

Revelation 2-3, hear what the Spirit says to the churches

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[0 : 00] Tonight's reading is from Revelation. It's actually chapter 2, Revelation chapter 2. Martin's going to be preaching on chapter 2 and 3 this evening, but our reading will just be Revelation chapter 2, verses 1 to 17.

That's on page 1, 2, 3, 4 of the Church Bible. Page 1, 2, 3, 4. Revelation chapter 2, verses 1 to 17.

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 people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not and have found them false.

You have persevered and have endured hardship for my name, and you have not grown weary. Yet I hold this against you.

[1 : 05] You have forsaken the love you had at first. Consider how far 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. Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God. To the angel of the church in Smyrna writes, These are the words of him who is the first and the last, who died and came to life again.

I know your afflictions and your poverty, yet you are rich. I know about the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor's crown.

[2 : 18] Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who is victorious will not be hurt at all by the second death. To the angel of the church in Pergamum writes, These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword.

I know where you live, where Satan has his throne, yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, not even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city where Satan lives.

Nevertheless, I have a few things against you. There are some among you who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin, so that they ate food sacrificed to idols and committed sexual immorality.

Likewise, you have also those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Repent, therefore, otherwise I will soon come to you, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.

Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give that person a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it.

[3 : 38] This is the word of God. Thanks so much for reading that for us, Robbie. Good evening, everyone. And if you'd find it helpful, there's an outline in the notice sheet for where we're going tonight.

It has a lot of words on it in all kinds of different places, but I think it will get clearer. So you might find that helpful. Having Revelation 2 and 3 open will be brilliant.

We've already prayed, but there is this repeated refrain in the seven letters here, in chapters 2 and 3, about how whoever has ears to hear, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

So this is our opportunity for an encounter with the Holy Spirit himself as he speaks tonight to his church. Let's ask that we would listen rightly.

Holy Spirit, living breath of God, we praise you for your word to us, your word that gives life as you point us to the Lord Jesus Christ. So would you give us the ears to hear and take to heart these words.

[4 : 47] And Heavenly Father, may we be blessed as you promise as we take to heart your word in the Scriptures. For we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. So I started watching the traitors, right?

Not just because of Emily Brown. So if you've not seen it, it's this TV show and there's all these guys in the house and every day they vote someone off at the round table because they think they're a traitor.

And are any of you behind? I'm just working out if... Yeah, okay. No spoilers. So there's this guy, right? Male or female. And they get voted off on the round table one day and they were completely blindsided.

So in advance, you've got them in the... Is it a diary room? Is it a diary room? It's like the diary room on Big Brother. They keep going in this room talking and this person said, yeah, yeah, I don't think anyone really suspects me of being a traitor.

I'm going in there tonight. I'm doing fine. And then basically, at the round table, everyone turned on them and they were just completely like rabbit in the headlights. They didn't know what to say.

[5 : 49] They were just... And afterwards, they were like, I just had no idea anyone suspected me. If only I'd known I'd have got a defense ready. And they've gone. So if you know what's going to happen in the future, you know, you can prepare.

Sometimes you live in the present because you know what's going to happen in the future. And that happens not just on the traitors, but in real life. We've seen pictures in our news of Los Angeles at the moment on fire and Paris Hilton and Mel Gibson and thousands of people we don't know have had their homes tragically toasted, burnt to the ground, completely destroyed.

And they could well be asking, couldn't they, if only we'd known two or three years ago that our home here in Los Angeles would be burnt to the ground with everything in it.

How differently they might have planned their lives over the last few years, but they've gone. If you know the future, it changes how you live in the present. And that is a key principle for this book, the book of Revelation.

We looked last week at chapter one of the book where we saw that it is an uncovering, that's what Revelation means, is an unveiling of spiritual realities for now and the future.

[7 : 01] And as you get on in the book, the ones about the future become more prominent so that as we find out more about what the future's going to be like, we change our behavior in the present.

And tonight we're looking at Revelation chapters two and three together where we find the letters to seven individual churches in Asia, which is now modern day Turkey.

And we looked at these in a series early last year. So we're just gonna do a high level view of them in one talk tonight to get back up to speed so that we can look, we can move on into Revelation to the bits we haven't done yet.

And although there's seven here that are real churches in real situations, the number seven is symbolic for completeness or wholeness. So these churches are representative of the kind of issues that any church could have in the time between Jesus' resurrection and his return.

