

Series: **The End of Time**

Today's Title: **"7 Letters"**

September 24, 2023 – *Revelation 2-3*

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**Objective:** To increase our faithfulness and commitment to the truth and grace of the Gospel.

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## Church Plant offering...

For a couple of years now, we've been talking, planning, and praying about planting a church.

We have sensed God's leading and have started the search for a pastor to lead the church plant.

Today marks the beginning of our collecting an offering for the church plant.

Much like we did when we came along-side Hope City Church as they were being planted – and supported them for their first 3 years, we want to begin raising funds to support our church plant.

***We don't want to short or minimize our support for this church.***

I want you to continue giving to CDOBC – to be faithful to our budget and giving goals.

If you are willing and able to begin supporting the church plant, just note that on the memo line of any checks – or if you give on-line or through the app – just make sure you're designated your gift for the church plant.

## ***Opening prayer***

Last week we studied **chapter 1** – and John’s vision of Jesus. We learned that Jesus is the central figure of Revelation – and the 2<sup>nd</sup> coming of Jesus is the central event of the book. Revelation is a vision the Apostle John had of Jesus – but it was also a vision of the future salvation, and judgment of God.

We also learned **The End of Time** is the next era / epoch of God’s plan for this world.

**Turn to Revelation 2 – p. 1028**

Today, we’re studying **chapters 2 & 3** which contain the 7 letters to the 7 churches in Asia Minor (Modern-day Turkey).

On this map we see the location of Asia Minor / Modern-day Turkey – just below the Black Sea – and on the eastern shore of the Aegean Sea – and the northern shore of the Mediterranean Sea.

These 7 churches were all located in the western ½ of Asia Minor – and we will start in Ephesus – and move clockwise until we end up at Laodicea.

In these letters we not only see a message from Jesus to each of these churches – but His message to them is also a message to us today!

So... let’s jump in and look at these 7 letters.

**Church #1 – Ephesus** 2:1-7

**Read 2:1-7** – BTW - the word “angel” is mentioned 76x in the book of Revelation.

**Commends: 2:2-3, 6** – He commends their “toil” – their “patient endurance” and how they have resisted evil people and they’ve been discerning regarding false teachers. In that light – they hate – or reject the “works” or teaching “of the Nicolaitans” – which Jesus says He also hates.

The Ephesian church loves the truth.

But there is a problem.

**Condemns: 2:4** - “But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.”

It’s difficult to know if this is their love for Christ – or their love for others.

I think it’s both.

Our love for Christ should energize our love for others. If we’re lacking in love – it can be traced back to a decreasing love for Christ.

This church loved the truth, but they lacked in love and grace.

## **Church #2 – Smyrna** 2:8-11

Smyrna is a church that is evidence of the great paradox that is true in Christianity.

*When Christians are persecuted, the Church grows stronger and more faithful.*

This is what happened to the church in Smyrna.

Smyrna was a long-time ally of Rome, and under the Roman Emperor Domitian it became a capital offense to refuse to offer the yearly sacrifice to the emperor.

This is certainly one of the reasons the Christians in Smyrna were persecuted so much.

Polycarp, a disciple of the Apostle John and one of the Church Fathers – served as the bishop of Smyrna – and he was burned at the stake at the age of 87 because he refused to renounce Christ.

The city of Smyrna gets its name from myrrh – a very expensive, aromatic gum resin which is mentioned a number of times in the Bible (Matt. 2:11; John 19:39).

- It was one of the gifts the wise men brought to the baby Jesus.
- Nicodemus bought 75 lbs. of myrrh and aloes to prepare Jesus' body for burial.

Myrrh is extracted from a certain type of small bush – when the branches are crushed – the fragrant resin is released.

It's fitting – that when the Christians were crushed by persecution, they released a sweet fragrance of worship and faithfulness to God.

**Read 2:8-11**

**Commends: 2:9-10** - “...your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

Do not fear what you are about to suffer...Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.”

