

## ***Revelation: Letters***

### ***Prayer:***

### ***Locating Ourselves:***

So, last week we didn't talk all that much about Chapter 1 of Revelation; we spent most of our time in introductory stuff. But if we had discussed the chapter, we would have seen John having an apocalyptic vision of a larger-than-life glorified Jesus.

This Jesus is in charge--and more than this, he's on his way to put things in order, and he tells John: Write down what you see, and write down some letters for me, because there are things my churches in the Roman Empire need to know. And today we're talking about these letters John writes to these congregations that existed in Western Turkey.

Let me lay out some important things. Every message is going to start this way: Just a few things we can't forget as we read.

### ***Black & White***

First, John's world is a black and white world. You are either loyal to Jesus, acting like the faithful witness he was, or you're loyal to the devil, to God's enemies, who are embodied in Rome. This is just how John views things.

And if we call someone Satan it's because we really

don't like them, because they've done terrible things to us or others. We use the name as an identifying label we can put on people we really, really dislike--legitimately or illegitimately. We "demonize" our enemies. But *John* is using the word to talk about spiritual realities. We rarely mean that in fact the person we're talking about really *is actually possessed by evil*. We tend to not go that far.

John is saying that Rome is in fact possessed by the devil, and wholly used by the devil. He's not demonizing them. He's just telling us about the reality that Rome and its institutions have been demonized, possessed in the worst way: their institutions, their leaders, the whole shebang.

For John "getting along" with Rome or those who are in league with Rome just isn't an option. We have to take seriously his perspective in this context; because frankly, it's the perspective Jesus is promoting in this book. We may, at some point, talk about how that relates to our present situation; but for what it's worth, this doesn't give us permission to demonize whatever institution we don't like.

### ***Scripture***

Secondly, John knows his Bible. He knows Scripture better than you and me and I think all of us put together. Every passage of Revelation references and draws images from all over Scripture, but especially

the prophets, Exodus, other Old Testament passages.

Expect this. We could spend most of our time each Sunday just talking about all these connections. We won't too much, but it'll come up.

### ***Apocalyptic Worldview:***

And again, spiritual realities are more than theoretical for John. For John, entities and institutions in our world have beings who represent them in the unseen spiritual world. So Jesus can tell John to write to the angels of the churches in such and such a place, because a view of the world that is informed by apocalyptic sensibilities knows that every institution has a spiritual counterpart, that exists objectively and interacts with spiritual realities that are outside our normal perception.

And many Christians today take this far more seriously than we often do. I think we often neglect these things to our detriment, frankly.

But there are really interesting things that show up in the letters John writes to these congregations in Western Turkey. There's no way for us to walk through every single letter Jesus dictates here: Some are kind of boring, some are too full. What I want to do instead is talk about the high-points—or low-points, I guess—that reveal the broad message of Jesus to these seven churches. So what do we see?

## ***Jezebel & All Her Friends***

We see references to groups of people and individuals. And we have no idea who they really are. But we can learn about them.

In the letter to Thyatira, John records a condemnation to “that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet and is teaching and beguiling my servants to practice fornication and to eat food sacrificed to idols.” She’s apparently teaching something called “the deep things of Satan.”

Which, you know...sounds bad to me. Like, why would I want to learn that?

But there are some in the church that are eating this up, apparently. But if we were a part of that church, we all would have known who he was talking about, right?

The real Jezebel, by the way, was the wife of the Israelite King, Ahab, who led him away from worshipping God. And as far as John is concerned, this woman is doing the same things. She’s gathered a following in the church, and is endangering this group of Christians, basically leading them to the dark-side, right? Pastor John sees the danger here.

He goes on to say fine: sleep with her if you want. She’s available. Follow her ideas. But if you do you’ll

share in the judgment that she's setting up for herself.

Look: Do you tell your kids to try drugs, all of 'em, because it's good to experience things? Do you tell them to run across busy highways because it's smart to know how to dodge cars?

No: we train our kids to make wise, safe choices, because the choices they make carry consequences. They could die. John and Jesus both are concerned for these churches, and do not want to see the people who make them up stray over into dangerous territory, places Jezebel is taking them.

And there are others in other places doing similar things. We learn about "some...who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the people of Israel, so that they would eat food sacrificed to idols and practice fornication" and in the same church, the one in Pergamum, there are those who "hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans."

