

Ministering the Word



CLEARCREEK
CH A P E L

To the Seven Churches

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*S*avoring the *S*upremacy of *G*od
*S*tudying the *W*ord of *G*od
*S*haping the *P*eople of *G*od
*S*preaching the *G*ospel of *G*od

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Introduction

Why study these obscure churches today?

- They are personal letters from Jesus to His church. They express His love and concern for the community of believers as they represent Him in the age just before eternity.
- They are written to those within every congregation who want to overcome—whose love for God and His kingdom motivates them to strive ever upward even in failing churches.
- Through them we today can evaluate the dangers and duties that characterize our congregation.

Describe various approaches taken to this portion of Revelation:

- Closed approach - The message to these seven churches is so unique that we can only draw very general lessons from them. This view feeds itself on the references to obscure heresies and groups. After all who are the Nicolaitans and why do we care?
- Historicist approach - Each church is representative of a succeeding age in church history. This is a very popular view that has only surface justification from Scripture. But it is reading history back into the Scripture. All versions of this view see our own day as that of the last church. The major problem with this view is that it does not account for the presence of all the churches *in the very generation in which it was written*.
- Practical approach - Each church represents one of seven major types of churches indicating their characteristics, strengths and weaknesses.

We will take this last approach.

How do the messages relate to chapter one? Is it possible to go immediately into a study of the letters to the seven churches without connecting it with what has gone before? No, that is not possible. That is what we will strive to do in our first study.

The Christ of the Churches

Revelation 1

Introduction

When Moses approached the burning bush where the very glory of the Presence of God flamed, he was told to remove his shoes for he was standing on holy ground. As we come to the pages of this chapter, we also should remove our mental and spiritual shoes as we draw near the awesome sight of our glorious Lord. We are coming onto holy ground.

But let us not lose hope or encouragement. The soul entrancing power of these words came through the experience and pen of a man just like us. He is John. Now John has been a follower of Christ, a disciple and now an apostle. His ministry resume included a long pastorate of the church at Ephesus, the gospel of John as well as 3 smaller epistles. He lived to see the terrible defection of some of their elders, an event Paul warned them about in Acts 20:29-30 and which John alludes to in 1 John 2:18-29. He has been arrested for his faith, thrown in prison, possibly boiled in oil and now banished to the tiny Isle of Patmos. Here is a man like us. He knows what it means to be married, have a family, do ministry and train others. He has tasted the bitter fruit of error and seen the wolves slinking about in sheep's clothes. He has watched the fabric of his beloved church torn apart by doctrinal error with the bitterness and hatred that accompanies it. He has suffered immense physical pain. Now, he contemplates the rest of his life, separated from his brethren who are also suffering.

So the truths of Revelation 1 come to us from God through John, not to exhaust or frustrate or even bore us. But in the grist mill of life and ministry, it comes to give us perspective, purpose and power.

The Vision: From God to the Church

(v.1-3)

At the beginning of the Olympic games, the torch is brought from Greece to the host country in a long chain of runners. These runners take the lit torch and hand it in a long relay. The highest point of the opening ceremonies comes with the entrance into the stadium of the Olympic torch. There, in grand style to the crashing chords of a stirring anthem, the final runner takes the torch up the stairs. In a moment of climatic pause, the torch is lifted then lowered and the Olympic flame is lit.

There is just such a chain in these opening verses. The torch of the revelation of Jesus Christ is handed from God the Father who gives it

to Christ. He communicates it to the angel who shows it to John. John, in a moment of grand climax, brings his pen to the paper. We now have those words which we read or hear. O, our souls flame up as we treasure and heed the unfolding of Christ.

The first of the seven Beatitudes (blessed are those) of this book comes to those who:

- Read - that is they read it out loud. This would have been the common practice in that day due to widespread illiteracy;
- Hear - we may hear this text with our ears or with our eyes;
- Heed - we treasure and obey what we hear.

So God has brought the flame of the revelation of Christ from His throne through His servant and now it is put into your hands—your ears and eyes: what are we going to do with it?



When we put on a program or a play, we usually want to have props and backgrounds and scenery. Daniel 7:13-14 is great prophetic backdrop against which what follows is set. Imagine the heavenly scene Daniel paints.

The Vision: God in His Greatness

(v.4-8)

John, to the church.

This revelation is to bring us enabling grace and a calming peace.

God and His Throne

(v.4-5a)

The key word here is *from*. Here is His *position*. The nature and character of God makes His grace and peace significant. He is the exalted King from whom this grace and peace comes. What we are to see is His Preeminence.

Suppose you received a letter from our President that opened with wishing you power and calm. Knowing his character and position, such a message would probably cause most of us deep concern. What is about to happen to me? But God wants us to see that this grace and peace comes from the very Presence on the Throne of Heaven.

The revelation of Jesus Christ and the enabling grace and calming peace that issues from that revelation all come in context of the Trinity. The Father is designated as Eternally existing one. The Spirit is indicated in the words “seven-fold Spirit before the Throne.” But Jesus Christ is named.

Here is the exalted Christ in His three offices. He is Prophet as the faithful witness. He is Priest as the firstborn (meaning, being first in his status, not first as to the historical record). He is King for He rules over Kings—monarchs and dictators and governors and Prime Ministers, and even Presidents.

God and His People

(v.5b-6)

The Reality of God and His People

The key word here is *to*. Here is our *praise*. Here is His *provision*. He has done all this to make grace and peace possible. The revelation of Jesus is an unveiling of His attributes and an explaining of His accomplishments.

In the midst of terrible trial and distressing trouble, we need the comfort and encouragement that comes in being reminded that Christ:

John's Gospel

- Loves us - His love is deep and continual. It is the well-spring of His choice of us, His delight in us and His desire to dwell in us.

John's Epistles

- Freed us from our sins - The calamities of life and living may be hanging from us like chains, but we are freed from our sins. This sometimes does not affect us as it ought because we do not see nor feel the magnitude, the misery and foul stench that our sins are. When Christian in *Pilgrim's Progress* looked at the cross, the burden of his sins rolled off his back into the grave. What an uplifting and heartening word this is!

John's Revelation

- Constituted us as a Kingdom community of priests - This is our sustaining and empowering perspective: we are serving our King, offering up ourselves to Him as priests offering living sacrifices .

In the midst of terrible trial and distressing trouble, we need the comfort and encouragement of being sought, saved and serving.

The Response to God by His People

The heartbeat of a serving people who know they are loved of God and freed from their sins is to magnify the worth of God and bow to the supremacy of God, from now on and forever.



There is another very important revelation of Christ—He is seen in His relation to God's throne and to God's people. Now He must be seen in His relation to the World.

God and the World

(v.7)

The key word here is *behold*. Here is His *Parousia*. Here is His appearing. From heaven, for His people—but against the world. This is the triumph and terror of the Lord's coming.

John sees Him returning just as He left. There was a bright morning where John stood with the other disciples and watched Jesus go up into the clouds. The angels sent them on to their ministries with the promise that Jesus would come just like that. So John gathers up the prophecy and promise and nourishes his hope on the sweet honey of that prospect.

But what is triumph for us will be terror for the lost. Everyone will see Him. From all over the world, all the tribes and peoples of the earth who have rejected Him will suddenly be overwhelmed in the flood of His fire and wrath and they will mourn. How is it with on this day? How will it be with your soul on that day? Will you be one of the redeemed or one of the ruined. Will there be magnificent triumph or mournful and mad terror? Flee to Christ today. In Him alone put your faith. For in Him we will be delivered from the wrath to come.

God and His Word

(v.8)

There is a sense of declaration here which is not to be missed. For what is to come in the Revelation that is this book, God stands as this kind of God.

- Alpha and Omega - God is the first and last of all that is meaning. This means that He is the creator, sustainer and definer all existence. He is its beginning and its end. Just as understanding our written language requires a knowledge of the alphabet, so understanding what exists and what it means requires God.
- Who is, who was and is to come - God is an ever present NOW. He simply is. From our view, He is, was and will be. From God's point of view, He simply is.
- The Almighty - This is a very important designation of God in the book of Revelation. In the ebb and flow of the tides of time and the conflict of Satan in sin against the saints and righteousness, we need to know that our God is almighty. Satan must never be thought as equal and opposite God. No, Satan's opposite number is Michael.

How we need to know when all does not seem to be going well with us and with our world, that God stands sovereign over it all, understands what it all means and is in ultimate control.

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take,
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break
In blessings on your head.

William Cowper

The Vision: Christ in His Glory

(v.9-20)

John, as one in the church.

John has seen the greatness of God as Christ is the one over the church who has saved His people, is glorified by His people, and who is coming for His people. Now John sees Christ as glorified in the midst of His people. Christ in His glory is the object of John's wor-

ship. Christ in His glory moves among the churches. Christ in His glory sustains the messengers (pastors) of the churches. So this paragraph will prepare us for the penetrating analysis of each church which follows in chapters two and three.

The Explanation John Gave

(v.9-10a)

John wants to identify himself closely with us. He is not so different from us. He is our brother and sharer in our blessings and our problems.

John wants us to see ourselves in his place. Our lives in so many ways ought not to be different from his. Christians who are reading this Book should draw from it the same help and hope that John does.

John wants us to understand that he had borne witness to the Word of God and to the testimony of Christ (v.2) and is now suffering the consequences (v.9).

John wants to remind us what the Lord's day ought to be like for us. There is a sense of communicating what worship, privately and corporately may involve. It was the Lord's Day and He was in the Spirit. Though he could not assemble with God's people, he could still commune with and worship God.

The Experience John Had

(v.10b-17)

When something amazing has happened to us, we usually want to relate it to someone. We usually relate it with great animation and excitement. John has had an amazing experience of God in Christ. He relates this, not so that we will attempt to duplicate this experience, but rather so that we will pay attention to the messages that follow it. It is almost always self-deceiving to expect to have the same experiences as others. Our experience of God in Christ needs to be genuine.

What Was Heard

(v.10b-11)

John heard the voice of God with both his spiritual and physical ears.

- It was a *commanding* voice. It was loud with a trumpet like sound. It arrested his attention. It would not be ignored. Sometimes God's voice is a small still one, sometimes it is a loud disturbing one.
- It was a *commissioning* voice. It told him what he was to do. Write and send. John had a clear understanding of what that voice demanded of him.



When Paul and Paul are playing their trumpets and they hit an especially high note or play loud, your heads turn. But if we hear a voice that trumpets what we are to do, we had better listen and obey.

What Was Seen**(v.12-16)**

John turns to see the voice. And he sees lamps. This idea happens all the time in the Book of Revelation. Look a lion and he sees a lamb. Look a city and he sees a bride

John sees seven lamp stands. Moving among them is One like the Son of Man. John uses Luke's designation for Jesus.

We must at this point stop and remember that John sees in terms of symbols and metaphors. He uses language that is rich in the metaphors of the Old Testament and the Rabbinical inter-testament writings. What makes the whole Book of Revelation profitable to us is to listen to the metaphors and symbols and see the image as a whole. The words of John are metaphorical descriptions of majestic realities.

Even the greatest painting's beauty and power comes from seeing the whole, standing a bit away from it and seeing the image. We too often tend to get out our magnifying glass to trace every brush stroke and every line. Some would even try to detect the pencil marks underneath. Doing so may say much about technique and reality; but it is not the painting. So let us see this without trying to analyze every stroke of the prophetic brush.

This imagery is meant to convey a sense of ancient wisdom and magnificent power. Our eyes are dazzled by His brightness and the ground rumbles under our feet under the mighty cascade of His voice. His truth pierces the soul with the parry and thrust of Spanish steel. His gaze fixes on us in the white-hot arc of a welding torch. The brightness of His countenance is a noon day sun in summer. And in an outstretched hand glitters seven stars.

What Was Done**(v.17)**

His whole being utterly failed him and John feel in fear at His feet. To all of you who listen at the keyhole of Charismatic theology on radio, and TV and books—if we were to see Jesus now, it would not be the warm, fuzzy, enfolding sense of self-affirming beatitude. It would be a soul rending, sin exposing, mind blowing brightness that would threaten our very existence.

The Exhortation John Received**(v.17-20)**

When we have fallen prostrate at His feet with a sense of His greatness and supremacy and our own unworthiness, then comes the comforting, encouraging exhorting words of God. A vision of the greatness and glory of God *is always given to people who being sent to serve God.*

- To courage energized by truth about Christ. “Do not be afraid—here are the facts. If you think that the images of who I am are great, let me remind of you of these realities as well.” These words leave us without a doubt that Jesus is God and that He is the redeemer. John hears the gospel.
- To a task communicating truth about Christ. “Write ...” This is probably the only book in the New Testament that has its outline right at the beginning. The obedience to this command brought about the book that is the Revelation of Christ.
- To understand truth about Christ. Here is what those metaphors point to. Here is the reality behind them. Christ is upholding His ministers. Christ is present in His church.

Conclusion

- In the midst of the very pressing troubles and trials of our lives, may we gain strength and calm, grace and peace from the greatness of God and the glory of Christ. May this not just be words and religious slogans—may they be deep resources of help and hope from the Spirit.
- Christ is in His church. Christ is upholding His ministers. How this encourages us and motivates us. Yet it also causes us to reflect on our accountability to Christ. May we be found faithful and steadfast in all our loving and laboring in Christ.
- May we, in the Word of God, hear His voice and see His form. May we gain real perspective, power and purpose from having a sense of the majesty, supremacy and glory of Christ. May we be challenged and comforted by all the truth about Him. May our hearts pant after His soul satisfying greatness.

