



Sunday, September 24, 2023
Revelation 2:1-7

Over the past two weeks as we have launched into the book of the Revelation of Jesus Christ, we have learned that this book, unlike any other book in the Bible, declares the glory and power, and nature of Jesus Christ, incredibly well. And over the past few weeks, we have seen exactly that. Last week we saw in vivid form the image of Jesus as a warrior - an image so powerful that at His sight, John fell before Jesus, as if dead. Amidst the nature of the all mighty, cosmic power of Jesus, we also saw the loving, nurturing side as He reached down with His right hand of power and authority to reassure and comfort John - letting him know that He truly is the same Jesus that always has been. Again, this is what is specifically meant when we talk about apocalyptic literature. It's revealing something that has always been there, but just hasn't been seen until that point.

A great example of apocalyptic literature is found in the book of Daniel where Daniel was praying and fasting for an answer from the Lord. The answer that he was looking for didn't come in the expected time frame and while he was at the mouth of the Tigris River a few days later he experienced an apocalypse. The Angel of the Lord appeared to him and revealed that which was hidden by explaining that the Lord had heard his prayer and dispatched His angel immediately. However, the Angel of the Lord was held up battling the Prince of Persia and even the prince of Greece later on. Daniel knew none of this in the physical, but knew enough to trust God that He would work things together as He saw fit. The fact that he was given a glimpse of what was happening in the spiritual realm only served to greater strengthen his faith, hope and trust in the Lord. And so the goal as we walk through the Revelation of Jesus Christ is exactly that, to be able to see Jesus as we've never seen Him before and look forward to the future with great anticipation and great hope because Jesus is victorious.

Now, last week we talked about the position of Jesus in the middle of the seven lampstands as symbolizing His authority as the Source. And in his right hand He was holding the seven stars representing the angels of the churches. Ultimately what this shows us is that Jesus has all authority over the churches and the leadership of the churches. And it's interesting to note the number seven being represented here because all throughout the Old Testament and now even in the New Testament, the number seven is significant in that it represents perfection and completion - 'perfectly complete.' There are numerous examples of this throughout Scripture, but two that stand out to me are: Creation and the walls of Jericho:

In creation, God created the world in six days, but it wasn't until after He rested on the seventh day that He declared creation complete. The Israelites marched around the walls of Jericho 6 times in 6 days, but it wasn't until the 7th day when they had completed the seventh lap that the walls came tumbling down.

And so, whenever we see the number seven represented in the book of the Revelation of Jesus Christ, it has to be understood that whatever it is representing, its significance lies in the fact that it is perfectly complete.

And so when John records that the voice of the Lord is speaking to the seven churches in Asia - yes - He's speaking to them specifically, but the fact that there are seven of them indicates that it's not just a message to them but that somehow Jesus is speaking to the complete church; the whole church, in every place, in every time and in every age.

The messages that follow therefore are messages to The Church and therefore equally as relevant to you and to me today. Let's read:

Revelation 2:1-7 (NKJV)

"To the angel of the church of Ephesus write,

'These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands: 2 "I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars; 3 and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary. 4 Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love. 5 Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent. 6 But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

7 *“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God.”*

But before we get into the first church that the first message was addressed to, I want to walk you through a bit of an overview of these seven churches, and point out some similarities and specific patterns that all seven share as this will help set the stage for the next part of our journey.

The first thing I want to look at is essentially the first thing that is said to each of the churches. Each of the seven messages to the seven churches opens up with the phrase: ‘These things says He...’ This might not seem important because we just identified the ‘He’ as Jesus the warrior in the last chapter, but the translation of this phrase into the Greek is actually quite important. The phrase is translated from the Greek words, ‘Tade Legei,’ which is a phrase that speaks to the authority of the message that is about to be delivered. This phrase would have been familiar language for those well-versed in Old Testament theology because this was the same phrase that was used by the prophets of old to introduce the word of God that was about to come. It’s the whole, ‘Thus saith the Lord...’ type of language. But it’s not being communicated exactly like that right now though. The way that it is declared now in Revelation is slightly different in that it is also the same phrase that was used by Rome and even Persian kings when introducing their decrees. Tade Legei! It was a literal, ‘Listen up, the king or emperor is speaking’ type of statement. And so by using this exact phrase to open up each of the seven messages to the seven churches, it didn’t matter who was listening, for that statement alone declared that the words that were about to come forth - ‘Tade Legei’ - carry all authority: the authority of Deity and the authority of Royalty.

