

The Revelation to John 2.1-3.22: Messages to Seven Churches

7 cities: form the circular route of a letter carrier: Ephesus to Smyrna to Pergamum to Thyatira to Sardis to Philadelphia to Laodicea (W.M. Ramsay)

Daniel 7.9-14; Daniel 10.1-9

2.1-7: A Message to the Church in Ephesus

2-3 the church commended – for what??

4 BUT – you have left your first love

- Matthew 24.12-14: ‘Most peoples’ love will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world for a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come.’

5 ‘the deeds you did at first’ – zeal for faithfulness and sharing Christ

What will happen if they do not repent?

Lampstand – those who are God’s ‘prophetic witnesses’ (Rev. 11.3-7, 10); also Mark 4.23 and Luke 8.8

6 Nicolaitans (from *nikos* [‘to conquer/subdue] and *laos* [people]) - likely named for Nicolas of Antioch (Acts 6.5). Some early Christian sources say that Nicolas was a convert from paganism who taught of Christian compromise with paganism

8-11: A Message to the Church in Smyrna

- Their faithfulness in the face of persecution is commended
- Poverty for unbelievers – 2 Corinthians 6.10; James 2.5; 1 Corinthians 1.26-29
- ‘slander’ - Jewish **and** Roman persecution. (Acts 26.9-10 on Jewish persecution; see Acts 13.45-50; 14.2-7; 17.5-9; 1 Thess. 2.14-16; Tertullian *Scorpiace* 10 on Jewish collusion with Romans against Christians)
- Imperial cult required sacrifices to emperor as a god
- ‘Those refusing to participate were seen as politically disloyal and unpatriotic and would have been arrested and punished according to Roman law’ (Beale 241)
- ‘synagogue of satan’ – ‘false accuser’, Hebrews 10.34. In Qumran, apostate Jews are called ‘a congregation of Belial’ (1QH 2.22)

Persecution here is understood as a source of testing which distinguish true from false believers in the Church (1 Cor. 11.19); What do you think of this?

Roman persecution – Acts 16.23-40; 2 Cor. 11.23; ‘unto death’ especially under Domitian (81-96 A.D.); Martyrdom of Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, in 156 by burning

‘ten days of tribulation’ – an allusion to Daniel 1.12-15; ‘To eat with a king was a symbolic act in the ancient Near East of giving complete loyalty to him above all else’ (Beale 242) Daniel and the three friends became the model for those who refused to worship idols even in the face of persecution (4 Macc.18.11-18; Frenn *Martyrdom and Persecution* 67)

Be faithful and ‘receive the victor’s crown’ – 2 Timothy 4.8; 1 Peter 5.4; James 1.12

‘the second death’ – eternal judgment; On overcoming temptation to compromise see Matthew 10.28, Luke 12.4-5: ‘I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!’

12-17: A Message to the Church in Pergamum

- Commended for their loyalty to Christ in face of persecution
- ‘throne of Satan’ – possibly role of city as a center for Roman government and pagan religion; there was a conical hill behind Pergamum which was the site of many temples, including a throne-like altar to Zeus

14 BUT the Church is complicit in compromising and is challenged to discipline apostate members

Balaam and Israel – Numbers 22.5-25.3; 31.8, 16; Israel was led into idolatry and immorality through deceitful counsel of Balaam. Balaam, a pagan prophet hired by Balak, the King of Moab, to curse the invading Israelites, was prevented by God. However, Balaam schemed to undermine the faithfulness of the Israelites through the temptations of Moabite women. The Israelites ‘defected from the LORD (31.16) through fornication and idolatry (worshipping pagan gods). God punished the Israelites and commanded Moses to execute the (Numbers 25.1-9)

What’s the big deal? Leviticus 18:1-5: *‘The LORD spoke to Moses saying: “Speak to the children of Israel and say to them, ‘I am the LORD your God. As they do in the land of Egypt in which you have been living, you must not do, and as they do in the land of Canaan into which I am about to bring you, you must not do; you must not walk in their statutes. You must observe my regulations and you must be sure to walk in my statutes. I am the LORD your God. So you must keep my statutes and my regulations by which anyone who does them will live. I am the LORD”*

