

Lesson 4: Message To The Churches - Ephesus/Smyrna

Key Text: Revelation 2:1-11

Lesson Objectives

In this lesson we will:

- a) Review the format of the letter written to the churches
- b) Discover the message Jesus sent to Ephesus?
- c) Discover the message of Jesus sent to Smyrna church?

In what format is each letter written?

Each message follows the same format:

1. An address (shout-out to the church)
2. An introduction of Jesus
3. Jesus' appraisal of the church
4. Jesus' counsel and warning to the church
5. An appeal to hear the Spirit
7. A promise to those who overcome.

(Detailed appendix of the messages to Ephesus and Smyrna given below).

EPHESUS: Lacking Love

The city was the home of the goddess of fertility Artemis or Diana, “whom all of Asia and the world” fanatically worshiped (Acts 19:27). Her image was believed to have fallen down from heaven (Acts 19:35). The magnificent temple devoted to the goddess was the pride of the citizens of Ephesus; it was reckoned among the wonders of the ancient world. The inner shrine of the temple of Diana was a safe deposit for an enormous number of valuables from all over the Holy Land; this made the temple “one of the most important financial centers in the ancient world.”

The temple possessed the right of asylum. That is to say, if any man committed a crime, if he could reach the precincts of the temple before he was arrested, he was safe. That immunity extended to an area of one bowshot, or two hundred yards, all around the temple.” Thus, the temple housed the “choicest collection of criminals in the ancient world.”

Ephesus had a large Jewish community (Acts 19:8–9), but was mostly pagan. The first emperor, Augustus, had allowed Ephesus to build two temples in his honor, and the current ruler, Domitian, had named the city “guardian” of the imperial cult, making it the foremost center of the imperial cult in Roman Asia.

In Ephesus was located probably the most influential Christian church in the province at the time of the writing of the book of Revelation. It was the church founded by Aquila and Priscilla (Acts 18:18–19) and the young preacher Apollos (Acts 18:23–26). Paul worked in Ephesus for about three years (Acts 20:31), and to this church he addressed his letter which we know today as Ephesians. It was in this city that some of the greatest victories of the gospel were won. In spite of the city’s notorious reputation, the church in Ephesus grew rapidly. Later, Timothy and John the apostle spent a great deal of time in ministry there. Teachers of many kinds and of

every shade of doctrine were drawn to Ephesus, to seek the patronage of the church and to influence its ways.

1. Introduction of Jesus (v. 1)

Christ controls the churches. Christ is described differently in every letter, mainly because each description is tied to the problems of the specific church. Ephesus, the mother church of all the other churches, was filled with pride. That Christ held these churches in his hand shows that he was in control over the churches. Ephesus had become a large, proud church, and Christ's message would remind them that he alone is the head of the body of believers.

Christ is portrayed as walking in the midst of the churches. The imagery of "walking" combines the ideas of concern for and authority over the church. Christ is present among his people and is both watching over them and watching them.

2. Appraisal (2:2-4, 6)

Jesus' appraisal of the church in Ephesus is very positive. The church is praised for great qualities: exhausting hard work and patience. The members there *have not grown weary*. They bear up under all kinds of pressure for the sake of Christ's name. That is to say, they have *"persevered for the sake of the purity of the message they preach."* The church is doctrinally sound; it does not tolerate evil men and tests *those who call themselves apostles—and they are not*. It hates the practices of *the Nicolaitans* (2:6), the heretical group that advocates Christian compromise and promotes the view to their fellow Christians that there Christ commended the church at Ephesus for five things:

1. working hard (*toil*)
2. persevering (*patient endurance*)
3. resisting sin (*cannot tolerate evildoers*)
4. critically examining the claims of false apostles (*tested those who claim to be apostles*)

5. *enduring patiently and bearing up* without becoming weary. All of these characteristics show a church busy with good works and suffering willingly for the cause of Christ. The Ephesian believers knew evil when they saw it through the Nicolaitan movement and did not tolerate it.

