

THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Lesson 5 - Chapter 2

I want to prepare you for what is coming today and for the next few weeks as we study the letters to the 7 Believing congregations; it is divine judgment of Christ's disciples and institutions. I don't imagine you've thought of it that way before, but that is precisely what it is about. These 7 letters are not to the world; they are not threats or condemnation aimed at pagans. These sometimes scathing rebukes, often coupled with a good report for doing well in some regards, are to Believers. God is pronouncing His judgment over these 7 congregations just as He pronounced judgment over disobedient Israel in times past. But whenever there was judgment there was also warning usually accompanied with a path to deliverance if the warning was heeded; and so we find the same dynamic in these 7 letters. Only 2 congregations are regarded as fully commendable; all the rest have problems of varying degrees from serious to grave and some are in danger of having their light extinguished altogether. While these letters are indeed specifically tailored and delivered to 7 distinct congregations, what God has to say about them can be applied universally to all Believers and groups of Believers. This means that you and I are going to have to be ready and open to use these pronouncements of divine judgments and commendations as a mirror to look soberly into and see our own reflection as both individuals and as a corporate body.

On another note; already in Revelation we're seeing why interpretation and understanding of this book is so challenging and complex, with the greatest reason being that most (but not all) of what we will encounter in the months ahead is unfulfilled prophecy. We even find unexpected and differing characterizations of the Godhead than what we have found in earlier books that makes it harder for us to visualize or to comprehend exactly which of those persons of the Godhead is speaking or is being spoken about. How do we deal with this as truth seekers? We should begin by taking a collective deep breath and surrendering to the reality that what we are experiencing, and will experience even more once we complete the study of the letters to the 7 Believing Congregations starting in chapter 2, is nothing short of what the Israelites of old experienced as they awaited their Messiah. Perhaps we have much more in common with them than we ever imagined. As Solomon once said: there is nothing new under the sun.

I wonder if we can envision what it must have been like for the Israelites as they tried with great effort to decipher the writings of Isaiah, Ezekiel, Zechariah, and the other great Prophets. On the one hand these Prophets of God spoke about a conquering Davidic king Messiah whose great prowess as a warrior leader delivers Israel from under the oppressive thumb of a gentile world empire and into a glorious Israelite Kingdom; and on the other hand they spoke words about this same Messiah being humiliated, suffering and dying. One time He's a lion, the next he's a lamb. How can both possibly be true? Could their Prophets have been mistaken? Their religious leaders struggled to explain this seeming paradox and they did so with a number of imaginative solutions. Over the centuries those solutions and interpretations about the coming Messiah became inviolable Jewish doctrines that were accepted as truth;

even though, sadly, they were mostly incorrect and had the people looking for the wrong things. So when their Messiah finally did arrive amidst the prophesied events that were to announce His coming, can we blame the bulk of the common Jewish folk for failing to recognize those events.....or Him?

What was mystery for them is revealed in the rear view mirror of history for us. So here's what we need to take from this: too many mysteries about unfulfilled prophecy in Revelation have been transformed into confident facts by Christian religious scholars and writers. These facts (that are often merely assumptions) are invariably the result of working to make the words of Revelation fit into an already established set of beliefs about the End Times. And I'm here to tell you that we're no different than the ancient Israelites who also sincerely believed God, and also sincerely sought to understand what their Prophets told them about what lay ahead. But if Bible history has taught us anything it is that we can really only be certain about some of the important details of unfulfilled prophesy once they have actually happened and become hindsight.

So let's face some more mysteries today, and when needed let's remember what those precious words actually say even if we can't currently imagine how they can possibly happen the way they appear in the Bible. Otherwise we risk mistakenly identifying some current events as prophetic when they're not or being blind to actual unfolding prophetic events when they happen because they don't meet our false expectations. Open your Bibles to Revelation chapter 2.