‘This second generation of Israelites had been wandering in the wilderness for nearly 40 years. They had eaten manna and water, with almost no exceptions. The spices of Egypt were no more. And suddenly the “welcome wagon” arrives at the Israelites’ camp. Some friendly neighbors come by to welcome them to the neighborhood and to offer them steak and ale. One should not minimize the temptation here, even though such a meal was wrong. Perhaps the Israelites did not initially realize that to share such a meal with the Moabites was to join them in the worship of their gods. But eventually they willingly participated, not only in the meal, but in the sexual immorality that also was a part of their “worship.”’(Deffinbaugh, ‘Profiting from the Prophets’)

Eating food? 1 Corinthians 10.1-22

Compromise with paganism and idolatry leads to what?

17 ‘white stone’ and a ‘new name’ – sometimes associated with a vote of acquittal (4 Macc. 15.26; Acts 26.10); also the manna resembled a white stone (Exodus 16.31; Numb. 11.7)

‘Pergamum’s great buildings were made of a dark black local stone. When people wanted to put up inscriptions, they obtained white marble on which to carve them. Then was then fixed to the black buildings, where it stood out all the more clearly. In addition there was a custom of guests at a feast being given a stone with their name on it as a ticket of admission’ (NT Wright 22)

18-29: A Message to the Church in Thyatira

Acts 14.16 – Thyatira was filled with dealers of fine linen, purple, bronze, and slaves

Trade Guilds in the Roman Empire

Daniel 3 – faithfulness and provision for Shadrach, Mechach, and Abednego

Jezebel and Ahab – 1 Kings 16-22; 2 Kings 9

Jezebel was a foreign woman who introduced the worship of Baal into Israel, which was at the heart of many evils, notably idolatry and fornication.

19 For what is the Church in Thyatira commended?

20 For what is the Church rebuked?

Rationalization for cultural accommodation? Deut. 32.15-22; 1 Corinthians 8-10

21-23 What is the punishment for their idolatry and immorality?

26 What's the reward for 'him who overcomes and keeps my deeds until the end'?

3.1-6: A Message to the Church in Sardis

- Located 50 miles east of Ephesus
- Ancient capital of Lydia
- Croesus in 6C B.C. – myth of Midas

What is the issue in Sardis? *Nekros!*

'like a thief' – Mathew 24.43f; Luke 12.39f; 1 Thess. 5.2

Also, Sardis was surprised by attacks from Cyrus in 549 B.C. and Antiochus in 218 B.C.

A few 'have not stained their clothing' – Sardis was a leading manufacturer of woolen goods

They 'will walk' – Genesis 5.22 (Enoch) and 6.9 (Noah); Ephesians 4.1

5 Three promises:

- a. Overcomer clothed in white robes: purity, white togas were worn by Roman citizens at a triumph; Zechariah 3.5-6 – exchanging filthy garments for a clean robe symbolizes the 'removal of iniquities'
- b. Not erased from the 'book of life'(13.8; 17.8; 20.12-15; 21.27) – Exodus 32.32-33; Psalm 69.28; Daniel 12.1
- c. Christ will confess the believers by name to the Father. Matt 10.32 and Luke 12.8

3.7-13: A Message to the Church in Philadelphia

28 miles SE of Sardis, Philadelphia was in an earthquake-prone region

Distinctive Messianic titles - Isaiah 22.22: *I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David. He shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open.* (Rev. 6.10; Mark 1.24; Luke 4.34; Rev. 1.18)

Eliakim – faithful steward/governor/finance minister of the house of King Hezekiah in Judah in 700 B.C.

The point: Jesus Christ holds the power of salvation and judgment

9 as in 2.13; some in the Jewish community were persecuting the Church; at/before your feet (Isa. 45.14; 49.23; 60.14)

10 *peirasmos* – trial/testing/tribulation

To which testing might John/the LORD be referring?

'those dwelling on the earth' – term used in Revelation to refer to unbelieving idolaters (6.10; 8.13; 11.10; 12.12; 13.8)

12 God's promise to Philadelphia; Isaiah 62.2; 65.15