The Nicolaitan movement is difficult to define, for the only information we have is found in Rev. 2:6, 15, and probably in the discussions of the cults of Balaam (2:14) and Jezebel (2:20–23). While we know next to nothing about their doctrine, we can be more certain of their practices. The key is the practices linked with Balaam (2:14–15) and Jezebel (2:20–23). The two sins found in both are idolatry and immorality.

Therefore it is likely that the twin problems were syncretism (trying to accommodate the pagans by participating in practices like emperor worship) and showing freedom from the law by doing what one wishes.

The presence of the heretical group of Nicolaitans in the church in Ephesus “threatened to destroy the integrity and purity of Christian faith and conduct.” Some fifty years earlier in his farewell speech, Paul warned the Ephesian elders: “I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves’ men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them” (Acts 20:29–30). Fifty years later, the prediction had come true. Nicolaitans were the most dangerous of all heretics from a practical point of view, for, if their teaching had been successful, the result would have been that the world would have changed Christianity, and not Christianity the world. As an energetic church, the Ephesians had tested these false teachers and had found them liars, and they were very determined to preserve sound doctrine and conduct.

3. Evaluation (v. 4)

Despite the commendations, Christ had something against this church—they had *forsaken* their *first love*. This “first love” refers to the maxim “Love

the Lord your God ... and your neighbor as yourself" (see Acts 20:35; Ephesians 1:15). The Ephesians, though commended for their zeal in protecting the faith, had fallen into caring more about orthodoxy than love. This reminds one of the situations of Israel before the Exile, as described by Jeremiah (2:2). Despite devotion to God in the early days, "the devotion of your youth, the love of your betrothals" was now past. The church in Ephesus was in a very similar situation. The initial members of the church in Ephesus were known for their "faith in the Lord Jesus" and their ardent "love for all the saints" (Eph. 1:15; Acts 20:37–38). But what characterized the religion of this church in the beginning was now lacking. The enthusiasm was gone and the members were starting to lose touch with God and love for one another.

Every church should have pure faith and root out heresy. But these good efforts should spring from their love for Jesus Christ and for other believers. Both Jesus and John stressed love for one another as an authentic proof of the gospel (John 13:34; 1 John 3:18–19).

In the battle to maintain sound teaching and moral and doctrinal purity, it is possible to lose a charitable spirit. Yet we need both. Prolonged conflict can weaken or destroy patience and affection. In defending the faith, believers must guard against any structure or rigidity that weakens love.

Something went wrong with this energetic, patient, and doctrinally sound church, however. It was backsliding in love. The initial members of the church in Ephesus were known for their "faith in the Lord Jesus" and their ardent "love for all the saints" (Eph. 1:15; Acts 20:37–38). But what characterized the religion of this church in the beginning was now lacking. The enthusiasm was gone and the members were starting to lose touch with God and love for one another.

Religion in the church of Ephesus became legalistic and loveless. The vertical relationship with God normally defines the horizontal relationship with humanity. It was stated that the Ephesians could not tolerate false teaching. In dealing with heresy and disciplining those who were not doctrinally sound, they evidently tended to be severe, censorious, critical, and fault-finding. It was clear that in emphasizing the soundness of doctrine and checking the orthodoxy of their fellow members, the church was abandoning the loving characteristic of the gospel and becoming legalistic.

Sound doctrine, hard work, and church order are undeniably important. However, no good qualities have value without love (1 Cor. 13). The Ephesians put the whole emphasis on the side of sound doctrine and hard work. It was a good decision, but they were backsliding from true, ardent love for Christ and their fellow believers that characterized them in their early days. They had forgotten that only the gospel can balance religious duty with loving affection for fellow Christians.

4. Counsel/Command (v. 5)

Paul had once commended the church at Ephesus for its love for God and for others (Ephesians 1:15). That love is pictured at *the height from which* the church had *fallen*. Jesus called this church back to love. They needed to *repent* of their lack of love and *do the things they did at first*—love as they had originally loved, with enthusiasm and devotion.