READ REVELATION CHAPTER 2 all

One of those mysteries we discussed at the beginning of today's lesson confronts us immediately in the first verse of chapter 2 when we read: **CJB Revelation 2:1 "To the angel of the Messianic Community in Ephesus, write: 'Here is the message from the one who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven gold menorahs:** The mystery is this: who or what is the angel of the Messianic community in Ephesus? The reason this is a mystery is because what sense does it make for John to be writing to a heavenly angel? Thus the majority of Christian commentators say that this cannot be a heavenly angel, but rather is only a human messenger. Or that John is only speaking figuratively or metaphorically, or even rather fancifully about this so-called angel. We're going to discuss this at some length because it speaks to the credibility of the vision itself, or the reliability of what John has recorded for us, or perhaps both.

First is that most Christian commentators insist that this is not a heavenly angel but rather a human messenger and on its face this is a reasonable viewpoint. In fact some Bible translations such as the Young's Literal Translation actually use the word "messenger" instead of angel. This is because the Greek word being translated into angel is **aggelos** and indeed it means messenger. Therefore it can legitimately indicate either a heavenly messenger (that we call an angel) or a common human messenger. **Aggelos** is attempting to translate the Hebrew word **malach**, which behaves exactly the same way. **Malach** means messenger, heavenly or human; the proper interpretation, then, depends on the context. So either way we read it in our Bibles, the translation of **aggelos** to English "angel" or "messenger" is good and

accurate. Therefore let me frame the problem simply: is John actually writing to an angel or is he writing to a human messenger that is associated with the Believing congregation of Ephesus? A knee jerk reaction for most people would of course be that the messenger is a human and not a spirit being. For one thing, could a human instruct an angel? And for another, if such a thing was possible would it be done using pen and paper?

So let's look at the strengths and weaknesses of each possibility. The human messenger viewpoint is the easiest to assume because it makes sense and it fits properly with the Greek word **aggelos** (sometimes written as **angeloi**). So what might this human messenger be in relation to the local congregation? There is no mention in the New Testament (outside the mention of such messengers in the letters to the 7 congregations) of any office or position within any local assembly of Believers called an **aggelos**. Christian commentators who hold the view that this is a human messenger say that this is a pastor or an elder. However nowhere else in the New Testament is a bishop, pastor or elder or any assembly leader called an **aggelos** (messenger). Nor do we find **aggelos** used this way elsewhere within Revelation. Especially bishop and elder were common words describing common offices so why not just use those words? Further in no document outside of the Bible do we find the use of **aggelos** to describe a church office or position.

Then we have the issue of what came just before John's mention of the angel of the congregation of Ephesus. To end chapter 1 the divine being that is giving John this vision (who most believe is Christ) explains that the 7 stars he holds in his hand are the 7 angels (**aggelos**) of the 7 Believing assemblies. Why would the definition of the term **aggelos** change from heavenly messenger to human messenger just a few words later? Because our modern Bibles are organized using chapters and verses, it appears to us subconsciously that there is a pause and a separation between the end of chapter 1 and the beginning of chapter 2. Thus it feels like we have one thought process ending and a different thought process beginning. But no such thing as chapter and verse markings or separations existed in John's day nor would it for another 15 centuries. Rather, the last sentence of chapter 1 and the first sentence of chapter 2 ran together; they were one continuous thought process. So in reality there is no separation; there is no pause; there is no end of one thought process and beginning of different one. So we need to read the final part of chapter 1 and beginning of chapter 2 this way: ***Here is the secret meaning of the seven stars you saw in my right hand, and of the seven gold menorahs: the seven stars are the angels of the seven Messianic communities, and the seven menorahs are the seven Messianic communities. "To the angel of the Messianic Community in Ephesus, write:***

When we do that, it is much easier to see the firm connection between the word angel in chapter 1 verse 20 and chapter 2 verse 1. So let's now follow the path of how the use of the word angel in verse 1 of chapter 2 might mean heavenly angel as opposed to a human messenger. The term stars (**aster** in Greek and **kochav** in Hebrew) that are self-defined for us in the final verse of chapter 1 are used throughout the Old Testament as referring either to an actual light in the sky or as symbolic for heavenly angels or spirit beings. It is not used to refer to a human being of any office.

