

# Revelation 2:1–7

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[ 0 : 00 ] Revelation chapter 2, verses 1 through 7. And you have not grown weary.

To the one who conquers, I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God. This is the word of the Lord. You may be seated. Good afternoon to all.

It's good to be in the house of God today and to be able to share from the word of God. If you've been around Holy Trinity for any length of time, you've heard us talk about ministry for God in a great city.

Such is the case with Chicago. We have a great city. And though we've been outdistanced these days in population by the likes of New York, L.A., and others, as a matter of fact, John reminded us this morning that Chicago is 25th now in world population as far as cities are concerned.

They used to be up there more, but things do change, don't they? But still, much about Chicagoland that attracts people from around the world, and yet it remains a true world-class kind of city.

[ 2 : 22 ] Check it out. Chicago's lakefront. Though it loses some of its luster during the winter. Have you noticed what the lake looks like during the winter?

It doesn't have that inviting blue. It has that drab gray look, and so you would be if you were out in the temperature all of that time, too. But still, it attracts millions during the course of a year.

The world has come to Chicago. Our neighborhoods reflect that. Our schools reflect that the world has come here.

We boast of a thriving business sector. Major corporations from other cities in our country and from around the world have come to Chicago.

Chicago, the famed Michigan Avenue, though rivaled by shopping centers around the city, remains a shopper's delight.

[ 3 : 22 ] Amen? Yeah? If you can afford it. Other well-known hidden facts make Chicago a viable option for permanent residency.

To live, to work, to raise a family, to die, and to be buried here.

Chicago. It's a great, great city. As we look at the text on this afternoon, it speaks about another great city, an ancient world great city, the city of Ephesus.

Ephesus was a great city in its own right. It was called the supreme metropolis of Asia. Though not the capital of the province of Asia, practically it functioned that way.

Commercially and economically, it was the trade center of the area. It was a coastal city and three major highways converged there at Ephesus.

[ 4 : 30 ] Check this out. It was a city of 250,000 people and the famed temple of Diana or otherwise known as Artemis was there.

One of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The platform of the temple was 100,000 square feet.

127 pillars of marble and there were 36 of those that were overlaid with gold and with jewels. Many of the temple priestesses were dedicated to cult prostitution.

The temple itself served as a place of asylum for criminals in the temple confines. One philosopher speaking about Ephesus had this to say, that the inhabitants of the city were fit only to be drowned and that the reason why he could never laugh or smile was because he lived amidst such terrible uncleanness.

Such was the great city of Ephesus in that day. Have you ever noticed here in our great city of Chicago that you have things that make us smile and things that make you frown?

[ 5 : 48 ] There are things about us that make us glad to be a part of Chicago and then there are some things that make us ashamed to call Chicago our home. They bring mourning and tears and hopefully prayers because of some of the things that happened here.

You may recall in the news even this week, a 70-year-old wife, mother, grandmother, life was taken away. Her husband had this to say about it.

He said he loved everything about his wife. But she's gone. Random victim of gang, fire, or whatever it was, but sort of stupid kind of stuff that happened in our city.

Here's the deal I want to help you to see, and I believe we can help you to see it even from this text, is that great cities need great churches that prioritize the great commandment.

Great cities need great churches that prioritize the great commandment. While Ephesus fit the profile of a great city, would the church of Ephesus at the time of writing be considered a great church?

[ 7 : 12 ] What is it, folks, that makes up a great church? How do you get on the list? Is it measured by great numbers that gather on a weekend?

Or perhaps it's great preaching or great programs? Or could there be another measure that might help us to come up with a profile of what it means to be a great church?

I believe the text can help. The messages to the churches in Revelation are actually prophecies in letter form. They are much like books of prophecy in the Old Testament, particularly Amos, because it is there, if you recall, that there were prophetic messages, but then there were prophetic visions. It was the Lord speaking, but also the Lord showing the prophets certain things about the people of God of that day. And they were, in fact, messages of judgment.

So we come to this text this afternoon. And notice the first sentence there, or the introduction.

[ 8 : 31 ] It says, to the angel of the church in Ephesus write. Huh? Wow. The question that we come to there is, who is it that is actually being addressed in this text?

And I believe that this is another good place for one of those rules for reading the book of Revelation. Remember the last time I gave you three of them.

But here's a good place for a rule that will help us, because believe me, we could spend a lot of time here just trying to figure out who in the world is this angel.

And if you're like me, you've heard that this angel is the pastor, the leader, the reader, or maybe it's the courier that's carrying the message that's here.

So when we come to something like this, we have to stop and think through, because there are some things in the book of Revelation that quite frankly are ambiguous.

