

THE BOOK OF THE REVELATION

REVELATION 2

Setting the Scene

John has seen Yeshua standing among the lampstands. Now the One who walks among His congregations begins to speak to them.

Revelation 2 takes us into four very different cities of Asia Minor: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum and Thyatira. These were not imaginary churches representing some distant prophetic age. They were real communities of believers living in real cities, surrounded by Roman power, pagan worship, commercial pressures and competing loyalties. Ephesus was prosperous and influential. Smyrna proudly displayed its loyalty to Rome. Pergamum was an important political and religious center. Thyatira was shaped by its trades and guilds. Following Yeshua in each city brought its own pressures.

Yet the remarkable thing is that Yeshua knows each congregation intimately. Again and again He says, “I know.” He knows their deeds. He knows their perseverance. He knows their suffering. He knows where they live. He also knows their compromises, their toleration of evil and the love that has grown cold.

The question, then, is not simply, “What was happening in those four cities?” The repeated command brings the message closer: “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” What Yeshua said to them deserves to be heard by us.

Lesson Summary

Revelation 2 contains Yeshua’s messages to four congregations in Asia Minor: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum and Thyatira. Each message is addressed to a particular community and situation. Yeshua identifies Himself, tells the congregation what He knows about it, commends what is faithful, confronts what is wrong where necessary, calls for a response, and gives a promise to those who overcome.

Ephesus has persevered and resisted false teaching but has left its first love. Smyrna is suffering and poor in the world’s eyes, yet Yeshua calls it rich and tells its people not to fear. Pergamum has remained faithful under severe pressure, but some within the congregation are compromising with idolatry and immorality. Thyatira is growing in love, faith, service and perseverance, yet it is tolerating destructive teaching within the community.

These four messages show Yeshua addressing His people as they actually are. No two congregations receive exactly the same word. He knows their circumstances, their faithfulness and their failures, and He speaks specifically to each one.

The Big Idea

The repeated words of Revelation 2 may be the most important: “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” Hearing in the Bible is never merely receiving information. We hear in order to respond. God, what do You want us to know?

Yeshua does not speak to His congregations merely to provide them with an assessment. He speaks because He wants a response. Sometimes that response is to persevere. Sometimes it is to repent. Sometimes it is to hold fast. Sometimes it is simply not to be afraid. But first we have to listen.

Opening Prayer

Father, give me ears to hear what Your Spirit is saying. It is easy for me to recognize the failures of other people and much harder to recognize my own. God, please keep me from treating Yeshua’s words as ancient history. Show me where my love has cooled, where fear has taken hold, where compromise has become comfortable, and where I have tolerated what I should have confronted. Give me courage to repent when I need to repent, persevere when life is difficult, and faithfulness when the world around me asks for loyalties that belong to You alone. Above all, help me to hear Yeshua clearly and then to do what He says. Amen.

Commentary

Ephesus — When Orthodoxy Loses Its Love (2:1-7)

Ephesus was one of the great cities of Asia Minor, prosperous, cosmopolitan and religiously important. The enormous temple of Artemis dominated the religious life of the city and attracted pilgrims and commerce from across the region. Acts 19 gives us a vivid picture of what happened when the message about Yeshua began affecting that religious economy. Demetrius and the other silversmiths understood that Paul’s preaching was not simply introducing another private religious preference. If people stopped worshipping Artemis, livelihoods, traditions and the reputation of the city itself were threatened. The resulting riot tells us something about the atmosphere in which the congregation at Ephesus learned to follow Yeshua (Acts 19:23–41).

By the time Revelation is written, this congregation has history behind it. Paul had ministered there (Acts 19:1–10). Timothy had served there (1 Timothy 1:3). The believers had been warned about false teachers (Acts 20:28–31). Now Yeshua commends them because they have worked hard, persevered and tested those who claimed spiritual authority but proved false (Revelation 2:2–3). They have endured for His name and have not grown weary. This is not a congregation careless about truth. They have theological backbone, discernment and staying power. If we stopped reading at Revelation 2:3, Ephesus might look like the congregation everybody should join.