We also find that virtually everywhere else in Revelation that the term **aggelos** is used it

means heavenly angel. And yet, where else in the Bible other than in Revelation do we find any such hint that specific angels are assigned as some kind of supervisor or guardian over an assembly of God-worshippers? The answer is that we don't. Then we have the issue of the message process; that is, of the divine vision-being telling John to give this message to a heavenly angel by means of "writing" it. The Greek for "write" is **grapho** and it indeed means to write by conventional means; so there is no error in translation or in understanding the term's meaning. Nonetheless several early Church Fathers, such as Origen, had no problem accepting the angels-means-angels concept. Later, however, Theodore Zahn, a noted New Testament Bible commentator, bluntly gives the view of the majority of Christian Bible commentators when responding to the question by saying: ***this view "first found in the writings of Origen," should be rejected because "it is absurd that the Lord should make known His will to the spirits which like Himself belong to the invisible heavenly world, through the agency of John, a being of this earth and that they should learn of this will only as unseen visitors at the meetings of the Churches when John's book is read (Revelation 1.3)."***

So let's approach this problem from another angle. The term **aggelos** (messenger, angel) occurs 165 times in the New Testament, 67 of those times in Revelation. Of those 67, 56 times these are direct references to heavenly angels (it is so self-evident from the context that there is no scholarly dispute over this). In 3 additional instances **aggelos** refers to Satan or his minions. So that leaves 9 times the term **aggelos** is used where its meaning is disputed and that is in regard to Revelation chapter 1 and to the letters to the 7 Believing assemblies. Throughout the remainder of the New Testament only 4 times is the term **aggelos** translated to mean a human messenger whereby it seems clear enough that there is no scholarly dispute over the meaning. But in those 4 instances, never does the term have anything to do with a congregation or a pastor or elder and none of the human messengers are entrusted with God's Word and told to communicate it to a person or a group.

The bottom line is that the Scriptural evidence leans heavily towards the angel of the assembly at Ephesus, as well as to the angels of the other 6 assemblies, being heavenly and not human. Primarily human logic and doctrine decrees that these cannot possibly be real angels because they don't fit the mold of angels that Theologians have constructed over the centuries. But what I want to remind you of is that already in chapter 1 we saw some pretty significant deviations from the norms we had come to expect from both the Old and New Testaments about the descriptions of the very nature and forms of the Godhead. Commentaries and Church doctrines tend to gloss over these deviations just as they tend to declare that John's angels are actually human beings because otherwise what is traditionally thought and taught from pulpits and theological schools about angels and spirit beings has to be rethought and reworked.

Although we won't get into the enormous subject of Angelology (the study and doctrines of angels and demons), which is present in the theology of both Judaism and Christianity, I can sum it up by saying this: there is only scant information in the Holy Scriptures about angels or demons. What most people think they know about angels and demons comes nearly exclusively from the human imagination, often borrowed from pagan ideas, but has over the centuries become etched in stone into our religious doctrines. So beware: this is another area

where we can be easily deceived and knocked off track.

As I said just before we read Revelation chapter 2, in cases involving these kinds of difficult mysteries it is often best to simply believe what is written in the Bible even though our minds can't square it with what we've always thought or mentally pictured as possible or even rational. The angels of the 7 Believing assemblies are 7 heavenly angels and John is being asked to deliver God's judgment of each of these assemblies through the angels who have something to do with them. I don't know why this is the process, but there is nothing unbelievable about it except that it doesn't agree with what so many Theologians have decided and told us we ought to believe instead.

Ephesus is a congregation that had been personally mentored by Paul, and of course is the subject of his letter to the Ephesians that in time became a New Testament book. The well known evangelists of the Gospel Priscilla, Aquila, and Apollos lived there and worked hard to disciple the Believers of Ephesus. We also read in the book of Acts about Paul's close call in Ephesus and about how the goddess Artemis (also known as Diana) was the patron god of the city. Ephesus had a substantial Jewish population and at the same time was regarded as the main center of Hellenistic culture and pagan idolatry in Asia; this explains why it was a target for evangelizing by the early Jewish Believers and drew special attention by Paul. So it is no surprise that the assembly at Ephesus would play a prominent role in Revelation as 1 of the 7 congregations that God directly addressed.

