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Revelation 2:1-7

Third Message

Bernard Bell

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PRESERVING PASSION

SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN

We return to the Book of Revelation after a hiatus of five months, five months in which much has changed. On September 11th, the priorities and passions of this nation changed. We became passionate about the flag. We found new heroes. We rallied behind the president as he launched a war on terrorism. And yet this same president urged us to carry on life as normal. Last week the pundits were watching to see if we would do just that, to see if we would shop with the same intensity as last year. But many have found that their world has changed too much, that the combination of the economic downturn and the terrorist attacks have reoriented their priorities. What are your passions and priorities?

I have been given the next three weeks to continue my series in the Book of Revelation. Today we reach the seven messages to the churches. Most preachers would devote one week to each of the messages, but since I have only a few weeks per year it would take a couple of years at that pace to cover these. So, instead I am going to devote just these three weeks to the seven messages, looking at the first three messages, those to Ephesus, Smyrna and Pergamum.

A. The Common Structure of the Seven Messages

Before I launch into the message to Ephesus, I first want to look at the seven messages as a whole, showing the overall structure of them, and how they are integrated into the structure and message of the whole book. This is the most carefully structured book in the whole New Testament, perhaps in the whole Bible. Each of the seven messages is carefully structured, and the seven messages are carefully integrated into the whole.

The seven messages are very similar. There is a common template for each, with much of the language already filled in—boilerplate as it were. Each message contains four major sections.

1. Command to write

Each message commences with a command addressed by Jesus to John, “To the angel of the church in Ephesus write.” John is given the addresses of seven churches. Most people think that these are the seven letters to the churches. But the whole book is a letter, addressed to “the seven churches in the province of Asia” (1:4). Jesus has already instructed John to “Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea” (1:11). The province of Asia occupied the western end of what is today Turkey. It was one of the most prosperous provinces in the entire Roman Empire. We know that it contained more than seven churches, for the NT mentions several that are not in this list: Troas, Colossae, Hierapolis. But the book of Revelation is full of symbolic numbers, the most common of them being seven, a number that occurs 55 times. Seven is symbolic of perfection or completion. By writing to these seven churches, John is writing to all churches both then and through the ages.

The address John is given is not “the church in Ephesus” but “the angel of the church in Ephesus.” John has just been given a vision of the risen and exalted Jesus, walking among seven lampstands and holding seven stars. Jesus himself explains that the seven lampstands are the seven churches and the seven stars are the angels of these seven churches (1:20). The lampstands are clear enough. In the OT, both the tabernacle and the temple contained lampstands, blazing away in the presence of God, who himself is unapproachable light. The tabernacle and the temple have both been destroyed. Where then is the light that testifies to the God who is Light? It is these seven little churches in the Roman province of Asia. They are the lights now blazing away in the presence of God. President Bush Sr. called for a thousand points of light. That is what the churches are. This is what PBCC is, a lampstand, a point of light, shining in the world, testifying to the God who is Light.

Who are the angels of the churches? Some interpret these as the pastors of the churches, but this does not fit the imagery of the book. Revelation is full of angels: of the 175 references to angels in the NT, 67 are here. An angel is a messenger; in just six instances elsewhere in the NT, angels are human messengers. Otherwise they are always residents of the two unseen realms into which John is given a revelation. Satan’s angels come from the Abyss; God’s angels come from heaven. The churches have angels because they are colonies of heaven planted on earth. The Church is not an earthly institution, but a heavenly one.

2. Introductory Formula

The message proper begins with an introductory formula, in which Jesus declares, “These are the words.” John, writing the words of Jesus, uses a deliberately archaic expression, the Greek words *tade legei*. No Greek speaker at the end of the first century would ever actually say that. But Jesus and John are using the language of the OT, where *tade legei* is the usual Greek translation of the phrase *koh amar*, which the KJV renders as “thus saith.” This is most frequently used by the prophets in the phrase “Thus saith the Lord.” The book of Revelation is filled with the language and imagery of the OT. John uses this archaic Greek to ensure that his hearers hear these messages as prophetic oracles from God.

