

Lecture 13 – “Write to the Churches...”

Revelation 2:1-29

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When a pastor became ill one Sunday morning, he called on a retired pastor in the congregation to fill in for him. The substitute agreed, but with some reservations since the regular pastor was well loved by the people. When the old preacher entered the pulpit, he grasped for an illustration that would convey his humility in the task. “I feel inadequate in taking the place of your minister this morning. He is such a good preacher and brings light just like sunlight through a clean pane of glass. I, on the other hand, am like the piece of cardboard that has been substituted for the pane in the window.”

He went on to preach a decent sermon. At the door afterward a well-meaning lady grasped his hand as she told him, “Preacher, you’re no cardboard. You’re a real pane.”

Just like that substitute pastor, I feel both humbled and honored to speak to you about the second chapter of the Book of Revelation. My prayer is that we will get a clearer picture of what Jesus was saying and how it applies to us today and that I will not be a real pain!

On the island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea somewhere between modern Turkey and Greece, John received a stunning revelation from Jesus Christ. This revelation included seven letters that were created by our Lord, the Author of Life, and recorded by the Apostle John. These letters were written to the seven early churches in Asia—each

one to a specific church.

To tell you the truth, the letters were hidden in the back of my Bible. I say this because I left them buried and unread for years because the warnings contained in them seemed troubling to me.

At the suggestion of Dr. David Jeremiah in his message entitled, *“The Practical Use of Revelation,”* I started looking at the letters on two levels—both practically and personally. Yes, the letters were written to actual functioning churches with real believers who faced daunting challenges of the day. But they can and should be read as personal letters to each one of us, because as Christians, we are members of the church, Christ’s body.

I now realize that they are timeless love letters from Jesus to the churches and to us. They are full of unfathomable grace, and they speak to the deepest needs of our hearts.

Today we will take a closer look at the letters written to the first four of those churches. While each letter is addressed to a specific church, they contain similarities, as well as messages from the Lord Jesus Christ unique to that church.

Here are some of those similarities: Jesus is speaking to the representatives of the churches. The seven stars are identified as the seven messengers as angels. Most commentators believe that He was addressing the pastors of the churches.

Each of the letters begins with a glorious picture of our Lord Jesus Christ which is unique to the particular church. Each begins with the

words, “*I know all the things you do...*” All of them end with a special promise that contains these words: “*Whoever is victorious...;*” and all of the seven letters include this same sentence as part of its closing words: “*Let everyone who has ears to hear listen to what the Spirit says to the churches.*”

If we look at the map on the screen, we see that these church locations are arranged in a semi-circle. If you were to deliver those letters to the churches, you would start your postal delivery route at Ephesus, then you would travel north to Smyrna and Pergamum, then southeast to Thyatira, Sardis and Philadelphia and finish your journey at Laodicea. In fact, a postal route of that day would have stopped at all seven locations. Today we will focus on information pertaining to the first four churches along that “postal” route.

Ephesus

As we begin our journey along our conceptual “postal route,” we make our first stop at Ephesus. It was here that John was taken captive and exiled to the Isle of Patmos where he received the Revelation of Jesus Christ. At the time when Revelation was written, the city of Ephesus was the most prominent city in the Roman province of Asia. It was the religious and commercial center of the Roman Empire. In the great city, was the Temple of Artemis, a Greek goddess. It was also called the Temple of Diana by the Romans and was considered one of the seven wonders of the ancient world (<http://en.wikipedia.org>).

Jews and Greeks who dwelled in this province heard Paul's message and the Word of God in this city around 60 A.D. Timothy, then John the Apostle followed Paul when he finished his ministry in Ephesus. Can you imagine having these men as your first pastors? What a launch this church had!

The correspondence begins in Revelation 2:2 as our Lord describes the characteristics of the church in Ephesus. We see that Jesus at first commends the church and then adds a serious word of caution:

*"To the angel of the church of Ephesus write,
These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands. I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance.*

I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars; and you have persevered and have patience and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary."

Jesus begins His letter by reminding all that He walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands which are His churches. He holds the seven stars in his right hand (messengers of the churches). The picture that we have of Jesus is that He is powerful and has authority over the churches and their leaders. He acknowledges that He knows the precise situation of each church. He knows what is taking place on the surface and what is happening under the surface in the hearts and minds of His people.

