

REVELATION

Study 3: The Oracles to the Seven Churches

In our previous study, we discussed how John's vision of the risen Jesus would have brought hope and comfort to the first-century Christians who were wondering where their God was in the midst of everything that was going on in their society. But we also mentioned how this vision of the risen Jesus would have confronted and challenged Christians who were compromising their loyalty to God through giving in to the status quo of Roman society and culture. John's incredible vision of the risen Jesus in chapter one shows us that God is not absent or distant. Jesus is paying attention to what is going on with his people, and he informs John that he has something to say about it.

In this particular study, we are going to read and discuss the seven prophetic oracles that are given by Jesus to the seven churches in Asia. In these oracles, Jesus address the specific challenges and problems that each of these seven churches were facing. Some of the Christians in these churches had become lackadaisical in their loyalty to Jesus due to the wealth and prosperity that the Roman economy provided. Others were compromising their loyalty to Jesus due to cultural influence and public pressure. And then there were others who were remaining loyal to Jesus but were suffering public harassment and persecution because of it.

As we read each of these seven oracles to the seven churches, we need to try and put ourselves in the shoes of the Christians being addressed. We need to hear and understand what Jesus had to say to these churches, and then discern how his words to them still speak and challenge us today.

The Church in Ephesus

Revelation 2:1-7

Jesus commends the church in Ephesus for defending the truth about God against some local false teachers. They are suffering for the sake of the gospel and guarding themselves from evil people and imposters.¹ And one particular group of false teachers that were prevalent in Ephesus and then mentioned again in the oracle to Pergamum is a group referred to as the Nicolaitans.

¹ Read the apostle Paul's instructions to Timothy in 2 Timothy and remember that Timothy was the pastor in Ephesus.

The city of Ephesus was dominated by the worship of the goddess Artemis and participation in the imperial cult. A major part of the local economy and life in the city was dependent on the people's participation in activities and practices that took place at the local pagan temples.² It is likely that the Nicolaitans were a group that was teaching that it was okay for Christians to take part in these activities and practices just as long as they were inwardly honoring Jesus as Lord in their heart. The church in Ephesus was opposed to this kind of false teaching, and Jesus commends them for it.

The Ephesians love for God is evident, but what they had forgotten seems to be their love for one another. This love for one another is an essential aspect of what it means to be a Jesus-community, and it is the hallmark of what it means to be God's faithful witnesses here on earth.³ And so, Jesus warns them to repent and to regain this love for one another or he will remove them from being a church – a source of God's light – in Ephesus.

The Church in Smyrna

Revelation 2:8-11

The church in Smyrna receives no rebuke or correction from Jesus, only words of encouragement. Their current state of poverty is likely a result of not being allowed to participate in social networks and the local trade unions due to their new identity as Jesus people. It was difficult to take part in local commerce when you were not willing to take part in the public activities and various practices associated with Roman allegiance. The church in Smyrna was refusing to compromise their loyalty to Jesus despite the harassment that they were experiencing. Jesus comforts them and encourages them to be fearless in the midst of their tribulation and to remain loyal to him to the point of death.

The Church in Pergamum

Revelation 2:12-17

Jesus commends the church in Pergamum for staying loyal to him in spite of intense persecution.⁴ However, he warns them that there are some in the church who have let false teachers lead them into moral compromise.

² John often summarizes these pagan activities and practices as "eating food sacrificed to idols and practicing sexual immorality."

³ John 13:34-35

⁴ Antipas, the only Christian named in the entire book, was loyal unto death and is given the same title that described Jesus himself, "faithful witness". This is the honorable title that all Christians who read and hear the Book of Revelation should strive to receive.

The city of Pergamum was notorious for its many pagan temples⁵ and participation in the imperial cult. There was an expectation for all local citizens to participate in temple festivals and activities in order to preserve the things that everyone held dear such as the favor of the gods, the promise of Roman peace and the prosperity that was available through participation in the Roman economy. These festivals and temple activities promoted heavy drinking, all sorts of sexual practices⁶ and the eating of raw meat that had been offered as a sacrifice to the emperor and various pagan gods.

