

THE REVELATION TO JOHN

INTRODUCTION

A. Introductory outline of Revelation

1. The Things Past (1:1-20)
 - a. Introduction (1:1-8)
 - b. The vision (1:9-20)
2. The Things Present: Letters to the Seven Churches (2:1-3:22)
 - a. Ephesus (2:1-7)
 - b. Smyrna (2:8-11)
 - c. Pergamum (2:12-17)
 - d. Thyatira (2:18-29)
 - e. Sardis (3:1-6)
 - f. Philadelphia (3:7-13)
 - g. Laodicea (3:14-22)
3. The Things Future (4:1-22:21)

B. Comments on Revelation 2-3

1. Purpose
 - a. Revelation was relevant in the day of John as well as today. This section contains seven letters to seven churches in Asia Minor.
 - b. The term "overcomer" is found in each letter and reveals again the purpose of the book, exhortation to godly living in the face of persecution. Believers may stand firm on the basis of specific promises and the future hope of the return of Christ.
 - c. Charles Ryrie, *Two reasons substantiate the representative character of these seven churches. The first is simply that there are only seven selected. Second, in the promise to each of these churches at the close of each letter is the exhortation to hear what the Spirit says to "the churches." Though each letter is written to a church, the exhortations are to all the churches.*
 - d. The reign of Domitian was one of terrible persecution for those who did not submit to emperor worship. The occasion for writing the Apocalypse centers on believers in need of encouragement during persecution by the assurance of the ultimate victory in Jesus Christ.
2. Recipients
 - a. There were other Christian communities in the area. John must have had a specific reason for specifying these particular churches.
 - b. Donald Guthrie, *W. M. Ramsay supposed that the choice of churches was governed by the great circular road which linked them all and which, therefore, provided a convenient network for the distribution of the letters throughout the whole province. The order of mention would then represent the route which the messenger took in delivering the book.*
 - c. Mark Hitchcock, *I believe these seven churches were selected because they possessed spiritual conditions that were the most representative of what Jesus wanted to address as a whole. The Lord knew that His letters to these particular churches and the issues they faced would resonate with God's people throughout the church age.*
 - d. The seven churches may also have been those specifically under John's care and which were of special concern to him, Yet, the relevance of this book is for all churches.
 - e. According to Robert Thomas the seven cities . . . were centers of seven postal districts, which made them well-suited to publicize the message further, once they received it . . . [they were] situated on a great circular road that tied together the most populous, wealthy, and influential part of the Asian province, the wet-central part.
2. Interpretation
 - a. There are basically four approaches to the book which look at the time the prophecies were fulfilled.
 - 1) The preterist school
 - a) Chapters 1-3 deal with historic churches.
 - b) Chapters 4-19 are symbolic of contemporary conditions.
 - c) Chapters 5-11 view the victory of the church over Judaism.
 - d) Chapter 12-19 see victory over the Roman state, A.D. 312.
 - e) Chapters 20-22 have to be symbolic of heaven and victory.

- 2) The idealist school
 - a) Chapters 1-3 deal with historic churches.
 - b) Chapters 4-22 are symbolic of the conflict of good and evil with the eventual victory of good.
 - c) It is non-historical story of spiritual realities.
- 3) The historicist school
 - a) Chapters 1-3 are seen as historical churches.
 - b) Chapters 4-19 are subjectively viewed as symbolic of events of history: fall of Rome, the papacy, the Reformation, etc. Chapters 20-22 speak of the final judgment and the eternal state but tend to deny a literal future Millennium and other literal future events.
- 4) The futurist school
 - a) Chapters 1-3 deal with historic churches and/or seven stages of church history.
 - b) Chapters 4-22 are seen as unfulfilled and include future tribulation, the second coming of Christ, the Millennial kingdom, judgments, and the eternal state.
 - 3) The approach taken in this study of Revelation will be from this perspective.