The works and labor that Jesus refers to could very well mean that the Christians of Ephesus lived right in the midst of a pagan city that was known for its idolatry and false gods.

The church in Ephesus was a discerning church. In verse 2, Jesus said, “You cannot bear those who are evil.” The Christians in Ephesus were surrounded by false doctrines. But the church leaders knew right from wrong and took pains to warn and equip their people.

When Paul took his final leave from the church of Ephesus, praying with the church elders before he boarded a ship, he gave them this warning:

“I know that false teachers, like vicious wolves, will come in among you after I leave, not sparing the flock. Even some men from your own group will rise up and distort the truth in order to draw a following. Watch out!” (Acts 20:29-31 NLT)

So, the church had been warned, and they had been doing a good job in keeping the wolves at bay and equipping the sheep.

Here we come to the point where our Lord Jesus Christ tells the church that He has a complaint against them. After He tells them all the good things they are doing, He gives them a corrective mandate.

“Nevertheless, I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent.” (Revelation 2:2-5)

The members of the church in Ephesus had “forsaken their first love” that they once had.

Greg Laurie referred to this passage in his book, Revelation—a Book of Promises by saying that:

“It may mean that their devotion had turned to duty. They had motion, but they had lost their emotion. They had substituted labor for love, work for worship, perspiration for inspiration, and the joy of walking with Jesus... These Ephesian believers had been so busy maintaining their separation from the world that they were neglecting their adoration of the Savior.”

Then the Lord gives a warning to the church in Ephesus at the end of the verse, and the same warning applies to our churches and to all of us. When Jesus looks into the heart of a church and sees how far they have fallen from their first love, He says I am giving you one more chance to repent. If you do not, I will come and remove your lampstand from its place among the churches.

In verse 6, the Lord gives one more commendation to the discerning Ephesian believers for hating the practices of the Nicolaitans which He also hated. You might ask, “Who were the Nicolaitans?” According to Laurie, their founder was Nicolas who apparently fell away from the faith, became apostate, and began to lead people astray. As a result, a movement grew up around him, and these followers of Nicolas became known as Nicolaitans whose basic philosophy was that you can engage in sin, live pretty much as you please and still be a Christian. “After all,” this philosophy says, “God will understand. Your sins are forgiven and your position in Christ is secure.”

The biblical response to that view comes from Romans 6:1-2 (NLT) which says:

“Well then, should we keep on sinning so that God can show us more and more of his wonderful grace? Of course not! Since we have died to sin, how can we continue to live in it?”

Jesus concludes this letter with a promise. To Ephesus, He says, *“To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.”*

I love the interpretation of this promise given to us by Paul Ellis in his book Letters from Jesus:

“Jesus is talking about Himself, for He is the Tree of Life in the Paradise of God. He is our refuge and the fortress of our salvation. He is our resting place and our longing fulfilled.”

Smyrna

Our next stop along the postal route is the city of Smyrna. Smyrna was the second largest and one of the most beautiful cities in Provincial Asia and it is the only city of the seven mentioned in chapters 2 and 3 of Revelation that is still in existence today. After Smyrna was captured, destroyed, and rebuilt, it became the “glory of Asia.” The city is alive today in Turkey, but its name has changed to Izmir meaning the Pearl of the Aegean.

Smyrna was a tough place to be a Christian. It, like Ephesus, was a center of paganism and false worship. The church struggled against two hostile forces--a Jewish population strongly opposed to Christianity, and a non-Jewish population that was loyal to Rome (See the NIV Life

and Study Bible commentary). It was also renowned for its worship of Caesar. Instead of saying, “Caesar is Lord,” believers in Smyrna would say, “Jesus is Lord” which was an offensive countercultural message in that city. Once the locals discovered that one was a believer, they would no longer do business with that person and they would report him/her to the authorities. (This sounds a bit like Gestapo action against the Jews in Germany, right?) The believers in Smyrna suffered greatly for their faith. They faced persecution which included poverty, imprisonment, torture, and death.

As we read the letter to Smyrna in Revelation 2:8-11, we see the encouraging words of our Lord to those who are going through suffering:

“And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write,

These things says the First and the Last who was dead, and came to life: ‘I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich); and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.’ ”

(Revelation 2:8-10 ESV)

As our Lord addresses the congregation in Smyrna, He provides a picture of Himself as the one who conquered the grave. He is their hope for eternal life and He will raise them up.

