

UNDERSTANDING THAT WEIRD BOOK OF REVELATION - Part two

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LOOKING TO JESUS AND LISTENING TO THE SPIRIT - THE KEYS TO BEING AN OVERCOMING CHURCH - (Revelation chapters 2 and 3)

The first chapter of Revelation ends with a picture of Jesus walking among seven golden lampstands. The text tells us those seven lampstands are the seven local churches He is about to address: **Revelation 1:20** - **"As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches."**

It's easy to forget about how close Jesus is to our church. It's easy to think of Jesus as caring about the **Church** - capital "C" - the universal Body Of Christ world-wide, but to miss His keen interest in **this** church - Cedarview Community Church - right here in Newmarket.

That's why this picture is given of Jesus walking **among the churches - plural**. He doesn't just see one big **blob** church - in which our local church just blurs in with the crowd. We know this because He doesn't just give **one big assessment** of the church in general. His words are **tailored** to individual congregations very specifically. Two receive no criticism at all. Five have different problems they need to face.

We won't have time to look at each verse, one at a time. But we will observe the **pattern and flow of Jesus' words**. As you look through these seven letters to seven churches, you will see the following pattern taking shape:

- 1) **Each letter is addressed to the "angel"** (the word **"angelos"** actually means **"messenger,"** and may refer either to an angelic being or a human leader or representative). The real important point is there is a messenger to each local church and the Lord speaks through this messenger.
- 2) **Each letter discloses something specific about the person of Jesus Christ, taken from the revelation of Him in chapter one.** If you look carefully at the opening of each letter, you'll find this repeated again and again (2:1, 8, 12, 18, 3:1, 7, 14).

This is highly significant. In five of the letters Jesus will expose something that desperately needs attention and repair. But, before the rebuke is given, the church is told **freshly** something important about Jesus. This specific, selected revelation of Jesus is given to show two things:

- a) First, each of these selected revelations is tailored to show each specific church the **importance** of listening to what Jesus is about to reveal. We are so inclined to picture every form of instruction or correction simply as another **opinion**. That's why each church is given a very specific reminder of exactly **Who** is speaking when they hear His voice. If we lose sight of **who Jesus is** we will never listen seriously enough to **what Jesus says**.

Without any doubt, there are people here today who aren't listening **seriously enough** to Jesus. In some secret, secluded corner of your heart, you've set yourself, perhaps some time ago, on a path of ignoring the voice of Jesus. And you're **persisting** in that path with greater and greater ease as time goes on. But make no mistake, the knowledge of who Jesus is will be growing dim in your soul.

- b) Second, each church - and our church as well - is reminded that, whatever fault is exposed - or whatever encouragement is offered - the abiding, passionate need of each church is always **Jesus Himself**. We are more in need of a **person** than another **program**. Jesus, in each specific message, calls each church back to some point of **fresh understanding of Himself**.

You can see wonderful examples of this right from our text:

- i) The church at Ephesus is called to **return to her first love**. And so the revelation of Jesus is one who **"walks among the seven golden lampstands"** (2:1). Only a Jesus this close can notice this cooling of love in the church's heart. A Jesus this close can't be fooled anymore than you could fool your husband or wife when your marriage is dying.
- ii) The church at Smyrna is praised for **faithfulness and encouraged to remain true, even unto death**. No wonder Jesus reveals Himself as **"...the first and the last, who died, and came to life..."** (2:8). These people needed the courage to face persecution and even death. That is why it is the conqueror of death who speaks to them.
- iii) The church at Pergamum will be rebuked for tolerating **false doctrine and teaching**. Jesus reveals Himself as the one **"...who has the sharp two-edged sword..."** (2:12). The cutting edge of that sword is meant to **cut out** that which is false and **cut through** the fog of that which is deceptive.

We need this picture of Jesus in the church today. Jesus will never tolerate false teaching. His love for the

church makes Him care **more** about false teaching, not **less**. He chides this church for her phoney tolerance and laziness for the truth, which is nothing more than compromise with the spirit of error.

- iv) The church at Thyatira is going to be exposed for tolerating **sexual immorality**. That's why there is no mistaking the message of judgment in the revelation of Jesus to this church: **Revelation 2:18** - **"And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: 'The words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze.'"**

"Eyes like a flame of fire." His passion against impurity never cools. Understand: There is nothing in our Lord that ever grows accustomed to the lowering sexual standards of our day. We need this picture of the purifying judgment of Jesus in His church.

- v) The church at Sardis is being called to **take stock of spiritual life that will diminish if not freshly re-embraced**. They weren't spiritually dead. They hadn't totally left their first love. But they were **coming close to carelessness**. That's why Jesus has this strange introduction, **"...He who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars..." (3:2)**.

Revelation is the only book in the Bible that gives any reference to the **"seven spirits"** around the throne of God. You can read about this in 1:4, 4:5, 5:6. Commentators aren't much help because, to be honest, no one knows for sure who these Spirits are.

My best guess is probably **not** the typical interpretation. I think this reference (and remember, John is describing for us, not necessarily literal objects and beings as they are - churches aren't lampstands, but we're **told** the lampstands are the local congregations) - this reference to the seven spirits coming from Jesus **doesn't** refer to seven different spirits. John is simply describing what his vision **looks like** - what it has the **appearance** of.

I think these spirits are a reference to the Holy Spirit (singular). I think John **sees** seven spirits because he sees them **in relation to** the seven local churches. In other words, **all of the Holy Spirit** is made available to each single church. Seven spirits is simply a visual way of **picturing the fulness of all the Holy Spirit's** presence and activity in each congregation mentioned.

