

THE LOVER OF OUR SOULS

(Fourth in a series of sermons on “The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ”)

And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write:

The Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet are like burnished bronze, says this:

‘I know your deeds, and your love and faith and service and perseverance, and that your deeds of late are greater than at first. But I have this against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and she teaches and leads My bond-servants astray so that they commit acts of immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols. I gave her time to repent, and she does not want to repent of her immorality. Behold, I will throw her on a bed of sickness, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of her deeds. And I will kill her children with pestilence, and all the churches will know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts; and I will give to each one of you according to your deeds. But I say to you, the rest who are in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not known the deep things of Satan, as they call them—I place no other burden on you. Nevertheless what you have, hold fast until I come. He who overcomes, and he who keeps My deeds until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations; and he shall rule them with a rod of iron, as the vessels of the potter are broken to pieces, as I also have received authority from My Father; and I will give him the morning star. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’
(Revelation 2:19-28, NASV)

Hard words. Jesus speaks hard words because so much is at stake. I am not going to give a full exposition of this fourth message, the message to the church at Thyatira, as I have done that in my book *Discipleship on the Edge*. Instead, I’m going to do what I did last Sunday, and stand back from any single one of the seven messages, and look at the whole package of the seven messages. In each of the seven messages, Jesus is making a statement. But He is also making a statement in the way He has packaged all of the seven messages, in the way He has put the whole package together.

Let us briefly review the context. The year is 96 AD. The apostle John, the human author of the last book of the Bible, is on the prison island of Patmos, just off the coast of Asia Minor, in what is modern day Turkey. He was sent there by the Roman government because he would not buy into the spirituality of the Roman Empire. Every Empire has an inner spirituality – every nation and every movement has an inner spirituality, and John would not buy into this inner spirituality of Rome. The emperor at the time was a man named Domitian, who had ordered all citizens worship him as *Domine et Deus*, as Lord and God. He did not care if people believed in other lords and other gods as long as they would worship him as Lord and God. All one had to do was go to one of the temples dedicated to the worship of the Emperor, take a pinch of incense, throw it on the altar, and say the words that unified the Empire – “*Kaisar Kurios*”, “Caesar is Lord”.

Now John could not abide this order. Caesar is Caesar. Caesar has a place in human society. But Caesar is not Lord. There is one Lord, and His name is Jesus. So John is sent off to the island of Patmos, where he tells us, one Sunday morning on the Lord's Day, he was in the Spirit. That is he was worshipping in cooperation with the moving of the Holy Spirit. John hears a voice behind him, he turns to see the voice, and in that moment, Jesus responds by giving him an apocalypse. Jesus pulls back the curtain and lets John see what is ordinarily there. He lets John see the greatest unseen reality of the present. Jesus lets John see Jesus. And then He puts on a "live drama", a "multi-media show", as Paul Spilsbury of Calgary puts it. And as I suggested a few weeks ago, there are five acts in this drama, built around the word "open".

We are in Act One. Jesus is standing in the middle of seven golden lampstands. Jesus identifies the lampstands as the seven churches, and from the middle, Jesus speaks to each of the churches. To Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamum, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea.

Last week we took careful note of the form of communication of each of these messages. They are not letters, which is why I am not calling them letters. The whole last book of the bible is a letter, but these messages are not letters – they're not in letter form. I tried to show you last Sunday that each of these messages is a new and unique form of communication. They are a mix of two other forms of communication, a mix of the so-called imperial edicts of the Gentile world, and the prophetic oracle of the Jewish world. I believe that Jesus himself crafted this new form of communication, this new genre, to make a statement about who he is. The genre itself is making a statement. The genre itself is saying that Jesus is Emperor – hence, imperial edict, and that Jesus is God – hence, prophetic oracle. The risen Jesus is the true Emperor and the true God; the Emperor of Emperors and the God of gods.

