



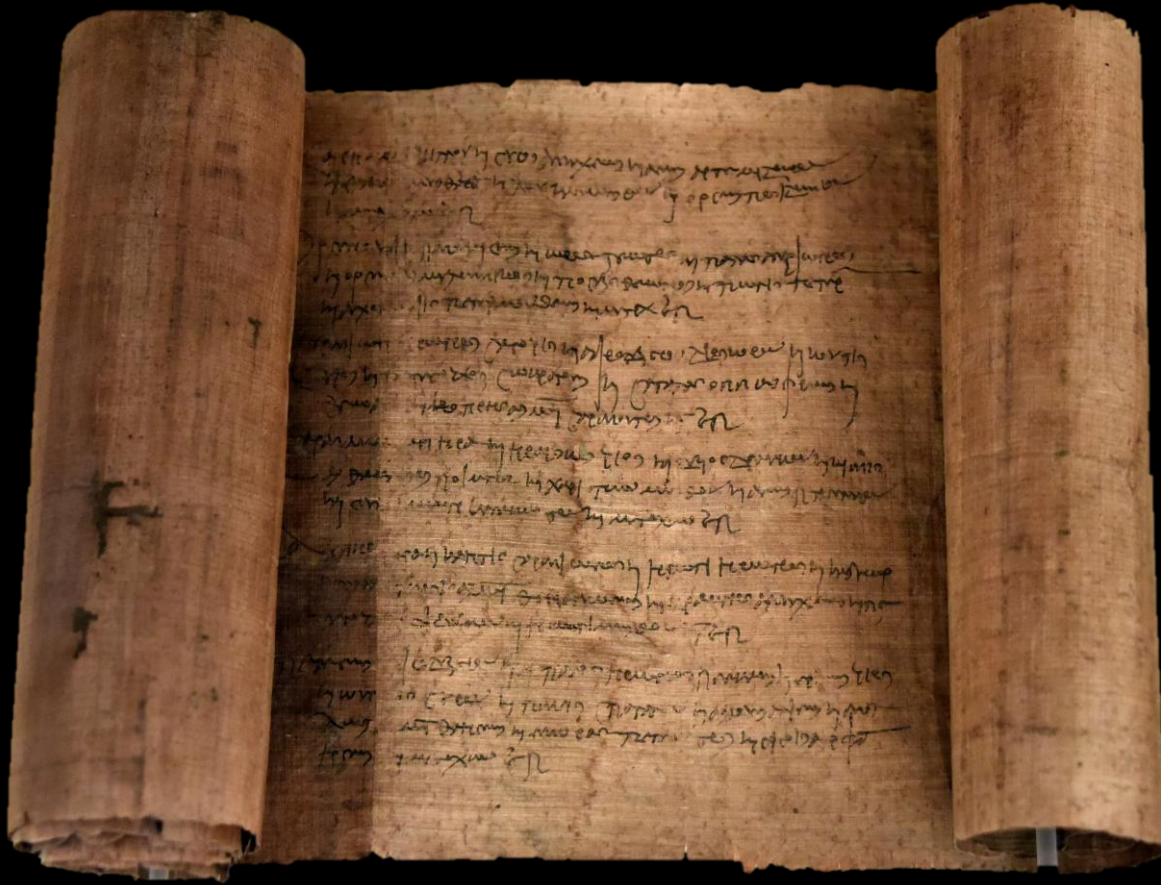
“Letter to a Loveless Church,” Part 2 ● Revelation 2:1–7



Text

“To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands, says this: I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot tolerate evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false; and you have perseverance and have endured for My name’s sake, and have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Therefore remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place—unless you repent. Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God.”

Outline



- I. The Address (2:1a)
- II. The Assessor (2:1b)
- III. The Approval (2:2–3, 6)
- IV. The Accusation (2:4)
- V. The Admonition (2:5)
- VI. The Appeal (2:7a)
- VII. The Assurance (2:7b)

“Nowhere does the word of the gospel seem to have found a kindlier soil, to have struck root more deeply, or to have borne fairer fruits of faith and love. . . . From a church to which so much was given, much would be required.”

—R. C. Trench, *The Seven Churches in Asia*, 95



III. The Approval (2:2–3, 6)

“I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot tolerate evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false; and you have perseverance and have endured for My name’s sake, and have not grown weary. . . . Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.”

- Christ states, “I know”—a declaration He will repeat in each of the letters.
- The term implies *complete* knowledge—not knowledge in process, but knowledge already possessed.
- In vv. 2–3, Christ lists six virtues stated in three pairs, and then elaborates on one of those virtues later in v. 6.

“I know **your deeds** and your toil and perseverance,
and that **you cannot tolerate** evil men” (2:2a).



- 1) “Your deeds” – activity of any kind, its quality defined by context.
 - “Toil” – *labor unto weariness* – a term used frequently in the NT to describe sacrificial efforts to advance the gospel.
 - “Perseverance” – *ability to stand up under pressure* – a term used to describe steadfastness in truth despite opposition.
- 2) “You cannot tolerate” – positive sense: *to sustain or bear a burden* (Gal 6:2); negated sense as here: *intolerance*.
 - “Evil men” – those who are morally corrupt; lawless.

