

A Letter to Ephesus

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Date: 10 March 2019

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[0 : 0 0] There's probably no religious text that has more captured the imagination in the West than the book of Revelation.

If you think about all of the movies, all of the books, all of the genres it has inspired, all of this endless speculation that has been produced as a result of trying to understand this book.

Post-apocalyptic literature is one of my personal favorite forms of fiction. Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and books like that just sort of ignited my imagination the moment I began to discover this world.

And a lot of that is inspired from this writing of the Apostle John. And today we're going to start a series looking at this book.

And it's a long book and so it's going to be a long series. We're probably going to follow this book all the way into the summer. So we're going to do this deep dive into the book of Revelation.

[1 : 0 3] I've personally found this book to be very intimidating. That's why I've never preached on it because I had no idea what it was saying. And so it's taken me a good 12, 13 years to get some sense maybe of what I think it's saying.

But I think that what we're going to find is that this is going to be a rich study. It's going to be a deep study. And I think ultimately it's going to help us fall in love more with Jesus. Because I think that's the point of the book.

So I want to say a couple of things about reading Revelation. We'll say a lot more as we go through the series about how we're interpreting things the way we are. But I just want to say a couple of things up front as we dive in.

Number one, Revelation is poetry. And it has to be read like poetry. If we don't read it like poetry, it's not going to make any sense at all.

Because poetry does not give us objective explanations of things. Poetry is aimed squarely at the imagination. And so there are some parts of Scripture that are aimed at our heads to help us think better.

[2 : 0 7] There are some parts of Scripture that are aimed at our hearts. Revelation is aimed at our imagination. And so we need to read it that way. And poetry uses vivid language and vivid imagery.

Because the goal of poetry is to ignite our imagination and give us fresh ways of experiencing reality. That's what it's meant to do.

And so all of the imagery that we're going to encounter in Revelation is crazy and bizarre to us. But what we need to understand is that most of this imagery is drawn directly out of the Old Testament.

In fact, Revelation alludes to every single book of the Old Testament. And so while it seems unfamiliar to us, we have to remember for the early readers, the first readers of Revelation, this would have ignited their imagination and it would have kindled their memory of all the old great stories of their forefathers.

All the stories that were told by grandparents to grandchildren around the fire at night. All of the great works of God in history. All of that imagery would conjure up those memories.

[3 : 21] Would remind people who God is. And so there's lots of fantastic imagery. We're going to talk more about that in this series. Number two, I'll say this about reading Revelation. It is a story.

It's a story. From beginning to end, it is telling one coherent narrative. And we're going to treat it like that. The point of the story, it's a complicated story.

A lot of twists and turns. But ultimately the point of the story is summed up in Revelation 11, 15. Here's, I believe, the theme of the entire book. The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord.

And of his Christ. And he shall reign forever and ever. That's what the story is about. If all this seems a bit esoteric, it's okay.

We're going to actually ease our way into Revelation during the season of Lent. By taking the first section of this book. Chapters 2 and 3. And we're going to look at this in detail between now and Easter.

[4 : 22] Because what we have in these chapters are letters. These are letters that Jesus instructs the Apostle John to write. Jesus says, I want you to write letters. Seven letters to be delivered to seven churches.

And all of these churches are in Asia Minor, which is modern day Turkey. And where John is at this moment, he's at Patmos. And geographically, these would have been the churches that were near him.

Starting with the church at Ephesus. And so Jesus instructs him to write these letters to all of these churches. And these are meant to be open letters. They're not, this is not private mail.

These are letters that are meant to be read, not just by these churches, but by all churches. So they're letters to us as well as to these churches in Asia Minor. Jesus wants us to read these as though they were to us.

And they're love letters. They're love letters. One of the most central images in Revelation, really in Scripture, is of Christ as a bridegroom and the church as a bride.

[5 : 26] And so you can imagine later in Revelation, there's going to be this climactic wedding. And this wedding celebration of the bride and the groom coming together, the church and Christ. And this is like a time of preparation before that wedding day.

And Jesus is writing letters to his bride. And he's showing us what kind of bride he hopes that we will be. And if we could summarize all the letters in one word, we would say that Jesus is a lover who desires a passionate bride.

