letter to the church at Ephesus probably was written during Paul's imprisonment at Rome, between 4 and 8 years before this revelation.
- 2:2 The means of distinguishing **false apostles** is not given. Although it would be convenient to differentiate on the basis of the ability to perform miracles, this may not have been possible, since the other side had powers, too. While some false signs certainly were illusions, some were real (*e.g.*, Acts 16:16-18, 19:13-16, 2 Th 2:1-12).
- 2:5 The nature of that **first love** is not given, although it was within their memories and could be found by comparing their present deeds to those of the past. **Removing the lampstand** would seem to indicate the demise of the congregation as a whole, not the individuals. The lampstand image is that of casting the light of God onto the world, as a kingdom of priests (1:6). The image in this place is stronger than just that the church will lose its effectiveness. The threatened '**coming**' is different that the 'coming' of 1:7 and 22:7. Here, the 'coming' was the result of a particular congregation failing to repent. The other 'coming' was prophesied more certainly, and was not conditional on the behavior of Christians.
- 2:6 The identity of the **Nicolaitans** is uncertain. Several traditions and theories exist, but no facts. Their deeds were rightly hated, so their problem was more than teaching a strange theory.
- 2:7 Each of the seven letters has the same line about **hearing** as the last or the second to last sentence. Jesus used this line several times (*e.g.*, Mt 11:15, 13:9, 13:43), although Jesus always used the plural. The promise of the **tree of life** in paradise recalls the one to which access was removed (Gn 3:22-24), and looks forward to the same tree in the future (Rv 22:2 and 14).

What went right: Works. Patience. Testing, detecting, and rejecting bad teaching. These lead to overcoming.

What went wrong: Maintaining rather than maturing, which leads to a failure of evangelism and the congregation.

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Smyrna

- 2:8 The origin of the church in **Smyrna** is unknown. It is 38 miles north of Ephesus, so perhaps the church began during Paul's long stay in Ephesus (Acts 19:10-12). The '**first and last, dead and alive**' refers to 1:17-18.
- 2:9 Some have compared this '**synagogue of Satan**' to Jesus' description of Jews who opposed Him (Jn 8:44). However, the behavior described here seems to be more extreme than Jewish opposition in other cities. This seems more extreme than that found in other cities. Most unbelieving Jews were described sympathetically, as Paul described his relatives as having a zeal for God, just not according to knowledge (Rm 10:2). The '**poor but rich**' theme may be found in several places (2 Co 6:10, 1 Tm 6:5-6, Jm 1:9, 2:5).
- 2:10 Although the **devil** would be capable of throwing these Christians in prison personally, the reference seems to describe the activities of the synagogue of Satan, rather than Satan himself. **Imprisonment** due to false charges by unbelieving Jews happened to several church leaders in Acts. However, the tribulation probably is not limited to imprisonment, since the letter is part of vision that contains many figurative pieces. This, too, could be a figure of speech representing many types of difficulties. Similarly, it is unlikely that their **testing** would last only **ten days**. Rather, this seems to represent a period of unknown but short duration. Some have tried to relate this to ten major periods of Roman persecution, but the selection of those ten periods is arbitrary and could be enumerated with any total from 5 to 25. Those who **remain faithful** through this tribulation will attain to eternal life. The implication is that those Christians who do not persevere will not receive the same **crown**.
- 2:11 Those '**not hurt by the second death**' are those who receive 'the crown of life.' The sentences are parallel. The second death is described in more detail in 20:1-14 and 21:1-8. Similar crowns may be found in 1 Co 9:25, 2 Tm 4:8, Jm 1:12, and 1 Pt 5:4.

What went right: Works. Overcoming tribulation, poverty, and organized opposition which had power from Satan. Their letter was only encouragement to persevere.

What went wrong: Nothing is mentioned.