[ 9 : 42 ] And we could get caught up with the ambiguous, uncertain kind of things where we can't see clear, and we'll just say, oh, I give up. What's the use of going any further?

Huh? Some things will not be crystal clear, but you and I must not allow speed bumps, as we read through the book of Revelation, to cause us to stop altogether.

Huh? Everyone overrun those speed bumps in the neighborhood? Huh? What do you do? You slow down, and then you just sort of glide over them. Well, this is one of those places where we're going to slow down a little bit, and we're going to glide over this particular bump here.

So my point here as far as this rule, it's okay to embrace some uncertainty. It may not be crystal clear, but it's enough.

So who is the angel being spoken of here? Again, we've got to understand, folks, this is apocalyptic literature, a lot of images, what it enables us to see beyond the veil of the seen into the world of the unseen, that the angels have an active part in.

[ 10 : 55 ] You know, sometimes we feel we want to see behind the veil. I don't know if we want to see or not. God has given us the kind of vision that we need, because there's a whole lot of things that are going on in this life and in the universe that you and I don't see.

And you know what, folks? We don't need to see it. Angels are a part of that realm. Again, some see these as a human messenger, but here's the deal with that.

Is it really a human messenger? If we look at the almost 70 usages of the word angel in the book of Revelation, really none of them refer to a human messenger.

So it would be rather inconsistent in this particular verse to see this angel as a human kind of messenger.

Another view is that these angels are the guardians of the congregation, guardian angels, huh?

This view builds on a Jewish understanding that individuals and nations have angels assigned to them.

[ 11 : 58 ] As a matter of fact, turn with me over to Daniel chapter 10. I didn't think I would give you a page.

And here it is. It must be on 9, excuse me, 748. Look at verse 13. Here we get to see some of these unseen principalities, rulers.

Look at verse 13. The prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me 21 days, but Michael, one of the chief princes, came to me to help me, for I was left there with the kings of Persia.

Again, this was when Daniel was praying and things sort of got held up. His help was held up, okay? And this is explaining why the delay.

Look at verse 18. Again, one having the appearance of a man, touched me and strengthened me.

And he said, O man, greatly beloved, fear not. Peace be with you. Be strong and of good courage.

[13:12] And he spoke to me. I was strengthened. As he spoke to me, I was strengthened. Let my Lord speak, for you have strengthened me. Then he said, Do you not know why I've come to you? But now I will return to fight against, again, the prince of Persia.

And when I go out, behold, the prince of Greece will come. But I will tell you what is inscribed in the book of truth. There is none who contends by my side against these, except Michael, your prince.

And Michael seemed to have been the prince or the angel that was designated for the well-being of Israel. It seems best then to see the angels who are introducing these, or to whom he's saying to write to the angel, as these God-appointed angelic representatives for the individual churches.

While separate from the churches, these heavenly beings are closely associated with the churches and represent the church in the heavenly realm. As a matter of fact, back to Revelation.

If you will look back up in Revelation 1, verse 20, it says, As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and the seven golden candlesticks.

[14:36] Now, note, this is what you have. You have light-bearing entities, stars in the heavens, lampstands on earth.

Okay? So you saw in my right hand that the seven golden candlesticks, the seven stars, are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the same, are the seven churches.

Light-bearing entities in the heavenlies, the stars. Light-bearing entity on earth, lampstands. Okay? So it seems to see these, though not spelled out, the association is so close that to address the angel is in fact to address the church.

This view sees angels as corporate representatives of the saints, and this is consistent both with the Old Testament, the New Testament, and Jewish writings. Commentator Beale notes that addressing the churches through their representative angels is to remind the churches that already a dimension of their existence is heavenly, and that they have heavenly help and protection in the struggle not to be conformed to their pagan environment.

There was help for them and for the church. And guess what? There's help for you and me today. We are not alone in this world. Huh?

[15:54] Huh? The angels of the church seem to be the God-appointed heavenly representatives who serve his interests and the interests of his people. Huh? Perhaps there's a comparison without being represented by our congressmen in Springfield or in Washington.

Here we vote and they're appointed, but these are God-appointed representatives. Huh? And their assignments are from above. And praise God for that.

Huh? So here's the deal. While lack, so there may be a lack of clarity and certainty as it concerns the messenger. Hey, there's some other things in this passage. There is no doubt about them at all, folks.

Huh? As a matter of fact, who sent the message is clear. Huh? The church in Ephesus, as far as the content of the message, it is very clear.

So we don't want to get caught up that we needed to take time to try to provide a measure of clarity. We don't want to just stop there. Notice in verse, in the next part of the verse, the sender's identification is clear.