He wants a bride who is head over heels in love with him and devoted to him and willing to do anything for him. Because that's how he feels about his bride.

And so this is what we're going to look at in more detail. These love letters from Jesus. And each week we're going to look at one letter. And we're starting with the letter to the church in Ephesus. And this is Revelation 2, 1 through 7.

And there are three things I want to look at in this letter. First, Jesus offers a word of encouragement. And then he offers a word of warning. And then lastly, he makes an amazing promise. So encouragement, warning, promise.

[6 : 32] Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word. And we thank you that without it, we are in the dark. But with it, Lord, you illuminate our lives.

You illuminate this world. Lord, you illuminate the hope that we have in your son, Jesus Christ. We pray that we would sit under your word now and that you would speak to us through it, Lord. That you would have us hear these words that John wrote so long ago.

This letter that has come through time and now is in our hands. We pray this in your son's holy name. Amen. So first of all, Jesus offers a word of encouragement to his bride, to the church.

I should say this. It must have come as a bit of a shock to John to hear these instructions from Jesus. And Jesus says, okay, the first letter needs to go to the church in Ephesus.

Because if you know anything about the tradition around the apostle John, John was the bishop of the church in Ephesus for many, many, many years. And so you can imagine Jesus coming to you and saying, I want to write a letter to this church.

[7 : 35] And it's your church that he's talking about. So John probably perked up and paid really close attention. And here's what Jesus says. I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false.

I know you're enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. So Jesus is beginning by affirming these things that he sees in his church that he thinks are good.

He says, number one, you're a hardworking church. This church is not idle. They're not lazy. They're not complacent. They're not passive. They're out there, and they are doing good in the community.

They're working hard. They're making an impact, making a difference. And then he says, you've held up well under persecution. If you know anything about the early church, the first couple of centuries, the persecution was fierce, especially under Emperor Nero.

And so Christians were tortured. They were burned. Nero illuminated his garden with burning bodies of Christians. They were dressed in animal skins and torn apart by wild animals for sport.

[8 : 50] Christians were persecuted in all kinds of ways. And he says, you're not only facing this persecution and enduring it, but you're actually thriving. You're holding up well.

And one of the things that we know is that the church was persecuted in the hopes that it would extinguish the faith, and yet it only strengthened the faith. The martyrdom of the early Christians laid the groundwork for the thriving church that emerged.

The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church, or so Tertullian said. And so they're holding up well under persecution. And then thirdly, they're committed to the truth.

This is a church. They are committed to doctrinal purity. They know God's word. They're devoted to the teachings of the apostles.

And so when somebody comes in and starts teaching, these aren't people that are just sitting back and just receiving whatever anybody says, as long as it's somewhat entertaining. They're discerning. They're listening.

[9 : 52] They're thinking, you know, I, you know, he's saying that, but I don't think that's in Scripture. And they're opening the word, and they're reading, and they're saying, yeah, that doesn't align with what I read here. And they're going to these false teachers and saying, you're no longer welcome here.

You're not teaching God's truth. And so they're actively discerning. They're actively rejecting false teachers. And by the way, the word it says is actually self-appointed apostles, which is an oxymoron.

You can't have a self-appointed apostle. By definition, an apostle is someone who Jesus appoints and sends with news, right? So if you're a self-appointed apostle, you're sort of, you know, dead from the start.

And so they're rejecting people like this. This is extremely important in Ephesus because you have this massive temple of Artemis that dominated not only the skyline of Ephesus, but also the public life of Ephesus.

This cult of worship was very influential. You also had Ephesus being the center of occult practices. And then there was also this group called the Nicolaitans.

[10 : 59] And we're not quite sure who the Nicolaitans are. Frankly, we just don't have a lot of information. But based on what we do know, we can safely assume that the Nicolaitans were Christians who had taken Christian doctrine and they had refined it and revised it and smoothed it out so that it fit in easily and seamlessly with the prevailing cultural values.

So they sort of integrated Christianity into the prevailing worldviews and values of the day so as to not have any conflict. And, you know, and we see that in every era, right?

