

# Lesson 8

In verse 18, Jesus tells us that he possesses the keys of hell and death — or better translated, hades and death. What does that mean?

Having a key to something means the same thing here that it still means today — having a key to something means that you control that thing. I have a key to one of the cars in the parking lot — what that means is that I control that car. I can make it open; I can make it start; I can make it go; I can make it stop. It does what I want it to do. To have a key to a thing means to have authority over that thing. We see such a description of the Messiah in Isaiah.

*Isaiah 22:2 — And the key of the house of David will I lay upon his shoulder; so he shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open.*

It is in that same way that Jesus possesses the keys of hades and death. Jesus conquered death — Jesus controls it.

*Acts 2:24,27 — Whom God hath raised up, having loosed the pains of death: because it was not possible that he should be holden of it. ... Because thou wilt not leave my soul in hell, neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption.*

*Hebrews 2:14-15 — Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; And deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.*

Rome thought that it controlled death, but bloodthirsty Rome and its bloodthirsty emperors would soon learn otherwise!

Keys are often associated with locked gates, and death has gates.

*Psalms 9:13 — Have mercy upon me, O Lord; consider my trouble which I suffer of them that hate me, thou that liftest me up from the gates of death.*

*Psalm 107:18 — They draw near unto the gates of death.*

*Isaiah 38:10 — I shall go to the gates of the grave.*

Jesus has the key to those gates. He can open them. He can close them. When Jesus says “Come forth!,” the dead come forth and no gates can hold them back.

Notice that 2 Timothy 1:10 tells us that Jesus “hath abolished death” (past tense). But 1 Corinthians 15:25-26 tells us that Jesus “must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death.” **How can death remain as an enemy if death has already been abolished?**

Death was abolished and conquered (past tense) when Jesus died and rose from the grave — but death will remain as a **conquered** enemy until the last great day. On that last day, “then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory” (1 Corinthians 15:54).

Rome and death are in a similar position, and when Jesus is coming in judgment the very last place you want to be is in the same position as death! By the time this book ends, Rome will also have been judged and conquered (past tense), and yet we may find that Rome like death will remain for a time after it has been conquered. But as with death, the final outcome for Rome will never be in any doubt. Just as we see that death has (past tense) been abolished, so in this book we will be told that Babylon is fallen (18:2) in reference to Rome.

Think for a moment about the descriptions of Christ in verses 17-18 — descriptions of Christ spoken by Christ himself. They all carry the same message — Jesus is God! Although it is clear throughout the Bible, nowhere else in the Bible is the divinity of Christ any more clear than it is in these verses and in this book. Virtually every Old Testament description of God the Father is applied in this book to God the Son. Jesus is God!

And yet many then and many today deny that Jesus is God. When you study modern commentaries about Revelation you often hear a lot about “the Anti-christ” — even though that word occurs nowhere in this book. 1 John 2:22 tells us that an Antichrist is anyone who denies the divinity of Christ. What that means is that there are **many** Antichrists in the world today. Yes, we will see the son of perdition from 2 Thessalonians 2:3, and yes the son of perdition was an Antichrist — but he was not alone in that. Many then and many today deny the divinity of Christ and are properly called Antichrist.

In verse 19, John is told to write everything down. He is told to write down “the things which are” (that is, what he is now seeing in the first vision) and

“the things which shall be hereafter” (that is, what he is about to see in the second vision, which starts in Chapter 4). Another possibility is that John is writing the things that are already happening (the activities of the seven churches, for example) and the things yet to come (the coming of the son of perdition and the judgment of Rome, for example).

In verse 20, Jesus explains the mystery of the seven stars and the seven candlesticks. As with other mysteries in the Bible, this mystery is something that was formerly not understood but that has now been revealed. The seven candlesticks are the seven churches, and the seven stars are the seven angels of the seven churches.

Before we look at what this explanation means, let's pause to note two important things we should take from verse 20.

First, verse 20 confirms that this book contains figures. Jesus refers to stars and candlesticks, but he tells us that these items are figures for other things. So, for those premillennialists who pride themselves in taking everything in this book literally, they need to study verse 20 very carefully. Do they take the stars and the candlesticks literally? Jesus did not.

Second, verse 20 tells us with absolute certainty what these particular figures represent, and we will see other such explanations in this book. This is but one example of someone (in this case, Jesus himself) explaining a part of the vision to John during the vision. These explanations are signposts to let us know if we are on the right track with the other symbols in the vision.

What does the explanation in verse 20 mean? First, the candlesticks or lampstands depict churches. We have already noticed that a lampstand is used elsewhere in the Bible to denote God's people.

