

The Seven Churches

I really enjoy watching baking competitions on TV. Lately, I've been binge watching past seasons of the Spring Baking Championship. On each episode, the bakers are given instructions to make a specific type of baked good or to use specific ingredients. They have a certain amount of time to complete their items. Then comes the moment of reckoning as they stand before the judges to receive either commendation about how good their baked items were, or criticism for what they did wrong, or some combination of the two. The baker who did the worst job is sent home while the others continue in the competition.

I thought about these baking competitions as I was reading the letters to the seven churches in the passage that we'll be studying tonight. These churches had received instructions about how to live in a manner pleasing to God, and they had been given time to follow those instructions. Now, however, their day of reckoning has come as they listen to the critique of the One True Judge, receiving either commendation or criticism or both. However, they are not competing against the other churches, where the best church wins. Each church is judged based on its own merit.

Greeting (1:4-8)

Author and Audience (v.4a)

As we think about Revelation, it's easy to see that chapters two and three contain letters to the churches, but what we may forget is that the entire book is a letter. As we begin tonight's passage, we see the greeting of this letter from John to the seven churches. He writes kind of a blanket greeting to all the churches, reminiscent of the greetings found in Paul's letters.

In this greeting, John first identifies himself as the author, and he identifies his audience as "the seven churches that are in Asia." We know that there were more than seven churches in Asia, but we also know that numbers are very significant throughout the book of Revelation. The number seven represents completion and perfection. According to Nancy Guthrie, "Seven is the number of completeness, so by addressing seven churches, John is saying the letter is written to the church as a whole, to Christians through the centuries."¹ John is writing to specific churches that are facing specific problems, but those problems are representative of problems that all churches face throughout history, including our churches today. So, we can learn a lot from studying what John says to these churches.

Benediction (v.4b-5a)

John goes on to offer what Thomas Schreiner calls a "grace wish,"² or what might be called a benediction or blessing. He knows that the people in these churches are facing trials, conflict,

¹Guthrie, Nancy. *Blessed*, 36.

²Schreiner, Thomas. *ESV Expository Commentary: Revelation*, 552.

persecution, and temptation, so they need grace and peace to help them through these troubling times. He also recognizes that this grace and peace can come only from God Himself.

What we actually have in verses 4 and 5 is a reference to the Trinity. The One “who is and who was and who is to come” clearly refers to God the Father, alluding to Exodus 3:14-15, where God tells Moses, “I am who I am.” Then John makes a reference that is not so clear, when he says, “from the seven spirits who are before his throne.” Considering that this seems to be a Trinitarian benediction, we can assume that this refers to the Holy Spirit. As I’ve already said, the number seven symbolizes perfection and completion, so this could read, “the Holy Spirit who is complete or perfect.”³ It could also allude to Isaiah 11:2, where seven things are said about the Spirit.⁴

Next, John mentions Jesus Christ, and identifies Him in three different ways, what we refer to as the three offices of Christ.

What are the three offices of Christ?

They are prophet, priest, and king. That’s what John is referring to here in verse 5a. First, he calls Jesus “the faithful witness,” referencing His office as prophet. A prophet was one who bore witness to or proclaimed the truth of God’s Word. Next, John says that Jesus is “the firstborn of the dead,” which relates to His office as priest. The priest’s job was to offer sacrifices on behalf of the people as an atonement for their sins. Jesus, as the Great High Priest, offered Himself as the ultimate sacrifice for our sins. We know that Jesus’ sacrifice was accepted by God because He raised Jesus from the dead. That He is the “firstborn of the dead” means that He was the first to be resurrected but that many will follow. We can be assured that we will rise from the dead one day because Jesus Himself rose from the dead. Finally, John calls Jesus “the ruler of kings on earth,” clearly indicating that He is the King of Kings, ruling over all the earth.

How would a reminder of the offices of Christ bring comfort to John’s audience? How can it bring comfort to us?

These three designations of Christ would have been very significant and very comforting to those in the Asian churches. Due to outside pressure, they would have been tempted to deny Christ, yet they would have been encouraged to be faithful in their witness because Jesus was a faithful witness. Some of them faced death for standing firm in their faith, yet they could find hope in the fact that Christ has conquered death, knowing they would rise again. They were oppressed and persecuted by evil worldly rulers, but they could take comfort in the fact that Christ was still ruler over all.

Praise (v.5b-8)

This blessing obviously moves John to praise the God he just described. In verses 5b-8, John praises God for what He has done, what He will do, and who He is. First, He has loved us, freed

³Godfrey, Robert. *Blessed Hope*, Video 2.

⁴Schreiner, 553.

us from our sin, and made us a kingdom of priests. This is an allusion to Exodus 19:6, where God promises that Israel will become a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. This shows that the church is the true Israel, God's special people. It also gives us motivation and security to stand firm in the midst of tribulation, knowing who we are in Him.

Next, He will come again in judgment. This alludes to Daniel 7:13 and Zechariah 12:10. For those of us who are in Christ, thinking about His second coming brings hope, knowing that one day all things will be made new. However, for those who have rejected Christ, His second coming will be a terrible event, and they will wail in misery. Finally, we see who God is. He is the Alpha and the Omega, which are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, the beginning and the end. That along with saying He is the One "who is and who was and who is to come" indicates His eternity. He always has been from the beginning and always will be. He is also the Almighty, which refers to His sovereignty and power.

