

Seven Churches of Revelation pt1 2-11-01

Letter to Ephesus

We have just finished our series on the lessons from the Exodus. There are more we could look at from the book of Numbers, but I sense the Lord is having us move on and that right now we need to look at the letters to the seven churches in the book of Revelation. The Apostle John who calls himself the 'one who Jesus loved', James brother, also known as one of the Sons of Thunder, is seeing this revelation. Chapter One gives us some interpretation of the symbolism and gives the setting.

¹ The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John,² who testifies to everything he saw--that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ.³ Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near. Rev 1:1-3 (NIV)

Jesus is revealing to us (his servants) what **MUST** not may or might but 'must' take place. It is a revelation of Jesus. John is writing as a witness to what he is seeing – and what he is seeing is the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus. What we read in this book is Jesus' testimony. Revelation is a revelation of Jesus. People get all excited about the tribulation events but the book is focussed on revealing Jesus to us. I need a revelation of Jesus to help me persevere. I need a revelation of Jesus to keep me on track. And then verse three promises a blessing on the readers that take it to heart. Notice you don't get blessed by just reading but by reading **and** taking it to heart. And I hope we will all take to heart these messages we see in this revelation. "The time is near." For John it was probably a few years after he wrote this, he died and went to be with Jesus. For many in Ephesus, persecution would take their lives. For you and me, our short time here on earth will soon be over and we will enter the Eternal Now. Death is near us all, but make no mistake – Jesus will return one day. In light of eternity, that time is very near.

Rev 1:4-8 (NIV)⁴ John, To the seven churches in the province of Asia: Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne,⁵ and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood,⁶ and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father--to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.⁷ Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be! Amen.⁸ "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty."

These seven churches are in Asia, but I believe they are also types of fellowships from the time of Pentecost to the return of Christ. I say that because in the prologue all who read and take to heart are blessed. It is addressed to His servants. The seven spirits before his throne- the sevenfold Spirit of God, each of which should be demonstrated in these churches – a revelation to the world of who He is. As we go through the letters each one begins with a description of Christ, which is perhaps one of those seven types of witness of Christ. We will try to understand what each one is by the unique description Christ gives of Himself as He speaks to each church.

He has made us a Kingdom of priests – this is what He always intended his people to be. Ex 19:6 The work of Jesus made it a reality. That day of his coming in the same manner that He left is approaching. The angel told them in Acts 1, he would come back just as he left. The clouds surrounding the top of Sinai where Moses met with God represent the glory of God and so He left in clouds and returns in clouds. Every eye will see Him, not just the living but the dead. Those that pierced Him, who are they? You and I pierced Him. In Peter's Acts 2 Pentecost message he told the crowd they had pierced Him, for He was pierced for our iniquities. Every sinner pierced Him. You pierced Him. I pierced Him, and we will all see his return.

He is the first and the last. He started things, and they end in Him and about Him and for Him. Man is so proud he gets to thinking it is about him and for him. It is all about Jesus, and if you want to be apart of that, the grace of God welcomes you in as a part of his body – if you turn from your pride and accept what He did for you. I could go on in the introduction but we need to get to the message to Ephesus.

Rev 1:9-11 (NIV)⁹ I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.¹⁰ On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet,¹¹ which said: "Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea."

John says he is our companion in suffering and kingdom and patient endurance. When you are living for the Lord, in Him, you will suffer and as one part of the body suffers we all suffer with it. Are you suffering with our brother Ed? Others in this fellowship suffer in emotional and situational circumstances, are you suffering with them? Patient endurance – I confess this last few weeks I have not been patiently enduring. We should be patiently enduring the trials of this life knowing that Jesus' endured them as our example – and that without sin. He was on the island because of "the word of God and the testimony of Jesus". That is what this letter is about, see vs2, and that is why he is exiled. Is the word of God and the testimony of Jesus manifested in your life? It meant exile for John, but it also meant fruit that remained.

Rev 1:12-20 (NIV)¹² I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands,¹³ and among the lampstands was someone "like a son of man," dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest.¹⁴ His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire.¹⁵ His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters.¹⁶ In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.¹⁷ When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said: "Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last.¹⁸ I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.¹⁹ "Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later.²⁰ The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

Here is a glorious description of Jesus and what happens to John is what seems to happen to all humans in the presence of the glorified Christ, we fall down like we were dead. But Jesus says what He often said in his time on earth. "Do not be afraid." His touch gives us strength for the revelation. Right now I pray He touches you so you will be strong enough to hear what He says to us in his letters. John has described what he has seen of Jesus but now Jesus describes himself. The First and the Last, the Living One, the One who was dead and alive forever, the One who holds the keys of death and Hell. Look again at 19, have seen, is now, will take place – past, present, and future.

In verse 20 we have the key to interpreting some of the symbols. The stars are the angels or messengers. It was the official title for the speaker on a Sabbath worship in a synagogue. Jesus was the angel in the church of Nazareth the week he read Is. 61. To say it was the Pastor – one special leader – ignores the history of the early church. It goes to the speaker/reader of the week. They normally opened the scroll of the Law or prophets to read, but this week they had a new revelation, New Covenant words of life from the Messiah to read. This means these words are equal in authority and importance with the Law and the Prophets. The seven lampstands are the seven churches. They are each to give light to the world around them and especially to reveal one of the seven aspects of the Spirit of God to their city.

Rev 2:1 (NIV)¹ "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:

This is the church that cares for John and the church in which he is an elder. This introduction of the character of Christ, the speaker, gives us insight into what the church of Ephesus was to bring of Christ to their community. He holds the messengers, and walks among the churches. I believe their calling was to exhibit the presence of Christ. They were to give Ephesus a real display of Christ among them in their lives but also that sense of the reality of Him walking among us as they gathered. The following rebukes and encouragement is in regards to how they are entering into that calling or missing the mark.