The message to Ephesus begins by identifying the one who is giving John the divine vision. And yet, we still don't get a name or even a familiar title for the message-giver. Rather we see the same set of characteristics that were given to end chapter 1: it is the one who holds the 7 stars (angels) in his right hand AND walks among the menorahs (the Believing congregations). The repeat mention of the RIGHT hand is because in the ancient world the right hand was the hand of power and authority. So this divine message-giver says that He has power and authority over the 7 angels. God begins by commending the Ephesus leadership by saying that He knows what they've been doing, and how they persevered, and how they won't tolerate wicked people and how they tested those who claimed to be apostles of Christ and found some of them to be false and liars. In the context of Believers living in the most idolatrous and heathen city in Asia, the Ephesus assembly has been paid a great compliment. And while these words are directly aimed at the congregation of Ephesus, modern Believers need to learn from this as well.

Belief in Christ as Lord and Savior is, in our time, on the wane throughout the West. The only places in the world where it is growing are in the Far East, Africa, and to some degree in South America. It has not been very difficult in the West to "persevere" as a Believer; Western Culture was built on Judeo-Christian ethics and traditions. But those days are fading rapidly. In contrast, being a Believer in Ephesus was very difficult; you were a tiny minority and seen as an insulter of the Grecian gods that the majority of society worshipped. Believers in Ephesus were anything but popular; they were the odd balls. But in the popularity driven West where secular humanism reigns supreme, it isn't cool to be a Christian any more. Oftentimes Believers are looked at with suspicion. We now have Presidents and Prime Ministers openly declaring that such beliefs in the God of the Bible are ignorant and have little place in modern

Progressive societies as much more than warmly remembered relics. What is the response of Western Christianity to such a great threat? Generally speaking it has been surrender. Unfortunately too often this surrender has led to watering down the Gospel, relegating the Bible to a book of a passive religious philosophy, and doing everything possible to make God more attractive by turning Him into a genie-like character that makes our wishes come true, and a buddy whose goal is to make our lives as happy as possible.

Notice how the Ephesus assembly was also commended for refusing to tolerate wicked people and for testing self-proclaimed apostles only to find them as false. How did the Ephesians define “wicked people” and discern true apostles from the many liars? What did they turn to so that they would know what was wicked versus what was godly and true? The only source available to them: the Old Testament. The New Testament would not be created for more than a century after the death of John the Apostle. These false apostles who came as wolves in sheep’s clothing were not pagans because no testing would have been needed to recognize them; rather these lying apostles held themselves up as Believers who were teaching new truths. And clearly they came with sufficient credentials and a good enough story that testing was needed to determine their veracity because what could be determined by those credentials couldn’t be counted upon to avoid deception. The lesson for modern Believers is this: if we don’t PERSONALLY know God’s Word, we’ve lost our only means to test people, spirits, and yes even pastors and Theologians. Many Church denominations and seminaries have mostly replaced actual Bible knowledge with manmade doctrines said to interpret God’s Word. Others, as with the Ephesian congregation, have held tightly to God’s Word as their litmus test for truth. It is each Believer’s responsibility to determine which they, or their congregational leadership, rely on for truth: the actual Word of God as we find it in our Bibles, or doctrines and traditions insisted upon by Christian religious leaders.

After being commended, the Ephesians are judged as having lost the love they had at first. Often this passage is cited as “you have lost your first love”, and that first love is said to be Christ. While “first love” is an acceptable translation, its English comes from the old English that actually means “the love you had at first”. Because of the influence of eroticism upon the Church, “first love” can wrongly be taken to mean something like puppy love; or the first person we had a real crush on or a passionate love for. Therefore in such a case “first love” refers to a specific person. Rather what is meant here is that while the Ephesians dug-in against the constant onslaught of false apostles and mightily resisted the never-ending pressures of the local pagan society, and while they hung-on with a strong determination to a proper biblical doctrine and a purity of worship, they somehow forgot that love must be the basis of it all.