These are things to expect in church life in every age. And tonight, the reason we're focusing again on chapters two and three is because we get the application for the whole book of Revelation.

[8 : 11] In the rest of the book, Jesus is gonna reveal these hidden realities for us about the future that should move us to follow the application in these seven letters.

And for those of you who know your Bibles well, we're used to that kind of idea, aren't we? That you, in a book of the Bible, sometimes you have the doctrin-y bits and then you have the livi-out-y bits.

So we did Colossians last term in the mornings and the first two chapters of Colossians, doctrin-y bits, chapters three and four, livi-out-y bits.

Romans is the same. Chapters one to 11, doctrin-y bits. Chapters 12 to 16, livi-out-y bits. And in Revelation, it's sort of the other way around. John puts the application, well, Jesus, through John, puts the application at the beginning, the livi-out-y bit, and then we get the doctrine that supports that and upholds it.

So we'll come back to these letters and refer to the application in them. And this is where the words come on the outline there. They're very carefully arranged, these letters, to the seven churches.

[9 : 15] You can see that on the sheets. The first and the last letters, Ephesus and Laodicea, you see how we've aligned them together on the sheet on the left because they are similar, that churches facing similar issues, they get similar letters.

And then you move in one to letters two and six, the churches in Smyrna and Philadelphia, and they have great similarities between them.

And then churches three, four, and five, in the middle, they are all connected in some way. So it's like a sandwich, you see that, and that will help us navigate through in one go.

And each letter follows a very deliberate pattern. At the beginning of the letters, each time, it starts with the phrase, these are the words of him who.

And then there is something we're told about Jesus as he addresses the church. In chapter one, which we looked at last week, the apostle John records for us this breathtaking revelation he had of Jesus as he is right now.

[10 : 20] John was in exile on the island of Patmos, and he heard the command to start writing this letter, and he turned to see who was speaking to him, and he saw a vision of the glorious risen Jesus that literally struck him down.

He was floored by it. And it's that Jesus who is now speaking these words. So let's just see an example of that carried through into the letters. If you look at verse 18, it's the beginning of the letter to the church in Thyatira.

And it says, these are the words of the Son of God, that's God's great forever King, whose eyes are like blazing fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze.

So he is a being, a risen man of blazing purity. And glory is just radiating out from him.

And then look at verse one of chapter two, just up there, to the angel of the church in Ephesus write, these are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand.

[11 : 26] Well, we're already told in Revelation the seven stars are the angels who are guardians of the church. So it's a picture of that Jesus doesn't just have the world in his hands, he's got the spiritual universe in his hands.

This is how ascended he is, how all conquering he is. And he is among his people, so he's present with us. Look on at verse one, and it says, chapter two, verse one, he who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands.

And the lampstands are the churches. So he is present with us, the risen Lord Jesus, by his spirit. And so the question each introduction leaves us asking is, does Jesus have the right for you to listen to him?

Does this Jesus have the right to be listened to by you? Does he have that right? You bet.

You bet he has that right. Hang on his every word. And then the next thing that he does is he says, I know, each time, I know. Look at verse two of chapter two.

[12 : 40] I know your deeds, your hard work, and your perseverance. Or look at verse 13. I know where you live, where Satan has his throne.

Chapter two, verse 19. I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance. In every church, with every letter, Jesus wants his people to know.

He knows what is going on. And that can be a word of great comfort when you're going through tremendous difficulty. And that can be true for any of us personally, that if you're carrying burdens in your life, that you feel are very heavy.

You can hear Jesus sees you, holding on to him in daily dependence, keeping on, trying to trust him, trying to be godly. And he says, I know.

I know what you're going through. But when we hear that Jesus knows, it can equally be a word of challenge if we are someone just keeping up appearances in the Christian life.

[13 : 49] Jesus knows that too. If we're trying to hide something from others, we're to remember that we can't hide it from him. He knows. Then the next step in each of the seven letters is that Jesus gives some assessment of how things are going.

In five of the seven letters, he has things to commend in them. In five of the seven letters, he also has these five daunting words. He says, I have this against you. And then he gives some detail of something that they need correcting in.

And after that, he gives a call to repent. If there's nothing negative to say, he gives them a call to endure, to keep on being faithful. But he also calls those he's correcting to repent, to turn back.