Notes

Ephesus: Duty and Devotion

Revelation 2:1-7

Introduction

Background Church is about 40 years old. Is the church who received the book of Ephesians, where Paul taught for 3 years, the Apostle John and Timothy pastored. This church's elders were summoned to Paul to hear strong encouragement and exhortations.

History of the church: doctrine to dissension to division.

Danger Each of these letters has its distinctives that set it apart from the others and the book as a whole. Yet, each is timeless in its insight into the way churches are. What strikes me with great force is that the greatest danger to these churches, and ours as well, is not from direct attacks by the enemy, but from decline and decay from the inside. The church is more susceptible to cancer and tumors than to viruses and diseases.

Thus, the Lord of the church moves among His people to encourage them in their strengths, to expose them in their weaknesses and to explain to them what recovery as a church will mean and what victory as individuals within the church will accomplish.

Characteristics of Christ

(v.1)

The attributes given here are bridge to chapter one. The very one who is the great and glorious expression of the Godhead, who redeemed, rules and rewards His own speaks to the church at Ephesus.

One Who holds the seven stars in His right hand

What does it mean that the messengers (pastors, representatives) of the churches are held in God's right hand?

In the Psalms, we are saved by God's right hand and upheld by it. We run to God's right hand for safety and find there pleasures forevermore. God's right hand then is a place of salvation, sustaining, safety and joy. The emphasis is on the One who. May we as God's shepherds find pardon, protection, power and pleasure in the Lord Jesus Christ, who loves us and holds us securely in His omnipotent right hand.

One Who walks among the lamp stands

What does it mean that the Lord of the church walks among the lamp stands?

All through the Old Testament, lamps were used as physical reminders of the light of the presence of God. In the tabernacle and in the Temple, the seven branched menorah stood in the place of worship where fellowship took place. In that part of the Temple stood the table with the loaves of bread on it and the alter of incense. The emphasis here then is on the very Presence of Christ in midst of His churches. We are not being evaluated from a distance. He is here among us.

Here is what HE SAYS. When all is said and done, when we have done all we can to be fully Biblical in all our ministry as a church, the only evaluation which really matters is that of Christ. In a day where we are very image conscious, the Lord of the church, with blazing eyes, penetrates the haze and fog of our posturing and sees the realities, the true contours of our Christianity as a people and as a church.

Commendation of the Church

(v.2-3)

The commendations that accompany medals awarded to soldiers for bravery or outstanding feats beyond the call of duty are words that often give us little of the scene of those acts. Words usually cannot give us the sharp acidity of cordite, the buzzing whine of bullets, the smell of rotting jungle and putrid flesh, the agonizing cries of the wounded, the roaring hammering of our hearts and choking cloud of our own fear. But men and women press forward, endure and finish the tasks that duty calls them to.

Just such a commendation adorns the medals to this church. Jesus has seen her work, her toils, and her endurance. He has perceived her passion for truth, as she cannot bear evil men and false apostles. This church has stood faithful motivated and empowered by a concern for the fame and cause of Christ. She has pressed forward unwearingly and unswervingly in the tasks that duty called her to.

O, that we would have such a commendation. Would to God that we were known to Christ for our commitment to *doctrine*, our faithfulness to *duty*, our consistency in *discipline*, and our perseverance and patient endurance in the face of *difficulty*. This is the reality of Christian living. We need a wartime mentality in the application of our resources and strengths and sacrifices to the evangelizing of the lost in our neighborhoods and among the nations and in our edifying and equipping of the saints.

What would this church look like? It would be:

- A *servant* church - A church that God commends is one who *works*. It must be serving. A church that is not working has not understood what faith is really about. Sadly, too many see church as a spectator sport.
- A *sacrificial* church - The word *toil* points to labor until exhaustion. It means that we are willing to pour out our lives for God in His kingdom.
- A *steadfast* church - When trials came, they held true to the course. They were a church marked by enduring and patient labor over the long haul toward greater ends.
- A *separated* church - They did not tolerate false doctrine and false deeds. They tested the claims to truth and authority for themselves. They understood that error is like Ebola virus: it is virulent, dangerous, communicable and deadly to the soul. It is telling that we evangelicals hardly use the word and are falling prey to wolves on every hand.
- A *suffering* church - They patiently bore their burdens and toiled without fainting. They, like us, may not have yet had persecution, but they had plenty of opposition and pressure. I am impressed by their unwearying labor.

To you for whom doctrine is relatively unimportant, for whom duty and disciplines are outmoded and unnecessary, who succumb to the seducing fancies of error and evil, who faint at the prospect of the long haul and the pressures of it all—hear this word of exhortation. Be warned. The Lord Jesus Christ knows. He sees with piercing perception who and what you really are.

To you whose commitment to truth, whose faithfulness in duty, whose firmness in opposition to evil and error, whose perseverance and patient endurance in the face of stress, pressure and difficulty often seems to go unnoticed and unrewarded—hear this word of encouragement. Press on. The Lord Jesus Christ knows. He sees with piercing perception what really is going on.

Charge Against the Church

(v.4)

Here is what is really going on; here is the terrible indictment, the awful accusation against us. He has this against us. What could God possibly have against so faithful a church? Such a hard working, separated, sacrificing church? We have abandoned our first love.

What does this mean? What is this *first love* forsaken?

- It may refer to the way things were in our love to God when we *first* came to Him. We have failed to maintain, in the growing and maturing of our love, its honeymoon excitement and commitment. Thus, what we have forsaken is love for God in its first sweetness and power.
- It may refer to the *first place* love ought to occupy in our hearts and minds. Loving God with all our beings and our neighbors as we do love ourselves is Christianity. Faith working by love is the fullest expression of godliness. Paul says that it is all that matters. Thus, what we have forsaken is the first place love for God must have and replaced with labor for God.
- It may refer to the *first one loved*. It is not that we have stopped loving in the way we did at first, or that love is not an important priority, *we have just stopped loving God*. It is the object of our first love who has been forsaken. In fact, this last insight captures the other two as well. When we have forsaken our first love, we have ceased to treasure God as our greatest object of affection and have turned Him into an object of slavish service. We substitute duty for devotion, rather than laboring out of love.

How can we flesh this out?

- Imagine that it is your anniversary, or Valentine's Day. You stop by the store and pick up a large bouquet of cut flowers (maybe they are even roses). You arrive at the door. Your wife greets you with genuine surprise and pleasure. And you say, "O, it was no trouble. After all, it is my duty." In that moment, your very labor has reached out with a cold, loveless hand and chilled your wife's heart.
- Think of Christ, the most desirable spouse one can imagine. One who has sought us and has given His word of engagement. The ring of the Holy Spirit has been placed on the finger of our hearts. We have given our betrothal. But time goes on. Distance separates. The blur of daily work distracts us. The lure of present pleasures draw us. Though we are still inviting others to the wedding and preparing the church and making our dress, we have lost

sight of our precious groom. The heart has gone out of it. Though we are going to stick it out, the coming wedding and our union with Christ simply no longer stirs us as they ought.

- Think of how many marriages end up like this. What was once a close relationship of sharing and caring has turned into dull routine. There is no time set aside for one another. Little effort to talk. Marriage has become the routine of work, home and play. O, we're going to stick it out. We know that we ought to be together. So you make the most of it without putting much into it. This sometimes almost precisely describes some of our relationships with Christ.

How is it possible?

How can a church or a people who have been recognized and commended as this church has have fallen this far? The reasons are in the first part of the remedy. We do not remember the fervency and passion of our youthful love to Christ. It was that very desire to please Him that got us involved in the labors and tasks and trails to begin with. Our delight in Him brought real satisfaction in our duties for Him. The eyes of our souls were steadily fixed on Him even as we worked. Soon, we were too busy doing just to be doing. The delight had turned to dust.

We forget that all relationships have to be cultivated and watered and pruned until the sunshine of God's blessing and roots cast deep into the soil of the Word of God bears a harvest of a deep and abiding love. So while we are working at our duties for the King, we had better be working on our devotion to the King.

For many, this happens because we think that love for God expressed in wonder and passion and pursuit is only for those with a certain personality type. Yet, I find that Moses and Daniel and Isaiah and Paul and John were quite different and yet all burned to see, to know and to commune with God. Jonathan Edwards stands as one of the great examples of towering intellect and soaring passion all applied with humble grace to experiencing a ever growing love for God.

What happens when we do this? When we forsake one love, we always transfer it to another. If we stop loving our spouses, we have started loving someone else. We have transferred the power and pleasure of our affections to another. Some begin to love the flickering image on a screen or glossy photo in a magazine. Some pant helplessly in the coils of lusting after someone who is not theirs. But frankly, many transfer their love to themselves. It is their own selfishness and self-centeredness and self-love that draws them. They have fallen in love with the image in a mirror.

It is like this in our love for Christ as well. If we have left our first love, then we have given it to another. The fleeting illusions of pleasure, the grasping hands of profit, the poisoning air of power all become heart pursuits. On and on the list goes. I do not well know what has received the deposit of the treasure of your heart, but I know what attractively ruinous investments mine tends to make.

What are we to learn from this? There are some powerful lessons that grip me as I reflect on this text.

- It is possible to serve, sacrifice and suffer for the sake of Christ all without loving Him. But it is not possible to love Him without serving, sacrificing and suffering. Pity the man or woman who, professing Christ, has neither labor nor love to satisfy.
- “Labor is no substitute for love; neither is purity for passion. The church must have both if it is to be pleasing to the Lord.” Wiersbe Christ acknowledges our service for Him. But Christ desires our love to go out to Him.
- I have to give attention to my love for Christ: to inform it by truth, to fan its flame in worship, to send it heavenward in prayer and praise, in singing. I have to keep making deposits of heart treasures in heaven so that my affections will go out to Him. I must be ever vigilant in the performance of my duty, in the exercise of my disciplines, in the sharpening of my doctrine to evidence of waning devotion to Christ.

What do we do when we discover this to be true of ourselves?

Correction of the Church

(v.5)

Here is one of the very few places in the Bible where concrete steps of action for cure and recovery are outlined. Sometimes, its very simplicity stumbles us.

Remember

We have to look back and recognize how far we have fallen. And it is a great fall. To serve in loveless labor for the sake of Christ is a soul crushing plunge from the heights of Zion to the garbage pits.

But I am convinced, that even some of you, do not think so. You are convinced that if you just believe the right things and do the right things, this is all that God requests. You well know there is little affection for Christ. Your hearts are hard, like stone. May we bring to God tender hearts willing to long and yearn and hunger for God Himself.

Here is the first step. It is a vital step. Without it you are simply doing another task of loveless labor. Remember how far you fallen.

Repent

The word here means that we are to have a change of *our whole inner being*. It begins with a change in our thinking. You must begin to think that it is necessary and vital that you love God with your whole being. You moves to our wills, our choices. We set ourselves, in all the Biblically given ways to reach out to God. We begin to think about Him, talk to Him, read His Word and then live in love in our world. When we have, in a sense, pointed the spout of our faith and will towards God, the fountain of affection and devotion will rise up.

To you who claim a feeling of love without the works that go with them, I say this. Which would your spouse rather have: you say you love and do loving things for them. The Biblical answer is, "BOTH". To say that we love God and not do what He commands is self-deceiving. Faith (seeing with our understanding the reality of Biblical truth and God's promises) works (labors with hard toil and long discipline) by love (giving myself by submitting and sacrificing).

Loved ones, we simply need to repent. We need to repent of our loveless lives towards God and our loveless deeds toward one another.

Return

What deeds is He talking about here? I am convinced that these are the foundational disciplines of the Christian life. In our over reaction to legalism, we have spurned the regular Bible reading, praying, reflecting and serving that is the fuel of the fire of our devotion. You

well know that if you treated your spouse now like you treated her when you were dating and first married, your marriage would be very different. Stir up your affections and devotion to Christ in the midst of your labors for Him by spending time with him. If you are too busy, you are simply too busy.

Remove

These are important words. They tell us that a church who continues on in loveless yet commendatory labor *will have its place and power as a church removed*. There is this awful *or else*. How terrible it would be to be committed to *doctrine*, to be faithful in *duty*, to be consistent in *discipline*, and to persevere and patiently endure in the face of *difficulty* and have God's blessing on our church removed. But it is a very real possibility. And on a personal basis, probably some hearing these words are living out that reality.

Concession to the Church

(v.6)

Now why mention this here? Is this truly something to be recognized for? Listen to the tone of this: "You have labored long and well, enduring with patience. You know how to work for My sake. But you have forsaken your first love. Yet, I'll give you credit for this. You sure hate the things I hate." Reflect on this with me.

- There are some things we ought to hate. God hates sin and error and falsehood and deceit. How many of you would cuddle up with an AIDS ridden blood soaked teddy bear? God says that He hates the deeds (v.6) and the doctrine (v.15) of these Nicolaitans. Though we do not know how this error and evil appears in our churches today, a great deal of error and evil does.
- God has no problem using names to point to error and evil. We might be squeamish about it. But the Lord wasn't and neither was Paul. After all, we do know about the Judiazers, Demetrious the silversmith, Demas the traitor and a host of others, including these Nicolaitans.

You do not love me as you ought, but at least you hate as you ought.