Christ makes a strong appeal with three great imperatives: ***Keep remembering ... repent ... do the first works.*** First, they had to keep remembering. As the Greek text indicates, the Ephesians had not forgotten; they were not ignorant of their former condition. Remembering means more than simply recalling the past; it means bearing in mind and keeping afresh the past and applying it in the present. That is why Jesus calls for a decisive turning around and admonishes us to repent. The

entire church is called upon to repent, implying that the entire church has declined in love.

Repentance denotes a radical change of the whole direction of life. It is a decisive break with the present situation. Remembering and repentance moves one to do the first works. The “first works” are the outcome of the “first love.”

Departure from first love is a falling; it is symptomatic of a decline in practice as well as in devotion, for first love and first works belong together: the latter spring naturally from the former. Consequently, the disappearance of the first love entails the disappearance also of the first works, which are works distinguished by selfless zeal and joyful dedication. To recapture the first love is to return to the first works, and this is what the church in Ephesus needs to do if it is to recover its well-being before God. A return to the first-love Christian experience always results in the first-works experience.

If they refused to repent, however, Christ said that he would come and *remove the church's lampstand from its place*. For Jesus to remove a church's lampstand from its place would mean the church would cease to be a church. Just as the seven-branched candlestick in the temple gave light for the priests to see, the churches were to give light to their surrounding communities. But Jesus warned them that their lights could go out. In fact, Jesus himself would extinguish any light that did not fulfill its purpose. The church had to repent of its sins.

In Revelation, God's witnessing people are referred to as lampstands (11:4). As ancient Israel was called to be God's light-bearing witness to the world (cf. Isa. 42:6-7; 49:6; 60:1-3), so is the church in Ephesus. When the Israelites “renounced their calling to be a light to the nations, God removed them as his light-bearing people and transferred the emblem of that call to the church.” The church is called to be the light for Christ in the

world (Matt. 5:14–16; Phil. 2:15). If it does not exercise its call to shine, it loses the very essence of its existence; consequently, it will have its witnessing lampstand removed from its place, just as Israel in the Old Testament.

5. Call/Promise (v. 7)

The overcomer in the church of Ephesus is given the promise that he or she will *eat from the tree of life which is in the paradise of God*. This reference reminds one of the garden of Eden with “the tree of life in the midst of the garden” (Gen. 2:9) in which man and woman were placed at creation. To eat from the tree of life was “to live forever” (Gen. 3:22). It was from that garden, after they had sinned (or lost their first love), that Adam and Eve were expelled and forbidden to approach the tree of life and eat of it (Gen. 3:23–24).

Through Christ, this situation has been changed. The faithful followers of Christ will, in the new earth (which in Revelation is described as the restored garden of Eden) have access to the “the tree of life producing twelve fruits, yielding its fruit every month, and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations” (Rev. 22:2). The tree of life symbolizes the eternal life free of death and suffering.

The overcomer in Ephesus is promised a permanent home in the restored Eden in which he or she will share the gift of eternal life which Adam and Eve enjoyed before the entrance of sin into the world.

Eating from the tree of life pictures the gift of eternal life. In paradise God will restore the perfect fellowship that existed in the Garden of Eden before sin entered and ruined the relationship between people and God.

Call to hear the Spirit. The message to the church in Ephesus is a strong appeal to all Christians who are backsliding in ardent love for the gospel. They are urged to examine their past lives and to bring to mind what it

was like when they were in love with Christ, and how in those early days of their devotion to Christ they responded enthusiastically with “works” of love in their relation to other members of the believing community as well as those outside that community.

Christ’s message to this church suggests that the best place to start renewing that relationship is to bear in mind the first-love experience. Like the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–24), we will never be satisfied until we return to the first-love experience with Christ, doing “the first works” that initially characterized that relationship. That is to say, we must make Christ our religion.