This is the shortest of the seven messages Jesus gave to these churches. It is interesting to note that Jesus had no critical words for them. Instead, He extends comfort and support to strengthen this suffering church.

In Revelation 2:9, Jesus tells the believers He knows about their suffering and poverty, but He also tells them they are rich. While the Smyrnaeans were poor in the eyes of the world, they were rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom. James 2:5 tells us:

“Listen, my beloved brethren: did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which he promised to those who love him?”

If the believers in Smyrna remain faithful to the point of death, Jesus promises He will give them the crown of life.

This letter contains two simple commands in Revelation 2:10. The first one is “do not be afraid because of your suffering.” The second one is that believers should remain faithful even if they are facing death because they will be rewarded.

The message to these believers ends in Revelation 2:11. The Lord Jesus Christ promises: *“Whoever is victorious will not be harmed by the second death.* “Our Lord is encouraging the Smyrnaeans to hold on as this test is for a short time and soon they will meet face to face.

Pergamum

As we leave Smyrna and continue our journey on our imagined

postal route, we come to Pergamum which was the capital and cultural center of Asia. The city was built on a rocky hill with a view of the Mediterranean. It was renowned for its magnificent library and a huge, throne-shaped altar dedicated to Zeus which was also regarded as one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.

Let's now turn our attention to the message to the church in Pergamum and some insights regarding Revelation 2:12-17:

"To the angel of the church of Pergamum write:

These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. I know where you live—where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, not even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city—where Satan lives." (Revelation 2:12-13)

In the first chapter of Revelation, we were introduced to Jesus who was ready to execute judgment with a two-edged sword coming out of His mouth. That two-edged sword represents the Word of God (Revelation 1:16). In the letter to the angel of the church in Pergamum, our Lord identifies Himself by these same words. Hebrews 4:12-13 describes this sword as the Word of God, so sharp, that it penetrates down deep into our innermost thoughts and desires and exposes us for what we really are.

In verse 13, Jesus spoke of Pergamum as the "city where Satan has his throne" (NLT). Jesus knew these believers were living in a dark place where people bowed down to worship Caesar and were trying to hold on to their faith.

Jesus commended them for holding fast to His name and not denying their faith even when Antipas, who was His faithful martyr, was killed because he refused to say “Caesar is Lord” resulting in a terrible death.

So, He also commended them for standing firm in their faith, but Jesus still had words of warning.

“Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: There are some among you who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin so that they ate food sacrificed to idols and committed sexual immorality. Likewise, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.”

(Revelation 2:12-16)

Despite these believers’ commitment to Christ, they were not faultless. Corrective action was required because some believers compromised their faith.

In Revelation 2:14, the church was chastised because some tolerated those, who like Balaam, lead people away from God. Ron Rhodes in his book 40 Days Through Revelation explained that in Old Testament times, Balaam had been hired by Balak, the King of Moab, to lure the hearts of the Israelites away from the Lord God by having Moabite women seduce Israelite men into intermarriage. The Israelites succumbed to fornication and idolatrous feasts. (Numbers 22—25:31)

Jesus identified yet another danger area for the Pergamum

fellowship. As in Ephesus, the Christians in Pergamum who were open to the false teachings of the Nicolaitans were called to repent.

Verse 17 calls the church to obedience, but the verse continues with Jesus' promise that the one who remains faithful, will be given "hidden manna."

Rhodes explained:

"Just as manna sustained the Hebrews during the wilderness sojourn, so Christ Himself, the bread of life, sustains believers. Believers who refused to eat food sacrificed to idols would enjoy a much better banquet in heaven—the hidden manna, Jesus Christ Himself."

The verse concludes, by saying the one who is victorious will also receive "*a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it.*" Rhodes offers two viable interpretations of the significance of the white stone. First, winning athletes in biblical times were given white stones that served as admission passes to a winners' celebration. The faithful believer's white stone may point to admittance into the ultimate winners' celebration: eternal life in the presence of our Lord.

He also offers the explanation that judges in Bible times indicated defendants' innocence by placing a white stone in a vessel. Perhaps the white stone represents the believer's assurance of being acquitted before God (see Romans 8:1).

Verse 17 concludes the letter with the reference to a new name that will be written on the white stone. Rhodes offers this possible

reason for these words. In the Old Testament, the high priest wore twelve stones on his breastplate that were inscribed with the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. A new name on a stone may point to believers being included with God's chosen people.