Challenge to the Church

(v.7)

What a challenge is given here. If you have spiritual ears, you will hear the voice of the Spirit *in this Book*. Here is what He is saying and it is a promise.

This promise is to individuals. Turning a church's labor into love is always done at the individual level. It is people who labor. It is people

who forsake their love for Christ. It is people who remember, repent and return.

This promise is to overcomers. Now they are not a special class of super spiritual people. These are all of the truly saved who come out victorious because of the sustaining and preserving work of the Spirit.

The promise is a picture of the loveliness, delight and intimacy which believers will have with Christ. It reminds us most vividly of what was lost in the fall to remind us of how far a falling our forsaking of first loves is. We will partake of life in the glorious presence of God. We will drink deeply from all the eternal pleasures and satisfying joys that make up the Paradise of eternity.

May we with eyes of faith see these promises from afar, treasure and embrace them and send the deep fountains of our love for God springing out of obedient hearts to God.

Conclusion

O, we are doing quite well aren't we? We are laboring for Christ. We are a serving, sacrificing, steadfast, separated and suffering people. We believe we would be commended for our commitment to doctrine, our faithfulness in our duties, our consistency in our discipline, and our patient endurance in difficulty.

But we have forsaken our first love. We have duty without devotion, purity without passion, labor without love. For many of you, the beating heart and soaring passion of your walk with God is gone. What, O what will we do?

May we remember from what we have fallen ...

May we repent of our lovelessness ...

May we return to do what love prompts ...

Before we lose our position and power as a true church of God.

Notes

Smyrna: Faithful in Suffering

Revelation 2:8-11

Introduction

It was Saturday, the Sabbath of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. The year is 155 AD. The stadium of Smyrna, Asia is loud with the roar of spectators. The proconsul or city governor stands in his box seat to begin the events. The trumpets sound and the crowd hushes. "Let it begin", rings out. The participants are ushered onto the playing field accompanied by the delighted shouts of the crowds. Bright uniforms flicker around the sidelines. Banners wave. Doves flutter upward in newfound freedom. The crashing of the drums and the blare of trumpets make the din almost unbearable. It is a scene not unfamiliar to us. Yes, let the games begin.

The authorities brought one forward. There on a raised dais is a statue of Caesar. In front is a table on which a golden bowl sits from which incense rises in fragrant plumes of blue smoke. Beside the golden bowl is an urn. It was his last chance to do the right thing, to deny the charge against him.

This account is adapted from *Ecclesiastical History*, Eusebius and *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. The translation has been updated in contemporary English with some of the quotes reduced for clarity and brevity.

He is an old man, having seen over 86 years of living and ministering. Having been thrown from the vehicle earlier, he limps on a sprained thigh. In great dignity with grace shining from his face, he stands.

"Simply swear by Caesar", the governor pleads.

"Eighty-six years have I served and He never did me any injury. How can I blaspheme my King and my Savior? I am a Christian," he says. "If you want to know what that is, set a day and listen to me."

"Persuade the people," is the derisive response. "I would explain it to you, not to them," came the mild, but strong reply.

"Then I'll throw you to the beasts."

"I have no fear of the beasts."

"If you scorn the beasts, I will have you burned."

"You try to frighten me with the fire that burns for an hour and forget the fire of hell that never goes out. Why are you waiting? Bring on what you will"

The governor calls to the people, "He says he is a Christian." Then the mob shouts in a frenzy, "This is the teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians, the destroyer of our gods. Let a lion loose."

"I cannot because the chase of the lions is past."

"Burn him. Burn him alive," rings out from the crowd.

Immediately there is a great movement as a number of the crowd stream out in to the streets. Even on this Sabbath, the Jews are marked as taking their place among this awful crowd., gathering up wood,

straw and sticks from the nearby homes and shops. These were piled around the stake erected for that purpose. The aged pastor calmly removed his outer clothes, loosed his girdle and removed his shoes. Refusing to be spiked to the post, he reaches those thin arms around it and is tied by his hands. Bowing his head, he prays.

- How is this possible? By what divine help can such men and women give of the last measure of sacrifice?
- How can we possibly identify with this? Our laziness keeps us from the Word and prayer and church. Our self-pity requires constant outpours of the therapy of other's attention. Poverty means going without a dishwasher or a new car this year or the latest, greatest hot CD or book. Suffering means the inconveniences of ministry.
- How can we possibly cope with this? We can barely deal with the wounds of the past and the pressures of the present. Just the prospect of real suffering sends shivers among those used to imaginary pains.

The gentle steel that faces this suffering is forged in the purifying and sustaining promises held out in the Word.

“To the messenger of the church in Smyrna, write.” The name of the city is taken from the word *myrrh*. It means bitter. Yet the city had been a place of special recognition for its loyalty to Rome and the beauty of its setting. It was known as the crown jewel of Asia. It had been heavily settled by Jews. Of the church there we know only a little. But what we know of it rings true with the message written to it. For from it the bitter perfume of a suffering church rose up to God.

The Character of Christ

(v.8)

These are the words, the message of the Lord to them. Their particular situation and needs are met by hearing and understanding who God is in Jesus Christ is to them.

His Superiority

The first and the last

For those facing the pressure of worshipping the emperor, this was of prime importance. Against the passing claims to godhood by mortal men, stood the immutable claim of Christ as the One who is superior. He is the first. He is the last. In all things, at all times, in all ways, He is the supreme One. He is superior over all the pantheon of fabricated myths, over all the images of man-made worship, over all the imaginations of lost men, over even the passing glory of Moses and Abraham. Before anything was, He is. After all things are not, He is. His greatness is such that He stands at the beginning and at the end at the same time.

His Eternality

was dead and yet is living

Our translations miss the thrust of the Greek. Here is one who became dead and yet all the while lived. How can this meet our need?

- Jesus has passed through death already. He knows and understands what suffering and loss and pain and death all mean. They are not merely abstract concepts observed in others. They are *memories* to Him. Even in this, our Lord Jesus has pioneered the way. And the greatest promise is that at the moment of our passing, we will not see death, but will blink from this life to gazing on the glory of Christ.
- Jesus is yet alive. Being alive means that we can live. Physical death holds no terror for us if we have experienced the resurrection from our spiritual death, the new birth. The casting off clay means the putting on of glory. This earthly body will be shed and the heavenly donned. The caterpillar emerges a butterfly.
- Dying while living is the constant reality of the Christian life. “I die daily”, Paul said. 2 Corinthians 4:10-12 puts it this way, “We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that His life may be revealed in our mortal body.”

What John wants you to feel is that sense that Jesus Christ is superior over all the demands that can be put on you. He has the right to demand your complete and total submission, reverence and adoration. Yet He has gone through death for us. We have been released from

the bondage of fearing it, from its sting and its victory. His sacrifice leaves us the pattern for our sacrifice.

The Commendation of the Church (v.9)

Once again, He knows. He does not stand aloof from all that we are going through. He knows them fully and intimately. Listen to what this church is experiencing.

Their Problems

The Lord Jesus knew their *suffering, hardships, problems, difficulties and trials*. We need a theology of suffering for the church today. We are rife with triumphalism that denies the necessity or possibility of long-term suffering for the Christian. Here is a cluster of texts to start you thinking.

Theology of Suffering

- Acts 14:22 - Suffering is the lot of all entering the Kingdom.
- Romans 5:1-5 - Patiently enduring suffering while believing the promises of God for the future is the fuel for joy and the environment of love.
- 1 Thessalonians 1:6 - Suffering accompanied by the joy given by the Holy Spirit tunes our heart to hear God's Word.
- Romans 12:12 - Joy, prayer and patience are our sustaining friends in suffering.
- 2 Corinthians 4:16-18 - We place our suffering on the scale find it light and momentary and easy when measured against the eternal *weight* of glory it will bring.
- Romans 8:35-39 - Suffering may separate us from our bodies, but never from the love of God for us in Christ. In suffering, we must never conclude that God does not love us.
- 2 Corinthians 1:3-7 - What we learn and how we are comforted in our own suffering equips us when others are suffering.
- 1 Thessalonians 3:7-8; Colossians 1:24 - Successful suffering turns outward to others, not inward to self.
- 2 Thessalonians 1:4 - There is no virtue in suffering itself. It is the patient enduring of suffering that produces character.



The message for all of us is simply this: Jesus Christ knows your troubles, your hardships, your suffering.

Their Poverty

This word was often used to refer to being destitute. Poverty for us usually means being without the luxuries of life. Often, the poverty of the Bible means having only the barest necessities of life. The Grand Canyon stands between what the church at Smyrna heard and what we hear in this word. Few of us have really known what it means to really be *poor*.

Their poverty arose from their unwillingness to worship Caesar. When they would not bow, they often lost their jobs. They knew what the cost could be and yet most stood true. Jesus says to them, “You may be poor in material possessions, but you are rich in heavenly treasure.”

Now outward poverty does not guarantee inward spirituality. Many over the long road of church history have made that wrong turn. Nor is material prosperity necessarily a sign of spiritual poverty. But know this, to judge a believer on the basis of their net worth, rather than on their spiritual value is a serious sin.



To us Jesus says these words, “I know your financial status, your true material position. I *know*.”

Their Pressures

Listen to how John uses this word *blasphemy* or *slander* in the Book of Revelation.

[Revelation 13:1,5-8](#)

And the dragon stood on the shore of the sea. And I saw a beast coming out of the sea. He had ten horns and seven heads, with ten crowns on his horns and on each head a blasphemous name.

The beast was given a mouth to utter proud words and blasphemies and to exercise his authority for forty-two months. He opened his mouth to blaspheme God, and to slander his name and his dwelling place and those who live in heaven. He was given power to make war against the saints and to conquer them. And he was given authority over every tribe, people, language and nation. All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast—all whose names have not been written in the book of life belonging to the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world.

[Revelation 17:3-6](#)

Then the angel carried me away in the Spirit into a desert. There I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns. The woman was dressed in purple and scarlet, and was glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls. She held a golden cup in her hand, filled with abominable things and the filth of her adulteries. This title was written on her forehead:

MYSTERY BABYLON THE GREAT THE MOTHER OF
PROSTITUTES AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE
EARTH.

I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of those who bore testimony to Jesus. When I saw her, I was greatly astonished.

For John, this word is associated with those politically and religiously who defame God and destroy His people. Jesus knew about the religious persecution they were suffering. They were under tremendous pressure from apostate Jews. The weapons these Christians faced are not so much different than what we face today.

The Weapon of Slander

The word here has both the meaning of blasphemy and the meaning of slander. In the context, it could easily mean either one.

- The believers at Smyrna faced the slander and lies of religious groups who elevated their own self-importance and uniqueness by slandering others. May we never, even when we strongly disagree, stoop to slander and misrepresentation in order to destroy another professing Christian. In theological debate, represent them accurately.
- The claim of the Jews to being the sole people of God is represented as blasphemy. Once again, we must recognize that heresy and error are no small problems. And too often, there is outright blasphemy from many people claiming to be Evangelicals. Much of this is the popular Christian fiction as well as the pop theology.

Make no mistake about it. The character assassination, misrepresentation, slander and outright lies about one another will destroy those who participate in it. I do not care whether it is in the political realm, the theological arena, or our personal and private relations. Truth in love must govern our discussions and divisions at all times.

The Weapon of Disrespect

This church faced the situation of one religious group claiming to have sole relationship with God and the correct worship of God.

- They claimed to be the true people of God. They said they were the true Jews, not these Johnny-come lately Christians. They could trace their spiritual heritage all the way back to Moses and to Abraham.
- They claimed to have the true place of worship. Their synagogues were places where the Bible was read, the Law was taught and Jehovah worshipped.

But God had fulfilled what Judaism was all about. The shadow of the Old Covenant had now become the reality of Christ. Under the New Covenant, the true people of God were being gathered from all neigh-

borhoods and all nations to worship God in spirit and truth. Now returning to Judaism, even the Judaism of the Old Testament, *was to apostatize from God*. Their place of worship of Jehovah was in reality a meeting with Satan.

We have parallels today. Many today make exclusive claims to truth and worship. And we had better be careful ourselves. We believe we are the true people of God with the Word of God and the truth of God meeting together in genuine worship of God—but *we and those who believe and worship like us, are not the only ones*. Remember, the church of the New Testament included the whole range from Ephesus to Rome to Thessalonica to Corinth. And they were still churches.



To us this message comes from the Lord of the church, “I know what they are claiming and what they are saying about you.”

The Commands to the Church

(v.10)

Jesus says to them, and to us, “If what you are going through now wearies the strength of your faith, let me give you what it will take to face tomorrow.”

Do not fear

This may be poor psychology (by today’s standard) but it is great Christianity. Even if it gets worse than it is now, take heart. Don’t be afraid. Have courage. How?

- **Be aware of the enemy's strategies.** The government is merely the instrument in the hand of Satan. Rome may come and put you in prison for your faith—see behind it the malignant hatred of the enemy of our souls. But be not afraid, even Satan is being orchestrated by God for the purposes of His own glory.
- **You are being tested.** The product of the fire of suffering is the gold of refined character. But the same fire that purges dross also melts the clay. Some believers are tested by prosperity, others are tested by pleasure and we are all tested by persecution and pressure. Not everyone would be thrown in prison, but all would be tested by it.
- **The trial will be only for a short, definite time.** The *ten days* is a common way to say that something would only last a definite and endurable time. It may difficult now but the end of the tunnel is definitely there and it is out of sight just around the bend. (Even at worst, as a Christian, you can only suffer for the rest of your life.)

