

Revelation Chapter 2 Part 1 – John Karmelich

1. My title for this lesson is "Jesus gives a mid-term". ☺
 - a) If you are not familiar with that term, it is a big test usually given half way through a high school or college semester. The point is to measure the progress of the student and make sure the student is comprehend the material being taught to that student.
 - b) I'm also using the term "mid-term" to mean a mid-term report. It would be like a boss giving a company status report or an employee evaluation. The idea is a leader is telling his or her subordinates the things they are doing right and wrong.
 - c) This leads us to Revelation Chapters 2 and 3: They are seven specific letters to seven specific churches. The Lord Jesus is dictating this to John, the Revelation "scribe". In each case, each church is told what they are doing right and wrong. Three churches have "perfect scores" in that two churches are doing nothing wrong and one is doing nothing right. The other four churches have mixed reviews where they are told good things that they are doing and bad things they are doing. This lesson covers the first two letters.
2. Let's back up a little to the last part of Chapter 1 and understand Chapters 2 and 3 in context:
 - a) Chapter 1 Verse 19 says, "'Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later". This verse is an outline of the whole book of Revelation.
 - i) "What you have seen" describes the vision(s) as described in Chapter 1.
 - ii) "What is now" describes the positive and negative aspects of the seven churches to who this letter is addressed. This is Chapters 2-3.
 - iii) "What will take place later" describes the remainder of the Book of Revelation.
3. Now comes the most important part of this lesson. Time to pay attention! ☺
 - a) By the same standards Jesus judges these churches, He is judging you and me.
 - b) I call this chapter a "mid-term" report because it is describing a work-in progress. The people in these churches are continuing to live their lives. These letters are designed to be written to Christians to evaluate their work in progress.
 - c) There is a key phrase in Chapters 2 and 3 that is repeated to each of the seven churches:
 - i) To each church Jesus says, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." Now go look in the mirror and see if you have ears. ☺ If you believe Jesus is the Lord of your life and you have ears, these letters are for you! I'll even add that this applies to those who are born without ears as one can read these letters. The principal is the same.
 - d) Now let's get back to why this is so important. Stop and think about Chapters 2 and 3 this way: These are Jesus first words to "everyone" (all believers) since he was taken into heaven after the resurrection. Yes, the bible records Jesus spoke some words to Paul after that, but this is Jesus' first words to the church in general since the resurrection.
 - i) As of the time Revelation was written, it is roughly 60 years since the resurrection.
 - a) By this time some doubted Jesus' Second Coming (See 2nd Peter 3:4).
 - ii) Now here is Jesus giving a "report card" to seven specific churches.
 - e) Remember that the main purpose for Jesus Second Coming is for judgment. Before Jesus can "judge the world", which is the bulk of Revelation, Jesus first has to "judge the church". Peter said, "For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? (1st Peter 4:17, NIV). Revelation 2 and 3 lays out standards for Christian church judgment.
4. Let's talk a little more about Jesus and judgment.
 - a) When we get to Revelation Chapter 20, we will read of a specific time era where two judgments occur. One is for Christians and one for unbelievers. The judgment standards are different for each group. The judgment for believers is to give our rewards in heaven and the judgment for unbelievers is to determine whether to go to heaven or hell.

- b) In essence, we as Christians will be held accountable for what we know about Jesus and what we did with that knowledge. For those wondering about people who die young or people who never have heard of Jesus, the simple answer is a perfect God will judge perfectly. I have faith a perfect God will work all of that out.
 - c) These two chapters lay out the standards by which these churches are judged. We as Christians are subject to the same judgment standards. We need to read each line of these letters and apply it to ourselves.
 - d) I also need to give a brief discussion of "group" judgment: Not only are we accountable as individuals, but also as "groups". These seven letters make it real clear that God judges churches. The idea is that we may still be saved, but if our actions are not up to God's standards, our individual church may come to an end. It may come to a physical end or it may simply become an ineffective witness for Jesus. In that sense, these seven letters become models for how to have a vibrant and effective church for Jesus Christ!
5. Hopefully by now you will understand why I consider Chapters 2 and 3 the two most important chapters in the bible when it comes to understanding God's standards for Christian judgment.
- a) From Chapters 4 through the end of the book is describing events tied to Jesus Second Coming and God judging unbelievers.
 - b) Most Evangelical Christians see Chapters 4-21 as all future events from our time frame. Another common view that is popular among traditional denominations is that most of Chapters 4-19 describes world judgment over the last 2,000 years of church history and then, in the future Jesus returns. We'll discuss each view much more in future lessons.
 - i) No matter which view you hold, most of the remainder of Revelation deals with judgment on nonbelievers and then with rewards for the believer.
 - ii) Only Chapters 2 and 3 focus on the "rules" for Christian judgment. That is why for the "here and now" they are the most important chapters in the book.
6. Finally, let's talk about the different "levels" of the seven letters:
- a) First, one can read each letter from a historical aspect. These letters are dealing with seven churches that actually existed at that time. Each church is in a different city. Understanding a few historical facts about each city give us some additional clues as to what the verses mean. We'll discuss those facts as we go.