As with the earlier descriptions of Christ, this would have brought great comfort to the readers of this letter, who were facing extreme trials. Nancy Guthrie describes the significance of it this way:

He who is and who was and who is to come is present with us now by His Spirit and will be fully and ultimately present with us when He comes. Because He is the Almighty, we can rest knowing that He has the power to provide the blessing promised in this book, to accomplish the elimination of evil and suffering portrayed in this book, and to prepare us as a bride to present to the Son as pictured in this book.⁵

We are also facing trials today, many very similar to those of John's audience. So, we can also take comfort in the fact that God is in control and He has the power to fulfill every promise that He has made. Evil will be defeated, the wicked will be judged, but those of us in Christ will be saved.

Vision of Christ (1:9-20)

Now we're going to move past the introduction to the first of the visions in Revelation. In this vision, John sees Jesus Himself, and Jesus gives John messages to pass on to each of the seven churches.

Introduction (v.9-11)

John begins by identifying himself and explaining how this vision came to be in verses 9-11. He shows that he can relate to his audience. He's got some hard things to say to them, but he wants them to know that he understands what they are going through. He writes that he is their "brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus" (v.9a).

What do you think John means by that?

⁵Guthrie, *Blessed*, 40

First, John is their partner in tribulation and suffering. He was one of Jesus' closest friends, and he watched Jesus being crucified according to John 19:26. After Jesus' death, as we read through Acts, we see that John was arrested more than once. He was likely the only one of the twelve apostles that was not martyred for his faith, so he lost a lot of friends.

Instead of martyrdom, John was exiled to the island of Patmos because he preached about Jesus, as we see at the end of verse 9. I never really thought about what this exile would have been like, but I guess I pictured him just sitting in his little hut writing letters all day. But Patmos was actually prison colony where John would have been forced to do hard manual labor working in the marble mines.⁶ John suffered much for the sake of Christ, so he was able to encourage his audience to endure their suffering.

John was also their partner in the kingdom. I'm sure John is remembering all of Jesus' teaching about the kingdom of God at this point. When we're saved, we become citizens of God's kingdom. He becomes our ruler, and we begin to live by a different standard than that of the world. However, we still live in the world, where Satan is trying to set up a counterfeit kingdom of his own. There is a war going on between God's kingdom and Satan's kingdom, and we are a part of that war even though we may not realize it. This spiritual war is the cause of much of our suffering. However, we'll see as we study Revelation that God has already won the war. Considering the state of the world around us, it may not seem like Satan has been defeated. However, Jesus issued the death blow to Satan by His death on the cross, and He will come again to usher in His kingdom in its fullness. Knowing this will help us endure suffering because we know that it's only temporary.

Finally, John was their partner in patient endurance, which is a major theme in the book of Revelation (2:2, 3, 19; 3:10; 13:10; 14:12). This phrase is actually one word in Greek, and it carries the idea of patience and perseverance.

How would you describe patience and perseverance? What is the difference between the two?

Patience is a passive idea, which relates to our inner attitude about suffering. Do we recognize it as part of God's will and trust in His goodness, or do we become bitter and angry, questioning why God would allow suffering to occur? Perseverance has to do with our actions. Do we stand firm in our beliefs when suffering, or do we compromise and fall into sin?

According to Derek Thomas, patient endurance means standing firm under pressure, maintaining a trust in God, and desiring to maintain spiritual discipline.⁷ Both John and his audience suffered "because of their allegiance to Jesus and their unflinching allegiance to the Word of God."⁸ John's audience would have been tempted to compromise their faith due to the persecution that they were facing. However, they could stand firm by remembering who they were in Christ and focusing on the kingdom to come. So, to summarize this section, Nancy

⁶ Ibid., 46.

⁷ Thomas, 10.

⁸ Schreiner, 561.

Guthrie says, “Revelation is a call to patient endurance of tribulation as we await the coming of Christ’s Kingdom in all of its fulness.”⁹

After connecting to his audience, John explains how he came to receive the vision. John said that he was “in the Spirit on the Lord’s day” (v10). In spite of his hard life of manual labor in a prison colony, worshiping his beloved Savior was so important to John that he still observed the Lord’s Day. The phrase “in the Spirit” likely refers to being in a trancelike state induced by the Holy Spirit in order to convey information.¹⁰ While in this trance, he heard a voice that told him to write down what he sees in a book and send it to the seven churches that are listed. It’s interesting because the cities are listed in geographical order¹¹, so a messenger would have taken this book that John writes to these cities in this order to allow each church to read the message from Christ. I’ve already mentioned that these were real churches facing real problems, but they also represent the Church at large because all churches face similar problems to what these seven faced.

Setting (v.12-13a)

After being told to write down what he sees, John turns around to see who is speaking to him. What he sees is so amazing that it’s as if he doesn’t have the words to explain it. John falls back on what he’s familiar with to describe this spectacular vision, which is Old Testament imagery. All of Revelation is full of allusions to the Old Testament, but that’s especially true of this next section. Unfortunately, we won’t have time to read all of the Old Testament passages, but I urge you to look them up later, because it will really help you to understand what we’re studying.