b. Comments

- 1) Dr. Ryrie gives a helpful way of understanding each church letter: *Destination, The Lord, Commendation, Condemnation, Exhortation, and Promise*. I will follow his outline as we examine the churches of Revelation 2-3.
- 2) Mark Hitchcock, *The seven churches are significant for two main reasons. First, they had a practical meaning for the seven original, historical churches to which they were addressed . . . Second, they seven churches have a perennial meaning, in that they are representative of all the different kinds of churches that will be present during the entire church age . . . Without a doubt, Revelation 2-3 gives us the greatest insight into what Christ values in His church and what he considers vile. These seven churches provide models to which we can compare our churches . . .*
- 3) John Walvoord, *The pointed message of Christ to each of these churches is the capstone to New Testament Epistles dealing with the practical life of those committed to the Christian faith.*

3. Map of western Turkey and the seven churches of Revelation.



C. Introductory comments on Revelation 2:1-7

1. The church at Ephesus is told of Christ's authority over the churches. On that basis, the church is exhorted to repent and do the deeds which she had first done. One senses that the vitality of a spiritual relationship is in continued fellowship and service.
2. Thomas Constable, *Jesus Christ instructed John to write the letter to the church in Ephesus in order to commend the Ephesian Christians for their labors and perseverance in God's truth. But He also wanted to exhort them to rekindle their former love for the Savior.*
3. William Barclay, *When we know something of the history of Ephesus and learn something about its conditions at this time, it is easy to see why it comes first in the list of the seven churches . . . Pergamum was the official capital of the province of Asia, but Ephesus was by far its greatest city. It claimed as its proud title 'The first and the greatest metropolis of Asia.' A Roman writer called it Lumen Asiae, the Light of Asia.*

THE THINGS PRESENT, REVELATION, 2:1-3:22

THE LETTER TO THE CHURCH AT EPHEBUS, REVELATION 2:1-7

A. Destination - Ephesus (2:1a), **To the angel of the church in Ephesus write:**

1. Background

- a. Ephesus, built in the 10th century BC, was the capital of the province of Asia and had a population of approximately 300,000, the third or fourth largest city in the Roman Empire.
- b. It was a commercial center located at the mouth of the Cayster River on the Aegean coast in the southwestern corner of present day Turkey.
- c. William Barclay, *Its position made Ephesus the wealthiest and the greatest city in all Asia—and, because it resembled so well John Bunyan's picture in The Pilgrim's Progress, it has been aptly called the Vanity Fair of the ancient world.*
- d. William Barclay, *It was a free city. In the Roman Empire, certain cities were free cities; they had had that honour conferred upon them because of their services to the empire. A free city was within its own limits self-governing, and it was exempted from ever having Roman troops garrisoned there.*
- e. It was the home of the Temple of Diana (Artemis) which was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.
 - 1) Charles Ryrie, *This magnificent structure stood in an area 425 by 220 feet, with 126 pillars of marble 60 feet high. Thirty-six of these were overlaid with gold and jewels.*
 - 2) E. J. Banks (ISBE), *It was also a sanctuary for the criminal, a kind of city of refuge, for none might be arrested for any crime whatever when within a bowshot of its walls. There sprang up, therefore, about the temple a village in which the thieves and murderers and other criminals made their homes.*

2. Progress of the Gospel

- a. The Apostle Paul founded the church in Ephesus during his Third Missionary Journey (Acts 19).
- b. The province of Asia was evangelized with more than 500 churches established.
- c. Thomas Constable, *Ephesus was the first recipient of four New Testament books (Ephesians, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Revelation) and possibly four more (John's Gospel and his three epistles). Paul also wrote 1 Corinthians from Ephesus.*
- d. Charles Ryrie, . . . *a great number of believers dedicated themselves more fully to the Lord after they burned their books of magic, which some had evidently been hanging on to for two or more years. The value of the books was equivalent to a year's wage for 138 workers.*
- e. Spiritual leaders at the church included Aquila, Priscilla, Apollos, Timothy and John.
- f. The Apostle John lived in Ephesus before and after his exile on the island of Patmos.