So, here are three statements to be relied on in faith:

- The sovereign hand of God overrules all for the best;
- The sanctifying purpose of God means we will be tested;
- The sustaining grace of God empowers us till the end.

Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer.

Do be faithful

John speaks to them about being faithful in the midst of the possibility of imprisonment, torture and death. It is faithfulness *to Christ* which is in view. They must not turn away from Him or deny Him. They must be faithful, even if it means death. They must be faithful all the way through until death.

But O what an incentive He holds out to them! His grace holds out to the faithful crowns of life. It may be that they are experiencing problems, poverty and slander—that they may be the down-trodden under the feet of the political and religious powers, but if they will be faithful all the way to the end they will be recognized and rewarded by the Lord.

How convicting this text is!

- It means that faithfulness is a standard of measure for all believers. Being faithful is not a Himalayan peak only to be attained by a select few. I know that is what it seems like. But no, faithfulness is a basic requirement for all.
- Faithfulness is grown in the soil of daily disciplines and weekly responsibilities. It is threatened by the prevailing winds of sin and the frost of cold hearts and the weeds of wasted or wanted time. It is cultivated by diligence, fertilized by the Word and watered by prayer. Faithfulness' harvest is a lifetime of obedience and recognition and reward from our Lord.
- If we do not develop faithfulness in the small things, *you will probably not be faithful in the big things*. If Super Bowl or work or family draws away, what would prison and torture and death do?



There are no excuses:

I know your troubles, your hardships, your suffering;

I know your financial condition;

I know what others are saying about you;

Do not be afraid and be faithful no matter what it costs.

The Challenge for the Church

(v.11)

Again that challenge: if we have hearing ears, this is what the Spirit says. Overcomers, that is to say, true believers will not be harmed by the second death of punishment in hell. We can face the first death with without fear and in faithfulness because we have been delivered from the second death.

Conclusion

One of things that I see in this text is the difference between appearance and reality. They appeared poor, but were rich. They faced death, but were alive. Their religious opponents appeared to be theologically correct while they were really Satanically inspired. Their troubles appeared to be from Rome while actually behind the throne was Satan. Do you ever wonder about appearances and realities in our own lives?

Let us return to the opening scene and listen to our martyr's prayer.

“Father of Your well-beloved and blessed Son, Jesus Christ through whom we have received the gift of knowing You. The God of angels, powers and all creation and of all the family of the righteous that live before You. I bless You that You have thought me worthy of the present day and hour, to have a share in the number of the martyrs and in the cup of Christ, unto the resurrection of eternal life, both of the soul and the body, in the incomparable joy of the Holy Spirit. Among whom may I be received in Your sight, this day, as a rich and acceptable sacrifice, even as You, the faithful and true God, have prepared, have shown and fulfilled. Wherefore, on this account, and for all things I praise You, I bless You, I glorify You through the eternal high priest, Jesus Christ, Your well-beloved Son. Through whom glory be to You with Him in the Holy Spirit, both now and forever. Amen. Amen”

The fire was kindled. In great flames, the sacrifice rose up unto God in a sweet smelling perfume and a great witness to the invincible grace of God. So died, Polycarp, student of John the Apostle, pastor-teacher of the church of Smyrna, and one of seven recipients of the Book of the Revelation from John's hand.

The Lord knows our problems, our financial position and our pressures. But we are not to afraid of what may lie ahead. We are to be faithful no matter what the cost. For He is holding out for us, a crown of life.

Pergamum: A Wielded Sword

Revelation 2:12-17

Introduction

“Come and visit Pergamum”, the Ad read. “This beautiful city sits on like a crown on the top of a hill. We are the capital of our Province, with the wonder of the Roman Emperium and the residence of the proconsul.

“We boast one of the largest libraries in our world, with over 200,000 books. Come and see where parchment was first made. Our theaters are the latest with productions rivaling the best in Greece. No matter what your taste in fun may be, we have it: from pursuits of the mind to the pleasures of the flesh.

“Come to see our festivals and join in with the offering of incense to our Caesar. Join in with our whole populace in publicly testifying to our loyalty to him. Come and worship in our temples. Our alter to Zeus is unmatched. We are a leader in the worship of the god of healing. Come here to feel the beneficent power flowing from the rod entwined serpent.

We are Pergamum. We are loyal. We are modern. We are proud. Come and see why.”

Another side of the city was not touted in this Tour Guide. For to it prisoners were carried from all parts of the province for trial and sentence before the authority who possessed the right of the sword, the power of life and death, that is, the proconsul of Asia. This intensely loyal city, who led the way in offering up its worship to Augustus and a long line of increasingly loathsome Roman emperors, led the way in martyring those who refused to bow.

Somewhere in midst of all this decadent culture, gross pagan idolatry and blazing patriotic fervor, a faithful church spread the fame of Christ by believing and preaching the faith of the Scripture.

To the messenger of the church at Pergamum comes these words. We do not know who he was. We do not know what he looked like. But the contours of a soul passionate for Christ and powerful in ministry are familiar to us all.

The Character of Christ

(v.12)

“One who is wielding a sword.” What are the believers at Pergamum to see and feel when they hear this of Christ?

His Absolute Authority

The power of the sword is the power of life and death. This power the sovereign and august Caesar held. This is the power over the life and death of all his subjects. In their day, Rome wielded the sword over life and death. God had given that sword to her as a means of justice to deal with the wicked (Romans 13:1-7). In this city, where patriotism and loyalty were its motto, the sword moved among the church, not as a minister of justice, but rather as an inflictor of pain and death.

Over this sword, Jesus reigned supreme. Rome may have the power of physical death; Jesus has the authority and power over Rome, death and hell. His authority is absolute. Whenever there were conflicting claims, Jesus' was to held in the highest regard and in obedient fealty.

His Authoritative Word

But when Jesus Christ the Lord has a sword, it is His Word.

This sword comes from His mouth (Revelation 1:16) and strikes the nations (Revelation 19:11-16). It is the Word of God, living, active and able to penetrate, dividing the soul and spirit (Hebrews 4:12-13). It is the sword of the Spirit (Ephesians 6:17) and thus, with the breath of His Word, He destroys the wicked (Isaiah 11:4) and the Wicked One (2 Thessalonians 2:18).

The importance of the sword of the Word of God, for it brings:

- Revelation of Christ
- Reign of Christ
- Rescue of the church
- Ruin of the lost

Here is an aspect of Christ that is misunderstood today: Jesus is a warrior. He has a sword. He will use it on His enemies to bring about the righteousness of His rule and reign. Our awe of the majesty of Christ grows as we see with our inner eyes the magnificent dignity of His Person and the awful power of the sword He wields.

In the days of old, warriors gave names to their swords. We would know Arthur and *Excaliber*, Bilbo and *Sting*, Gandalf and *sword*. The Lord Christ has named His sword and it is: The Word, the Breath, Heart Penetrator, the Spirit's Edge, the Protector of the Elect, and Satan Slayer.

We are not afraid of that sword, however. For the sword that slays Satan and strikes the nations and separates our inmost thoughts is in the hands of our own exalted Sovereign and Savior.

The Commendation of the Church

(v.13)

What a comfort it is that Jesus knows our situations. He knows them in such a way that He is involved with them. The Lord here comforts and commends them by understanding:

The Place of their Ministry

Where they loved and labored in ministry was a stronghold of Satan. It was a place where Satan dwelled or was in permanent residence, so much so that He had a “throne” there. The idolatry, immorality and decadence were gay clothes and bright homes in which crouched the rotting soul of the city.

Jesus wants them to sense that He knows what ministry there means. They are not just here on a short mission. They cannot leave and shake off the dust of their feet against the city. This is where they live, where they work, where they worship. This is home, to them.ⁱ

But it is the hardship of their situation that the Lord knows and understands. He knows how each detail piles up into a mountain of difficulty. He knows this about our ministry as well. We are ministering to city whose hearts are hardened by generations of religious idolatry, whose senses are dulled by the pursuit of alcohol and gambling and carnal pleasures, whose minds are poisoned by error.

“I know where your ministry is...”

The Perseverance in their Ministry

They held true to the Name and truth of Christ.

- The Name of Christ - They are clinging to the character and the reputation of Christ. His Name sustains them. It holds them up like a lifeline in the rising tide of filth and sin. They are like velcro kids—they are stuck firmly to the greatness and magnificence and assurance that is in the Name of Christ.
- The Faith of Christ -They stand tall and strong in the truth they believe against the howling winds of religious plurality and political power. The house of their faith has been grounded on solid rock and built with precious stone.

“I know you have a passion for my fame and for my truth ...”

The Pressures against their Ministry

Their lives were on the line. Being a Christian did not merely bring some inconveniences—it brought serious questions, challenging problems and life-threatening pressures. They clung to the Name of Christ and refused to deny the doctrines they held dear even as one of their number was taken out and martyred.

Do you see how God measures the strength of their love and the standing of their faith? He places them in the beaker of suffering and raises the temperature of persecution and pours over them the acid of death. The enduring caliber of their character and fiber of their faith may be challenged, but it never crumbles. What about us? Compared to them, we are pot metal alongside the temper of their steel.

“I know the price that sacrificially loving ministry is costing you...”

The People in their Ministry

What a pattern of faithfulness and witness their people were. Antipas is held out as the martyr *whose sacrifice in their church and their culture* was a standard, a model. Even when such exemplary Christians were being singled out for special suffering, the church as a whole never faltered and never failed.

“I know those special people whose lives are poured out for me...”



Jesus says to them, “You are a great church. I do not measure it by size of your crowds, the multiplying of your programs, the greatness of your successes, or the stature of your ministers. You are a great church for, in a dangerous place and in difficult times, you have been faithful to Me and to truth, even when it costs you everything.”

Are we a great church?

The Charge Against the Church

(v.14-15)

While they had stood when Satan persecuted, some had succumbed when Satan seduced. He had not been able to come against them like a roaring lion, but he was making inroads as a seducing serpent.

There were those in the church who were not holding to the Name of Christ (v.13), but were holding to the teaching of Balaam and the Nicolaitans. We have been introduced to this little known error in its deeds (2:6) hated by the church at Ephesus and its doctrine (2:15) embraced by some here at Pergamum.

Understanding the Indictment

But what about this “teaching of Balaam”? What and who is that?

Its Condemnation

We need to understand who Balaam was and why he is important to New Testament church leadership. The church then, just as it is now, was plagued by two opposite but equally dangerous errors. There were those who were legalists who wanted the church to live by the Old Covenant law code. On the other hand, there were those who turned their liberty in Christ into license in carnality. The Apostles and Elders of the New Testament are constantly dealing with those whose separation disengages them from any contact with culture and with those whose compromise enslaves to their sin and worldly expressions in their culture.

Its Error

This last error, and those teaching it, is censured by:

- Jude 11 - Here the *way of Cain, the error of Balaam and the rebellion of Korah* are all labels applied to those involved in the sensual and carnal lifestyles contrary to the Word.
- Revelation 2:14 - The teaching here is the counsel given by Balaam that led Israel getting involved in idolatry and immorality. (Numbers 22-26; 31:16).
- 2 Peter 2:13-22 - This is the most extensive condemnation of both the doctrine and the deeds of Balaam.

Its History

Who was Balaam? He appears in Numbers 22-25, 26 and in 31:16. He was a Gentile prophet of God who lived near the Euphrates River in Mesopotamia. Israel was traveling from Egypt to the Promised Land and was passing through the land of Moab. The king of Moab, Balak, sent and tried to hire Balaam to curse Israel. Balaam finally went. On the way he was met by the Angel of the Lord. Balaam didn't see Him, but his donkey did. Finally, the donkey spoke up (just imagine the scene) and the Lord opened Balaam's eyes so that he could see the Angel. Balaam was ordered by God only to say what God put in his mouth. The result was that Balaam did not curse, but rather blessed

Israel. However, as Israel was camped in Moab, she was seduced by the idolatry, began to participate in the pagan festivals and ended up committing immorality with the Moabite women. Numbers 31:16 tells us that this all occurred because of the counsel of Balaam.

What Balaam was to Israel, the Nicolaitans were to the church. See Revelation 2:15, “in the same way”? The Nicolaitans, like Balaam, were preaching and prophesying for their own gain. And they were teaching the church to compromise her holiness and to be sinfully involved in the culture around them.

Applying the Indictment

What does all this mean to us today? Why do we care what Balaam did or what the Nicolaitans were teaching? Remember that when Satan cannot ruin us with persecution, he infiltrates us with seduction. Listen to this indictment in modern terms.

- Woe to those who teach what is popular because of the money, power and prestige gained by it. O, we may not be quite so openly greedy as to prostitute our ministry or to hire ourselves out. But how many today are writing books, doing conferences, publishing papers and doing radio and TV because of the money. How many of all these popular Christian stars are teaching unpopular truths: for example, sovereign grace? Or the sufficiency of Scripture?
- Woe to those who tell us that we are free to do anything. Now that we have cast off the restraints of legalism, are we becoming enslaved by the sins we were supposed to be delivered from in our salvation? 2 Peter 2:13-22 condemns those who promise freedom but produce slavery.

