

THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Week 7 – The Things Which Are: The Seven Churches – Ephesus & Smyrna
October 18, 2016

Is our menorah/lampstand lit? From Revelation 1 we discovered that the lampstand represents the Church. Jesus dwells in believers and He is the light of the world. Is He shining through you?

How do these churches fit into the book of Revelation? The book of Revelation is a prophetic book. What is the prophetic perspective of the churches? Jesus told John to write what he SAW – the vision of Jesus...past, present, and future. Jesus told John to write the things which ARE – the condition of the churches in that day which would represent churches down through the entire Church Age – from Pentecost until the rapture. Every exhortation given to the churches is spoken with an urgency in the light of Jesus' return! There's the prophetic piece!

EPHESUS: THE LOVELESS CHURCH

Revelation 2:1-7

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."

The message of each letter is structured in a set pattern:

- The church and city are identified
- Jesus is described; before us is set an aspect of Who He is.
- The church is commended (except Sardis and Laodicea)
- Compromise is denounced, reprimanded (except Smyrna and Philadelphia)
- The church is counseled
- There is a charge to the church
- Promises are conveyed to "overcomers"

Rev. 2:1 - *To the angel of the church of Ephesus write*

John was told to write to the *angel*. I'm suggesting that the *angel* is the Pastor (the Bishop/Elder) of the church in Ephesus. The Pastor was, along with his congregation, the recipient of ALL Jesus' words. The recipients are people, those who can be redeemed. Angels cannot be redeemed (I Pet. 1:12).

What of Ephesus?

- Ephesus was an inland city three miles from the coastline of the Aegean Sea. The greatest harbor in Asia Minor was near Ephesus; therefore, it became known as the gateway to Asia. People from throughout the known world traveled to Ephesus. It was a first-class city. It was a rich cosmopolitan city: Jews, Gentiles, Persians.

- Ephesus was the center of the worship of Artemis (as known among the Greeks) or Diana (as known among the Romans) whose temple in Ephesus was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. There were fourteen idolatrous temples in Ephesus. There were hundreds of temple prostitutes – both male and female. Sexual immorality was rampant with continual orgies.

- Priscilla and Aquila began this work in Ephesus and Paul later established the church on his 3rd missionary journey (Acts 19) and ministered in Ephesus for three years (Acts 20:31).

- Ephesus became a missionary center from which all Asia heard the Gospel. Acts 19:8-10 - *And he went into the synagogue and spoke boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading concerning the things of the kingdom of God. ⁹ But when some were hardened and did not believe, but spoke evil of the Way before the multitude, he departed from them and withdrew the disciples, reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus. ¹⁰ And this continued for two years, so that all who dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks.*

- After Paul left Ephesus, Timothy pastored the congregation primarily to counter the false teaching of influential men, such as Hymenaeus and Alexander who might have been elders in the church at Ephesus (I Tim. 1:3, 20)

- John was in Ephesus when he was arrested by Domitian and exiled 50 miles southwest to Patmos.

- The Emperor cult was prominent in Ephesus. The Roman Emperors claimed to be God. They went by such titles as *Savior, Lord, Master, Son of God!*

- Christians were required during specific times of the year to publically proclaim Caesar as Lord!

- At times, Christians were able to slip under the radar – but not as much when Domitian was ruling. Emperor Domitian exiled John.

- With 14 idolatrous temples in Ephesus, there was, as you can well imagine, a strong demonic presence in Ephesus.

Can we now understand more fully Paul's words in Ephesians 6 regarding putting on the whole armor of God? And, Paul told the Ephesians to forgive their enemies. Paul admonished them to live out their faith in Christ in a Christ-denying world!

These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands. Jesus is walking in the midst of the churches then and now. He cares, protects, and holds us accountable. God desires to use the church as lights to the lost world surrounding them.

Rev. 2:2-4 - 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.

