Letters to Four Churches

Revelation 2

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| **Natural Divisions** | * Revelation 2:1-7 Jesus praises the church at Ephesus for her doctrinal purity, but challenges her to restore her first love.
* Revelation 2:8-11 Jesus praises the church at Smyrna for her perseverance in suffering, and challenges her to remain faithful even unto death.
* Revelation 2:12-17 Jesus praises the church at Pergamum for her courage in the midst of crisis, but challenges her to return to purity of doctrine and practice.
* Revelation 2:18-29 Jesus praises the church at Thyatira for her continued spiritual growth, but challenges her to remove false teachers from her midst.
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| **Summary Sentence** | Jesus, who is the Lord and judge of the churches, assesses the strengths and weaknesses of four of the churches in Asia. |
| **Central Idea** |  Our inheritance in the Kingdom enables us to be faithful in the present.  |

Back when my husband and I had just finished graduate school and taken our first professional jobs, we had friends in our church—a young, newly-married couple—who were the offspring of fabulously wealthy parents. Their confidence in the future was very different from ours.

They knew that the trust fund that was already place for them would take care of their financial needs for the rest of their lives. They didn’t have any trust fund income yet, but it was something they could count on in their future.

Because they knew that their financial future was assured, they lived very differently than we did. We had each bought similar modest 3-bedroom starter homes in nondescript neighborhoods, but they knew theirs was only temporary; we had no expectation at the time of ever moving from that neighborhood. The income they received was about the same as the income we received, but we bought a Toyota Corolla; they bought a Jaguar. We were very concerned about saving rather than spending; they had no need to be concerned with saving. We felt a need to strive for financial security within the context of the income we were making. Their financial security was a done deal.

Our friends lived their lives differently than we did because they were confident of their financial security.

In the same way, as we grow in our knowledge of God and in our understanding of His future Kingdom, we can live our lives differently, because we are confident of our future security. God has already established something like a trust fund for us. It’s not a trust fund of material abundance; it’s a trust fund of spiritual abundance. It’s a trust fund that guarantees an eternity of peace and comfort and righteousness and fulfillment. The confidence of our eternal future in the Kingdom of God should enable us to live our lives differently. **Our future inheritance in the Kingdom enables us to be faithful in the present**.

Last week we looked at the conditions of life for Christians in the first century. We considered that they were probably perplexed at the suffering they were experiencing. Life was hard for them. Where was God? Where was the comfort, the protection, the provision that God’s people expected to enjoy if indeed their faith was true? Where was Jesus?

We saw in the first chapter of Revelation, in a vision given to the apostle John, that Jesus stands with His people in their suffering. In John’s vision, the churches are represented as lampstands. The churches are like structures that are designed to uphold a light—to display a light. The churches are to display and proclaim the light of Christ—the truth of the gospel. The churches are to proclaim the message of God’s righteousness and love.

The churches are lampstands, and we saw last week that Jesus stands among the lampstands. Jesus is right there with His people, standing with them in their circumstances. Jesus stands with His people in their suffering.

In the present, we live in a world that is not the way it’s supposed to be. In the present we are subject to disasters, to disease, to sin and death, but that’s not the way it’s supposed to be. In the present we are subject to suffering, but in the future we will inherit the glory and the perfection of God’s Kingdom. And **our future inheritance in the Kingdom should enable us to be faithful in the present**.

Open your Bibles to Revelation chapter 2.

In Revelation chapter 2 we see Jesus’ messages to four of seven first-century churches in the province of Asia. As we consider what Jesus wrote to these churches, we gain insight into the challenges and dangers that face our churches today.

The seven messages to the seven churches each follow a common literary structure. Each message is being sent to a particular church, and the name of that church is given. Each message is sent from Jesus, but Jesus identifies Himself not by name, but by a descriptive phrase—a characteristic—taken from chapter 1 of Revelation. The particular characteristic of Christ that is named is one that is appropriate and meaningful for that church’s circumstances.