Throughout history, Christians have often found themselves strained between love on one side and obedience on the other. In emphasizing strongly the love aspect of the gospel, obedience to the requirements of the gospel can easily be disregarded. *In focusing on duty and the preserving of sound doctrine (and often exposing heresy and fighting against it), Christians very often lose love for each other.* Upholding doctrine and church order without focusing on Christ is useless, and religion not based on the gospel has no value; it is rather a lifeless, dead religion. Genuine religion is Christ-centered; it is based on both the vertical and horizontal relationships characterized by love for Christ and love for each other.

Historical application: In seeking to apply Jesus’ message to the church in Ephesus to a particular period of the history of Christianity besides its local significance, one may observe that the situation and spiritual condition of that church characterized by faithfulness and good works coincided with the situation and spiritual condition of the Christian church of the apostolic period (and some time after). This period was a great start for the church characterized by love and faithfulness to the gospel. But by the time John wrote the book of Revelation, namely, the last decade of the first century, the church had begun losing the fire of its first love, thus departing from

the simplicity and purity of the gospel. Thus the church in Ephesus could aptly represent the Christian church of the first century.

SMYRNA: Persecution (Revelation 2:8-11)

This is one of only two churches (the other being Philadelphia) with no weaknesses. It is telling that these two were also the least significant of the seven churches in terms of numbers and influence. The current preoccupation of the modern church with numbers and influence must be reexamined. It is more important to be faithful than to be powerful. This is also one of two letters (with Pergamum next) without the formula "I know your (good) deeds." Instead, the divine knowledge of (and empathy for) their situation is described. Smyrna was the next closest city to Ephesus, being about forty miles to the north. The message to the church in this city is the shortest of the seven.

Smyrna, like Ephesus, was a proud and beautiful city. Smyrna also had earned the right to be self-governing. It had a large library, stadium, and the largest public theater in Asia. Mount Pagus rose above the harbor with an acropolis built on it that was considered the city's "crown." A famous "Golden Street" traversed the city with a temple to Zeus at one end and a temple to a local goddess Sipyrene (Cybele) at the other. Other temples to Apollo, Asclepius, and Aphrodite lined the way.

Perhaps even more important, the city had become a center for the cult of emperor worship. Smyrna received permission (over several other cities who requested) to build a temple to the emperor Tiberius in 23 b.c.. Under the emperor Domitian (who ruled from a.d. 81 to 96), emperor worship was required for all Roman citizens. Those who refused could receive the death penalty.

Once a year, all citizens were required to burn incense on an altar to Caesar, after which they would receive a certificate proving that they had done their civil duty. While this was more an act of political loyalty than a religious act, the citizen had to say, while burning the incense, "Caesar is lord." Many Christians considered this act blasphemous and refused to do it.

In addition to being a center for the imperial cult, Smyrna also had a large Jewish population that actively opposed the Christians. Thus, the church in this city struggled against two hostile forces: a Gentile population that was loyal to Rome and supported emperor worship and a large Jewish population strongly opposed to Christianity.

Persecution and suffering were inevitable in that kind of environment. Years later, in a.d. 156, the eighty-six-year-old church father, Polycarp, was burned alive as "the twelfth martyr of Smyrna." Obviously, the church in Smyrna was persecuted.

1. Description of Jesus (v. 8)

Jesus introduces himself as *the first and last, the One who was dead and came to life* (2:8; cf. 1:17). This introduction of Jesus is well suited to a suffering church passing through dire, constant persecution. These are the words which John heard earlier when he fell down at Jesus' feet: "Stop being afraid! I am the first and the last, and the living One, and I was dead and behold, I am living for ever and ever" (1:17).

We observed earlier that "the first and the last" is a reference to the Old Testament Yahweh, the God of the covenant. Jesus begins his message to Smyrna by reminding them of his own suffering and death. He experienced the worst that life could bring; he died, but he was raised to life again. In identifying himself with Smyrna, Jesus is telling them that no matter what might happen, he, the resurrected and glorified Lord, can

help because he has gone through it. He remains faithful to his promise to be always with his suffering people.

