

REVELATION 2:1 - 3:22

Chapters 2-3 give us much of the historical context in which the vision of Revelation is given. It contains 7 letters written to the seven angels (stars) of the seven churches (lampstands).

The structure of the letters is as follows:

- 1) some phrase drawn from the vision of Christ in chapter 1 or else new terms for Christ drawn from the vision yet to unfold.
- 2) the words: 'I know' which then proceed with an estimate of the church's condition.
- 3) words of rebuke or encouragement.
- 4) a promise for the those who 'conquer', who stand fast through the ordeal of persecution.
- 5) the words: 'let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches - (in the last 4 letters it comes at the end and in the 1st 3 letters just before the promise).

What is going on in the churches? There is reference to 'Nicolaitians', 'Balamites', 'Jezebel', and 'Jews'. The church is being threatened from **without** and from **within**.

From without: The empire required worship of the deified emperor (Caesar) and the goddess of the heavens (Roma). This was a way to build loyalty and subservience to Rome. Jews were exempt from such religious practices because the Romans knew that it was difficult to extract such worship from strict monotheists like the Jews. Early on, Christians were considered sectarian Jews and therefore treated the same way. But as Christians grew in numbers and drew from the gentile population, orthodox Jews wanted to separate themselves from them. They demanded that Christians not be seen as Jews and in some cases, encouraged the tendency to treat Christians differently, outside any exemption. This also meant that Christians were now being required to worship the official polytheistic religion. If they did not, they would be fined, in some cases harassed and imprisoned, and in some cases executed.

From within: Given this new situation of persecution, many within the church pushed for a compromise solution. Christians could pretend to worship with the Romans, and since their gods were really mythical, no harm was being done. Moreover, besides worship, there was ritual eating of food sacrificed to the gods. And further, as Christians were becoming diversified in cultural backgrounds, there was also the natural tendency of 'fornicating' - marrying or being bonded sexually with non-believers. In a context where being a Christian was highly unpopular and a reason for discrimination, the pressure to hide, tone-down, give up or compromise one's faith was high. Without support and a fellow sharing of the faith from those within your household, the chances of falling away from your faith were greater.

Finally, for some, the temptation of being a good citizen, and therefore becoming less a target for discrimination, could pressure them to participate in social functions that were based on collective exploitation of people and a culture of violence, status and material

wealth and comfort. How do you rationalize and justify how you make money because you are enslaved to certain lifestyle choices and how do you fit in even as your participation feeds the engine of a system of mass exploitation that is the state?

The letters to the seven churches take a stand against compromise and against a Judaism that was anti-messianic, as false to the truth that Jesus came to reveal and embody in his death and resurrection. Compromise would weaken the church from within and dampen the purity of passion for God. It would also dilute Christian identity in a pluralistic world. There is a time to compromise or at least for taking a more moderate position in relation to the larger culture. Other times call for a more clear-cut separation and distinctiveness from the larger culture. The early church struggled with these options throughout the New Testament. The vision of Revelation calls for no compromise with 'idolatry' or 'fornication', otherwise the lamp (light) in the church would be extinguished. Stand fast and firm and you will be rewarded with the blessing of communion with God/Christ/Spirit eternally. A little suffering now, but then eternity with a clear conscience rooted in a higher justice than the corrupt and contaminating values of popular culture established by an oppressive regime.

Can you think of examples in your own life where compromise is the better path? What about clear cut, either-or choices? What's at stake for the seven churches should they just give in, compromise, and just blend into the larger culture and worship of Rome? How is our identity, character and integrity established or diminished by the choices we make that cost us something and require both risk and courage? How often have marginalized groups had to swallow it and try to fit in to survive within a dominant culture?

What is the 'Life Strategy' being presented in these letters?

1) Even though you may feel isolated and few in numbers, there are many more of you scattered throughout the empire. And so, these letters are written to individual churches, but also for all to see and read for both encouragement and warning. There are many more of us and God knows us all and holds us all, wherever we are.

2) Jesus Christ, the Son of Man, understands what you're going through. He was persecuted, tortured, and killed. But he has 'conquered' and now lives forever. This is the future for all of you if you patiently endure and remain committed to faith, hope and love, and to moral integrity. If you get unanchored from your faith, your identity, and your roots, you will be swallowed up by the empire and chewed out. You may save your lives but lose your souls.

3) The reward you will receive is so much greater than whatever comfort or provisional security you can gain here and now through compromise. A little pain and hardship now through your resistance and sacrifice now and a future too rich for words to capture, beyond your wildest imagination.

4) Your identity, character and integrity are far more important than comfort and safety through compromise. There is a quick and immediate peace which also carries the baggage

of an uneasy conscience, and a longer-term peace which, although it may bring difficulty now, will provide a richer fullness eternally.

5) Revelation offers a rich description of the glory and power of Christ and the splendour of heaven. This is in contrast to the pale glories of Rome and the glories of wealth, pleasure, and comfort in this world if you sell your soul. The price of conformity is not worth it. Let your imagination ponder the rich and dramatic descriptions of heaven and its pleasures and rewards. This heaven will be joined to earth at some point... More on all that to come...