People sort of dumbing down and refining Christian faith to make it fit. And that's what the Nicolaitans were doing. And he says, you've rejected that. And so this is all strong, high words of praise from Jesus.

You know, he's giving the state of the union on the church, the state of the church. And he says, here's all the things that we should celebrate about you. High praise. And so when you look at this alone, you think, man, on paper, this church is amazing.

If I had just moved to Ephesus, you know, I graduated, you know, grad school, had an internship, took me to Ephesus, and I'm looking for a church. This is the kind of church I'd want to go to. They got everything right, you know? And so it looks amazing.

[12 : 13] And yet there's one problem. And so we now turn to the warning. The problem is they are doing all the right things.

They're believing all the right things. And yet there is no love in this community. They've lost their love. He says in verse 4, And think about a marriage.

Think about when you meet and you begin dating and spending time with somebody. And as you're falling in love, you start to learn all kinds of things about this person, things that they like and things they don't like, right?

So when I met Laura way back in college, I started to get to know her. I started learning that there are certain things that really delight Laura, things that she loves and things that she enjoys. You know, Laura loves folk music.

Yeah, I didn't like folk music. But Laura loves folk music. Laura loves doing things like eating vegetables. Laura loves doing things like talking about her feelings, things like that.

[13 : 18] She loves these things. And so I started doing all of these things because I wanted to make Laura happy. Because when you love somebody, you want to make them happy. And you have to change things. You know, like I used to drive like a maniac.

Laura does not like always feeling like she's going to die. So I had to change how I drive so that Laura would enjoy being in the car with me. And so, you know, and this is what love is.

And this is what marriage is. It's a lot of work. It's a lot of change. You're doing things because you love this person and you want to make them happy. And that brings you joy.

But then imagine years into a marriage. And imagine that long ago the intimacy died. You're coexisting in the same home but you barely speak to each other.

You're having your separate silos. Your separate orbits. You, you know, one of you goes to bed early. The other stays up till one o'clock in the morning watching TV. You're just not. There's no time, you know.

[14 : 14] And imagine that you barely talk. But yet you're still doing all the things. You're still doing all the things. You're still eating the vegetables and listening to the folk music. And you're still going and you're still driving safely.

And you're still doing all those things. And yet there's no love. There's no warmth. There's no joy anymore. And those good works that used to be a source of joy and delight and it was your pleasure maybe even become a source of resentment.

But they don't even appreciate me. And Jesus is saying this is what's happened in this church. You've lost the love. There's no warmth here. There's no intimacy here.

I feel disconnected from you. I feel like we have nothing in common anymore. You know, you can imagine this happening. And Jesus is saying this and then we look around at the church and we realize that the church is full of people who are doing things for Jesus.

Doing lots of good stuff. In the community. Doing lots of good work for justice and mercy. And doing things that, you know, ways that we talk about serving Jesus.

[15 : 18] And there are many valiant defenders of truth out there. People who are holding the line. Who are refusing to compromise.

In the culture of relativism. We're standing firm. And yet there's no love. There's no love. No love for Christ.

No love for other people. Right? Because if you have no love for Christ, then you really, your love for others begins to fade. And so this is a church where, imagine a church like this.

They're so confident that they have the right doctrine that they scoff at other churches and denominations. How could they possibly believe that? You know?

How could they worship without a liturgy? Everybody has a liturgy. Don't they know that? Right? Or how could they possibly baptize babies? Or how could they possibly not baptize babies? Or how? And they scoff these idiot Christians.

[16 : 16] They may not even be saved. You know? So they're scoffers. Right? This is a church where they're so clear in their beliefs. Everything is mapped out. Everything is explained. It is all laid out systematically.

And so anybody who has questions or doubts or pushes back on anything, they're treated with suspicion. They need some remedial education in the basics.

Right? This is a church that has forgotten that the church exists not only for God's glory but for the sake of others. You know, the church exists for the sake of those outside the church.

And one of the main ways we glorify God is by loving those neighbors. And this is a church that has forgotten that. This is a church that has developed.

