

What is God saying to you?

Rev. 2

'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'

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[Biblical text at the end of sermon for those online.
Previous sermons in this series available online, email
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Introduction

Today's lesson from the Book of the Revelation is really four lessons in one. As we could tell from the reading just now, we have jumped into the middle of a series of conversations and that's never easy to figure out. Sort of like coming to the movie theatre a few minutes late and trying to catch up with what is happening in the show. So, it's possible that you can find our way back to the beginning. And by doing this we will find out what God is saying to us in the church in Chatswood, or as we like to say, the congregation Beth Messiah meeting here today. God, what do you want us to know? And can you give us the grace to listen and do?

We may need to outline each of these conversations, or rather edicts/monologues, and see that there is a clear pattern, and thus a clear message for each of us personally and us corporately today.

Remember last week we saw John pop his head out above the clouds. Into the vision that God gave him, he looked in 360 degrees. And the first thing he saw was a voice behind him. Sounds like Genesis, where Adam and Eve heard the sound of the Lord God walking. You hear then you see. No wonder we put such an emphasis on the Word of God. We do that in our public worship, in our listening to sermons, in our reading of the Bible itself. The Word, the voice of the Almighty... then the viewing of his work.

Now notice the pattern (you probably already heard it as it was read) of the 7 letters. Each one will have a messenger who will return it to the city, then comes some words to the messenger and some identifier from the vision of the previous chapter. Y'shua knows something about each congregation then he has something against the community of faith. He calls each to repent, then a promise of overcoming.

Let's do this with each letter/scene today.

Remember that figurative language is powerful and more telling than direct info. For instance, "tell that fox" is more descriptive than "tell the king whom I disapprove of". Or "you must hate your father and mother" is more punch packing than "you must love God more than your parents." So we will see much by way of symbolic or figurative language in our study of Revelation and it's more fun and more forceful. (McGuilkin)

Ephesus (.1-6)

Ephesus was a major port city on the western coast of Asia Minor, in what today is Turkey. As a centre for seaborne trade and the hub of the region's road system, Ephesus was a thriving urban community. By the late first century, it was the fourth largest city in the Roman Empire, about quarter million residents. The Romans made Ephesus an administrative centre for the province of Asia, but it was an unusual Roman town in that it was a free city, that is, self-governing, except in hard cases. The governor and other officials from Rome entered the province through the harbour and conducted much of their business in the city. He would come with elaborate pageantry. Renowned religious shrines including the most important, the one to Diana (Artemis), a spacious theatre, stadium, and elegant public buildings gave Ephesus an integral place

in the cultural life of the entire region. In the mid-first century, Paul worked at Ephesus for several years. (<http://www.luthersem.edu/ckoester/Revelation>) John had made this city his pastoral hub as well, and Patmos was a mere 60 miles from Ephesus. In fact, it's the closest of the 7 cities to John in his writing.

The Temple to Artemis is a fascinating centre point to the city. There is a tree near it, which acted as a sort of 'home base 'from the kids' game' tag, or 'you're it.' Vagrants and thieves would gather there with full protection and security. Greatness and shame are juxtaposed so neatly.

So what does Y'shua commend to the Ephesians believers? (verse 2.3) Their good words, their remaining, their continuing in faith, they don't bear falseness, they test and prove false wrong apostles. They have not grown weary. This is the test of longevity. This is a great commendation. It's not the one who begins who is praised, but the one who keeps on keeping on.

Remember in Y'shua's final sermon in Matthew 24, when he was asked about the last days? He said the first thing to guard against was false apostles who would try to deceive many. Here the Ephesians are commended for obeying Y'shua in that regard.

In verse 6 Ephesus is commended for hating the deeds of the Nicolaitians. It's unclear from the text what that is, but comparing v.14ff in the Pergamum letter and v.20 with the Thyatirans, it appears to be a description of lawless folks, who are going against apostolic teaching. Whatever the Nicolaitians were teaching it wasn't God's word, and we are reminded that God wants us to listen to his word and to follow it only!

But as you can expect in our chart/outline, we see Y'shua has something against this congregation. The community of faith is about 40 years old at this point, having been birthed at the time of Paul with Aquilia and Priscilla in Acts 18/19. The congregation had forgotten its first love.