[17:00] He describes himself as one who holds the stars and walks among the lampstands. And these things, brothers and sisters, speak of the reality of his protection and his presence.

And how assuring, and this was something that was not just for the churches in antiquity. This is something, this is a reality for you and me today in the midst of our living in a city like Chicago.

Huh? We need to hear this kind of message today. And these lampstands, notice the lampstands, they are golden lampstands, aren't they?

That they are precious and valuable and treasured. The sender's identification is clear. He identifies himself on the basis of what we've already seen about the glorified Christ in chapter 1, verses 9

through 20.

This serves sort of as a palette of sorts because he takes these things the way he shows himself in chapter 1 and he addresses the churches on the basis of that kind of identity.

[18:05] And here, the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and who walks among the seven golden candlesticks. So, the sender's, not only is the sender's identification clear, the sender's examination is clear.

Look at verses 2 through 4 and verse 6. This was like report time, report card time for the church. Huh? And notice, this particular church received passing marks in several areas.

Look at the text with me. They, I know your works and your toil and your patient endurance, how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but you have tested those who call themselves apostles and you've, and are not, and you have found them to be false.

Huh? Hard work. A. Huh? The church wasn't afraid to work hard. No one could call these people lazy.

They labored, and this is a great word here, tall, they labored to the point of exhaustion. The same word is used in 1 Corinthians chapter 4 verse 12 to speak of ministerial labor.

[19:19] And then there's that great verse in 1 Corinthians chapter 15 verse 58, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord for as much as you know that your labor, there it is, that's the word, is not in vain in the Lord.

It speaks of the labor there of those, the saints who anticipate a resurrection in the future. And it implies toil and hard work in spite of the odds.

Church at Ephesus, they knew how to work hard. Then they were steadfast. They knew how to endure under less than the best conditions.

They stood their ground. These were gutsy kind of people. They knew something about not giving up, not giving in. They had discernment, self-proclaimed prophets.

Some TV evangelists couldn't cut it with these particular folks. When they passed through the ministerial sort of zone, this detector, they went off.

[20:21] I mean, just like a metal detector. These folks, hey, they don't pass the test. They checked their credentials. They said they were enrolled in certain schools and had credentials.

And they checked them out. They hadn't even enrolled there, let alone have credentials from there. Not only did they check out the would-be ministers, look at the verse, they checked out the would-be groups here known as the Nicolaitans.

These were those, and we'll talk more about them later, but their teachings and practices didn't fit the guidelines of the biblical faith. The Lord hated their practices, and so did this particular church. These were marathon-like saints here, folks. The Energizer Bunny didn't have anything on these folks. They had endured in the name of the Lord, and for the name of the Lord had not grown weary.

They just kept on keeping on. They had passed the hard work test, verse 2, the steadfast test, verses 2 and 3, the discernment test, the fatigue test, passed with fine colors.

[21:23] Now, just think, if this report were read in the midst of our church, you know what would be happening? Well, we'd be high-fiving one another. We'd be saying, amen, hey, this is us.

Hallelujah. But the test wasn't over, was it? The sender's examination not only included what the church had done well, it included areas where they had not done well.

My all-time favorite teacher is a woman by the name of Anna Mae Griner. Miss Griner was my fifth grade teacher, and when we were at Lowell Elementary School, that we would go out on the first day of school, and then the teachers sort of would pick their class.

So Miss Griner had us in the fifth grade, and guess what? She chose us again for the sixth grade, so I had her in two years. I remember one of my report cards from Miss Griner, and so I looked at mathematics, and we had a number scale.

We didn't have A, B, C, D, E, F. We had ones and twos, and anybody else have ones and twos? No, different system. Anyway, a one was a good grade, so I looked at arithmetic.

[22:39] One. Geography. One. History. One. Physical education. You.

Unsatisfactory. But here was the deal why I got a U. It wasn't based on what I did in the classroom. It was my unsportsmanlike conduct on the playground. Huh? That got me a failing grade.

Huh? The summary report for the church of Ephesus was this. You've got a good defense, but you've got a bad offense.

The church could read the opposition well. They could keep the enemy from scoring, but they couldn't put any points on the board themselves.

[ 23 : 40 ] Didn't you see all? I mean, they got great marks there, except in the offense. The good news is that there was failing marks in just one area.

The bad news was that it was the most critical area, and we see that in verse 5. I have this against you, verse 4, that you have abandoned the love that you had at first.

That's just like my U on the playground. They've gotten all of those other things right. Good defense. Bad offense.

Huh? Notice how their grade was described, or this was described. It was they had abandoned.