In each message, Jesus begins with praise for the church, and then He identifies a problem He sees in the church (if there is a problem). Jesus then challenges the church, telling them what He wants them to be doing, and finally Jesus gives a promise—a word of encouragement—a picture of future blessing.

For those of you who take notes, I would suggest that you jot down on your “notes” page a table that will look like this. Across the top you’ll have four columns for the four churches we’ll look at today. (I labeled them just with a couple of letters in order to make them fit on the overhead.) Down the side there will be labels for five rows. You have a row for the description of Jesus that is given. You’ll have a row for praise, a row for the problem identified, a row for the challenge Jesus presents, and finally, a row for the promise He gives.

Let’s look at the first four of these messages to the churches.

The first message is to the church at Ephesus.

Ephesus was a bustling hub of commerce. Ephesus was located on a gulf of the Aegean Sea where three major trade routes converged. It was the chief seaport of the Roman province of Asia.

The apostle John had been the pastor of the church at Ephesus for many years, and by the end of the first century, the church at Ephesus was the largest and most influential Christian church in the world.

In Jesus’ message to Ephesus, He refers to Himself as *“the one who holds the seven stars in His right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands.”* This description emphasizes the fact that Jesus is Lord of the church. The fact that He holds the seven stars of the churches in His right hand demonstrates His authority over the churches. Jesus is Lord of the church.

Jesus praises the church at Ephesus for their deeds and their doctrinal purity. Jesus praises them for their hard work and their perseverance. This is not a complacent church; it’s not a lazy church. The Christians in the church at Ephesus are involved. They’re serving. They are doing good things.

Jesus particularly praises them because they have carefully guarded their doctrinal purity. Look at verse 2. Jesus said this: *“I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false.”* Jesus commends them for this. Jesus praises them because they have carefully evaluated the claims of those who have come presenting themselves as Christians—presenting themselves as apostles, even, but bringing false teaching. The church at Ephesus has refused to tolerate false teachers in their midst. They’ve maintained doctrinal purity.

Jesus sees a problem in the church, however, and Jesus confronts them about it. Look at verse 4. Jesus says, *“I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love.”*

In our 21st century American culture, we think of *love* as being all about *feelings*; it’s not. Love is about commitment. Love isn’t an emotion; it’s a choice—a choice to be committed—a choice to be invested in a relationship and in a person.

Jesus rebukes them because they have forsaken their primary love. What is their primary love? It’s Jesus; it’s the Savior. How do you forsake your primary love? You set your affections on another love. You adjust your priorities so that something else comes first. The Ephesians’ primary love was Jesus. If the Ephesians have forsaken their primary love, then that suggests that their priorities have shifted. Their focus is elsewhere. So Jesus challenged the church to adjust its priorities.

How could this problem happen to us? How do we see the danger of that in our own lives? What sort of thing happens in a believer’s life that could draw her away from her first love?

A very common thing to happen is that something comes into your life that’s a distraction—something else captures your fancy. It could be politics; it could be PTA; it could be training for a triathlon. Sometimes good things distract us from better things. If a distraction captures your heart, then pretty soon, your primary focus is on this other thing—this distraction—it’s no longer on our Lord. It’s not that you leave the church or that you stop serving in the church, but you’ve forsaken your first love. You’ve set your primary affection on this other thing. You’ve forsaken your first love.

Jesus challenges the church to adjust its priorities. Look at verse 5. Jesus says this: *“Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.”*

Repent! Change the way you are thinking. Adjust your priorities. Return to your first love.

Jesus says, “*If you don’t repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.”* Jesus warns this church: *“If you continue to flirt with worldly distractions then your spiritual vitality as a church will flicker and die. If you fail to shine forth the light of the gospel, then I’ll take you out. I will remove you as a church.”*

Jesus then reminds the church at Ephesus of the inheritance promised for them in the future Kingdom. Look at verse 7: Jesus says, *“To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.”*

This promise is for the one who *overcomes*. Who is that? What does it take to *overcome*? Who are these *overcomers*?