The Lord identifies himself to the church in Smyrna in a way that undoubtedly recalled the history of the city as well as the history of the Christ. He describes himself as the One who “died and came to life again.” The expression in the Greek New Testament is especially poignant. A literal translation would be “the one who became dead and is alive again.” The Greek also seems to stress that his death was neither an expected part of his existence, nor was it something that overtook him by surprise. There is certain purpose that seems to be written into the expression “who became dead.” Whatever the case, the fact that he came back to life again is even more refreshing news to saints facing possible persecution and death than the story of the death and revival of the city could possibly have been to a citizen of Smyrna, though the allusion would not have been lost on the first-century reader.

Although this church was almost dead due to persecution, Christ was reminding them that he was sovereign and eternal. No matter what they faced, Christ already knew about it; as the “First and the Last,” nothing could take him by surprise. Christ identified himself as the one who died and came back to life again. Even if believers have to suffer to the point of death, Christ, the one who “came to life again,” would raise them to eternal life with him.

2. Appraisal (2:9)

Jesus knows the “affliction and poverty” of the church in Smyrna. The members of the church are in dire peril. In Greek, *affliction* means a serious tribulation, under the pressure of a burden that crushes. This pressure comes from outside, namely, from the demands for emperor worship and the malignant slander of the Jews.

Second, the members are in extreme *poverty*. As the Greek text indicates, they possess nothing. Their poverty is undoubtedly the result of the persecution the church is going through. It certainly contrasts with the wealthy church of Laodicea which boasts of its material riches and is in need of nothing; but it possessed nothing of spiritual things (3:17). The Christians in Smyrna lived in one of the wealthiest cities, and yet they are extremely poor. Although poor in material things, however, they are rich in grace and faith.

Much of the persecution seems to have been coming from the Jews who, as noted above, were actively opposing Christianity. Christ identified them as those who claimed to be Jews but *really* weren't. They may have claimed to have descended from Abraham, but true Jews (God's people) are those who have accepted Jesus as Messiah and Savior. Paul had written to the Christians in Galatia, "Now that you belong to Christ, you are the true children of Abraham. You are his heirs, and now all the promises God gave to him belong to you" (Galatians 3:29 nlt).

Because these Jews had rejected the Messiah, they were, in reality, no more than *a synagogue of Satan* (John 8:31-47). The phrase "synagogue of Satan" means that these Jews were serving Satan's purposes, not God's, when they gathered to worship, because they hated and persecuted the true people of God, the Christians.

Even though a sense of well-being among Jews outside of Israel was certainly wavering, the Jews were themselves increasingly concerned about the inroads of the new faith in the Nazarene within their own ranks. The fact that some Christians continued to associate closely with the synagogues was apparently not a matter of great comfort to Jewish leaders. The whole situation continued to decline with growing hostility of Jews toward Christians and fostering an increasing determination not to allow them to be identified with the synagogues. Apparently, all came to a

crisis point about AD 90 with the so-called “Curse of the Minim” in the *Shemoneh ‘Esreh* (a popular Jewish prayer).

This document produced by the Jews is apparently to be understood primarily as an official effort to divest synagogue worship everywhere of those Christians who claimed also to be Jewish.

The conflict was not dissimilar to the one faced in the modern state of Israel, not just regarding Israelis who become Christians but even the question as to whether anyone other than orthodox Jews would be considered Jewish. Shortly after the issuing of the curse of the Minim, the Emperor Domitian, who had come to the throne in AD 81, intensified his own determination to extend emperor worship and to bring to bay any unruly elements in the empire.

The combination of all of these events left Christians in a serious predicament. Though they had never been granted the status of an approved faith in the empire, they had existed without serious discrimination and persecution by virtue of their identification as a sub-Jewish sect. The curse of the Minim generally brought that to an end; and Christians, especially Jewish Christians, found themselves facing the unhappy alternatives of either denying Christ and embracing Judaism entirely or else preparing themselves for serious persecution at the hands of both the Romans and the Jews.

