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Lessons of the seven churches.

The Book of Revelation is largely abstract, symbolic - and without a lot of background knowledge, it can be impossible to interpret. Here is a very brief overview. Early in the book, in Chapters 2 and 3, we read letters written by the author of Revelation to seven early churches, all of them close together geographically. One of the churches is Ephesus, the author's home city. The letters tell these churches that while they have done many good things, they have some problems, some evil beliefs and practices that they need to correct. Then there is a vision from Heaven where Jesus, the Lamb of God, is seen as sacrificing himself for all humans. Next, seven seals are opened. These seals present some powerful symbolism, in the form of horses of various colors. This part essentially tells us that horrible plagues will attack humanity because of its corruption. Next, there are seven trumpets. Each of these is a plague. Then, there is a woman, a dragon, and a child. Importantly, dragons were a common literary characteristic of ancient Jewish and pre-Jewish literature. The dragon is probably Satan, and it is at war with the people of God. Then there is a Beast from the Sea. This beast

has seven heads, probably representing seven major emperors of Rome – a city which has received its authority, not from God, but from Satan. Next comes a statement that Babylon – which is an obvious reference to the Roman Empire – will be attacked by God. This message is delivered by three angels. After this, there are seven bowls filled with the wrath of God. These bowls represent God's final judgement against evil and against the Roman Empire. Then the whore of Babylon, i.e., Rome, is symbolized as a beast with seven heads. Then Babylon falls. There is rejoicing in Heaven. A rider on a white horse arrives. This is Jesus Christ, who has come to conquer Rome. Satan is then cast into the lake of fire for a thousand years, which in fact means infinity. All people, including all who have ever died, are judged – and the books that have been written about each of our lives are read aloud. There is now a new Heaven and a new Earth, which are purified. We see a New Jerusalem in all its glory. Sin has been erased. God has destroyed evil - and all the faithful will receive an amazing reward for all of eternity. We will be citizens of the glorious Empire of God, the New Jerusalem.

I'd like to look at an early part of this book, where the author writes letters to seven major churches that were active in his day. But first, let's talk about the author of this book. The Book of Revelation was written by a man who identifies himself as John. He was exiled to the Island of Patmos in the Aegean

archipelago. The Aegean Sea is a body of water that is connected to the Mediterranean Sea and sits between Turkey and Greece. Patmos is off the coast of Turkey. There is a church tradition that John was the same John who wrote the Gospel of John and the letters of John, and who was one of the Apostles of Jesus. But there is far more Jewish symbolism and language in Revelation than in the Gospel. And the Book of Revelation is written in far less literate Greek than the Gospel. There were probably three Johns, the authors of Revelation, the Gospel, and the letters. When Revelation was written, Domitian was the emperor of the Roman Empire and he initiated a program of hunting down, imprisoning, killing, and exiling Jews and Gentiles who were followers of Jesus Christ. That's why John was on Patmos. He had been sent there in exile.

We're going to look at the letters that were written to the seven churches. It is believed by many that this material was written separately. It is far more worldly and easier to comprehend. It deals with the here and now, and not with the end of the world, as much of the rest of the Book of Revelation seems to be dedicated to. But wording in these seven letters is repeated later in the Book, and so are the topics to which they refer. The material is not out of place. The seven churches are in Asia Minor, now Turkey. Here is something interesting: while historically, these seven statements have been referred to as letters, in

truth they are prophetic pronouncements, not standard letters of the day. By using language that is very reminiscent of the Hebrew scriptures, one thing is made clear. John isn't delivering his words: he is delivering God's words to these churches. Not only are these letters not letters, and not only are these God's words and not John's words, but these prophetic announcements are meant for all churches of all times, all congregations, including us, and not just these seven.

Ephesus is the first church John of Patmos addresses. Ephesus was the most important city in Asia minor, having a major port on the Aegean Sea and being located on a major Roman highway. Paul the evangelist spent two years there. Here is an abbreviated version of what was written to this church:

"I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. ³I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. ⁴But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. ⁵Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.

God praises this church for their holy works and their endurance in their faith. They have been resistant to false apostles, who were probably itinerant prophets, people who traveled around, selling religious artifacts that were supposed to be magical. They have also been abused because of their faith, but they have withstood these threats. But the criticism of this church goes to the heart

of what it means to be a follower of Christ: they have grown routine in their faith and have lost their love of all those made in God's image. Apparently, they have become more concerned with orthodoxy, with following rituals, and have forgotten Christ's two major commandments: to love God with all you heart and soul, and to love you neighbors as yourself. Then there is a threat. God says that if they do not repent and change their ways, he will *"remove their lampstand from its place."* This means that the church would no longer exist because Jesus is the light of the world and of any church, and losing that light means the death of the church.

The second church is the one at Smyrna, a city that, unlike Ephesus, still exists and is today called Izmir. It is thought to be the birthplace of Homer, and it had a harbor and was prosperous. It was at the end of a very long highway that cut across Asia Minor. This city was loyal to Rome and had a major temple dedicated to Roma, the goddess of Rome. It had a temple dedicated to Emperor Tiberius. We don't know how the church there was founded. The proclamation by John of Patmos to this church contains nothing critical. The church receives praise. Apparently, the Christians there did not share in the wealth of the city, and they were discriminated against. As John tells them, they may be poor, but they are rich in God:

⁹ "I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. ¹⁰ Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of

you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. ¹¹ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.'