² 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.

First a commendation for their deeds, hard work, and perseverance. The word 'deeds' makes many Christians cringe because they think you are trying to relate it to salvation. Salvation is free. Faith results in action. Jesus mentions deeds 6 times in the seven letters. 3 in commendation, 2 in rebuke and one that can be taken either way. Christ yoke is easy, but sometimes He calls us to hard work. Yoked with Him is the easiest place to be but that does not eliminate the plowing that needs to be done. Sin is a hard yoke and you still have hard plowing – I'll take Jesus yoke and plow with One who loves me.

Another commendation is they have tested false apostles. Understand that when Christ chose apostles he chose men who would write down the teaching of the New Covenant.

Paul was chosen to replace Judas by the Lord himself on the road to Damascus. The word 'apostle' is used of other men but the 12 hold a special place in conveying the words and doctrine of Jesus. Their names are on the foundation of New Jerusalem. Men claiming to be official representatives of Jesus would make their rounds to churches teaching false doctrine and demanding support. Ephesus was commended because it tested them and found they were false representatives. They were not appointed by Christ at all, but by their own pride. When someone teaches for their own glory, contradicting the basic beliefs of the Word of God, we are not to tolerate them! The compromise of letting them teach detracts from the presence of Christ which this church is called to be a witness of. "Intolerant!" absolutely! Intolerant of evil and the teaching of self – and that intolerance has the blessing of Christ who alone is head of the church.

³ You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.

I'm sure under the Roman government they have gone through much more than this fellowship has. Yet they endured difficulty, for his name. They did not grow weary. I have to say I am a bit weary. God help me, and I ask for your prayers. I haven't gone through anything like they have, but I am weary to see us as a body of genuine love for each other and the lost. They didn't grow weary even though they worked hard. Their strength was in the Lord.

⁴ Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love.

But He holds this against them - you mean He doesn't just sweep it under the rug and let it slide? They have left the fervency of their love for Jesus. God looks at the heart. The deeds are outworking of the faith, but God is first after a heart to heart relation. Even busyness in the right things can take the place of a tender and broken heart that loves Jesus with fervently. We so easily get into going through routines, good routines, even ones that are his will, but not from the heart. Jeremiah 2:2-5

First love reminds me of firstfruits. In the Old Testament the firstfruits were the Lord's whether animal or grain or fruit or wine or oil or city. Jericho was the Lord's because it was the first conquered. Everything there was dedicated to God nothing to be kept for self. Firstfruits demonstrates a trust in God that He is the Provider and will bring more, but first and foremost it is his. First love is first place in your heart. First love is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. It is the love that first recognized your condition and great need, along with the wonder of His love and great provision. Ro 8:23 We have received the best of God, the firstfruits of the Spirit. We dare not fall from that recognition and from the Great Commandment. First love is due Him and He alone is worthy. To attach that love to any other thing is idolatry.

⁵ 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.

The highest place you can be is that first love of conversion. So often we see works as what Jesus is after, some kind of sanctified state. But what God is after is that first love of a sincere and broken heart poured out on the altar to Him. REPENT - stop - look at it - recognize it - weep over it - forsake the sin that led you there - and go the opposite direction. The things they did at first were not so noticeable by the world but God sees

the heart. They can point at all the things they do now - everyone can see them. What pleases God is faith which is invisible, relational, sincere and whole hearted. Works are great when they are in Him but their foundation is relational faith or they mean nothing. No change...no church in Ephesus. God will not tolerate a church of works. You say, "then why are there so many"? They are not churches - they are clubs.

⁶ But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

One last commendation – seems they are more commended for what they hate than what they love. To hate evil is a good thing. "Let those that love the Lord hate evil..." Ps 97:10 We don't know much about this group but the word has a plain meaning – nico (to rule) laity (people) I believe this was the beginning of church hierarchy. Jesus taught the disciples that to be great was to serve. Gradually this world perspective of ruling over the church with positions and hierarchy crept in. Man always lusts for power and control. It is tied in with the pride of life. It is the antithesis of the life of Jesus who came not to be served but to serve. No wonder God commends them for hating their practices.

I'm impatient that we have not been able to develop elders as a group of servants, and that I do most of the speaking because I don't want us to have even a hint of Nicolaitan practices. If you ever feel we do speak out quickly and clearly.

⁷ 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.

Are you born again? His sheep hear his voice. Then have a spiritual ear to hear this message. It is to us all as the word 'churches' here is plural. Overcomers are people who hold that first love, rely on the strength of Christ, persevere to the end. Those who do will have the privilege of entering the city of God where the tree of life is and eat of that tree. Adam and Eve were forbidden to eat of it after they had sinned or they would have continued in that state of sin through eternity. We need to be transformed first. 1Jn 3:2. Then we can eat of that fruit they could not and live forever in His presence, the paradise of God.

If we want the testimony of the presence of God we not only need to hate the things God hates, be actively doing what He calls us to do, but also to keep that first love our priority. Everything else must spring out of that. I would ask you today, is that the source of your life moment by moment? Is that what you are living for – just loving Him more and knowing Him more fully? If not you can repent right now- turn and go another direction. The world has so much to offer that competes for your first love, but it is smoke. Leave it and return to that height of your first love. He is waiting for you. If we don't there will be no Fellowship of Christ in Sedona assembly. It is not a threat from Jesus, just a warning of the consequence of our actions.