

Churches

By David Feddes

Today we're going to be thinking about churches and what our Lord Jesus Christ says to the churches in Revelation. Let's begin with the revelation that Jesus gives of himself, and then we'll look again at what he said to the church at Ephesus. After that we'll see what he says to all the churches.

^{1:10} 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."

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."

^{2:1} 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: 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. ³ You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.

⁴ Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. 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. ⁶ But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

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.

What Jesus sees

How does Jesus see churches? How does he assess what a church is like? When we read the book of Revelation, we find out very quickly that Jesus does not necessarily see a church the way others see that church. He doesn't even necessarily see that church the way the church sees itself.

When you consider, for instance, the church of Sardis in the letters that Jesus gives, Sardis has a reputation, a name for being alive. It's the happening church. It's the church other people want to be like. It is really vibrant--except Jesus says, "You have a reputation for being alive, and you are dead" (Revelation 3:1). So a church is not always what other people think it is. It's not always what it thinks of itself.

The church in Laodicea says, "I am rich. I see well. I am well clothed." And Jesus says, "You are blind, you are poor, you are naked" (Revelation 3:17). So again, self-assessment, our opinion of ourselves as a church, might be pretty high, but Jesus may have a very, very different opinion.

On the other hand, there are churches that had reputations that weren't so lofty. For instance, the church at Smyrna was slandered and spoken against. It was struggling and known to be poor. However, Jesus says, "You are poor, but you are rich, and you are slandered, but I have nothing but good things to say about you" (Revelation 2:9). It's ironic that one of the churches Jesus has nothing bad to say about is the church that a lot of people were saying bad stuff about.

Or when you look at the church of Philadelphia, it's another church that Jesus has nothing bad to say about. There are only two churches that Jesus has nothing bad to say about, and both of them were not admired. Both of them were not very big. Both of them were struggling. The church in Philadelphia was a church Jesus says, "I know that you don't have much strength. I know that you're weak, but you're strong" (Revelation 3:8). So when we ask what Jesus thinks of the churches, we need to be prepared for the fact that he's going to see things differently than other people see us or even than the way we see ourselves.

It's interesting, too, that for each of these churches he addresses an angel. There have been different opinions about that, whether that maybe refers to the pastor of a church or the messenger being sent to a church, because the word *angel* can also be translated as *messenger*. But I think it most likely means there is an angel for each of these churches. God sends his angels as ministering spirits for a variety of tasks, and one is to be involved in the life of churches. To each church here there's an angel that Jesus sends a message to.

Letter format

1. Jesus
2. Praises
3. Rebukes
4. Commands
5. Warnings
6. Promises
7. Listen!

Each letter has the same format. There are seven letters, and in each letter there are basically seven parts. Jesus uses the same format in all of them.

First, he says something about himself, and it usually reflects what we just heard from Revelation 1 about the vision that John saw of the glorified, magnificent, splendid Lord Jesus Christ . He begins the letter to each church by picking something about himself to say.

Then he praises that church, except in the cases where there's nothing good to say. There are a couple of churches that he has nothing good to say about.

Then he rebukes the church, at least when there's something to rebuke, because there are two of the churches that he doesn't rebuke at all.

Then, whether there are praises or rebukes, he gives some orders, some commands. He gives marching orders of what to do from here.

He gives warnings of bad things that will happen if those commands aren't heeded.

Jesus makes promises of what will happen if they do listen to the Savior and do heed his commands, good things that are going to happen.

He closes each letter with a final "Listen up!." "Let him who has an ear hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (Revelation 2:7). Jesus Christ is speaking, but notice that he says this is what the Spirit is saying to the churches. We need ears from the Spirit to hear the voice of the Savior.

The order of these elements can vary a little. In several of the letters first come the promises, then the "Listen up!" In other letters, there's first the "Hear what the Spirit says to the churches," and then the promise. So the order is a little different in those, but you'll see that these are the elements of all seven letters to the seven churches.

One way to approach this would be to do a series of messages, one on each of the letters to each of the seven churches. That's a good approach. I like John Stott's book titled *What Christ Thinks of the Church*, in which he goes through each of those letters in detail. But what I'm going to do here is look at a composite of what all seven letters say about each element. First we'll consider all the things Jesus says about himself. Then we'll hear all the praises that Jesus gives to the various churches; this will give us the big picture of what good things you'd want to be looking for in a church. Then we will examine the different rebukes that Jesus gives to the various churches. Then we'll hear all the commands, then all the warnings, then all the promises, and then his final "Listen up!"