But these oracles are predicated not of God but of Jesus. The second part of each declaration contains a self-description of the one making the declaration. Here, as throughout the book, is John ascribing to Jesus language that in the OT was appropriate for God alone. Again, I say, this book has an extraordinarily high Christology, that is a highly exalted view of who Jesus is. For the first six messages, the self-description of Jesus draws on the language of John’s vision of Jesus in chapter one, the vision that introduces these messages.

3. Prophetic Message

The longest section contains the prophetic message itself. This section has the least amount of boilerplate, yet even here there is a two-part template: a narrative and a pronouncement.

Each narrative section begins with the same word, “I know.” Jesus knows what is going on in each church. Then follows a sequence of verbs in the present and past tenses, describing what Jesus knows in each of the churches. To five of the churches Jesus says, “I know your deeds.” In most cases Jesus commends the churches for their deeds. But in five of the churches this commendation is followed by censure for failures, often prefaced by the phrase, “But I have this against you.” The churches in Smyrna and Philadelphia receive no censure. The church in Laodicea receives no word of commendation.

These, then, are the things that have come to the attention of Jesus. Reacting to this information, Jesus issues a pronouncement in which the tenses are present and future. Many of these pronouncements include both a command and a promise. The command is often to remember and repent. The promise concerns the coming of Jesus.

4. Proclamation

Each message closes with a two-part proclamation, addressed to two sets of people: the one with an ear and the one who overcomes.

To each of the churches John writes, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” The whole book is a letter. Within it are contained these seven messages, one to each church. Each message is relevant to that particular church. But each is also intended for all churches.

To each of the churches Jesus gives a promise to the one who overcomes. This word overcome (*nikaō*), also translated as conquer or be victorious, is a key word in the book, used 17 times (of 28 in NT). Warren Wiersbe recognizes this in entitling his commentary, *Be Victorious*, as does William Hendriksen with his, *More Than Conquerors*. But this conquering has nothing to do with who wins the battle of Armageddon.

To those who are victorious Jesus makes a promise. Each of the items promised reappears at the end of the book. The final use of the word conquer is in the declaration by God himself, “He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son” (21:7), where “all this” refers to the new heavens and the new earth that have just been described. Those who conquer will find their home in the new heavens and the new earth.

We will look at this theme of conquering next week when we study the message to the church in Smyrna. For the moment, suffice it to say that the one who conquers is the one who heeds the message that Jesus has for the church, the one who holds on to Jesus. He is assured a place in the new heavens and the new earth. He has nothing to fear from God’s judgments that are poured out in the middle of the book.

B. The Message to the Church in Ephesus

Hear the word of the Lord to the church in Ephesus:

To the angel of the church in Ephesus write:

These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands: I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You

have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.

Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God. (Rev 2:1-7 NIV)

1. Ephesus

To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: (2:1a)

The first of the seven cities addressed by Jesus is also the largest, Ephesus. It was the home of John, before and after he was exiled to Patmos. It was presumably the starting point of the messenger who took the messages around the seven churches.

No city in the New Testament had as illustrious a spiritual history as Ephesus. Paul stayed here for more than two years on the outward leg of his third missionary journey (Acts 19). For three months he taught in the synagogue, then for two years he taught in the lecture hall of Tyrannus, with the result that “all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord” (Acts 19:10). Some years later, Timothy exercised a vital ministry in Ephesus (1 Tim 1:3). Later still, Ephesus was the home of John.

2. Prophetic Message

Jesus’ prophetic message to the church in Ephesus contains commendation, chastisement, command, and warning. This is a church with a rich history stretching back over forty years. Jesus finds much still to commend in the church:

I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. (2:2-3)

But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. (2:6)

This is a church known for its hard work. It is not a lazy church. Its members are not sitting back in idleness. Outsiders would see a church buzzing with activity.

This is a church known for its perseverance. It has faced opposition and suffered hardship. Perhaps this opposition came from the same sources as the opposition Paul faced when he was in Ephesus. He was opposed by the Jews in the synagogue. And he was opposed by the Gentile merchants who profited greatly from the tourists who came to see the Temple of Artemis, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Whatever the opposition, it had failed to discourage the church. The believers had remained resolute, not flagging in their work.