“a synagogue of Satan” – this refers to the Jews in Smyrna – and we’ll see in Philadelphia. When the Church was born, most of the Romans and Greeks thought it was part of Judaism – or an offshoot of Judaism.

But toward the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century, the Jews had separated themselves from Christians – and they were actually helping the Romans persecute those who followed Christ.

**Romans 9:6**

“For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel...”

Just because someone was Jewish doesn’t mean they were / are part of God’s family – part of the redeemed.

In like manner – just because someone is born into a Christian home – that doesn’t make them a follower of Christ!

These Jews in Smyrna were serving Satan – not God. They were betraying those who belonged to God – which is why Jesus refers to their synagogue in this way.

**Condemns:** Nothing

This was a faithful church.

Jesus has no correction for them – only the encouragement and promise:

“Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.”

### **Church #3 – Pergamum** 2:12-17

#### **Read 2:12-17**

“Satan’s throne” – Pergamum was the official center of Emperor worship in Asia Minor – which is why it’s referred to as “Satan’s throne”.

“Antipas My faithful witness, who was killed among you...” – he was probably the pastor of the church in Pergamum. Tradition says he was roasted to death inside a brass bull or kettle.

The persecution here – like Smyrna – is likely due to the Christian’s refusal to deny Jesus and worship the emperor.

**‘Jesus is Lord.’** – the Christian belief.

**‘Caesar is Lord.’** – the forced statement of belief of the emperor. Many Christians refused to say it – and they paid with their life.

**Commends: 2:13** - This church was faithful – holding onto the truth – did not reject the faith – even though this city was “...where Satan dwells” and many of them were martyred.

This is so good – but there were some problems.

**Condemns: 2:14-15** - “...you have some there who hold to the teaching of Balaam...

So also you have some who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.”

Idolatry and immorality.

There seems to have been some in the church who were involved with idols – and with sexual immorality.

It seems the church did nothing about it.

The church didn’t confront the sin of these members.

There were also some who were holding “...to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.”

We don’t know a lot of details about the Nicolaitans.

The Church Father, Irenaeus (born c. 120/140, Asia Minor—died c. 200/203), wrote that they were heretical followers of Nicolaus, one of the 7 chosen in **Acts 6**.

Whatever their specific beliefs and teaching, it seems they taught and practiced in accordance with Balaam (Numbers 22, 31).

***The teaching / doctrine of Balaam makes believers indistinguishable from the unbelieving world.***

Peter addressed similar problems.

**1 Peter 2** – Peter is addressing the church about false teachers – warning the church about what they do and teach – so the church will reject false teachers.

2:1 – “But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them...”

**2:14-15**

“They have eyes full of adultery, insatiable for sin. They entice unsteady souls. They have hearts trained in greed. Accursed children!

Forsaking the right way, they have gone astray. They have followed the way of Balaam, the son of Beor, who loved gain from wrongdoing...”

These were serious problems – much like the church in Corinth – the church in Pergamum was embracing the world – and the desires of the flesh.

This is rejecting the truth of Christ – and embracing the values and practices of the world.

Today, there are many in the Church – followers of Jesus – who are rejecting the teaching of Jesus – and embracing the values and practices of the world.

### **One example...**

Young people living together before getting married.

In a recent Barna study, it found that *“The majority of American adults (65%) believe cohabitation is generally a good idea.”* (<https://www.barna.com/research/majority-of-americans-now-believe-in-cohabitation/>)

A pew research survey in 2019 found that between 58% - 70% of evangelicals and protestants believe cohabiting is acceptable if a couple plans to marry.

(<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2021/april/cohabitation-dilemma-comes-for-american-pastors-ayers.html>)



Even though the Bible is clear that sex before marriage and sex outside of marriage is a sin (See Exodus 22:16-17; Matthew 5:32; Romans 12:1; 1 Corinthians 5:1-7, 6:13,18, 7:2, 9; Galatians 5:19; Ephesians 5:3; 1 Thessalonians 4:3-4; 2 Timothy 2:22; Hebrews 13:4) — and even though data from numerous studies over the years have looked at this issue and the evidence is clear that cohabiting / living together before marriage — is harmful.