And then he gives a promise at the end of each letter to the one who is victorious, he says. And then he gives a promise about the future to make the challenge in the present worth overcoming because of the future.

And those promises draw pictures from the last few chapters of Revelation. that we're going to come to in the coming weeks. So in the letters tonight, we get three challenges that the Spirit says that we should expect in the Christian life and in the life of the church.

[15 : 13] Our first one, they're on the sheet there. You might be orthodox and active, but watch you don't lose your love for Jesus. Now we get that kind of warning in the first church's letter and the seventh church's letter.

So we'll just look at the one to the church in Ephesus at the start of chapter two. If you just look there with me at verse two, Jesus says, through his Spirit, I know your deeds, your hard work, and your perseverance.

I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles, but are not, and have found them false. So notice there already, the people who are wicked people who are to be not tolerated, who are to be avoided, are not people out there in the world, as though Christians are to kind of retreat from the world into some sort of holy huddle.

No, it's when people who are not authentic followers of Jesus, not faithful to him, are in the church. They are the people being described here as wicked people, false teachers.

They claim to be apostles, but they're not really. Jesus has found them to be false, and so they're not to be tolerated. In verse six, he mentions again that they have guarded against false teaching.

[16 : 39] So this is what I mean in the heading there by being an orthodox church. I don't mean like a Greek orthodox church or a Russian orthodox church. The word orthodox is just about being, believing the right stuff, being faithful to what churches should believe, what Christians should believe, what the New Testament tells us we should believe.

And this church is doing exactly that. They are orthodox. They are right in line with what you're meant to believe. And he goes on, verse three, it gets better. Verse three, he says, you have persevered and have endured hardships for my name and have not grown weary.

So what are we learning about the church in Ephesus? This is a resolutely evangelical church. They hold to the Bible. And it is a very active church.

They've got lots going for them. And that's what makes verse four so surprising. Look at verse four. Yet I hold this against you. You have forsaken the love you had at first.

So you can be a church that's taken a stand for the Bible with lots of activities that other people in other church would hear what's going on in your church and say, oh, I wish we did that.

[17 : 57] I wish we did a bit more of that. That sounds great. I wish I was at your church. And what Jesus sees is hearts that aren't loving him. And that is so much more important to him than a busy Christian life.

So look at verse five. He says, consider how far 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.

That is, the spiritual life of the church will be gone. They might still have meetings. They might still come together. Might have a notice board outside with service times on, but it wouldn't be a living church anymore.

Jesus would have pulled away the light from that place. So what are we seeing here? We're seeing that Jesus is concerned about the hearts of his people.

And so we can reflect on that as we get going in the new year here, 2025, as a church where we have taken a stand in our church life to demonstrate that we are committed to the Bible.

[19 : 05] That's involved stepping away from a historic denomination. And there's other ways that we take, we structure our life together in a way that upholds that we believe the Bible.

And we're a very busy church. We're an active church. We've got all kinds of things going on in our church life. Lots of us are very busy serving. It's really encouraging. And just to see the danger here that we could be busy and forget why we're doing it all.

Our focus could become just getting done the good things that we know we should do. And our focus could also be alongside that getting the Bible right.

Make sure we get the Bible right. And yet miss this essential call of Jesus to live in his love. To see that he loves us with a love that meant he endured the agony, the anguish of the Garden of Gethsemane because he knew there was no other way to make us his people.

And he calls us to see that love that he shows us and love him in return. So that whatever we do with our lives or whatever we don't do, we are immensely thankful to him.

[20 : 24] We love him. We're joyful about him. We make much of him. And so maybe a question we could ask a friend tonight after the sermon would be just asking them, how is your heart?

How have you thought, what would help you guard your heart in the coming days to keep yourself close to Jesus, to keep living in his love, knowing him better, loving him more?

What could help you do that? That's our first thing to expect. You might be orthodox and active, but watch you don't lose your love for Jesus. Secondly, you might be faithful and blessed and find that the world hates you.

So this is true of the second church, the church in Smyrna, and the sixth church, the church in Philadelphia, across the page. If you have a look, we'll look together at the Smurfs, chapter 2, verse 8.

Verse 8, he says, these are the words of him who is the first and the last who died and came to life again. I know your afflictions and your poverty, yet you are rich.

[21 : 38] Now just imagine how encouraging that must have been to receive as a letter in Smyrna. This is a church that evidently, materially, is deprived. And it's quite possible that the reason they don't have very much is because it's been taken from them because they are Christians.