They're looking at the changing tides. They're looking at where culture is going. They're reading the news and watching the news. And they're developing a fear toward the outsider.

[17 : 18] They're developing this us-them mentality. They're becoming more combative. Wanting to make sure that they get the right people in office. Wanting to make sure that they're protecting themselves.

And so they begin, instead of loving and serving and engaging all of the difficult people and issues and questions in their neighborhoods, they're starting to circle the wagons. And they're starting to protect themselves.

And just make sure that we take care of ourselves and that our kids are taken care of. And that's what really matters. We need to be protected from this scary outside world. And so this is what's happening.

And we realize that love is the one virtue without which all other virtues are worthless. Right? And so here is Jesus' warning.

Listen to this, verse 5. Remember, therefore, from where you have fallen. Repent and do the works you did at first. Now, they're doing lots of works. So what does he mean? He means works that are infused with love.

[18 : 12] Love for Christ and love for the people that Christ loves. Do the works you did at the first. If not, I will come to you and I will remove your lampstand from its place unless you repent.

He says, recenter your life on love for Christ and one another. Or Jesus says, I will come to you and remove your lamp. Now, that's not just Jesus taking the lamp away, right?

This is poetic imagery. What's he talking about? Well, earlier in Revelation, we're told that the lamps are the churches. And so what he's saying is, you will cease to be a church.

Repent, return to that first love, or you will cease to be a church. The building may remain. The people may still come on Sunday. Your programs may still be full.

Your endowment may be strong. But the life-giving, spirit-warming, illuminating presence of God will be gone. Because let's remember, what makes a church a church is not the programs or the building or the people.

[19 : 20] It's the presence of God. And Jesus says, I'm going to remove your lamp. And this is extremely important because it tells us, it warns us, that you can have all of the right doctrines.

And you can be valiantly defending the truth. And you can be doing lots of good works. And yet you can still be spiritually dead. Because you have no love.

So this is the warning. Loveless churches become lampless churches. And a lampless church is a lifeless church. Loveless churches become lampless churches, which are lifeless churches.

But along with the warning, Jesus doesn't leave us there. He makes a promise. And he gives us a reason for tremendous hope. And here's the promise, verse 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. It's going to start to get cool here in just a second. But what he's saying is, what he's saying is, it's not too late.

[20 : 28] It's not too late. The reason I'm telling you this now, the reason I'm sending you this letter, is because there's still time. And he says, it's not too late. There's still time to repent. There's still time to return to the love that you had at the first.

There's still time to overcome. And he says, for those who do overcome, for those who do endure, for those who continue to remain faithful to the end, Jesus says, I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.

Now, watch this. What does this mean? The first thing that most people think, if they're in the first century, second century, and they're reading this, is they think back to Genesis.

They think back to the tree of life that's in the garden before the fall. But we're no longer in Genesis. We're a long way away from that garden. And so, what is he talking about?

Well, what's even more interesting is the normal word that you would use for tree, dendron, is not used here. There's kind of an odd word used for tree of life.

[21 : 31] And that word sometimes is translated wood. So, wood of life. You could eat of the wood of life. It's often also translated as stocks, like what you would put prisoners in, stocks, like wooden stocks.

Then the third translation, it's very often translated as cross. A wooden cross, like you would hang a traitor from until they died.

And so, what we see here is Jesus is saying to his church, to those who conquer, I will grant to eat of the cross of life. You will eat the food that comes from the cross.

And so, we ask, what is the food that comes from the cross? And this starts to kind of make sense when you look at the broader context of Revelation and realize that in Revelation, Jesus is the tree of life.

Whenever you see the tree of life, that is another poetic image that's talking about Jesus. Jesus is the tree of life. And so, what is the food that comes from Jesus on the cross that gives us life?

[22 : 39] Well, we should know it because we have it every week. We have it in the body and the blood of Jesus that we receive in the Eucharist. And so, the promise is this, that as we love Jesus, as we serve Jesus, Jesus will sustain us with his own body and his own blood.

The food that comes from the cross of life, the tree of life. He'll sustain us with that food until the day when we share in the great wedding feast.