Jesus tells them I know your works. . . Jesus knows what is going on within your life and within my life. The Ephesian church was strong in doctrine and spiritual discernment (applying the knowledge of the word of God). There was no hint of compromising of the truth on the part of the believers in Ephesus. Ephesus was orthodox in doctrine; they had the right doctrine.

⁴ *Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love.* Would those words have cut like a dagger? Do we want to hear those words coming from Jesus to us? *you have left your first love....* NOTE: the word is *left* and not *lost*. Ephesus is the loveless church. Would you wish to be known in that way? Their love hadn't cooled. They had LEFT their first love – Jesus! Jesus, it appears, was no longer their priority. Ephesus was a doctrinally correct church, but it was cold. You can be right theologically, but if your love for Jesus is no longer a priority, then your theology is nothing but cold academics. The beautiful combination of sound doctrine and love for Jesus makes a church – be the church!

Was our love for God, when we became believers, different than our love for God NOW?

- Have other things/people taken God's place?
- Have we tired of what He tells us in His word?
- Is life too complex?
- Is it too difficult to “endure” what is coming into our life?
- Might we not believe that God will provide?
- Are our agendas – what WE want to do - getting in the way?
- Do we have a desire for our WANTS and not just our NEEDS?

How can we understand Jesus as our first love? *Crazy Love* by Francis Chan: *It's crazy, if you think about it. The God of the universe – the Creator of nitrogen and pine needles, galaxies and E-minor – loves us with a radical, unconditional, self-sacrificing love. And what is our typical response? We go to church, sing songs, and try not to cuss.*

Have you ever met someone who was utterly and desperately in love with Jesus? Francis Chan: *When you are truly in love, you go to great lengths to be with the one you love. You'll drive for hours to be together, even if it's only for a short while. You don't mind staying up late to talk. Walking in the rain is romantic, not annoying. You'll willing spend a small fortune on the one you're crazy about. When you are apart from each other, it's painful, even miserable. He or she is all you think about; you jump at any chance to be together.*

A Christian teacher/pastor made this statement: *The critical question for our generation – and for every generation – is this: If you could have heaven, with no sickness, and with all the friends you ever had on earth, and all the food you ever liked, and all the leisure activities you ever enjoyed, and all the natural beauties you ever saw, all the physical*

pleasures you ever tasted, and no human conflict or any natural disaster, could you be satisfied with heaven if Jesus was not there?

Francis Chan responded to that statement in his book: *How many of you will read those words and say, 'You know, I just might be okay with that.'* If you are deeply in love with God, you know you could never be satisfied in a heaven without Christ.

When we LOVE Jesus, we run to Him, don't we? We run frequently and with much zeal, with much passion. We are told in Deut. 6:5 to *love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength* – with our ENTIRE being! NOTHING must take the place of Jesus!!!!

We need to know that the abundance of our love does not increase God's love for us. The lack of our love does not diminish His love for us. When our love for Jesus is no longer our priority, our consuming passion, we are negatively impacted!

Re: the church in Ephesus, their work was no longer motivated by love. It's noted that the Ephesian church was not lacking in works; their works continued. But, if they left their first love, it would seem that the motivation for their works had changed. And that motivation would be based on self-centeredness! Self-centeredness leads to destruction – to self-destruction!

Rev. 2:5 - *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.* They were to recall their past commitment and weigh that against where they were now. They were to remember how and where they had gone astray and confess their sin. They were to engage in their first works – serving Christ with passion for HIM, spending time with HIM in fellowship, studying His word, worshipping Him, communing with HIM...serving others by loving others – letting GOD love others through them!

Their refusal to repent would cause the removal of their lampstand – their church – their testimony to those around them – and BEYOND. Their light in Ephesus would go out! The Ephesian church closed in the fifth century.

Consider the ramifications of being removed. The believers would remain believers but they would no longer be used of God; they would be put on the side; they would be benched - no longer used. Paul spoke of being *useful for the Master, prepared for every good work* (II Tim. 2:21). How important was this for Paul?