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Pergamum

- 2:12 **Pergamum** was located 30 miles north of Smyrna. The city is mentioned only here in the New Testament, so the origin of the church is unknown. The ‘**two-edged sword**’ refers to 1:16.
- 2:13 Many theories have been advanced as to the nature of ‘**Satan’s throne**,’ most with reference to the emperor worship cult that had a major temple there. All is speculation. What may be said is that the agents of the evil one were strong in this place. Nothing is known of **Antipas**, either.
- 2:14 **The teaching of Balaam** is unknown in this context. The historical account of Balaam and Balak may be found in Nu 22-24 and 31:16. The latter reference seems to apply better to John’s ideas. Balaam apparently convinced a substantial number of Israelites to take foreign (pagan) wives. Perhaps believers in Pergamum were being enticed to idolatry through marrying unbelievers (pagans). Immorality seemed to accompany paganism. Eating things sacrificed to idols was addressed by Paul in 1 Co 10:14-33. Being unequally yoked to unbelievers is addressed in 2 Co 6:14-18. A synagogue of Balaam has been excavated in Jordan.
- 2:15 The identity of the **Nicolaitans** is uncertain (2:6).
- 2:16 This ‘**coming**’ is different than that of 1:7 and 22:7, but like that of 2:5 because it is directed at a specific group of people. The ‘**quickly**’ time frame would likely occur before the ‘shortly’ and ‘near’ of that larger coming. The sword would seem to represent the Word, as in Eph 6:17 and Hb 4:12.
- 2:17 The images at the end of the verse are parallel with the reward of eternal life in 2:7 and 2:11, so these should be understood to represent the same general idea. Each letter has several parallels with the others to aid in separating literal from figurative. **Hidden manna** is Jesus (Jn 6:30-58). (Also see Ex 16.) The **white stone** is more obscure, but probably relates to the stones on the ephod of the High Priest, each of which represented a tribe, and the two shoulder stones on which were engraved the names of the twelve tribes (Ex 28:6-21). The faithful will be priests with ephods with stones and new names: an image of heaven. In 3:12, the image is repeated with the variation of writing a new name on the believer, which fits with the ephod image.

What went right: Works. Focusing on the essential quality of Jesus and the promises of God in the face of extreme persecution and evil. They are promised “manna” to survive in this wilderness and are reminded of that they are a kingdom of priests.

What went wrong: Cultural baggage. Syncretism (merging religions). Falling for slick doctrines. These result in opposition from God – the sword of the Spirit.

