

Assemblies of Believers in Pain and Hope

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Revelation 2-3 Letters from Christ to the Seven Churches in Roman Asia

Letter 1: Ephesus 2:¹ To the angel of the assembly in **Ephesus** write: “The words of the one who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands. ² I know your works, your **toil** and your **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 frauds. ³ I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for **my name’s** sake, and you have not grown weary.

⁴ But I have this against you, that **you have abandoned the love you had at first**. 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.

⁶ Yet this you have: you hate the **works** of the **Nicolaitans**, which I also hate. ⁷ One who has an ear, let them hear what the Spirit says to the assemblies. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the **tree of life** (22:2), which is in the **paradise** of God.”

Letter 2: Smyrna ⁸ And to the angel of the assembly in **Smyrna** write: “The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life. ⁹ I know your tribulation and your **poverty**, but you are **rich**....”

Letter 3: Pergamum ¹² And to the angel of the assembly in **Pergamum** write: “The words of the one who has the sharp **two-edged sword**. ¹³ I know where you dwell, where the **Satan’s** throne is. Yet you hold fast **my name**, and you did not deny **my faith** even in the days of **Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you**, where the Satan dwells.

¹⁴ But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the **teaching of Balaam**, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food of idols and practice immorality. ¹⁵ So also you have some who hold the **teaching of the Nicolaitans**. ¹⁶ Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with **the sword of my mouth**.

¹⁷ One who has an ear, let them hear what the Spirit says to the assemblies. 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.”

Letter 4: Thyatira ¹⁸ And to the angel of the assembly in **Thyatira** write: “The words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze. ¹⁹ I know your **works**, your **love** and **faith** and **service** and **patient endurance**, and that your latter works exceed the first....”

Letter 5: Sardis 3:¹ And to the angel of the assembly in **Sardis** write: “The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your works. You have the **reputation of being alive, but you are dead**. ² **Wake up**, and **strengthen what remains** and is about to die”

Letter 6: Philadelphia ⁷ And to the angel of the assembly in **Philadelphia** write: “The words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens. ⁸ I know your works. Behold, I have set before you **an open door**, which no one is able to shut....”

Letter 7: Laodicea ¹⁴ And to the angel of the assembly in **Laodicea** write: “The words of the **Amen**, the **faithful** and **true witness**, the beginning of God’s creation. ¹⁵ I know your works: you are **neither cold nor hot**. Would that you were either cold or hot! ¹⁶ So, because you are **lukewarm**, and neither hot nor cold, I will **spit you out of my mouth**. ¹⁷ For **you say, I am rich**, I have prospered, and I **need nothing, not realizing** that you are **wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked**.

¹⁸ I **counsel you** to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that **you may be rich**, and white garments so that you may **clothe yourself** and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that **you may see**. ¹⁹ Those whom I **love**, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent.

²⁰ Behold, I **stand at the door and knock**. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. 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**. ²² He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the assemblies.”

2 Corinthians 11:13-15

¹³ For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ.

¹⁴ And no wonder, for even the Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. ¹⁵ So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness.

1 John 4:1-3

¹ Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world. ² ... Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, ³ and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already.

1 Corinthians 4:8

⁸ Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Without us you have become kings! And would that you did reign, so that we might share the rule with you!

Jesus sends Letters to Struggling Churches

John's Revelation begins with the startling vision of Jesus. Jesus turns Apocalypse into Letters, like Paul's but strange: to angels standing for whole assembly (you, sing.). An Apocalypse different from others, not for later ages but for now, assemblies of people under pressure. Much of Rev. is cosmic, but like ancient prophets, it first names sins of God's own people.

Seven churches seem to stand for the whole church. Overlapping but distinct problems. Each letter has stylized form, with individualized content. Each starts with who Jesus is and ends with a call to listen to the Spirit. This clarifies vision. They struggle to recognize false guides: fraudulent apostles, prophets, teachers. They're often deceived about themselves: love abandoned, spiritually rich/wretched. They're beset by false narratives of power/weakness.

The Disaster of the Loss of Love: Ephesus (Letter 1)

Ephesus, ancient, center of culture, worship (Acts 19). Jesus with stars/lampstands: churches.

Jesus knows their struggles. They face continuing challenges like Paul and John. Emissaries who change the Gospel like Paul faced in Galatia or Corinth. Try to be true to message.

Jesus' warning is not lack of fervor or truth but a failure of love, perhaps in the heat of struggle. Love for each other, love for the outsider, love even for the opponent. They've fallen. Jesus calls them to repent/change their thinking. Their identity is at stake. The struggle is for love.

On the Spot Persecution: Pergamum (Letter 3)

North of Ephesus, great temple of Zeus, Asclepius center. Local persecution has struck. After Nero, being a Christian was open to challenge, illegal. The slanderer/accuser/Satan is there.

In a world where every public activity was tied to Greek/Roman gods or emperor worship, how do you survive if you're Greek/Roman, not Jewish? "Balaam," from Scripture (Num 22-24) stood for the call to place God as one lord among many, so also probably the Nicolaitans. Jesus challenges them with the "sword of my mouth," the message the cross, of God's love.

Rejected in order to be Healed: Laodicea (Letter 7)

Laodicea is close to Colossae. The letter is famous for the striking image of spitting out a lukewarm liquid, neither hot nor cold. They don't know themselves. "We are rich!" But in reality wretched. But with hard judgment comes hope. Jesus gives gold, cloths, salve.

Intensely hopeful: Jesus at door: Shared life, eating. Shared throne with Jesus and the Father.