What John sees when he turns around is “seven golden lampstands” (v.12), which is an allusion to Zechariah 4:2-6, where a lampstand refers to the nation of Israel and the seven lamps on it represent the power of the Holy Spirit. In John’s vision there are seven lampstands. According to Greg Beale, each one represents one of the seven churches and all together they represent the universal church.¹² Each lampstand would have a lamp on it, which refers to the power of the Holy Spirit as it works among God’s people. Those in the churches are to draw power from the Holy Spirit so that they can overcome or conquer as they are encouraged in the letters to come.

John also sees among the lampstands “one like a son of man” (v.13a), which alludes to Daniel 7:13. According to Vern Poythress, “Daniel sees in the distant future a mysterious, exalted human figure who brings an end to the succession of pagan world-dominating kingdoms. What was distant for Daniel has now become reality through Christ’s death and resurrection.”¹³ So Jesus is the “son of man” that Daniel foresaw so many years before. The title “son of man” refers more to

⁹Guthrie, 45.

¹⁰Ibid., 47.

¹¹Schreiner, 562.

¹²Beale, 47-48.

¹³Poythress, 78.

the majestic deity of Christ than it does His humanity, although Jesus did appear in human form.

How can we find comfort in knowing that Jesus is walking among the lampstands?

The fact that the “son of man” was walking among the lampstands shows that Christ is present among His churches. He hasn’t abandoned them to their trials.¹⁴ This, of course, would bring comfort to John’s audience. Sometimes, in the midst of suffering, we may wonder “Where is God in all of this?” What a relief to know that Jesus is with us, walking among us even in the midst of our trials!

Source (v.13-16)

This brings us to what is probably my favorite section of Revelation, this beautiful vision of Christ. It’s important to remember that this is not a literal picture of what Christ looks like, but it describes who He is and what He does. It’s a symbolic representation of Christ.

What do you think about when you think of Jesus? How do you picture Him?

Many of us are so familiar with the Gospels that when we think about Jesus, we think of Him in His humanity. We envision Him as this meek and humble man, which He was while He was on Earth. When Jesus came to Earth, He took on a human body and He willingly put aside certain aspects of His deity. He was still 100% God but He also became 100% man. This is one of those mysteries of our faith that we will never fully understand. Apparently, certain parts of Jesus’ deity were hidden or veiled while He was human.

However, after His death and resurrection, I think that Jesus’ glory and His deity were unveiled, at least to a degree while He remained on earth. We know that He was changed after the resurrection. He could be seen and heard and touched, like a human, yet He could do things that humans couldn’t do. He could appear and disappear at will. He could basically transport from one place to another. And, of course, He was able to ascend into heaven. Once He returned to heaven, I believe His deity was fully unveiled. So, although Jesus will always have a physical body, I don’t think that the Jesus that is in heaven at the right hand of the Father is the same meek, humble man that allowed Himself to be beaten and nailed to a cross, the one that gave His life and died for the sake of His people.

Quoting Nancy Guthrie again, she says, “Jesus doesn’t want our mental picture of him to be stuck on how he looked for the thirty-three years that he walked the earth. John’s vision shows Jesus as he is now and how he wants to be known.”¹⁵ John’s vision focuses on the majestic glory of Jesus, rather than His humanity. John shows us an entirely different image of Christ than what we’re familiar with from the Gospels. Each aspect of John’s description symbolizes some part of Jesus’ character and His work.

¹⁴Schreiner, 563.

¹⁵Guthrie, 49.

Now, I'm a visual learner, so I like charts and graphs. I've put together a chart for you about the vision of Christ, and one about the letters to the churches. Let's look at those.

- “Clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest” (v.13)
 - This is priestly attire. The robe represents the purity of Christ. The golden sash reflects the wealth, beauty, and exalted status of the one wearing it. So, this shows that Jesus is the exalted one, the one worthy of all praise and honor.
 - Also, the priest was the one who interceded between the people and God, the one who offered sacrifices for the sins of the people. This is exactly what Jesus did for us. It's only through Christ and his atoning death that we have access to God.
- “Hairs of his head were white” (v.14)
 - The white hair symbolizes the wisdom and dignity that comes with old age.
 - This is an allusion to the Ancient of Days from Daniel 7:9. The verse in Daniel is referring to God the Father. By ascribing the same attributes to Jesus, John is affirming the deity of Christ.
- “His eyes were like a flame of fire” (v.14)
 - Fire is purifying. It refines. In the same way, Jesus sees into the heart of a person. His discerning gaze exposes and burns away every sin, even those we try to hide.
- “His feet were like burnished bronze” (v.15)
 - Bronze was used in weapons, so there is an association with judgment and war. Jesus will come again to judge the world and wage the final war against evil. He will crush His enemies under His feet. No one can stand against Him.
 - Also, Nancy Guthrie says, “Bronze is a combination of iron and copper. Iron is strong, but it rusts. Copper won't rust, but it is pliable. When the two are combined into bronze, the best quality of each is preserved, the strength of the iron and the endurance of the copper. So to say that his feet were like burnished bronze that has been refined in a furnace is to say that the foundation of Jesus' power has been tested by fire and will endure.”¹⁶ Jesus' power and His authority and His rule of the earth cannot be shaken. It's a firm foundation, one on which we can confidently place our faith and our hope.
- “His voice was like the roar of many waters” (v.15)
 - Roaring waters are loud. It's not a sound that you can ignore. In the same way, the voice of Jesus is commanding and overwhelming. When He speaks, He cannot be ignored.
 - Rushing water is also powerful, so this symbolizes the authority, power, and majesty of Jesus.
- “In his right hand he held seven stars” (v.16)
 - This is the only part of the description where I couldn't find an Old Testament reference.