Standing back from any one of these messages, I want us to now take careful note of how Jesus has packaged all seven of the messages. The package itself is making a statement; the medium is the message. Jesus has crafted this new genre of each of the messages to say something, and he has crafted the whole package to say something.

Westerners, and people under western influence, tend to think, read, and speak, in a linear way – in a straight-line.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.

The point of the whole sentence, paragraph, or document is found in the last word, clause, or statement. The major point comes at the end.

Middle-Easterners of the first century, and of the twenty-first century, tend to think in parallel ways, and in particular in inverted parallelism, or what is called a chiasm (a side-ways V).

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.

The point of the sentence, paragraph, or document, is found in the middle, at the pivot, not at the end. As I said a few weeks ago, much of Scripture is put together this way. This is why, when you're listening to leaders from the Middle-East speak, say at the United Nations, you must listen very carefully. At the beginning there will be all these things that are said, and at the end there will be all these things that are said, but the point they're making will be in the middle. I think Western press misses this much of the time, and I hope that Western leaders have somebody in their counsel who understands how the Middle-Eastern mind works.

I think that the seven messages to the seven churches are packaged in an exquisite chiasm. The clearest indication of this is an audio cue at the end of each message. Remember, the last book of the Bible was intended to be read out loud: "Blessed is the one who reads, and those who hear the words of the prophecy" (Revelation 1:3). It was read out loud at a gathering. Yes, we can benefit from reading the book with our eyes, but we especially see the message when we hear it read out loud.

At the Entrepreneurial Leaders Conference held at the Wall Centre this past Thursday, Jeremy Fry told me about the leading audio company in the world, Bower & Wilkins from the UK has a slogan that says "listen and you will see." Or, as Matt Day's Christmas CD asks, "Do you see what I hear?"

Now, each of the messages ends with the exhortation to hear: "Hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches." And with promises to those who overcome, to those who remain loyal to Jesus under the pressure of compromise.

In the first message, the order is "hear", and then "to those who overcome."
 In the second message, the order is "hear", and then "to those who overcome."
 In the third message, the order is "hear", and then "to those who overcome."
 But in the fourth message, the order is "to those who overcome" and "hear."
 And it continues in the same way in the fifth, sixth, and seventh messages.

People listening to this document read aloud would have gotten used to the cadence – "hear, overcome", "hear, overcome", "hear, overcome", and then they would have heard "overcome, hear". And as Middle-Easterners, they would have heard that and said "Ah ha! Something is changing."

Now when I heard this (and when I saw this), I began to look at the whole package of Revelation 2-3, the seven messages, very differently. On one of my days off, I photocopied each of the seven messages, and then laid them out on the living room floor. And I saw! And I heard! And it all became so clear to me!

Being suspicious that there was a chiasm, I zeroed in on the fourth message, the message to Thyatira. As we've already noticed, in the fourth message, the ending element changes from hear/overcome to overcome/hear. Now, many people in their commentaries will say that John changes this to break the monotony. I don't think so – it's changed because it gives an audio signal that something is changing.

Notice that only in this fourth message does Jesus define what overcome means: “The one who overcomes, and keeps My deeds until the end.” (2:26). Overcoming is about persevering to the end, remaining loyal to the person and mission of Jesus when all around is the pressure to compromise.

I noticed that the fourth message is the longest of all of them, and wondered if this wasn’t a cue as to how important it is for the whole of chapters 2-3.

In the fourth message, Jesus says, “all the churches will know that I am the one who searches minds and hearts” (2:23). All the churches. Yes, in each of the other messages, Jesus says “listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches”. But only here does He speak of “all”, and I wonder if this is because this message is the critical one, the one that helps interpret the others.

I notice that only in this fourth message does Jesus use the sacred Divine Self-designation, “I Am”. Revelation 2:23, literally reads, “I Am, the One Who searches...”. It is the exact same construction we find in the Gospel of John, where Jesus speaks his famous “I Am” sayings (John 4:26, 8:24, 8, 58; 13:19; 18:5-6). Now why speak in this very high, exalted way in this particular message? Is this a cue?