As we said before, although we are the light of the world (Matthew 5:14), we are **not** the source of that light. Jesus is the true light of the world “which lighteth every man that cometh into the world” (John 1:9), and the church is an earthly container for that true light. Christian light is always borrowed light. The church is a lampstand.

*John 8:12 — Then spake Jesus again unto them, saying, I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.*

Second, Jesus tells us that the seven stars are the **angels** of the seven churches. Who are these **angels** in verse 20?

Some suggest that these angels are men sent to John to inquire about his condition on Patmos and then to report back to the churches. Others suggest that these angels are the elders or the ministers of the seven churches. I don't see much evidence for either of those views.

Others suggest that these angels are actual angels who are responsible for the churches. But notice how the letters are written — while the letters are addressed directly to the angels, the comments in the letters are addressed directly to the churches.

*Revelation 2:1-2 — Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus write; ... I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience...*

It appears that the angel in verse 1 is the church of Ephesus, unless we take the “works” here to be the works of the angels rather than the works of the churches, which would not make much sense. If this is an actual angel, then we would have to conclude that this angel is somehow responsible for what the church has done right or wrong. If the angel is responsible, then don't we have to conclude that the angel exercises some control over the church? And how would that fit in with our own free will? In short, taking these angels to be literal angels does not fit well with the text and what we know from elsewhere in the Bible about angels and the church.

I think Milligan has the right explanation. He says that the **angel** of a given thing in this book is that thing itself in its essential nature. When the angel of a thing is discussed, that thing is invested with angelic personality in order to act out its part in the scheme of the book.

Later in Revelation we will find rivers, winds, bowls, trumpets, and books that also have angels. Under this view, the angel of a church is the personification of that church so that it can act out its role in this book. This view fits very well with how the letters are written in Chapters 2 and 3.

One final question before we reach the letters in Chapters 2 and 3 is **why** the letters are included in this book? We answered that question in the introduction — these seven letters in Chapters 2-3 provide the all-important context for the vision that follows in Chapters 4-22.

These letters are not an afterthought. They are not separate and unrelated from the rest of the book as many commentators suggest or imply. These letters are an integral part of this book, and any view of Revelation that makes them anything less than integral is an incorrect view of this book. These letters

tell us about the initial audience of this book, and these letters are crucial in understanding the rest of the book.

Revelation is primarily about a great threat to church from **without** by the Roman empire, but these letters show us that the church also faced a great threat from **within**. That threat will be different for each of the seven congregations, but taken together they provide a powerful lesson to every congregation of the Lord's body, even to those today that no longer face great threats from without.

In the remainder of this book, we will see the church largely take on a **passive** role while Jesus takes care of the mighty Roman empire threatening the church from **without**. But in these letters we see the church commanded to take an **active** role when it comes to battling the problems that faced the church from **within**.

## Chapter 2

### **Revelation 2:1-7**

#### **The Letter to Ephesus**

**1** Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus write; These things saith he that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand, who walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks; **2** I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil: and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars: **3** And hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name's sake hast laboured, and hast not fainted. **4** Nevertheless I have somewhat against

**thee, because thou hast left thy first love. 5 Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent. 6 But this thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. 7 He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God.**

The city of Ephesus has been called the “first and greatest metropolis of Asia.” Ephesus had the greatest harbor in Asia, and it was the greatest and wealthiest city in Asia.

Ephesus was one of the few “free cities” in the Roman empire, which means that within its own limits it was self-governing. Ephesus could never have Roman troops garrisoned within it.

Ephesus was the center of worship of Artemis or Diana (the Roman equivalent of Artemis).

*Acts 19:35 — What man is there that knoweth not how that the city of the Ephesians is a worshipper of the great goddess Diana, and of the image which fell down from Jupiter?*

The Temple of Artemis in Ephesus was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

**Philon of Byzantium:** “I have seen the walls and Hanging Gardens of ancient Babylon, the statue of Olympian Zeus, the Colossus of Rhodes, the mighty work of the high Pyramids and the tomb of Mausolus. But when I saw the temple at Ephesus rising to the clouds, all these other wonders were put in the shade.”

The temple was destroyed during a raid by the Goths in AD 268. The “image which fell down from Jupiter” in Acts 19:35 was a sacred stone, probably a meteorite, that had been placed in the earliest temple, built there around 800 BC.

Acts 19 tells us about Demetrius, who made silver shrines of Artemis and who saw his livelihood threatened by the spread of Christianity. In Acts 19, we also see that Ephesus is where the seven sons of Sceva had their run-in with the evil spirit, and also where the expensive magic books were burned to prevent their evil from spreading any further. That, we are told in Acts 19:20, caused the word of God to grow mightily and prevail.