Jesus

- Holds angels, among churches
- First and last, died and rose
- Sharp, two-edged sword
- Son, fiery eyes, fierce feet

- Holds seven spirits and stars
- Holy, true, holds keys
- Amen, witness, beginning

First of all, when Jesus comes to each church, he says who is speaking. He reminds them who's talking, and he often highlights something about himself which that church in particular especially needs to hear. When you put together those things that he says about himself to the various churches, then you get a fuller picture of our Lord Jesus Christ.

He says to Ephesus that he's the one who holds the stars in his hand and walks among the candlesticks. And we know that the stars are the angels of the seven churches. The candlesticks are the seven churches. So Jesus reminds us that he is the one who controls the angelic powers, and that even though he's in heaven, he's also among the churches right now. He walks among his churches.

When he speaks to Smyrna, that persecuted church, he says, "I am the first and the last. I died and rose again" (Revelation 2:8). He reminds us of his great resurrection victory.

To a church that's been compromising, he says, "I'm the one with the sharp, double-edged sword" (Revelation 2:12). We need to be reminded that he wields a sharp sword, and that sword can be the Word of God, as it often is in the Bible, but also his judgments that come upon the enemies of the gospel and also the churches that compromise with the enemies of the gospel.

To another church that's caught up in compromise, he says, "These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze" (Revelation 2:18). Once again, he reminds them of his power and his fierceness.

Jesus is the one who holds the seven spirits, which is the way the book of Revelation sometimes speaks of the Holy Spirit of God in his fullness. The number seven represents fullness. Jesus not only controls the angels that deal with churches, but also the Holy Spirit of God as he's manifested in each of these churches.

Now, when I mentioned earlier that perhaps God has an angel assigned to a church, that might make you think twice. In this room there are the people we see, but what if there's also that angel of God that's present among us when we worship? The Bible speaks of that not just in the symbolic passages of the Bible, such as Revelation, but also when Paul is talking to people about how to behave during worship. He says, "And also because of the angels" (1 Corinthians 11:10). Or when he's giving instruction on how somebody ought to preach, he says, "I charge you in the sight of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels" (1 Timothy 5:21). So there is this sense of angels being present whenever we worship or wherever we go. That ought to be a sobering thought for each of us.

But an even more sobering thought is that Christ himself walks among the churches, that the sevenfold Spirit of God is at work among the churches. "God himself is with us. Let us now adore him," as one of the hymns says.

To another church, Jesus says that he's the holy one, he's true, he holds the keys. "What he opens, no one can shut, and what he shuts, no one can open" (Revelation 3:7). We sometimes don't want to think of Jesus as having a set of keys. We like to think the door is always open. But the door is never going to be open unless he opens it. And if he decides to shut it, nobody else is going to open it. When the door to Noah's ark was closed, it was too late to get into that ark. Nobody was going to open it after God shut the door. And so it is when Jesus Christ has keys. He says, "If I open the door of opportunity, the door of salvation, nobody's going to shut it. But if I close it off, don't think you've got other avenues. Don't think you have other keys that are going to get you in."

Jesus is the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning or the ruler over all of God's creation (Revelation 3:14).

These are the things that Jesus says about himself to the seven churches. We need to hear what he says, because otherwise it's always an imaginary Jesus that we worship. Sometimes, when told about divine punishment, a person will say, "My Jesus would never do that. My God would never do that." Well, I'm sorry, but you don't own God. He doesn't consult your imagination on who he's going to be. He is who he is.

Some of us might not like to hear about a sharp double-edged sword in his hand, or these eyes of fire, or keys locking the door, or those passages elsewhere in the Bible where people knock on the door and they're told, "It's locked, you're too late" (Luke 13:25). Nowadays that's not the way we want to hear Jesus talk. But that's the way the real Jesus talks. So we need to heed him, and then hear what he says to the churches about himself.

Praises

- Orthodox, upright, steadfast
- Spiritually rich, persecuted
- Faithful amid Satan's attacks
- Love, faith, service, endurance
- Unsoiled remnant in dead church
- Spiritually strong, keep Word

What does Jesus say in praise of the churches? He says some great things to Ephesus, and they are very important things. Ephesus is orthodox. They believe the truth, and they will not put up with wicked people or those who claim to have apostolic authority but are false apostles. The people in the church of Ephesus are upright. They hold to the morals and the way of life taught in the Bible instead of changing moral standards every ten minutes. When opposition comes, they're steadfast and they stick with the gospel. Those are things of tremendous value that the Ephesus church has.

