

Letters to Seven Churches

We turn today to the seven letters written to the seven churches of Asia Minor. As I mentioned last week, each of the letters follows a formula. There is an address, "To the angel of the church of ... write", followed by, "these are the words of ..." followed by a description of Jesus, and then "I know" followed by a description of good things and bad things that Jesus knows about that church. He has something good to say about every church on the list except for the last one, Laodicea, and something bad to say about all but two churches, Smyrna and Philadelphia. Then comes a word of exhortation or encouragement, something for the people to do, then the call to pay close attention, "The person who is willing to hear should listen to what the Spirit is saying" and finally a call to overcome and a promise that is made to each one who is victorious.

Again, the number 7 makes an appearance as there are seven items in each of these letters. As we saw last week, the number seven is a number of completeness, which means that it can represent the whole church or the full counsel of God to His people. These are letters that contain more than just a bit of timely advice for a few folks living in the western part of Asia Minor. They speak to believers all over the ancient world who are experiencing opposition, persecution, from the Empire of Rome.

Despite this general flavor of the letters to the churches, there is also some very specific counsel and some telling local references in each one. We'll see this as we go along, so let's get started with the address to Ephesus:

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. I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for My name and have not grown weary. Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which 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. But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the Paradise of God. (2:1-7)

In Ephesus was the great temple of Artemis, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Within the temple grounds was a large garden and at the heart of the garden was a sacred tree -- Lord of the Rings fans can think of the "white tree" of Gondor. The area around the tree was a religious shrine, but it was also a place of asylum, where a criminal, if he was able to get there, would be granted freedom from capture and prosecution. And Jesus reminds the Christians of Ephesus that God has a tree of life right at the heart of His paradise, His beautiful garden. And this tree is accessible, not to the person who can run fast, but to the person whose heart is

repentant, who is sorry for sin. The gift is life, the kind of life God created us for in the first place.

Before we get there, though, we see that Jesus wants to let the believers know that He is among them, watching their deeds. “These are the words of Him who walks among the seven golden lampstands (the seven churches). I know your deeds.” Jesus is walking among His believers and He sees what’s going on with them. He is close, certainly much closer than the Emperor of Rome, and He has His eye on His people at all times. And He has some strong words of affirmation for their hard work, their perseverance and their discernment and rejection of people who have evil intentions for the church. These are faithful, enduring people who are intent on doing the right thing ... but that focus leaves them lacking in one crucial area: “You have forsaken your first love”. The “first love” would seem to indicate that their hearts had grown cold towards Jesus, but then the Lord says, “Repent and do the things you did at first.” Love involves doing, and the Christians were upsetting the ancient world by loving with actions, by taking in orphans, by caring for widows, by showing hospitality to strangers, by loving sacrificially those who were in the greatest need. Had they stopped doing these things in Ephesus and chosen instead to focus on keeping their doctrines sound? It seems likely.

Without love, the whole Christian enterprise falls apart. It becomes, in Paul’s words, a “resounding gong or a clanging cymbal”, a hollow expression of gifts and powerful ministry that lacks its heart. This is so serious that Jesus warns the Ephesians, “If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand.” Ephesus remained an important church, even hosting one of the church councils in the fifth century, but, since the rise of Islam, there is no longer a Christian church in Ephesus. The lampstand is gone from what was, in John’s day, a city of a quarter million people, tens of thousands of whom were Christians - but whose love, whose works inspired by love, had been abandoned.

The greeting to the angel of the church in Smyrna comes from Him who is the First and the Last, who died and who came to life again. This is an interesting picture, because Smyrna as a city had once been destroyed and then rebuilt. Jesus has nothing to criticize here, but says,

“I know your afflictions and your poverty -- yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. 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 a crown of life. (2:9-10)

Smyrna was thought of as a city with a crown, which had something to do with the way its architecture featured the cliff which loomed behind it. This group of Jesus-followers had experienced persecution from the Jewish synagogue, perhaps to the point of being excluded from jobs (“I know your afflictions and your poverty”). Jesus warns that their suffering will get worse and will last for an extended time. The “ten days” could be years or even longer - ten being one of the numbers of completion, it

should be understood as an extended period. While physical death may await some of the believers there, Jesus promises that their faithful endurance of this suffering will mean that they will have no fear at all of the second death, the death that follows judgment for those who reject Jesus.

