

### **Lesson Three** **Letters to the Churches (2:1-17)**

Jesus revealed a letter to seven of the churches in the Roman province of Asia. There is no basis to theorize that these churches symbolize seven periods of church history. The form of the brief epistles is unique.

1. Greeting. “To the angel of the church.”
  - The angel could be the guardian angel of the church.
  - The angel could be the messenger who would deliver the letter to the local churches.
  - The angel could be the pastor of the church.
2. Son of Man. Each letter contains a description of Jesus as found in John’s initial revelation recorded in 1:12-16.
3. Commendation. Every church, other than Laodicea, is commended before receiving a word of rebuke.
4. Rebuke. Every church, other than Smyrna and Philadelphia, are rebuked for a failure.
5. Warning. A unique warning is given to each church.
6. Reward. A reward is promised to each church.
7. Hymn. Each church receives the same hymn fragment, “He who has an ear let him hear what the Spirit says unto the churches.” .

#### **Letter to the Church at Ephesus (2:1-7)**

##### *Background of Ephesus*

Ephesus was the most prominent city of the seven cities of Asia. Ephesus was a central city in terms of culture and religion. At the center of the city was the Greek amphitheatre. The center of Ephesian religion was the Greek deity of Artemis (Acts 19:35). Timothy later became the pastor of Ephesus (I Tim.1:3), and then John became pastor.

##### *Letter to Ephesus*

1. Greeting (2:1a). “To the angel of the church of Ephesus write.”
2. Son of Man (2:1b). This is a message of assurance that Jesus is grasping his churches (as represented by their angels) tightly in his hand.
3. Commendation (2:2-3, 6). Jesus commends the Believers for their work and endurance. Their good work included the refusal to tolerate false teachers (Acts 20:29-30). Their endurance included not being led astray by the influence of the false teachers and apostles. How did they do this? They put false teachers to a test (cp I John 4:1). The Nicolaitans was a heretical group that is only mentioned here and in 2:15. Some commentators believe the heresy was a form of Gnosticism.
4. Rebuke (2:4). Their love had grown cold (cp. John 13:34-35). Perhaps the struggle with false teachers and apostles eroded their heart-felt affection for the Lord and one another.

5. Warning (2:5). If they do not repent and comply with the instructions of Christ, he will remove the “church” out of the church. Oh my, the terror of not having Christ in the church! This describes many churches today.
6. Reward (2:7b). Believers who overcome the spiritual battle will receive an eternal reward. The tree of life (22:14) clearly references eternal life. Paradise is a descriptive term for heaven (cp II Cor.12:2). It is the abode of God.
7. Hymn (2:7a). “He who has an ear let him here what the Spirit says unto the churches.”

### **Letter to the Church at Smyrna (2:8-11)**

#### *Background of Smyrna*

Smyrna was a beautiful seaport town seated at the foothills of the lovely Mt. Pagos 35 miles north of Ephesus. Smyrna was a strong supporter of Rome and had erected a temple to the goddess of Rome.

#### *Letter to Smyrna*

1. Greeting (2:8a). “And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write.”
2. Son of Man (2:8b). Jesus is described as the one who was dead and came back alive again.
3. Commendation (2:9). Since Smyrna was the first city to worship Rome, this placed Believers in conflict with local authorities. Perhaps the poverty of the Believers was associated with their opposition to Rome worship. Spiritually they were rich even though they were poor in currency. Many ethnic Jews were not true Jews (Rom.2:28-29; Phil.3:3). “Synagogue of Satan” references their rejection of Jesus as Messiah.
4. Rebuke. There was no rebuke of the persecuted Believers at Smyrna.
5. Warning (2:10). The situation for the saints at Smyrna would soon worsen. Many would be cast into prison for their faith. Believers should consider this a spiritual test. The Great Tribulation of 3 ½ years was not in mind here, but rather a short time of local persecution. The saints must be faithful unto death!
6. Reward (2:10b, 11b). Saints who persevere will receive the crown of life and not experience the second death. The crown of eternal life is for every Believer (Ja.1:12). The second death is later described as the final abode of the wicked (20:6; 21:18).
7. Hymn (2:11a). “He who has an ear let him here what the Spirit says unto the churches.”

## **Letter to the Church at Pergamum (2:12-17)**

### *Background of Pergamum*

Pergamum was the capital of the Roman province of Asia and the first city of Asia to support Emperor Worship. Many pagan temples were located in and near Pergamum. Many people traveled to Pergamum for healing through its medical school. Both emperor worship and pagan deity worship brought great threat to the early Believers in Pergamum.

### *Letter to Pergamum*

1. Greeting (2:12a). “And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write.”
2. Son of Man (2:12b). The “sharp two-edged sword” is suggestive of judgment. Perhaps the saints at Pergamum had not taken a strong stand against false deities.
3. Commendation (2:13). Believers are commended for staying away from “Satan’s throne,” which may be a reference to imperial worship. Jesus identifies a specific saint named Antipas who had become a martyr for Christ.
4. Rebuke (2:14-15). The church had tolerated false teachers that led to compromise. An example of this failure was found in Balak in the OT (Num.22). “Eat things sacrificed to idols” suggests that the saints at Pergamum participated in festivals at pagan temples, and many of these involved immoral fertility rites. Nicolaitans was discussed in the letter to Ephesus. Compromise led to the sins of idolatry and immorality.
5. Warning (2:16). They were to repent or else experience the chastening hand of Christ.
6. Reward (2:17b). It was believed by some Jews that when the Messiah came, he would feed his people with heavenly manna once again. A white rock had many purposes in the first century, such as admission to community events. Often, the name of an invited guest had to appear on a white stone. Perhaps Jesus was saying that as saints in Pergamum overcame their sin, they will be an invited guest to the great feast when Messiah returns. If so, this event is later announced as the marriage supper of the lamb (19:7-10).
7. Hymn (2:17a). “He who has an ear let him here what the Spirit says unto the churches.”