¹⁶Guthrie, 52-53.

- In verse 20 we see that the seven stars are identified as “the angels of the seven churches.” There’s some debate as to what this actually means.
 - Nancy Guthrie and Greg Beale both suggest that the lampstands represent the church on earth, and the stars represent the church in heaven, those who have already died.¹⁷
 - Derek Thomas suggests that the angels could be literal angelic beings sent to watch over the churches, or the word angel could refer to the leaders of each church.¹⁸
 - Based on the language and context, I tend to believe that this is referring to literal angels. I think that God sends angels to each church to provide protection for them. No matter which interpretation you favor, the point is that Christ is watching over His church, whether by holding close those who have already died, or by holding the leaders securely in His hand, or by sending His angels to guard the churches.
- “From his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword” (v.16)
 - The sword refers to the coming judgment of Christ through the words that He is about speak.
 - The dual edge shows that His word can bring judgment and condemnation to those who reject Him, but salvation and mercy to those who belong to Him.
 - Even in His messages to the churches we see both praise and rebuke.
- “His face was like the sun shining in full strength” (v. 16)
 - This is a reference to the unbridled glory of Christ.
 - It brings to mind the Transfiguration, where the veil is pulled back and Jesus’s glory is revealed to Peter, James, and John. In Matthew 17:2, it says “He was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light.”

Response (v.17-20)

When John saw this vision of the glorified Christ, he “fell at his feet as though dead” (v.17). This is a common response when a person is exposed to God’s glory. We see it with Abraham (Genesis 17:3), Isaiah (Isaiah 6:5), Ezekiel (Ezekiel 1:29), and Peter (Luke 5:8). It’s also the only appropriate response when we come into the presence of God. When faced with His holiness and purity, we can’t help but be aware of our own unrighteousness and impurity. Nancy Guthrie states it this way, “Coming into the presence of the glorified Jesus makes the disparity between his perfection and holiness and our sinfulness unbearable so that all a person can do is fall down as though dead.”¹⁹

Obviously, this vision of Christ was frightening to John. He was terrified. However, Jesus immediately comforts him by laying his hand on him and telling him to fear not (v.17). I

¹⁷Ibid., 54.

¹⁸Thomas, 13.

¹⁹Guthrie, 56.

imagine a scared child curled into a ball, trying to hide from his fears. Then I see his father coming and stroking his head and telling him it will be ok, that there's nothing to be scared of. This shows us that the things to come in the book of Revelation are not meant to scare us, but to give us hope and peace, which we see in the next couple of verses.

Not only does Jesus comfort John with His touch, but He also tells John why he shouldn't be afraid. First, Jesus says He is the first and last (v.17). He is the only eternal one. He has always ruled over history, and He always will rule. Everything is under the authority and dominion of Christ.

Jesus also says that He is the living one (v.18). He may have died, but He rose again. He overcame death and so He will never die again. Because of that, He holds the keys to Death and Hades. The one who has the keys controls entrance or access to the door. The one with the keys is the only one who can open or close the door. Jesus is saying, "I'm in control of death. I open the door to those who die, and I control where you go after you die." So, if we are in Christ, there is no need for us to be afraid to die, because Jesus is sovereign even over death.

The comfort that Jesus gives John is for us as well. Jesus is still with us. Knowing that He is in control of what's happening in the world can give us peace now, and knowing that He's in control of death can give us hope for the future.

The Letters to the Churches (ch.2-3)

The Significance of the Letters

Jesus then tells John again to write what he has seen...those things that are and those things that are to take place (v.19). This shows that parts of Revelation describe things that were currently happening in John's day, while other parts reveal things that will happen in the future. I don't want to go too much into the different interpretative approaches, but some people would argue that chapters 1-3 are what's current, the things that are, while the rest of the book is all futuristic or the things that are to take place. However, I don't think so. I, personally, hold the idealist approach, which Vern Poythress describes as follows:

Idealists maintain that general principles are expressed. If so, those principles had a particular relevance to the seven churches and their struggles in the first century. The principles will also come to a climatic expression in the final crisis of the second coming. We ourselves are involved in the same spiritual war, and so we must apply the principles to ourselves and our own time. Hence, many passages have at least three main applications, namely to the first century, to the final crisis, and to us in whatever time we live.²⁰

As we study Revelation, we'll see a lot of connection between the letters to the churches and the various visions. According to Greg Beale, "The visions of 4-21 are developments of the more

²⁰Poythress, 28-29.

straightforward teaching of chapters 2-3, much as was the case with the prophets or with Jesus in the Gospels.”²¹ At the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, His teaching was pretty easy to understand. The Sermon on the Mount, for instance, was just basic instruction for the Christian life. However, as time went on, Jesus began teaching more in depth and using parables, in part to distinguish between those who had ears to hear and those who didn’t. That’s what we see here. The letters to the churches are fairly straightforward, but the rest of the book is much harder to understand. This is my opinion, and you are certainly welcome to disagree, but I think that the letters to the churches are showing what’s going on in the world from a human, physical perspective. In the trials that the churches face, we see the earthly consequences or effects of the spiritual warfare going on around us.