This is a church known for its zeal for the truth. Ephesus had a long history of false teachers. On his way home from the third missionary journey, Paul stopped at Miletus and summoned the elders from Ephesus, twenty miles away. He warned them,

Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of

God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! (Acts 20:28-31)

He instructed Timothy,

stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer. (1 Tim 1:3)

These false teachers had evidently remained a constant problem in Ephesus. But the church had a great track record of ferreting them out and exposing them. False teachers were still present in Ephesus, in the guise of the Nicolaitans. This group was active also in Pergamum (2:15), so we will consider them more thoroughly when we study the message to that church. The Nicolaitans were teaching that it is OK to compromise with the world. They were blurring the line between the church and the world. The churches in Pergamum and Thyatira were riddled with compromise, but the church in Ephesus was not. It rejected the teaching of the Nicolaitans.

Thus far, Ephesus seems to be a model church, receiving glowing commendation from Jesus. But all is not well in the church. Jesus chastises them:

Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. (2:4)

For all of its hard work, perseverance and zeal for the truth, the church in Ephesus has forgotten the one thing needful. Externally it shows all the right characteristics: hard work, perseverance, zeal for the truth, but internally it has lost its way. Ephesus is not the only church in which this has happened. Sardis has a reputation of being alive, but is dead (3:1). Laodicea has become so lukewarm that it feels self-sufficient (3:17). Many churches throughout history have followed in their footsteps.

Hard work, perseverance, and zeal for the truth are not enough. It's not that they are unimportant, it's that they are not the most important things. This church had forgotten the one thing needful: love. The nature of this love is not specified, so commentators have debated whether it refers to love of God or love of man. But the love of the believer for the saints is driven by his love for God. New believers are characterized by a love for God, a tremendous appreciation for what he has done.

The church in Ephesus has lost this love. But it is not too late: Jesus offers the church an opportunity to mend her ways:

Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. (2:5a)

Jesus commands the church to do three things: remember, repent and repeat. They are to remember what life was like earlier, when they were driven by a passion for Christ. They are to repent, that is, turn back from their current mode of operation as a church. They are to repeat the things they did at first, when they were driven by passion for Christ.

Jesus next issues a warning as to what will happen if they do not heed this warning:

If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. (2:5b)

Seven times in the book Jesus says "I am coming." Whether that is good news or bad news depends on whether or not we are longing for the coming of Jesus. It is obvious that the coming of Jesus is not

a good thing for the church in Ephesus, for his coming will imply judgment for the church.

I had the privilege of visiting Ephesus last June with a dozen others from this church. It is perhaps the largest archaeological excavation in the entire Mediterranean. Austrian archaeologists have been working on the site for over 100 years, and they anticipate another 100 years of work. The reason that Ephesus is such a large excavation is that the site has been abandoned for over 1000 years. This was the fifth largest city in the Roman Empire, a city of 250,000. It is the only city of such size to be totally abandoned.

Jesus warned that he would remove the lampstand from its place in Ephesus. So thoroughly did he do this that there is not only no longer any church; there is no longer any Ephesus!

3. Promise to the Victor

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God. (2:7)

To the overcomer, Jesus promises "I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God." In the context of this message, the overcomer is the one who maintains his first love, the one who is filled with passion for the Lord, and for what he has done in Christ. To this one Jesus will grant admission to the paradise of God, where grows the tree of life. Paradise is the Greek translation for the garden of Eden, where grew the first tree of life. It is through the tree of life that God mediates life to the humans whom he has created as his image-bearers, the humans whom he has created to dwell in his sanctuary. Ever since humanity was driven out of the garden and away from the tree of life, it has been on a quest to return to the garden. Access to the tree of life is granted by Jesus to the overcomer. The overcomer is the one who holds onto Jesus, who maintains his first love.

C. Preserving Passion

As I mature as a Christian, I am becoming more acutely aware of the danger of losing my first love. I see how many churches there are that share the positive characteristics of Ephesus: busy with good deeds, persevering in the midst of opposition, zealous for identifying error and exposing it. But they are not driven by passion for Christ.