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Thyatira

- 2:18 **Thyatira** is mentioned here, and is the home town of Lydia, the first convert of Europe (Ax 16:14). The **eyes as flames of fire** and the **feet like burnished bronze** refer to 1:14-15.
- 2:19 These Christians had not fallen back in enthusiasm like those of Ephesus (2:4-5).
- 2:20 The identity of Jezebel is unknown. The name is from 1 K 16 – 2 K 9. When selecting a name for children, two names are avoided: Judas and Jezebel. The problem introduced by this Jezebel is similar to that of Balaam in 2:14. Queen Jezebel made Baal worship the state religion in the Northern Kingdom. Immorality often accompanied idolatry, and immorality was often used as a figure of speech for idolatry.
- 2:21 The patience of God is illustrated. Also, this Jezebel was not a part of the plan, although God had used evil in the past in order to accomplish His purpose.
- 2:22 This sentence has been explained in many ways. Jesus says He will cast her into a **bed**. The figure may imply sickness, or it may be a piece of the **adultery** image that represented idolatry. Whatever the exact nature of her difficulty, it shows that Jesus is in control. Those who followed her would have a very difficult time. But, they, too, have the opportunity to avoid this **tribulation by repenting**.
- 2:23 The threats extend to her **'children'** who will be killed with **'death.'** The word, death, is used in the New Testament for both spiritual (1 Jn 3:14, 5:16-17, Jm 1:15, 5:20, and many others) and physical death (Hb 7:23, 9:16, Col 1:22, Ph 2:30, and many others). This may be taken either way, or perhaps both ways. The 'kill' is likely figurative, as in "I will dispose of this idolatrous movement through death." Whatever Jesus had in mind, it would be obvious to the churches in the area. He extends the warning to all the readers at the end of the verse. Literally, John wrote that Jesus would search the **'kidneys.'** That was a figure of speech of the time representing the deepest emotions and affections.
- 2:24 The false teaching has not spread to everyone. The false teaching is characterized as **'the deep things of Satan.'** No further explanation is given, and little remains of the history of the time and place.
- 2:27 The quotation of Ps 2:8-9 began back in 2:26. Ps 2 is often quoted in the New Testament (Ax 4:25-28, 13:33, Hb 1:5, Rv 19:15, 19:19). The pope used this verse to claim authority over the kings of the earth. The future tense written by David is present tense for the Christians of Thyatira, as seen in the change to the past tense in the last part of the verse. Jesus was already reigning (Mt 28:18, Eph 1:20-23). This promise was made in reference to the eternal kingdom that is now in reality. So, in some real way, Christians have authority over the **'nations'** and **'rule them with a rod of iron.'** We have this authority because Jesus has passed it on to us (Eph 2:6, Rm 5:17). This must also harmonize with the passages concerning obedience to civil governments (Rm 13:1, Titus 3:1, 1 Pt 2:13-14). See comments on Rv 1:5-7. By being obedient to civil government, we are in control. We may have a hard time seeing this **'rod of iron.'** As a comparison, we can say with confidence that God has authority over all people on earth, yet most of them do not acknowledge His authority.
- 2:28 The **'morning star'** is of uncertain interpretation. Later in this book, Jesus identifies Himself as the morning star (Rv 22:16). The other places where a star is meaningful are Nu 24:17, the star in the east of Mt 2, and 2 Pt 1:19.

What went right: Growth in works. Love. Faith. Service. Patience. With these, they rule over the nations and a positive destination.

What went wrong: Cultural baggage. Syncretism (merging religions). Falling for slick doctrines. Continuing in this path will result in great difficulties, perhaps spiritual death, and the demise of the congregation.

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Sardis

- 3:1 Sardis was the capital of the ancient nation of Lydia. The **seven stars** and **seven spirits** refer to 1:4, 16, and 20, identifying the speaker as Jesus. The problem with the church in Sardis was complacency brought on by a good reputation.
- 3:2 Jesus warning is that complacency kills.
- 3:3 The image is repeated in 1 Th 5:2, 2 Pt 3:10, Rv 16:15, Lk 12:39, and Mt 24:43. This image may or may not be that of Judgment (the time of which no one knows, not even Jesus: Mt 24:26). It could be a specific visitation upon these people.
- 3:4 Note that individual humans are found '**worthy**.' (2 Th 1:5, 11). The image of **white** clothing stands for purity. In the New Testament other than in Revelation, white garments are seen only on angels and the transfigured Jesus. However, two prophets used the image of white garments to represent purity. (Dn 12:10, 11:35, Is 1:18)
- 3:5 The action of **erasing** (blotting out, wiping away, Ax 3:19, Rv 7:17, 21:4) implies that the names were in the **Book of Life** (Rv 21:27, Rv 20:12-15, Rv 17:8, Rv 13:8, Ph 4:3) at a prior time. Therefore, some Christians in Thyatira were in danger of losing their place in that book. They had secured entry into heaven, then lost it by their complacency. Jesus will **confess the names of the faithful** on that day (cf. Mt 10:32-33, Lk 12:8-9). Moses refers to the same book in Exodus 32:32.

What went right: Works. A few were still called worthy.

What went wrong: Their reputation was without substance. Inconsistent works, ready to die out. This will result in a sudden and unexpected opposition from God. Potential to be blotted out of the Book of Life.

