

To the Seven Churches

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In this world, the things that are important don't change. Sure, some externals are different than they were in Bible times. We travel by car and airplane, not chariot and sailing ship. We keep in touch with distant friends via Facebook, not parchment scroll. However, whether we find them in cars or chariots, people are still people. Our nature is no different than the nature of the people who lived 2000 years ago. We still show the same potential to glorify God and face the same challenges in getting there.

As a result of this, what the Bible says to people who lived 2000 years ago is still relevant to us today. The warnings of the Scripture to first-century churches aren't historical curiosities; they are as timely now as they were before the ink dried on the originals. With this in mind, let's consider the most rapid-fire series of letters to churches in the entire Bible. Let's look at what Revelation says to the seven churches.

Jesus Christ

However, our tour of the seven letters is going to begin with John's description of the One who is sending them: Jesus Christ. After the prelude of Revelation 1, John begins by describing **THE WORKS OF JESUS**. Read with me from Revelation 1:4-6. This is quite a resume, brethren! Each one of these descriptors of our Lord is filled with meaning. First, John describes Him as the faithful witness. This means that Jesus has faithfully represented to us both God's nature and God's will, even though being a faithful witness before Caiaphas and Pilate cost Him His life. Because Jesus witnesses faithfully, we can trust Him.

Second, Jesus is described as the firstborn from the dead. The day will come when every human will rise from the dead. However, Jesus was the first to truly experience that transformation. Unlike Lazarus, Tabitha, and all the others in Scripture who were raised from the dead, Jesus rose never to die again. Finally, John presents Jesus as the ruler of the kings of the earth. All other rulers might think they're in control. Jesus actually is, and the day will come when every other monarch will give allegiance to Him.

Then, John discusses how Jesus feels about us and what He has done as a result. His attitude toward us is one of unfailing love, and because of that love, He has done several things. He has released us from our sins by His blood, which he shed on the cross. He has transferred us from the dominion of darkness into His own kingdom. Finally, He has made us priests by sanctifying us to offer spiritual sacrifices to God. Because of the power and love of Jesus, we are completely different people than we were before.

Next, John describes **THE JUDGMENTS OF JESUS**. Consider Revelation 1:7-8. When we look at this text today, we are tempted to assume that this is a reference only to the final judgment, in which heaven and earth will be destroyed, the saved glorified, and the lost condemned. However, that isn't necessarily so. In Matthew 24, Jesus Himself uses similar language to refer to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. Scripturally speaking, there is not one judgment of God, but many, and times of judgment are often spoken of as *a* coming of the Lord. Having said that, judgment language in Scripture can often be applied to all the judgments of God. So it is here. When Jesus appears, even His worst enemies will repent.

Third, we encounter a **VISION OF JESUS**. Let's read Revelation 1:9-16. First, this tells us more about the setting of Revelation. John is writing from the island of Patmos. Sadly, on the map on the screen behind me, some designer decided to put "Patmos" in black on a dark-blue background, so I know you can't possibly read it, but regardless, inside the yellow circle is where Patmos is. It's an island off the coast of modern-day Turkey in the Aegean Sea. John hears a voice directing him to write a book and send it to seven churches in Asia. Back then, "Asia" wasn't used to refer to a continent. John isn't writing to churches in China or anything like that. Instead, it was a province of the Roman Empire in modern-day western Turkey.

John hears this voice, turns to see who is talking to him, and is confronted with a strange figure who we can tell is the Lord. Here is where the language of Revelation starts getting confusing. John describes Jesus as a man with flaming eyes, feet like molten metal, a voice like the sound of the ocean, and a sword coming out of his mouth. However, we should not allow this to mislead us into believing that Christ actually looks like this. Instead, this describes His reality.

Let me put it like this: How would we describe the color purple to a blind man? Those of us who can see know exactly what purple is. It's . . . purple. However, how do you explain purple to somebody

who's never seen it? You might say that purple is kind of like the way that the air outside feels during a spring evening. Purple is the taste of dark chocolate, purple feels like velvet, and so on. Descriptions like that are simultaneously contradictory, inadequate, and still the best we can manage.

This is why Revelation reads the way it reads. John is trying to describe a spiritual reality to us that we have never experienced and are not equipped to understand. The feel of thick velvet is not the same thing as the color purple, and Jesus does not have a sword coming out of His mouth, but at the same time, it is, and He does. The potential for confusion is only heightened by John's continual employment of Old-Testament language that meant a lot more to first-century Christians than it does to us, because they knew the Old Testament a lot better than we do. Biblical scholars commonly describe this brew-up as "apocalyptic language", and we should remember to understand it not for what it says, but for what it implies.