 - b) There is also the universal application. This is how the letters apply to you and me.
 - i) I encourage you to memorize is the meaning of the name of each city. Those actual city names are a word-picture of the key point or theme of each letter. The way I recall the theme of each letter is I simply recall what that city name means. For example the first letter is to the church in Ephesus. That word "Ephesus" means "darling". The main theme of this letter is that the church has lost its love for God. That is why "darling" is a word-picture tied to one's love for God.
 - c) The letters also follow a pattern that outline the last two thousand years of church history. Some commentators see this, others think it is a stretch of the imagination.
 - i) For example, many see the first letter as a generalization of the church of the first century. Many see the second letter describing the next several hundred years when the Romans persecuted the church. This continues to present times.
 - ii) I'll explain this view as we go. If you agree with this view, terrific. If not, it's not a key issue. Remember you and I will face a judgment day before God. Therefore, it's vital to understand what God considers "good and bad" in each of the letters.
 - d) My last bit of advice when studying these letters is to remember some basic bible rules:
 - i) Rule #1: "The plain things are the main things and the main things are things". This means that the big or obvious things are what are most important as opposed to some of the trivial details.
 - ii) Rule 2: "A text taken out of context becomes a pretext". The best interpretation of any bible verse is always to read it in context of the surrounding verses.

- iii) With all that said, may the Holy Spirit "hover" over these studies and teach us the things He wants us to learn from them, in Jesus name, Amen.
- 7. Chapter 2, Verse 1: "To the angel of the church in Ephesus write:
 - a) Let's start with a quick discussion of who this letter is to and from:
 - i) The "from" is given in Chapter 1: The last half of Chapter 1 gave a physical description of the resurrected Jesus Christ. That description is full of word-pictures that are going to be used in Chapter 2, including this verse.
 - ii) The "from" of Chapter 2 is Jesus himself. He was the one who started speaking in Verse 17 of Chapter 1, and it continues through all of Chapter 2 and 3. The writer John, (Same writer as Gospel of John) then took dictation.
 - iii) The "to" is stated in Chapter 2, Verse 1. It is the church in Ephesus.
 - b) The church of Ephesus was founded by Paul in his missionary journeys. It is mentioned in the Book of Acts, Chapters 18 through 20. It was one of the largest cities in the ancient world. If you recall from Acts, it was home of the temple to the goddess "Diana". The worship of this pagan god included sexual acts. The temple was full of prostitutes. That temple was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. In Chapter 19 of Acts, as Christianity grew, Diana-worshipped decreased. This affected the Ephesians' economy and anti-Christianity sentiment grew. The point of all of this is that the church of Ephesus had to deal with paganism and all of this immorality in the background.
- 8. Verse 1, Second Sentence: (Jesus is still speaking) "These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands:"
 - a) Let's break down the word-pictures of this sentence:
 - i) "These are the words of him": This is Jesus speaking. Chapter 1, Verse 18 said in effect "I was dead and now alive", making it Jesus.
 - ii) "Seven stars in his right hand": Chapter 1, Verse 20 says the stars are the angels of the seven churches. "Seven golden lampstands": Chapter 1, Verse 20 says the lampstands are the seven churches.
 - b) Putting it all together, this is a colorful way of saying Jesus is speaking to the angels of the seven churches. Why does Jesus use these word pictures?
 - i) Both stars and lampstands give off light. Jesus calls us the "light of the world" (Matthew 5:14) in that we are to illuminate Jesus to the world.
 - ii) "Stars" give off a small amount of light, and "work in the background" of our sky. It makes a nice picture of a function of angels.
 - c) Time for a quick word on angels: The word angel means messenger. The letters are written to the "angel" of each church. Does that refer to some angelic being in charge of each church or some human messenger sent to each church? Scholars debate this stuff. Personally I find the debate irrelevant because no matter which way you look it at, the point is these letters are being delivered to these seven churches.
 - d) OK, Jesus is dictating letters to seven churches. What's the point? Glad you asked! ☺
 - i) The verse says that Jesus "walks" among the seven churches (lampstands).
 - ii) To paraphrase Jesus, He is saying, "I know that you have your doubts at times. I know it is hard to have faith in Me when you can't physically see Me. I know you think that in the whole world of people and places, you sometimes wonder if I know what is happening in your church. Let me, Jesus Christ reassure you, that I am aware of what is happening in your church, your town and your life every day. I "walk" among the seven churches and among your church!"
 - iii) Remember my key point is what "happens" to the Christians of these seven churches also happens to you and me as believers in Jesus. What Jesus considers a good or bad thing in the "status reports" is a good or bad thing for you and me.

9. Verse 2: I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. ³You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.
- a) OK, here comes the first of the actual "performance status" comments of Chapters 2-3. In these verses, we get the positive accommodations given to the church in Ephesus.
 - b) It starts by saying "I know your deeds". It doesn't say, "I've got great second hand knowledge of what you're doing by my staff memos". ☺ The idea is Jesus is personally aware of what is going on in our lives.