All of God’s Word including His Laws and Commands are based on the principle Messiah taught in Matthew 22. There He is asked which is the greatest commandment of the Law. He responds that it is to love God with all your heart, soul, and might and to love your neighbor as yourself. These were not new instructions coming from Christ, but rather they were ancient coming from Deuteronomy 6:5 and from Leviticus 19:18. The 10 Commandments rest upon this principle of love, and the remaining 603 commands rest upon those first 10. Essentially the Law of Moses teaches us what loving God and loving our fellow man amounts to.....and what it does not. So just as important as consistently looking into the mirror of God’s Word to see if

we are being obedient to it is also looking to see if we are doing it in the spirit of love that is the Word's foundation and underlying principle.

Now in verse 5 a stern warning is issued from the One who can back-up that warning with action. God says the Ephesians need to look back to "before they fell", and to turn from this sin....OR....their menorah will be removed. I don't think the CJB does as good a job as it could on this verse translation and so here is a little better one from the KJV that is more true to the Greek. **KJV Revelation 2:5 Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent.** I prefer this translation because it properly uses the words "repent" and "do the first works". It also adds back in the word "quickly" to explain that there is little time to right the ship. Especially the issue of doing works is problematic to much of Western Christianity because works are wrongly characterized as an enemy of grace. But here God is plainly demanding concrete action, demonstrated first by a change of heart (repentance) followed by a change of behavior (doing the first works). And since the pertinent issue is the loss of operating in the spirit of love that the Ephesians were initially displaying, then we see that recapturing that love must manifest itself first in spirit and then in action. One without the other is not acceptable to the Lord.

Now for the scary part: the consequence of disobedience to this warning is God removing the menorah from its place. The menorah (lampstand in most English Bibles) symbolizes God's light (or better enlightenment). Removing the menorah from its place means God's guiding light is removed and therefore the congregation will cease to exist as part of the body of Christ. It may certainly remain as a social group of nice people; but God has removed Himself from identification with it. It is notable that God says that not practicing our faith in love is sin; but this sin is so serious that if the Ephesians don't turn from it God will remove them from His presence. Notice that the divine being didn't step away from the menorah; He banished it away from Himself. Is this a sin for which there is no atonement in Christ? An unforgivable sin? Might that be because trying to practice a faith without love means to God that we aren't practicing an authentic faith based on redemption in Yeshua? A redemption that itself is based upon love? While I can't say with absolute certainty, it is my opinion that this may well mean a loss of salvation. Others say it just means that this particular assembly of Believers can no longer serve God. That makes no sense to my mind because if a Believer has been pushed far enough away from God **by God** so that he can no longer serve or identify with the Lord, hasn't the essential purpose and evidence of being redeemed been removed? Is not the light of God INTERNAL to us in the form of the Holy Spirit? So if the light of God is extinguished, then the Holy Spirit is no longer present. And if the Holy Spirit is gone, then the supreme indicator of our redemption in Messiah Yeshua is gone. Either way the punishment for attempting to follow God's laws and commands without pursuing them in the spirit of love is extremely serious and dangerous.

In verse 6, interestingly, God returns to offering commendation by saying that at least the Ephesians hate what the Nicolaitans do.....which is in tune with God because He hates it, too! What do the Nicolaitans do? Who are the Nicolaitans? I can tell you that there is no consensus of scholarship as to exactly what this is indicating. One train of thought is that this is speaking to clericalism. That is, that the Nicolaitans were all about creating and maintaining rigid

doctrines above all else. And in addition, the Church leadership held themselves up as the highest authority, even as being in regular communication with God. While I don't know for sure, this smells a great deal like some Protestant Theologians taking a shot at Catholicism and the Pope. I can't find any evidence that this is the sense of the word Nicolaitans.