Then comes one of the most sobering words in the whole Bible: “But I have this against you” (2:4). They have left their first love. Notice that Yeshua does not tell them that their concern for truth is wrong. He does not say that doctrine is unimportant or that testing false apostles was unloving. Their problem is not that they cared too much about truth. Somehow, while defending truth and persevering in service, something central had been lost. The congregation that could identify error had become deficient in love.

What exactly was their “first love”? We do not need to choose too sharply between love for God and love for people. Biblically those loves belong together. The congregation's early devotion to Yeshua would have expressed itself in its life together and its treatment of others. Years of conflict can do something to us. Fighting error can make us suspicious. Persevering under pressure can make us hard. We can become so experienced at identifying what is wrong that we lose the warmth, generosity and delight that once characterized our relationship with God and His people.

Yeshua's remedy is wonderfully direct: remember, repent and do the deeds you did at first. Remember where you were. Turn around. Then act. Repentance in Revelation is not simply feeling bad about what has happened. It means changing direction. Love is not recovered merely by remembering how passionate we once felt. We begin doing again what love did. Yeshua takes this seriously enough to warn that if they do not repent, He will remove their lampstand from its place. A congregation can have correct doctrine, an impressive history and enormous religious activity and still cease to fulfil the purpose for which Yeshua established it.

That should make us uncomfortable in a useful way. We can be right and still be wrong. We can defend biblical truth and speak without love. We can become veterans of messianic service who remember what devotion used to feel like. Yeshua does not ask Ephesus to abandon discernment. In fact, He again commends them for rejecting the practices of the Nicolaitans. But He calls them back to love. Truth and love are not enemies from which we must choose one. The congregation of Yeshua needs both.

Smyrna — Faithful Through Suffering (2:8-11)

Smyrna receives no rebuke from Yeshua. That does not mean life there is easy. Quite the opposite. Yeshua says, “I know your tribulation and your poverty” (2:9). These believers are hurting. They live in a wealthy city but apparently do not share much in its prosperity. Following Yeshua could carry economic and social consequences, especially in a world where trade, civic life and religious allegiance were often intertwined. Yet after acknowledging their poverty, Yeshua adds these remarkable words: “but you are rich.”

That turns our usual measurement devices upside down. We tend to measure successful communities by attendance, buildings, money, influence and visibility. Yeshua sees something different. A congregation can appear poor by every ordinary measure and be rich before God. Conversely, as we will discover later in Revelation and perhaps in our own experience, a

congregation can say, “I am rich,” while Yeshua sees profound spiritual poverty. Revelation repeatedly challenges us to decide whose assessment of reality we will trust.

The difficult phrase here is “the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not but are a synagogue of Satan.” These words have had a terrible afterlife in Christian history and have sometimes been ripped from their setting and turned into a weapon against Jewish people. They should never be used that way. Yeshua is Jewish. John is Jewish. The apostles are Jewish. The Scriptures from which Revelation draws almost every page of its imagery are Jewish Scriptures. This is not a declaration that Jews or synagogues are satanic.

I grew up in an Orthodox Jewish community in the US, and my synagogue was not a synagogue of Satan. The congregation’s name was Kehilath Israel and focused on Tanach studies and Jewish cultural and social activities so that every member of the community would feel at home together. When I came to faith in Messiah Yeshua, that experience within the Jewish fabric was how I saw what we should be like in the community of faith. Certainly nothing close to a synagogue of Satan.

The language here reflects a fierce first-century conflict over allegiance to Israel’s Messiah and the identity of God’s faithful people. Whatever the precise local circumstances in Smyrna, Yeshua is addressing opponents who are slandering His followers and claiming religious legitimacy and supremacy while doing so. His language is severe because the conflict is severe, but it cannot responsibly be detached from that local controversy and transformed into a general verdict upon all Jewish people. Tragically, some Christians have done exactly that. We should name that as misuse rather than repeat it.

