

## THE REVELATION OF JESUS CHRIST: THE KING

Seven Letters: Smyrna, Pergamum, and Thyatira

Revelation 2:8-29

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*“And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: ‘The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life. I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. 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.’ And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: ‘The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword. “ ‘I know where you dwell, where 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 Satan dwells. 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 sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality. So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth. 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.’ And to the angel of the church 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. I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first. But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols. I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality. Behold, I will throw her onto a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent of her works, and I will strike her children dead. And all the churches will know that I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you according to your works. But to the rest of you in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not learned what some call the deep things of Satan, to you I say, I do not lay on you any other burden. Only hold fast what you have until I come. The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received authority from my Father. And I will give him the morning star. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches”’ (Rev. 2:8–29, ESV).*

One of the things I love about Indianapolis is the uniqueness of the various communities within the broader city. You don't have to travel very far to see and feel a very different culture. In some cases, it's a fiercely protected or defended culture.

When we started planting churches in 2015, we began to realize how different the communities really were. Fishers, North Indy, Castleton, Greenwood, and Pike Township are not only different places, they're entirely different cultures. And with those cultures, there are different strengths, weaknesses, challenges, and opportunities. The spiritual needs and struggles are not the same. Each community needs a unique expression of the gospel because they are all different.

What would Jesus say to a church in Carmel? What about Speedway? Greenwood? Broad Ripple? Brookside? Lawrence? The context, history, struggles, and challenges are all part of the mix. Every church and every Christian has a setting in which we live. We have a moment in time in which we are called to live obediently and faithfully.

Two weeks ago we looked at the first of seven letters in the book of Revelation. We only focused on the church in Ephesus with a view toward asking ourselves about the status of the love we had at first as it relates to our relationship with God and with others. I challenged you to consider doing one thing that was similar to what you did when you first came to Jesus. The church at Ephesus was a great church with doctrinal orthodoxy, but they had lost something of their first love.

Today we're going to look at three more churches: Smyrna, Pergamum, and Thyatira.

As we examine these letters, I want to identify the central themes for each church for the purpose of asking ourselves how those apply to us. The letter to Ephesus was deeply applicable, but the other letters are meant to be received in the same way.

We don't just have one letter written to College Park Church. We actually have seven. There's something to learn from all them as we try to live out the gospel in our community and in our generation.

There's a lot to examine with these three churches, so let me summarize the main message of each one in this way:

- Smyrna: Suffering and Endurance
- Pergamum: Conviction and Compromise
- Thyatira: Passion and Passivity

Let's look at these three churches to see what we can learn.

### **Smyrna: Suffering and Endurance**

The second letter is remarkable in that there are no direct critiques of this church. They are only encouraged and commended. Surely there must have been some areas of growth, but it would appear that the main message is designed to strengthen them in their suffering.

Remember that every letter contains a reference back to the vision of Jesus in chapter 1. As we start to get deeper into the weeds of these churches, don't forget that the theme of this book is "The Revelation of Jesus Christ." Verse 8 describes Jesus with words that connect to his sovereignty ("first and last") and his power over death ("who died and came to life"). He's conquered the unavoidable and the ultimate foe of mankind. These are hope-filled words. Jesus rules over everything – including death.

Notice where the letter turns next. The church is given assurance that Jesus knows their tribulation, poverty, and slander. He knows how hard it's been to follow him He knows the limited resources that they have to help themselves. And he knows what's been said about them.

This is designed to be comforting, and it must have been. Part of the deep pain of suffering is the private nature of it. When the pressure is on, there can be an ever-increasing descent into loneliness and discouragement. You can't share everything that is happening. Doubts and frustrations are internally overwhelming. Sometimes talking about them isn't helpful. If you're not careful, it's easy to slip into a pattern of despair and disillusionment as you feel trapped in quiet pain.

What a comfort to know that Jesus knows all about it. One of the deep struggles in suffering is the injustice of it all. It's probably not hard to imagine someone saying "Do you know how hard this is?" or "Do you know what they've said and how untrue it is?" Here's Jesus described as the first and the last...the one who was dead and is now alive telling the church that he knows – their tribulation, their poverty, and the slander.

This reminds me of the hymn from the 1800's

Jesus knows all about our struggles,  
He will guide till the day is done;  
There's not a friend like the lowly Jesus—  
No, not one! no, not one!

There's not an hour that He is not near us –  
No, not one! no, not one!  
No night so dark but His love can cheer us—  
No, not one! no, not one!

Take specific note about what Jesus says regarding the slander they've experienced. It's coming from those who claim to be Jews, but Jesus says they're not. In fact, he calls them a synagogue of Satan. Wow! That's strong.