- In I Cor. 9:24-27 Paul speaks of competing for a prize while running in a race - *Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it.* ²⁵ *And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown.* (Paul is a believer. His eternal home is secure!) ²⁶ *Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air.* ²⁷ *But I discipline*

my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.

- *Adokimos* (disqualified/castaway) – not standing the test, that which does not prove itself as it ought; unfit.

- Paul is assured of heaven. II Cor. 5:8 – “We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord.” So, why does Paul speak of becoming disqualified? Paul uses the analogy of sports: running the race; competing for a prize in sports. When one is engaged in sports and is disqualified, we see that person sitting on the bench, not being used. If you truly know Christ, you can’t be happy sitting on the bench. You want to be in the game. There are consequences to not walking faithfully and obediently.

We then read of a commendation from Jesus...

Rev. 2:6 - *But this you have, (you have this in your favor) that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.* Jesus’ message is NOT to hate the Nicolaitans. Their “deeds” are to be abhorred! We don’t know much about the Nicolaitans and their doctrine, except that it was heretical. They were a cult that professed faith in Christ but taught freedom to live without any moral law. The Nicolaitans practiced promiscuous/decadent living.

Rev. 2:7 - *He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.* Barring any physical issue, everyone has a natural ear. This is speaking of a “spiritual” ear – hearing from the Spirit. I Cor. 2:14 – *But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.* John 16:13 - *when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth;* This invitation from Jesus is noted in the following verses – Jesus addressing the masses: Matt. 11:15, 13:9, 43; Mark 4:9, 23; Luke 8:8)

To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God. Each of the letters to the churches closes with one or more promises for “he who overcomes.” An “overcomer” is a genuine believer. This is confirmed by I John 5:4-5 - *For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.*⁵ *Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.* Of course Jesus would give overcomers – believers – to eat from the tree of life which speaks of eternal life. The overcomers in each church - overcome – NOT by their actions. Their overcoming is an indication of their identification with the Overcomer, Jesus! Jn. 16:33 - *These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.*

to eat from the tree of life – speaking of eternal life which we see in Genesis. Adam and Eve were barred from the tree of life. If they had eaten of the tree of life in their sinful condition, they would have remained in sin eternally.

which is in the midst of the Paradise of God. Significantly, Ephesus, the church which had left its first love was given the promise of access to a tree which was in the midst of

the garden where God and Adam enjoyed sweet fellowship (Gen. [3:8](#)). This is the very essence of the *first love*: close communion and intimacy with God which the Ephesians had left.

SMYRNA: THE SUFFERING CHURCH

Revelation 2:8-11

And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write, 'These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life: ⁹I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich); and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. ¹⁰Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw 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. ¹¹He 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.'

The modern name of the ancient city of Smyrna is Izmir. Smyrna was located 35 miles north of Ephesus. Smyrna had been a Greek colony. It was invaded and destroyed. For 400 years there was no city. Alexander the Great rebuilt Smyrna. In its folklore and literature, Smyrna was known as the city that had experienced death and had literally been brought back to life. It was the loveliest of all the cities and was oftentimes called “the Ornament of Asia,” “the Crown of Asia,” or sometimes “the Flower of Asia.” Smyrna was known as having one of the finest and safest seaports of its time. It boasted a thriving economy because it was on the main trade route from Rome to India and Persia. And, it was the gateway to the rest of Europe. Many Jewish people lived in Smyrna; yet Smyrna was overwhelming pagan. It was the first city in the world to erect a temple to the goddess Roma and to the spirit of Rome.

Jesus identified Himself to this church as *the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life*. *Smyrna* means *myrrh* or *bitterness*, a sweet perfume used for embalming the dead which is an appropriate reference to Jesus’ suffering and death. Knowledge of the Lord’s suffering was a great comfort to the believers at Smyrna, who were undergoing horrible persecution. Since many in this church died for their faith, Christ assures them of their resurrection and future rewards because He is the first and last, the eternal God who became man, died and rose again ([1 Pet. 1:3](#); [Acts 2:24](#)).