How easy is it to grow stable and grow cold. In verse 5 we see this called 'fallen' and something for which we need 'to repent.' Comfort in faith is good, but comfort and relaxing and disregarding the realities of the eternal one, they will evidence themselves soon enough. I just got back from Korea and one of the constant themes I heard in the people was that Korean Christianity was so much a part of the culture that a forgetting of the 'first love' was evident. Such a surprise when we see the full expression of faith in the society around it. Growing in numbers can often make a church relax in their superiority. Orthodoxy can lead to pompous views of others. God help us!

The promise of the Garden and the Tree of Life reflects the Book of Genesis again, and is in direct contrast with the asylum tree near the Temple of Artemis. You want asylum, you want protection, and you want fellowship and worship? God will give it to you in the eternal City with the angels and with us!

2. Smyrna (.8-11)

Smyrna was a port city in Asia Minor. In ancient times Smyrna contended with Ephesus and Pergamum for the honour of being called the foremost city of Asia. The symbol of the city was the crown, and there the temple in honour of the Roman Emperor was built. Streets and buildings extended from the bay up the sides of the surrounding hills. Fountains flowed with the water from the city's aqueducts. The largest amphitheatre in Asia on one of the highest slopes overlooked the lower city. Smyrna claimed to be the birthplace of the poet Homer and built a shrine in his honour. A library, gymnasiums, baths, and a stadium contributed to Smyrna's cultural life. The city attracted speakers like Apollonius of Tyanna in the first century and other renowned orators in the second century.

(<http://www.luthersem.edu/ckoester/Revelation/Smyrna/Main.htm>)

It was known as the "Glory of Asia." And the beauty and riches flowed like the water. No wonder the contrast is so clear in the describing of the setting for believers as being 'in poverty' (v. 9)

Let's talk at length about this term "synagogue of Satan." (v. 9) Most commentators use this phrase to chide Jewish opposition to the church. It has been used over the centuries as excuses for virulent anti-Semitism and hate crimes against Jewish people. David Stern, you might expect, takes a different view. But I think he's guarding a charge unnecessarily. Stern says 'nothing 'in the present context call for a violent outburst against Jews.'" He says, "virtually all the commentators ignore the obvious and straightforward interpretation that John is talking here about Gentiles pretending to be Jews." (Stern, p. 795)

Let's set this well in history. At 70 CE, Titus, son of Vespasian, destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem. But there was a tax that Rome enjoyed for use of the Temple by Jews. In other words, the Jews had to pay a toll, like we do to cross the Harbour Bridge, long after the bridge has been paid off. So when the Temple was destroyed, the Romans continued to tax the Jews, and still called it the Temple Tax. It was unfair to be sure, but let's call it something else to see its history. It was hush money.

What I mean by that is that Jews enjoyed a protection and a permission to stay out of Greek and Roman temples as a result. It was a 'get out of temple' tax, if you will. Christians, that is, those Jewish and Gentile believers who followed Y'shua, had no such permission. It was legally required for believers to worship in the temple here in Smyrna to Apollo or Aphrodite.

The responsibility of those who hear God's word is to keep it. The Jewish people as a whole have been the leaders in both the keeping and the rejecting of the Word. Let me explain.

The first followers of Y'shua were Jews. The first rejecters of Y'shua were Jews. It was an in-house affair. And John is highlighting that again for us. Jewish people are responsible to hear and to do what God says. If we don't, we are 'blaspheming' and might as well call our worship centres 'synagogues of Satan.' Y'shua told those Jews who rejected him (John 8) that they were children of Satan. John is merely using this same language here. And it's similar language to Isaiah (chapter 14) and Ezekiel (chapter 28) when God labels humans Satanic in action and judgment.

The Jewish leadership, exempt from pagan worship, were actually dobbing in Christians, against whom they stood religiously, and thus many in Smyrna were 'about to suffer' (v. 10). The length of the suffering is 'ten days.' (v.10) This is a symbol of a relatively short time (especially compared to the 42 months later in the book), and Peterson in *The Message* says, "for a time of testing- 10 days. It won't last forever."