Couples who do this are actually more likely to divorce.

We see an increasing number of Christians — under 40 — living together before marriage — in order to make sure they are compatible.

But both the Bible — and the data — show this to be wrong.

Jesus' command to them.

**vs. 16** — “Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of My mouth.”

This is judgment from Jesus.

**Revelation 19:15**

“From His mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations...”

**Church #4 – Thyatira** *2:18-29*

**Read 2:18-29**

**Commends: 2:19** - They have grown in their faith.

Their ministry has grown – “...your latter works exceed the first.”

There is a group in this church who have remained faithful to Christ and His Word.

But...many have not.

**Condemns: 2:20** - “But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols.”

Thyatira was a city with a strong trade guild – or labor unions. If you wanted a job – you had to be a member of the trade guild.

The trade guilds were very pagan, and they would put on big banquets in celebration of the different gods.

This involved eating the meat which was sacrificed to these gods – and also participating with the temple prostitutes.

“Jezebel” was an evil queen of Israel in the O.T. – so it’s uncertain if there was an actual woman named “Jezebel” in this city – or if Jesus is using this name in a symbolic way.

It seems this woman – or whoever this woman is representing – was in the church and she was encouraging others in the church to engage with all of this activity.

*‘Go ahead, attend and be involved with the celebrations – it’s OK – God understands.’*

Ephesus is praised by Jesus for their dedication to the truth – but He criticized them for their lack of love for others.

*Thyatira is the opposite.*

They were trying to love others – but they had no truth to guide their love.

Their love was not actually love – it led to license and full acceptance of sin – which is never actually love.

It would be like a Christian today – going to church – serving – part of a small group – helping to reach the community with the gospel – and as they are doing those things, they’re hanging out with some friends getting drunk, sleeping around – and thinking everything is OK – I went to church last weekend!

The church in Thyatira was tolerating this kind of dual-living – hypocritical living.

**vs. 21-23** – Jesus promises severe judgment to Jezebel – and those like her – who practice these things.

**vs. 24-28** – “But to the rest in Thyatira...” – Jesus promises to reward those who are faithful and obedient by giving them a share in His kingdom.

He will give them “authority over the nations” in His kingdom.

## **Church #5 – Sardis** 3:1-6

I'm going to switch up the order here with Sardis, because Jesus switches it up in His letter to this church. Jesus begins with what He condemns in this church.

### **Condemns: Read 3:1-3**

Most people who are spiritually lost – don't know they're spiritually lost.

They may be religious – someone who believes in God – but they don't know Christ.

They don't know what God requires for salvation.

They are spiritually dead – and they think that going to church – doing something kind to another – is spiritually life-giving and life-sustaining.

### **But it's not.**

Those are good things.

But they're not saving works.

### **Faith / belief in Jesus as your Savior – is the only saving work!**

Sardis use to be wealthy, but it was no longer.

It was known for its fine wool that was dyed various colors.

Let's see what Jesus commends in the church in Sardis.

### **Commends: Read 3:4-6**

Do you have spiritual life in Christ – or just religious activity?

### **Church #6 – Philadelphia** 3:7-13

Like Smyrna, Philadelphia is commended by Jesus – and He gives no condemnation – no correction.

**Commends: 3:8** - “I know your works... I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept My word and have not denied My name.”

This church was tired – weak – but not from spiritual disinterest or sin.

They were weakened by the persecution they were enduring – which actually revealed their strong faith. They were holding on – keeping a grip on the truth of Christ – willing to suffer for His name.

“I know your works” – Jesus knows what difficulties we endure for His name.

He is aware of our suffering – the unfair treatment – the teasing – mocking – the promotion we don’t receive.