The answer to that is given in the book of 1 John. In 1 John 5: 4-5, the apostle John wrote: *“Everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.”* John is saying that if you are a true believer in Jesus; if you’re truly saved—if you are a Christian—then you are an overcomer. The final verdict for you is that in the end you will overcome the world. You will overcome the consequences of the fall. You will inherit the Kingdom of God, and in that day you will be in paradise with God, and you will have access to the sacred tree of life.

What is the significance of the tree of life in the paradise of God? When Adam and Eve were in the Garden of Eden—in Paradise with God, the central blessing of their existence before the fall was their intimate fellowship with God. They lost that blessing when Adam sinned. They were driven out of the Garden of Eden. They were no longer permitted to eat from the tree of life. They were no longer permitted to walk with God in paradise. This promise from our Lord is a promise of the restoration of that original blessing. This is a promise of eternal blessing, eternal fellowship, eternal love.

As a child of God you’ve been set apart for salvation. As a child of God there’s a trust fund set apart in the Kingdom for you. As a child of God, you will inherit the blessings of paradise that were lost when Adam sinned.

If this paradise is your future inheritance, how can you be so enamored of things that are temporal—of things that are of no eternal value? Turn your affections back to Jesus. Turn your commitment back to the things of God. Return to your first love, for that is a relationship that will last forever. **Our inheritance in the Kingdom enables us to be faithful in the present**.

The next church that Jesus addressed was Smyrna. The Christians in Smyrna were suffering greatly. Persecution of Christians there was especially intense. But the church at Smyrna was standing firm.

Jesus identified Himself to this church as *“the First and the Last, who died and came to life again.”* Jesus emphasized His own experience of suffering and death, and that He is the One who has conquered death. Jesus has taken away the sting of death. In this description Jesus revealed that He is the Savior of the church.

Jesus praised this church for their perseverance in suffering. Look at verse 9. Jesus said, *“I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich!”* Although the Christians in Smyrna faced extreme deprivation; nevertheless, they were rich in spiritual blessing.

Jesus offers no criticism to this church. Jesus has plenty of praise for them, but no rebuke. This is the church that is experiencing the greatest suffering, and yet this is the church that is doing the best spiritually.

The challenge Jesus gives to this church is that they continue to persevere and remain faithful. Look at verse 10: *“Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.”*

Jesus charges them to remain faithful, and He tells them that they’re going to suffer persecution for ten days. The term “ten days” here represents a short, limited period of time. Jesus is saying, *“You’re going to face persecution. I’m not telling you exactly how long it will be, but there will be an end to it. It’s temporary. Stand firm in the faith.”*

Jesus says, in verse 10, *“Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.”*

What is the crown of life? As we read this, the emphasis shouldn’t be on the word *crown*, but on the word *life*. The contrast is between *death* and *life*. The crown signifies victory; death appears to be defeat. Jesus is saying, *“Be faithful, even to the point of the apparent defeat that is death, and I will give you the ultimate victory that is life.”* Don’t be afraid of death in this life, because your future in the Kingdom is life—eternal life. **Our inheritance in the Kingdom enables us to be faithful in the present**.

Jesus gives this promise to the church at Smyrna, in verse 11: Jesus said, *“He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.”* The second death that Jesus refers to here is the final judgment and condemnation of the wicked. Jesus assures His church that Christians will not be hurt by the second death. Our inheritance is eternal life.

The next church was Pergamum. To the church at Pergamum, Jesus identified Himself as the one who has the sharp double-edged sword. Jesus is pictured here as the one who purifies His church. He is prepared to do battle against evil in the church—against deception in the church.

Jesus begins by praising the church at Pergamum. Look at verse 13: *“I know where you live--where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to My name. You did not renounce your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city—where Satan lives.”*

Jesus called Pergamum *“the city where Satan lives”* because Pergamum was a major city for pagan worship. There were several temples to Roman gods and there was a temple devoted to worship of the emperor.

Jesus commended the church at Pergamum for their courage even in time of persecution and crisis. They had seen Antipas suffer a martyr’s death because of his faith, but still they remained faithful to Christ.