Balaam and the Nicolaitans led God’s people into idolatry and immorality. The church at Pergamum had to stand against the claims of Rome and the pressures of their culture. The government required worship of its leader. The guilds (labor unions) of the day required members to attend pagan festivals. In the midst of this, there were those who said, “A little incense to Caesar doesn’t matter. Go ahead go to the parties: just don’t worship their gods in your heart. After all, doesn’t God want you to provide for your families?”

We hear this today. Immorality is rampant in churches, from the pulpit all the way to the pew. We are bombarded by the images and illusions and messages so much that our sensitivity wanes. There is little difference in the divorce rate inside from outside evangelicalism. Pregnancy among unmarried Christians (not to mention the fornication which goes on without being caught) is only marginally lower. What is wrong with us?

Well at least there is not much idolatry in the church! Listen to Colossians 3:5, “Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and **greed, which is idolatry.**” We may not be bowing down to physical idols (though I think the adulation that some Christian leaders and entertainers gets borders on it), but we are a greedy, covetous people. We are living too much for our material gain. Colossians 3:5 defines idolatry as *valuing anything more than we treasure God*. I could list for you all the idols that my own sinful heart treasures—but then, I would probably miss some of yours.

Let us cling to Christ and hold fast in believing truth though Satan may roar against us or he may seduce us. May we stand firm against the Balaams in our midst whose doctrine and deeds will corrupt us. May we be fully satisfied with Christ, looking to our reward, that is, God.

The Correction of the Church

(v.16)

As parents, we are always thinking through strategies that will effectively correct our children. We have to make sure that we have their attention. We have to point out that what they are doing is wrong or unacceptable or inappropriate. Then we have to ensure that they change what they are doing. Now this is easier said than sometimes done. I wonder if the Lord feels like that about us as well? In correcting those who have fallen prey to the seduction of the flesh and Satan, the Lord adopts a common strategy.

In the Form of a Precept

Repent

He gives us a command. Repent. Simple word. Tough to do sometimes. Usually it is tough because we want to change our behavior before we change our thinking. Rarely works. God wants our repenting to begin with a change in the way we think that bears fruit in a change in the way we act.

He has pointed out what is wrong. He has illustrated how it is wrong from the Scripture and then fleshed it out in their contemporary situation. Then He says, “REPENT.” Sometimes we make it way too complicated. We 12 steps to recovery and all these how to processes when what we need is a basic and fundamental change in our thinking. Repent.

In the Form of a Promise

I will come...

He also gives us a threat. Now this is a common strategy. We adopt it often because it works. “Stop. Change. Or else.” Wonder if we ought to be correcting in this way *because it is how God does?* Jesus basically says, “Repent or else.”

Jesus promises to deal quickly with those who do not change. He is not coming to be nice and kind and winsome. He is coming as a warrior with His sword. And He means business.

I know it is trite to say this. But we too often are simply playing games with God. We don’t believe that what we think and how we behave matters. But God is so concerned that He promises to move against us with the Word of God, the sword out of His mouth.

Let us respond to God in His Word. He means business.

The Challenge to the Church

(v.17)

Once again, the Lord says to us, “Listen up. I have something to say. If you have ears to hear, listen to what I am saying.”

Overcomers enter into special blessings in their walk with God. Now, the commentaries strain with all their might to be helpful as to what these things are and what they mean. Time will not allow us to try to sort all that out. These three things, however, point out God’s reward to every believer who perseveres in their faith.

- Hidden manna - Since it is manna and it is hidden, it must refer to the daily supply of inner sustenance. It is the spiritual strength flowing from our being nourished by grace in Christ.
- White stone - Since there does not seem to be an Old Testament referent for this, it must be being drawn from the culture. The most prevalent use was in giving an acquittal to someone accused of a crime. The white pebble signified that the person bearing this token had been declared justified and released from all charges and was to be treated as innocent.
- A New Name - This new name is written on the stone. This name is one that new and private for us. This may point to the tradition of giving a new name to Christians at their baptism whose birth names were pagan gods or obscene.

Though we cannot be sure of what all these mean now, we can treat them like birthday presents that are wrapped and waiting for us. We do not know what is in them—but we do know that it will be very special.

Conclusion

Let us cling to Christ—to the His Name and His reputation. Let us never deny what we believe, even in the face of great suffering.

Let us be on the guard for those who, by their doctrine or their deeds, seduce us away from our holiness in Christ.

Let us repent—let us change our thinking and our actions where it is needed. May we do it NOW before the Lord comes to us quickly with His sword.

Let us look forward with trembling joy till the day we get to open these special gifts and enjoy them in their full reality.

Notes

Thyatira: Toiling and Tolerating

Revelation 2:18-29

Introduction

Dear Loved One,

Greetings in the Name of our Lord whose resurrection has brought us life. I write to tell you what a struggle we are facing here in our little town. As you know, we are small and insignificant. We are not a trading center, but have a large military garrison here. But for most of us, this is a union town. We call them guilds. We are what you call, a blue-collar town.

For us this has become a significant challenge in our faith. The guilds, or the unions, control all employment. You cannot even own a business here that produces a good if you do not belong to that guild. Each guild has its patron god. To belong to the guild, we are supposed to go to the parties and activities that are sanctioned by our guild to honor its patron idol. After these celebrations and parties, we are expected to participate in the revelry and the immorality. Prostitutes are usually available.

Now, we have understood the faith to require us to not identify ourselves with idols by eating and partying at their feasts and we must not commit sexual sin. Now, it is more that just we don't get promoted, or we don't get raises or we face harassment. We are not just the butt of jokes or whispers. We can't work. I refused to attend since coming to faith and now I have no work.

Many of my friends, who think that the guilds (or the unions) are useful and necessary but who disagree with its philosophy (idolatry) or its practice (immorality) are going along with it in order not to lose their jobs. Now, in our own assembly (which you know is small and struggling, and, praise God, seems to be faithful), there is a woman, claiming to be a spokesperson for God is telling us that, in order to reach out neighbors in their guilds, we need to stay in them and experience what they are experiencing so that we can communicate the Good News to them. The elders are putting up with her. They confronted her and she changed her mind about the idolatry.

Please pray for us as we are trying to think through this. Must close now. We are meeting this evening to hear the letter going around from the Apostle John. May the Lamb find your faith working in love.

Thyatira, Asia

John writes the longest letter in Revelation to the smallest church. Nothing is known in history about this church except for what is here in the Scripture. This small church faced the dilemma common to believers in all times in all places. I can sum it up in a very simple statement: *how tolerant are Christians to be?*

The Character of Christ

(v.18)

Again and again the church is confronted by Christ. He speaks to His church out of His character, His nature. Here is what He has to say. Here is Who He is. The effect on us ought to be: *listen*. So Christ is revealed:

In His Person

Son of God

This church is confronted by *the Son of God*. Before and to all the others, Christ has been *the one who*. Now, this church must face the truth that what they are doing is being done under the scrutiny of the Son of God. It is His elevated position as a reigning and divine King that He comes into His church.

In His Description

eyes of fire/ feet of bronze

This is quite a frightening aspect. Jesus comes as the Son of God with flaming eyes and bronzed feet. Why? Why use this language? Simply to show us that Christ moves among His church and speaks to His church in discernment and in judgment. His gaze burns through the facades we put up and He will deal with what He finds.

The imagery here is meant to evoke pictures of hot furnaces in which molten bronze is forged. In these powerful ovens, the impurities are burned off. Bronze almost always speaks of judgment. Against those who have infiltrated the church with their error, the Lord turns the brightness of His holiness and truth. And there is no place to turn.

I am reminded of C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*. At the end, when the children meet the lion, they ask, "Is he safe?" "No, He is not safe, but He is good. He may be gentle, but He is never a tame lion." Jesus may come to us as a suitor and our groom: but if He finds us tainted, He is not safe.

The Commendation of the Church

(v.19)

What an amazing church this was. When pastors gather at conferences, the discussion inevitably turns to their own congregations. “My church is like this ...” “Well, mine does this .. or thinks like this ...” “My church treats me like this ...” The elders at Thyatira would have high praise of their church. And this praise comes from the living, seeing, knowing and discerning Christ.

The Serving of the Church

The words here show us a church whose faith has matured through loving ministry.

- Dutiful Church - The Lord speaks of their *toil*. They were working hard at all that was their duty.
- Devoted Church - They were a church whose *love* for God and neighbor motivated their labor.
- Doctrinal Church - Jesus acknowledged their *faith*. They held true to body of truth given them by the Scripture. It was not something just acknowledged, but actually believed.
- Dedicated Church - It was a church who know what *servicing* meant. They ministered much. They were genuinely available to meet one another's needs.
- Diligent Church - Jesus knows that they are a church that was *steadfast*. They persevered. They were not daunted from the task nor swayed from the path. They simply pressed on.

This church is marked, not by mere religious activity, but by real, informed, caring and long term sacrificial ministry.

The Progressing of the Church

This church was not in decline. It may have been small and insignificant. It may have been serving a small community. But this church was continuing to expand its ministry and develop its serving. It was a church whose present level of serving was greater than ever before. They were not like Ephesus whose labor grew while their love waned. Thyatira's labor and love were growing all along.

The Charge against the Church

(v.20-23)

But the Lord has something against the church. She may be toiling by love and in doctrine, ministry and not only enduring but actually progressing, but they are tolerating a great problem.

The Designated Problem

(v.20)

The church at Thyatira was tolerating error: error in doctrine and duty being spread by a woman who usurped the role of an elder and then taught the people a rationale to justify sin.

We do not know who this woman was. We do know that John reached back into the history of evil and brought forward the name of the loathsome toad who squatted in horrid evil on the throne of Israel. Jezebel married Ahab the king and led him astray into idolatry. She viciously slandered and then murdered just to get Ahab a vineyard he coveted. The stench of her deeds still rises up in a foul odor from the chronicles of Israel.

What she did in Israel was being done in the church. A woman, claiming the credentials and authority of a prophet, was teaching the church how to compromise with the cultural idols and immorality in order to keep their places in society. She had so infected the church with her doctrine of toleration, that the church in turn tolerated her.

Toleration is becoming a significant challenge for us today. Our post-modern world will call us intolerant when we declare that what we believe is not only true, but is **the** truth. Pluralism and plurality is the only dogma that can be asserted. Once again we have a culture that effectively says that there absolutely no absolutes. Just so, the prevailing world-view says that we must tolerate all view except views who are not tolerant. Listen, loved ones, this is simply not possible. Pluralism is an utter failure: to assert that *we must be tolerant* is itself intolerant.

And we are being sucked into the morass, particularly in doctrine and to a lesser degree, in our understanding of Christian duty. We are being pressed to see our Biblical world-view as simply one among many others, our doctrine one among many others in Christianity. Loved ones, toleration like this will eventually destroy the doctrinal heart of the body of Christ.

This points to a recurring problem in the churches. We struggle with maintaining our love for people while at the same time sustaining our discernment and our willingness to expose and expel error. This is highlighted by contrasting Ephesus and Thyatira.

Ephesus	ever increasing labor diligent exposure of error loss of love and passion for Christ	↑ Duty & Discipline ↓ Devotion
Thyatira	ever increasing labor growing from informed love loss of discernment and discipline	↑ Duty & Devotion ↓ Discipline

 God's people must not tolerate error and evil.

The Delaying Patience (v.21)

The Lord gave her time to repent. He was patient with her. But the His patience with her was not to be construed as toleration. It rather was used as a searchlight shining deep into the recesses of her heart to expose the hardness within. It seems that having been confronted with her evils, she renounced her idolatry but clung to her immorality. What God demanded was total and complete repentance. But her sinful stubbornness showed what she really wanted.

The Lord's patience with us can either bring about a full repentance or it will expose our hard heartedness. While waiting for us to change, it is our own unwillingness that is exposed by it.

 God's patience often exposes our hardness.

The Dire Punishment (v.22-23a)

The Lord waited, now He moves to deal with the problem. Note how extensive the uprooting of this evil is. Her teaching had *corrupted* the church and had *condemned* herself.

➤ Source - He moves against the false prophetess. Her bed of sin had now become a bed of sickness. The Lord often uses sickness to deal with His people. There were many in Corinth who were sick and many who had died because God had begun to move against their sinful deeds. We must take this to heart. All of you every time you fall ill must begin recovery by finding out if this has fallen on you because of the Lord's chastening of you!

The term here *great tribulation* does not refer to the period of time just before the 2nd Coming, but to trouble brought by judgment or chastening.

➤ Consorts - He also moves against those who have sinned with her. When our hearts and minds are seduced by error, God sees this as adultery, as spiritual immorality. Great will be the trouble that God sends to such people. But there is hope and mercy. They must

repent of her deeds. Repentance is always the condition to forgiveness.

- Next generation - This might sound harsh. But the words here are referring to the next generation of those who believe the errors promulgated by this false prophetess. Error poses the greatest danger to the second generation. God will not allow it to happen. He threatens to destroy those who grow up with, adopt and cannot see that this is error.

We cannot help but be struck by how serious God is about error. If this is the way God sees it, should we not see it the same way?



God will do what is necessary to maintain the purity of His people.

The Designed Purpose

(v.23b)

God's patience with the false prophetess revealed her hard heart. Now His judgment and chastening *speaks with great emphasis and authority to the church*. What God does is designed to cause us to understand something with great clarity.

- God knows us - His eyes of fire penetrate right to the most hidden motivation and uncovers them.
- God deals with us - His feet of bronze move in judgment and chastening to give us based on what we have done.