B. The Lord (2:1b), **The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.**

1. Remember the Lord giving interpretation of the seven stars and the seven golden lampstands in Revelation 1:20, **As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.**
2. Charles Ryrie, *In this instance (in view of the loss of first love), the Lord's watchful relationship to local churches and their leaders is emphasized in two ways: He is seen holding fast the seven stars or angels (in contrast to 1:16; where He merely has them), and He is walking (in contrast to standing, 1:13) in the midst of the churches.*

3. Thomas Constable, *The “angel” who was the primary recipient of this letter was probably the human representative of the Ephesian church who carried this letter, along with the rest of Revelation, to the church at Ephesus . . . Another view is that the “angel” was the pastor or leading elder of this church.*
 4. Matthew Henry, *The ministers of the gospel are in his hand. He supports them, or else they would soon be falling stars; and all the good they do is done by his hand with them.*
 5. William Barclay, *If the church submits to that control, it will never go wrong; and more than that—our security lies in the fact that we are in the hand of Christ . . . Christ clasps the whole of the seven stars in His hand; and that means that Christ clasps the whole of the Church [as opposed to just a few churches] in His hand . . .*
 6. Kendell Easley, *Jesus was simply among the lampstands (churches). Now he is walking among them, observing their deeds and their motives. Because he has been observing, he can both compliment and criticize.*
 7. Grant Osborne, *Here Ephesus, the mother church of the region, is reminded that Christ is in charge.*
 8. Warren Wiersbe, *The Ephesian assembly had enjoyed some “stellar” leadership—Paul, Timothy, and the Apostle John himself—but the Lord reminded them that He was in control of the ministry, placing the “stars” where He pleased. How easy it is for a church to become proud and forget that pastors and teachers are God’s gifts (Eph. 4:11) who may be taken away at any time. Some churches need to be cautioned to worship the Lord and not their pastor!*
- C. Commendation (2:2-3), ***I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name’s sake, and you have not grown weary.***
1. Jesus commended Ephesian Christians for their service, perseverance and rejection of false leaders who were probably the Nicolaitans mentioned in verse 6.
 - a. Douglas Mangum, *The letters to the churches in the book of Revelation collectively imply that God has seen and come to know the deeds and circumstances of all humanity (Rev 2:2, 9, 13, 19; 3:1, 8, 15).*
 - b. Benjamin Galan, *The statements build on each other: working hard and persevering translates into not tolerating wicked people and continuing to believe even though some leaders have tried to negatively influence them.*
 - c. Nicolaitans
 - 1) Charles Ryrie, *Some understand the Nicolaitan error to be the exaltation of the clergy over the laity (based on the etymology of the word itself, which means “laity-conqueror.” Others consider it to be the heresy of license and compromise in matters of Christian conduct, since it is associated in 2:14-15 with the doctrine of Balaam, who tried to induce God’s people to compromise.*
 - 2) Warren Wiersbe, *Paul had warned the Ephesian elders that false teachers would come in from the outside and even arise from within the church (Acts 20:28–31), and John had instructed them to “try the spirits” (1 John 4:1–6). Indeed, Satan has his false ministers and the church must be constantly alert to detect them and reject them (2 Cor. 11:1–4, 12–15).*
 - 3) Grant Osborne, *The form this opposition took is biblical: they tested them and proved them false. In both the Old Testament and New Testament, the people of God are instructed to test, or critically examine, prophets and teachers to see if their ministry is based on truth or falsehood.*
 - 4) The issue concerning the Nicolaitans will be addressed further in verse 6.
 2. Jesus acknowledged their continual faithfulness to Him despite suffering for His name.
 - a. Benjamin Galan, *Jesus noted their carefulness and praised it.*
 - b. John Walvoord, . . . *they were commended for enduring hardships and not growing weary in serving God. In general this church had continued in its faithful service to God for more than 40 years.*
 - c. Warren Wiersbe, *The Ephesian Christians paid a price to serve the Lord. They were a steadfast assembly, for the word patience carries the meaning of “endurance under trial.” They kept going when the going was tough.*
 - d. Ignatius (died 108 AD), church leader in Antioch spoke of the Ephesian church, *You all live according to truth, and no heresy has a home among you; indeed, you do not so much as listen to anyone if they speak of anything except concerning Jesus Christ in truth.”*
- D. Condemnation (2:4), ***But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.***
1. *love*
 - a. The type of *love* addressed by Jesus is *agape*, a love based on sincere appreciation and high regard.
 - b. It is the love expressed by our heavenly Father to the Son, John 3:35, *The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand.*
 - c. It is God’s love for those who have placed faith in Christ alone, 1 John 4:19, *We love because he first loved us.*

