

Week 2

A series in REVELATION

22 June Monday

Read Revelation 2:1-7

This passage begins a section in which we encounter seven letters to the seven churches; letters that Jesus dictates, celebrating and challenging various things specific to each church. Here he speaks to the church in Ephesus, and he celebrates their hard work, endurance and perseverance. He also praises them for not tolerating evil. But he challenges them over having lost the love that they had at first. Some see this as love of one another, others as the early love they had for Christ. Either way, Jesus encourages them in three ways; firstly, to remember what they used to be like and do; secondly, to repent of having strayed from that; and thirdly, to resolve to start doing it again. Notice that whilst Jesus praises their endurance, he wants more for them (and us) than just a 'grit your teeth and bear it' kind of spirituality: it's about soft hearts as well as unwearied hands.

Can you think of times where following Jesus has felt more like faithful plodding than passionate pursuit? Faithful plodding is important, but if all we have is a dry resolve then there is more for us than that. **Can you remember when you first encountered Jesus? What might it look like to remember, repent, resolve?**

23 June Tuesday

Read Revelation 2:8-11

Today's letter is to the church in Smyrna, a wealthy and beautiful city forty miles north of Ephesus. Smyrna was a centre of Emperor worship, which under the emperor Domitian became compulsory for all on threat of death. Citizens would have to burn incense at the temple of Caesar and say, 'Caesar is Lord', once a year in order to receive a certificate proving they had. In this letter, Jesus sees the church's afflictions and their poverty. It may well be that this was the result of economic sanctions due to refusing to participate in Emperor worship. But Jesus encourages them, that in their poverty they are rich towards God and that those who endure will receive the 'crown of life'. He reminds them that behind their struggles are spiritual realities; Satan is at work in and through those who persecute them. But Jesus is also at work; he who is the first and last, who died and rose, and will certainly reward all those who endure.

How and why might seeing spiritual realities behind things encourage you when things are hard?

24 June Wednesday

Read Revelation 2:12-17

The church in Pergamum is the recipient of the letter in these verses.

Pergamum lay sixty-five miles north and inland from Smyrna and was also a wealthy city with established cults around several gods, including the emperor cult. The city had been given by Rome the rare power of capital punishment, symbolised by the image of a sword. It is interesting that, living under this image of imperial power, they are given an image of Jesus, their true King, who also has a sword! Notably though, the sword is not in his hand but his mouth! It is with this sword – truth – that Jesus will come and correct the deceptive teachings that have made their way into the church. Here, not only do they face trouble from the society around them, but they also face trouble from within - deceptive teaching. It is the word of Christ that helps bring truth to bear on error.

Can you recall times when you have experienced the truth of the gospel at work against lies that you may have believed?

25 June Thursday

Read Revelation 2:18-29

Thyatira was forty-five miles east of Pergamon. The city was known for commerce in various things, but notably excellent bronze work. It's interesting that Jesus' feet are described as made of burnished bronze (certainly referencing a vision in Daniel 10), perhaps symbolising strength (bronze was one of the strongest / longest lasting materials they had) and purity (it was also often used in sacred spaces). In addition to Jesus' feet, his eyes are described here like blazing fire, penetrating to the heart of things. He 'sees' and commends their deeds, faith, perseverance and service. But he also 'sees' subtle but significant error. The name 'Jezebel' has a strong Old Testament precedent; she was King Ahab's wife who led Ahab and the people of Israel into idolatry. It was a disastrous moment for the people of God. Jesus 'see's' something of that dynamic at play in subtle, deceptive ways that threatens to lead this church astray, from within.

Two things to note. First, the theme of judgement is a thread throughout the Bible and we find it here in revelation too: Jesus will not sweep evil under the carpet, he cares about justice, right and wrong and will not abide evil forever or turn a blind eye to it. For those struggling under persecution and those struggling to 'stay true' when others don't, this thread would be a deep encouragement, 'God will sort things out: just stand firm'. But secondly, repentance remains on offer (see verse 21) and therefore the 'mercy of God' is never out of sight.

(We must remember, in passages like this, that the images and linguistic style are all part of the apocalyptic genre; they are not meant to be taken literally and so we mustn't push them too far.)

We should be cautioned about being carried away by 'new ideas', by being 'blown off course' with subtle but significant shifts in belief or practice. We should also be deeply encouraged by Jesus who is both just and merciful, whose penetrating sight allows him to judge rightly, and who is able to keep us from straying. He is the 'morning star' given to those who stay faithful come what may: our great reward!

Perhaps you could pray with the psalmist today, Psalm 139:23-24:

'Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.'

26 June Friday

Read Exodus 3:1-15

Take some time to notice the Old Testament backdrop to images and phrases that John uses in the book of Revelation. For those to whom it was originally written these things would have been immediately clear; the images would have functioned like hyperlinks opening up a whole world of meaning. It reminds us, like John Bodily mentioned in talk 1, of the important principle: whilst this book is for us, it was not originally written to us. As you read today, notice the internal links and referencing within the Bible itself.