I think of Bella from Indonesia who was with us for three years. She left a year or two ago, Glasgow. She came to Glasgow for a PhD. She talked about how in parts of Indonesia where Islamic rule is very strong, if you're a Christian, it's very hard to get your kids educated.

So they end up in this kind of underclass, deprived of the access to social structures that they would have if they converted to Islam.

Just an example of where you can be in a situation where because of your Christian faith, you end up materially poor. Happens all around the world. People can't get jobs in places because they're Christians.

Jesus knows when his people go through poverty like that for him. And he says, as the one who will inherit the whole of heaven and earth, you are rich.

[23 : 00] You are rich. Why? Because you're with him. He stands with you and he is the heir of all of this and he'll share that inheritance with you in his new creation.

But he needs them to know that things are going to get worse. If you look at verse 10. Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you and you will suffer persecution for 10 days.

Be faithful even to the point of death and I will give you life as your victor's crown. And there are places all around the world today where people know that if you were to go public on being a follower of Jesus, the cost would be immense.

I think of a lady I met in Blackburn down in Lancashire who in the community she lived in, when her family found a Bible in her home and she left the house, she knew she'd never see her family again.

And if you convert in lots of countries to Christianity, in Somalia, in Yemen, in Libya, in Sudan, in parts of northern Nigeria, it would be immensely costly.

[24 : 18] And in many cases they keep going. They turn to Christ courageously. I was reading this week on Open Doors the website about Pastor Laxman from India who had his church burnt down by extremists.

He was put in prison. Forty members of his church when the church building was burnt down and the pastor was put in prison, forty of them kept on meeting in secret just to pray together.

And now Pastor Laxman has been released and he pastors six house churches. They don't have a building anymore. There's far more of them than there were when they had a building. Now for lots of us, looking to live a godly life, looking to be known as a Christian, bears nothing like that cost.

But we can still recognize that in our times for lots of us, being persecuted for being a Christian is still a miserable experience for anyone, whatever that looks like, where it involves social exclusion or prejudice.

Some of us in our church are in families where it's caused deep resentment that you're a Christian or deep conflict. Some of you experienced that over Christmas, being with wider family, where it causes tension that you are committed to Jesus.

[25 : 36] Well, whatever it looks like, it helps us to remember when we look at these letters that Jesus does say that we should expect this. Even when it's very unjust, we are not to be kind of destabilized and think, I just had no idea that it would be like this.

Jesus says, if the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me too. And I think this is especially sobering for those of us who are still holding on to the hope that I reckon I can get both.

I can be a wholehearted Christian and my non-Christian mates will still think I'm a legend. That we might think I'm still a nice enough person to be right with God and also to be respected and popular with everyone.

When Jesus says, we can expect some rough treatment from the world. But crucially, remember, what he also is saying is, don't be afraid of it.

You see that again? He says, do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer in verse 10. Be faithful even to the point of death and I will give you life as your victor's crown.

[26 : 56] He's saying, don't be afraid. They can't take it from you. I will give you life. I'm the one who rose never to die again and I will give you that life forever. That's our second challenge.

Then our third challenge, we go from the persecuted church to the tolerant church. Our third point, you might be getting lots right but watch you don't tolerate false teaching.

Now this rubs a bit, doesn't it? Because tolerance is a virtue today. Who could be against tolerance? And in one sense, the church should be the most tolerant community on planet earth.

We would be socially tolerant of cultural differences that other people would not be able to manage. We should be a community tolerant of ethnic diversity, tolerant of all different kinds of characters and personalities, tolerant of those who are very poor, tolerant of those who are very rich.

But sometimes, we think, it's a virtue to be tolerant of all kinds of different beliefs under the umbrella term Christian.

[28 : 10] people sometimes say that's a virtue of denominations, particular ones. Whether it's, you know, the Scottish Episcopal Church or the Church of Scotland or the Church of England, people might say, oh well, the great thing about it is it's a broad church.

Whatever you believe, you can find your place in this big tent. And we speak of that as a good thing. Well, what does Jesus say? Let's have a look at these churches.

The church in Pergamum, verse 13, look how well it starts. They are faithful under persecution. Verse 13, I know where you live, where Satan has his throne.

Okay, so it's not a good description of Pergamum. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, not even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness who was put to death in your city where Satan lives.