Which raises an interesting question for the reader here, since this is a message specifically to the church, why then the necessity for kingly, royalty language, when this is specifically spiritual language meant for the community of believers?

So this is where things get a little more interesting. Note the phrase that comes just before Tade Legei. In all seven messages John prefaces this call by giving us the subject of this instruction: ‘To the angel of the church.’ We’ll get to the angel part in a sec, but the word for church that is used in each of these seven messages is the Greek word ‘Ekklesia,’ which is a word that some of us may already be familiar with. It is derived from two Greek words: ‘ek,’ meaning ‘out of,’ and ‘kaleo,’ meaning ‘to call.’ Thus, at its root, ‘ekklēsia’ means ‘those who are called out’ or ‘assembly of called-out ones.’

Which when put into the perspective of Christian language, makes great sense because Christians

are called out of their life of sin and called into the Kingdom of Christ, by Christ, for Christ: Basically, an assembly of Christians gathered for worship in a religious meeting. And so when we read the term church/ekklesia in the New Testament nearly every single time, it is in reference to this religious assembly.

I say nearly every time, because there are 3 times where this word appears but refers simply to: 'a gathering of citizens called out from their homes into some public place, an assembly.' And that's because long before the word was used for Christians, it was used primarily within Roman society as a formal place where the public would assemble to talk about civic duties. In fact, in every city that the Romans would conquer, one of the first things they would do is set up ekklesia.

Now, once Christianity started going into cities and the Gospel message began to spread like wild fire, the adoption and practice of ekklesia for the christian community began to stick and became the primary way of identifying the christian community. And so when we read this term now in the Revelation of Jesus Christ it would be ones assumption that this is exactly what is being referenced here.....but it's not. The definition of the word ekklesia as it is used here is in fact, 'a gathering of citizens called out from their homes into some public place, an assembly.'

Which actually makes perfect sense if you think about it. Because now everyone would know that the voice that is speaking carries all authority whether divine or royalty and now this voice is speaking directly to them whether they are citizens of the city or citizens of the kingdom of God.

Make no mistake, this simple delineation is not an oversight but intentional because it was to be made implicitly clear that as much as this was a message to the Christian community, the Tade Legei decree was for all people. Hence the term as we will see in every single message: 'Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches...' That the message may start with the church, but it is not limited to the church. Jesus is now sending a message to the world as the King of all kings, the Emperor of all emperors, the Caesar of all caesars, the Lord of all lords.

But now we see that although the focus is on the church and beyond, it's also specifically a message to the Angel of the Church which is another interesting delineation. As I mentioned last week, the term angel here is the Greek word 'Angelos,' which simply means messenger and does not necessarily denote spiritual realm or physical realm.

Historically, there are three explanations for the meaning of this term as it appears in Revelation 2: Angel means real angels - supernatural beings.

Angel refers to pastors of the church as the messenger of God.

Angel is metaphorical, referring to the 'spirit' of each church - kind of like its nature.

Whereas this could mean any one of the three, it's interesting to note that we see the term 'angelos' being used frequently throughout the rest of the Revelation of Jesus Christ, and when it is used, it is 100% of the time used specifically for spirit beings. As we continue in the letter, we will read of this term as it relates to the angels who hold the four winds; we hear of an angel of the abyss; an angel in charge of the fire on the altar; the angel of the waters....etc.

And so, it seems to me that the most reasonable explanation is that these are in fact, spiritual beings that are given roles and responsibilities over the churches. Think guardian angel of the church.

Part of the reason I think this to be true, is because there is evidence of this kind of behaviour throughout the Bible. We started off this morning with the introduction of Daniel, where we learned that God assigned guardian angels over nations and people groups. In fact, there are a few other sections in Scripture that talk about angels namely Colossians 2:18 where the Apostle Paul actually has to warn the church against angel-worship. It's not something that we are given a lot of insight into, but it's certainly a reality that we have to embrace.

