

Revelation 2: Letters to the Seven Churches

Revelation 2:1–17 | Sunday, January 11 | Revelation Series

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OVERVIEW

Revelation 2 and 3 are seven letters dictated to John by Jesus himself, and Hal picks up the question he raised last time: there were hundreds of churches, so why these seven, and why in this order? His answer is that the characteristics of each one match, in sequence, the dominant characteristics of the stages of Church history — real letters to real congregations, with a prophetic application laid over them. He sets out the divine format every letter follows: the addressee, a description of Christ chosen to fit that church's need, a commendation, the analysis and rebuke, and a promise to the overcomer. Then he takes three of them. Ephesus is doctrinally sound, tireless, and has left its first love. Smyrna is poor, persecuted, and receives no rebuke at all. Pergamum lives where Satan's throne is, and gives Hal the story of Antipas, whose name means against everyone. Underneath all three runs priestcraft — the Nicolaitans, the victors over the people — and he closes on one phrase missing from Revelation 13:9.

KEY SCRIPTURES

Revelation 2:1–7 — Ephesus: sound doctrine, tireless work, and a first love left behind

Revelation 1:20–21 — The seven stars are the messengers of the churches

1 John 4:9 — Not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son

1 John 5:3 — This is the victory that has overcome the world — our faith

Revelation 2:8–11 — Smyrna: tribulation ten days, and the crown of life

Revelation 2:12–17 — Pergamum: where Satan's throne is, and Antipas the faithful witness

1 John 1:9 — If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us

Revelation 13:9 — “If anyone has an ear, let him hear” — with the churches no longer named

KEY TERMS

Angelos — the Greek word in each address; it can mean an angel in the traditional sense, or, as here, messenger — the one who would be the preacher of that church

Nicolaitans — from nikos, victory over, and laity, people — those who see themselves as the victors over the people

Priestcraft — Hal's one-word name for the Nicolaitan error: men setting themselves up as lords between God and the believer

First love — the fervent, focused love for Jesus that Ephesus lost while its doctrine stayed sound; lose it, Hal says, and you lose your compass

The overcomer — not the believer working in his own energy, but — out of 1 John 5 — the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God

The second death — standing at the great white throne as an unbeliever and being cast into the lake of fire

Antipas — “against everyone” — the martyr’s name of the one man Church history remembers from Pergamum

REVIEW QUESTIONS

Answer from the message itself. Every answer is in the teaching.

1. Why did Jesus choose these seven churches, and why are they in this order?

2. What format does every one of these letters follow?

3. What does angelos mean, and who is actually being addressed?

4. Hal says the opening description of Christ in the first letter is a reason the Church needs no hierarchy. Why?

5. What is Ephesus commended for, and what is the one thing against it?

6. Why does Hal say first love matters more than work or learning, and what rekindles it?

7. Where does the word Nicolaitans come from, and what does it describe?

8. Who is the overcomer, and what is he not?

9. What period of Church history does the first letter represent, and what went wrong in it?

10. Which two churches get no rebuke, and what was happening at the first of them?

11. How did Antipas get his name, and what does it mean?

12. What does Hal point out about Revelation 13:9, and why does it matter?

DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

1. Hal calls first love the compass of the Christian life. What crowded it out for you the last time you noticed it slipping?

2. His test is simple: how many times a day do you think about Jesus? What would honestly answering that tell you about this week?

3. Ephesus was doctrinally excellent and still rebuked. How does a person, or a church, get everything right and still lose the main thing?

4. Hal says we cannot initiate love for God — we can only love him back. What changes if love is a response rather than something you work up?

5. Antipas was told the whole world was against him and answered that he was against the whole world. What would that cost where you live and work?

6. Hal insists you have the right and the duty to check him out with the Bible. What would it take for your group to do that well rather than either blindly or cynically?

MEMORY VERSE

“But I have this against you, that you have left your first love.”

— Revelation 2:4, as Hal reads it in this message