The greek name Nicolaus means the same thing as the Hebrew name Balaam. Whatever they teach, it might be similar things. (DeSilva, Honor Discourse and Rhetorical Strategy, 85). Balaam was an Old Testament character who, in the book of Numbers, causes Israel to worship other gods. These were factions, groups, who were definitely straying from the

message of Jesus, and partnering with Rome (Ibid.)

The theological understanding that lies underneath this stuff is the belief that if you're taking part in the Imperial Cult, where your food sacrificed to idols was coming from, you're playing patty-cake with the devil. And Jesus is on his way, and if he takes out the devil while you two are having a tea-party, you'll be collateral damage. You'll get taken out, too. So hurry up and run home before Jesus gets here.

### ***Snapshots: Problems in the Synagogues***

We see a phrase in the second of today's seven letters, the letter to the angel of the church in Smyrna. John writes "I know the slander on the part of the those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan."

What! That's a little strong, right? We see something really similar in the letter to Philadelphia First Congregation.

Here's what's happening here: Jewish people were, by special declaration, able to get out of the imperial cult. We talked about this thing, the "imperial cult," which at the end of the day is all the stuff that went into Emperor worship. The Emperor claimed to be divine, civic life demanded that you take part in worshipping him, and Jewish people, Israelites from Judea, didn't have to.

But Christians by this time were a weird bunch. They weren't just Jewish Christians anymore, what we would call Messianic Jews. Many of them were Gentiles, were "not-Jews." And even though Christian theology was about as close as you could get in the ancient world to Jewish theology, there were some huge differences, right? Whether or not the Messiah has come yet, the role of the Law in our lives, just how God was Jesus?

These things were beyond the "differences of opinion level."

And what many people think John is talking about here as he calls the Smyrna and Philadelphia synagogues the devil's is the fact that Christians were starting to no longer be welcome in the synagogues. The differences were just too much; they were being forced out.

And when they get forced out of the synagogues, they no longer are able to have the protection that the synagogues offer, namely: the ability to live in Roman society but not take part in the Imperial Cult.

So as far as John is concerned, these synagogues have become tools of Satan, used by the devil to make it so that Christians will be forced to take part in the Imperial Cult. And those people in the synagogues who think they are God's people: they aren't, because they

didn't recognize the Messiah, and don't have the Holy Spirit.

And again: John isn't interested in building bridges, you know, celebrating the shared aspects of the Jewish & Christian tradition. John has no sense of Judeo-Christian Roots or anything like this. He's just a pastor worried about his churches, who are still a minority in the world, who were basically hiding out in the synagogues, and can't anymore.

### ***Letters: Introduction***

So each of these letters are written to particular churches in Western Turkey, the province of Asia in the Roman Empire. Well: to the angels of these churches, who act as representatives of these communities of Christians, in the spiritual realm. John can write them, and it's like writing to the churches themselves; they're ambassadors of these churches before the Lord.

### ***Letters: Structure***

And the overall structure of these letters is pretty easy to outline. Here it is.

***Ephesus: 2:1-7***

***Smyrna: 2:8-11***

***Pergamum: 2:12-17***

***Thyatira: 2:18-29***

***Sardis: 3:1-6***

***Philadelphia: 3:7-13***

***Laodicea: 3:14-22***

Easy right? Seven letters to seven angels; Jesus walks among these churches, which he calls earlier “seven golden lamp stands,” and holds in his hand these angels, which he earlier calls “seven golden stars.” This is beautiful, you know?

And each one of these letters is structured exactly the same as the others. They are all structured exactly the same way. And one author--a guy who loves alliteration as much as the rest of us--has presented the structure of these letters in a way that I think can be helpful for us. (cf. Tenney, 68ff.)

***Commission: “Write this to...”***

***Character: “These are my words...”***

***Commendation: “Thatta’ Church!”***

***Condemnation: “But I have this against you...”***

***Correction: “So, do this...”***

***Call: “If you’ve got ears, listen up!”***

***Challenge: “For the one who overcomes...”***

Commission, Character, Commendation, Condemnation, Correction, Call, and Challenge.

And, nothing is as tidy as we want, right? The call & challenge trade places about half-way through the list.

More importantly: Not every letter has every one of these sections.

Some of these letters are missing either the condemnation section, or the commendation section. No warning, no praise. And this isn't an accident. Anytime we're reading the Bible, and we notice a part missing from some standard form or structure of a passage, we are supposed to notice it.

The classic example of this is Paul's letter to Galatians, which is missing the standard "Hey, I hear you're doing great so I'm praying for you" section. Paul's upset; he skips this to send a message to the Galatians that he isn't happy; he expects them to notice it, and to pay more attention to his letter because of it.