What we have here is **the fear of God**. When we understand that God knows us and that He will deal with us, that understanding is the fear of the Lord.



God's people need to cultivate a fear of God: a fear that motivates out of love, faithfulness in our doctrine and in our deeds.

The Correction of the Church

(v.24-25)

How merciful God is! Here is this wonderful church that has become infected with the plague of error passed on by this evil, false prophetess. But there are those who have not been seduced by the error and therefore do not believe it or hold to it. They understood the danger of deep exposure to or personal experience of the world and the occult. The phrase *deep things of Satan* probably refers to occult rites and secret practices within the meetings of the guilds.

I want to say a word on this topic. The Bible basically gives us all we need to know about Satan and the demonic world around us. I believe that it is extremely dangerous to get involved in deep studies and analysis of the occult, New Age and pagan rites. These are dangerous to your spirit and detrimental to your walk with Christ. We do not de-

tailed and massive knowledge of these things to know that they are evil and wrong. We do not even need this detailed knowledge to guard against being infected by them. Then to add to this, we have all the modern books that do not even do primary research, but are speculation based on extremely limited Biblical data. This is particularly true of the *spiritual warfare* people and books like *This Present Darkness*. Jesus speaks to those who did not get involved in those things.

Jesus says two important encouragements to those who do not hold the error and who have not investigated the deep things of Satan.

- I place no other burden - Think about this. There is nothing else that Jesus lays on this church. Just stop tolerating this woman and her sin. Repent of your own involvement. That is all He is concerned with now.
- Hold fast to what you have - do not lose ground. Embrace with firm commitment the doctrine and deeds that come directly from the text of Scripture. Keep on pleasing God until He comes. Keep on being dutiful, devoted, doctrinal, dedicated and diligent.

The Challenge to the Church

(v.26-29)

What a wonderful challenge is given to this church. Overcomers will one day experience the rule of Christ and will share in that authority.

God has a purpose for all that transpires. Part of that purpose is that from all the people groups God will have those who believe, obey and praise the excellence and worth of Christ. These will be given the privilege to:

- **Rule with Christ** - This is the clear language from this text. We will have the privilege of exercising Jesus' Kingly authority in Kingdom.
- **Receive the fullness of Christ** - Revelation 22:16 tells us that Jesus Himself is the bright and morning star. What Jesus wants us to understand that overcomers will be infused with the grace and fullness of Christ. What we know now in very limited amounts, will one day be our constant and complete reality.

If you have ears, hear and heed.

Conclusion

- Let us strive with all the grace God gives us to be commended as this church was. Let us be dutiful, devoted, doctrinal, dedicated and diligent.
- Let us *never* tolerate error in doctrine or duty. Let us be on the alert for false teachers and teaching where ever they may be.
- Let us never lose our sense of looking forward to the hope and glory and greatness of what is to come.
- Let us always hear and heed the Spirit's voice in the Word of God.

May these words be more than words—may we transform them into living realities.

Notes

Sardis: Wake Up

Revelation 3:1-6

Introduction

Ah, here it is. Nice place this, don't you think? Seems to have a good attendance. There's lots of parking. I am really impressed by their facilities. The yard is well kept. I really like the architecture.

Look at all the ministries too. Choir, youth, drama, outreach, March for Jesus, 50 missionaries. Look at the staff. Well trained. I like these pictures here. These guys really look like they know their stuff. O, here is their picture book. Man, look at all the stuff they have going. This church really seems to be alive and going. I am so glad we found this wonderful church since we moved here to Sardis. I just wonder...

An illustration of a dam being slowly eaten away by the constant pressure of the water.

Warren Wiersbe writes, "The unsaved in Sardis saw the church as a respectable group of people who were neither dangerous nor desirable. They were decent people with a dying witness and a decaying ministry." Their lamp was fading. Their candle was faltering. Though they managed to maintain the outward appearance, the inward realities had long ago faded.

May God preserve us from such an end. This message comes at this time to us so that we will fan the flame of the Spirit's life among us; so that we will be on the guard against all forms of rot and decay and disease that cause us to be a pleasant, nice people with no real testimony nor witness in our world.

The Character of Christ

(v.1a)

The Christ who confronts the church at Sardis is one who "holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars." We have already seen how important these designations of Christ are to the message the Spirit gives to the churches. So, we are going to have get out our spiritual spades and do some careful digging. To change the image, we are going to have to pan through some Scripture looking for the nuggets of gold that will enrich our understanding of this text.

The Seven Stars

Consider these out of their order, for a moment. Who the seven stars are is relatively easy. Revelation 1:16 and 20 tell us that the seven

stars that Jesus holds are the angels of the churches. We have shown that this word probably should be understood as *messengers*. It refers to the elders who have the speaking gifts in the church.

What John wants to remind them, and us as well, that what God says to the churches is to originate with God, not with us. We are all familiar with the express messengers in large cities. They risk life and limb riding bicycles through traffic and through crime-ridden areas collecting and delivering documents and packages for companies. It is their job to get the message to the destination. They are not to mix in their own thoughts and ideas and agendas with the documents they carry. They are messengers. So are we. We are to take the truth of the Word of God and communicate to you, the people of God who are then to carry that message to your neighbors and to all the nations.

The Seven-Fold Spirit(s)

What is this seven spirits or seven-fold Spirit of God? John uses this device in Revelation 4:5 to refer to the seven-fold Spirit before the throne and in Revelation 5:6 to the seven-fold Spirit of Christ. These appear to be an obvious allusion to Isaiah 11:2 where the Branch, the Lord Jesus Christ, on Him the Spirit of the Lord will rest.” This was fulfilled in Matthew 4:16-17 when the Spirit came and rested on Christ at the time of His baptism. So this is the Spirit of God, promised to us from the Lord Jesus Christ who comes to us because of the completed work of Christ in His resurrection and ascension to inaugurate the eschatological age.

But even further, I am struck by the parallel with Zechariah chapter 4. Please turn there in your Bibles. In verse 2, we have a lamp stand with seven lamps on its branches. Standing by are two olive trees. Zechariah asks the same question we are asking in our own text, “What are these?” Note the angel’s response in verse 6, “This is the Word of the Lord to Zerubbabel saying, ‘Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,’ says the Lord Almighty. ‘What are you, O great mountain? Before Zerubbabel you will become a plain; and he will bring forth the top stone with shouts of “Grace, grace to it”’. (NASB)

So here is the work God is going to do by the man he has appointed. This work is to elevate the cap or corner stone, the Lord Jesus Christ. And God will do this work, not by human might, but by the Holy Spirit as the man of God speaks the words of grace.



Now, let this become a searchlight in your hand to illuminate what has happened to the church at Sardis.

The Commendation of the Church

What startles us at this point is that there is no true commendation of this church. God has nothing good to say about Sardis and Laodicea. “If you don’t have anything good to say, don’t say anything at all,” may be a good guide for us in our speech, but God is more concerned about telling the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth to the church at Sardis and Laodicea. He is a physician with a patient who is wasting away and doing so *unnecessarily*. So to pass over and be complementary of their nice hair and lovely nails does not arrest the patient’s attention to *what must be done to make a turn-around*.

Both of these churches are “has-been” churches. They are in decline. Maybe they are aware of it. But they are doing everything they can to hide it. They are maintaining the facade. The pillars and posts of their worship and witness may look fine, but inwardly the termites of sin have eaten away at their strength and utter collapse is imminent.

There may have been a time when they were a great church. Their doctrine, their duty, their devotion, their dedication flowed from great inward realities. Their preaching was once Biblical, their worship spiritual, their lifestyles holy and their witness clear and effective. But no longer. What they once were is so far in the past that it no longer matters to themselves, to the community around them and particularly to Christ. What they are **now** is what concerns Him most. Most of us can think of churches like this, for we have them in abundance in our own community. And if there is not a major moving of God by His Spirit in the churches soon, evangelicalism will also become a wasteland filled with the outwardly strong but inwardly decaying hulks of dying churches.

The Charge against the Church

(v.1b)

This is a sobering and serious accusation against this church. I wonder what the reaction was when they heard it? Don’t you think that these people were in such a state of spiritual stupor that they would have denied that this was true of them? The words of this indictment are few—the implications huge for them and for us.

Understanding the Indictment

Christ knows what they are doing. They have a reputation for being a church that is alive and vibrant, but in reality they are dead. It seems that part of the accusation leveled by the all-knowing Christ is that the church is self-deceived about her own condition. All the while she is striving to maintain her reputation as she sustains ministry that has long since lost its usefulness and vitality.

Reflecting on Its Implications

Frankly, this is one of the most frightening indictments against the churches. Think of it loved ones. Here is a church that is *dead*, but is maintaining her outward appearance of effective ministry. This is where John, in alluding to Zechariah, shows us with horrifying detail, what is happening in this church.

- This church is maintaining ministry by might and power, not by the Spirit. She has so designed her programs and ministry that they function with amazing effectiveness *long after the life of the Spirit has left them*.
- This church is going through the motions of ministry without the enabling of ministry, that is, grace. It is quite possible to do ministry totally by technique and human ingenuity without one shred of enabling grace.
- This church has lost the centrality of the supremacy of God and the purpose of God that Christ might be preeminent. They have forgotten that the primary work of the church is to display the glory and greatness of Christ, our capstone, our cornerstone, in a dark and decadent world.
- This church is attempting to survive on past glories, not on present realities. They kept looking back to the glories of their history, not to the need for spiritual ministries in the present.
- This church is more concerned for their own reputation and name and position in the community than they are for the truthfulness of their message and ministry. They want to be accepted, applauded, admired and approved within their own culture. And they had succeeded—but had lost the approval of Christ.

None of these things happened over night. They did not come to church one Sunday and be a living and vital church ministering in the Spirit and by grace and come the next to do ministry without the Spirit and grace. No, it was a slow decline and decay. Week by week, they did more and more just by sheer human effort and labor. Until finally, there was little place left for the life-giving Spirit to do His work.

And we must ask ourselves continually, “Is this true of us?” Have we become so good at ministry that we are doing it by might and power and not by the Spirit? Is our prayerlessness and powerlessness the first symptoms that we are on the slippery slope that leads to Sardis?

Indicating the Symptoms

How can we determine if this is beginning to happen in our own ministry? What kinds of things do we need to be on the alert for?

- When we become comfortable in our ministry. All effective, spirit empowered ministry requires sacrifice and cost.
- When in weakness and weariness we do not sense the strength of God keeping us going. In other words, we are either not receiving grace or are not making use of the means of grace in order to be strengthened.
- When things do not go well, our immediate response is to examine structures, organize and administrate more carefully, orchestrate towards our preconceived notions instead of turning to prayer and the Word.
- When we think that just because we need a ministry, that means we ought to have that ministry. We have to keep asking ourselves, “Why do we think that we need this?”
- When we begin to structure ministry before we have people who desire to do the ministry and are willing to be equipped for it. Along with this, when we are constantly pleading for ministry staff.
- When our ministry is accepted by the culture around us and we are no longer confronting people with the gospel in such a way that they see and feel their sinfulness and their need of a Savior.

Everything that God intends by His Spirit and grace for us to do, He will give gifted people to do that ministry. Now, the church may suffer because she starts ministry without people or gifted people are simply refusing to do what the Spirit wants them to do. *Either way, the effect is that same: a church that appears to doing well, but is dying inwardly.*



May we with all the grace that God gives us, nurture and sustain the Spirit’s work among us. May our programs be channels for the Spirit’s power, not substitutes for the Spirit’s work.

Correction of the Church

(v.2-4)

So how does a church that has fallen into this condition, recover itself?

Awaken to the Danger

(v.2a)

They must become aware that the condition exists. Here is a powerful word, “Wake up!” This church was slowly falling asleep on the edge

of eternity. It was oblivious to what was happening. So the first cry to the church is to AWAKEN. The church must recognize what is happening to itself.

Sustain God-given Ministry

(v.2b)

What are the “things that remain”? Remember, this is not a church that has almost ceased functioning. It has all the outward accomplishments. The things that remain in such churches are *the remaining ministries being supported and energized by the Spirit*. Find out what it is that God really wants done and give your strength and energies to that before they cease entirely and there is no recovery.

Why? Because even though we think we are doing well, God sees that we are not finishing what ought to be done. Though outwardly, we may look like we are doing the job, in God’s sight, we are not completing His work.

Recover their Spiritual Realities

(v.3a)

It seems to me that this church has lost and must recover a sense of spiritual reality. It is so easy over the long haul to become so wrapped up in the externals of what we are doing that we forget that there are immense and important realities just beyond our five senses. What is lost then is *faith*, for faith is the eyes of the soul seeing with our understanding what God has said is really so.

Listen, this is a huge danger. We can repeat word by word our doctrines and our traditions *with very little sense that these are real*. We can lose touch with the wonder and mystery and majesty of God even as we are bustling about ministry. We can become so practical in our bent that we do not have time for the very things that really matter.

Notice the three imperatives here: remember, obey and repent. Want to know how to recover your sense of spiritual reality? Recall the truths that you have heard. Reflect on them. Then, begin to obey them. We are hearing with deaf ears when we are not doing truth. And come to a place where you consciously turn from the sin of forgetting truth and not doing truth and turn towards the truth and doing it with all your heart.

