

BITTER HONEY: THE REVELATION

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CHAPTER 2: LETTERS TO THE CHURCHES

Christ commanded John to write letters to seven churches. These letters follow a definite pattern. First, Christ identified Himself as the speaker. Then Christ said that He knew and saw what was happening in the church. If there was sin in the church, Christ stated what it was and what He would do about it. Christ often used symbols drawn from the Old Testament to describe the sin that he found in the church and His reaction to it. Christ also noted the obedience of several churches, and made promises typical of the Old Testament as a response to their continued obedience. Christ closed each letter with the command, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." This command was also drawn from the gospels and the Old Testament.

The letters all stressed not only that Christ was present but also that He maintained an ongoing relationship with His church. If His people obeyed, Christ would bless and protect them. If they disobeyed, He would chasten or judge. It was this continuing daily relationship that would give His church the strength to withstand persecution down through the centuries. In these chapters, Christ was also giving His church two principles for interpreting the Revelation. First, Christ was telling people to look for themes that were carried through the whole book and then to look for Revelation's symbols in the rest of Scripture. Almost every symbol in Revelation was drawn from the Old Testament. The Revelation could be interpreted if enough of its Old Testament sources could be found.

Verses 1-7

In Revelation 2:1, Christ identifies Himself as the One who held the seven stars in His right hand and walked among the seven candlesticks. This built on the last verse in chapter 1. The candlesticks were the churches, and Christ is still walked among them. So Christ knew what was happening at Ephesus. Christ praised the Ephesians for putting false prophets to the test and rejecting them. The Ephesians had a good record for defending the truth. Acts 18:24-28 recorded that Aquila and Priscilla taught Apollos the whole truth when he came to Ephesus. Then in I Timothy 1:3, Paul left Timothy in Ephesus to guard the truth. However, concern for right doctrine was not enough to please God. The church at Ephesus had left its first love. In their early years, the Ephesians had been known for their love (Ephesians 1:15). Within a few decades, the Ephesians had lost their love for the saints and for God. Love always seems to be the first thing lost by the church. When it was lost, any kind of sin could grow. So the greatest commandments recorded in the Old Testament were to love the Lord with all their hearts (Deuteronomy 6:4-5) and to love their neighbors as themselves (Leviticus 19:18).

God's children in both the Old and New Testaments were continually commanded to love God, and to love each other. However, the history of God's people had always been a record of harlotry. God warned Israel many times to leave her sin and return to God (Jeremiah 2; Ezekiel 16). If Israel refused to repent, God promised to drive her from the land He had given. So Christ told the Ephesians, "Remember therefore from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you, and will remove your lamp stand out of its place - unless you repent" (Revelation 2:5). If God's people did not return to their first love, their lamp stand would be removed. The church would cease to exist at Ephesus as surely as God had driven Israel from her land.

Christ promised that those who overcome would eat from the tree of life in paradise. Jesus was pointing back to the Garden of Eden in Genesis 3:22. Adam sinned, was driven from the tree of life, and died. Christ promised the Ephesians that those who endure to the end will be freed forever from sin and death. They will eat from the tree of life. The Lord closed this letter the same way that He closed all of the letters. He said, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." Christ was ordering those believers who can understand the prophecy to listen to the Spirit's warning. This command grows from the gospels and the Old Testament. Christ made similar commands in Matthew 11:15 and

13:43. The Old Testament often said that Israel should have been able to understand, though they seldom listened (Deuteronomy 29:4; Jeremiah 5:21; 6:10; Ezekiel 12:2; Luke 14:35).

Verses 8-11

Christ began His letter to the church in Smyrna by identifying Himself as the first and the last, the One who was dead and has come to life. Here Christ repeated Revelation 1:8. Christ was the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. Christ repeated this declaration several times in the book of Revelation. This description came originally from the Old Testament. Isaiah 44:6 read, "Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel and His Redeemer, the Lord of hosts; I am the first and I am the last, and there is no God besides Me." Christ was identified Himself as the God of the Old Testament. As God, Christ died for sin, and was raised to life.