The latter were now seriously alarmed as to what might become of them if they allowed association with Christians in any way. There were certain centers—apparently Smyrna, Philadelphia, and perhaps to some extent Thyatira—where the persecutions faced by Christians at the hands of both Romans and Jews were particularly ominous.

The NIV translation “I know your afflictions and your poverty” is not inaccurate, but neither does it quite accurately describe the words translated “afflictions” and “poverty.” In the case of afflictions, the word has

the sense of extensive tribulation rather than mere affliction. Poverty is not just general poverty but denies even the basics of life.

The situation for believers in Smyrna was grave indeed, yet there remains the Lord's added assessment, "Yet you are rich!" Although sometimes difficult for humans to appreciate adequately, the Scriptures seem to make clear that for every injustice and evil suffered by believers on the earth, there is significant reward in heaven. Here is a promise that because of the conditions of poverty and tribulation through which Smyrnan believers were walking, their value in God's eyes was exponentially increasing.

3. Evaluation

(No evaluation given for this church)

4. Counsel/Command (v. 10)

The Smyrneans are under serious pressure from the outside. They are told that they will soon suffer even more in the days to come. They will experience trial and imprisonment for ten days—that is to say, for a very short period of time, just as Daniel and his friends were tested for ten days (Dan. 1:12–15). Although short, this time of testing will be very sharp. It is commonly believed that prison in the ancient world was a place where the accused awaited sentencing which resulted either in execution or banishment.

They "will experience affliction" (see 1:9 on "tribulation, affliction") but it will last only "ten days." In other words, God will ensure them a manageable time, similar to the promise of 1 Cor. 10:13, "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be

tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.”

Stop fearing the things which you are about to suffer! This sounds rather like a gentle rebuke. The Smyrneans evidently worry. Jesus is telling them: “Stop being afraid! I am in control. I have personally experienced death and come back to life. I am the first and the last, and I am faithful to my promise.”

Jesus counsels Smyrna again: ***Remain faithful to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.*** This church has already been faithful, and Jesus urges continued faithfulness. The reward for faithfulness is “the crown of life,” namely, the crown that consists of life. It is not a royal crown, but the crown of victory, the garland, given to the winner at the Olympic games, signifying the joy that comes from victory.

Smyrna was famous for its athletic games. Each champion would receive a crown, a victory wreath. In ancient Rome this was the most sought-after prize. To have gained this wreath meant that one had done special acts for Rome and would be considered a patron of the Empire. This can be compared to being knighted in England. In contrast, those who have suffered for their faith will receive “the crown of life” in God’s kingdom.

The Smyrneans must keep their eyes fixed on the reward. The pressure and distress will not last; those who stand faithful will be rewarded. “Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life, which the Lord has promised to those who love Him” (James 1:12). Paul could speak with confidence and great anticipation: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course,

I have kept the faith; in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day" (2 Tim. 4:7–8). Indeed, "the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Rom. 8:18).

By using both "Satan" and "devil," John emphasizes the fact that he is the "adversary" of God's people. The imprisonment prophesied here can mean many things. The Romans did not use imprisonment as a punishment for criminal activity. The three Roman purposes for prison were coercion against recalcitrance, detention pending trial, and detention awaiting execution. The Christians of Smyrna were facing the real possibility of death in this desperate situation. The purpose of this was testing.

Christ told the believers in Smyrna, who had already been facing persecution and suffering, that they ought not to be afraid of what they were *about to suffer*. More was coming, yet they should remember that although the Jews and Roman authorities were carrying out the persecution, behind any actions against them was *the Devil* himself.

Satan would cause some of the believers to be thrown *into prison* and even be killed. He would put the believers *to the test*—that is, he would test their faith. Jesus had told his disciples, "Don't be afraid of those who want to kill you. They can only kill your body; they cannot touch your soul" (Matthew 10:28 nlt).