So the point of all this for the church at Sardis is this: She is being called to renew and refresh spiritual commitment at a time when many are careless and **"soiled"**(4). How is this possible?

Do you ever ask that question? "Lord, how in the world do you expect me to be holy?" We hear it all the time: "Our young people are under so much peer pressure." "I'm the only Christian at my job." "There is so much temptation all around me." "I'm too busy to have time for God." And on and on it goes.

Here's the lesson from the church at Sardis: Jesus not only **calls** His church to holiness and devotion. He **enables** her far beyond her own strength and resources to **walk** in holiness, even when all the odds seem against it's possibility.

- vi) Next comes Jesus' words to the church at Philadelphia. This is the only other church that receives no real word of correction or rebuke. Twice this church is reminded of an **"open door"** of opportunity that has been placed before them by Jesus Christ. But every challenge comes with fresh opposition and persecution.

They need to hear afresh that these things don't just **happen** to God's people. Jesus reminds this church that He is the One who is the **"...holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens"**(3:7).

How you and I **respond** to circumstances - especially very **hard** circumstances - has a lot to do with who we think is in **control** of those circumstances. This local church, just like **our** church - needed to be reminded that difficult times don't mean a loss of divine presence.

Here's what this means to us: If we seriously trust and follow Jesus, He will always take us **through** any door He opens for us. Twice He reminds us that no one will be able to slam those doors shut in our face. I like that.

- vii) The local church at Laodicea had fallen under the delusion of **pride and self-sufficiency**. She no longer was keenly aware of her need of Jesus. That's why Jesus introduces His remarks to this church with these words: **"And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: 'The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God's creation'"(3:14)**.

How we need to hear these tender words of correction from the Lord! To this church, so full of outward success and pride, our Lord comes and gently, yet firmly, says: **"I am the Source of all creation. I**

made you. There is nothing in your life that you brought about on your own. You've forgotten that."

So in each of these cases, each letter to each church comes with a fresh reminder of the revelation of Jesus Christ from Revelation chapter one. ***The church will always go off course when she forgets any single truth about her Lord.*** That's the second truth we learn from the pattern of these letters.

3) **FIVE TIMES OUT OF SEVEN, THE LETTERS CONTAIN THE REMINDER THAT JESUS "KNOWS OUR WORKS"**

That shouldn't surprise any of us. This is what we would expect of one who has ***"eyes like a flame of fire"*** (1:14). How often we carry around such big blocks of our lives as though God didn't know what was in them. How often, even in the church, we can settle for far less than what we know our Lord desires and expects.

Look at the churches addressed right in these two chapters. Who but the Lord could see through all the outward bustle and activity of a big church and see that, behind it all, people didn't love Jesus as much as they once did.

"I know your works," is our Lord's reminder to His church not to waste precious time ***pretending*** anything before God. It's a call to openness and repentance. It lays the groundwork for ***thoroughness*** in our dealings with our own souls.

4) **EACH LETTER UNIFORMLY SAYS, "HE WHO AS AN EAR, LET HIM HEAR WHAT THE SPIRIT SAYS TO THE CHURCHES"**

Seven times Jesus says that, to seven different churches. Every time those words are uttered in the Bible, Jesus speaks them. It's not enough to ***know*** what the Spirit says to the church. We must ***hear*** (pay attention to - heed - respond immediately in obedience to) what the Spirit is saying to the church.

There is more to worship than just singing choruses about the ***presence*** of God in the church. The presence of Jesus walking among the lampstands - walking among His local churches - is useless unless His voice is listened to when His Spirit speaks. We need to be good ***listeners*** in church. That is the secret to everything else. Every time His Word - the sword of the Spirit - is opened - every time we bow at the altar - every time we pause in adoration and worship - Jesus cautions us against ***losing the expectancy of hearing the Spirit of God speak to our hearts!***

What has God been talking to your soul about? Please don't say, "Nothing at all, Pastor Don." That would be the greatest tragedy of all! God speaks to our hearts by His Holy Spirit ***unless*** we build the habit of refusing to hear when He ***does*** speak. And that's how churches die. Big churches - rich churches - new churches - conservative churches - cutting edge, contemporary churches - all die when they stop listening to the Spirit of God.

5) **IN EACH LETTER, THOSE WHO HEAR, RESPOND, AND OVERCOME ARE PROMISED GREAT REWARD**

I'm so glad this is included so consistently in each letter. The reward is many faceted and so is worded differently each time. But the important point here is ***Jesus knows and rewards faithfulness.***

Look at this beautiful mural - this collage of blessing portrayed in these chapters:

Revelation 2:7 - "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God."

Revelation 2:11 - "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."

Revelation 2:17 - "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it."

Revelation 2:26-29 - "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, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received authority from my Father. [28] And I will give him the morning star. [29] He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

Revelation 3:5-6 - "The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels. [6] He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

Revelation 3:12-13 - "The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. Never shall he go out of it, and I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down

from my God out of heaven, and my own new name. [13] He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

Revelation 3:21-22 - “The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. [22] He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

The important point in all these references is the way **overcoming** is linked to **“hearing what the Spirit is saying to the churches.”** If you miss everything else in this teaching remember this: For the church of Jesus Christ, everything important hinges on two things: **Looking to Jesus** and **listening to the Spirit**.

Remember, each letter opens with a glimpse of Jesus and ends with a call to hear the Spirit. the consistency of this pattern means this is the **key** to being an overcoming church. And if we all understand and practice that with all our heart, we'll never go very wrong in our church here in Newmarket.