 - c) The first accommodation is "deeds". That refers to what we have accomplished.
 - i) Is your church supporting missionaries? Jesus is aware of it.
 - ii) Is your church doing some special charity project? Jesus is aware of it.
 - iii) Is your church spending time just worshipping Jesus? He is aware of it.
 - iv) Finally notice that "deeds" is a good thing. The tone of Verses 2 and 3 are that these are positive accommodations for the churches actions.
 - d) The second accommodation is "hard work". Let's face it, ministry is hard work. I've yet to meet anyone in "professional" ministry who only puts in a 40 hour week. I've yet to see any project that has made an impact for the Gospel that didn't require a lot of hard work. Don't get me wrong, doing God's will gives far greater joy than anything we can accomplish in life. Sometimes it just takes plain old hard work to get the job done.
 - e) The third accommodation is "perseverance". The idea is that we "stick through it". There is always a temptation to quit when things get tough. Persevering is about keep on going toward the goal even when the work gets routine, tough or boring. Remember this is an accommodation. Jesus is aware how tough it can be in the middle of a project when there is no end in sight. Jesus is saying He is aware how tough it is and is encouraging us to keep moving forward.
 - f) The fourth accommodation has to do with "wicked men" and "false apostles". In other words, the Ephesus church didn't tolerate those who are not sincerely following Jesus.
 - i) Remember that Ephesus was the home of the temple of Diana. The temple featured male and female prostitutes to encourage others in sex in order to entice Diana. The temple priests would then sell souvenirs to the tourists, which where silver replicas of Diana to take home. The Ephesus church had deal with all this in the background. I suspect that is the key reference to dealing with "wicked men".
 - ii) This verse also stated there were "false apostles". Think about this for a second: Does a false teacher or a false apostle (i.e., one who claims they were sent by God) wear a button that says, "Hello, I'm John and I'm a false teacher, follow me!" ☺ Of course not! The only way to tell a false teacher is by what they teach. The positive accommodation of this church (Hint! Hint!) is they watch the behavior of new members. They watch what they teach and judge their behaviors in comparison to what Jesus has taught.
 - iii) People who work in banks know the best way to spot counterfeit money is to spend a lot of time with real money. Bank tellers spend a lot of time holding and counting money. You get to a point where it gets easier to spot fake money because you spend so much time with the real thing. The same applies to false teachers. The more time you spend with "the real thing" (i.e., studying your bible and learning truth), the easier it is to spot counterfeits.
 - iv) Notice the church was given positive remarks for not tolerating false teachers. They did not say, "Well, Jesus loves everybody and maybe they'll change one day, come on in and teach us your views!" ☺ This is not say to "sinners" are unwelcome in church. The idea is newcomers or false teachers are not allowed to teach false doctrines in church.

- g) Let me give a quick comment on Verse 3: It reads, "You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary."
 - i) This is very similar to what was stated in Verse 2. It is as if Jesus is saying, "Let me tell you one more time how I notice your perseverance".
 - ii) Again, Chapter 20 of the Book of Acts records anti-Christian sentiment in Ephesus because Christian worship was "bad for business" for Diana-statue manufacturers. A lot of people are willing to tolerate other religions until it affects their wallets.
 - iii) This church had to deal with this problem for years. Its one thing to endure hardship for a week or a month. When it goes on for year after year, it wears you out. People who have gone through long term suffering need to take verses like Verse 3 to heart. They (we) need to know that Jesus is there and He is aware we are persevering through whatever hardship we are enduring.
 - iv) On a related work, any work for Jesus that is making a difference will encounter demonic spiritual resistance. There is a great true saying that goes, "If you don't believe the devil is real, try opposing him for awhile". That is another reason Jesus is accommodating this church.
 - v) OK, time for the bad news, verse 4. ☺
- 10. Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love.
 - a) You can read the first word "yet" and you can just feel the pink slip coming. ☺ (The "pink slip" is a cliché for getting fired or laid off work). For those who ever sat through an employee evaluation session, you listen to all the good things, knowing that the "yet" or the "however" is about to drop. This does not mean all of the positive comments in Verses 2 and 3 were just lip service. Those comments were as sincere as the criticism of Verse 4 and should be treated as such.
 - b) One of the things to catch is that each of the seven churches were "clueless" about some aspect of their relationship with God. With this church, it is that they lost their first love.
 - c) Also recall how the name of each church is a clue to the key point of the church. The word Ephesus means "darling". The key point to this letter is about losing one's love.
 - d) So what does "forsaken your first love" mean? Most men who have been married awhile can understand this verse. When we were dating our wives to be, we made all sorts of romantic efforts. We wanted to know everything about them. We thought about pleasing them all the time. Now it's, "Hi honey, what's for dinner?" ☺ This is an example of forsaken one's first love.
 - i) On a related note, think back to when you first dedicated your life to Jesus. You loved going to church and talking to other Christians. You loved to soak up knowledge about Jesus just so you can learn more about that. You loved to pray to just spend time talking to God. Let's face it, all veteran Christians go through periods of time where we are telling God in effect, "Hi honey, what's for dinner?" We take God for grant it and that's the criticism of this letter.