The persecution would continue for "*ten days*"—probably symbolizing that although persecution would be intense, it would be relatively short and have a definite beginning and end. God was in complete control. The church was challenged to *remain faithful* to Christ even when *facing death*. Believers need not fear death because it will only result in their receiving *the crown of life*.

The message to the Smyrna church was to remain faithful during their suffering because God is in control and because his promises are reliable. Jesus never taught that by being faithful to him, believers would avoid troubles, suffering, and persecution. Rather, believers must be faithful to Christ *even when* suffering. Only then will their faith prove genuine. Believers remain faithful by keeping their eyes on Christ and on what he promises for now and for the future (see Philippians 3:13–14; 2 Timothy 4:8).

Stop fearing the things which you are about to suffer! This sounds rather like a gentle rebuke. The Smyrneans evidently worry. Jesus is telling them: “Stop being afraid! I am in control. I have personally experienced death and come back to life. I am the first and the last, and I am faithful to my promise.” Jesus counsels Smyrna again: ***Remain faithful to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.*** This church has already been faithful, and Jesus urges continued faithfulness. The reward for faithfulness is “the crown of life,” namely, the crown that consists of life. It is not a royal crown, but the crown of victory, the garland, given to the winner at the Olympic games, signifying the joy that comes from victory.

5. Call/Promise (v. 11)

Those who remain faithful will receive ***the crown*** consisting of ***life***; that is to say, they will not experience the second death. In Revelation, the second death means the total extinction of the wicked (20:14); it stands in opposition to eternal life. The Smyrneans were in constant fear of physical death. To the faithful, however, physical death is temporary; it is like a sleep, and, as such, means nothing because of the hope of the resurrection.

It is the second death that should be feared—eternal death from which there will be no resurrection. Jesus warned his followers: “Do not fear those who kill the body, but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him