### **2 Corinthians 10:12**

“For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

**Condemns:** Jesus condemns nothing.

Even in persecution they remained faithful – “...you have kept My word and have not denied My name.”

Like Smyrna, the Jews in the synagogue were working to harm the Christians by reporting them to the Romans for not worshiping the emperor.

“...synagogue of Satan” – vs. 9

**Promises:** He doesn't condemn them – Jesus gives them many promises.

**Read vs. 9-13**

### **Church #7 – Laodicea** 3:14-22

Laodicea was:

1. Wealthy – so much wealth that when an earthquake occurred in 60 A.D., they refused financial help from Rome - and told Rome *'Thanks, but we can rebuild on our own – we can afford it.'*
2. Produced fine clothing – fashion industry.
3. Famous medical school – created an eye ointment that helped with vision problems.
4. Problem: No local water source – had to get water through a series of viaducts from over 6 miles away. By the time the water got to the city, the water was lukewarm and tasted terrible.

**Commends:** Nothing.

**Condemns:** Read 3:15-17

This church thought they had everything – and in a material sense – they did.

But spiritually – they were not rich, they were “wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.”

Spiritually...they made Jesus want to *‘spit them out of His mouth’*.

This is where our English translation is too polite.

The Greek word actually means: *‘vomit; repulsed, showing utter rejection; ‘to reject with extreme disgust’*.

### **Read vs. 18-22**

Everything Jesus told them to do (**vs. 18**) – they refused.

**vs. 19** - He tells them of His love for them – and He warns them of His impending discipline – and He tells them to “repent”.

### ***Apply it...***

These letters cover a lot of ways Christians can get things out-of-line with the things of Christ.

#### **1. Ephesus: Truth w/out love.**

Maybe you stand for everything that is right, but you are loveless in your heart.

When it comes to grace and truth, you’ve got the truth part right, but have lost sight of grace.

#### **2. Pergamum – A compromised life.**

You say you’re devoted, but you’re compromising when it comes to your lifestyle.

You like to serve others, love others, care for others, but you've forgotten or set aside the truth – in the interest of avoiding awkward conversations.

You've gone from *accepting* people to *affirming* their sinful choices – and maybe even affirming those choices in your own life.

### **3. Thyatira – Ritual over spiritual life.**

Maybe you've embraced ritual and routine – formality and appearances instead of faith in Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins – a relationship with Jesus as you live in obedience to His commands.

### **4. Sardis – Good works over belief.**

You're focused on doing religious things, but you have no faith in Christ.

You look spiritual, but you're just busy with church stuff.

### **5. Laodicea – Material blessings instead of spiritual blessings.**

You've equated material blessing with spiritual blessing.

You believe since you are blessed in life, God is pleased with you.

You have everything you need in this life – and you have become indifferent to the things of God.

The truth is you have nothing of significance, and your lukewarm nature is making God gag.

## **2 Faithful churches - Smyrna & Philadelphia**

You've been enduring things – a lot of things – and you've endured – remained faithful.

You feel weak, but your faith is strong.

Jesus wants you to be encouraged – and He promises future blessings.

## **Listen to Jesus.**



These 7 letters – specifically the 5 letters to the 5 churches that had problems – was not to beat them down, but to wake them up.

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” - 2:7, 11, 17, 29, 3:6, 13, 22

Hear the Spirit of God...repent...follow...obey.

Jesus wants to get our attention.

The attention of our church.

The attention of each one of us.

That’s why at the end of each letter – Jesus gives the same command. (Aorist imperative).

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

### **Repent from your sin.**

Repent means: turn around – reverse your direction.

Follow Christ.

Obey Christ.

There is always hope!

In each of the 5 churches who are condemned by Jesus, He makes an appeal for repentance.

You are never too far away from Christ...

You are never too sinful...

That the Lord will not receive you with open arms.

He loves you – despite your sin.

He still loves you – despite your rejection of Him  
and His Word.

Repent!!

He is waiting for you.

*Close in prayer*