 - e) Notice the word "forsaken" is not the word abandoned. Remember that this church is still doing good things in the name of Jesus. As one commentator put it, "They spent so much time doing the king's business, they forgot about the king".
 - i) This goes back to one of my favorite clichés: "Without God, we can't." We need to draw upon God's love in order to accomplish anything for Him. Without having that "vertical" relationship between God and ourselves, we eventually will burn out. The church in Ephesus appeared to be running on willpower and self-discipline. Jesus complimented that, but is saying in Verse 4 (and Verse 5) that eventually we "run out of gas" unless we draw upon Him.
 - f) OK, once the novelty of Christianity wears off, how do we reclaim our "first love"?
 - i) Jesus gives us the answer in Verse 5. Speaking of which...

11. Verse 5: Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.
- a) Jesus himself gives the remedy to reclaim one's first love: The key word is "remember".
 - i) Imagine saying, "I've been involved in this project at church for months now and I'm beat. I'm tired of doing all the work. It seems like no one is helping me and I can't go another day."
 - ii) A similar line is "I can't take another day with the kids without some help. I feel like I'm going to collapse". Yes, God understands we need both help and rest.
 - iii) The question to ask God is, "Are You big enough to handle my problems?" The point is we are trying to fix it ourselves without God's help. We need to draw upon His strength.
 - iv) "Remember" how much easier it was when we prayed regularly. "Remember" how much better our perspective was when we made time for God every day!
 - v) To "remember" starts with the mental decision to want to stay close to Jesus. We then make the effort to draw closer to Him. We then let the emotions follow. The key is not emotions, it is commitment. The emotions will naturally follow.
 - vi) To use a crude analogy, we need to "suck carpet" regularly, which means spending time on our knees before God. Once we get into that habit of making time for God, I promise the emotions will follow.
 - b) Now let's go on the last sentence of this verse: "If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place."
 - i) Remember the word "lampstand" refers to the local church (Rev. 1:20). The point is Jesus is saying that if we don't make time for Him ("our first love"), He is going to take away that church.
 - ii) Notice what Jesus does not say, "If you don't repent, you're all going hell". My point is this is not a salvation issue. Our salvation is based on our trust in Jesus as payment for our sins, not our daily behavior in life.
 - iii) Remember that judgment in the bible can be either individual judgment or group judgment. This is a case of "group" judgment. Jesus is saying in effect that if the church in Ephesus as whole does not change their ways in terms of spending more time worshipping Him, then they will cease from being a church.
 - iv) Again, we are back to our theme of "without God, we can't". If we try to run a church based on self-discipline we will burn out. We need to draw upon God's strength on a regular basis in order to do whatever is God's will for our lives.
 - v) This is why regular church attendance is so necessary. Can one be saved and never go to church? I supposed so, but I'll also argue that in order to be effective witnesses for Jesus, it needs to be a group basis. God never intended Christianity to be millions of solo-efforts. It is designed to be teamwork. We are to collectively draw upon God's strength to minister (help) each other grow in our faith and trust in Him. That is the basic purpose of ministry and that is why Christians should belong to some sort of church community.
 - c) So let's say you and I go to a local church and we are happy there. What do we do to keep it thriving and growing? The answer is not found in a marketing program. The answer is here in Verse 5: "Repent and do the things you did at first." God's word promises that a church will continue to have its lampstand (i.e. be an effective witness to the world around that church) by "Remembering our first love". That means to individually and collectively spend time worshipping God. That means singing songs as if Jesus is seated right in the middle. You are singing to Him as well as about Him! It means hearing God's word taught so it sinks in one's heart. Think of the local church as one's "gas station" to fill up our vehicle's so it can perform through the rest of the week.

12. Verse 6: But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.
- a) The criticism of "lost your first love" is sandwiched between other positive comments. Verses 2-3 are positive things said to this church in Ephesus and here in Verse 6 we have this other positive comment, that they hate the practice of the "Nicolaitans".
 - b) OK, who are these Nicolaitans and why should I hate them? ☺
 - i) This is an untranslated (transliterated) Greek term. If we break down the word, it will make sense.
 - ii) The first syllable "Nico" is the same as the word as "Nike", as in the shoe and clothing company. Nico or Nike means "victory". It doesn't mean we are to hate Nike shoes. ☺ It just means this word means victory. The second part of the word is Nico-laitan. It is the same word we get "laity" which means "people".
 - iii) Putting it together, it means "victory over the people". The idea is somebody who rules "by victory" over people. It can be ruler over the people by victory.
 - iv) OK, John, why does Jesus hate those who have "victory over the people?" What the Nicolaitans refer to (they probably were a sect at that time) is about one group of people ruling over Christian church congregations. It teaches against those who are full time in ministry having power over the "common" people in the ministry.
 - a) There is the distinct possibility the Nicolaitans were some sort of false teachers. That would fit in context with some of the earlier verses. The fact they "ruled over the people" would imply they were in charge.