The next most popular view is that this has to do with the gentile convert, Nicolas, found in Acts 6:5, who lived in Antioch. And the thought is that at some point he started a cult appropriately called the Nicolaitans that taught wicked things and tried to infect Christ's followers with his teaching. Again, this is pure speculation with no evidence to back it up.

However as more Christian scholars have become persuaded to re-open the Old Testament and to understand Jewish culture better, another solution has come to light that seems fruitful. It has been noticed that in Hebrew in order to say the phrase "we will eat" the verb *nokhal* would have been used. An example of this can be found in **Isaiah 4:1** where we read: ***On that day seven women will seize one man, saying, "We will eat (nokhal) our own bread and provide our own clothing. Just let us be called by your name. Take away our disgrace."*** It is common among languages to take a word from one language and transfer it to another. The goal is to make the foreign word sound very similar in the other language and also to make the meaning similar. In English were we find the term "the Nicolaitans" it is translating the Greek term *ton nikolaton*. Thus the intent is to describe a group of people that had become known as the "we will eat" people. So in a sense their base doctrine was that they will eat whatever they want to, including forbidden foods (such as food offered to pagan gods). The new study of Hebraisms (Hebrew sayings) found in both the Old and New Testaments has been developed as a means to help us better understand some phrases in the Bible that up to now have been very hard to get a solid grip on. And it is likely that this is what we're seeing with the term "the Nicolaitans". They were teaching wrong doctrine that would permit Believers to eat anything without restriction. And God hated it.

Verse 7 says: ***"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says..."*** This is another example of a Hebraism; a Jewish saying. Not only does it occur in all 7 letters, but also Yeshua said it during His earthly ministry (Matthew 13) and long before Him Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel said it. It is basically an encouragement to pay attention to what God says, and do it! It is said with the intent to shock a God worshipper out of their lethargy and into action; and it fits well with the background of Revelation as a book that announces impending judgment, just as divine judgment was the background of the books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and almost all Prophets for that matter. Perhaps this is a good time to repeat something I said earlier: these letters are to Believers, and not to the world at large. Verse 7 concludes with: "...let them hear what the Spirit is saying to the Messianic Communities". To use modern Christian-eze, "let them hear what the Spirit is saying to the Churches".

The final words of verse 7 require profoundly serious attention by the reader. Depending on your English Bible version, those words say: "To him winning the victory", or "To him who overcomes." The idea is that the Believer or assembly of Believers, corporately, conquers their shortcomings and sins and turns back to God. In the case of the Ephesians, they must regain the spirit of love that they used to have but set aside in their lives. And for those who do the reward is that they shall be allowed to eat from The Tree of Life. What does eating from the

Tree of Life give us? Eternal life with God. In fact, the reference at the end of verse 7 to the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden is meant as an allusion to **Genesis 3:22, 23**.

²² ADONAI, God, said, "See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil. Now, to prevent his putting out his hand and taking also from the tree of life, eating, and living forever-"

²³ therefore ADONAI, God, sent him out of the garden of 'Eden to cultivate the ground from which he was taken.

Let that sink in; especially for those who depend upon the once-saved-always-saved doctrine. The reward for the Believer at Ephesus who repents and changes (conquers) their wrong heart-attitude and subsequent physical behavior will be eternity. So conversely what happens to those who **don't** overcome this sin that God has said He will not tolerate? A time-out? A slap on the wrist? No; they will NOT get to eat from the Tree of Life that gives eternal life. Since this entire message is ONLY to Believers (those who are saved) then for them to NOT receive eternal life for refusing to correct their ways means only one thing: loss of salvation. And the allusion to Genesis 3 is most appropriate because just as the Lord threatens Ephesus with removing their menorah and distancing Himself from them, so Adam was removed from the Garden of Eden where the Tree of Life resides to put distance between He and God.

We'll take up the second letter that will be addressed to the angel of the Believing congregation at Smyrna next time.