“and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false” (2:2b).

- 3) **“You put to the test”** – *the effort to discover the character of something through investigation.*
- **“Apostles”** – those who claimed a status of authority to teach and direct (see Acts 20:29–30).
 - The Ephesians would have applied “tests” like Matthew 7:15–23; 1 John 4:1–6; 2 John 7–11; etc.
- 4) **“You found them false”** – *the ability to arrive at the right conclusion; the result of the testing.*

**“and you have perseverance and have endured for My name’s sake,
and have not grown weary” (2:3)**

- 5) **“You have perseverance”** – *ability to stand up under pressure*; Christ used the term to define the “deeds” of the Ephesians in v. 2, but here treats it as its own quality.
- **“have endured”** – *to sustain or bear a burden* (e.g., Luke 14:27); used in v. 2a, but here in the positive sense.
 - **“for My name’s sake”** – names were important, and the Ephesian believers chose “Jesus Christ” over “Caesar.”
- 6) **“You have not grown weary”** – Christ used the term to define the “deeds” of the Ephesians in v. 2 (“toil”), but says here that the Ephesians *labored wearifully but without weariness setting in*.

“There are things which thou canst not bear, and things which thou canst bear; thou canst not bear the wicked, such false brethren as name the name of Christ only to bring shame upon it . . . but thou canst bear my reproach, my cross.”

—R. C. Trench, *Epistles to the Seven Churches*, 106

“Yet this you do have, that **you hate the deeds **of the Nicolaitans,**
which I also hate” (2:6).**

- In v. 6, Christ re-emphasizes one of these virtues (“you cannot tolerate evil men,” v. 2a) as the letter draws to a close.
- **“You hate . . . which I also hate”** – strong words expressing *intolerance*.
- **“The Nicolaitans”** – the “evil men” of v. 2; the title means “conqueror of the people” and corresponds to the name “Balaam” in the Hebrew (“devourer of the people”).
 - They are described in more detail in the letter to the church in Pergamum as promoters of *idolatry* and *immorality* (2:14–15).
 - They were *compromisers* with pagan practices.



THE EPHESIAN CHURCH'S SPIRITUAL RESUME

- ✓ significant ministry activity (v. 2a)
- ✓ intolerance of moral compromise (v. 2a)
- ✓ testing of doctrinal purity (v. 2b)
- ✓ rejection of doctrinal error (v. 2b)
- ✓ persistence despite opposition (v. 3)
- ✓ refusal to give up (v. 3)

IV. The Accusation (2:4)

“But I have this against you, that you have left **your first love.**”

- **“But”** – a strong contrasting conjunction, sharply changing the tone.
- **“First love”** – *fervent love that characterizes newlyweds* – a phrase highly debated by scholars, leading to three possible options:
 - 1) **Love for fellow Christians** – a spirit of cold orthodoxy, excessive censorship, and perpetual suspicion diminished brotherly love.
 - 2) **Love for the lost** – an overemphasis on separation from the world and excommunication of sinners extinguished evangelistic zeal.
 - ✓ 3) **Love for Christ** – an overconfident orthodoxy and an imbalanced emphasis on works eclipsed devotion for God.

“Go and proclaim in the ears of Jerusalem, saying, ‘Thus says the LORD, “I remember concerning you the devotion of your youth, the love of your betrothals, your following after Me in the wilderness, through a land not sown. Israel was holy to the LORD, the first of His harvest. . . .” Thus says the LORD, “What injustice did your fathers find in Me, that they went far from Me and walked after emptiness and became empty?”

—Jeremiah 2:2–5

“So when they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon, *son* of John, do you love Me more than these?’ He said to Him, ‘Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.’ He said to him, ‘Tend My lambs.’ He said to him again a second time, ‘Simon, *son* of John, do you love Me?’ He said to Him, ‘Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.’ He said to him, ‘Shepherd My sheep.’ He said to him the third time, ‘Simon, *son* of John, do you love Me?’ Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, ‘Do you love Me?’ And he said to Him, “Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Tend My sheep.’”

—John 21:15–17



“I was indeed amazed at the labors and learning of the ministers among the Reformed. They understood the Scriptures well in the original tongues, they had all the points of controversy very ready, and did thoroughly understand the whole body of divinity. In many places they preached every day and were almost constantly employed in visiting their flock. But they performed their devotions but slightly, and read their prayers, which were too long, with great precipitation and little zeal. Their sermons were too long and too dry. And they were so strict, even to jealousy, in the smallest points in which they put orthodoxy, that one who could not go into all their notions, but was resolved not to quarrel with them, could not converse much with them with any freedom.”

“I have, upon all the observation that I have made, often considered the inward state of the Reformation, the decay of the vitals of Christianity in it, as that which gives more melancholy impressions, than all the outward dangers that surround it”

—Gilbert Burnet (1643-1715),
History of His Own Times, 3.1140-1141



V. The Admonition (2:5)

“Therefore **remember** from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place—unless you repent.”

- Christ gives three commands in light of the Ephesians’ waning first-love.