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Philadelphia

- 3:7 Unlike the other letters, this one begins with a description of Jesus that is not an exact quotation from chapter 1. Having a **key**, as in 1:18 and all the references at that place, is a symbol of power over whatever the key fits. Although the **key of David** is not used elsewhere in the New Testament, a similar usage may be found in Is 22:22. It would seem to be the power over the house of David, a reference to Jesus' claim to the eternal throne of David. The image in Mt 16:19 of possessing the keys to the kingdom of heaven may also be a part of this. The image of opening and shutting a door is also from Is 22.
- 3:8 The nature of the **open door** that is before them is not given. Paul used that metaphor three times (1 Co 16:9, 2 Co 2:12, Col 4:3) and Luke once (Ax 14:27) to indicate an opportunity to spread the gospel.
- 3:9 The **Synagogue of Satan** (2:9) appears again, but with different results. Whether the Jews in Smyrna repented is not given. But these Jews in Philadelphia apparently were about to become believers. Like the Christians of Smyrna, Jesus has no rebuke for the Christians of Philadelphia. If this image is of repentance, then the door in 3:8 should be a door of opportunity for the gospel and the keys would be the keys of the kingdom to which these Jews laid claim (Lk 11:52).
- 3:10 The **coming** in this verse is the same as the one in 1:7 because it was the one that would affect the whole world. This is another of the places where John echoes the prophecy of Jesus (Mt 24:1-34, Lk 21:5-28) that this tribulation would come in the latter half of the first century (1:1, 1:3, 3:11, 22:6, 22:7, 22:10, 22:12, 22:20). These Christians would be spared that tribulation.
- 3:11 The **crown** they could lose is likely the same one as in 2:10-11, another clear image that a Christian may have the crown of life and lose it, or be written in the Book of Life and be erased.
- 3:12 These pillars are in the church, the New Jerusalem.

What went right: Works despite having little strength. Kept the Word. Not denied Jesus' quality. This perseverance will result in the conversion of their theological enemies and being exempt from the tribulation leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem in which the Jewish quarter of every major city was destroyed.

What went wrong: Nothing mentioned other than a warning not to lose their crowns.

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Laodicea

- 3:14 The **faithful witness** recalls 1:5. The **beginning of the creation of God** has been used to make a case for Jesus being created, rather than having always existed. Those who wish to prove that Jesus was created turn to the eight places where Jesus is called 'begotten' (Jn 1:14, 1:18, 3:16, 3:18, Ax 13:33, Hb 1:5, 5:5, 1 Jn 4:9). But in the same passage in John where Jesus is called the 'only begotten,' He is also said to be the one through whom all things were made (*cf.*, Col 3:16). The argument cannot be settled because each side tries to make a case on too little evidence. The point of the figure of speech in this place is indicating that Jesus has first place (all power) over this world.
- 3:16 Put simply, lukewarm Christians make God sick.
- 3:17 This sounds like the church in the United States, especially those who believe that our prosperity is a blessing from God. The Christians of Laodicea allowed their prosperity to deceive them that they were doing well spiritually. Christians are not promised health or wealth (note the medical and financial conditions of the major characters of the New Testament). Having either or both may be a blessing, or may be a temptation.
- 3:18 The money, clothing, and medicine offered by Jesus must be figurative, since He chastised them for trusting those things in the previous verse. The **white garments** are purity (3:5). The **eye salve** is for understanding (that you may see, as in John 9:41 and Rm 11:8). The **gold** is less specific (1 Pt 1:7, Zech 13:9, Ps 19:10, Ps 119:72, Pr 8:19), perhaps wisdom or understanding God.
- 3:19 The Christian is nowhere promised health or wealth. Prosperity is more likely the reward of the other side than the blessing of God. Adversity is to be our teacher and our reminder (Hb 12:5-13, 1 Co 11:32).
- 3:20 Jesus **knocks** and calls, but we are required to answer in order to be part of the dinner.
- 3:21 The Twelve were promised **thrones** (Lk 22:30, Mt 19:28). The throne of Jesus was referenced in 1:7 from Daniel 7:5-14, and in Hb 12:2.

What went right: Nothing noted.

What went wrong: Lukewarm, therefore sickening. Lulled into complacency by comfort. But, the call to overcoming implies that they are not yet dead.