In chapters 4-22, it’s as if the curtain is being pulled back, and we’re seeing the spiritual warfare from the heavenly perspective. God gives us a glimpse of the spiritual reality behind the physical suffering. It shows why these people are suffering the way that they are. It also explains why we suffer, because we’re still fighting the same war against the same enemy. Satan is still using the same tactics against the church today as he did the first century church. So, our struggles are the same as theirs.

So, I believe that, while some of the visions pertain to future events, such as the second coming of Christ, much of the book is describing realities that were true of the seven Asian churches but are also true for churches in all times. It’s a description of what the Church can expect to face during the time between Christ’s ascension and His second coming. Vern Poythress writes, “The triumphs, failures, and struggles of the seven churches are a kind of catalogue of the sorts of things that we can expect to find in other churches throughout history.”²²

In verse 20 Jesus explains what the seven lampstands and the seven stars represent. The lampstands are the churches, which indicates that the church is to shine the light of Christ into the dark world around them. The stars are the angels of the churches. We’ve already discussed the possible interpretations of this. Again, I believe that these are literal angelic being sent to guard and protect the church.

It’s also a reminder of the spiritual reality that surrounds us. We have a spiritual help available to us that we don’t often think to make use of. We tend to focus so much on the physical...what we can see and hear and touch. However, Robert Godfrey says, “Heaven is not out there. All the time heaven is just over our shoulder. If we could just turn around fast enough, we could see it.” Hopefully, this study of Revelation will help us to see heaven all around us.

The Structure of the Letters

Now Jesus begins to give John His messages to each of the churches. There’s a pattern to each letter. They each basically contain the same elements, with a couple of exceptions:

²¹Beale, 58-59.

²²Poythress, 83.

1. The church is identified. The letters are addressed to the angel of each church. We've already discussed what that might mean.
2. Christ identifies Himself, using language from the description John gives in chapter 1, verses 12-20. The way that He chooses to describe Himself to each church reveals an aspect of His character or purpose that is related to the needs of that particular church.
3. Jesus reveals what He knows about the church. Jesus knew everything about these churches...the good, the bad, and the ugly. He knew their actions and their motives, just as He knows ours.
4. Jesus gives a critique or a commendation.
5. Jesus gives command or exhortation to do something, usually to repent.
6. There's a promise or a threat, where Jesus tells what He will do to the church if they are obedient or if they fail to obey.
7. Jesus gives a promise to the one who conquers.
8. Each letter contains the statement "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." We must ask ourselves, "Do we have ears to hear what Jesus wants to say to us through His Word?" As we've already discussed, the issues that these churches faced are the same ones that we face today. Jesus probably has the same critiques and commendations for our churches today, so we must be open to the message that we can glean from each of these letters.

The Substance of the Letters

We're not going to take the time to identify each of these elements in each of the letters. We're just going to focus on the main point of each letter.

These letters are like report cards, where Jesus is giving an evaluation of each church. Normally, a report card is an evaluation of your work, but it doesn't reflect your motives or your character. It's based on outward performance. However, Jesus doesn't just see what we do. He knows why we do it. Quoting Nancy Guthrie again, she says, "Jesus knows us better than we know ourselves. We have incredible powers of self-deception and denial. Jesus sees and knows the truth about us that we most need to know."²³

That's what these letters are about. Some of the people in the churches had deceived themselves into thinking that they were doing ok. They didn't realize their true spiritual condition. In each letter, Jesus strips away their self-deceit to expose the truth, and the truth He reveals applies to us just as much as it did them. So, as we look at these letters, we're going to focus on what each one shows us about what Jesus knows.

²³Guthrie, 64.

Jesus knows...

1. What and who we really love (Ephesus).

The church at Ephesus had benefitted from some really sound teaching through the years. Paul had spent three years teaching here. Apollos, Timothy, and John also taught in Ephesus. So, the Ephesian Christians knew God's Word. They could detect false teaching a mile away. They were also commended for their toil and patient endurance. They didn't give up or give in when facing persecution.

However, in spite of their doctrinal knowledge and discernment, the Ephesians love for God and for each other had grown cold. They cared more for the truth than they did God and each other. They were so focused on doing good that forgot the One whom they served. They were so focused on sound doctrine that they forgot the One whom that sound doctrine described. They were going through the religious motions without the proper motivation. They were not being driven by love. They had forgotten about Jesus.

Does that sound familiar? I confess, that I struggle with this. I love theology. I love to learn more about the Bible. And I love to teach the Bible. But sometimes, I get so focused on the knowledge, that I forget that the knowledge should actually be helping me grow in my relationship with Christ. I forget about Jesus too!

But Jesus identifies Himself to the church at Ephesus as the one who walks among the lampstands. We've already discussed how His walking among the lampstands signifies Jesus' presence among the churches. So, Jesus is reminding the Ephesian believers that He is with them. He's right there among them, just as He is right here with us.