One final word about this. Verse 3 can be translated to read like this, “Remember, therefore, how you received what you hear.” What does this mean? Loved ones, all that you received by grace came through faith. You hear God’s Word, His grace opened your eyes to understand and you began to act as though it were true, because it is. This is faith. If this church was to recover spiritual ministry, it had to do so on the principles of faith. They had to return to the Word of God, to

prayer in dependence on God and then, to doing what the Spirit of God compelled them by His grace gifts and spiritual power to do.

Understand the Consequences

(v.3b)

Get this. If dead, sleeping churches do not wake up, Jesus will come to them *to take away from them the things they treasure*. This is what thieves do. They thought that their programs, their ideas, their ministries were the most important thing about their church. They are not.

The most important thing about our church is Christ.

Whatever we value more than we value Christ, even when it may be good things, right things, things we feel we need—we will eventually lose them. And God will be the very one to remove them from us. Sadly, this will happen and they have no idea when. They may not even know that it has happened to them. The Lord came to them, took away their treasures and they were oblivious.

Hear me loved ones. We have a lot going on here. But we had better never lose our focus on Christ and the gospel. The most important thing about us is not our Sunday School, our youth ministry, our men or women's ministry. The most important thing is not our location or our building or our programs. We can have all of this and be utterly dead and decaying. Or we could have none of this, and still be a church that delights Christ. If we have Him in the center of our worship, in our love of the Word, in our fellowship as believers and in our witness to the world, then we have it all.

The Challenge to the Church

(v.4-5)

What wonderful words these. Here is as close a commendation as this church comes to. They have a few who have remained true.

I marvel as the Holy Spirit with the mind and pen of John reaches out into the lives the people at Sardis and uses words and analogies that will make them feel with razor clarity what He is saying.

Sardis was famous for its wool and woolen garments. The most expensive of what they produced was known for the brightness of its white color. For these garments to be certified, they were held up beside a standard and if they matched it, they were marked as worthy. So here it is, in the midst of all the imitations and inferior efforts at ministry, there were those who matched the standard and were marked as worthy. The garments of their life and walk were unsoiled by the world.

Once again, Jesus holds out to overcomers—to true believers—great promises that motivate and encourage them.

- They will be clothed in white. The righteousness of Christ clothes them now. But there will come a day that they will be completely holy. What they have longed and yearned for and have often fallen far short of they will experience in all its amazing reality.
- Their names will not be erased from the Book of Life. I take this to say exactly what it says. True believers are those whose names are written indelibly with the blood of Jesus in the Book of Life. Men and women from every tongue, and tribe and nation and people group whose names were written down before the foundation of the world. This text is not saying that there are those whose names will be erased—don't make that mistake. This is the grand promise that God's grace causes His children to persevere **because** their names can never be erased.
- We confess the Name of Jesus before men in our testimony; there will come a day when Jesus will confess our Name before His heavenly Father. What a great day that will be! And what a sad one many. Matthew 7:21-23 tells us that there will be many, many who have even done miraculous deeds in Jesus' Name who are not known nor confessed by Christ and go out into everlasting damnation.

Conclusion

Where will we stand on that day? Have we put our faith and trust in Christ, in His death on the cross, in His shed blood, in His resurrection as our only hope and assurance of salvation? Have we bowed our knee to Christ? Are you really saved? Do you have peace with God? If death darkened the door of your life and beckoned you, are you ready to stand before Christ?

I am talking to you, each one of you. This word goes to you teens, to each of you adults. Do you know Jesus? Do you have peace with God? Do you even care? I want to shake your confidence. I intend to dangle you over the flames of hell—to have you feel the awful force of the wrath of God. You have to sense how foul you and your sins are. You, without the cleansing blood of Christ, are loathsome to God. Isaiah 64:6 declares that even the best of your righteous and good deeds are filthy like menstrual rags. But He will save you. He will cleanse you from your sin. He will give you life. He will confess your name before God—but you must trust Him, bow to Him. Do so today. Today is the day of salvation; not tomorrow, not next week. Now.

Philadelphia: An Open Door

Revelation 3:7-13

Introduction

The Character of Christ

(v.7)

The character of Christ is communicated to the elders of the church at Philadelphia against the backdrop of the culture and community in which they ministered.

The city became known as the Gateway to the East as she sat at the cross roads between Rome and the Orient. Trade passed through her in a massive river of humanity and products. She was a large city and second only to Athens for the number of her patron gods and idol temples. She was swank, sophisticated, pluralistic and powerful. Her people were ethnically diverse, her religion pluralistic and her culture weary with worldly-wise sin. To the church ministering in this city, Jesus reveals Himself.

Pure in His Holy Character

That Jesus Christ is holy is a claim to Divinity for here He is the *Holy One*. Over against the all the idols of man's imagination and creation with their failures and follies, Jesus stands as absolutely and intrinsically holy. They may cavort and carouse, Jesus' character is pure and unstained and unblemished.

How we need to uphold the holiness of Christ against the sinfulness of our world and time. If we are going to be a church with the opportunities and the obstacles that Philadelphia had, we must give more time to meditate on and to live out the holiness of God.

Perfect in His Divine Truth

Satan has many chains by which he binds men. Some are bound by the paralyzing fear of powerful idols. Other are bound by the pernicious folly of pluralistic ideas. Our world, just as the world of John's day, has bought into the idea that there is no truth and that all religious and philosophical systems are equally valid. No one can claim absolute truth to which all other systems must bow. There is simply no place for truth, to borrow David Well's title.

Jesus comes to this church and declares that He is the truth. This must have impacted on the church in two ways.

➤ Truth resides in a Person. As Christians, we had better think more deeply about this. Our world views are only as true as they conform to the Person of Christ and to that final revelation of Him in His Word. Loved ones, this sounds arrogant in our world but I declare to you that Jesus Christ in His Person and in His Word is the Truth. All false systems, philosophies, world-views are simply errors and deceits propagated by the enemy of our souls to enslave our minds. That is why the Truth sets you free.

You see, the great danger of images of Christ about which we feel sentimental and which we feel communicate aspects of Christ is that they cause us to focus on the attributes of Christ *with which we are most comfortable*. And there is a subtle temptation to be drawn to think of that image when we worship and pray. That is why the idolatry of image making of the Godhead is utterly forbidden.

➤ Jesus Christ is the real, the genuine. This is a bit more difficult for us. But if you go into any pagan temple or Orthodox or Catholic Church, there will be the counterfeits in the form of images. There will be idols. They will be treasured, worshipped and prayed to. Against all this wood and plaster and marble stands the great genuine reality of the resurrected and living Christ.

Let us not miss the connection here as well. Jesus Christ is both the Truth and the only authentic, genuine, real God. Since this is so, our thoughts of Him must also be true, genuine and real. Otherwise, our own worship is little better than a bowing before an idol, not of wood, or marble, but of our own imagination.

Powerful in His Sovereign Authority

Here is an interesting phrase. Jesus Christ is the One who has the Key of David. Now what does that mean? And why is it significant? Let's consider those two questions.

➤ The allusion here is to Isaiah 22:22. In that text, Israel was relying on Egypt to defend them from the invasion of Babylon. They were going to be overthrown. They were not relying on the Lord (v.11), they were pursuing carnal pleasure instead of holy grief (v.12). God was going to remove Shebna, the false and sinful steward of the Royal household (v.15-17) and replace him with God's true servant, Eliakim (v.20). He will be given the authority over the household. This authority was symbolized by keys which were used to open the doors to different rooms in the palaces. God would establish this one to such a degree that he would be honored for his faithfulness (v.22-23). Jesus Christ is the reality of which that was the shadow. He, for the church, has the sovereign authority over all things, having been given the keys of death and hell (Rev. 1:18).

➤ Having the *key of David* is significant because of the opposition of the Jews. Christ has received the Messianic authority, which is now exercised universally over every tongue and tribe and people

group. He is the One who will open and close the doors through which the gospel goes and by which the kingdom grows. The Jews of their day and the religions of ours may stand against the gospel. But they can never stand against the sovereign, omnipotent supremacy of the High King.



“How great Thou art!” the hymn writer exclaimed. And so do we. Jesus Christ speaks to His church as the One who is pure in His holy character, perfect in His divine truth and powerful in His sovereign authority. What does this one say to His church?

The Commendation of the Church

(v.8-10)

Here is a church with no condemnation. Of all the qualities that mark the sterling character of this church, here is one that is easiest to miss. Jesus had nothing bad to say about her, no word of correction to her. Now stop and think about that (Selah). If the Lord singled us out as a church and wrote to us a letter, would there be things to be condemned? Would the Lord be able to pass over that part of His divine outline and move immediately to commendation? I think not.

But to the church at the city of “brotherly love”, there is not condemnation, no correction.

Her Commended Qualities

She is a small church stretching toward great opportunities. The phrase here is that “she has a little power.” In other words, she is not “super-church” or a “mega-church”. Yet in her weakness and smallness, she is moving in the strength and power of God to do great things in the Kingdom. Why is this so? Because this is at the heart of the way God does things. Corinth had become a “super-church”. So Paul writes the words of 1 Corinthians 1:26-29 to remind them corporately and 2 Corinthians 12:9 to remind them individually that divine strength is displayed in human weakness. What Sardis thought she was and wasn’t, Philadelphia was in truth.

She has kept or obeyed God’s Word. The sense here is both of holding onto and carrying forward. They treasured the Scripture so much that they obeyed it. Have we valued God’s Word like hidden treasure? Have we hidden it in our heart so as not to sin against God? Is the Word really a lamp that gives us light at each turn in our path? Do you love God’s Word so much that you read it, reflect on it and live by it? How many of you even came to church today without your Bibles?

She was a church who had stood for the fame and reputation and glory of Christ. The commendation is stated in the negative, “not denied my Name” because that was the pressure they were under and the perse-

cution they faced. They had such a sense of the greatness and majesty and supremacy of God's worth and glory that they would rather die than deny it. What about us? Do we, like Peter did three times, deny Christ? Does everyone you know, know that you are a Christian? If we fear to own the Name of Christ to someone who at best can slam the door in our face, what will we do when someone may put us in prison, or more likely, an insane asylum? And what about all the subtle ways in which we lower the worth of Christ in our own estimation? And what about our spreading His Name and fame to our neighbors?

Her Challenging Opportunity

Jesus said that He put before them "an open door which no one can shut." What does that mean? In Acts 14:27 Paul reported how God had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. Later, he related in 1 Corinthians 16:9 that at Ephesus a great door of effective ministry was opened to him. In 2 Corinthians 2:12, a door was opened for ministry while he was at Troas. Paul asks the church in Colossians 4:3 to pray that a door for the gospel might be opened. Therefore, we conclude that this opened door is the opportunity for the effective ministry of the gospel by the Sovereign providence and directive will of God.

So here she was, a small church in a metropolitan, gateway city. Her holy, true and Sovereign Lord whose Word she treasures and obeys and whose fame and worth are more satisfying than life, opens a door for effective ministry for the gospel *and no one can close it*. Make no mistake about it: the opportunity here is spread, in the gospel, a passion for God by calling on people to treasure, trust and bow to Him. This is evangelism.

Have we been so gripped by the glory of Christ that we will do all we can, in the strength of the Lord, to spread the good news of that glory to our neighbors? We profess that we believe in the supremacy of God—but do we believe it enough to spread it around? I pray with all my being that God's Holy Spirit will fuel the fires of your passion for the glory of God *for all peoples* including your neighbor, your grocer, your friend, your family.

↓ But this is not the whole story for a church of this character and with these opportunities. They face large **obstacles** as well.

Her Conquered Opposition

(v.9)

They faced religious opposition. Judaism has been declared by God to be finally and irretrievably apostate. God's people are those who bow

to Jesus as the promised Messiah and King. Twice now on the book of Revelation, Jewish synagogues have been called synagogues of Satan (2:9; 3:9). The Jews asserted that they were the people of God, loved of God and having the Law of God. Paul writes that a true Jew is not one who is Jewish outwardly but rather inwardly (Romans 2:28-29). It is a matter of the heart not the flesh. Like the Jews of John 8:31-27, these lost Jews were actually of their father the devil (John 8:44). Now, they either attacked the church from the outside, using Rome's power as a sword to attempt to destroy the church or from the inside, using legalism to try to enslave the church. God responds to them at three key points:

- God will sovereignly save. He will *make them come*. How marvelous the grace of Christ that He reaches with a mighty, sovereign hand even into the synagogues of Satan that look like legitimate places of worship and saves people in them.
- They will bow down. The point here is that a Jew must be willing to give up his Judaism and bow to Christ and recognize the church. There as one new man, we are all in true union for the middle wall of division, the Law, has been taken down in Christ (Ephesians 2:11-22).
- God loves them. The loved of God are the elect from *every* people group, not just from Israel. It is the challenge given to every ethnic and national church to recognize that *there is no special favor on them because of these external distinctions*.

What then are we to make of this for us today?

Churches who claim to be the people of God but who deny the truth of the Word and the Lordship of Christ are modern day synagogues of Satan.

- If God gives us the challenging opportunity to evangelize, He moves with sovereign authority to save.
- True Christians, those who come to trust in Christ alone and obey Him, *must* leave apostate churches and religions and in bowing to Christ, gather with believing people in Biblical churches.
- If God has given special dispensations of His providence to us as a nation (or to any nation) it is only in His concern for the spread of the gospel. Christian Americanism (Briticism, Koreanism) is elitist, provincial and wholly devoid of Biblical support.