 - v) The word "minister" is one who is a servant of all. It means one who is at the bottom rung of the organizational chart. The main purpose of those who are in the professional ministry is to encourage and help all the church members in their "flock" to grow in their relationship with Jesus Christ. The leaders are not to rule over them, but to serve their congregation and encourage them in their faith.
 - vi) The Nicolaitans ruled over the people. They set themselves over the congregation. They probably had the best parking spaces reserved for themselves at church. ☺ They may have been false teachers as well. Jesus point is he can't stand church leaders who consider themselves a higher class than the "flock".
13. Verse 7 (Part 1): He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.
- a) The term "he who has an ear, let him hear" is a common cliché used by Jesus. It is recorded eight times in the Gospels. Jesus must have used it often enough that the Gospel writers included it in their Jesus' quotes.
 - b) Here is the important part of this sentence: Notice the last word is plural: "churches".
 - i) In other words, it does not say, "Hey everyone, listen to what God has to say to these Christians living in Ephesus". These judgment rules are for all Christians.
 - ii) The tourism board of the city of Las Vegas, Nevada had a cliché that goes, "What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas". The opposite is true for these letters. The idea here is "what applies to the church in Ephesus also applies to you and me." That is what Jesus is saying by this sentence.
 - c) Finally, notice the word "Spirit". Remember Jesus is the one dictating the letters, but Jesus is specifically saying to note what the (Holy) Spirit is saying to the churches.
 - i) A function of the Holy Spirit is to help us understand what God's word says. That includes encouraging us in things we are doing right as well as convicting us in what we are doing wrong. That is why His name (i.e., the Holy Spirit) gets the credit here and not Jesus himself.
14. Verse 7, Part 2: To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.
- a) First, let's discuss the word "overcome". Just what is it we have to overcome? The good news is the writer John defines "overcome" for us in one letters:

- i) "For everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God." (1st John 5:4-5 NIV)
 - a) The term "born of God" refers a direct creation of God. Adam was born of God. We as humans are "born of Adam". When we become born-again, we become "new creatures" with the spiritual nature. (See 2nd Cor. 5:17). Thus, we as saved believers are now called "born of God".
 - b) Therefore, anyone who is born-again "overcomes" the world. The word "world" refers to nonbelievers. Therefore, "overcome" refers to salvation. Remember Verse 7 is addressed to the churches, not just the Christians who lived in Ephesus two thousand years ago. To paraphrase Jesus, "He who gives allegiance to Me, and accepts My payment for their sins, has at that moment overcome the world and has eternal life."
 - b) Remember the warning of "losing their first love" was not being sent to hell, but just the loss of their church, or the loss of the effectiveness of their church. That negative comment was not a salvation issue.
 - i) In Verse 7, we do have a salvation issue. The focus is on the Gospel fundamentals (believing Jesus as Lord, payment for our sins, salvation by faith, etc.).
 - ii) The idea of Verse 7 is to study what Jesus is saying to all seven churches and use that as a yardstick to measure our life as a Christian. Remember, this is a "midterm" report to see how we are doing as Christian. It still begins with the fundamentals, which is the reminder of Verse 7.
 - c) OK, now to the interesting part: Jesus says that if we are saved, "I (Jesus) will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God".
 - i) Back in the Garden of Eden, people miss the fact that two trees were mentioned:
 - a) "In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." (Genesis 2:9 NIV)
 - b) It was the other tree (good and evil) of which Adam & Eve ate the fruit.
 - c) This verse in Revelation focuses on "the other tree", the tree of life.
 - ii) The only other Genesis reference to this "tree of life" is in the next chapter:
 - a) "He (Adam) must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever." (Genesis 3:22 NIV)
 - b) This means that Adam and Eve, and all of humanity are not allowed back into the Garden of Eden for the sins they committed. It's a picture of the fact Adam can't "earn" his way back into "paradise". Jesus is needed.
 - c) Which leads us back to Verse 7: Remember I said that one of the blessings of Revelation is that the word pictures of this book tie to every book in the bible. We just hit Genesis. Since the tree of life has something to do with heaven and salvation, the whole of Verse 7 has to do with Jesus saying, "Hey, if you believe in Me, you get to go to heaven".
 - d) We actually made it to the second letter of the seven! This may take some time. ☺
15. Verse 8: To the angel of the church in Smyrna write:
- a) Remember I said earlier that the name of each city is a good clue as to its theme.
 - i) Smyrna has a similar root word as "myrrh". If you recall, the three gifts the wise men brought to baby Jesus was gold, frankincense and myrrh (Matthew 2:11).
 - ii) Myrrh is a sweet smelling incense that is used, among other things as a part of a burial ritual. It is made by "crushing". The theme of this letter is persecution!
 - iii) In the eastern half of the Roman Empire, the idea of emperor worship was common. This is where they believe the emperor is a god in human form. The city of Smyrna embraced this heavily. Therefore, many in that city persecuted Christians because they refuse to consider the Roman emperors as gods.