The Ephesians are called to repent and remember their first love for Christ. If they don't, their lampstand, or church, will be removed. However, if they do repent, they will eat of the tree of life in the paradise of God. This is an allusion to the Garden of Eden. In Eden, Adam and Eve had intimate fellowship with God. By rekindling their love for Christ and by renewing their relationship with Him, they can look forward to eternal fellowship with Him.

2. What we're willing to suffer for (Smyrna).

The people in this church were struggling. They were suffering from poverty. Because of their allegiance to Christ, they were probably not able to participate in the professional guilds that were common in that day. Many people would have refused to do business with them, so they suffered financially.

The Jews in the city were also spreading lies about them. John refers to the Jewish synagogue as a synagogue of Satan. Rather than following God, the Jews were under Satanic influence and were probably turning Christians in to the Roman authorities for things such as treason, or failing to engage in emperor worship. Because of this, some of the believers in Smyrna were being imprisoned and even killed because they stood firm in their faith.

We read in verse 10 that they would face tribulation for ten days. This does not literally mean ten calendar days. Instead, the number ten is used symbolically to indicate that the time of trial will last exactly as long as God intends, but it sounds like it will be brief.²⁴

Jesus identifies Himself to this church as “the first and the last, who died and came to life” (2:8). He’s reminding them that He is eternal and divine and in control of their suffering. He also is connecting with them in their suffering because He Himself suffered and died. However, just as He died and came to life, so they, if they endure, will be given the crown of life and will not be hurt by the second death.

So, even though they were facing persecution and even death, they could find comfort in the fact that Jesus knew about their suffering and was with them. They could also find hope in the fact that even if they died for their faith, they would live again.

3. What we really believe (Pergamum).

The city of Pergamum was a hotbed of secular, pagan, even satanic activity. It was the first city to build a temple for emperor worship, and it also had numerous pagan temples for idol worship.²⁵ The Christians in Pergamum were surrounded by false teaching and satanic influences. John even says to them, “You dwell where Satan’s throne is” (2:13). Greg Beale writes, “Throughout Revelation, we will see how Satan (the dragon) gives the political system (the beast) power to persecute God’s people, as was undoubtedly occurring in this city.”²⁶ So, that would have been a very difficult, hostile environment to live in, and it would have been so hard remain faithful to God’s Word.

Some of the believers did just that though. They did not deny the faith, even though a man was killed because of it. They were willing to endure persecution for the sake of Christ.

However, some in the church didn’t believe the truth and were being influenced by the false teaching. In verse 14, we see Jesus’ rebuke, when He says, “You have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam.”

What do you know about the story of Balaam from the Old Testament?

The Moabite king, Balak, was afraid of the Israelites, who were camping in Moab on their way to the Promised Land. Balak hires Balaam, who was supposedly a prophet. Balak wanted Balaam to curse the Israelites. In a humorous turn of events, Balaam, under God’s influence, actually blesses the Israelites (Num. 22-24). However, according to Greg Beale, “Balaam’s name became a biblical catchword for all false teachers who for financial gain sought to influence God’s people to engage in ungodly practices.”²⁷ So, when John says that

²⁴Guthrie, 67.

²⁵Beale, 65-66.

²⁶Beale, 66.

²⁷Ibid.

those in Pergamum are following the teaching of Balaam, he means that the false teachers, like Balaam, were luring the Christians into idolatry and sexual immorality.

Some of those in the church at Pergamum were following these false teachers, and it appears that the others did nothing to stop them. They were tolerating the sin that was creeping into their church.

Jesus identifies Himself to this church as the one bearing the sharp two-edged sword, and He says that He will use that sword against those in the church if they do not repent. If they don't pursue the false teaching from their midst, Jesus will have to intervene directly. I'm not sure exactly what that would look like, but I'm sure it wouldn't be pleasant.

Jesus does offer a promise to those who repent. This promise is full of Old Testament imagery. First, He says He will give them some of the hidden manna, which is an allusion to the manna given to the Israelites in the Exodus, which is a symbol of God's heavenly provision for His people.

Also, the believers in Pergamum might have been tempted to offer food to idols or eat food that had been offered to idols. However, Jesus promises them better food. This hidden manna also can refer to the food eaten at the marriage supper of the Lamb (19:9). They had a choice...participate in worldly pagan feasts and be excluded from the eternal feast later, or refuse to participate in these pagan feasts and look forward to the feast to come.

The next promise that Jesus makes to those who repent is that He will give them a white stone, which had multiple meanings in this time, as you'll see in this quote from Nancy Guthrie:

In the ancient world, a white ceremonial stone called a "tessera" had a number of different meanings, and each could be applied to those who overcome. Champions in athletic games in John's day were given a white stone. So perhaps this promise communicates that as they overcame the temptation to compromise, they could anticipate receiving recognition of their victory from Jesus. White stones were given as a token of admission to pagan feasts and festivals. So while they might not be welcomed into the pagan feasts of Pergamum, they could be assured of a place at the table at the marriage supper of the Lamb. Additionally, white stones were used in courts of law, as jurors would vote for acquittal by setting forth a white stone in contrast to a black stone for conviction. So while, like Antipas, they might be convicted in the courts of Pergamum, they could be assured that in the courts of heaven they would be declared not guilty.²⁸

The final promise God made to those in Pergamum is that those who conquer will be given a new name. Often, a person's name would be changed to reflect their new status in Christ.