Finally in Revelation 1, we get to what **SERVING JESUS** is like. Look at Revelation 1:17-20. Whatever it was that John saw, exactly, it terrified the wits out of him. He collapses before the revealed splendor of the Christ. However, the way that Jesus deals with John is telling. He reassures him, gives him a job to do, and explains what he needs to know to do that job. In 2000 years, not a lot has changed.

Before the Lord's Supper, let's ponder this. Culturally speaking, we hear next to nothing about this description of Jesus. Americans don't want to think about the terrifying Lord of Judgment. Instead, they prefer the Christmastime presentation of sweet little harmless Baby Jesus in the manger. Let's avoid that this morning. Let's remember what Jesus did, how He released us from our sins by His blood. However, let's also remember who He is. Baby Jesus is easy to ignore, but we dare not ignore the majestic Son of Man.

The First Four Churches

Now that we've considered Jesus, let's turn our attention to what He has to say to the first four churches in Revelation. First, though, let's briefly examine what this map tells us about the seven churches together. The letters to the seven churches aren't organized thematically. They're organized geographically. A messenger setting out from Patmos would have gone first to Ephesus, then north through Smyrna to Pergamum, then southeast to conclude his journey in Laodicea.

The first stop on this first-century mail route is **EPHESUS**, where the brethren struggle with **FORGETFULNESS**. Let's read Revelation 2:1-7. The Ephesians were doing all kinds of things right, but somewhere along the way, they had lost touch with their original love for God. This should be a warning for us today, particularly for Christians who to human perception are "doing everything right". It's entirely possible for us to faithfully assemble with the saints, live moral lives throughout the week, and even be heavily involved in the work of the church, yet not be pleasing to God. There are many reasons why we might do all of those things, but only one of them is the right reason. All that we do must be motivated by love for Jesus Christ. If it isn't, if we're present and involved because of family connections, or sense of obligation, or force of habit, then somewhere, we've gone astray. Christianity isn't about a church or a list of rules. It's about a Savior, and all that we do must be motivated by our longing for Him.

Second, we encounter the church in **SMYRNA**, which was facing **PERSECUTION**. Its story appears in Revelation 2:8-11. It's often said that two churches of the seven, Smyrna and Philadelphia, were the only two churches to which Jesus writes who didn't have any problems. That's not true or fair. Admittedly, the Christians in Smyrna didn't have any problems in their relationship with Jesus, but they had a serious external problem. They were suffering, they were poor, and in earthly terms, things were about to get a lot worse. We often blithely quote "Be faithful until death" as an instruction applicable to every Christian, but in context, it has a particular and sinister meaning. Some of the Christians in Smyrna were about to be arrested, imprisoned, tortured, and killed. Jesus' promise to them is that if they can hold out under torture for 10 days without renouncing Him, at the end of those 10 days, they will be released from torture by death and receive the crown of eternal life from Him.

That ain't exactly on the same level of hardship as going to church for the next 30 years! First-century Christianity wasn't a religion for wimps, and it isn't a religion for wimps today either. We may never face tests like that, but we will face tests, and if Jesus wasn't interested in excuses from the Smyrnans, He won't be interested in them from us either. Jesus doesn't care about "I turned aside from You because. . ." All He is concerned with is "I turned aside", and if we do, He will count us not faithful, but faithless.

Next on the mail route is **PERGAMUM**, and the Pergamenes have issues with **TOLERANCE**. Revelation 2:12-17 tells the story. To our ears, this sounds like a strange thing to call a problem. After all, if there is any behavior that our society endorses, it is tolerance. In reality, though, whether tolerance is good or bad depends on what we're tolerating. With respect to different races, different tastes, or different personal opinions, tolerance is a great thing. On the other hand, tolerance of evil within the church isn't so great.

Sadly, the latter kind of tolerance was present in the church in Pergamum. Even though they stood strong for the name of Jesus in the face of persecution, even though most members of the church weren't personally engaged in the practice of immorality, they allowed those who were to continue with them. Jesus warns them that if they continue to ignore problems, they're going to have a big problem.

So too, friends, we must recognize that there are things we can't tolerate in our congregation either. When we see other members here engaging in things that are black-letter, explicitly sinful, we can't pretend to ourselves that it's none of our business. We are one body, and that makes it our business. As Paul warns in 1 Corinthians, a little leaven leavens the whole lump, and willful sinners here must either repent or be cast out.

The final stop in Revelation 2 is **THYATIRA**, where the church is saddled with **A FALSE TEACHER**. We encounter her in Revelation 2:18-29. The appellation "Jezebel" tell us a lot about her. The original Jezebel was a strong-willed, persistent leader who happened to be dedicated to the goal of promotion of Baal worship in the northern kingdom of Israel. She led both her husband and the entire kingdom astray. This Thyatiran Jezebel was apparently having a similar and increasing effect on the congregation there. Just like the Pergamene Christians needed to get rid of the more amorphous group of immoral people among them, the Thyatirans needed to get rid of Jezebel. If they didn't, Jesus was going to drop the hammer.