2. *abandoned*
 - a. It means *to stop doing something in the way it had been done.*
 - b. Jesus declared their love for Him had changed.
 - c. 1 Corinthians 13:2, *And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.*
 - d. Charles Ryrie, *The original spiritual vitality of the church had been replaced by a routine of orthodoxy.*
 - e. William Barclay, *It may well be that heresy-hunting had killed love; it may well be that the eagerness to root out all mistaken men had ended in a sour and rigid orthodoxy. It may be that orthodoxy had been achieved, but at the price of fellowship.*
 - f. Warren Wiersbe, *Labor is no substitute for love; neither is purity a substitute for passion. The church must have both if it is to please Him . . . It is only as we love Christ fervently that we can serve Him faithfully.*
 - g. John Walvoord, *Most of the Ephesian Christians were now second-generation believers, and though they had retained purity of doctrine and life and had maintained a high level of service, they were lacking in deep devotion to Christ. How the church today needs to heed this same warning, that orthodoxy and service are not enough. Christ wants believers' hearts as well as their hands and heads.*

3. *love you had at first*
 - a. Warren Wiersbe, *What is "first love"? It is the devotion to Christ that so often characterizes the new believer: fervent, personal, uninhibited, excited, and openly displayed. It is the "honeymoon love" of the husband and wife (Jer. 2:1–2). While it is true that mature married love deepens and grows richer, it is also true that it should never lose the excitement and wonder of those "honeymoon days."*
 - b. Grant Osborne, *The love Christ is discussing is not just love for God but love for one another. Note John 13:35, By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*
 - c. Kendell Easley, *I once heard a preacher refer to people whose theology was "clear as ice and just as cold." That was a description of the Ephesians. Their good deeds were now motivated by duty rather than love.*

E. Exhortation (2:5-6)

1. A call to repentance (5), ***Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.***
 - a. Steps to repentance
 - 1) Thomas Constable, *The corrective for a cold heart that the Lord prescribed was a three-step process: They needed to (1) "remember" how they used to feel about Him (first love), (2) "repent" (change their attitude), and (3) return to the love that formerly motivated them ("do the deeds you did at first").*
 - 2) Robert Mounce, *Memory can be a powerful force in effecting a return to a more satisfying relationship (cf. the prodigal son in Lk 15:17–18).*
 - 3) John Walvoord, *In calling the Ephesian believers to repentance Christ was asking them to change their attitude as well as their affections. They were to continue their service not simply because it was right but because they loved Christ.*
 - 4) Warren Wiersbe, . . . *we must repeat the first works, which suggests restoring the original fellowship that was broken by our sin and neglect. For the believer, this means prayer, Bible reading and meditation, obedient service, and worship.*
 - 5) Grant Osborne, *The form the repentance must take is not a new turn but a return to the past: They must do the works they did at first. With 2:4, these are to be acts of love or good deeds toward one another and thereby toward God.*
 - b. A warning for the unrepentant
 - 1) John Walvoord, *He warned them that if they did not respond, the light of their witness in Ephesus would be extinguished: I will ... remove your lampstand from its place.*
 - 2) Warren Wiersbe, *The church that loses its love will soon lose its light, no matter how doctrinally sound it may be. I will come" (Rev. 2:5) is not referring to the Lord's return, but to His coming judgment then and there. The glorious city of Ephesus is today but a heap of stones and no light is shining there.*
 - 3) Thomas Constable, *Eventually the Ephesian church passed out of existence, but that did not occur until the eleventh century. The recipients of this letter apparently responded positively to this exhortation.*
 - 4) Kendell Easley, *Although Christ has promised to build his church worldwide (Matt. 16:18), he guarantees permanence to no individual congregation. A loveless church is no longer truly a church, and Christ has the right to extinguish such a congregation. Tragically, the Ephesian church ultimately succumbed, and neither the city nor the church exists today.*
 - 6) Grant Osborne, *Right belief without right practice results in a false religion!*