Yeshua then tells the suffering believers something we might not want to hear: more suffering is coming. “Do not fear what you are about to suffer” (2:10). Some will be imprisoned. They will be tested. They are called to be faithful even to the point of death. Revelation offers comfort, but once again we see that biblical comfort is not a promise that painful things will disappear. Yeshua does not tell Smyrna, “Nothing bad will happen to you.” He tells them not to fear because their suffering does not determine the final outcome.

Life Application

The Apostle Paul says something similar in 2 Corinthians. He describes being afflicted but not crushed, perplexed but not despairing. Present suffering is temporary compared with eternal glory. Therefore, believers have a choice. They can focus on what is seen or on what is eternal. These temporary, light afflictions are producing for us an eternal weight of glory if we keep our eyes on the Lord and His Kingdom (2 Corinthians 4:17–18). That is still true for us in our day. Asaph says something similar in Psalm 73. He struggles with the apparent injustice he sees around him: the wicked prosper and don’t seem to suffer like we do. Then everything changes: “Until I came into the sanctuary of God; then I perceived their end” (73:17). Keep your eyes fixed on Yeshua and God’s purposes, and no matter what you experience, the end result will be to His glory and your good.

The One speaking identifies Himself as “the First and the Last, who was dead, and has come to life.” That description is perfectly suited to Smyrna. Yeshua asks them to face the possibility of death, but the command comes from the One who has already passed through death and defeated it. “Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.” Death can take a believer's earthly life, but it cannot take the life Yeshua gives. The second death has no power over the one who overcomes.

That is a very different message from a faith that promises comfort, prosperity and protection from every hardship. Sometimes faithfulness costs us. Sometimes obedience makes life harder rather than easier. Smyrna reminds us that suffering is not proof that God has forgotten us. Yeshua begins His message by saying, “I know.” He knows their tribulation. He knows their poverty. He knows the accusations against them. And He knows what lies beyond their suffering. That is why He can say, “Do not fear.” Yeshua taught that the rain would fall on both the just and the unjust (Matthew 5:45). And in His final discourse He said, “In the world you will have tribulation” (John 16:33).

Pergamum — The Danger of Compromise (2:12-17)

Pergamum was not simply another prosperous city. It carried political weight. It had been the capital of an independent kingdom before coming under Roman control, and under Rome it remained an important administrative center for the province of Asia. It was also filled with religious significance. Temples and shrines stood throughout the city, and loyalty to the empire could easily take on religious form. That helps us understand why Yeshua says, “I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is.” John is not inviting us to identify one particular chair or altar as Satan’s furniture. He is describing a city where political power, pagan worship and pressure against believers converged.

The remarkable thing is that the believers in Pergamum have not abandoned Yeshua’s name. Even when Antipas was killed, they held fast. We know almost nothing about Antipas beyond what Revelation tells us, but Yeshua calls him “My faithful witness” (2:13). That is enough. Pergamum has already paid a price for faithfulness. This is not a soft congregation that has never faced opposition. Some of them have stood firm when standing firm was dangerous.

And yet Yeshua says, “I have a few things against you.” That is one of the sobering patterns in these messages. Courage in one area does not excuse compromise in another. Pergamum has survived external pressure, but some inside the congregation are accommodating teaching that leads toward idolatry and immorality. John reaches back into the story of Balaam and Balak in Numbers 22–25. Balaam could not simply curse Israel, but the later biblical tradition associates him with leading Israel toward compromise through idolatry and sexual immorality (Numbers 25:1–3; 31:16; Revelation 2:14). The danger was not frontal attack so much as enticement and compromise.

That makes Pergamum uncomfortably contemporary. We often imagine compromise as a dramatic moment in which a believer publicly renounces Yeshua. More commonly it happens

in small accommodations. We tell ourselves that this little thing does not matter, that everybody does it, that we can participate without being shaped by it. Over time the line between living in the surrounding culture and being absorbed by it becomes difficult to see.