What are the Smyrna folks promised? A crown of life. How fitting in the midst of the imperial city with the crown as its symbol.

3. Pergamum (12-17)

Pergamum was another major city in western Asia. It lies in a spacious valley, sixteen miles from the Aegean Sea in what is today the country of Turkey. In the centuries before Y'shua, Pergamum was the capital of an independent kingdom. Its impressive temples, library, and medical facilities made Pergamum a renowned cultural and political centre. By the time Revelation was written, Pergamum had become part of the Roman Empire, but because of its location and importance, the Romans used it as an administrative centre for the province of Asia.

(<http://www.luthersem.edu/ckoester/Revelation/Pergamum/Main.htm>)

It was the capital city for law and government matters. In other words, it wouldn't have had the wealth of say Ephesus, but it had the power. . It was a centre for pagan worship; hence it is called the site of Satan's throne. (v.13)

Note that the opposition to the Gospel in Smyrna was Jewish, but here it appears to be pagan and governmental. No wonder Y'shua is shown to be the one who has the sword! But remember the sword is the spoken word, and we will be reminding ourselves of this again. What God says, must be done!

Antipas, whoever he is, was killed by the Romans here in Pergamum. I should tell you that Pergamum was the city where the high priest of Asia was elected from the delegates of the other cities. Pliny says 'they recited a prayer to the gods at my dictation, made supplication with incense and wine to the emperor's statue' and of course to deny or curse Christ.

What did Y'shua have against the congregation here? Some hold the teaching of Balaam and some hold the Nicolaitan teaching. We know very little of the latter, as I've said, but the first is found in Numbers 22-24, and we can infer that Y'shua through John is teaching us to stop compromising our spiritual life. This makes sense in light of the Pergamum requirement to renounce our faith and follow the Emperor as a deity.

Antipas stands in stark contrast (even as light v dark) to the renouncers and compromisers. To whose sword would you like to succumb? Who wants to rule you, or rather to whom will you give yourself?

Look what God will give us who overcome. Hidden manna is the phrase you might expect in a Jewish context. The manna from the Temple (remember Exodus and the jar kept) was kept according to the Talmud (2 Baruch 6.5-10, 2 Maccabees 2.4-8) by either an angel or Jeremiah until the time of the Messiah. Here Y'shua promises that those who last to the end will experience his provision even as the Jewish people experienced it in the Wilderness for 40 years.

4. Thyatira (18-29)

Thyatira was situated in a fertile valley through which trade routes passed. Although damaged by an earthquake during the reign of Augustus (around the time of Y'shua), Thyatira was rebuilt with Roman help. (www.luthersem.edu/ckoester)

It was a trade union/ guild town. It also had plenty of pagan worship centres, and you can hear those in the charges to the city church. The idea of 'secret or hidden' information called in verse 24, 'the deep things of Satan' is common in cults. They have initiation information, but then as you keep going, you learn the deeper things. Aren't you glad we tell you from the beginning what we are all about? A cult will never do that. They operate in a bait and switch mode. Gnostics did it then, and mystery religions and cults do it now.

Y'shua's feet and eyes being consistent convey the impression of his absolute justice and inflexible integrity. (Hughes)

In light of the Jezebel reference, note that if the same sin is being talked about in these letters, look what each did. Ephesus 'hated' them (v. 6), Pergamum 'had' them (v. 14), which may indicate dislike but not opposing them, and Thyatira 'tolerated' them (v.20) without being disturbed by their evil. God help us to stop evil before it joins us and we accommodate ourselves to it.

Jezebel was an adulteress in the time of King Ahab (1 King 16) and brought no good to the Jews then, and John is saying, she and her spirit will bring no good to the church today. It's not just external either, look in verse 23, God will search hearts and minds, in other words, he knows what you are thinking. Y'shua taught adultery was going on inside people as well as what they did in bedrooms.

To the overcomers, Y'shua will give authority over nations. Jezebel wanted to rule other nations, and she will be tossed onto a rubbish heap, but God will give to those who overcome the royal venue and authority from God Himself. (v. 27)

Keep listening (v. 29) he says, and keep doing!

Summary

So: What should you learn/hear today as a result of reading this text? Or what lessons do we learn from today's teaching?