2. The Lord's approval (6), ***Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.***

a. Two views concerning the practices of Nicolaitans.

1) They were the forerunners of clerical hierarchy.

- a) Mark Hitchcock, *Some believe that the Nicolaitans fostered a stark division between the clergy and the laity in the church.*
- b) Thomas Constable, *The false teachers probably claimed to be functional apostles (representatives of Christ; cf. 2 Cor. 11:13), rather than official apostles (Acts 1:15–26).*
- c) Henry Swete, *The false teachers claimed to be apostoloi [apostles] in the wider sense, itinerant teachers with a mission which placed them on a higher level than the local elders . . .*

2) They were a heretical sect.

- a) Mark Hitchcock, . . . *Nicolaitans were a heretical sect that followed Nicolaus of Antioch, one of the seven original apostles' assistants mentioned in Acts 6:5.*
- b) Robert Thomas, . . . *strong support in the early church. Added to Irenaeus are the testimonies of Tertullian Hippolytus, Dorotheus of Tyre, Jerome, Augustine, Eusebius and others. Hippolytus adds that Nicolaus was the forerunner of Hymenaeus and Philetus who are condemned in 2 Timothy 2:17. Eusebius adds that after the group was censured by John in the Apocalypse, the sect disappeared in a very short time.*
- c) Not much is known of their doctrine but their behavior is condemned.
 - 1] The Lord Jesus hated the works of the Nicolaitans.
 - 2] Grant Osborne, *The key is the practices linked with Balaam (2:14-15) and Jezebel (2:20-23). The two sins found in both are idolatry and immorality. Therefore it is likely that the twin problems were syncretism (trying to accommodate the pagans by participating in practices like emperor worship . . . and an antinomian type of libertinism (showing freedom from the law by doing what one wishes).*
 - 3] Irenaeus (born 130 AD), *They lived lives of unrestrained indulgence.*
 - 4] William Barclay, *When we turn to the decree of the Council of Jerusalem, we find that two of the conditions on which the Gentiles were to be admitted to the Church were that they were to abstain from things offered to idols and from immorality (Acts 15:28–9). These are the very conditions that the Nicolaitans broke.*

b. Comments

- 1) Grant Osborne, . . . *we have to distinguish carefully between theological differences and heresy. The key is that heresy goes against Scripture and denies a cardinal doctrine of the faith . . . We must make this charge very carefully, for by definition a heretic has denied the faith and become an apostate, a tool of Satan. Disagreements over charismatic gifts or eternal security or the rapture do not come under the category of heresy.*
- 2) William Barclay, *The Nicolaitans were not prepared to be different; they were the most dangerous of all heretics from a practical point of view, for, if their teaching had been successful, the world would have changed Christianity and not Christianity the world.*