The church in Smyrna may be poor financially, but they're rich spiritually. Even though they're persecuted and despised, Jesus praises them and has nothing to criticize about them.

To those who are in Pergamum, a place that you could call Satan's headquarters, where Satan has his throne, Jesus says, "You're faithful amid those attacks of Satan" (Revelation 2:13).

To those in Thyatira, he says, "You've got love, you've got faith, you're serving others, you're enduring, and you're sticking with it" (Revelation 2:19). That too is a wonderful and encouraging thing to hear from Jesus, that these things matter to him.

Even in a dead church, Jesus says, "At least there are some in Sardis who aren't spoiled yet, who aren't ruined, who aren't dead (Revelation 3:4). So I want to encourage you, because just because overall my message to your church is that you're dead as a doornail, that doesn't mean that every individual there is dead.

Those in Philadelphia, Jesus says, "You're strong. You're spiritually strong even though materially and physically you're weak, and you keep my word" (Revelation 3:8).

Laodicea—oops, sorry—nothing good to say.

When you hear the praises that are given to the various churches, that gives us a balanced and beautiful picture of what Jesus is looking for in churches and what he finds that pleases him among his people. And it's a well-rounded picture. It combines orthodoxy and love. It combines uprightness morally and the willingness to serve others and get involved and bless their lives. It involves keeping God's Word and facing hardship. These are the things that Jesus praises in the churches.

And these are the things we should be praying for when we pray for our church and when we pray for God to revive other churches. We don't need to be praying blind. We know what Jesus is looking for. He's told us. He's told us what he likes and doesn't like. These seven letters give a very well-rounded picture of what our Lord and Savior wants and prizes when he finds it among his people.

Rebukes

- Lost first love, not shining
- Blend religions, permissive
- Tolerate false, immoral teachers
- Dead despite name & heritage
- Lukewarm, self-satisfied

Jesus also rebukes where there are failings. Oftentimes the failings are that he doesn't find in a church something that he did find in one of the other churches. Jesus doesn't want us to just major on one valuable thing and then neglect the others.

When you first hear what Jesus says to the church in Ephesus, it may sound like it's just about perfect. The doctrine is good, and they don't put up with baloney and with the novelties of false teachers. The morality is good. They stick with commitments; they don't give up at the first sign of difficulty. They keep on going. Some of us might wonder what more could you say about a

church than that? The doctrine is sound. They value holiness and good behavior. They don't give up in the face of trial. They keep on keeping on. What a great church! But Jesus says, "You lost your first love. You're not loving me the way you once did. You're not loving others the way you once did" (Revelation 2:4). The love seems to have faded away, even while the orthodoxy remains, even while the upright behavior and the high moral standards are held to, even as you keep going and you're diligent, you're a hard worker. Where's the love?

Then there's the church in Smyrna. There is no rebuke. They're persecuted, they're weak, and they're faithful, and Jesus has nothing bad to say about them.

When Jesus speaks to the church in Pergamum, he says, "I like some things that are going on there, but you are holding to the teaching of Balaam and you are tolerating the Nicolaitans" (Revelation 2:14-15). You're a tolerant church. You're a permissive church. You're an inclusive church. You're an affirming church. In fact, you're so inclusive and so affirming that you're including and affirming stuff that I hate. I hate the works of the Nicolaitans and the behavior of Balaam.

Who was Balaam? He was the Old Testament figure who for money was going to put a curse on the people of Israel, but God prevented the curse. Balaam was so dense that God gave his donkey the power to talk to him because there was a sword waiting for Balaam. And there's a sword waiting for the Pergamum church too, as we'll see in a moment. In the story of Balaam, he can't get the curse to work, so he says to the king who hired him to curse, "Here's what you've got to do. You've got to seduce the Israelites. You've got to get them sexually involved with your people, and you've got to get them hanging out with your worship and your gods. If you can get that done, then their God will curse them." And it worked.