- 1) Be blessed by reading this book regularly
- 2) Whatever God says, do it!

- 3) When opposition comes, be sure that it will be ephemeral, short-lived and that God's kingdom will last longer
- 4) Worship the One who holds all things in his hands, including my life and yours.
- 5) Be ruthless with sin, in your life and in the lives of the believers who know and respect you

Invitation

So... let me ask you. Today we give a choice to you. Maybe you have been an opponent of the Messiah. Maybe you have worshipped wrong. Maybe you have rejected what God said, but today you want to turn and agree with God about Y'shua. If you would like to be delivered from your sin by the blood of Y'shua, then pray this prayer and receive His love and grace. Father, forgive me in the name of Y'shua for all my sins. He was the Saviour and the fulfilment of all prophecies about Messiah. He is the one and the only one who can save me from my selfishness, from my sin. I acknowledge Y'shua as that one who wants to free me, and who alone can free me. I repent of my sin and accept Y'shua as my deliverer. By faith I am now born again by the Holy Spirit. Amen.

If you prayed that prayer, please talk to me after the service is over, [\[or email me if you are reading this online\]](#) so we can talk about growing in this knowledge and this relationship with God.

Actual text

Rev. 2.1 ¶ "To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lamp stands, says this:

Rev. 2.2 'I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot endure evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false;

Rev. 2.3 and you have perseverance and have endured for My name's sake, and have not grown weary.

Rev. 2.4 'But I have this against you, that you have left your first love.

Rev. 2.5 'Remember therefore from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you, and will remove your lampstand out of its place — unless you repent.

Rev. 2.6 'Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

Rev. 2.7 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the Paradise of God.'

Rev. 2.8 ¶ "And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life, says this:

Rev. 2.9 'I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

Rev. 2.10 'Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.

Rev. 2.11 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death.'

Rev. 2.12 ¶ "And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: The One who has the sharp two-edged sword says this:

Rev. 2.13 'I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is; and you hold fast My name, and did not deny My faith, even in the days of Antipas, My witness, My faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.

Rev. 2.14 'But I have a few things against you, because you have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit acts of immorality.

Rev. 2.15 'Thus you also have some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans.

Rev. 2.16 'Repent therefore; or else I am coming to you quickly, and I will make war against them with the sword of My mouth.

Rev. 2.17 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, to him I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it.'

Rev. 2.18 ¶ "And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: The Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet are like burnished bronze, says this:

Rev. 2.19 'I know your deeds, and your love and faith and service and perseverance, and that your deeds of late are greater than at first.

Rev. 2.20 'But I have this against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and she teaches and leads My bond-servants astray, so that they commit acts of immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols.

Rev. 2.21 'And I gave her time to repent; and she does not want to repent of her immorality.

Rev. 2.22 'Behold, I will cast her upon a bed of sickness, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of her deeds.

Rev. 2.23 'And I will kill her children with pestilence; and all the churches will know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts; and I will give to each one of you according to your deeds.

Rev. 2.24 'But I say to you, the rest who are in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not known the deep things of Satan, as they call them — I place no other burden on you.

Rev. 2.25 'Nevertheless what you have, hold fast until I come.

Rev. 2.26 'And he who overcomes, and he who keeps My deeds until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations;

Rev. 2.27 and he shall rule them with a rod of iron, as the vessels of the potter are broken to pieces, as I also have received authority from My Father;

Rev. 2.28 and I will give him the morning star.

Rev. 2.29 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'

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Notes not used in sermon:

Tacitus said that Christian “hated the human race’ and ‘were hated’ by the society in which they lived. (Annals XV44).

His friend Pliny was governor of the adjoining province of Bithynia at the time. In a famous letter to the Emperor Trajan, Pliny describes Christianity as an “insanity’ a “contagion...a superstition” characterized by “obstinacy and unbending perversity” (Epistle X)

Manna. The Talmud says that in the 3rd heaven, “mills grind manna for the righteous (Chagigah 12b) According to 2 Baruch 29.8, in the messianic era, ‘the treasury of manna will again descend from on high, and those alive then will eat of it.’

IN the ancient world a white stone was used as an admission ticket to public festivals.