

This morning, I am continuing our series through the book of Revelation. We will be in chapters 2 & 3 this morning. Revelation was written by John, either the apostle John who wrote the gospel and the letters 1, 2, and 3 John, or by another John, an elder in the early church. It was written late 1st century, and is primarily concerned with encouraging Christians who were undergoing persecution in the Roman Empire. The biggest key to understanding this book is to read it according to its genre. It belongs to the genre called “apocalyptic literature.” In apocalyptic literature, matters of the future or the spiritual realm are unveiled, usually through the agency of angels, in lurid colors and with many crazy symbols. Apocalyptic literature is very visual. Instead of saying “Jesus is the judge” it shows Jesus with a sword coming out of mouth. Instead of saying Jesus is sovereign over his church, it shows him holding seven stars in his hand, which are the angels of the seven churches. Instead of saying that the Holy Spirit is the spirit of all the churches, he writes that they are the seven spirits before the throne. And instead of saying that the churches are lights, it depicts them as seven lampstands. In other words, do not read Revelation literally, but recognize that it is communicating in most cases familiar truths in unique, visual ways.

Revelation is 22 chapters long, and so we could take months to go through it. My preference is to look at larger sections and consider the themes and messages we find there, as opposed to going deeper into every symbol and Old Testament allusion. This is why I will be looking at all the letters in 2 & 3 this morning instead of doing seven sermons on the seven letters, which some others would do. Chapter 1 ended with Jesus appearing to John and telling him to write a letter to the seven churches in Asia Minor, which is present day Turkey. This morning’s chapters consist of the seven letters that Jesus dictated to John. You will notice as we read through that there is a similar pattern to the letters:

- Command to write to an angel of a church
- Christ’s self-description derived from the description in ch. 1
- Commendation of the church’s good works
- Accusation because of some sin
- Exhortation to repent with a warning of judgment or an encouragement
- Exhortation to discern the truth of the preceding message
- Promise to the conquerors

This is so unique, to hear Jesus evaluating churches. Surely this applies to us today. He who has an ear to hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Revelation 2:1 - 3:22 - *"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. ⁸ "To the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. ⁹ I know your afflictions and your poverty-- yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. ¹⁰ Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life. ¹¹ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death. ¹² "To the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. ¹³ I know where you live-- where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city-- where Satan lives. ¹⁴ Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality. ¹⁵ Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. ¹⁶ Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth. ¹⁷ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it. ¹⁸ "To the angel of the church in Thyatira write: These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze. ¹⁹ I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first. ²⁰ Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. ²¹ I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling. ²² So I will cast her on a*

*bed of suffering, and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely, unless they repent of her ways. ²³ I will strike her children dead. Then all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds. ²⁴ Now I say to the rest of you in Thyatira, to you who do not hold to her teaching and have not learned Satan's so-called deep secrets (I will not impose any other burden on you): ²⁵ Only hold on to what you have until I come. ²⁶ To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations-- ²⁷ '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. ²⁸ I will also give him the morning star. ²⁹ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. ^{NIV} **Revelation 3:1** "To the angel of the church in Sardis write: These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. ² Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God. ³ Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you. ⁴ Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. ⁵ He who overcomes will, like them, 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. ⁶ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. ⁷ "To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. ⁸ I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. ⁹ I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars-- I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you. ¹⁰ Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth. ¹¹ I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. ¹² 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. ¹³ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. ¹⁴ "To the angel of the church in Laodicea write: These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation. ¹⁵ I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! ¹⁶ So, because you are lukewarm-- neither hot nor cold-- I*

am about to spit you out of my mouth. ¹⁷ You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. ¹⁸ I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see. ¹⁹ Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. ²⁰ 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. ²¹ 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. ²² He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

What a unique section of Scripture, as we hear Jesus evaluating some 1st century churches. And shockingly, it seems that already some churches are in danger of being shut down. But before I begin, please notice what he does not say:

Your music has too many hymns
 You're too casual
 Your children's ministry is using the wrong curriculum
 Your church services are too short

No – Jesus might care about those things, but He has another focus entirely.

If I had to sum up Jesus' message in a phrase, it would be "faithful witness." He calls his church to be a faithful witness, and evaluates them according to how they are doing in fulfilling that calling. I see that phrase as consisting of four things:

1) Faithful to Jesus

In some of the letters, he either praises or rebukes the church for their devotion to Him. Some are zealous and faithful. Others have lost their zeal. His desire is evidently that his church would not be lukewarm, not losing their love for him, not straying after other gods, but that they would be zealous for the Lord.

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

They were valiant for truth, but had lost their love with Christ. Think of Augustine's concept of disordered love, that sin and brokenness happens when our loves are out of order. We were made to love God first and foremost.

Matthew 22:35-40 - *One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: ³⁶ "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" ³⁷ Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' ³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹ And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' ⁴⁰ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."*

Thyatira - ²⁰ *Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols.*

Not just physical adultery but spiritual adultery, forsaking God and going after other idols.