Those churches that are not commended, are not encouraged: they need to notice that. Those churches that are not condemned for anything, this is good, this cool. They should see this and stay their course, right?

If you're interested in this, you can look it up yourself. I'll put a few examples in the message we post online, but just check it out: Commission, Character, Commendation, Condemnation, Correction, Call, and Challenge. Take a look at the letter to Sardis and Smyrna: See what's missing in each of them.

***Letters: What They Share***

But there are things that each of these letters share that we've got to notice. This is important.

Even the churches that face no condemnation, ones that are commended and praised, even they receive correction from Jesus. They need further encouragement, need a slight nudge either in their behind to keep them going, or in the side to get them back on a straight course.

These seven Roman churches are like most churches, are apparently like congregations have always been. No matter how great we're doing, how highly God thinks of us, we always need righted a little bit.

***Letters: Jesus, Repeated***

And in each of these letters, in that "Character" section, some quality of Jesus that was mentioned in Chapter One is restated, and in restating them the congregations are reminded that Jesus is worthy of their absolute loyalty.

Jesus is the one who walks among the churches, who is in control of the angels that represent & protect them, he's the one who is "the first and the last," a statement about his expansive authority & the amazing power that he holds. All the descriptions we have about Jesus point out how worthy he is of worship.

This is as expansive language as we have seen of Jesus; and it points us to part of the reason these Christians were being kicked out of the synagogues: they were saying that Jesus and the God of the Old Testament were cut from the same cloth. Different activities, but the same person.

And even in these passages we see the way these statements about Jesus interact with the context that these Christians are living in. When we're told at the start of the letters to Ephesus & Sardis that Jesus is "the one who has the seven stars," it's not only a statement about the fact that Jesus is in charge of the angels of these churches, and the churches themselves: it's also a statement against Rome.

Domitian--the emperor at the time this letter was written--had a son who died, and to commemorate his death, a coin was struck. It had the words "The Divine Caesar, Son of the Emperor Domitian" on it, and a picture of the child sitting on sphere and holding his hands out to seven stars. And if you're kid is a god, then you are too, right? This is part of the claim Domitian is making on this coin--I'm a god, and so is my child. I made a picture of the coin my off-video zoom image so you can check it out later.

The counter-claim of letters is look, it ain't true. Domitian's claims are a lie. Jesus is the one who holds

the seven stars. Domitian's a fake. So like so much in Revelation, there's layers of meaning in this statement. But all the layers point out that the claims Rome makes about itself are not true (DeSilva, 917).

### ***Letters: Looking Forward***

And lastly, each of the challenge section of these letters—remember, Commission, Character, Commendation, Condemnation, Correction, Call, and Challenge—each of these “Challenge” sections actually foreshadows stuff we're going to read as we move forward. Avoiding the “Second Death,” the “New Jerusalem,” the “Tree of Life,” “White Robes” & “White Stones.” It's all stuff we'll see as we move forward. Which, again, is more support that what we see in chapters 4-22 wasn't for us, but was for them, these seven congregations, and you can't split Revelation up into letter and not-letter. The things we'll see are the reasons that these churches should listen to Jesus.

So.

What can we say about these letters.

### ***Jesus knows his churches particular needs & situation:***

We can say that Jesus knows the particular situation each of his churches finds themselves in. Jesus knows his congregations' particular needs and the situation each of them face.

Churches are different, right? But all find themselves in a particular situation, with particular needs, and particular people, even if they exist in the same culture, under the same government. Jesus cares about the differences among his churches, and knows what each church needs.

***All the churches are corrected:***

We can say that some of these churches were only commended and praised, like Smyrna and Philadelphia. Some of them were only condemned, like Sardis and Laodicea. A small majority of them were both commended and condemned: Ephesus, Pergamum, Thyatira. But all of these churches were corrected. The best of them and the worst of them. No matter the situation the congregation was in, it could be more faithful.

***Keeping to Jesus:***

We can say that five churches—Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Philadelphia—are either commended or condemned because of matters of loyalty and unity. They've either avoided divisive teaching and avoided Rome, and so are commended, praised. Or, they've given into teaching that tells them embrace Rome. They've split into factions, and strayed from the Lord. And they're condemned for it.

For John, the churches face a constant pressure to

abandon Jesus as their center. John keeps calling them back to who Jesus is, what Jesus is capable of, what Jesus has already done, and will do soon.