16. Verse 8, Second Sentence: These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again.
- a) Remember that each of the seven letters has a title of Jesus. It is the "from" of each letter.
 - b) Jesus' title to Smyrna includes the phrase "The First and the Last"
 - i) This is a title used of Jesus four times in Revelation and three times in Isaiah.
 - ii) The idea of the title is "Life begins with Jesus and ends with Him". An English paraphrase might be, "when it comes to the alphabet, I'm the "A" and the "Z".
 - c) Let's move on to the second title and then I'll tie them together:
 - i) The second title is "who died and came to life again". The idea is to remind the Christians in Smyrna that Jesus was resurrected.
 - d) Remember each letter has a theme. The theme of this letter has to do with persecution.
 - i) The incense "myrrh", of which the town is named, is made by "crushing" the product and grinding it up. It was commonly used with burial rituals.
 - ii) Because the Smyrna Christians were being persecuted to death, Jesus is emphasizing the fact He was resurrected and so will be the Christians here. That is why Jesus emphasizes the title of "who died and came to life again."
 - iii) The reason the "First and Last" title is emphasized is to remind the persecuted Christians that Jesus is in charge. Life begins and ends with Him. Jesus is aware of their suffering. Jesus will resurrect them to eternal life and punish those who cause harm to "one of his".
 - e) Let me share a little more about the city of Smyrna that is relevant to this sentence:
 - i) The City of Smyrna is one of the few cities in history that actually died and came back to life again. It was destroyed around 700BC and came back to life as a city again about 400BC. I'm sure the Christian residents of Smyrna knew their history. They could "relate" to Jesus saying, "I died and came to life again".
 - ii) In case you ever visit these seven cities, Smyrna is still in existence today. It is now called "Izmir". It is part of modern Turkey. It might be an interesting "pun" in that the one church in the one city that Jesus says, "I am dead and am now alive" is still alive. There are Christians in modern Izmir.
17. Verse 9, Part 1: I know your afflictions and your poverty – yet you are rich!
- a) This is a church that is persecuted to the point of death. Again, the city was known for Caesar worship and persecuted Christians as they refused to take such an oath. Being on the run for their lives made it hard to earn a living, and thus they were in poverty.
 - b) Notice the words "I know". When everything is falling apart around us, we go into a pity party and think, "Nobody understands the pain I'm going through". Jesus first words to this church are "I know", as in Jesus knows what we are going through!
 - c) Finally, it says, "yet you are rich".
 - i) Remember I said that each of the seven churches is "clueless" about something. For example, in the first letter, the church of Ephesus appeared to be clueless about the fact that they "lost their first love". Here, the church of Smyrna is clueless that they are rich in eternal rewards.
 - ii) Jesus said something similar in the gospels: "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven. (Matt. 5:10-11a, NIV)
 - a) Notice that suffering in general does not earn rewards. We don't have to rejoice when we stub our toes. ☺ Jesus point is that when you are being physically persecuted for His sake, one has a great eternal reward.
 - iii) Does this mean we should seek suffering in Jesus' name for our sakes? ☺ No! It just means that if you are going to be an effective witness for Jesus, expect spiritual resistance. That demonic resistance often comes through people.

- d) The idea here is to get our perspective right. Physical persecution of any type should not be tolerated. The history of mankind is full of horrible stories of people being tortured and killed for believing in different religions and Christianity has received (and given!) more than its share of such persecution. Having faith that one has great rewards in heaven won't make the pain go away, but having that perspective can help us to tolerate the pain of persecution.
 - e) Does this mean we are to just take it when being abused? Of course not. The Gospels record Jesus and Paul escaping danger when it arose. (e.g., See John 8:59, Acts 9:23-25). The "cross" is different in that Jesus knew it was His destiny to suffer that fate. The point is not to deny Jesus as Lord of one's life during times of suffering. He can't help us if we're not willing to reach out to Him.
18. Verse 9, Part 2: I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.
- a) This sentence is best explained with history. A Jewish community lived in Smyrna at that time. Archeological records indicate they too were persecuted as well because they refused to say Caesar is Lord. The Jewish people of Smyrna "took the heat off themselves" by making false accusations against Christians. They have also joined the Christian persecution due to religious differences. Either way, the local Jews of that town either directly or inadvertently participated in the Christian persecution.
 - b) Which leads back to this verse: This verse is not saying that all Jews are persecuting Christians or that all Jews are bad. Suppose some Christians stole or murdered. We should say to such people, "You call yourself a "Christian"? Look at what you are doing! That is sort of the same flavor being stated here when Jesus is saying in effect, "You call yourself a religious Jew? Jewish people are supposed to uphold the law and have a respect for human life! Look at what you are doing to the Christians in the same town!"
 - c) The verse does say the local Jews are a "synagogue of Satan". That verse does not mean the local synagogue is involved in Satan worship. ☺ It means demonic forces are using the members of this synagogue to persecute Christians.