As always, the first thing Christ said to the church in Smyrna was, I know what you are doing. This constant theme is very common in the Old Testament. Israel sinned because they thought God did not know what they were doing. This astounded God and His prophets. Psalm 94:8-9 commanded, "Pay heed, you senseless among the people; and when will you understand, stupid ones? He who planted the ear, does He not hear? He who formed the eye, does He not see?" So Christ told His church in every city, I am not for off; I see and I know exactly what you are doing. So I responded to you every day in blessing and chastening.

Christ comforted His people in Smyrna by assuring them that He saw their tribulation. The Lord warned them that the church was about to suffer severe persecution, but that it would only last for a short time. Those who were faithful until death would not be hurt by the second death and would receive the crown of life. This was the same promise that James made to the twelve tribes of Israel dispersed among the nations (Jam 1:12). The exile church must continue to endure. Those who are faithful to death would receive eternal life with Christ. In verse 8, Christ called Himself the One who was dead and had come to life. As Christ rose from the grave, those who persevered would rise in Him.

The Lord assured His people in Smyrna that He not only saw their suffering but also the blasphemy of those who said that they were the spiritual descendants of Abraham. Verses like Deuteronomy 29:11; 31:12 and Leviticus 24:16 implied that believing gentiles would not be cut off from the community. They were treated like Jews, and even Jews could be cut off from the church if they rebelled. In Hosea 1:9, God told the prophet to name his son Lo Ami, saying, "for you are not My people and I am not your God." Scripture always looked at the Jews from a bifocal perspective. In the same chapters of Romans, Paul said that Jews owned the temple and the law (Romans 9:4-5), and that the real Jews were the believers (Romans 9:6-8). As the spiritual descendants of Abraham, the Jewish nation encompassed all believers of all time. As the physical descendants of the patriarchs, the Jewish nation has a special love from God which was not shared by gentiles, and promises which remained yet to be fulfilled.

Verses 12-17

Christ introduced Himself to the church at Pergamum as the One who had the sharp two-edged sword. This sword was seen first in Revelation 1:16. The Old Testament mentioned the sword of the Lord quite often (Ezekiel 21:3; Jeremiah 47:6-7; Isaiah 27:1). When Christ was seen in the Old Testament, He sometimes had a sword either in His hand or proceeding out of His mouth (Joshua 5:13-15; Numbers 22:31). Christ's sword judged or chastened men for their sin. It brought nations against each other to accomplish God's purposes, and it caused famine and disease. Christ's sword was a symbol for His judgment, but it may also have existed. Genesis 3:24 said that God stationed both the cherubim and Christ's flaming sword to guard the way to the tree of life. Christ mentioned the sword of the Lord because He threatened to chasten His people.

Christ praised the church in Pergamum for holding fast to their faith despite persecutions. However, the Lord was not completely pleased with them. There were some in the community who acted like Balaam. This prophet kept teaching Balak to put stumbling blocks before God's people. Why Balaam? Through Numbers 22 and 23, Balaam appeared to be a true believer. Balaam only went to Balak when God told him to do so. Balaam told Balak exactly what God told the prophet to say. But why was God angry enough at Balaam to threaten his life for going? Why? Balaam knew God, believed Him, and apparently had quite a reputation as a prophet. Although Balaam greatly feared God, the prophet did not love Him. Balaam tried to be independent and to compromise with the world. Balaam obeyed God as far as he really had to obey. Beyond that, Balaam tried to get as much from the world as he could. So Balaam viewed Israel objectively. He told Balak, I can't curse Israel because God had blessed them. However, if you are determined to fight them, cause Israel to turn away from God so that God will reject them (Numbers 31:16). Though they had done a fine job of standing up under persecution, the church at Pergamum contained rebels. These looked like believers, thought of themselves as believers, and were actually intent on destroying the church. These taught rebellion against God for their own gain, and they placed stumbling blocks before God's children. How would Christ respond? Balaam was killed when God judged Balak through His people. The Lord promised the same judgment for the rebels at Pergamum. Jesus would destroy them with the sword of His mouth.