Jesus introduces himself in the fourth message as “The Son of God”. In the initial apocalypse in chapter 1, he’s introduced as “one like a Son of Man”. In the fourth message, Jesus for the first time uses a term or title which is not found in the initial revelation, and I wonder if this is not some sort of audio cue that something is changing.

Let’s look at the rest of the package. Look at messages two and six – Smyrna and Philadelphia. In neither message (two nor six) is there the phrase, “I have this against you.” In the other five messages, Jesus says, “I have this against you.” Nothing against Smyrna or Philadelphia. Oh, to be the church against which Jesus has no complaint!

Both messages refer to the “synagogue of Satan” – I’m not sure what that means, but it’s only in these two messages that he uses that phrase. Not in the other five.

In both messages, he uses the verb “test”. Smyrna, “that you may be tested”; Philadelphia, “I will keep you from the hour of testing.” The verb “test” is not found in the other five messages.

In both messages, Jesus speaks of a crown. Smyrna, “I will give you the crown of life”; Philadelphia, “In order that no one take your crown.”

In both messages, Jesus has the phrase “those who say they are Jews, but are not”. He does not say this in any of the other five messages.

And in both messages, the disciples think they are suffering some kind of inadequacy. Smyrna thinks it is poor; Philadelphia thinks it is powerless. But Jesus thinks otherwise. He says to Smyrna, “you are rich”; and to Philadelphia, your enemies “will bow down to you.”

Now, focus on messages three and five – Pergamum and Sardis.

In both messages three and five, Jesus says, “But you have some who.” He does not speak that way in the other messages.

In both of these messages, the promise involves something white: Pergamum, “walk with Me in white”; Sardis, “white garments”. Nothing white appears in the other five messages.

In both messages, the promised blessing involves the word “name”. Pergamum, “a new name written on the stone...”; Sardis, “I will not erase his or her name from the book of life.”

In both messages, Jesus speaks of his “coming” for judgment, or at least, for severe correction. Pergamum, “or else I am coming to you quickly”; Sardis, “I will come like a thief”. Yes, in message six, to Philadelphia, Jesus says “I am coming quickly”, but there he is speaking in a positive way, whereas to Pergamum and Sardis, it is in a warning way.

Do you see a pattern emerging?

Focus now on messages one and seven, to Ephesus and Laodicea. Are they in parallel? Look! (Echoing John’s major exhortation).

In both messages one and seven, Jesus speaks of love. Ephesus, “You have lost your first love”; Laodicea “those whom I love I reprove and discipline.”

In both messages, Jesus speaks of eating. Ephesus, “I will grant to eat from the tree of life”; Laodicea, “I will come into him or her, and dine with him or her.” Yes, the word “eat” is found in other messages, but there it speaks of eating food sacrificed to idols. These are the only two messages that speak of eating in the presence of God, and eating the things of God.

In both messages, people think very highly of the churches. Ephesus is the model church that the rest of the churches look up to. Laodicea is “rich, wealthy, and has need of nothing”. But in both cases, Jesus sees through the external impression to a serious flaw at the core of the congregation’s life.

The warnings in messages one and seven are the most severe of the seven. Ephesus, I will “remove your lampstand from its place”, Laodicea I will “spit you out of My mouth”. Horrible! The judgments come down to the same thing – no longer being in relationship with Jesus Christ. It’s awful.

But the promises in messages one and seven are the most glorious. Ephesus, that they would have access to “the tree of life”, Laodicea, “I will come in” and “grant to sit down with Me on My throne.” The promise is this deep, personal intimacy and sharing in Jesus’ governance of the universe. There is only one blessing greater than the blessings of messages one and seven, and it is found in the fourth message: “I will give you the morning star,” which turns out to be Jesus Himself. This is just how it should be. If the fourth message is the pivot of the chiasm, its blessing should exceed the great blessings of the two ends of the chiasm.