In his book Discipleship on the Edge, Pastor Darrell Johnson says, 'What John seems to be saying is that God has assigned angels over the churches, who, as far as I can, tell, are responsible for making sure the message gets told: who is somehow making sure the human messenger (pastor) speaks the Word accurately and faithfully. What is clear in each of the messages in Revelation 2 to 3 is that what Jesus speaks to the angel of each church is meant for the ears of the church. We know this for two reasons. One, the pronouns, 'you' and 'your,' as in, 'I know your deeds,' are translated as plural. And two, each message concludes with the exhortation, 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.' And so the message to the angel is actually a message through the angel to the church.'

Friends, there is a whole governmental structure of Angels out there that we just cannot see. Remember, this battle is not one of flesh and blood - there are things happening in the spirit-realm that we are just not meant to see. And although we are given glimpses through Scripture, I think it's important to note that perhaps we aren't given full sight or clarity into the spirit realm as a way of protecting us from potentially putting our faith, hope and trust in something other than Jesus Christ as per what was happening in the church in Colossians with angel worship.

At any rate, with all that behind us, we now step into the very first message to the very first people - the Ephesians. And as our time has escaped us this morning, we will close with this point because this really is a great way to bring everything full circle.

At the outset, the church in Ephesus looks to have everything going for it and Jesus acknowledges this in His opening remarks by saying:

'I see what you've done, your hard, hard work, your refusal to quit. I know you can't stomach evil, that you weed out apostolic pretenders. I know your persistence, your courage in my cause, that you never wear out.' (MSG)

I don't know about you, but these are incredibly affirming words from Jesus. If even half of that was said about me, I would be thrilled! On the outside the church in Ephesus was a Gospel machine. Upholding the tenants of faith, rebuking evil, preaching against sin and the allowance of evil. Not refusing to quit and in all things, courageously making ground - all for the sake of righteousness. Doing the good work of the Gospel. All of their T's are crossed and all of their I's are dotted. They are a textbook church and a very worthy model to follow.

So whatever could be the problem in a context as good as this?

As good as everything seems to look, amidst all of the hustle and bustle of activity, Jesus saw something different. What he saw was a massive cover-up. A massive cover-up of epic proportions. Jesus knew the real condition of their souls, that they were deeply flawed to the core and even though the church had everything going for it, they lacked the one thing that Jesus deserves. Their love. But not just left-over love. Their first love.

'But I have this against you says Jesus, you have left your first love.'

They had gotten really good at doing church but somewhere down the line they'd forgotten how to be the church.

"But Lord, I'm working really, really hard for the church."

"I know, but you're not doing it out of love anymore."

"But Lord, I am fighting for the truth on all kinds of fronts."

"I know, but there is no love in your heart."

But Lord, I am literally on the front lines, securing our position for the kingdom."

“I know. Thank you. But you have lost the attentiveness, the tenderness the extravagance, the beauty of your first love.”

They had been so busy in doing everything that they had forgotten why they were even doing it in the first place and who they were doing it for.

I think the best example I can think of is that of Mary and Martha. They're sisters and Jesus came to their house for a visit and both operated in very different manners. Martha was busy with serving and preparations. While these tasks were essential and well-intentioned, they became a source of distraction for her thus preventing her from focusing on Jesus, who was literally right in front of her. Mary, on the other hand sat at the feet of Jesus, listening to what He said. When Martha complained about Mary not helping, Jesus responded, “Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her” (Luke 10:42).

Mary knew the value of relationship with Jesus. There will always be work to do, but when Jesus is in your midst, sit down and listen to Him. You make time and space in the midst of busyness to sit in His presence and allow His love to flow over you.

And so the reminder is to keep the main thing the main thing - which is to love the Lord your God with all of your heart, soul and mind. And out of that, we can then love our neighbour. Don't let loving your neighbour take priority over loving your God. Because if it does, then that's akin to idol worship, and we all know that we are to worship no other gods, but God.

This is how serious Jesus takes this. It's not just a little whoopsie, let me fix that kind of a deal. It's actually a call to 'repent and return' to your first love.

I imagine Jesus saying something like: 'You used to listen for my voice. You used to take time to be still before me to seek my face and enjoy my company. You used to open yourself up to my Word daily. Nothing got in your way. You used to not complicate my commandments. You took them at face value and found freedom in obeying them. You used to weep for those who do not know me. You used to realize you cannot make it on your own and throw yourself on me with reckless abandon.

Jesus is calling us to do whatever it takes to restore “first love.” Nothing satisfies us but Him and His love. And nothing satisfies Him but us and our love.

It's a call to repent and return.

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