 - i) Another of my favorite clichés is, "In the game of life, people are both the prizes and the pawns". We are prizes in that God seeks us, to commit our lives to Him. People are "prizes" to Satan if we fail to make such a commitment. All people are "pawns" in that we can be used by God or Satan to accomplish their will. This is not to say God and Satan are somehow equal. Because God allows free will, both forces work behind the scenes to manipulate people to accomplish their will.
 - ii) In the end of course, God wins. Satan understands his time is limited on earth. Heaven will be finite with people, not infinite. Therefore when the last person gets saved, God says in effect "that's a wrap" and Satan's time is over. Satan delays that event as long as possible by preventing as many people as possible from becoming saved. Thus he manipulates his "pawns" for his will.
 - d) Which leads back to the idea of the verse: This verse says the Jews of Smyrna who are persecuting the Christians are a "synagogue of Satan". What we need to remember when persecution arises is that there are spiritual forces behind the scenes working. Remember what Jesus said to the soldiers who nailed him to the cross "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." (Luke 23:34 NIV). It would help our attitude us during times of persecution if we can see people as "pawns" as opposed to someone trying to hurt us. Remember when someone tries to hurt us for our faith, instead of wanting to take revenge, pray for them. See them as someone who needs the Lord.
19. Verse 10: Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer.
- a) The idea is not to have fear to the point of denying one's faith in Jesus as Lord of our lives. Being afraid of danger is a natural instinct and a good thing. Jesus point is do not let that fear affect one's faith in Him.

- b) Personally, I hate pain. I'll say just about anything to avoid pain. I draw the line at my faith. If such a situation ever arises, I can't deny what is truth. My eternal salvation is greater than any pain I will suffer in this lifetime. One also has to have the faith that God will not allow us to suffer more than we can bear, if we draw upon His strength.
 - c) The greatest fear is usually of the unknown. If one knows there are people around who want to kill you for believing in Jesus, it is natural to be afraid. The point Jesus is making is that one has to expect spiritual resistance if one is going to be an effective witness for Him and that spiritual resistance will come through other people. One's fear can be less if one expects it.
20. Verse 10, Part 2: "I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.
- a) The first thing to notice is that there is no guarantee that God will rescue us out of danger. Jesus is telling those in Smyrna to be faithful until death. God calls some to be rescued and some to be martyrs for Him. Our job is to live for Him. We are free to ask God to rescue us, but in His sovereignty, we have to accept His answer.
 - b) Let's look at the first part of the first sentence: The devil will put some of you in prison to test you." First, the devil is not the one testing them (and us), Jesus is. I told you the title of this lesson is "Jesus gives a midterm" and I meant it! ☺
 - c) It is important to understand that God does not tempt us, but God does test us. In order for us to grow in our faith, testing is necessary. When you teach a child to ride a bicycle, the parent has to let go of the handle bars. The child may fall a few times, but that is the only way they are going to learn. In order to strengthen our faith in God, He "lets go of the handle bars" every now and then so we can trust Him more.
 - d) Remember that God, through Jesus, created everything, including Satan. Satan is well aware He is subservient to God. Satan does not believe man is worth redeeming and Satan desires to prove it. It is as if everything Satan does to us is "God filtered for approval". It is Satan who leads this persecution, but God is the one who says, "Ok, that's enough. I allowed this persecution to happen to see if we are going to have faith through this process".
 - e) So what's the key point of all the testing? That is the second sentence of this verse: "Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life."
 - i) Our salvation is dependant upon our trust in Jesus for the payment of our sins. Imagine being tortured and someone saying, "All you have to do is deny Jesus as God and I'll have the pain stop or I'll spare your life". God is testing them and us by seeing if we are willing to trust Jesus to the point of death.
 - ii) Does this mean that every time I have a lapse in faith I'm destined for hell? No. All Christians go through periods of doubts, especially in difficult times.
 - a) On a related note, another classic saying is "People are like teabags. You never know what flavor they are like until you get them in hot water". The point is when things get really tough, our faith in God or our lack of faith in God comes out. It gets past the points of doubts.
 - iii) Let me also add how much it helps to read one's bible regularly (daily) and praying regularly (daily) keeps us close to God and reminds us of the "reality" of the next world. It keeps us going during such difficult times.
 - iv) I've read that in the Vietnam war, the prisoners of war who survived the best were the ones who had memorized some bible scriptures to help get them through some of the worst torture imaginable.
 - v) I've heard torture victims express, "even in the worse of situations, there are always parts of the brain they can't get to". My point is God is there, through the worse of suffering and "keeps a place" for you that others can't get to.

- f) OK, enough torture talk. ☺ Let's get back to the verse. It says this suffering will last for "ten days". What did Jesus mean by that?
- i) There is no recorded history of the church in Smyrna suffering for 10 days. There may have been some specific event that lasted ten days, we just don't have any historical or archeological records of any ten day period.
 - ii) Many commentators point out that there were 10 Roman Emperors who organized persecutions of the Christian church. The "ten" may be a reference to that fact.