Similarly, we today must remember that no Christian is bigger than God's law. No matter how persuasive a false teacher may be, no matter how much we like them, they cannot be permitted to go on teaching things that are contrary to Scripture. This goes for ordinary Christians. It goes for preachers. It even goes for elders, and yes, we know from Acts 20 that elders can turn aside to false teaching too. We are responsible for defending and proclaiming the truth, even in opposition to one of our own.

The Last Three Churches

Revelation 3 presents us with an additional trio of churches who need to be warned about something. The first of them is **SARDIS**, the infamously **DEAD** church. Jesus pronounces His judgment against them in Revelation 3:1-6. The church in Sardis used to be alive. Among the other churches of Asia, it still had a good reputation. However, Jesus knew better, and they were in danger of being erased as a church.

Brethren, spiritual death is a danger for every congregation, and it is a danger for this one. There is no assembly of the Lord's people so vital, so dedicated to Him, that it cannot be consumed from within by Satan and left as an shell of what it used to be. Sure, some people still show up on Sunday morning. Sure, it's still in one of those church directories. However, if you go there, you won't find any true disciples of Jesus.

This can happen to us as individuals too. We can have a name among the other Christians here as being alive, but inside, still be dead, dead, dead. The only solution, both on a church and an individual level, is growth. As a church, we need to be actively going out and making disciples. We need to be teaching the disciples here to grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord. As individuals, we need to be pressing on, daily giving more of our lives to Jesus, daily becoming more like Him than we've ever been before. This is a demanding course, but if we aren't growing, we're dying, and if we're dying, Sardis is where we will end up.

After Sardis, the messenger trots on to **PHILADELPHIA**, which has problems with **OPPOSITION**. Jesus tells them what they will face in Revelation 3:7-13. Here, we encounter a group we saw in Smyrna but didn't really talk about there: those who claim that they are Jews, but are actually a synagogue of Satan. They've apparently been making life miserable for the Philadelphians. Let's unpack this a little bit. Genetically speaking, at least, those in the synagogue of Satan are Jews. Jesus isn't denying their ethnic heritage. Instead, He is denying their claim that they are still the people of God. Because they rejected their Messiah, God chose a new people for Himself—His church. These Jews may think that they are still serving God, but in opposing God's true people, they are actually serving Satan.

It's obvious that this particular group of Jews is making trouble for the Philadelphian Christians. However, Jesus promises the faithful that He will humble their opponents and spare them from further trial because of their perseverance in serving Him. I see two take-homes here for us. First, any group that

opposes Christ and His church will be humbled and come to nothing, on the Day of Judgment if not before. Second, it is often the case that doing the right-but-hard thing now will spare us a lot of trouble later. Conversely, if we slack off on some spiritual duty we don't want to face, we're generally only storing up problems for ourselves down the road. We need to confront our spiritual challenges, not try to evade them.

Finally, we make our way to **LAODICEA**, where the brethren struggle with **LUKEWARMNESS**. Jesus confronts them in Revelation 3:14-22. What stands out to me about these Christians is that they don't really think that they need Jesus. They've got lots of money, it looks to them like they can take care of themselves, so they treat Jesus like a hobby, not a Savior. They give Him halfhearted service because they don't think that they actually need Him for anything.

In historical terms, every one of us here is wealthy, and I fear that our prosperity too often persuades us that we don't really need Jesus either. Let me put it like this. Let's say that we were stricken with some terrible, fatal disease. Only one man in the world knows the secret to treating this disease. He knows how to compound a pill that will save us for a week. We go to him and ask him what he wants for the pill. He says, "Work for me throughout the week, and if I think you've done enough, I'll give you a pill at week's end."

Brethren, I guarantee you that if I were in that position, I'd do everything I could for the guy. I'd be mowing his lawn. I'd be waxing his car. I'd be washing his dishes. I definitely would NOT be saying to myself "I think I've done enough for him this week." I would NOT be looking for opportunities to slack. I would NOT be putting the other activities in my life ahead of him, because my life depended on him.

That's a pretty transparent illustration, but the funny thing is that we so often don't live in the way it predicts. Our lives do depend on Jesus. He has told us that we need to live for Him. He has not set some minimum of service that we can reach and then coast. Instead, He expects everything we have to give.

However, Jesus' expectations are not evident in the lives of so many Christians. They do act like they've done enough for Him already. They do slack. They do put other things in front of Him. Generally, even though they owe Him their very souls, they don't act like they need Him. As with the Laodiceans, He's their hobby, not their Savior. Friends, if we adopt the Laodicean life, we can expect Jesus to react to us the same way He reacted to them. Our apathy disgusts Him, and if we persist in it, it will prove eternally fatal.