So what are we supposed to do with this 2,000 year old collection of letters to churches that it seems like we have nothing in common with?

### ***Bridging the Gap: Personalization***

Let me be straightforward. People almost always personalize these letters. If we read them, we do it devotionally, as individuals, as if they're printed on a desktop calendar. We think to ourselves, "Have I turned away from my first love, Jesus?" "Am I patiently enduring?" "Can I be faithful unto death?" Sometimes we're go further: "Do I worship anything more than I worship God?" "Am I a part of some small group of divisive antagonists in the church, leading people to worship things other than God?" I dunno if divisive antagonists ask themselves that, actually, but you get the idea.

### ***Bridging the Gap: Jesus' Concern***

We could remember that Jesus knows the particular situation that each of his churches is going through, and despite their similarities, they are different churches.

And in remembering this, we can remember that we are not just another church on Smoky Row road trying

to flop our way through a pandemic. We are unique. We are special.

We have unique blessings, unique problems, and a unique calling as a church. So when we think about ourselves, we need to consider ourselves on our own terms; not in relation to all the other churches around us. That's a particularly difficult thing to do right now, if we're connected to what's going on in the church. We need to ask what we can do that no other church can do, because no other church is Smoky Row Brethren Church.

So: what can we do?

### ***Bridging the Gap: Correction, Participation, Action***

We could remember that everyone of these churches needed something that could be called correction. No matter how good they were doing at being faithful, they needed nudged a little. So in what ways might we need nudged, Smoky Row?

Are we, as a church, holding to Jesus? Are we, as a church, standing up against the pressures of the world? We could maybe talk particularly about all the things we do: How is our giving? How is our unity? How is our prayer? Really, where are our weaknesses? And how can we as a group work to improve them?

And these are questions that each of us should be thinking about, because we are in this together. We are in this together, and if Jesus were to say something to Smoky Row, he would be saying it to all of us, not just me, or some Governance Team member; all of us.

But it's been pointed out (cf. Tenney, *Ibid.*) that each of the challenges in these letters is an individual challenge: For the person who overcomes, such and such will be their reward. As we identify a need in our church, each one of us has a personal responsibility to act on that need for the sake of all of us.

And this makes sense, because we are a church, together, not a church, apart.

But as I sat and thought this week about what God might want to say to us, it wasn't correction that I wanted to emphasize. It was commendation.

### ***Conclusion: Commendation***

Because while every church John wrote to got corrected, not all of them were commended. But I do think God wants to commend you, through me, today.

So, here me: You are doing well.

You are in the middle of a weird, hard time. A time of dislocating confusion, of disrupted routine, taking baby steps into a world that will not be the way the world

was just a short time ago. Our society is in the middle of what one writer has called an “omni-crisis,” crisis on top of crisis on top of crisis—environmental, economic, governmental, societal. The things that we've known, which modernity was built upon, are unsafe, and no one knows just what the future will bring.

That is an unsettling time to be alive. No wonder so many of our neighbors just want to pretend like nothing's wrong, and do what they did just a few months ago.

But Smoky Row, in the midst of this wave of troubles, which can weigh down our hearts, you're keeping the faith. You're showing up, literally and figuratively. You're providing what you can give to those in need, and to each other, and to the Lord. You're praying—I know—and hoping, and clinging to what is good. You're open to God leading you to care about new things, and being brought back to your first love, too.

I'm so proud to be counted among you.

I want our eyes of faith to be opened so that we see the ways God is preparing us for our shared future, as a congregation, preparing us by way of the situation we find ourselves in. We will eventually come together in person, again, and when we do we will have to consider so many things about what it means to be us, again, and how we live in the world together, again,

and what God is again asking of us.

But until that comes, and during this weird time we've been together, what I've seen of you has been the evidence of God's presence among you. I've seen the fruit of the Spirit among you: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, self-control. Anxiety, worry, fear—the things we would expect when our congregational life has become so unsettled and abnormal—they've been absent entirely. That's a work of God, and I love God for it, and I love all of you for leaning into Him.

So. Are there things that we can each correct? Things that, together, we ourselves ought to consider? Yeah. Every church every can do better. But I think you are meant to be commended this morning, for your hard work of staying faithful, and drawing close to Christ when the world around you is asking for your loyalty, your anxiety, your worry, and your reactivity. You're not giving it, and I think Jesus is very proud of you, of us.

So let's keep on keeping on. We'll move forward in this group letter John writes, and see more of what God wants these seven churches of His to hear.