

Blessed Are Those: A Journey Through Revelation – Part 3

The Seven Churches: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum – Rev. 2:1-17

Crosspoint – Dave Spooner – Jan. 19th, 2025

Intro:

- Last week we saw a glorious image of Christ that established who He is. Jesus explained that the seven stars in His right hand are the seven angels of the seven churches and that the seven lampstands are the seven churches.
- In chapter two He now addresses these angels and these churches one by one. Today we will look at the messages to the first three churches. Please turn in your Bible to Rev. 2:1 (1062). Before we jump into the passage, there are a number of things that I want to ask and point out.
- First, why seven churches? Darrel Johnson helpfully points out in his book *Discipleship on the Edge*:

Why seven? Because for John, as well as for most of the ancient world, seven is the number of completeness. “Seven Spirits of God” (1:5) is John’s way of saying the complete presence and work of the Holy Spirit. “Seven churches” is a way of saying “the complete church.” In addressing these seven particular churches Jesus is addressing all the churches. It turns out that the seven churches of Asia embody every major issue with which the church has struggled in every age in every cultural setting (p. 51).

I would not say that these seven churches are a progression of the church during the church age, but these are areas that people and churches have struggled with during the whole period of the church age, including today.

- Second, why this order? The order of churches, starting with Ephesus and ending with Laodicea, is the literal “mail route” of how this letter would have traveled. The letter was meant to be read by all the churches everywhere, not just these seven. (There were other churches established at that time in places like Philippi, Corinth, Thessalonica, Rome, Jerusalem, etc. that were not mentioned, along with many other churches in various cities.)
- Third, why are these letters addressed to angels? You will notice that each of these letters is addressed “To the angel of the church in . . .” What are we to make of this? There are three primary options. First, these are literal angels. Second, to the human messenger of God’s word in a church, angel means “messenger,” or third, to the “spirit” or “ethos” of a church, their culture, or general characteristics.
- I think the answer that makes the most sense is that these are literal angels. I say this because in the rest of the book of Revelation, every time the word “angel” is mentioned, it is referring to literal angels, and it makes sense that this is here as well. Also, in the book of Revelation, we see that there are angels who have responsibility over things, for example the angels who hold the four winds (7:2), the angel of the abyss (9:11), the angel in charge of the fire on the altar (14:18), the angel of the waters (16:5). And also in the book of Daniel we learn that God has assigned “guardian angels” over nations and people groups (10:13, 20, etc.). So, it does make sense that there would be angels assigned to local congregations as well.
- Also, nowhere in the Bible are people called “angels” or angels called “people.” These are two separate classes of created beings. So, the “angel” or messenger to the churches would not be human. Also, in the NT, leadership for a local body of believers is always in the plural form, “elders, shepherds, overseers,” and never singular.
- It does not make sense to address the “spirit” of the church directly because the spirit of a church is the product of the church, not the source of it, and God directly communicates to the

cause of the thing. The people of the church make up the church, and these letters are addressed to the people of the church, always in the plural form. So, in considering all of this, my conclusion is that apparently, there are literal angles that are responsible for the local church to ensure that God's message is communicated to them.

- Fourth, another thing to notice is that Jesus's message to every one of the churches starts out by highlighting a specific aspect of Jesus's character which directly addresses the situation in each individual church. Like to Pergamum – “these are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword,” or to Thyatira – “these are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze.”
- Fifth, in each one of the messages to the churches, there is an emphasis on what Jesus “knows,” which tells us He knows exactly what is happening in each one of us and what is happening within the corporate body of individual churches. Everything that He says is communicated on the truth and reality of what is. These are things that He “knows,” and what He “knows” is what is. Like X-ray vision, or like someone who has been watching and listening very closely, whether they realized it or not. Some of what he sees is commendable; other things are deadly faults or dangers.
- Sixth, in each message to the churches, the phrase “whoever has ears” is repeated to each one, meaning that not everyone will receive and “hear” these messages. So, we have to ask ourselves, as Nancy Guthrie, in her book *Blessed*, points out:

Do we have ears to hear what Jesus has to say to us? Are we open to seeing ourselves as he sees us? Or will we deflect, defend, or dismiss what he has to say? Will we sit in the room with our fellow believers inwardly pointing a finger at others who really need to hear what Jesus has to say while assuming that we are doing just fine? Or will we do what he calls us to do even though it will be costly, humbling, and hard? (P. 62)

- We need to evaluate how we are doing collectively as a congregation and individually as children of God. I pray that God will help us in this. I pray that we, as individuals and as a church, will hear what God is speaking to us. God, give us ears to hear what You are speaking. Do Your work in us and among us.
- Seventh, each one of these churches is given a reward to those who “are victorious” or “overcome.” Every person and every church have an “OTO,” an “opportunity to overcome,” which tragically means that not everyone will do so. We must carefully be on guard and examine ourselves. However, to those who indeed overcome these difficulties and obstacles, there will always be a reward, and the eternal nature of the reward always far outweighs the temporary difficulty of the trial.
- Okay, another super long introduction to this section, but I think it is necessary to help us understand what is being communicated in these messages to the seven churches. Now, we are going to jump into the text, and I have one primary takeaway or “action point” from each church. I hope you spend much more time on these than we have together this morning. Read them slowly for yourself, asking God to give you ears to hear.