Ephesus was also a center for Caesar worship. The city had temples dedicated to Nero and Claudius. Domitian enforced Caesar worship with a renewed fervor, and a large temple to Domitian was established in Ephesus. Domitian also appears to have extended the boundaries of the temple of Artemis.

One commentator said that in Ephesus, pagan religion was at its strongest.

Ephesus was also a center for crime and immorality. The Temple of Artemis was filled with hundreds of priestesses who were sacred prostitutes. Heraclitus, the weeping philosopher, attributed his tears to the fact that no one could live in Ephesus without weeping at the immorality.

Although Ephesus seemed very unpromising soil for the word of God, some of the church’s greatest triumphs occurred there. Trench wrote: “Nowhere did the word of God find a kindlier soil, strike root more deeply or bear fairer fruits of faith and love.”

There is a lesson here for us. Sometimes we are tempted to write off someone or some group because we are sure they will never listen to us or obey the gospel. And yet, as Ephesus shows us, God can reap a wonderful harvest from unpromising soil if we will but plant the seed.

We don’t know when or how the gospel first arrived in Ephesus. Acts 2:9 tells us that some of the Jews who heard the first gospel sermon were from Asia. Acts 19:1 tells us that there were disciples in Ephesus prior to Paul’s arrival, although they had not been properly taught about baptism.

Of the cities Paul visited on his missionary journeys, Paul stayed longer in Ephesus than in any other. (Acts 20:31 says he was there for three years.) Aquila, Priscilla, and Apollos were in Ephesus (Acts 18). Paul’s great farewell address was delivered to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20.

What had this congregation done that was right? Many things. They had worked hard for Jesus' sake (verses 2-3), they had endured patiently (verses 2-3), they did not bear evil men (verse 2), they tested and exposed false apostles (verse 2), and they had not grown weary (verse 3).

With all of that going for them, what could possibly be wrong? Verse 4 tells us that the Ephesian congregation had a major problem. They had abandoned their first love.

It is interesting to note how Paul ended his letter to the Ephesians in Ephesians 6:24 — “Grace be with all them that love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity.” That letter was likely written in the early sixties, after Paul had visited Ephesus in the early fifties. Revelation was most likely written late in Vespasian's reign, which ended in AD 79. So within a span of about fifteen years the church at Ephesus had gone from the condition described in Ephesians 6:24 to the condition described in Revelation 2:4, having abandoned their first love. It can happen quickly!

They had lost their proper focus – perhaps their programs and their labors had become an end rather than a means to an end. Their actions were right, but their motivation was wrong. They were doing okay with the **what**, the **when**, the **where**, and the **how** — but it seems they were falling short with the **who** and the **why**.

And what would happen to the Ephesian congregation if the situation was not remedied — if they did not repent? Jesus says in verse 5 that he would come quickly and remove their candlestick from its place. After all, if the candlestick is no longer casting light, why should it remain in its place?

One thing this letter tells us is that it is possible for an entire congregation of the Lord's church to be plunged into such darkness that it ceases to be a congregation of the Lord's church. They may not change the sign outside the building that says “Church of Christ” — but what you find inside is no longer a church of Christ, a church that belongs to Christ. Its lampstand has been removed from its place. And whether a congregation of people is a congregation of the Lord's church is not determined by what is on the sign out front — it is determined by Christ, the head of the church.

And notice verse 2 — they had works, they had labor, they had patience, and they did not bear those who were evil. And yet, absent love, they were at risk of losing their lampstand. None of those good things was enough absent love.

This book of Revelation is all about the victory of the church over Rome — but the first thing we see is a congregation that was in danger of being rejected by Christ. But if that rejection occurred, it would not be caused by Rome, but rather it would be caused by what that congregation itself had done or not done. Jesus would defeat Rome for them, but it was up to them to remain faithful to Jesus.

In verse 5, we see another **figurative** “coming of Christ” of the sort we have already talked about. Here the coming depicts a coming in judgment against this congregation if they did not repent.

Verse 6 is interesting. Jesus says that he **hates** the deeds of the Nicolaitans.

When Jesus says he **hates** something, it should really get our attention. If Jesus hates it, then we must hate it as well. Jesus **commended** the Ephesians in verse 6 because they also **hated** the false doctrine of the Nicolaitans.

The Nicolaitans were a sect that some surmise (without much evidence) was started by Nicolas, one of the first deacons in Acts 6:5. Another theory is that the name is symbolic (as most likely is the name “Jezebel” that is used in a later letter). The Greek word “Nikolas” means “destroyer of the people.”

What did the Nicolaitans teach? Verse 6 does not tell us what they taught — only that Jesus hated it. But verse 15, which we will study later, is more informative. It seems to link the Nicolaitan doctrine with the doctrine of Balaam, which involved eating things sacrificed to idols and committing fornication.