Isn’t this amazing? It is so intricately and artistically crafted, and it is all intending to make a statement. The package itself is put together in a way that makes a statement. What the package of the seven messages is saying will be heard and seen in the interplay between the first, seventh, and fourth messages. The message of the whole package is found in message 1, 7, and 4, with the fourth being the key that interprets the first and the seventh.

The first message, to the church in Ephesus. Ephesus is the most “successful” of the seven churches. Founded by the apostle Paul, pastored by Timothy, his right-hand lieutenant, and then later pastored by the apostle John. The church in Ephesus had become the epicentre of Christianity, which had moved from Jerusalem to Antioch, and then to Ephesus. What a church! Founded by Paul, pastored by Timothy and John, and home to Mary, the mother of our Lord, whom John had brought with him to Ephesus in fulfillment of the promise he made to Jesus to take care of His mother. This is the church that all the other churches looked up to – orthodox to the hilt, engaged in mission, and willing to endure hard times.

But, the One who stands in the middle of the church sees through everything to a fundamental flaw. “This I have against you,” He says. “You have lost your first love”. Or as other versions render it, “You have forsaken your first love,” or “You have abandoned your first love.” For all the good things going on in the life of that church, they were no longer “in love” with Jesus. They were not passionate about Jesus the way they once were.

It’s not hard to imagine, is it? Caught up in programs, caught up in crossing t’s and dotting i’s, caught up in being “First Church” Ephesus, they fell out of love. Thousands of congregations today are losing passionate love for Jesus, and are preoccupied with issues that would never have won them to Jesus in the first place. Why? Why did such a vibrant congregation lose its passion for Jesus?

The seventh message – to the church in Laodicea. Laodicea is the wealthiest of the seven churches. It’s the best educated of the seven churches, the best dressed of the seven churches, the most physically fit of the seven churches. And it is unashamedly proud of it. Their motto was “I am rich, I have become wealthy, and I have need of nothing” (Revelation 3:17). But the One who stands in the middle is not impressed. He sees through the façade to a fundamental flaw. “You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked.” Oh, how that stung! Laodicea was known for its banks – all solvent. And for its garment businesses – people were well dressed. And it was known for its medical school, which had developed an eye salve to arrest blindness. “You are wretched, poor, blind, and naked.”

And, “you are lukewarm.” That was the issue. Lukewarm – neither hot nor cold. You may know that Laodicea had no natural water sources. Water had to be piped in, “aqueducted” in from neighbouring cities, particularly, Hieropolis and Colossae. Hieropolis had hot, healing water; Colossae had cool refreshing water. By the time either kind of water reached Laodicea, it was putrid, and I’m told that people who drank the water straight out of the aqueduct would have to vomit it up.

Jesus wants his church to flow with hot, healing, water, and with cool, refreshing water. The church in Laodicea, in its arrogant self-sufficiency had become putridly lukewarm, neither bringing healing for the spiritually sick, nor refreshment for the spiritually weary.

Not hard to imagine, is it? Thousands of congregations, thousands of disciples today are lukewarm. Why? Why did such a wealthy, educated, well-dressed, physically fit congregation become lukewarm?

The pivot of the chiasm is the fourth message, the message to Thyatira. The One who stands in the middle of the church sees a major flaw – Jezebel. “I have this against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and who leads my bond-servants astray” (Revelation 2:20).

Now, whether this trouble-making woman was actually named Jezebel is not clear. Jesus probably uses the name because she has all the marks of her Old Testament counterpart. Jezebel of old was a committed Baal worshipper. Baal was the god of nature, the fertility God, the god of the way things are. Jezebel came into the life of Israel through marriage to King Ahab, and she quickly became a powerful force in government. She just as quickly imported her Baal theology into the life of Israel. She even persuaded Ahab to build an altar to Baal in Samaria, and she personally underwrote the support of some 850 prophets to spread her ideas and ways. Any prophet who dared to speak in the name of Yahweh alone, she had executed.