²⁸Guthrie, 71.

Think about Abram becoming Abraham, or Simon becoming Peter. So also, we will be given a new name to reflect our new status.

4. What we're willing to tolerate (Thyatira).

The believers in the church at Thyatira, like those in the other churches we've discussed so far, were facing pressure from the pagan culture surrounding them. In spite of this pressure, Jesus commends them for their work, love, faith, service, and patient endurance. They were doing a lot of things right. They were even growing in these areas.

However, Jesus rebuked them because they were tolerant of false teaching that had crept into the church. The leader of this group is referred to as Jezebel.

What do you know about Jezebel from the Old Testament?

Jezebel was a wicked queen who promoted idolatry of Baal and Ashtoreth, even to the point of having God's prophets killed. She led the Israelites into wicked practices, including sexual immorality. Her name in Revelation refers to the person in the church who was leading people into the same type of sin, sexual immorality and idolatry, both of which were major forms of indulgence in Asia Minor.²⁹

Many people in Thyatira were tradesmen and manufacturers, so they would have been expected to participate in trade guilds that oversaw these various industries. They have also been expected to participate in festivals to pagan gods and in temple prostitution. Apparently, this Jezebel was encouraging people to go ahead and participate in order to fit in. Maybe she suggested that Jesus knew their heart and He knew that they didn't really mean it, so it's ok.³⁰

It seems that not everyone in the church participated in these sins, but even those who didn't were tolerant of those who did. Rather than addressing the issue and implementing the proper church discipline, they ignored it. So, Jesus says that if the church won't discipline Jezebel and those who follow her, He Himself will.

Jesus identified Himself to the church as the one who has eyes like flames. He saw through their motives straight to their sinful hearts. He saw through their "good intentions" to their spiritual adultery. They may have thought that Jesus wouldn't mind them giving in, but in reality, He was angry over their sin, and He was jealous that they were giving themselves to another.

For those who didn't follow Jezebel, Jesus says that He will not put on them another burden. It's possible that some people, in order to avoid the teaching of Jezebel, went to the other extreme and became legalistic. Sometimes to avoid sin, we create additional rules to keep us from even coming close to the sin. For instance, we want to keep our minds pure, which

²⁹Poythress, 89.)

³⁰Guthrie, 70-71.

is a good thing. But instead of being discerning about what movies we watch, we create a rule saying that we aren't going to watch any movies. Now some movies are not bad and some are even edifying, but we throw the baby out with the bathwater. At least our minds will be pure. That's legalism, especially when you force your rules on others. It's the attitude, not only will I not watch movies, but you're sinning if you do.

That kind of thing may be what's going on in the church here, and Jesus saying, "That's not necessary." He says, "Hold fast to what you have until I come. That's enough." And for those who do hold fast, who refuse to become like the world, Jesus promises that He will use them to influence the world. He also promises them the "morning star," which is a reference to Christ Himself, as we see in Revelation 22:16, "I, Jesus, have sent my angel to testify to you about these things for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star."

5. The reality of our spiritual condition (Sardis).

We don't know much about the church at Sardis, but they must have been well-thought of by their neighboring churches, as they have a reputation for being alive, or a thriving church. They were active in good works, apparently, but Jesus found their works lacking (3:2). They were busy doing things, but were obviously doing the wrong things, things that were of no value to God. Their reputation was a sham.

In fact, Jesus says that they are spiritually dead. There are some true believers in the church, but even they need to wake up and strengthen themselves. If they don't, Jesus threatens to come against them like a thief. According to Poythress, "The seemingly impregnable fortress of Sardis had in wartime been captured twice by surprise, probably at night. Christ warns that a similar experience will befall the church, unless they wake up."³¹

As Jesus reminds them in His introduction to this letter, He has the seven spirits of God, which, as we've said, is a reference to the Holy Spirit. It's only through the Spirit that those in the church can awaken to receive life in Christ.

Those who conquer will be clothed in white garments, representative of the righteousness of Christ. Some in the church are already clothed in His righteousness, but it's not too late for the others. Instead of the spiritual death they are currently experiencing, they are promised eternal life.

6. Whose kingdom we are committed to (Philadelphia).

Like Sardis, we don't know much about the church at Philadelphia. It may have been a small church, as they are said to have little power. They were also facing persecution from the Jews, who were spreading lies about them. However, the believers in this church kept God's

³¹Poythress, 90-91.

Word and did not deny the name of Christ. Because they stood firm in their faith, Jesus makes them several promises.

First, Jesus said that He would set before them an open door. He is the one who has the key of David, which gives Him the ability and authority to open and shut doors (see Isaiah 22:20-25). Because Jesus has the key, He has the ability and authority to set before the church at Philadelphia an open door. Many believe that the open door is a reference to the road that leads from Philadelphia to the interior of Asia Minor, which opened a way for the church to spread the gospel,³² although others believe that the open door actually provides entry into the presence of God and into the heavenly city.³³

Next, Jesus promised that the Jews spreading lies would one day repent. Derek Thomas writes, "God has a way of turning the tables on those who oppress and harass. Those who persecute will be brought to confess the integrity of the persecuted."³⁴ So, the Philadelphian Christians could look forward to a day when they would be vindicated before their enemies.