A footnote: Balaam was killed by the sword later on. He avoided the sword when his donkey talked to him, but the sword got him later on. But Balaam specialized in blending different religions together and affirming various moralities. Theologians call it syncretism when you take bits and pieces of various religions and moral systems. For example, here's a book title that says it all: *Living Buddha, Living Christ*. The person who writes that title tells you everything you need to know. And there are churchgoers who say, "Isn't it cool? We're moving into greater depths of understanding. We're seeing how all religions at their very heart are the same." But Jesus is not fond of that—worshiping idols along with worshiping Jesus, or permissiveness in morality when he has a standard of holiness.

Thyatira has a similar problem. They tolerate. Toleration is a great and wonderful virtue nowadays. But it is not regarded as a virtue by Christ when it comes to the toleration of false teaching and of immorality infecting the church. Jesus hates it that they tolerate false, immoral teachers. He wants the church not to listen to them, to ban them from teaching there.

Now when you look at those various rebukes, you see that not every church has the same problems. One of the dangers is that if you don't have one problem, you think you're pretty good. So you get churches nowadays that might be labeled liberal or affirming, and love is what they're all about. Action, social action, getting involved and helping others is what they're all about. And they should be. Don't underestimate what Jesus said about love, about being active in

serving and helping others. It's a wonderful thing and it needs to be done. And it's a terrible thing to lose that love for Christ and for others. But if you pride yourself on saying, "I'm so loving," and you being loving means you don't make a big deal about doctrine or moral standards, watch out. Jesus cares about love, but he also cares about the soundness of doctrine and the uprightness of moral standards.

We've seen already the danger of going the other way, where you might say, "We're a Bible-believing church and an upright and moral church. Don't give me all that goo about love. We teach the Bible here. We tell you what God wants. We make it crystal clear, and we don't back down and we don't give up." Those are all very good things. But if the love is lacking, then Jesus says, "I'm going to remove your lampstand, because you're not the kind of church I want you to be" (Revelation 2:5).

So when we hear what Jesus says to the churches, we need to beware of our own tendency to zero in on what we think we're kind of good at and then say those other things don't matter as much. All these things matter, because they matter to Jesus. It's of no help to say, "I thank you, God, that I'm not like other men" (Luke 18:11). That was the prayer of the Pharisee looking over at the publican. And it's not very helpful for a church to say, "God, we thank you that we're not like that church over there. Our church doesn't have those weaknesses." Maybe you don't have those weaknesses, but maybe you've got your own set of weaknesses, and you neglect some of the strengths that the other church has, the strengths that you're despising. So don't look at the other church at all to determine your spiritual health. Look to the Lord, and ask what he thinks of us.

Sometimes it's not even a matter of whether there enough love or enough doctrine and soundness. Sometimes it's a matter of being spiritually dead. Jesus says to the church of Sardis, "You have a reputation for being alive, but you are dead" (Revelation 3:1).

What's going on there? Well, maybe they deserved their reputation once upon a time. There are churches that were great churches, but fifty years later they're running on fumes, and they still think they're great. Once upon a time, they were alive and powerful, and the same name is still on the building, but the life and power are gone. Or sometimes you have colleges with a great reputation as Christian institutions. They were originally founded with a strong faith, but they have long departed from what they were. Yet they still have their old reputation. They still have the name Christian on the college. A college or church can still have a good reputation that lingers from what it once was.

We need to realize that past reputation does not make up for current deadness. The name that a church has is often based on the tradition that it once had. Theologian Jaroslav Pelikan said, "Tradition is the living faith of people who are now dead. Traditionalism is the dead faith of people who are now living." Tradition is a good thing if you remember that living faith of the past. But if you're just banking on that, and all you have now is deadness, then you may still have the name, the reputation, but not the reality.

The harshest words of Jesus are directed at people in the church that he doesn't say much about in detail. He just says, "You are lukewarm" (Revelation 3:16). That's frightening, isn't it? You

could have a lot of ducks lined up. You could have orthodoxy—check. Good standards—check. You go down the list and then you get to lukewarm. Oh, rats! You just don't have that zeal, that delight, that joy, that relish for the Lord. And Jesus has his harshest words for them. But even then, Jesus does not end with harsh words. He also offers an invitation.

So let's listen to those rebukes and realize the dangers of playing a comparison game, where if we're doing okay in one area, we think our church is healthy, and another church is much worse because their weakness lies in a different area than ours. No, we need to listen to the whole picture of Jesus' praises and the whole picture of Jesus' rebukes, and then we need to listen to Jesus' commands.