Now, here's the point of this little history lesson. Jezebel argued that one could worship Baal and Yahweh, Yahweh and Baal, but she knew better. Baal-worship and Yahweh-worship were so very different that there is no way anyone could embrace both at the same time. She knew the prophets of Yahweh were right: it is Yahweh OR Baal, not Yahweh AND Baal. It is "either-or", not "both-and".

The Jezebel at work in Thyatira was advocating the same "both-and" position. Through what she called "the deep things," she was convincing disciples of Jesus that they could serve Jesus as Lord AND the gods of an idolatrous culture. She was convincing disciples of Jesus that they could follow Jesus as Lord, and still embrace the spirits of the prevailing ideologies.

And that the One Who stands in the middle will not tolerate. To tolerate Jezebel and her "both-and" philosophy is to tolerate the spirit of compromise. It is to tolerate the theology that says we can serve Jesus Christ and other gods, other powers, other movements at the same time. And that Jesus says, "I will not tolerate." In the nature of things, He cannot tolerate it: it would mean He would deny Who He is to us and for us. The "both-and" position is out-and-out adultery, spiritual adultery, and that Jesus will not tolerate – bless His holy name!

OK, stand back... and put the chiasm together. Why did the disciples in Ephesus lose their first love? Why had their passion for Jesus gone? Why were the disciples in Laodicea lukewarm? Why were they no longer sources of refreshment and healing to the city? Because whether they realized it or not, they had bought into the spirit of Jezebel, the spirit of compromise. They were committing spiritual adultery.

The whole package of the seven messages is crafted to "say something." It is Jesus' way of saying that He is the passionate lover of our souls. To Ephesus He says, "You do not love me like you used to, with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength." To Laodicea He says, "Those I love I reprove and discipline. You are lukewarm in your wealth and health and education, and you have left Me out of your everyday lives."

Why? To Thyatira He says, "You are tolerating the 'both-and'. You know it cannot work. For every time you adopt the both-and, I end up on the outside. It is 'either-or.' Either Me or the gods your culture worships... money, sex, power, comfort, and prestige. It's me or those gods. Either-or, not both-and.

So He knocks at the door, and He knocks again. The seventh letter, to Laodicea: "Behold!" He says. "Look! Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If you hear My voice and open the door I will come in" (Revelation 3:20). My voice – the voice of a lover. Jesus is echoing words from the Song of Solomon: "The voice of my beloved, he knocks at the door. Open to me, my beloved" (Song of Songs 5:2).

Do you see what the chiasm itself is saying? The Emperor of Emperors, the God of gods, is the passionate lover of our souls. He will not tolerate any compromise arrangement. He will not tolerate finding His beloved in bed with false lovers. That is why He speaks in such a hard way – so much is at stake. Spiritual adultery leads to spiritual sickness, and spiritual sickness to spiritual death. He does not want us to die!

When we lose our first love, it simply means that our soul is compromised in some way. We have allowed someone else, something else, to have a greater influence in our lives than Jesus Christ. When we become lukewarm – neither hot nor cold – it simply means that we have been seduced. Someone or something has seduced us, and we are more preoccupied with that someone or something than we are with Jesus Christ.

Jesus packages all seven messages to the seven churches in a way that gets in our face, right in our face. “I am in the middle. I, the great I AM, I am in the middle – I am in the centre. When it comes to Who will be in the middle, it is either-or, not both-and. In the nature of things there can be only one centre. You cannot have two or three or four centres. No spouse, no child or grand-child, no career, no project, no savings account or pension fund, no national cause ... nothing else can be in the middle of your lives. Nothing else can bear the weight of being in the middle.”

“I, the true Emperor and true God, am the passionate lover of your soul. Do not let anyone or anything else take my place in your soul.”