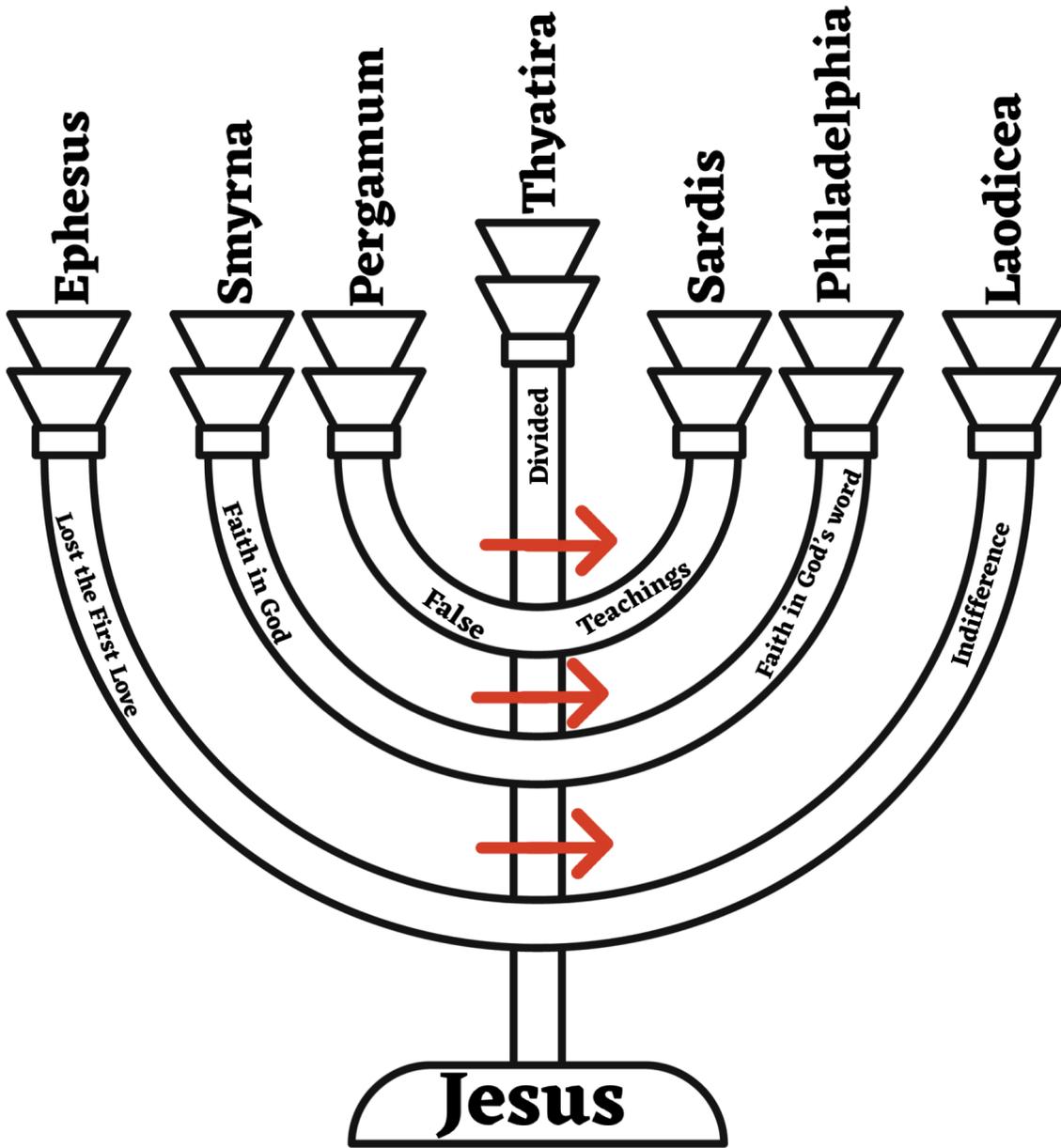
who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matt. 10:28). By virtue of his death on the cross and resurrection, Jesus broke the power of death. He is the One having “the keys of Death and Hades” (Rev. 1:18). He lives forevermore on behalf of his people. The faithful will receive the crown of eternal life and, therefore, will not be harmed by *the second death* (cf. Rev. 20:6) which is reserved for the wicked (Rev. 20:14; 21:8).

Call to hear the Spirit. The message to the church in Smyrna still applies to Christians suffering under the pressure of life or the pressure of antagonism and injustice. It is for those who may be afraid because they fear the suffering to come. Jesus’ counsel is for them: “Stop fearing! I am in control. There is nothing in life or in death, in time or eternity, nobody and nothing, that can separate you from my love” (cf. Rom. 8:38–39).

This is a letter especially for those who are going through hard times. There are two levels at which one can contextualize (apply) the Word of God: at the surface level of the text (here it would apply to persecution) or at the theological underpinning (here it could apply to trials, since persecution is one type of trial; cf. Heb. 12:4–11 or 1 Pet. 1:6–7).

This would be valid for both. There are four levels at which persecution can apply in a society like ours where overt persecution seldom occurs: we can identify with the many Christians who are suffering around the world (cf. Rom. 12:15; Heb. 13:3); we can realize that such persecution could happen here in the near future and be ready for it; we can ask ourselves how many compromises we have made in order to avoid any persecution at work or in secular society; and we can endure general trials that draw us away from the world and toward Christ. Any of these can fit this letter.

Historical application. The experience of the church in Smyrna coincided with the severe persecution of the faithful Christian church throughout the Roman Empire during the second and third centuries. Historicist interpreters have generally applied the “ten days” (2:10) to the notorious intermittent imperial persecution (a.d. 303–313) initiated by Diocletian and taken over by his successor Galerius. This period was also characterized by further departure from the simplicity of the gospel. In such a way, the church in Smyrna could represent the period in church history from the beginning of the second century until approximately a.d. 313 when Constantine the Great issued the famous Edict of Milan granting Christians religious freedom.



Relationship between the 7 Churches