Christians would have experienced intense social pressure from their neighbors and local officials who would have viewed their loyalty to Jesus as anti-Roman skepticism or even treasonous political defiance. This pressure had led some persuasive teachers among the church to start teaching that it was okay to be a Christian and to still show support for or to even take part in the various temple festivities and practices. This would help Christians avoid any unwanted tension and controversy, and allow them to still have access to the material and social benefits that Roman society offered. However, Jesus declares that this sort of moral compromise is completely unacceptable. He calls those who are compromising to repent and warns them that he will follow up with judgement.

The Church in Thyratira

Revelation 2:18-29

Jesus commends the church in Thyatira for their love, loyalty and willingness to patiently endure the costs and social consequences of being a follower of Jesus. However, similar to the situation in Pergamum, he rebukes them for tolerating the false teaching of a local female leader in the church.

This particular woman is leading some Christians into moral compromise by persuading them that it was not that big of a deal to participate in the immoral practices that were simply a part of Roman society and culture. Jesus accuses this woman of seducing his servants and accuses those who *get into bed* with her teaching as committing adultery.

This oracle to the church in Thyratira is the center point of the seven oracles (fourth out of seven), and it is the longest of the seven as well. This is also the strongest rebuke of false teaching and moral compromise found in any of the oracles. All of these things suggest that this temptation to

⁵ Pergamum had temples dedicated to Caesar and the goddess Roma, to Asklepios (the god of healing, symbolized by serpents), and a large altar dedicated to Zeus.

⁶ There was even a local law that said a woman was not allowed to marry until she lost her virginity in the annual Dionysus festival.

compromise was a problem that is intentionally being emphasized, and one that will be addressed throughout the rest of the Book of Revelation.

The German historian and Biblical scholar, Dr. Loren Stuckenbruck, comments on this emphasis by making this observation:

“For John the influence of Jezebel within the Christian community is the microcosm of a [form of spiritual and political fornication] that is taking place on a grander scale in the Roman Empire.”⁷

John alludes to this grander spiritual and political fornication in Revelation 14 where the Roman Empire is described as “she who made all nations drink the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality.” And then again in Revelation 17, the Roman Empire is characterized as “the great prostitute... with whom the kings of the earth have committed sexual immorality, and with the wine of whose sexual immorality the dwellers on earth have become drunk.” These images of the Roman Empire seducing nations and people to get into bed with her ideologies, idolatry and imperialism sets the stage for the final warning given by the voice from heaven in Revelation 18. John writes:

Then I heard another voice from heaven saying,
“Come out of her, my people,
lest you take part in her sins,
lest you share in her plagues;
for her sins are heaped high as heaven,
and God has remembered her iniquities.”

The warning throughout the Book of Revelation is clear. Christians must avoid getting into bed with any empire that is fueled by an oppressive, exploitive and idolatrous economic system. Those who take part in the temporary benefits of such an economic system put themselves in a situation where they will have to share the responsibility for the injustices and iniquities committed by that system.

And so, the warning for the church in Thyratira is a warning and major theme that runs throughout the whole Book of Revelation. By teaching that it is okay to participate in the immoral practices that were associated with Roman allegiance, this “Jezebel” is leading Christians into spiritual adultery – the sin of compromising your loyalty to God by getting into bed with the way of the empire.

⁷ Loren Stuckenbruck, Revelation. In *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 1542

Turning your head and tolerating this kind of teaching is unacceptable. Jesus calls those who are compromising and those who are tolerating such compromise to immediately repent. Christians are called to be faithful witnesses – humans who are verbalizing the truth about God and who are living out that truth through uncompromising obedience to God – and an essential aspect to being a faithful witness means that we have to resist participating in unjust, idolatrous systems, no matter how difficult that may be and no matter what that may end up costing us.

The Church in Sardis

Revelation 3:1-6

Jesus warns the church in Sardis for assuming that their spiritual condition is better than it really is. They are clinging to a reputation that does not accurately define their true spiritual reality. They are deceiving themselves by highlighting the good things that they have done but ignoring the ways in which they are taking part in the idolatry and iniquities of the empire. Jesus warns them to wake up to the reality of their spiritual condition and to repent of their incomplete obedience to God.