We typically don’t think of sexual impurity as a false doctrine, but the sexual impurity here seems to have been tied to false religious views, which is not uncommon. The surest sign of a false religion is the use of that religion as a justification for sexual impurity. There are many examples of that around us in the world today.

What verse 15 will suggest is that the Nicolaitans mentioned here in verse 6 were a **libertine** sect. That is, their false doctrine promoted sin in the name of religion. That is certainly what the pagan religions taught — the temple of Diana was filled with so-called sacred prostitutes! Why not just be like them, the Nicolaitans likely asked. Why not compromise?

And there we have a **major theme** in the entire book — **compromise**. There again is the big choice we will see over and over again in this book — Caesar or Christ? The world or the word? Light or darkness? Faithfulness or faithlessness? We know which path the Nicolaitans chose — and Jesus **hated** their deeds!

The wolves mentioned by Paul in Acts 20 in his address to the Ephesian elders had arrived. And perhaps it was because of Paul's warning that the Ephesian congregation was not taken in by these false teachers. They recognized and hated their false teachings. (We will see a congregation with a different attitude toward the Nicolaitans when we study the letter to Pergamum.)

What is the lesson to the church from Christ's letter to Ephesus? Look at verse 4. This congregation had lost its focus. They were still doing the programs and the activities, but they had forgotten **why** they were doing the programs and the activities. They were standing firm against all forms of false teaching, but they had forgotten *why* they were doing that, and for *whom*. They had left their first love.

Remember Paul's description of loveless works in 1 Corinthians 13:3 — "And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing." And remember John 14:15, where Jesus told us what it means to love him: "If ye love me, keep my commandments." There is no such thing as a disobedient love.

Verse 7 is interesting. Those who overcome, we are told, will be given the right "to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God." Certainly that is a promise of eternal life with God in heaven to those who overcome through faith in Christ (1 John 5:4), but the particular interest here is the reference to the tree of life. Why? Because the Temple of Artemis was a tree shrine. A tree was often used as the emblem for the city of Ephesus or its temple to Diana. A date-palm tree is often used as a symbol of Artemis on the coinage of the time. Jesus is telling us here that the tree of life is not found in the Temple of Artemis or in any other false man-made temple. Instead, the tree of life is in the paradise of God (which is heaven, 2 Corinthians 12:4), and that tree of life is promised to those who overcome by remaining faithful unto death.

What can we learn about the **context** of Revelation from this letter to the church in Ephesus and from the history of Ephesus?

First, we learn something about the interaction of Roman gods and Greek gods.

Rome did not insist that those within the empire convert to Roman gods. Instead, Rome tolerated local religious observances, and Rome fused Roman gods with local gods as long as loyalty to Rome was secured. That is why we still find a temple to Artemis in Ephesus under Roman rule.

The people of Ephesus regarded Artemis and their mother goddess and as the divine protector and sustainer of the city. She was thought to have saved the city. A number of inscriptions and coins from Ephesus show emperors linking themselves with the temple. Rome was fine with the temple, but Rome wanted to control it and benefit from it. The town clerk in Acts 19, for example, would have been an elite ally of Rome charged with protecting the status quo. His concern was not for Paul but rather to avoid a riot that could be bring wrath from Rome. (“For we are in danger to be called in question for this day’s uproar” in Acts 19:40.) Twice in recent history Rome had intervened into temple affairs — once to stem asylum seekers and once to stop financial misdeeds.

Think for a moment about how an earthly government can interact with the Lord’s church. There are really only three options: (1) indifference, (2) persecution, or (3) embrace. Of the three, the third is by far the most dangerous for the health of the church. Rome’s first choice with the church would have been to embrace it and thereby control it (as Rome had done with the Greek temples), and that eventually happened under Constantine, leading to a great apostasy. But here that strategy of embrace did not work; the Christians would not acknowledge Caesar as god, something that would have been required to fuse Christianity with Caesar worship as Rome desired. So Rome went for the other option — persecution.

And what about today? Would we rather be ignored, persecuted, or embraced by the government? Indifference is best. And second best? Persecution. History tells us that the most dangerous thing for the church is to be embraced by an earthly government.

Second, we learn something about compromise — it comes in many forms, and it is not always easy to identify.

For example, the temple to Artemis or Diana operated as a sort of bank where people could safely store their wealth. (Recall the mention of temple robbers in Acts 19:37.) The temple itself became wealthy through donations, bequests, and sacrifices. The overseers of the temple were a major source for loans in the city. Could a Christian take such a loan? Could a Christian store his money in the temple? The Nicolaitan compromise was easy to spot, but what about this? Paul dealt with such questions with regard to eating meat sacrificed to idols, and those principles could be applied to these and other questions.