This is one of the climactic moments in Revelation when this meal that God's people have shared for centuries is consummated. It reaches its ideal.

Everything that this points to is realized in the great wedding supper of the Lamb. And Jesus says, I'm going to sustain you at this table until you are welcomed and given a permanent place at that table.

That's pretty cool. And so, this is the promise that Jesus gives his people. And so, what we need to see as we're wanting to kind of draw all this together is this.

[23 : 45] The church, when we ask Jesus, what do you want from us? You know, why are we here? What should we be thinking? What kind of church should we be? And Jesus writes us a letter and says, here's what I desire from you.

Here's the kind of bride I want you to be. Here's what he's saying. I want you to be people who are devoted to truth and devoted to love. I want you to be devoted equally and passionately to both.

And I think we really need to hear that message, particularly now, because I think in our society, a lot of people think, a lot of churches think, that you have to choose what kind of church you're going to be.

As though truth and love are like a zero-sum game. Right? Either you are a church that is devoted to truth, and you're devoted to doctrine, and you're devoted to the word, and you're devoted to faithfulness, and you're devoted to the good works of the kingdom.

You're devoted to all these things at the expense of welcoming and including people, at the expense of loving those outside the church.

[24 : 46] You're sort of phobic of anyone outside of the immediate community. That you either have to be that kind of church, or you can be a church that is devoted to love, and inclusion, and welcoming everybody.

But you have to do it at the expense of biblical truth. And you're kind of soft. You're kind of soft on scripture. It's helpful sometimes. You're kind of soft on it, but really what we're about is loving and including and welcoming.

Right? And Jesus says, neither one will do. Neither one will do. He calls us to both. He says, I want you to be passionate about biblical truth. I want you to be passionate about your doctrine.

And doctrine matters. Paul says the main way that we become mature is by being mature in our doctrine. This is what he says in Ephesians. That this is a part of Christian growth and maturity.

And Jesus says, I want you to be passionate in your devotion to biblical truth. I want you to know the word. I want you to reject false teachers. I do not want you to compromise in your doctrine. I want you to live lives of faithfulness.

[25 : 47] Every word of scripture matters. And I want you to uphold all of it. So Jesus is saying that. But he also says, be passionate every bit as passionate in your devotion to loving and serving and caring for the people that God loves.

Love God. Love your neighbor. Love your neighbor. Go overboard in showing hospitality and compassion and mercy. And serve those God puts in front of you.

And you know what? That's going to be really messy. And it's going to be really complicated. And it's going to cause all kinds of uncomfortable conversations. But this is what Jesus calls his bride to be.

Right? Serve the people that God puts in front of you as though you were serving Christ himself. And you know, a lot of us hear this and we think, well, how is that possible? How can you do both? Don't you have to give in one category or the other?

And if we wonder whether this is possible, we have only to look to the cross. Because the cross is the place where the truth of God and the love and mercy of God come together as one.

[26 : 54] And so on the cross, you see Jesus is nailed to the wood. And the reason he is nailed to the wood is because truth matters.

It's because there is such a thing as sin. It's because there is such a thing as righteousness. It's because God does not overlook sin. It's because God does not let it roll off his shoulders.

It's because God doesn't just go lax with some people. That God's only standard for us is perfect righteousness. And he will not tolerate anything less.

Truth matters. And that's why Jesus is nailed to the wood. Because it matters. And God won't flex. And yet he's nailed to the wood with his arms wide open.

In a posture of embrace to the world. Arms spread wide to accept and embrace and welcome anyone who comes to him regardless of who they are.

[27 : 55] All are welcome. Come and receive. And that's the love of God. And so you see both on display on the cross of Christ.

And so every week as we eat the food that comes from the cross of Christ. The tree of life. The son of God. Every week that we come to this table we are invited to return to our first love.

And to fall in love with Jesus once again. I'm going to end with this collect that comes from the book of common prayer. That I think is appropriate. Let's pray.

Lord Jesus Christ. You stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross. That everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace.

So clothe us in your spirit that we reaching forth our hands in love. May bring those who do not know you. To the knowledge and love of you. For the honor of your name.

[28 : 55] Amen.