But there was a major problem in the church. Look at verses 14-15. *“I have a few things against you: You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality. Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.”*

What does He mean by the teaching of Balaam? Jesus is referring to the book of Numbers in the Old Testament—to the account of Balaam’s plot to defeat Israel by infiltrating the culture and seducing Israel into idolatry.

So what Jesus saw at Pergamum was just this kind of situation. There were some who become a part of the church who were wolves in sheep’s clothing. They were persuading Christians to adopt some of the behaviors and perspectives of the pagan culture of the city. The problem at Pergamum was compromise with the culture. The sin of Balaam is the sin of compromise. The Nicolaitans were teaching the same thing. Jesus challenged the church to purify their lives.

Jesus said, in verse 16, *“Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of My mouth.”* Jesus is prepared to discipline His people when they sin. Jesus is prepared to do battle against false teaching in the church. Jesus challenged the church to purify their lives.

Jesus makes this promise, in Revelation 2:17, *“To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it.”*

What might Jesus be referring to here? There is manna, a white stone, and a new name. There is no firm consensus about what these things signify. I’m going to suggest that Jesus is talking about our eternal purpose.

We don’t know what these things signify, but manna, in the Old Testament, was supernatural bread from heaven. It was God’s supernatural provision of bread for the needs of His people. In the gospel of John, Jesus called Himself the Bread of life. Jesus is God’s provision for our eternal life.

The notion of a new name brings to mind Isaiah 62. In Isaiah 62:2, the prophet speaks of the salvation of God’s people, and he says, *“The nations will see your righteousness, and all kings your glory; and you will be called by a new name, that the mouth of the Lord will give.”*

We don’t know what these things signify, but the white stone may be a picture of our identity. God has given us an identity, a calling, a purpose. Each of us has a unique place in the heart and in the plan of God. We each have significance. In the future Kingdom of God, Christians will receive a white stone with a new name written on it—and this may represent our purpose in the plan of God. We have an eternal purpose.

This is another aspect of our inheritance in the Kingdom, and **our inheritance in the Kingdom enables us to be faithful in the present**.

The last church we’ll look at today is Thyatira.

Jesus identifies Himself to the church at Thyatira as *“one whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze.”* These attributes represent judgment. This is Jesus as the judge of His church.

Jesus praises this church because it has grown in spiritual vitality. Look at verse 19. Jesus says, *“I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first.”* Jesus praises them for their steady growth.

But this church has a major problem. They have tolerated false teaching. There is a woman in the church whom Jesus refers to by the name *“Jezebel.”* This woman has been teaching that it’s okay to participate in the pagan feasts and the immoral practices of the trade guilds of Thyatira. Some in the church have believed her, and those who have believed her teaching have been engaging in sin.

Jesus condemns her teaching. Jesus challenges the church to remove the false teacher. Jesus tells the church to remove her, because Jesus is the judge of the church.

Jesus then gave a promise in verses 26-28. Jesus said this: *“To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations—he will rule them with an iron scepter; he will dash them to pieces like pottery'—just as I have received authority from my Father. I will also give him the morning star.”*

This is a promise of eternal significance—eternal authority. Jesus is saying this: *“If you remain true to Me, you may feel that you’re giving up power and status and position in this world because of your Christian standards and your Christian witness. But you don’t need to worry about that, because I plan to give you power and position and authority in the coming Kingdom. You may find that you have to give up things in this life because you’re a Christian, but I have the universe to give you in the future Kingdom, and that represents eternal position, eternal authority, eternal significance.”*

Jesus promises that in the Kingdom, the believer will be given the morning star. Just as the morning star rules the heavens, so believers will rule with Christ. Later, in Revelation 22, Jesus calls Himself *“the morning star.”* “Star” is a symbol of royalty, and in the Kingdom we will rule with Christ, exercising authority over all creation.

In these letters to the churches we’ve seen Jesus challenge His people to live in a way that is pleasing to Him. It’s hard to stand firm when you live in a culture that may despise your values, but because we know of our future blessings in the Kingdom of God, we are strengthened to stand firm in this life. **Our inheritance in the Kingdom enables us to be faithful in the present**. Let’s close in prayer.