Christ promised His people that those who overcome would receive hidden manna and a white stone with a new name which no one else knew. God fed Israel manna for forty years in the wilderness (Exodus 16:35). The word "manna" means, "What is this?" To this day, no one knows what manna was, unless it was in fact the bread of angels rained from heaven. The phrase "hidden manna" is difficult to understand. It may have come from John 6 where the apostle used the symbol of manna to represent Christ. Perhaps the hidden manna was eternal life in Christ. In John 6:48-51, Christ explained, "I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread which comes down out of heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he shall live forever; and the bread also which I shall give for the life of the world is My flesh."

The promise of a new name grew out of a broader Scriptural context. Names attempt to describe people and objects. So God used names to describe Himself like the Good Shepherd, the Eternal Father, and the Prince of Peace. God also said that He could not be completely understood by men, so His name was incomprehensible. Christ made this point to Samson's parents in Judges 13:18. The depth of man's heart is also incomprehensible, and only God understands it (Jeremiah 17:9-10). Only God can really name a man. Through history, Christ had often renamed His people. Jesus named Peter a pebble who would become a rock and would be a foundation stones of the church (Ephesians 2:20; Revelation 21:14). Christ also renamed Abram as Abraham, Sarai as Sarah, Jacob as Israel, and Saul as Paul. The names spoke of who people were in God's sight. Peter always was a rock in God's sight, so Christ named him accordingly as a promise of the pillar of strength that he would become. Christ would give His children a new name because He knew them infinitely better than they can know themselves. The name may well be an eternal reminder of how enormously deep and comprehensive is their relationship with Christ.

Verses 18-29

Christ introduced Himself to the church in Thyatira saying, "The Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet are like burnished bronze says this..." (verse 18). This description came first from Revelation 1:14-15. Both Christ on His throne, and sometimes Christ as the Angel of the Lord, were described in the Old Testament as having eyes like a flame of fire and feet like glowing bronze (Daniel 10:6). When Christ was described this way in the Old Testament, He was usually speaking about judgment. In Revelation 2:18-29, Christ saw the sins of His people in Thyatira, and He would judge them.

Christ said that He saw the love and perseverance of His people in Thyatira. He knew that they were growing in the faith. The Lord had this against His people. They tolerated among them the woman Jezebel who led believers astray into immortality and idol worship. Christ was equating a woman in Thyatira with Ahab's wife Jezebel who filled Israel with innocent blood. Jezebel tried to kill all of God's prophets and to establish Baal worship as the official religion of Israel (II Kings 9:7; I Kings 18:13). Baal worship emphasized not only idolatry, but immorality. In judgment, God decreed that Jehu would kill Ahab's whole family, including Jezebel. Christ would be cast on a bed of sickness. Her children would die of the pestilence, and those who sinned with her would suffer great tribulation. Then all the churches would know that Christ saw men's hearts and dealt with them accordingly.

Still, Christ saw the love and perseverance of some of His people in Thyatira. Those who had not fallen into sin were promised, "To him I will give authority over the nations; and he shall rule them with a rod of iron, as the vessels of the potter are broken to pieces, as I also have received authority from My Father; and I will give them the morning star" (Verses 26-28). Christ often prophesied through the Scriptures that He and His people would rule over the nations. Perhaps the clearest Old Testament parallel to these verses can be found in Psalm 2:8-9 which read, "Ask of Me, and I will surely give the nations as Thy inheritance, and the very earth as Thy possession. Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron, Thou shalt scatter them like earthenware." This promise was given to Christ by His Father. The Lord chose to share His authority with His people. Daniel 7:27 showed this saying, "Then the sovereignty, the dominion, and the greatness of all the kingdoms under the whole heaven will be given to the people of the saints of the Highest One; his kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom, and all the dominions will serve and obey Him." Christ's people share His authority because He is in their hearts. That is why Jesus promised to give them the morning star. Much earlier, Balaam had prophesied that Christ would be a star who came forth from Jacob (Numbers 24:17). Peter used the same symbol commanding Christ's people to pay attention to the prophetic word until the day dawned and the morning star arose in their hearts (II Peter 1:19). Those who persevere would rise with Christ. He would be in their hearts, and the world empire would become the kingdom of Christ.