You see that in verse 4? And remember, look at verse 5. It says, notice, therefore, from where you have fallen, they had abandoned something, and they had fallen from a level.

[ 24 : 44 ] The specific dimension of love is not mentioned. It could have been love for Christ that expresses itself in life, surrendering obedience.

After all, is he not the one who loves us and gave himself for us? Chapter 1 and verse 5, to him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his own blood.

He is the one that calls us to an obedience that will send us and cause us to go and adjust our lives in ways that reflect an obedient kind of response.

The church has not always had this kind of response to Christ. There have been times when those that may have even been called great churches for various reasons, but have not responded with this kind of life-surrendering kind of love for Christ.

There's a social phenomenon known as white flight. The influx of minorities into the city has caused fears for families and churches.

[ 25 : 57 ] There was an exodus to the suburbs. churches were also caught up in this pattern. I read this past week about that kind of phenomenon that happened in the 60s out in L.A.

in the area where Pepperdine University was in the city. And a church of Christ there right in the city. But as this phenomenon began to take place, they headed up to Malibu.

If you've ever been to Malibu, right off the Pacific, you know. So now Pepperdine is sort of a university for somewhat of an elite kind of people because everybody can't send their children there.

But we have these kind of trends and patterns and oftentimes our love for Christ does not allow us to stay put and to do the hard things, the things that will sometimes cost us.

Rather, we find ourselves fleeing and disobeying Christ in various ways. As churches and families, we can find ourselves motivated by fear rather than love.

[ 27 : 09 ] It could be he was talking about love for the saints in a life-sharing kind of fellowship way. Had not Paul prayed for the Ephesians and their love for one another.

And listen to what he says in Ephesians chapter 1 verses 15 and 16. He says, for this reason, because I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and your love toward all the saints.

We're talking about maybe some 40 years or so prior to the time of this writing. He says, I do not cease to give thanks to you, remembering you in my prayers.

So he prayed for them. He had heard about this particular great trend. They had a life-sharing kind of love amongst themselves. Perhaps it's best to see that this was a love for Christ.

The love that expresses itself in a love for the lost. And I think that we can defend this from the text because that expresses itself in a light-bearing outreach.

[ 28 : 18 ] So a love for Christ that expresses itself in reaching out. I believe that we can see that, number one, for how we see these light-bearing entities, particularly, he's talking about Christ walking among the seven golden lamp stands.

And we are to be reflectors of Christ's light out into the world. Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify the Father.

Textually, this may have the most support based on how the glorified Christ identifies himself as one who walks among the lampstands and the consequences of their not repenting.

Look at verse 5b, the removal of the lampstand there. So was this the love that caused the saints of God to reach out to a lost world?

The failure of love in this area distinguishes, in this area that distinguishes us as the disciples of Christ as the saints of God. That is, by this you'll only know that you're my disciples.

[ 29 : 20 ] Love, again, is a failure indeed. Loving Christ, God with our all, the foremost commandment, the greatest commandment, here Israel, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind and all your strength.

That's what first love is. It includes love for God and expresses itself in love for people. Notice the sender's prescription in verse 5.

That's pretty clear. What about a prescription? What about medication? He says here, remember, therefore, from where you have fallen, repent and do the works you did at first.

If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place unless you repent. threefold prescription.

First pill, remember. Look back, remember where you were. What do fallen churches and believers need to remember? They need to hit the rewind button and then replay to see the way that it was and then go back to that.

[ 30 : 37 ] When love begins to get cold, you and I are to remember. Oh, the blessedness of memory. Yesterday, I celebrated my spiritual birthday.

I know it well because it was my grandmother's birthday when I came to Christ in 1964. And as I look back and see the hand of God in my young, 15-year-old, green as a gourd kind of life, God has been good.

Oh, the love that drew me and oh, where would I be had not Christ rescued me?

And you can ask yourself that same question. We perhaps have come to Christ under different circumstances, but oh, I trust that you're able to rewind and remember the love of Christ that has drawn you and what that encouraged you or spurred you to do.

The love of Christ, as we grow in Christ, year by year, Christ should get more and more and more of you. And more and more and more of me. That's what it means to grow and to mature in Christ so that you're willing to let go of whatever you and I need to be.

[ 31 : 59 ] Yes, Lord, kind of people. the love of Christ will cause you to do that. A willingness to surrender.

Remembering God's goodness and where we were can help to rekindle the love that you and I need, but then tells them to repent. John gave us a good definition this morning of repentance. I think it squares with the metanoia word to rethink. rethink. Rethinking. It's a call to rethink, to repent, to have a change of heart that leads to a change of action.

