

When God Is on the Throne: Discovering the Mysteries of Revelation

Study Guide on Revelation 2—Week 2 (Sunday, Sept. 13)

Background: The letters to the seven churches remind us that the book of Revelation was written to a specific group of Christians (those in the province of Asia) during specific circumstances (persecution). While the Revelation has much to say to us, it must be interpreted from the standpoint of its late first-century context. In other words, whatever meaning we derive from the book must be consistent with what its first readers could have understood it to mean. Fortunately, the letters in chapters 2 and 3 are among the easiest portions of the Revelation to understand. The Christians in these seven cities were soon going to experience terrible persecution at the hands of those who want them to worship the emperor.

All seven letters follow the same basic pattern. First, there is some mention of some of the characteristics of Jesus, usually drawn from the images of the first chapter. Second, John praises the church for what they are doing right. Third, there is criticism of the church for their deficiencies. Finally, there are Christ's promises, especially for the one "who overcomes," the one who remains faithful even to the point of martyrdom. Incidentally, all the letters are addressed to the "angel" of a particular church. This probably refers to an actual angel, a "messenger" of the church who reports to God, or less likely, to a human "messenger" of the church. (The term "angel" means "messenger.")

Because too much detailed information would be needed to provide a study guide for all the letters, we will focus our discussion upon the first letter this week, although everyone should read through all the letters in order to better understand this letter to Ephesus. Ephesus was the largest city of the important Roman province of Asia, and Paul had spent three years with this congregation (see Acts 19).

Text: The one who holds the stars and walks among the lampstands (the glorified Jesus) offers encouraging words to the church at Ephesus. They have worked hard and endured. They have resisted the influence and teaching of false apostles. They have also refused to follow the way of the Nicolaitans, a group that apparently took a more open attitude toward pagans and their religions (see 2:14-16). Perhaps the Nicolaitans had adopted an attitude of peaceful co-existence with Roman religion, even emperor worship. Unfortunately, we cannot know with any certainty what they taught or thought.

Jesus has only one criticism for the Ephesians, but it is a devastating one. They have "forsaken their first love." After all their effort to resist false teaching and to be separate from the world around them, they are failing in the central virtue of love.

Discussion Questions

1. What might it mean that Jesus, as he dictates this letter, holds the seven stars in his hand and walks among the lamps (see 1:20)? Does Jesus still hold stars and walk among lamps? What should we learn from this?

2. The Ephesus church was praised for hard work, endurance, and holding to true teaching. What do you think that meant for these first-century Christians? How important are those characteristics? Are you and/or your church known for these?

3. Unfortunately, the Ephesians had “forsaken their first love” (TNIV: “lost the love they had at first”). What do you think this means? Have you known Christians who have sound doctrine but are lacking in love? How can we have both?

4. The Nicolaitans may have been a group that wanted to get along a little bit too much with their surrounding culture. Perhaps they believed, for example, that it was fine for them to go to pagan festivals where the emperors were worshipped. Maybe they thought it was acceptable to eat meals with friends in the temples of Romans gods and emperors. How do we have an influence on our culture and its people without succumbing to its seductions and giving up our distinctiveness?

5. What does it mean to have “ears to hear”? How do we ensure that we truly hear what the Spirit is saying?

6. What does it mean that the one who overcomes will obtain the right to eat from the tree of life which is in the Garden of God? How important is such a promise for us, who are not facing persecution?

7. (This discussion starter may be too controversial. If the group leader thinks that it will be, it should be skipped.) Being very careful not to criticize individuals or even the leadership, try to answer the question, “What might Jesus write to your church?”