There was no condemnation for this church, only commendation.

v. 9 I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich)

The word “tribulation” is *qlipsis* which means “pressure, a literal crushing beneath a weight.” In the ancient world “tribulation” was the word for an ancient torture where a victim was laid on his back and placing weights on his chest, one upon another, upon another, until the person’s chest was crushed and he could no longer breathe. Jesus knew the weights upon the church in Smyrna: poverty; slander as they, the believers, were a subculture and were persecuted; Jesus knew they would face imprisonment and death.

Regarding their poverty, taking a stand for Jesus in the Roman world often meant being cast into an impoverished state. Many lost their jobs. And, certainly there were those who were kicked out of the trade unions because they didn't worship the gods of the trade unions! But, how lovely that we find in parenthesis...*(but you are rich)*. The lives of the believers in Smyrna didn't consist of an abundance of possessions. Their lives consisted of the assurance of Jesus' love, encouragement from the word of God, and spiritual blessings.

They were rich positionally in Christ ([Eph. 1:3](#)) which, of course, was by grace. They were also rich in that God had counted them worthy to suffer for Him (Phil. 3:10; [1 Pet. 1:6](#); [3:14-17](#); [4:13-14](#)).

I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Many in the Jewish community in Smyrna were being used by Satan to blaspheme this church and the Lord. These people were Jewish by birth, but not by faith. They were motivated by Satan to persecute and slander the church.

v. 10 - Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Satanic persecution caused some of the believers in Smyrna to be imprisoned. They were "tested" and would undergo "tribulation ten days."

Commentators hold three positions regarding this tribulation: Ten literal days of persecution; ten major Roman persecutions for the first 250 years of the church; a ten-year persecution through the Emperor Diocletian. The first position/option is most likely correct.

Note the connection of this with Satan. This persecution is attributed to the Devil. It is a continuation of the serpent's battle with the Lord Jesus Christ and those who belong to Him ([Gen. 3:15](#); [John 15:18-21](#)). Human means and men are those we see persecuting the church of Jesus Christ, but invariably, behind the scenes is the prince of the power of the air.

Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life, This is the martyr's crown.

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.* "He who overcomes" would not be hurt by the second death. No true believer will have to stand before the Great White Throne Judgment and be condemned to the lake of fire, which is the second death (Rev. 20:11-15).

Smyrna, unlike the city of Ephesus, stands today. Their lampstand was not removed! Though many of these believers died a martyr's death, Satan could not stamp out their testimony. Suffering has a way of keeping us pure in our devotion to Christ and it was evidently so with this church. They could be comforted by the fact that the sufferings of this present time do not continue forever, and the blessings that are ours in Christ through His salvation and precious promises will go on through eternity.

QUESTIONS

Whose message is written to Ephesus and Smyrna?

Why are there messages to seven churches?

Why are these messages important to churches today?

What impacted you regarding the church in Ephesus? Smyrna? What are your thoughts about Paul's letter to the Ephesians, given the culture and religious beliefs in Ephesus?

How does the message to the Ephesian church speak to you?

How does the message to the church in Smyrna speak to you?

How do Jesus' words re: the church in Ephesus leaving their first love impact you?

Do you find solace in Jesus' commendation to those in Smyrna?

How will the overall message to the Ephesian church impact your walk with the Lord moving forward? Smyrna?

Any V8 moments?

HOMEWORK

Reread the handout for week 7 along with the Scripture references.

If you disagree with anything in the handout, why? How would you support your view – using Scripture?

Share what was occurring in the church in Ephesus and/or in Smyrna with a believer and why Jesus' individual message to these churches is significant.

Read the handout for week 8 when you receive it.