The structure of these letters follows a pattern. The two churches which are at greatest risk are the first and the last of the churches mentioned. The two that receive no correction from Jesus are the second and second last. The ones that fall in between those extremes are the ones that fall in the middle of these letters.

The angel of the church in Pergamum receives a message from “Him who has the sharp, double-edged sword.” In the heart of this city there was a very high hill and on the hill was an acropolis which housed many fine temples which were visible, not just from the city below, but for many miles around. This was probably a source of great pride for the citizens, but Jesus called it the place where Satan has his throne.

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, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city - where Satan lives.

The good news is that the people of Pergamum have not denied their Lord. The bad news is that many of them are not willing to stand out, to be obviously different than the masses of people who would be celebrating in the pagan worship at the temples up the hill. They are participating in the feasts of food offered to idols and in sexual immorality; in other words, participating fully in the culture around them, a culture which is swallowing up their identity as followers of Jesus. The threats are both the magistrates who can charge them with failure to honor Caesar, and the pressure of the culture and the rationalization, “But everybody’s doing it!”

Jesus’ reply is to remind them that He is the sword-bearer, that His sword is more powerful than that of the local magistrate, that the sword He carries will cut through the two-faced religion that tries to please everybody.

To the overcomers in Pergamum, two things: one is the promise of “hidden manna” which we can only guess at the meaning of. There is some secret “food” whether physical or spiritual, that Jesus will supply His faithful with when they are being ostracized, pushed out of the community of pagan worshipers because of their faith in Christ. The second thing promised is a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it. This is a striking image for the city of Pergamum where many of the buildings were made of a local black stone and then the name placed on the building would be inscribed on white marble. This is evidently a promise of a deep and true intimacy with Jesus in which His personal love for each individual is communicated in a unique way.

The fourth letter is written to the angel of the church of Thyatira. Jesus identifies Himself as the one whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze. This language is used to address a city known for its smelting work in copper and bronze. The fire in Jesus’ eyes and the burnished bronze look of His feet would

resonate with the workers of Thyatira.

The local deity in Thyatira was Apollo Tyrinnaeus, the patron god of the bronze trade. He would appear on local coins along with the image of Caesar, the so-called “son of God”. So Jesus introduces Himself as “the Son of God whose eyes are blazing like fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze.” (2:18)

The good things Jesus commends the believers for are their love and faith, their service and perseverance and their growth - “you are now doing more than you did at first”. But there is a problem. They tolerate a woman who calls herself a prophetess - Jesus calls her “Jezebel”, a reference to the wife of Ahab, king of Israel in the time of Elijah the prophet, who inspired a lot of Baal-worship and other evils during the time of Ahab’s reign. In Thyatira, this woman is teaching that it’s okay to participate fully in the culture of the city, that the freedom we have in Christ allows us to join in the feasts at the shrines and engage in cult prostitution there. She even seems to suggest that the Christian can become involved in the occult without fear, as Jesus refers to some who have learned “Satan’s so-called deep secrets”. While He promises judgment to those who follow her advice, He also urges those who have rejected her counsel to hold on to what they have until Jesus Himself returns. To the faithful He promises to give the “morning star”, which later in this book refers to Jesus Himself, but which is also a symbol of a new day, the dawning of new hope, free from the evil of the world that surrounds the Christian and presses us to conform.

Chapter 3 begins with the letter to the angel of the church in Sardis. They are greeted by the One who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. The good news for them is that they have a few people who have not soiled their clothes and who will, therefore, walk with Jesus, dressed in white, because they are worthy. The bad news is that they have a reputation for being alive, but it’s not based in reality; they are dead and need to wake up! Jesus says that their deeds are not complete in the sight of God.

600 years earlier, Sardis had felt secure, untroubled by the various armies that attacked her. The city sat on a steep hill and had been unassailable to all who had tried to conquer. Until the Persian King Cyrus attacked in 546 BC and someone scaled the cliffs and broke into the city. The reputation of being unbeatable was shattered, and now the Lord of the Church is saying that the reputation of being alive and vibrant is also untrue. The believers in Sardis need to wake up to this reality, to repent and make changes. It’s not clear what the specific challenges are, but Jesus warns that He will come in a sneak attack, like a thief, at a time when He is least expected, just as had happened to Sardis six centuries earlier.

To the overcomers, the promise is that their names will never be blotted out of the book of life. They will be dressed in white, like people who are part of a triumphal procession, and will share in Jesus’ victory over death.