Laodicea - ¹⁵ *I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! ¹⁶ So, because you are lukewarm-- neither hot nor cold-- I am about to spit you out of my mouth. ¹⁷ You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. ¹⁸ I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see. ¹⁹ Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent.*

Jesus uses aspects of the region to communicate this truth. Two nearby towns were known for their hot and cold waters. The hot waters of Hierapolis had a medicinal effect, and the cold waters of Colossae were pure, drinkable, and had a life-giving effect. But by the time the water got to Laodicea, it was warm and nausea-inducing. Jesus tells them that this is what they are like spiritually. And he tells them in strong language that lukewarmness makes him want to vomit.

Lord, set us on fire for you! We are called to not just believe but to love Him.

2) Faithful to the gospel

A big emphasis in these letters is on not tolerating false teachers. We mentioned the Jezebel allusion. Here are two others:

Ephesus – ³ *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...⁶ But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.*

The Nicolaitans taught that some degree of participation in the idolatrous culture of Ephesus was permissible.

Pergamum - ¹⁴ *Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality.* ¹⁵ *Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.* ¹⁶ *Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.*

Balaam used Moabite women to entice the Israelite men to defect from the Lord by fornicating with them and joining with them in the worship of their pagan gods. Notice that Jesus uses notable people from the past as metaphors for what is happening in their church today.

Jude 1:3-4 - *Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints.* ⁴ *For certain men whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are godless men, who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord.*

This is a theme throughout the New Testament that truly does not get much attention. The stain on the church that comes from greedy televangelists, prosperity preachers, etc. is terrible.

3) Faithful to witness

There are many pictures of the church in the Bible – bride of Christ, family of God, body of Christ, spiritual temple. In Revelation, the main picture is of the church as a lampstand, meant to display Jesus and the good news of salvation that is found in Him to the world. The church is a light on a hill, a faithful witness to the gospel. In some of these letters, Jesus commends the churches for their witness and good deeds:

Thyatira - ¹⁹ *I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first.*

Philadelphia - ⁸ *I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name.*

These churches are commended for their persevering witness. Other churches are commended for staying doctrinally pure but are chastised for their lack of witness to the outside world. But we know that this is close to Jesus' heart for His people, based on his last words to his disciples:

Matthew 28:18-20 - *Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."*

Acts 1:8 - *But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."*

This is so critical that two of the churches are already in danger of losing their lampstand, their identity as a Christian church.

4) Faithful through suffering

The churches were facing serious challenges to compromise their faithfulness to Jesus, more serious than anything we experience. Caesar and the imperial cults demanded homage, that Caesar would be worshiped as lord. It was almost impossible to rise up in class without having to offer sacrifices to the emperor. Those who did not participate were seen as politically disloyal and unpatriotic and would be arrested and punished under Domitian's rule. Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna in AD 115, is an example of someone who was executed for not giving public acknowledgement of Caesar as Lord.

Another challenge to compromise came from the trade guilds. Participation in the guilds included feasts where they would offer sacrifices to the deity of the trade, or homage to Caesar. Christians who wanted to avoid idolatry would therefore be hurt economically by not being a part of the trade guilds. The choice was to compromise and deny Christ, or to stay faithful to Christ and suffer.

Beyond the compromise, they were also facing suffering and persecution for being Christians. They had been protected as a Jewish sect, but eventually the Jews turned them over as a new religion to the Romans, and they experienced persecution.

Pergamum - ¹³ I know where you live-- where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city-- where Satan lives. ¹⁴ Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality. ¹⁵ Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.

Pergamum was the center of Romans government and pagan religion in Asia Minor. They also had trade guild festivals involving celebration of patron deities through feasts and sometimes immoral activities.

Smyrna - ⁹ I know your afflictions and your poverty-- yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. ¹⁰ Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life

They are poor and afflicted, yet they are rich. They will be thrown in prison and suffer, but Jesus calls them blessed.

The church today is tempted to compromise. Compromise on sexuality. Compromise on finances. Get in bed with politic power. We may want to be liked by the masses, but faithfulness to Jesus means that you will be persecuted.

Each letter ends with “to those who overcome.” They are all encouraged to overcome. What does that mean?

Revelation 12:10-11 - Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say: "Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ. For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down. ¹¹ They **overcame** him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.

Overcome the temptation and threat of the world through denial, taking up the cross, suffering, and even dying. **The victor is not obvious to the world.** Smyrna is rich. Sardis has a reputation of being alive but they are dead. Laodicea – wealth has made them lukewarm – repent and come back into relationship with me

Those who overcome will receive rewards and true riches of unity with Christ – eat from the tree of life in paradise, crown of life, not hurt by second death, hidden manna, white stone, authority over the nations, the morning star, dressed in white, name in the book of life, pillar in the temple of my God, name of God on him, new name, sit on my throne

That's what it means to be a faithful witness. How are we doing?

Let's spend some time in prayer for our church.