Unlike many churches, PBCC does not have a mission statement. But I have my own informal mission statement. I can claim no originality for it. Some of you may know Bob Roe, long-time former elder and pastor of PBC. Nine years ago I arranged for our interns to spend an evening with him, so that he could explain some of the history of PBC. One thing in particular stuck with me. He described how many years ago the elders had discussed the role of spiritual leadership at PBC. Essentially they were seeking a mission statement. And they adopted one. Their role was to lead people into an all-consuming love-relationship with the Lord.

C. S. Lewis distinguishes two types of longing: "the one is an *askesis*, a spiritual exercise, and the other is a disease."¹ In our movie theaters today are two fantasies, *Harry Potter* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Some Christian parents are very concerned over whether or not to allow their children to see these movies. But these are not dangerous fantasies. Few if any of the children who watch *Harry Potter* really believe that there is a Hogwart's School of Wizardry. The dangerous fantasies are those fed us by Madison Avenue, by Wall Street, by Sand Hill Road. These fantasies arouse longings that disease our

minds and hearts. They have all the appearance of reality, but they are fantasies. The events of September 11th helped temporarily to expose them as such.

The Book of Revelation contains also the story of the great deception. The world is deceived by an unholy triumvirate: the dragon, the false prophet, and Babylon. The dragon, who is Satan, deceives the world to oppose God (12:9; 20:3, 8, 10). The false prophet deceives the world to worship the beast (13:14; 19:20) rather than worship God. Babylon, which is the mass of humanity living apart from God, deceives the world with all its treasures (18:23). The overcomer is the one who resists these deceptions, the one who refuses to worship the beast, who refuses to participate in the life of Babylon, who refuses to join the dragon in opposing God. He is the one who maintains his first love, who preserves his passion.

Messages bombard us all day, every day. They are seductive, but they are also deceptive. To counteract these fantasies we need regular doses of reality. That's what Sunday mornings ought to be about. We gather for a dose of reality. During the week we have become disoriented, none more severely than Christmas week. We gather to reorient ourselves. We join the angels and the saints in heaven gathered around the throne to reorient ourselves onto God and the Lamb. We remind ourselves that our lives revolve around that throne. We gather as a people, reminding ourselves that we are the people of God. This is why we sang "Holy God we praise thy Name," a hymn based on a fourth century Latin poem *Te Deum Laudamus* (You, O God, we praise). For 1600 years the saints below have been lifting their voices with this hymn to join those above, in the praise of God. This is why we sang "Jesus Thou Joy of Loving Heart," by Bernard of Clairvaux, with its line, "From the best bliss that life imparts, we turn unfilled to Thee again."

Bernard was keenly aware of the danger of losing passion for Christ. When a former monk from Clairvaux Abbey, of which he was abbot, was elected pope he wrote him a book to remind him not to allow the busy papal office to detract from his own spiritual life:

I should like you to note carefully, Eugenius, since you are the wisest of men, that whenever your consideration wanders from these things to lesser and visible things, whether in search of knowledge or something for practical use, or to do your duty in administration or action, you go into exile. You do not do so if your consideration concentrates on these higher things, so that through them it seeks what is above. To consider in this way is to come home.²

During the week as we get more and more distracted by the deceptions, we go further and further into exile. On Sundays we gather to consider God, and we come home.

The Book of Revelation has helped me grow in my longing for the coming of Jesus. Seven times Jesus says, "I am coming" (*erchomai*) Another three times he uses a different verb, "I will come" (*hēxō*) to say the same thing. Seven, yea ten times, Jesus says that he is coming. In the prologue John concludes his doxology addressed to Jesus with the excited cry, "Look, he is coming" (1:7). At the end of the prologue Jesus says, "Yes, I am coming soon." To which John answers, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus" (22:20). It seems that the whole book is designed to so reorient our vision that at the end we cry out, "Maranatha, Come Lord." Will the coming of Jesus be good news or bad news for you? Will it be a tremendous inconvenience because you are so enmeshed in the world, or will it be the fulfillment of all your longings?

The Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let him who hears say, "Come!" Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life. (Rev 22:17)

1. C. S. Lewis, "On Three Ways of Writing for Children," in *On Stories and Other Essays on Literature*, ed. Walter Hooper (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 39.

2. Bernard of Clairvaux, *On Consideration* I.1, in *Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Writings*, trans. G. R. Evans (New York: Paulist, 1987), 148.