Reignite your first love

Rev 2:1-7 NIV

“To the angel of the church in Ephesus write:

These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands. 2 I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. 3 You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.

4 Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first. 5 Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. 6 But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

7 Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. 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.

- Jesus, who has the angels in His hand and walks among His churches, knows all the good that has been done. These people living in Ephesus have good deeds; they are hard workers, and they have persevered in them. They don't tolerate wicked people. They know their Bible and keep away from anyone who teaches differently. And they "hate" false teaching and what comes from it. They have endured hardships for His name and have not grown weary in so doing. These are some good, hearty, solid Christian folks who have good and commendable attributes, and these are things that we should strive towards.
- However, with all of the good that is happening in this place, there is one very serious and perhaps fatal flaw: that they have "forsaken the love" that they had at first. It is not that they didn't ever love Him, but over time, their "doing" for Jesus extinguished their love for Jesus.
- This is the stuff of 1 Cor. 13, where the Apostle Paul warns us, **"If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. 3 If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing"** (1 Cor 13:1-3, NIV).
- Christ's prescription for the disease of the heart is this: *Remember* (consider how far you have fallen), *Repent* (repent of falling out of love), and *Return* (to do the things that you did at first). In the doing of those things, the love in your heart will be reignited. (It works this way in human relationships as well.)
- The consequences of non-compliance are of the utmost importance. If they don't repent and do what He tells them, their witness as a church will go out. They will cease being a "light" in the darkness. Their "lampstand" will be removed, and Christ will no longer walk among them. This is when the darkness of duty extinguishes the light of love. This is the most serious of consequences.
- We must examine our hearts to see not what we do but the reasons and motivations of why we do it. May God fill our hearts with overflowing, abundant love for Him, and may our doing be a reflection of our being in love with Him. For love is what matters most, both now and in eternity.
- Those who do overcome will have the right to live forever in the paradise of God. What makes it paradise is not the place but the people who dwell in love there with their loving King.

Faithfully endure suffering

Rev 2:8-11 NIV

“To the angel of the church in Smyrna write:

These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. 9 I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich! I know about the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. 10 Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor’s crown.

11 Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who is victorious will not be hurt at all by the second death.

- This is a church that is suffering, and they are known by the one who has the first word and the last word, who sets the boundaries. He is also the one who has suffered, and He also died. But that end was not THE END. He came to life again! He is with us in our suffering, and we will be with Him in new life.
- Now, you would think that because Jesus knows about these afflictions, poverty, slandering, suffering, imprisonments, persecutions, and deaths, that He would put an end to it, right now. But He does not say that. What He tells them is not to be afraid and to be faithful, even unto death. So why does He not stop these things from happening? Because God uses the events of this world as evidence for His just judgment to come. Evil people will have evidence of their evil, and good people will have evidence of their good.
- There are many scriptures that support this, including 1 Peter 1:3-9 where testing and trials come to prove the “genuineness of your faith.” Second Thessalonians 1:3-12 describes the believer’s “steadfastness and faith” in all their persecutions and afflictions and the “evidence of the righteous judgment of God.” In Matthew 7:15-20 Jesus taught that you will recognize people “by their fruits.” And Romans 2:6-11 states:

Rom 2:6-11 ESV

He will render to each one according to his works: 7 to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; 8 but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. 9 There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, 10 but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. 11 For God shows no partiality.

- Now, the good news for this church and those who are suffering is that this time is limited and set. It will not go on forever. It will happen for “ten days.” Darrel Johnson says, “In that day the number ten stood for human completion: five fingers on each hand, makes ten; five toes on each foot, makes ten. Ten days of suffering means a complete trial” (p. 72). Jesus is ultimately in control, and He sets the beginning and the end. Even in trial, hardship, and poverty, and slandering, and persecution, we are not to be afraid and are to be faithful to Him, even unto death.
- The way we overcome or are “victorious” is to remain faithful to Christ within all these things. The reward is that Christ will give you life, and you will not be hurt by the second death, which

is the lake of fire. The truth is that those who are born once, die twice, but those who are born twice, die once.