F. Promise (7), ***He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.***

1. Jesus declared a message from the Spirit to the churches.

- a. Thomas Constable, *Christ may be speaking to the churches through His Spirit, or the identity of the Spirit with Christ may be implied.*
- b. Grant Osborne, *The second half of the verse centers on the Spirit and is an all-important reminder that each of us should apply the Ephesian situation to our own churches—note the emphatic plural in the text. The perfect (sevenfold) Spirit (see on 1:4) is the revealer of eternal truth, and he is speaking directly through each of the letters. Moreover, he is making certain that every detail is made available to all churches, so I must ascertain the extent to which my church also has the Ephesian problem. Too many of our churches stress right doctrine to such an extent that we become judgmental and unloving. While I want my church to care deeply for doctrinal truth, I also want my people to care just as deeply for each other!*

2. An interpretation of *conquerors* (overcomers)

- a. Some believe *conquerors* are only faithful believers, especially martyrs.
- b. Others believe *conquerors* are faithful believers but the unfaithful will lose their salvation. This is an untenable

position since salvation is solely based on the finished work of Christ. Philippians 1:6 clearly proclaims that God will complete the work He has begun in the life of every believer.

- c. The following proposal is that all believers are conquerors but there are rewards for faithful service.
 - 1) John Walvoord, *this promise should not be construed as reward for only a special group of Christians but a normal expectation of all Christians.*
 - 2) Those who consider martyrdom as a requirement for being an overcomer is too restrictive. The issue of reward will be addressed.

3. Understanding may be discerned through the promises which accompany *overcomer* passages.

a. Verses

- 1) Revelation 2:7, ***He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.***
- 2) Revelation 2:11, ***He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.***
- 3) Revelation 2:17, ***He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it.***
- 4) Revelation 2:26, ***The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations,***
- 5) Revelation 3:5, ***The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels.***
- 6) Revelation 3:12, ***The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. Never shall he go out of it, and I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name.***
- 7) Revelation 3:21, ***The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne.***

b. Comments

- 1) These verses reveal basic salvation promises in Revelation 2:7, 3:5, 12 and 21.
- 2) Today, all believers are overcomers on the basis of the work of Christ who is the overcomer, Revelation 3:21. Another key passage depicting all believers as overcomers is 1 John 5:4-5, *For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?*
- 3) Charles Ryrie, *Believers here are promised the tree of life, that is, eternal life, which was lost when Adam sinned in the garden (Gen. 2:9; 3:22; Rev. 22:2, 14). And of course, all believers possess eternal life forever.*
- 4) Several look to the concept of rewards as seen in 1 Corinthians 3:10-15. In Revelation 2:17, not all believers will have the same degree of spiritual walk; and Revelation 2:26, responsibility in kingdom rule will be determined according to faithfulness on earth. Within the total group of believers, there will be those who more closely live according to Scripture. To those overcomers, rewards are to be bestowed on them by God as seen in 1 Corinthians 3:10-15.
- 5) Romans 8 vividly depicts the truth that all believers will be overcomers on the basis of God's sovereign will.
- 6) Thomas Constable, *There is a connection between the tree of life and people's rule over the earth. Adam and Eve in their unfallen state had access to this tree, but when they fell, God kept them from it (Gen. 1:26–28; 3:22). In the future believers will have access to it again (cf. 22:14). This promise suggests that overcomers will experience the fellowship with God that Adam and Eve enjoyed before the Fall.*
- 7) John Walvoord, *"The paradise of God" is probably a name for heaven (cf. Luke 23:43; 2 Cor. 12:4—the only other NT references to paradise). Apparently it will be identified with the New Jerusalem in the eternal state.*

CONCLUSION

- John Walvoord, *This encouragement to true love reminded them again of God's gracious provision for salvation in time and eternity. Love for God is not wrought by legalistically observing commands, but by responding to one's knowledge and appreciation of God's love.*
- Warren Wiersbe, *The church of Ephesus was the "careless church," made up of careless believers who neglected their love for Christ. Are we guilty of the same neglect?*