God has purposed to spread the fame of His glory by the good news that the great God loves people from every neighborhood and all nations. From every nation, out of every false house of worship, God calls His own by the proclamation of the gospel.

Her Coming Ordeal

(v.10)

What an amazing text this is. Because these believers had followed the model of Christ's endurance in their obedience and defense of the Word, they would be delivered out of a coming time of testing, sent to try the inhabited earth.

The language here points to a world-wide "testing" or "temptation" which is going to come on "all the inhabited world" and from (possibly through) which they will be "kept" (defended).

How are we to understand this? In my opinion, in some measure, all of the following three ways:

- The church at Philadelphia would be defended by God during a coming time intense trial and persecution unleashed by the Roman emperors on the believing church. This gives the promise substance and makes it related to them directly.
- All churches can expect to endure, defended by Christ, through times of national or universal testing or judgment. This makes the promise applicable throughout church history and explains the amazing ability of the believing church to avoid extermination.
- The church as the Body of Christ, can expect to be defended or kept from the day or hour in which the great wrath of God is poured out on an unbelieving world. Though we may endure through tribulation, we are delivered from wrath. This makes the particulars and the principles of this text accord with the larger prophecies in the Word.

Whether we are delivered in, through or out of times of testing and trial, we are still delivered and defended. Are we keeping His command to patiently endure?

The Challenge to the Church

(v.11-13)

In this church's opportunities and obstacles there are hidden three promises: the promise of an open door, of defeated opponents, of protection through trial and of enduring security. Now here are her obligations.

Their Responsibility

(v.11)

I want you to imagine with me a terrible battle. The enemy is engaged. The treasures and crowns won for the Lord are at risk by the advance of the enemy. The soldiers of the Lord seem to be weary at times. At other times they seem to be making great headway. The bombs are bursting. The guns are firing. Many are falling. Just at the moment we think we have to retreat because the pressure is too great, we hear this

sustaining word, “Hold on. I am coming quickly.” Suddenly, hearts beat faster. Vision clears. Weary arms and legs move with renewed vigor. The enemy is more stoutly resisted, for the great Commander is coming quickly with reinforcements. The battle may be great, but the Victor, the Lord of hosts, is on His way.

So, dear ones, hold on. It may seem dark. The enemy may be pressing hard. But Jesus is coming quickly.

God’s Promise

(v.12)

To true believers, Jesus makes these promises.

- Workmanship - They will be pillars in God’s house. In a region where an earthquake had destroyed the city and many cities around it, the idea of being a pillar in God’s house would strike home. We, the church, the Body of Christ, are the true Temple of God. We are being built up living stone by living stone, strong pillar by pillar, to be the Tabernacle, the dwelling place of God. The word points to a huge, strong pillar made of consummate workmanship.
- Ownership - The true believer will have God’s Name written on them. This is a powerful image of ownership. What a privilege it is to be owned by God.
- Citizenship - The true believer is not a citizen of this world—his citizenship is in heaven. We are aliens and strangers. We are passing through on our way to our heavenly residence.
- Relationship - True believers will have an enduring relationship. When we marry, we give to our wives our names. To them it is a new name. To all it should speak of the enduring joy of oneness.

Conclusion

Lest you think I have taken this too far, turn, in closing to two exhilarating texts that brightly illuminate verse 12. First, turn to Revelation 21:1-3 and 9-11a. Do you see something here? “I will show you the Bride. What we see is the City.” And this as a part of making all things new (v.5). Now to Isaiah 62:1-5. Listen to the Word of God.

Do you see it now? O, precious privilege. God delights in us. God will rejoice over us just like newlyweds.

In the midst of the great darkness of this world, with the opportunities, obstacles and obligations, how we long for the King. But, O loved one. He is coming, and coming quickly. For He delights in you.

Notes

Laodicea: Making God Sick

Revelation 3:14-22

Introduction

Dateline: 60 AD. **Headline: City Refuses Government Aid** Laodicea, a city recently devastated by earthquake, has refused all government aide and will not be declared a Federal Disaster Area, the government spokesman said today. In a communiqué released today, the city spokesman said funds to rebuild were already being raised by its own citizens. The city's businesses would see to their own reconstruction. Its banking and financial powerhouses were mobilized today to create vast projects for rebuilding. Wool production (famous for glossy black wool) and its medicinal products would begin as soon as the shops can be rebuilt. In a final note, the religious temples, Jewish Synagogues, and Christian assemblies all were endorsing the spirit and the stand taken by the city fathers.

Though this dateline is fictional, the history behind is factual. Laodicea was a city that prided itself for its independent and self-reliance. Its refusal of aid from the government simply reflected the pragmatic pride of its people.

It is interesting to see the church here taking on the character of the city's culture. To some degree, that is inevitable. People, individually and collectively will take time to think through and be transformed from worldliness to heavenliness. Sadly, this church has become so infused with the character of the culture around her that she is self-deluded and deceived about her true spiritual condition. And let me say this: when we speak of "the church" we are talking about the collective and corporately embraced view of the people who make up the church. That the church is like this together comes about because this is the consensus of the church individually.

And just at the outset it is important for us as Christians here in America, in the mid-west and in the Dayton area to have an authentic Christianity, one that is growing evermore heavenly and less and less like the culture around us. So while we are surrounded with pragmatism, pluralism and a self-absorbed therapeutic culture, let us grow in grace and in the knowledge of Christ to the end that we are most like Him and least like all this.

To this end, to that church and to us, comes this final message. And what a stunning and powerful word this message is.

The Character of Christ

(v.14)

As in all of them, we begin with the particulars of the character of Christ that are most needed to open spiritually deaf ears and soften hardened hearts. So Christ is the...

Affirmation of the *Promises* of God

The Amen

He affirms the truth and promises of God as *the amen*.

2 Corinthians 1:19-20 reads, For the Son of God, Christ Jesus, who was preached among you by us—by me and Silvanus and Timothy—was not yes and no, but is yes in Him. For as many as may be the promises of God, in Him they are yes; wherefore also by Him is our Amen to the glory of God through us. Christ is God's "yes" to all His promises for us.

Revelation of the *Person* of God

The Witness

His witness and testimony is *faithful and true* – He tells what He has seen and knows. Jesus is the very person of God in *logos* form. He is God's self-knowledge, so perfect and so faithful and so true, that He stands forth from God as the second person of the Godhead.¹ He is not only the witness of God's person, but He is also has the true testimony of the character and deeds of the church. In the face of their own self-delusion, they need the true witness of the Word of God who moves among them and sees them and knows them truly.

Expression of the *Power* of God

The Ruler

The ideas here is not that He is the first created thing, rather He is the source, origin and thus the **ruler** of every created thing. This is ever the emphasis in the Scripture. God made all that is. He is the creator. And since He is the source and sustainer of all that is not God, all the cosmos, then He is its ruler. And He is its final judge.

This tells us why we have a multitude of myths about origins. If you can show that God is not the source of all things, then you have the right to deny that God rules and that we are ultimately accountable to Him. Understand this, that we believe that God made all things as the Scripture tells us in 6 days and all very good. We believe that He sovereignly rules over history. We believe that we owe Him our total and delighted allegiance and fealty. And we will one day stand before Him to give an account.

¹ See the discussion of this in Jonathan Edwards and John Piper.

The Condemnation of the Church

(v.15-17)

So as the Ruler of the world and Lord of the church, Jesus relates to their deeds and their works. He knows them personally and experimentally. He does not have some angelic report of them. He is not coming to them on the word of the great Accuser of our souls. He has tasted their spirituality...

Lack of Spiritual *Passion*

(v.15-16)

He is not grieved by them; He is not angry with them; He is disgusted with them ... He is nauseated by them. He wants to spew them out of His mouth.

Now, the words here are not meant to be understood in some spiritually metaphorical sense. God would much rather you be spiritually cold than the disgusting lukewarm. That is not it at all. God wants you to be what you are supposed to be.

Imagine you are hot and thirsty from a long stint of yard-mowing. The sweat is running off your brow and you are THIRSTY. There sits a large glass of tea. And you pick it up and drink deep and ... YUCK ... it is warm. The ice has long melted, the thirst-quenching delighting cold gone.

Or imagine it is bright cold winter day. And you have been out shoveling the snow. You come in and shake out of your coat and mittens and rub your hands together. Ah, there is a pot of coffee. You pour it into your cup and bring it up slowly and someone has turned off the warmer. It is just at that nasty, lukewarm state.

This is what God is trying to get us to feel and see. He has come to His church in her works and deeds and it is like drinking the water from a garden hose long lying in the sun. He is gagged by them.

Lack of Spiritual *Perception*

(v.17)

They are hugely self-deceived, self-important and self-centered.

You say	You are
Rich	Wretched
Wealthy	Miserable
	Poor
	Blind
	Naked

They had lost their vigor, values, vision and vesture. Their very words and self-talk and self-view have contributed to their deception. Be-

loved, it is imperative that we ever keep before us that we are anything we are *by the sheer mercy and powerful grace of God.*

The Correction of the Church (v.18-20)

Now I have broken the outline in the middle of a sentence. Look at how verse 17 connects to verse 18. "Because you say _____ and are _____ I counsel you to _____."

In His Counsel (v.18)

These 3 things were related to the particular strengths of the city around them.

True treasure	Refined gold
True righteousness	White garments
True faith	Eye salve

In His Command (v.19)

He does not leave solution at mere advice. It is not just, "O, this is just a good idea that you can take or leave." No, it is utterly vital.

Explanation

Because He is moving among them with the rod of correction, they can be assured that they are still the objects of His love. His chastening of them proves that they were believers.

Instruction

Exhortation

So, be zealous and repent. Have a passion and change.

Injunction

Listen to these related texts: Romans 12:9-13; 1 Peter 1:22; 4:8. Do you get the point? Away with a passionless devotion to Christ and fervorless love for Christians! I tell you that some of you have more passion for a sports team than you have for the God of all the universe. What an absolute shame.

In His Communion

(v.20)

Most misinterpreted, misunderstood, and misused verse in the whole Bible. This verse has *nothing* to do with evangelism.

NOT	IS
Door of the heart	Door of the church
Salvation	Fellowship/communion
To the lost	To the saved
“Asking Jesus into your heart”	“Giving Jesus place in His church”

So if you have that painting Jesus knocking at the heart's door, take it down. It misrepresents the Scripture and distorts the gospel.

This will come as a shock to many of you. But the common way of evangelism where we tell people to ask Jesus into their hearts is totally unbiblical. Yes, Jesus does dwell in our hearts *by the Holy Spirit*. But not ever, not once anywhere are the lost exhorted to ask Jesus into their hearts. This utterly reverses the Scriptures. It is never that we ask God to come to us, but always that we come to God. So use Biblical language. The command of the Scriptures is to believe, to bow, to acknowledge, to repent and to call on God.

Promises a fellowship which is:

- Real
- Spiritual
- Rich
- Mutual
- Heavenly
- Personal

Even when the church is lukewarm, self-satisfied, content and self-deceived. Jesus will fellowship in sweet communion with believers who have a passion for Him.

The Challenge to the Church

(v.21-22)

Here is the final challenge from our Lord...

In Our Relationship

(v.21)

This refers to:

- Ephesians 2:4-11 Raised and seated in heavenly places. Present spiritual reality in anticipation of:
- Revelation 22:1-5 Glorified and reigning in heaven itself. Future hope that becomes a glorified reality.

We can sit down with Jesus on His throne after overcoming JUST AS He overcame and sat down. What is the point? The work is accomplished. He finished His work of redemption. And we finish our work of the great commission.

In Our Responsibility

(v.22)

Here we meet the very voice of God,
For when we read the Word of God,
We hear the Spirit of God.

Lessons

- It is wrong to misuse the Scripture in our evangelism. We must discard evangelistic talk that is grounded in a misuse of this text. Don't invite people to "ask Jesus into their hearts." Nowhere in the Bible is that kind of evangelistic appeal. Always, we encourage, plead, weep with people to believe, repent, trust, confess and bow to Christ.
- Are we lukewarm? Is there really a passion and a zeal for God? Does your spouse or your closest friend know this to be true? Does the Lord Jesus?
- Are we deceiving ourselves? Is it possible for us to content, comfortable and complete while being in desperate spiritual need?
- Loved children are disciplined: fuel the fires of your passion for God. Change; repent.

Let us hear what the Spirit is saying,
Lest we leave Savior standing,
Outside the door of our church.

❧ ENDNOTES ❧

ⁱ Now are we to think when we hear this? How do we discern if our place of ministry was like theirs? By the level of opposition to the authority and exclusive claims of the Lord Jesus. The political Rome of their day elevated itself and refused to acknowledge the claims of Christ and arrayed its might against those who did. The religious Rome of our day does the same. We are surrounded by religious groups, churches and powers who deny the exclusive claims of Christ as the sole Redeemer and Ruler whose authority rests in His Word alone.

Do we minister in a place where Satan dwells and has his throne? Yes. If you do not think so, go to almost any religious person around us and insist that Jesus alone is the sovereign and savior and that to no other are we to bow in worship, prayer or petition. Insist that the Bible in its 66 books is absolutely inspired, infallible, inerrant, supreme and sufficient. Don't say it in such a way that this is *your opinion*, but that this is *the truth*. The foul spirit of this age will rise up in the anger and accusations of lost men and women.