The next letter is to Philadelphia and comes from “Him who is holy and true, who

holds the key of David. What He opens no one can shut, and what He shuts no one can open.” Jesus says simply that He knows their deeds and that He has placed before them an open door that no one can shut. He recognizes that they are a small group, weak in the eyes of the world, but full of possibility because of the presence of Jesus with them.

It seems that this church, like the one in Smyrna, has faced strong opposition from the Jewish community in the city - a community which would have been much larger and more influential than the small group of Jesus-followers. Because of the faithfulness of the Christians, Jesus says He will make these false Jews come and bow at the feet of His followers and acknowledge that He has loved them.

Jesus urges them to stay strong, to hold on to what they have, and then promises to the overcomers that they will be made pillars in the temple of God. In a city well known for its frequent earthquakes and the destruction that went with them, the idea of being a living pillar in the enduring temple of God must have been a comfort. There are no words of correction or rebuke to this small band of believers, just a series of promises and mercies from the Lord because of their enduring patience.

The final message is to the church of Laodicea and this one is in stark contrast to Philadelphia. Whereas the church we just looked at had no faults addressed, this church has no virtues praised. Jesus offers His words as those of the “Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God’s creation”, and then launches in with the rebuke:

I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm -- neither cold nor hot -- I am about to spit you out of My mouth. You say, “I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.” But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. (3:15-17)

He goes on from there to urge them to repent, to buy from Him gold that has been refined in the fire, so that they can be really rich, spiritually rich, dressed in white robes and having a salve for the eyes that could truly help them see.

Laodicea was known for several things that are illustrated in this passage. One was that they were the only city that refused help from the empire in rebuilding the city after a devastating earthquake in 61 A.D. Laodicea was a wealthy town and was proudly self-sufficient -- this attitude had apparently rubbed off on the Christian community. One of the reasons for its wealth was the popularity of some local manufactures, namely an eye salve used by the medical school there where people came to learn ophthalmology, or how to be an eye doctor. Also, the local farmers had developed a breed of black sheep and the clothing made from their black wool had become very popular in the region. But Laodicea was also known for its very poor water supply. The water from the hot springs of Hieropolis, 4-5 miles away, was brought to Laodicea in aqueducts, but had lost most of its heat by the time it got there. The cold mountain water from Colosse, 11 miles to the southeast, was also transported to

Laodicea, but it, too, had become lukewarm by the time it arrived. Jesus used all of these local images to describe their situation and their need, urging them to wear white to cover their nakedness and to buy the kind of eye salve that would heal their spiritual blindness.

Despite their wretched condition, Jesus reaffirms His love for them and ends with some beautiful promises to those who repent:

Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in and we will share a meal as friends. (3:20)

And this word to those who overcome, the victorious ones:

To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with Me on My throne, just as I overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne. (3:21)

To those who seem the farthest away from being in a good place and doing the right things, Jesus makes the greatest promises. The words of the Amen, the faithful and true.

This has been a long journey, through seven cities of ancient Asia Minor, but there are some important things for us to draw from these texts.

1. Love is an action word. Jesus affirms churches for what they have done and rebukes other churches for what they have failed to do. He rebukes Ephesus because they have forsaken their first love and then tells them what to do about it: “Repent, and do the things you did at first.” If we love the Lord and we love His church, it will be visible to others. People can see love and they can see through pretense.

2. Perhaps the most obvious application in this section is the 7-times repeated call to be an overcomer, to win your battle. We all have battles to fight, against sin and temptation, against pride or fear or anger or self-pity - the list is endless. We may have to battle major doubts, severe emotional pain, crippling health issues or cruel injustice. Overcomers will hang onto Jesus in the midst of all those trials. They will receive the rewards of their faith and their perseverance -- Jesus promised many great rewards in the Revelation.

3. The third application is simply an observation. The church has always been squeezed by the culture that surrounds it and has always had to resist that pressure if it is to remain faithful to Jesus. The question we need to ask is not, “Does our culture influence us?”, but “How are we being influenced by our culture and what do we need to repent of and change?”

There are specific applications from each church that is addressed, but I want to leave us with these general ones: Make sure that our love is practical, not just a matter of words but of action. Stay strong in the battle against the evil one; be an overcomer, endure to the end. And resist everything that is ungodly that pressures us to conform to the culture of our day, of our place.