The Nicolaitan reference appears again here. One understanding of their practices connects them with the development of hierarchies in social and religious rankings. We still cannot identify their teaching with certainty, but in this chapter the effect is clear enough: Yeshua is confronting teaching that encourages His people to make peace with practices that do not belong to His Kingdom. Those include idolatry and immorality. The issue is not curiosity about an obscure ancient sect. The issue is what we do when someone gives us theological permission to live in ways Yeshua has told us to reject.

Yeshua identifies Himself to Pergamum as the One who has the sharp two-edged sword. Note the contrast: Pergamum was associated with governmental authority and the power of Rome, but Yeshua carries the decisive sword. Yet His sword comes from His mouth (2:16). His authority is expressed through His word. Human institutions can legislate, threaten and punish, but the word of the Messiah finally judges what is true and what is false.

Then comes the call to repent. Again, repentance is not merely directed toward the most obvious offenders. The congregation has a responsibility for what it allows to remain within its life. We sometimes say, “That is their business,” and there are certainly times when we should mind our own business. But the New Testament also understands the community of faith as a body in which the behavior and teaching of one part can affect the whole. (1 Corinthians 5:6–8; 12:12–27) Pergamum is being told not merely to survive persecution but to resist corruption from within.

The promise to the one who overcomes is rich with biblical imagery: hidden manna, a white stone and a new name. The manna takes us back to Israel in the wilderness and God’s provision for His people. Later Jewish tradition connects hidden manna with the coming messianic age (2 Baruch 29:8). The basic message is clear. The people of God do not need to compromise in order to be sustained. Yeshua Himself provides what they need.

The white stone is more difficult to interpret. In the ancient world white stones could be associated with acquittal, admission, recognition or participation in public events. The larger promise here is unmistakable. Those who refuse to gain acceptance by compromising with the surrounding world will receive acceptance from Yeshua Himself. The new name belongs to the intimacy and identity He gives. The world may label His people one way. Yeshua knows them by another name. In the same way Adam named all the animals in Eden (Genesis 2:19–20), Yeshua names us all in His kingdom.

Thyatira — When Tolerance Goes Too Far (2:18-29)

Thyatira was smaller and less politically impressive than the previous three cities listed, but its economic life made it a particularly interesting setting for this message. The city was known for its trades and guilds. Lydia, whom we meet in Acts 16, was a seller of purple cloth

from Thyatira. Membership in a trade guild could be important for earning a living, but guild activities often included meals and religious observances connected with pagan gods. That created an obvious problem for believers. How far could you participate before participation became compromise?

Yeshua begins with strong commendation. He knows their deeds, love, faith, service and perseverance. More than that, their later deeds are greater than their first. That is almost the opposite of Ephesus. Ephesus had good works and doctrinal vigilance but had lost its first love. Thyatira is growing in love and service. If we were grading congregations from a distance, Thyatira might look wonderfully healthy.

Then comes another “But I have this against you” (2:20). They tolerate a woman whom Yeshua calls Jezebel, who claims to be a prophetess and is leading His servants toward immorality and idolatrous eating. Whether Jezebel was her actual name is unlikely to be the most important question. John is drawing upon the notorious Jezebel of 1 Kings 16–21, the wife of Ahab who promoted Baal worship in Israel and opposed the prophets of the LORD. The name itself tells us what kind of influence Yeshua sees operating in Thyatira.

There is an important progression in the chapter. Ephesus hates the practices associated with false teaching. Pergamum has people who hold such teaching. Thyatira tolerates it. Tolerance usually sounds like a positive word in our world. Tolerance calls us to be patient with people. It tells us we should make room for questions, differences, immaturity and growth. But tolerance becomes destructive when it means allowing teaching and behavior that Yeshua says is harming His people.

That does not give believers permission to become harsh, suspicious or controlling. Revelation 2 is not a charter for religious policing. Notice that Yeshua says He gave this woman time to repent. There is patience even in judgment. The goal is repentance and restoration. But patience is not the same as indifference. Love sometimes says, “This must stop.”