The Church in Philadelphia

Revelation 3:7-13

Like the church in Smyrna, the church in Philadelphia receives no rebuke or correction from Jesus, only words of encouragement. And also like the church in Smyrna, the church in Philadelphia is described as a marginalized minority that is experiencing harassment and opposition from a local Jewish community. Despite this opposition and the various cultural pressures to compromise, they have kept Jesus' words and have refused to deny his name. Jesus commends them for their faithful witness and patient endurance, and he promises that he will protect them and vindicate them.

The Church in Laodicea

Revelation 3:14-22

Similar to the church in Sardis, Jesus warns the church in Laodicea to wake up to the reality of their spiritual condition. They have become useless and detestable in the eyes of Jesus even though they assume that they are doing just fine. There is no mention of any harassment or persecution. And this is most likely an indication that the church in Laodicea has compromised to the point of not looking any different from the rest of their society and culture. They are embracing the status quo and enjoying the lifestyle, wealth and prosperity that the Roman economy has made possible.

The only hope for these Christians is to recognize their poor spiritual condition and how much they really need Jesus and then to immediately repent of all the ways that they are compromising with the way of the empire. The material benefits of life in the empire have led to the spiritual blindness of the church. These Christians need a complete makeover and a renewed relationship with Jesus.

The Call to Conquer

Revelation 2-3

These seven oracles written by John are warnings and exhortations from the risen Jesus himself.⁸ Jesus warns these seven churches that a tribulation has arisen that is going to force them to choose between compromising with the empire or staying loyal to the kingdom of God. This is a tribulation and a choice that continues to confront us as Christians today. And so, as we have read and heard what Jesus said to these seven churches, we must take some time to reflect on his words and discern how they speak right into our social, political, economic and spiritual circumstances today.

Jesus calls his people to resist the way of the empire and all the temptations that come with it. He calls his people to patiently endure the tribulation and to remain loyal in their commitment to him no matter what it may end up costing them. And he reassures his people that the incomparable rewards of the new creation will be given to all of those who hear his message and “conquer”.⁹

This call for Christians to conquer – to be faithful witnesses of God and his Messiah no matter the cost – is the one big exhortation that transcends all of the encouragements and warnings that are given in each of these seven oracles. It also provides us with the lens through which we must view and read the rest of the book. Jesus’ call to conquer, addressed to the seven churches here at the beginning of the book, is a call to engage in the cosmic battle that is described in the central part of the book in order to reach the promised new creation that is described at the end of the book.¹⁰

But how exactly will Jesus’ people conquer and inherit the new world that God has promised? And what is the actual connection between loyalty to Jesus and this idea of conquering? Well, the rest of the book stands ready to give us an answer.

⁸ This heightens the urgency to listen intently to these oracles and to respond. Notice that words and expressions are used that are characteristic of Jesus (repent, keep watch, ear to hear).

⁹ John uses the verb “to conquer” in Revelation 2:7, 2:11, 2:17, 2:26-28, 3:5, 3:12, 3:21, 12:10-12, 15:2-4, 21:7.

¹⁰ Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of Revelation*, 14

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. In these oracles, Jesus address the specific challenges and problems that each of these seven churches were facing. Some of the Christians in these churches had become lackadaisical in their loyalty to Jesus due to the wealth and prosperity that the Roman economy provided. Others were compromising their loyalty to Jesus due to cultural influence and public pressure. And then there were others who were remaining loyal to Jesus but were suffering public harassment and persecution because of it.

Which of the seven churches addressed in Revelation 2-3 do you, or your Church community identify with the most and why?

2. Social pressure had led some persuasive teachers among the church to start teaching that it was okay to be a Christian and to still show support for or to even take part in the various temple festivities and practices. This would help Christians avoid any unwanted tension and controversy, and allow them to still have access to the material and social benefits that Roman society offered. However, Jesus declares that this sort of moral compromise is completely unacceptable.

In your experience, what are some of the most prominent forms of cultural compromise in the Christian churches today?

3. The warning throughout the Book of Revelation is clear. Christians must avoid getting into bed with any empire that is fueled by an oppressive, exploitive and idolatrous economic system.

Describe what it means to be a faithful witness and why was distancing yourself from Roman ideology, idolatry and imperialism an essential aspect to being a faithful witness?

4. As we have read and heard what Jesus said to these seven churches, we must take some time to reflect on his words and discern how they speak right into our social, political, economic and spiritual circumstances today.

What might be the prophetic message of the risen Jesus to you and your church today?