- We will consider one more church this morning, the church in Pergamum, where they are challenged to oppose false teaching.

Oppose false teaching

Rev 2:12-17 NIV

“To the angel of the church in Pergamum write:

These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. 13 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.

14 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. 15 Likewise, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. 16 Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.

17 Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give that person a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it.

- The characteristic of Christ that is highlighted in this introduction to this church is that these are the words of Him who has a “sharp, double-edged sword.” This sword, if you remember was coming out of His mouth. This signifies that He speaks and is the word of God.
- The One who is the word of God knows where we live. He knows the difficulties that are unique to our location and situation. In the case of the people of Pergamum, they were in a city not just where there was supernatural demonic activity, but where Satan lived. Even in this place, they had remained true to His name, and they did not renounce their faith under the threat of death.
- Even with the strength of their faith, within the church, there were people who held to the false teaching of Balaam and the Nicolaitans. We don’t know much about the Nicolaitans, but Bible scholars tie them in with the teaching of Balaam, which we do know about. His story is recorded in Numbers 22-25.
- Balaam was basically a “prophet for hire” who was paid to bless or curse people. He did actually hear from the Lord, and He had power. In the case of Numbers 22-25, he was hired by Balak, the king of Moab, to curse the Israelites, but God did not allow Balaam to curse them, only bless them.
- So when this overt cursing did not work, Balaam and Balak employed a different tactic by enticing the Israelites to compromise the word of God, to accept and worship other gods, and to justify the unlawful fulfillment of their sexual desires. This tragically has become commonplace in liberal churches in our day that say that it is okay to worship gods other than the God of the Bible. They believe you can mix and match them together, and that it is okay for

you to do with your body whatever you want, whenever you want, with whomever you want without any consequences and still be in Christ.

- There are “prophets” and “pastors” who teach these things and “bless” these things, and they do so not because the Bible teaches it, but because it is profitable to do so. Jude and Peter (2 Peter 2:1-22) have the harshest words for these people, describing them saying **“These people are springs without water and mists driven by a storm. Blackest darkness is reserved for them. 18 For they mouth empty, boastful words and, by appealing to the lustful desires of the flesh, they entice people who are just escaping from those who live in error” (2 Peter 2:17-18 NIV).**
- There were people who were part of the church of Pergamum who believed in these things and followed them. And Jesus’s word to them is to “repent,” which means to turn away from, have nothing to do with, oppose these things. If they did not do so, Jesus Himself would fight against them with the Word of God. Don’t think that can’t happen here! Don’t think we’re too sharp to be deceived. These are dangerous and deceptive teachings.
- Those who resist these false teachings and overcome them are victorious. They are the ones who will receive the “hidden manna” and a white stone with a new name written on it. Jesus is the “bread of life,” and He will be given to those who overcome. He is the one who will sustain us in the New Kingdom. The white stone with a new name signifies acquittal and victory. The new name signifies the unique attention that Christ gives to every one of His people; it’s a uniquely personal relationship. He knows the true name of every believer.

Conclusion

- I hope that you have ears to hear what the Lord is speaking to you and to all of us. Perhaps you need to reignite your first love, or remain faithful while enduring suffering, or repent from holding to non-biblical teaching and practice. Ask God about these things. I encourage you to spend more time in these passages and in prayer. Meditate upon these things, what you see about Christ in them, and what this means for you and your life. We do serve a great and glorious King who knows all things, holds all power, and will reign forevermore. He is faithful and true, and we can trust Him, both now and for all eternity.

Questions for Growth Groups

1. The church in Ephesus was commended for its hard work, perseverance, and commitment to sound doctrine, yet they had forsaken their first love. What do you think it means to “forsake your first love,” and how can we guard against this in our own spiritual lives?
2. Jesus calls the Ephesians to remember, repent, and return to the things they did at first. What are some practical ways we can rekindle our love for Christ when we sense it growing cold?
3. What do you think it means that Jesus will “remove your lampstand from its place” if the church does not repent? How does this warning apply to churches today?
4. The church in Smyrna was experiencing suffering and persecution, yet Jesus encouraged them to remain faithful, even to the point of death. How does Jesus’s own suffering and resurrection provide comfort and motivation for believers facing trials today?
5. Why do you think God allows suffering and persecution to continue for His people rather than immediately removing it? How have you seen God use suffering to strengthen faith?
6. Jesus promises that those who remain faithful will not be hurt by the second death (eternal separation from God). How does this promise shape our perspective on hardships and struggles in this life?
7. The church in Pergamum was praised for holding onto their faith in a difficult environment, yet some had embraced false teachings. What are some false teachings that the modern church is tempted to accept, and how can we discern and oppose them in a way that honors Christ?