That may be one of the harder lessons for modern congregations. We can imagine only two options: condemn everything or tolerate everything. Yeshua does neither. He recognizes love, faith, service and perseverance wherever they are present. He gives time to repent. He distinguishes those who have embraced corrupt teaching from “the rest” who have not. But He also refuses to call destructive teaching harmless.

The language becomes severe because the matter is serious. Yeshua says He searches minds and hearts and will give to each according to their deeds. That reminds us that the real issue is deeper than public reputation. We can hide some things from congregations, leaders, friends and family. We cannot hide them from the One whose eyes are like a flame of fire. The description of Yeshua at the beginning of the message fits the situation perfectly. He sees clearly, and His feet like burnished bronze suggest firmness and stability. Nothing corrupts His judgment.

Then Yeshua turns to those in Thyatira who have not embraced what He calls “the deep things of Satan.” Ancient mystery religions and some forms of Gnostic teaching promised deeper or secret knowledge to insiders. I compare that with the bait-and-switch method of cults: first one message is presented, then deeper teachings are disclosed as the participant moves further along in their program. That movement usually comes with increased price structures—the newcomer has to pay more and more. Yeshua offers no secret inner circle. His instruction to the faithful is wonderfully simple: “What you have, hold fast until I come.”

There is comfort again. Not everybody in Thyatira is corrupt. Yeshua sees the faithful as clearly as He sees the compromise. He does not place another burden upon them. Hold fast. Sometimes faithfulness is not spectacular. It is simply refusing to let go.

The promise to the overcomers speaks of authority over the nations and of the morning star. Jezebel represents a false attempt to exercise influence within the congregation, but Yeshua promises genuine authority to those who remain faithful to Him. Authority in God’s kingdom is received from the Messiah, not seized through manipulation. And the morning star finally points us toward Yeshua Himself, who will later say, “I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star” (Revelation 22:16). The greatest reward for holding fast to Yeshua is Yeshua Himself.

And once again the message closes the same way: “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” Not simply to Thyatira. To the churches. To us.

Takeaways

1. Listen before you evaluate. Revelation 2 makes it very easy to evaluate Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum and Thyatira. But Yeshua’s repeated command is simply, “He who has an ear, let him hear.” Before we judge how well those congregations were doing, we should hear what the Spirit says to the churches.
- 2\ Keep truth and love together. Ephesus reminds us that discernment and sound teaching are essential, but they do not excuse a cold heart. We can be right in what we believe and wrong in the way we live it.
- 3\ Do not let fear interpret your circumstances. Smyrna is suffering, yet Yeshua calls it rich and says, “Do not fear.” Hardship is not evidence that God has abandoned us. The One who was dead and came to life still has the final word.
- 4\ Watch out for small accommodations. Pergamum and Thyatira show that compromise often enters gradually—through what we excuse, normalize or tolerate. Faithfulness sometimes requires repentance; at other times it simply requires us to hold fast.
- 5\ Trust Yeshua’s assessment more than reputation, comfort or success. He knows His congregations completely. His word may comfort us or confront us, but in either case it is spoken by the One who loves His people and calls them to faithfulness.

Memory Verse

Revelation 2:7

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

What's Next?

Revelation 2 called us to hear what the Spirit says to the churches (and thus to us!). Revelation 3 continues that challenge, but another theme begins to emerge: What's in a name?

Sardis has a name—a reputation—for being alive, but Yeshua says it is dead. Philadelphia has little strength and not much worldly importance, yet it has kept Yeshua's word and has not denied His name. Yeshua promises the faithful there something far greater than an earthly reputation: He will write upon them the name of God, the name of the New Jerusalem and His own new name. Then Laodicea thinks it already has everything it needs—wealth, independence and security—while Yeshua sees poverty, blindness and nakedness.

Once again appearances can deceive. A congregation can have a wonderful reputation and be spiritually dead. Another can look weak and yet be faithful. Another can consider itself rich while being desperately poor before God. Yeshua sees beyond the name we have made for ourselves to the people we actually are. He calls us to self-evaluate. And once again He says, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

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