 - a) Also remember that some argue that these seven letters are laid out in "church history". The first letter to Ephesians ties to the early church where they were busy spreading the gospel, but may have been guilty of "forgetting their first love". The second letter ties to the "persecution period" which ran from about 100AD to roughly 300AD.
 - iii) My personal view is that there was some literal meaning to "10 days" for those who lived in Smyrna at that time. The original meaning is long lost to us.
 - iv) What is important is that the time of suffering is limited. The number "ten" in the bible is associated with humanity. (E.g., ten fingers, ten toes, so the number "ten" is associated with human design and humanity in general). Suffering is more bearable if one knows there is an end in sight. I believe that's the idea here. God wants to get across the idea that "Yes you will suffer. Yes I know the pain you are going through. Yes, you have great rewards in heaven. Yes, I am testing you, but I also am aware this test has a time frame and comes to an end.
- g) Remember my title of this lesson is "Jesus gives a midterm". It has a double reference to both a midterm (school-like) test and a midterm (business like) status report. No matter what type of "midterm" is being discussed, there is a definite time frame. When a teacher gives a midterm, there is always a time limit to finish the test. Jesus is saying to us, "Yes I do test you in ways you won't like, but that test has a definite time frame".
- h) Before we move on, stop and think what is not said to this church in Smyrna:
- i) There is nothing said about "I'm proud of your good works".
 - ii) There is nothing said about "You've lost your first love".
 - iii) It is not that the Smyrna church didn't have good points and bad points. The theme of this status report is about persecution. The other issues are not relevant for the moment.
 - iv) It's always amazing how little problems become irrelevant when big problems occur. A church may be involved in a heated debate over something, but if there is someone trying to kill them, the debate gets put on the back burner. In a sense, that is what's happening here in Smyrna.
 - v) It is as if Jesus is saying, "I'm not going to nitpick you with the little stuff right now. You're busy trying to save your lives. Who cares about all that other stuff right now? We can worry about that another day. Right now, let Me focus on what is on your mind at the moment, which is the persecution issue.
 - a) My point of all of this is "God cares about the big pain when we are going through big pains and God cares about the little pains when we are going through the little pains. God is not going to make us focus on the relatively small stuff when we are struggling for our lives.
- i) Finally notice the word "some" in this verse. Only some Christians will be martyred. Not every Christian is tortured and murdered for their faith. It was common in this town and is still common in the world today. Personally, I think living a long life for Jesus is harder than a martyr's death, but I'll save that discussion for another day.

21. Verse 11: He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.
- a) The first sentence is identical to the first sentence in Verse 7. Get used to this. That same sentence is repeated to each of the seven letters.
 - b) Again, notice the word "churches". The idea is that all Christians need to pay attention to what Jesus is saying here. Again, back to my main point of this lesson: What applies to the members of these seven churches, applies to all Christians.
 - c) The final sentence is, "He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death".
 - i) I defined "overcome" earlier in this lesson. In 1st John, (the same writer as Revelation), the term "overcome" is associated with salvation. The idea of "overcome" as it is used here is that we still have faith that Jesus will resurrect us to eternal life despite the temporary pain of suffering.
 - d) Since I'm spouting classic cliché's by the dozens today, ☺ let me give one more: "Born once, die twice, born twice, die once". The idea that if one is not born-again, that person suffers two deaths, one is the physical death and one is eternal death in hell. If one is born twice (i.e., born-again, committed their lives to Jesus), then we only die the physical death. There is no "second death" for the Christian. That is what is being said in the second sentence. Anyone who is saved "only" has to experience physical death.
 - i) Understand there will be nonbelievers in heaven. If God judges people fairly, then God will judge based on one's knowledge of Him and what we did with that knowledge. That is the purpose of God's second judgment in Revelation 20.
 - e) This letter to Smyrna began with the fact Jesus was dead and rose again. The letter ends with the fact that all who believe in Jesus will also rise again.
 - f) When the world is failing apart around us, sometimes all we have left is our hope. We don't know how long the "ten days" will last for us, but we have hope that the time frame is never forever. I'm not advocating suicide as our time frame is in God's hands, not our own. I'm simply saying God is very aware of whatever suffering we are going through. God knows the exact time frame of that suffering. We may get through it in this lifetime and we may not. That is up to God to decide. We can have reassurance there is a wonderful reward coming one day, just for simply believing Jesus paid the price for our sins. We don't deserve such rewards, but that is what the bible is teaching and that is what we have to trust in.
22. Well, I'm only half way through the chapter. I've persecuted you with enough material for one lesson. ☺ The mid-term report and exam by Jesus will continue in the next lesson.
23. Let's pray: Father, Let not the lessons in these two letters be wasted. Help us to constantly remember You, which is our first love. May the Holy Spirit convict us when we lose our priorities to love You. Help us to keep the "vertical" relationship strong so that we have the power, the strength and the will to be servants for You in our "horizontal" relationship with other people. Help us to remember there are Christians around the world today who are being persecuted for their faith. If it is your will, help them escape from danger. Give them encouragement through such time and strengthen their churches. Help us all work together to make a difference for You. For we ask this in Jesus name, Amen.