

Re-Reading the Apocalypse

Lesson 3: “Letters and Churches”

Overview:

Revelation chapter 2 lays out a potential contemporary audience for the work, listing many churches that were in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey). However, the list is not a simple statement of presence, but rather serves to encourage and correct the seven churches as they face increasing pressure. The seven churches also give us an insight into our own church and faith, reminding us of the problems faced by many before us.

1. Why could reading about a church many years ago help us today?
2. Why do you think this section is an epistle while the rest of the book is not?
3. How do you see hope in today’s passage?

(Open with prayer)

Background on our Passage:

The New Testament is made up primarily of epistles (letters) from various early Christian writers to other communities and peoples who were part of the early Christian movement. The Apostle Paul is by far the most prolific writing at least 7, perhaps as many as 13, letters within the current canon. Other purported writers include James the Brother of Jesus, the Apostle Peter, and John (unclear as to which John). While the authorship of these letters has no end of debate, they help the reader to understand the early church.

For the writer of Revelation, the list of churches and challenges faced run the gambit from seemingly minor inconvenience to significant spiritual shortcomings. The churches and their issues include:

- Ephesus: Have let go of love
- Smyrna: Are enduring great hardship and poverty
- Pergamum: Following a false teacher
- Thyatira: Following a false prophet
- Sardis: Not taking their discipleship seriously
- Philadelphia: Have seen many flee
- Laodicea: Are lukewarm to Jesus

Each of these churches, whether a literal church or not, helps reveal to the reader all the different ways in which people of God face challenges. The use of the number 7, a common numerological statement in Revelation, referencing the things of God (in contrast to the number 6, referencing the things of humans).

1. Which church do you most identify with? Which worries you most?
2. What is the most common one you see?
3. What is the most troublesome of these issues? Which one is hardest to overcome?

Scripture lesson: Revelation 2:8-17

⁸“And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These are the words of the first and the last, who was dead and came to life: ⁹“I know your affliction and your poverty, even though you are rich. I know the slander on the part of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. ¹⁰Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Beware, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison so that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have affliction. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. ¹¹Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. Whoever conquers will not be harmed by the second death. ¹²“And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword: ¹³“I know where you are living, where Satan’s throne is. Yet you are holding fast to my name, and you did not deny your faith in me even in the days of Antipas my witness, my faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan lives. ¹⁴But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the people of Israel, so that they would eat food sacrificed to idols and practice fornication. ¹⁵So you also have some who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. ¹⁶Repent then. If not, I will come to you soon and make war against them with the sword of my mouth. ¹⁷Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give a white stone, and on the white stone is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it.

1. What is the main point of this passage?
2. How do these churches capture the difficulty of the modern church?
3. What stands out most in this passage? What gives you hope?

Discussion

In this brief glimpse at the Epistle section of Revelation, we see two churches: Smyrna and Pergamum. These churches suffer from two issues. First, Smyrna (while not falling away from Jesus) has clearly faced some strong hardship. The writer sees this and writes encouragement, urging them to stay firm and follow Jesus. In contrast, the church in Pergamum has been following a “false teacher”. They have endured much and have stayed faithful despite an unusual circumstance, but now some are following a false teacher. These two churches give differing experiences, but reveal to the reader that even staying faithful, does not mean one has an “easy” or “simple” life.

1. Why is it hard to stay faithful when in difficult circumstances?
2. What do you think the writer means regarding “false teachers”?

Conclusion

In our penultimate week in Revelation, we encounter our own difficulties as followers of Jesus and as a church. This long epistle section shows us that there are many temptations facing the church and the faithful. However, the writer reminds us all that the power of the Spirit pushes us into a deeper relationship with Jesus if we will only listen. Revelation, ever focused on hope, shows us that even when we are in deep difficulty, we have the possibility of redemption and new life.