

Letters to Four Churches

MJCF May 24, 2020

Revelation 2:1-29

In my last message, we began a series on the book of Revelation. The first chapter was filled with some wild images and symbols, but today's chapter looks a bit different. It contains the first four of seven letters addressed to various churches in first century Asia. Today, this is the western part of Turkey. It's different than present day Asia. Each of the letters talks about different problems the churches are facing, but they also contain strong encouragement, fitting for the general theme of the book of Revelation. It's mainly a book of hope and strength for those who are facing persecution. God is the one ultimately in control.

The problems come when we forget whose we are. We lose our focus on following God. We stop reading God's messages to us in the Bible. We start to focus only on working hard, facing life, on our own. We forget to pray. Maybe prayer begins to feel like it doesn't make much difference. It's at those times that we need revival. And, in order for revival to happen, we need to focus on repentance. We need to change our focus from concerns about ourselves to a focus on remembering that we belong to God. Let's see what we can learn from John's first four letters to the churches of Asia.

The letters are given from Jesus Christ, written for the "angel" of each of the churches, to be told to the people of the churches. As we talked about earlier, in chapter one, the lampstands represent the churches. In talking with his followers, Jesus said, "You are the light of the world..." Jesus has an intimate relationship with his church, and walks among us. Like lampstands, churches are to shine the light of Christ, the one who rules the universe (holding the seven stars).

Looking at the letters to the churches, each one uses a different image of Jesus that had been presented already in the first chapter, and the structure of the letters is similar. After both positive affirmation and challenges to repent in certain areas, each church receives a unique promise, given "to everyone who conquers..." Here, God's faithful people conquer not through violence, but through overcoming suffering and persecution. It takes faith, endurance, and even a readiness to be killed. Those who seem to winning by force and violence are actually the ones who lose. And, those who seem to have been defeated, in the end are actually the winners, (just like Jesus the "Lamb of God" who was slain, rose to life as Lord of all).

Near the end of each letter we have the statement, "Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches." It takes an effort to actually listen and follow what the letters say. We are challenged to repent, to change some areas of our lives. No one is forcing us to take these letters seriously. It's all up to us to listen. These letters are divine words, spoken with the authority of God to first century churches, but they are also messages to us. Do we have "ears to listen?"

As we look more closely at the content of the letters, the challenges and encouragements fit for churches throughout the ages. Ephesus was a large, port city. It was the centre of religion, boasting of a huge temple to the goddess Diana, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Ephesus was the centre for emperor worship, and the centre for pagan magic. So, one challenge of the Christian church was to stay away from false teachings. In this letter, they are praised for their hard work and patient endurance. They have not accepted false prophets and teachings. But, we read that they have abandoned their first love. It's possible that they have lost their love within the church, due to some conflict. Or, they may have lost their original enthusiasm in their faith.

I am reminded of people who first give their lives to Christ and are "on fire" for him. They have so much energy! But then, years later the excitement to share the good news has gone way down. How is the fire of Jesus burning in our hearts? Jesus challenges the church 1st to remember, (who they are, and what God has done for them). They are to repent, (turning from their own ways and returning to God's ways), and then do the works that they had been doing at first (before they lost their energy). We need to regularly examine ourselves and take time for repentance. Next week, we celebrate the 20th anniversary of MJCF. It's a time we can remember all that God has done for us. It's also a time to

remember that we haven't always done well, and there are always areas where we need to repent. True repentance will then be shown in how we live.

On the positive side, the Ephesians are praised because they "hate the works of the Nicolaitans." This shows that they refused to compromise their faith even if it meant they may be persecuted. When are we tempted to compromise our faith? For those who endure the challenges, the reward is a place in God's kingdom, eating from the tree of life. For the Ephesians this was a strong contrast to the common practice of idol worship and eating food offered to idols...

I won't spend as much time on the other churches, but let's move to the church in Smyrna. They were also persecuted because they didn't worship the emperor like those around them. The title for Jesus in this letter is "the first and the last, who was dead and came to life." It's a strong encouragement for people who may actually die because of their faith. Christ, as "the first and the last," has the power of almighty God. He even has power over death. Those who are able to endure would be given "the crown of life," like the ancient wreath of leaves given to athletes who win a competition. We also read they would escape the "second death" which was understood to be the end-time judgement faced after the first, physical, death.