James Hamilton, in his commentary, helps us understand what may have been happening here:

The Romans had granted the Jews an exemption from required participation in the Roman Imperial Cult. In other words, the Jews did not have to take part in Roman idolatry. Everyone else was required to participate. Obviously, Christians would not want to participate with the Romans in their idolatrous festivals and celebrations. The Jewish slander in view here probably has to do with Jews denouncing Christians to the Romans. . .If the Jews began denouncing

Christians to the Romans—arguing that they were not Jews at all—Christians who refused to participate in Roman idolatry could face retribution.<sup>1</sup>

So, these believers were dealing with people who claimed to be spiritual who were using the political and cultural system to hinder the work of the gospel. That's why Jesus calls their gathering place the synagogue of Satan. Just let that sink in. And note that its sometimes the most "spiritual" people who are behind persecution and suffering.

What's the solution? Notice that the promise in this text is not the absence of more suffering, but the command is not to give in to fear and to be faithful – even unto death. The actual promise is receiving the crown of life which is another way of describing eternal life. This is reinforced with the statement about not being hurt by the second death.

What do we learn from Smyrna? The call to endurance in suffering. Or to boil it down to one word: faithfulness. How does that word – faithful – land on you? If I'm honest, it has not always landed on me very well. In my youthful arrogance, I would hear an older pastor saying, "I'm just trying to be faithful," and I'd think – "That's it? That's your goal?" It seemed like an excuse for stagnation and maybe being "old-fashioned." But the older I get, the more wisdom I see in those words. Faithfulness is probably underrated in the short-term, especially in our culture where new, innovative, disruptive, and change-agent are more in vogue.

But when it comes to suffering and things that are hard, faithfulness is a treasure. Sometimes we may need to give up on our need to fix something or change something. We may just need to be faithful. So if you are suffering today, I want you to receive the comfort that Jesus knows all about your trouble. Play the long-game. Be faithful. Embrace the need to endure suffering.

### **Pergamum: Conviction and Compromise**

Now let's talk about Pergamum. It's another great church with a particular blind spot that we need to examine. Their strength and weakness is connected to truth. The church at Pergamum was known for conviction and compromise.

That's why the description of Jesus in verse 12 is so important. Jesus has a sharp two-edged sword. Previously this reflected the words coming out of Jesus' mouth. This is a powerful image with judgment in mind.

Once again we see that Jesus says that he knows about this church. But notice the difference from Smyrna. He knows where they dwell and where Satan's throne is. What's more, he know that they have held fast under persecution – even the martyrdom of a "faithful witness" named Antipas. What's going on here? You need to know something about this history of Pergamum.

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<sup>1</sup> James M. Hamilton Jr., [\*Preaching the Word: Revelation—The Spirit Speaks to the Churches\*](#), ed. R. Kent Hughes (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 79.

According to Greg Beale:

{Pergamum} was the first city in Asia Minor to build a temple to a Roman ruler (Augustus) and the capital of the whole area for the cult of the emperor. The city proudly referred to itself as the “temple warden” (νεωκόρος) of a temple dedicated to Caesar worship. Life in such a politico-religious center put all the more pressure on the church to pay public homage to Caesar as a deity, refusal of which meant high treason to the state.<sup>2</sup>

The people were facing direct political pressure. They were having to decide how Roman citizenship and Christianity could co-exist. Could they be loyal to Rome and loyal to Christ? Some of you know what that feels like. But the pressure wasn’t just political. It was also cultural.

Pergamum was home to a number of pagan cults that were central to life in the city. There were multiple temples on the hill overlooking Pergamum. The worship of mythical gods like Zeus, Athene, and Dionysus were prominent. And the serpent god of healing (Asclepius) was even featured in the emblem of the city.<sup>3</sup> So you can imagine the social pressure to pay homage to these gods that people believed controlled the events of their life, way of life, and economy. Sacrificing to these gods, pledging your allegiance to these deities and other acts of veneration would have been expected to be a good citizen. Christians were an easy target to blame. Yet the Christians in Pergamum were holding fast.