Commands

- Remember, repent, renew love
- Stay faithful unto death
- Repent
- Hold fast, keep Christ's works
- Wake up, recall, strengthen
- Hold fast to what you have
- Get serious, receive Jesus

Even for churches whom he has no rebuke, Jesus gives some commands. And certainly for those church whom he criticizes and rebukes, he's got some commands.

To those who have lost their first love, he says, "Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first" (Revelation 2:5). Sometimes there are people who really did love the Lord and they really did love other people, and their love was strong--but it waned. So Jesus says, remember, and then repent, and renew your love.

To those who are suffering in Smyrna, Jesus says, "You are suffering. You are facing troubles, and I've got news: it's going to get worse." He says, "It's bad, and it's going to get worse. But I have nothing against you. Stay faithful unto death" (Revelation 2:10). What a great command to Christians in every time: stay faithful, no matter what comes at you.

To the church in Pergamum, he just says, "Repent" (Revelation 2:16). You're putting up with the Nicolaitans, putting up with Balaam's type of teaching, with that mixing of different religions and that mixing of different moralities. Just stop it. Turn around. Repent.

To the church in Thyatira, there are some things that were going on that were good. So he says, "Only hold on to what you have until I come" (Revelation 2:25). Keep Christ's works. Hold on to the love you were involved in and the good things you were doing. Hold on to that. And of course, don't keep putting up with the false teachers and the immorality.

To the dead church, Sardis, he says, "Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die" (Revelation 3:2). There was a reason they had that good reputation. Once upon a time, their church was alive and enthusiastic. Remember what that involved. Wake up, and then strengthen what remains. Even in a dead church, there may be some individuals who are spiritually alive.

Even in a dead church, there are things that still linger from the past that could be built up again. There are still people there who have not soiled their robes. And so, even though the church as a whole is in trouble, Jesus says, “Those of you who are still faithful, stay faithful. Strengthen what remains. Build it back up again.”

To Philadelphia, he has nothing bad to say, but he gives this command, “Hold fast to what you have. Hang in there. Hold on. Hold fast to what you have” (Revelation 3:11).

To the lukewarm Laodiceans, Jesus says, “You’ve got to get serious. Be earnest and repent. Face facts. You claim to be rich, but you’re poor. You claim to see well, but you’re blind as a bat. You claim to be magnificently clothed, but you’re naked. So you’ve got to receive what only I can give you. You’ve got to receive sight and vision from me. You’ve got to be clothed with the righteousness that I provide. You need to be made rich with my wealth, not with the things that you think make you rich. You need what Jesus, and Jesus only, can give. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me. Receive me” (Revelation 3:17-20).

When you’re lukewarm, that’s really the main problem: you’re out of touch with Jesus. You’ve lost track of the fact that all that you have that’s worth having comes from him, and that fellowship with him is what it’s all about. That’s why a church exists. If the church is not fellowshiping with Christ, if Christ is not at home in that church, if people are not eating and drinking with Jesus and enjoying him, then they need to know that he’s at the door and they need to receive him.

These are the commands of Jesus, adapted to the different circumstances of different churches. Again, considered as a whole, these commands show us the importance of repentance, of renewed love, of courage and faithfulness all the way to death, of receiving the fullness of Jesus and all that he gives. That’s the only cure when we’ve lost our love or when we’ve become lukewarm or have any other problem: more Jesus. More Jesus.

Warnings

- Remove lampstand
- Attack with sword
- Disease, death, payback
- Come like a thief
- Spit out

The warnings—that’s the part we don’t like to hear. “I will remove your lampstand” (Revelation 2:5). You might be orthodox. You might be orthodox and upright, but I’m going to yank that lampstand and toss it out, because I don’t see the light of love shining there—unless you repent. There’s always that unless. Every time Jesus gives a warning, there’s always the unless.

No warning for Smyrna. They’re in good shape.

To the church in Pergamum, Jesus says, “I’m the one with the sword, and I’m going to come after you with the sword if things don’t change there” (Revelation 2:16). I’m in various pastors’ groups online, and the way some of them talk about Jesus, I wonder whether they’re talking about the almighty Christ or talking about their pet kitty without claws. In their theology, Jesus is harmless like declawed pet. They think he would never come at anybody with a sword; he wouldn’t come after enemies with a sword; he certainly wouldn’t come after any of his churches with a sword. But he will. And that’s his warning.