Thyatira

The last stop on our imagined postal route for today is Thyatira. The city was a thriving commercial center and had been under Roman rule for centuries.

"Here are the words of our Lord written to the church of Thyatira:

To the angel of the church in Thyatira write:

These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze. I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first."

(Revelation 2:18-19)

In verse 18, we receive a significant introduction and a glorious picture of our Lord. Jesus refers to himself as the Son of God. We've met Jesus with the lamps and Jesus with a sword, but this is *Jesus as God*. He's rolled back the heavens to reveal His most exalted name. His eyes are like blazing fire. They search hearts and minds. Nothing is hidden from His sight (Hebrews 4:13). And the bronze feet? These are the glorious feet under which all things have been placed (1 Cor. 15:27). These are the feet of Him who tramples upon His enemies (Ps. 60:12).

In verse 19, Jesus continues to declare that He is aware of all the good things that characterize members of this church and even takes note that the Thyatirans were growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus and becoming increasingly fruitful according to Paul Ellis in his book Letters from Jesus.

But in Revelation 2:20-23, Jesus tells us what He had against this church. Despite the love, faith, and patient endurance these believers had, they were nevertheless in need of corrective action. The offense? Jesus shares that some tolerate “that woman Jezebel.” He hated her deeds because she was sabotaging His efforts to save the lost. By promoting sexual immorality, she was making it difficult for people to receive and respond to the authentic love of our Father. Because she refused to repent, she would receive grave consequences.

In verses 24-29, Jesus stated He would not lay any other burdens on the members of this church so as not to make their already difficult lives more difficult. He urged these believers to continue to resist evil until His Second Coming, at which time He will reward them for their faithfulness.

Here are some closing words in verse 28, “I will also give them the morning star.” According to the NIV Life Application and Study Bible commentary:

“Christ is called the morning star. A morning star appears just before dawn, when the night is coldest and darkest. When the world is at its bleakest point, Christ will burst onto the scene exposing evil with his light of truth and bringing his promised reward.”

Application

These letters to the early church are so personal and relevant and they have much to teach us today. They are packed with wisdom, revelation, and truth. After spending some time with these letters, I have developed a strong affection for the Christians who lived under the shadow of giant idols and pagan altars where people were forced to bow down to worship ungodly leaders, but remained faithful to our Lord and Savior. I am in awe of the words Jesus used as He revealed Himself to them in truth and in love. This study left me with invaluable lessons and a stronger faith. Here are three truths to which I will cling.

1. The Ephesian letter is a reminder to us that we must not leave our first love. We might be a hard-working bunch of believers, but we need to serve the Lord for the right reasons...not substitute labor for love, work for worship, perspiration for inspiration, or finding joy in walking with Jesus. It can happen. But if we lose that first love, Jesus shows us the way back. Let's put Revelation 2:5 into practice:

“Remember from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works.”

- We are to remember how much Jesus loves us and His matchless demonstration of love for us on the cross.
- We are to repent by the renewing of our minds and seeing God as our Savior and dearest friend.
- We are to rest as Psalm 23 reminds us. The Good Shepherd doesn't say come and perform. He wants you to find rest. When

we yield to His gentle hand and lie down at rest in His presence, His goodness and grace catch up with us and we are blessed.

2. The letters to Pergamum and Thyatira tell us to continue in love, faith, and service and that we must hold tightly to our Christian faith and never engage in compromise. The philosophy of compromise endangered the churches of Pergamum and Thyatira and it endangers our churches and us as individuals today. Sometimes we have to face the difficult choices: Do we become all things to all men or do we take a stand? Do we join in or remain apart? The Word of God is our guideline and protection against compromise with this fallen world.

As overcomers, we need to rejoice in the new identity that God has given us. Instead of eating the junk food of earth, let's feast on the heavenly manna.

3. And finally, we come to the lesson we learn from the church in Smyrna which is probably my biggest challenge. Let us hold tight to Revelation 2:10 — “Do not be afraid about what you are to suffer... Be faithful even to the point of death and I will give you the crown of life.” Suffering and death may be inevitable, but fear is a choice. When we see Jesus who was dead but has come to life, our faith rises and our fear diminishes. We need to fix our eyes on Jesus and know, without a shadow of a doubt, that He will never leave us or forsake us even when we are faced with struggles, suffering and death. We need to accept this invitation to faith and remember the heavenly reward that awaits us.