1. Remember

- “**Remember**” – *an active, continual bringing to mind*; memory is a powerful force for motivating change (e.g., Luke 15:17–18).
- “**From where you have fallen**” – the focus of the remembrance: the heights of affection.

“Therefore remember from where you have fallen, and **repent** and **do the deeds you did at first**; or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place—unless you repent.”

2. Repent

- “**Repent**” – *a fundamental shift in one’s thinking; a decisive change of direction; a turn from that which is recognized as evil to that which is acknowledged as good.*

3. Return

- “**Do the deeds you did at first**” – *a return to the kind of deeds done at first; the current “deeds” (v. 2) as commendable as they were, were not substitutes for the first “deeds” (v. 5).*

“Therefore remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place—unless you repent.”

- **“Or else . . . unless you repent”** – Christ’s commands are not suggestions; they come with warnings.
- **“I am coming”** – A promise frequently used in Revelation for final, eschatological salvation or judgment (1:8; 16:15; 22:7, 12, 20), but here probably a local, limited judgement.
- **“I will remove your lampstand”** – Christ’s building of His universal church (Matt 16:18) does not preclude His extinguishing of disobedient local churches.



“If I please Jesus, it doesn’t matter whom I displease.
If I displease Jesus, it really doesn’t matter whom I please.”

—Adrian Rogers

VI. The Appeal (2:7a)

“He who has **an ear**, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

- The same appeal is repeated in each of the seven letters; it serves to gather attention and emphasize the need for a response.
- It was also is used by Jesus in His earthly ministry (e.g., Matt 11:15; 13:9, 43; Mark 4:9, 23; Luke 8:8).
- “**An ear**” refers not merely to a *physical* ear, but to something greater, a *spiritual* ear—one able to receive and understand *the truth*.
- The wording points to the obligation each one has to receive and obey the truth, but that doing so comes only with *the gift* of a *hearing ear*.

“He who has an ear, let him hear **what the Spirit says to the churches.**”

- John previously referred to the Holy Spirit in 1:4 (“and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne”) and in 1:10 (“I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day”).
- Here in 2:7, the Spirit is the one described as *speaking* this letter to the churches, although it is also Christ who is *speaking* this letter according to 2:1.
- Ultimately, this appeal indicates that the contents of the letter were not just applicable to the church in Ephesus, but to all seven churches of Asia—and by extension, *to all churches universally*.

VII. The Assurance (2:7b)

“To **him who overcomes**, I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God.”



- “Overcomer” – *literally*, “conqueror” (repeated in each of the letters). Who is he?
- “The word *conquer* is a military term. It suggests that the Christian life, so far from being a bed of roses, involves a struggle against anyone and anything that saps the Christian life of all that gives it strength and power” (Metzger, *Breaking the Code*, 30).

- The vocabulary of “**the overcomer**” is particularly unique in John’s writings, being used ultimately to describe *Christ*:
 - **John 16:33** – “These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world.”
 - **Revelation 5:5** – “and one of the elders said to me, ‘Stop weeping; behold, the Lion that is from the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has overcome so as to open the book and its seven seals.’”
 - **Revelation 17:14** – “These will wage war against the Lamb, and the Lamb will overcome them, because He is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those who are with Him *are the* called and chosen and faithful.”

- But the special vocabulary of “**the overcomer**” in John’s writings also extends to *all genuine Christians*:
 - **1 John 4:4** – “You are from God, little children, and have overcome them; because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world.”
 - **1 John 5:4–5** – “For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. Who is the one who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?”
 - **Revelation 21:6–7** – ““It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give to the one who thirsts from the spring of the water of life without cost. He who overcomes will inherit these things, and I will be his God and he will be My son.”

“But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer
through Him who loved us.”

—Romans 8:27

**“To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life
which is in the Paradise of God.”**

- **Genesis 2:9** – “Out of the ground the LORD God caused to grow every tree that is pleasing to the sight and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.”
- **Genesis 3:22–24** – “Then the LORD God said, ‘Behold, the man has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might stretch out his hand, and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever’—therefore the LORD God sent him out from the garden of Eden, to cultivate the ground from which he was taken. So He drove the man out; and at the east of the garden of Eden He stationed the cherubim and the flaming sword which turned every direction to guard the way to the tree of life.”

“To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life
which is in the Paradise of God.”

- That which was once forbidden and rendered inaccessible will one day be provided freely and without impediment.
- Whatever had been lost through Adam’s sin is now regained and more, through the victorious obedience of the One “who loves us and released us from our sins by His blood,” and “made us to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father” (Rev 1:5–6).
- **Revelation 22:2** – “On either side of the river was the tree of life, bearing twelve *kinds of* fruit, yielding its fruit every month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.”

QUESTIONS FOR SELF-EXAMINATION



- Do the admirable qualities of the church in Ephesus mark us (ministry activity, intolerance for immorality, careful testing of teaching, rejection of error, persistence in hardship, and the refusal to give up)?
- Would Christ accuse us of the same fundamental flaw?
- Are we motivated to fan the flame of our affection by the reward to eat of the Tree of Life?