John tells these people that although they are hated by the Jews of Smyrna, these particular Jews are in truth of Satan, and not true Jews at all. What's interesting is that at this time, most people in Smyrna, who would have been pagans, would have hated Christians and Jews alike. The point is that John holds Jews, as the Chosen People, to a higher ethical standard. But if the believers remain steadfast in their faith, they will be blessed – and they will not suffer the second, final, eternal death.

The third church is at Pergamum. It later become an important military city in the Roman Empire. It contained several large pagan temples including one dedicated to the emperor. The Romans deified their emperor, considering him a god. This apparently led John to call the city the location of Satan's throne:

¹³ " 'I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is. Yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you. ¹⁴ But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality. ¹⁵ So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. ¹⁶ Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them. ¹⁷ To the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone.'

The church at Pergamum was in a dangerous situation, due to persecution. But they were holding fast to their faith. One of their members, Antipas, apparently

was martyred. But many of them were weak when it came to threats against their faith. Some believed in the teachings of Balaam, who is a person from the Book of Numbers who was a pagan prophet. Balak was a king in Moab; the Moabites were arch enemies of the Israelites. Some were also following the teachings of the Nicolaitans, which was a heretical group of believers. Those who remain faithful will receive hidden manna; this symbolically declares that God will provide for them when they are in great need. They will also receive a white stone. We're not sure what this means, but white stones were used by jurors to indicate innocence – and so maybe this means that they will be rewarded by God at the End Times.

The fourth church was at Thyatira. This was yet another important city, located at the intersection of a handful of major Roman trade routes. Several major trades were centered here, including textile workers. They produced an extremely valuable purple dye. The church is complimented, but it also has its faults:

'I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first. ²⁰ But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols.

Unlike the church at Ephesus, this church never lost its love. Jezebel appears in 2nd Kings; she is a seducer who leads her people astray with false teachings. They also ate food sacrificed to idols. This is an interesting remark, as the local guilds would

have held major banquets, and so the Christians there would have felt pressure to assimilate and eat the food served by these pagans. But some people do not fall to this temptation to imitate the ways of their pagan neighbors. We read this:

²⁴ But to the rest of you in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not learned what some call the deep things of Satan, to you I say, I do not lay on you any other burden. ²⁵ Only hold fast what you have until I come. ²⁶ The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations, ²⁷ and he will rule them with a rod of iron.

The fifth church was at Sardis. This was a city that was legendary for its wealth. There were gold mines nearby. To these believers, John proclaims:

“ I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. ² Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. ³ Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you.

We see that this church is accused to being dead, passive, inactive in its faith. They are commanded to wake up and change. This is a great condemnation.

The sixth church is at Philadelphia, a city with fertile farmland but one that had frequent devastating earthquakes. It was largely destroyed in AD 17, before this letter was written. Like the one at Smyrna, this church is not rebuked:

⁸ “ Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. ¹⁰ Because you have kept my word about patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth. The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of God.’

The last church was at Laodicea, which was situated at the intersection of a major north-south and an east-west highway. It was famous for its banking industry and was a wealthy city. The people of Laodicea worshipped Zeus, as well as several other pagan gods. This church is condemned because it is complacent:

¹⁵ “ ‘I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! ¹⁶ So, because you are lukewarm, I will spit you out of my mouth.

What do we learn from this? Revelation is often written off as radically abstract, even unbiblical. Martin Luther thought it should be tossed from the Bible. But it contains some solid New Testament advice for modern churches. American churches are much like these seven ancient churches. Every church should read the seven proclamations and ask: Where do we lie, among the seven churches of Revelation, all nestled in a wealthy corner of the worldly Roman Empire?

Are we Ephesus, the church that works hard, has endured great evil, but has lost its Christian love and forgotten the two commandments of Jesus Christ?

Are we Smyrna, the persecuted church that has stayed faithful despite all that it has endured? Has our suffering brought us closer to God and not caused us to become bitter? Are we better because of what we have endured?

Are we Pergamum, the worldly church that is tolerant to a fault, accepting corrupt behavior from its members, adopting evil beliefs in order to be accepted by society?

Are we Thyatira, the church with love, faith, and good works, a church that has endured much, but the one that falls short because some of its members live sinful, corrupt, hedonistic lives?

Are we Sardis, the spiritually dead church from a city filled with gold, the church that follows its faith in a mechanical, insincere fashion?

Are we Philadelphia, the spiritually alive church that has maintained a bright, vibrant faith, the church in the destroyed city that has kept its spirit and its faith fully intact despite all its challenges?

Are we Laodicea, located in a city that controls the finances of much of the empire, but one that has become lukewarm in its faith and one that relies on the things of this world - and not the things of God's world?

The Bible does truly contain powerful advice if you read it carefully, and perhaps rely on a teacher or a commentary. Even a mystical book like Revelation, can tell you a lot, in particular the difference between real faith and imitation faith.

Pray very briefly with me. *God, let us learn from Scripture. Let us examine the seven churches of Revelation. Let us see what we do right, see what we do wrong, and become stronger and purer in our faith. Let us learn that although we may live in an area filled with wealth, this wealth can be a threat to the depth and purity of our faith. May our faith grow and become very deep. Amen.*