Hear the truth about the situation and our situation so that we can rethink our course in life, rethink our direction in life.

And guess what, folks? Repentance is good for the church. Some people feel that repentance is a dirty word. Repentance is a healing word.

[ 33 : 04 ] Repentance is a restoring word and one that you and I need to embrace and to exercise in our lives and then return.

In other words, just do it again. Take, go back. There needs to be evidence of a true change of heart and mind. Return to the things that you used to do. And he tells us in verse 5, what if the medicine is not taken?

What if no medicine, no cure? He says, if not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.

What's he talking about here? The consequences, it's discipline, it's another way of saying in somewhat colloquial language, I'm going to pull the plug. it's when the glory of God departs.

People can go through the motions, but God is not there. Ichabod, the glory of God is departed, is written across the door. No repentance, no maximum usefulness.

[ 34 : 11 ] No repentance, no maximum effectiveness. As churches, we can carry on without the true source of light and power.

The Lord Jesus Christ is not there. I remember when I was a gas serviceman and I would go on a no heat kind of call. Oftentimes in going in, the fan would be running.

You could hear the air would be moving, but when you would check and see, guess what? There's no heat in the heat exchanger. There's nothing there.

So you just got a bunch of cold air. And oftentimes in a no cooling, you can have movement, but the refrigeration is not going through the coils like it should.

And even so in the church of Jesus Christ, there can be air movement, but the flame is gone. There can be a lot of activities, there can be a lot of programs, and by some people's definition, you will

achieve the definition of a great church.

[ 35 : 21 ] shot. Oh, but according to this text, prioritizing the great commandment is really what Jesus wants from those who identify with him and those who call Jesus as Lord and Savior.

Huh? No repentance, no maximum usefulness. Huh? The fan can be running, but not much is really happening.

Notice the sender's exhortation in verse 7. It includes both a great challenge, but also a sneak preview to a great conclusion.

He says, listen up, he that has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. This has an echo of Jesus' words in the gospel.

He that has an ear, let him hear. Let him hear. Let him hear the word that Jesus is saying, which has an echo of Isaiah chapter 6.

[ 36 : 28 ] When it speaks about hearing, they will see and not perceive and hearing they will hear and not understand. But he says, he that has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

These are the timeless words of the glorified Christ that echoed to first century Ephesus and it reverberates down through time to you and me today.

And I believe he would say similar things to you and me. Huh? As far as our, the totality of our commitment and prioritizing the right things for his glory and for his honor.

Huh? The great, that's the great challenge. Listen up. But the great conclusion to the one who hears, to the one who conquers, I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God. That's a fast forward to Revelation 21 and 22, where you see this glorious inheritance of those who have remained faithful to Jesus Christ.

[ 37 : 52 ] It is a future day when we will partake of, it is a return to the garden and beyond the garden because the dwelling of our God will be with man and we will enjoy him, the glory of who he is.

Huh? These, this, these things are repeated, the exhortation, the challenge is repeated to each church. But as you look at the reward, you will find these rewards that are promised in Revelation 21, chapters 21 and 22.

Huh? What are we saying here this afternoon? A timeless message for the church of any day emerges from this text this afternoon.

It echoes from heaven from you and me today. It is a call to biblical priority. It's a call to rethink what our priorities actually are as God's people.

A call to prioritize our love for him over our labor for him. It's one thing to have a good worth ethic. It's a better thing to have a good love ethic.

[ 39 : 15 ] And God is calling for that for you and me. What is it that great cities like Ephesus like Chicago today need they need churches that prioritize the great commandment.

My prayer for you and for me is that we would be nothing less than that. And may we do all that we can.

I believe that we're on the right track but also believe that we have room to grow. May we do all that we can to be the kind of church that values love over labor and are willing to repent where that is not the case.

Willing to take a good hard honest look at ourselves as individuals as families as community groups as a church.

The city needs what God has given us. And I love our vision to see the city of Chicago transformed by the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

[ 40 : 49 ] May we labor and love to that end for the glory and honor of God. Join me in prayer.

Lord, we love you and we thank you and we give you praise for this text. thank you for the reality of our of your presence and your protection among us.

Thank you for helping us to see how those things are connected at least to get a glimpse of that.

Thank you for the ministry of your angels even today.

Lord, behind the veils that we cannot see. thank you that you haven't left us alone in our task, Lord, to love you and to surrender to you and to love one another and to love people and life sharing, light-bearing outreach and life-sharing fellowship.

Prayers that you would be glorified in us. We give you the praise here today. Bless your name.

Amen. Won't you stand? Join us. Amen.

[ 42:08 ] Amen.