So this is brilliant, isn't it? These guys have been willing to be known as Christians in a place where evidently someone was martyred. But then, verse 14, nevertheless, I have a few things against you.

[29 : 21] There are some among you who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin so that they ate food sacrificed to idols and committed sexual immorality. Likewise, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.

Repent, therefore. I don't know what the teaching of the Nicolaitans was, but Balaam was this Old Testament figure who, a foreign nation tried to get God to curse the Israelites.

So Balaam was this kind of prophet and Balak, the king of the foreign nation, tried to get Balaam to get God to curse his people. God wouldn't curse his people.

So then he had a different idea, Balaam. He said, just get the people not to be faithful to God. God's not going to abandon his people. You'll get them to abandon their God. And so he, what they did was they enticed the Israelite men away through sexual immorality with women who had different beliefs and through idolatry.

And Jesus has the same kind of problem described in a similar way with the next church, the church in Thyatira. So that's just further down. But essentially what's happening is he's using picture language here from the Old Testament to say there are false teachers leading the people of God to be unfaithful.

[30 : 44] And the church is being called here, charged here, be intolerant of false teaching. And what we see here is that often in church life, one thing that goes with false teaching that encourages people not to need to be faithful, is sexual immorality.

In the original languages that term is the Bible word pornea, that we get our word pornography from. And it just refers to any sexual behavior outside of God's good design for sex in faithful, committed Christian marriage.

And when we think about false teaching in the church today, it is a similar story. That one place people most acutely feel the pressure to drift from the teaching of the Bible is in the area of Jesus teaching about God's design for sex and sexual purity.

And we hate division, don't we? We hate it. We especially hate division when the church is a small minority presence and when the world is giving the church a kicking.

In those moments in church history, what the church really wants to do is just kind of put every Christian, if anything, anyone believes that's vaguely Christian, let's just stand together, let's just be shoulder to shoulder.

[32 : 09] But a healthy church we're seeing here, even when it's being persecuted, a healthy church has a healthy intolerance of false teaching.

An intolerance that is firm and resolute. Now that doesn't mean that there's a rage about it. We're not to be ungodly. Striking in the letter 2 Timothy, Paul writes to a younger minister, Timothy, and says, those who oppose you in church, you must gently instruct in the hope that they will repent.

So our godliness matters in confrontation like that. But we are not to tolerate it. And this challenge has real implications. It means there are times when very reluctantly we have to break fellowship with churches because what they believe and teach is not faithful to the New Testament.

And there are times we have to very reluctantly say that someone would not be appropriate to do word ministry in our church, whether it's preaching or it's growth group leading or it's youth group leading, because the gospel they teach is not faithful to the gospel of the New Testament.

and whenever you act like that you feel it doesn't feel nice and people accuse you of being narrow-minded and judgmental and harsh but it's an expression of a love for Jesus and his word that we would be intolerant of teaching that leads people away from him.

[33 : 39] So three challenges tonight to expect in church life. Dangers from being a loveless church, the trials of being a persecuted church, the risks from being a tolerant church and we could each ask which is the threat that I most need to be aware of in this season of my Christian life at St. Silas?

I wonder if for a good number of us it would be that first danger that we don't keep nurturing a living love for Jesus. We don't keep kindling the flame in our hearts for him of affection.

so we keep affirming all the right things and we even keep being very active in our Christian lives. We keep busy but our hearts drift.

We become what one preacher memorably used to call a chug-along Christian. How are you? I'm just chugging along. Just chugging along. And Jesus invites us tonight don't settle for it.

Set your mind on him. Set your heart on him. Why? Because when you know what's going to happen in the future it changes how you live today. And Jesus promises in letter after letter he's coming.

[34 : 52] And he's not coming to destroy our homes if we're faithful to him like a Los Angeles fire. He's coming to give us a home to take us home to be with him to make his home with us as he makes all things new.

And if we keep loving him if we're faithful to his truth if we stand firm against opposition there is a wonderful future ahead. Just look at chapter 3 verse 12.

He says the one who is victorious I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will they leave it. I will write on them the name of my God and the name of the city of my God the new Jerusalem which is coming down out of heaven from my God and I will also write on them my new name.

Amen. So we're going to sing together in response to God's word. Andrew and the band will come up and lead us. Just as they're coming up just take a moment to reflect on what God's been saying to us an opportunity to think to pray and then in a moment's time Andrew will invite us to stand.