Moving on to the letter to Pergamum, Jesus is described as the one who has a "sharp two-edged sword." The word John uses for sword, here, is always used in a symbolic sense rather than a literal one. Here, it likely means the "Word of God," as in the image of the sword coming from his mouth, seen in chapter one. In Pergamum there were a number of pagan shrines. The Roman judge's bench was located there, and the emperor often went by titles such as "Lord" and "Saviour." Also, the Roman god of healing had the form of a serpent. There was even a shrine to the god, Zeus, with a huge throne built into the hillside. John may have had any of these images in mind when he called Pergamum the place where Satan's throne is. The church is praised for keeping their faith, but some of them were following the teachings of Balaam, and the Nicolaitans. They were compromising their faith through intermarrying with unbelievers and worshipping other gods. This led to sexual immorality. As with other churches, they are called to repent.

Those who overcome would be given "hidden manna" and a "white stone" with "a new name." There are many possibilities as to the meanings of these symbols. I'll just say a little bit here. Manna that God sent to the Israelites in the desert was said to be preserved in a golden pot in the Ark of the Covenant, until the time when the Messiah (the Saviour comes). At that time, people would again receive the gift of manna and eat it together in the new Kingdom of God. So, here the manna it could represent a banquet in heaven. The white stone could be a symbol of innocence. In a court of law, a white stone passed among the jury would symbolize a person's innocence, while a black stone would represent a guilty verdict. There are many, many other possible interpretations, but we don't have time to get into them all. The main meanings of the manna, the stone, and the new name all have to do with receiving God's blessings for those who refuse to compromise their faith.

And finally, the church at Thyatira is to receive "the words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze." (Christ sees all, judges and purifies like fire, and stands firm). The people are praised for their love, faith, service, and endurance. But, they "tolerate that woman Jezebel." Jezebel was King Ahab's wife. She led Israel away from God into idolatry and evil. She became a symbol of all false prophets. Though, her judgement would come. God says, "I am throwing her on a bed..." meaning the bed of sexual immorality will become her sickbed. In the ancient world, people believed sickness to be a form of punishment. Her children being stricken dead fits with the Hebrew belief that children suffer for the sins of their parents.

By the way, an important thing we need to remember here is that these words and images are symbols that give a message understandable to people living in the 1st century. Now, over 2,000 years later, our understandings have changed. We still follow the deep truth given through the Bible. It is still the inspired Word of God. It is still the story of God's relationship with people. But, we now have

new understandings of how the world works. We also have new understandings of what the Bible means for us in today's context. The same message of Revelation, if written to us, today, would have very different symbols and words. But, the message would still be one of encouragement. And, it would still challenge us to not conform to the values of the world, but instead hold fast to our faith in Jesus Christ.

In Thyatira, those who endure to the end would be given "authority over the nations." Jesus often talks about how those who suffer with him will rule with him, later in God's Kingdom. The image of ruling with an iron rod may seem like a violent one, except the image here is one of Christ ruling as a Shepherd. The rod and staff were used to keep sheep safe. As we read in Psalm 23, verse 4, "...your rod and your staff – they comfort me..." The way Christ rules is with love and care. And finally, the "morning star" is likely an image of Christ the light, who breaks through the darkness of evil.

Well, this chapter of Revelation is filled with many images. What is the Spirit of God saying to you? Do any of the challenges to the churches resonate with you? If written today, I believe Jesus would have both positive encouragement for us as well as challenging words. Have we lost our first love, our focus on Christ? Are we facing big challenges in our lives? Are we tempted to compromise our faith? Are we putting up with evil? It takes effort to listen to the Spirit. It takes effort to resist temptation. It takes effort to confess where we fall short. But, Jesus Christ walks among us. As we focus on him, we gain the power to walk in his light. Let's pray.

Almighty God, we confess that we have not always had ears to hear your voice. There are times we've forgotten to think about where we're headed in life. Lead us to repentance. Grant us strength and courage to endure the challenges we face. May we stand firm on the rock that is Christ. Amen.