Jesus also promised that He would keep them from the hour of trial that is coming. According to Poythress, this most likely refers to the various trials and punishments that God sends in the later chapters of Revelation. The trials are sent against those who dwell on earth, which is a reference to those with earthly citizenship rather than those whose citizenship is in heaven.³⁵ Believers are not from suffering and tribulation, but we can take comfort in the fact that Christ will keep us safe in the midst of our suffering.

Finally, for those who had little strength on earth, Christ promises that He will make them a pillar of strength in His temple. For those facing the instability of life on this earth, Christ promises that they will have a permanent, stable home in the City of God. The name of God and Christ's own name will be written on them, showing that they truly belong to God.

7. Whom we are depending on (Laodicea).

The church at Laodicea is the only one to receive no commendation at all. The letter to Sardis was pretty serious, but at least there were a few there who hadn't soiled their garments. In Laodicea, there seems to be no one left who had kept the faith.

The problem with the people in this church is that they are lukewarm rather than cold or hot. As a result, Christ said He wanted to vomit them out of His mouth! In our modern context, it's hard to understand why that's such a serious accusation, so we need to understand the historical context.

³²Poythress, 91.

³³Guthrie, 77 footnote.

³⁴Thomas, 35.

³⁵Poythress, 92.

Vern Poythress describes it this way:

Laodicea's water supply had to be provided from a distant source through pipes. The resulting water was lukewarm and barely drinkable. By contrast, the neighboring town of Hierapolis had medicinal hot springs, and neighboring Colossae was supplied by a cold mountain stream. Christ urges the church to be refreshing (cold) or medicinally healing (hot), rather than like the Laodicean water supply. Be able to minister in some valuable way, rather than being worthless, as lukewarm water is³⁶

Apparently, the Laodiceans were unaware of their true spiritual condition. They thought they were rich, in need of nothing. They were placing their faith in worldly things. Their city was known for its wealth, textile industry, and medical expertise, and they thought their treasure was found in those things.

However, Jesus is the faithful and true witness. He saw past their self-reliance to their prideful hearts. He revealed their true condition, which was wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. Jesus used the physical things that they relied on as illustrations to show that He is the only source of what truly matters.

First, He promised them gold. They thought they were rich by the world's standards, but Jesus revealed their spiritual poverty. All of the material wealth they had acquired was worthless in light of eternity. They should have sought their wealth in Christ.

He also promised them white garments to cover their shame and nakedness. All the beautiful, expensive clothing manufactured in Laodicea was not enough to truly cover them. They needed to be clothed in the righteousness of Christ, which is what white garments represent.

Finally, He promised them salve to anoint their eyes. That seems like a strange thing to promise, but Laodicea was known for its doctors. It's possible that they had created an eye salve that was supposed to be healing.³⁷ Jesus is saying that He alone has the salve to cure their spiritual blindness.

Jesus has some harsh words for this church, but He says that He is rebuking them and disciplining them because He loves them. He wants their relationship to be restored, so He's calling them to repentance.

Now we come to one of the most misinterpreted or misapplied verses in the Bible, Revelation 3:20.

How have you heard this verse used?

³⁶Poythress 93.

³⁷Ibid., 94.

This verse is often used evangelistically. We tell people, “Look, Jesus is knocking on the door of your heart. You just have to open the door and let Him come in.” However, this verse has nothing to do with evangelism. It’s written to the church, to people that are already believers. Greg Beale points out that this invitation is for renewed fellowship with Christ:

He is standing there reaching out to the Laodiceans, as He is always standing at the doors of the hearts of those who have become cold in their love and enmeshed in the pursuit of what this world has to offer...This is an invitation, not for the readers to be converted, but to renew themselves in a relationship with Christ which has already begun, as is apparent from v.19.³⁸

Christ ends by saying that those who repent and who conquer will help reign in the eternal kingdom. Whatever they give up in this world by following Christ will be repaid many times over in the world to come. Thomas Schreiner says it this way:

Those who overcome will rule with Jesus. The reign of Jesus is shared with all his saints, all those who belong to him. Jesus himself is the model for believers, for he overcame through his faithful witness and thus was exalted and sat down at the right hand of the Father, to rule with him. So too, the Laodiceans must be faithful and humble, for only the faithful and humble will be exalted.³⁹

Conclusion

Thinking back to the descriptions of Christ that we read earlier, how can those descriptions comfort us in the midst of trials and suffering?

He’s with us. He’s in sovereign and in control. He’s eternal and will never leave us alone in our suffering.

How can we use what we’ve learned from the letters to the churches to evaluate our own spiritual condition and that of our church?

Hopefully, reading about these churches made you think about the churches in our time. As I said before, the seven churches addressed in these letters are representative of churches throughout time. Churches today face the same problems as those churches: a lack of love, compromising their beliefs, tolerating sin, hypocrisy, self-reliance.

Believers today are suffering as well. Their businesses may suffer as they stand up for the truth. Lies are being spread about innocent people and reputations are being ruined. In many places, believers are being arrested and even killed. So, these letters, and the entire book of Revelation, are just as relevant to us today as they were to the original audience.

³⁸Beale, 93.

³⁹Schreiner, 597.