They were deeply convictional. But there was also a problem. Their convictional stance was selective. They were apparently tolerating people who were compromising. Two groups are mentioned: 1) those who hold the teaching of Balaam and 2) those who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. We’re not entirely sure about the Nicolaitans, but we do know about that teaching of Balaam. He caused the people of Israel to stumble by tempting them with sexual exploits in their worship of foreign gods (Num. 22:5-24:25). Balaam became a proverbial name for someone who was “the false teacher who for money influences believers to enter into relationships of compromising unfaithfulness.”<sup>4</sup>

Again, Greg Beale is helpful here:

What may be included are trade guild festivals involving celebration of patron deities through feasts and sometimes immoral activities. Refusal to participate in such activities could result in economic and social ostracism (cf. 1 Pet. 3:11–21). Therefore, there was much pressure to

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<sup>2</sup> G. K. Beale, [The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text](#), New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cumbria: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1999), 246.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> G. K. Beale, [The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text](#), 249.

compromise. And just as Israel was influenced to fornicate both sexually and spiritually, the same was true of Christians in Pergamum.<sup>5</sup>

The warning is clear and the invitation blunt: repent. They were allowing compromise to take root in their lives and in their church. For the sake of economic, social, or political power, the church was finding ways to justify their idolatry and immorality.

The promise here is related to eternal reward. Hidden manna, a white stone, and a name written that one knows are all promises connected to the future home of Christians.

And so we would be wise to ask ourselves about the extent of our conviction and compromise. Where might you be tempted to justify choices that tip too far into being accepted by people who do not share your belief in the gospel? Where might you be guilty of wanting to be “cool” versus being “godly”?

This is complicated and challenging. But I think it’s worth considering because the possibility of compromise is real. And if we have ears, we should hear.

### **Thyatira: Passion and Passivity**

The fourth church is Thyatira, a church that is marked by incredible passion but also a dangerous passivity.

Notice again the description of Jesus: “Son of God...eyes like a flame of fire...feet like burnished bronze.” Commentators suggest that this is speaking to both emperor worship and the association of bronze works in the city of Thyatira. Once again Jesus is using familiar symbols and connections. Where they live matters.

This church has quite a commendation! (v. 19) It’s filled with passionate spiritual activity: works, love, faith, service, and patient endurance. There’s not much more than you’d want said about a church than this. But there’s even more! The church is commended because her “latter works exceed the first.” (v. 19) This is in direct contrast to what we saw with Ephesus. Do you remember?

While other churches are commended for their orthodoxy and conviction, this church seems to be on fire! But there’s a problem. A big one. Her name is Jezebel. At least that’s what she’s called, connecting this person(s) to the wicked Old Testament queen of Ahab. Jezebel was infamous for inducing Ahab and the entire nation to worship Baal and for her strident opposition of the prophet Elijah (see 1 Kgs. 16:31; 21:25). Verse 20 indicates that the church was tolerating this woman and her teaching. More

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<sup>5</sup> G. K. Beale, [\*The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text\*](#), New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cumbria: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1999), 249.

specifically, she was “teaching and seducing my servants “to practice sexual immorality and “to eat food sacrificed to idols.” The concern here may have been similar to what was happening in Pergamum, but we also need to see immorality and idol worship through the lens of Revelation 18 where promiscuity is a metaphor for the sinful systems of the world. The focus here seems to be more on her teaching. She was convincing people that their passivity with the world was acceptable.

What follows is a strong warning. Jezebel has been given time to repent (v. 21). She along with those who are associated will be punished and judged, and the church is reminded that Jesus is the one who searches the mind and heart (v. 23). This is clear statement about judgment.

Apparently, there are some who have not “bent the knee” to this passivity. They have not learned “the deep things of Satan” which is probably a play on words. Jezebel may have induced people to a kind of esoteric teaching related to the “deep things of God.” Perhaps something similar as to what was happening in Colossae (see Col. 1:18).

The command to this church is to “hold fast” and to “keep my works until the end” (v. 26). Great reward is promised connected to authority (vv. 26-28a). In other words, those who remain faithful and discerning will be victorious in the end.

### **Applications: He Who Has an Ear**

Smyrna, Pergamum, and Thyatira were great churches. And we should be exhorted and warned by these letters. Let me highlight a few things:

**Faithfulness:** When life is hard or when the world is falling apart, don’t underestimate the priority of faithfulness. Make it your goal to outlast the devil. Don’t neglect or minimize the slow, steady, and consistent approach to daily godliness. You may never be cool, hip, or flashy. But you can ask the Lord to help you be faithful.

**Wisdom:** I haven’t used this word yet, but it needs to be front and center in our lives. We need wisdom to not allow our conviction to blind us to compromise. What’s more, we need wisdom to know when our passion in one area is deceiving us into passivity in another. Every generation needs to wrestle with this reality.

**Affection:** Don’t forget that this is the Revelation of Jesus Christ. He’s the God-man behind the curtain. You might feel a bit overwhelmed with all the challenges in these churches. You might feel the same thing about your life, your relationships, or even your church today. Let me remind you to keep your eyes on Jesus. The surest remedy to compromise or passivity is to keep our minds and heart fixed on him.

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As the writer of Hebrews said:

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted (Heb. 12:1–3).*

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