When Jesus speaks to the church in Thyatira, he speaks of Jezebel, a woman teacher who is teaching wickedness. I heard a while ago of a woman theologian who she supports ethically sourced porn. According to her, it’s okay for Christians to be involved in porn as long as it’s ethically sourced. Welcome back, Jezebel! And in that same church, Jesus says, you’ve got people who are teaching “deep things,” who pride themselves on thinking deep, who see the deeper unity of the different religions. They see the deeper realities that go beyond all those moral standards that you thought were important. What does Jesus say about their deepness? They are into the “deep things of Satan” (Revelation 2:24). What a terrible phrase—the deep things of Satan—and Jezebel, the ultimate wicked queen of old. That’s what Jesus says when he looks at that church in Thyatira. “Hey, Jezebel, you’re really good at the deep things of Satan.” And what does Jesus say he’s going to do? He’s going to send disease upon them if they don’t change. He’s going to kill children. And he’s going to pay them back what they deserve (Revelation 2:22-23).

Remember, this is Jesus Christ speaking, not the apostle Paul speaking. Not some other Bible writer. You’ve heard that old game before, haven’t you? “This is the way Jesus is, but of course Paul was different, and the apostles, and the other Bible authors were different from Jesus. Such people don’t know diddly about Jesus except from the Bible. Their harmless, wimpy Jesus is just a figment of their imagination. The real Jesus revealed himself in all his splendor to John and speaks these terrible warnings.

Jesus says to a sleepy church, “I will come like a thief in the night. You will not know at what time I will come to you” (Revelation 3:3). When Jesus says, “I’m coming,” he does not only mean the final coming at the end of history. He is coming at the end of history, but he can come sooner than that. He can come to your church sooner than that and wipe it out. Some of these churches that are addressed in these letters are gone. They’re just gone. Jesus can come in judgment on an individual and cast them on a bed of sickness. He can take their life. He can remove a church. He’s the one who holds our lives and who holds all the churches in his hand.

So we need to be ready to hear the real Jesus when he warns us that he could come like a thief, that he can pay us back, or just spit us out (Revelation 3:16). Those are his ferocious warnings. And keep in mind that his warnings are also an opportunity. After he says, “I’m going to spit you out of my mouth unless something changes,” he says, “Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline” (Revelation 3:19). Those whom I love. I’m giving these warnings because I want these warnings to get you off that track and out of the line of fire of my judgment. I am warning you and I’m rebuking you because I love you, and you still have great opportunity to know the Lord, to walk with him, to be straightened out by him, and live in intimate fellowship with him.

Promises

- Eat from tree of life in Paradise
- Crown of life, unhurt by 2nd death
- Hidden manna, engraved stone
- Rule nations, morning star
- Dressed in white, book of life
- Pillar in temple, names engraved
- Christ within; share his throne

If you heed Jesus' warnings and obey his commands, he speaks wonderful promises. What are the promises?

“To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God” (Revelation 2:7). “

He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death” (Revelation 2:11). Jesus says that to the church of Smyrna that’s facing persecution and death. He says, you’re not going to be hurt at all by the second death. In Revelation, the second death is hell. You’re not going to go to hell. Hell has no danger for you at all.

Jesus says, “To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna” (Revelation 2:17). We don’t live by bread alone. We live on the hidden food that God gives to those who love him. “I’ll give some of the hidden manna, and I’ll give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it” (Revelation 2:17).

What’s that white stone that’s engraved with a special name? Well, in that time, a stone could be used for a couple of different things. One was in a jury trial. A white stone meant acquittal. A dark stone meant you were convicted and guilty. And so if your name had a white stone engraved, it could be God’s declaration of innocence and of being made right with him. A second way such a stone could be used was as a token of entrance—what we today would call a ticket. Jesus is giving this declaration of acquittal or this ticket into glory.

“To him who overcomes, I will give authority over the nations. He will rule them with an iron scepter; he will dash them to pieces like pottery—just as I have received authority from my Father. I will also give him the morning star” (Revelation 2:26-28). Jesus Christ is the morning star. He gives himself. That is the greatest of all promises. And he gives authority. You may be facing the challenges of politicians and of nations, but Jesus says, I’m going to give authority over the nations to those who are faithful.

“He who overcomes will be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels” (Revelation 3:5). What a promise—to be clothed beautifully in white, to have your name in the book of life, and nothing, nothing can erase that name. Your name is written there and it can’t be erased. That clothing is given you and it can’t be spoiled. Those are his promises.

“Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God. And I will also write on him my new name” (Revelation 3:12). God seems to like engraving names. He engraves your special name on a white stone, but he also engraves his name on you. You have the name of the new Jerusalem engraved on you as a citizen. You have the name of God, the name of Jesus Christ himself, engraved on you as a pillar in his glorious temple. What a beautiful picture of what it means to not only be in the new Jerusalem, but to be part of God’s glorious temple.

The Bible says there’s not going to be a temple in the new Jerusalem, “because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple” (Revelation 21:22). And we are pillars in that temple with the name of the Lamb and the name of the Father engraved on us.

In his promise to the lukewarm, Jesus says, “Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me” (Revelation 3:19-20). Jesus promises to come to fellowship with us, to be with us forever. And he says, “To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne” (Revelation 3:21). What a promise! To reign with Christ! To share the throne of Christ!

Why does Jesus speak these promises? He wants us to know what we would be missing out on if we abandon him, and he wants us to know the glorious future that awaits those who embrace these tremendous promises by faith. You’ll notice, if you’re familiar with the book of Revelation, that much of this is picked up again throughout the book and especially in the last two chapters—where you’re eating from the tree of life in the paradise of God, and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations, and the great river of life is flowing there (Revelation 22:1-2). They’re crowned. They’re saved from that second death while the devil is cast into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:14). They’re ruling the nations. The nations are bringing their splendor into the new Jerusalem (Revelation 21:24-26). That’s how the book of Revelation ends—with these tremendous promises of God.

So in each of those letters, as you read them, as you meditate on them, listen to what it says about Jesus and what he says about himself. Listen to what he’s looking for in a church and look for those same things, and pray for those same things to be true in our church and in the churches in our community, in our nation, and in our world. Look at the things he rebukes: doctrinal matters, moral matters, failure to love, getting lukewarm and without any zeal. Those are some of the things we can look at and say, “Is Jesus rebuking me in this area?” Listen to the commands of how he wants us to proceed from here, the warnings of what will happen if we don’t, and the promises of belonging to him forever. And then finally, there’s one thing that he keeps saying over and over and over again.

Listen!

Each of these letters has variety in the kinds of things Jesus says, except for one thing that’s always the same: “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches”

(Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). Seven times he repeats it. “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

May the Holy Spirit give each of us as individuals an ear to hear what the Spirit is saying to us as a person. But also may we as a church have ears, so that we’ll know how Jesus is addressing us—the areas that he’s encouraging and building and telling us to keep on keeping on, and also those areas where he wants us to change, where he wants us to be renewed by that wonderful Word and presence that only Jesus himself can bring.

Jesus walks among the churches. He holds the angels in his hand. And he speaks to us. And when Jesus' voice speaks, the voice of his Spirit speaks in our hearts: “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

Churches

By David Feddess

Slide Contents

^{1:10} 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."

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."

^{2:1} 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: 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. ³ You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.

⁴ Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. 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. ⁶ But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

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.

Letter

1. Jesus
2. Praises
3. Rebukes
4. Commands

5. Warnings
6. Promises
7. Listen!

Jesus

- Holds angels, among churches
- First and last, died and rose
- Sharp, two-edged sword
- Son, fiery eyes, fierce feet
- Holds seven spirits and stars
- Holy, true, holds keys
- Amen, witness, beginning

Praises

- Orthodox, upright, steadfast
- Spiritually rich, persecuted
- Faithful amid Satan's attacks
- Love, faith, service, endurance
- Unsoiled remnant in dead church
- Spiritually strong, keep Word

Rebukes

- Lost first love, not shining
- Blend religions, permissive
- Tolerate false, immoral teachers
- Dead despite name & heritage
- Lukewarm, self-satisfied

Commands

- Remember, repent, renew love
- Stay faithful unto death
- Repent
- Hold fast, keep Christ's works
- Wake up, recall, strengthen
- Hold fast to what you have
- Get serious, receive Jesus

Warnings

- Remove lampstand
- Attack with sword
- Disease, death, payback
- Come like a thief
- Spit out

Promises

- Eat from tree of life in Paradise
- Crown of life, unhurt by 2nd death
- Hidden manna, engraved stone
- Rule nations, morning star
- Dressed in white, book of life
- Pillar in temple, names engraved
- Christ within; share his throne

Listen!

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Letter

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