



Jesus' Appraisal

The Letter to Ephesus

March 21, 2021

SONG #1

CALL TO WORSHIP | Psalm 34:1-9

I bless GOD every chance I get;
my lungs expand with his praise.

We live and breathe GOD;
if things aren't going well, hear this and be happy:

Join me in spreading the news;
together let's get the word out.

GOD met us more than halfway,
he freed us from our anxious fears.

Look at him; give him your warmest smile.
Never hide your feelings from him.

When we were desperate, we called out,
and GOD got us out of tight spots.

GOD's angel sets up a circle
of protection around us while we pray.

Open your mouth and taste, open your eyes and see—
how good GOD is.
Blessed are you who to run to him.

Worship GOD if you want the best;
worship opens doors to all his goodness.

SONG #2

A LETTER TO THE CHURCHES | General Pattern

The revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave [Jesus] to show to [God's] servants the things that must soon take place. Jesus made known by sending his angel [Spirit] to Jesus' servant, John, who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw.

*Blessed is the one who reads about the words of this prophecy, and blessed are **those** who hear and who keep what is written in it; the time is near.*

John to the seven churches that are in Asia...

Rev. 1:1-4

The Revelation is an apocalyptic (unveiling) story of the universe and its multi-realm reality framed in a pastoral letter. Yes, the author John was a pastor and apostle. Yes, he is closely connected to the seven named churches in this narrative of cosmic proportion. But while the pastoral shepherding is penned by John the beloved (later called “the divine” or “the theologian”), it is Jesus Christ the Chief Shepherd who addresses his flock directly.

While we “would prefer to go straight from the awesome vision of Christ,” Jesus [which we looked at last week](#), “to the glorious,” raptures of an inside look at the courts of “heaven (Rev. 4-5), and then on to the grand victorious battles against dragon wickedness (Rev. 12-14)” before the harshness of final ending and wonder of earth reborn (Rev. 19-22); “we can’t do it. The church has to be negotiated,” navigated through, “first. The only way from Christ to heaven and the battles against sin,” the defeat of the enemies and the majesty of re-creation, “is through the church. And not one church, but seven!”¹ Which means *all* churches. Even “those” churches, and certainly our church.

Let’s be honest; we are often more interested in the unveiling of beasts and harlots and plagues and world-ending battles and (maybe) golden cities than we are in hearing about “the church.” We know “the church,” we are “the church”! Unraveling the mysteries of the end-times, now that’s entertaining, but, once again, assuming honesty, we know that the church is not nearly as intriguing as apocalyptic narratives! In fact, it might at times be boring, for being a follower of Jesus does not automatically make a person a good conversationalist (myself the chief example) nor a “stimulating companion” along the pilgrimage of lived faith. We don’t always look at church people and instinctually think of exciting people and best friend material.

Not to mention the obvious issue with the church, the people are sinners. Sinners in the usual ways of society, but also sinners in their religion. Committing not just the sins they bring into the church, but “sins that develop out of the life of faith itself.” “The worst sins,” argues one pastor, “are not even possible to persons who do not live a life of faith...The church attracts to itself persons who like to live in the atmosphere of the holy but have little interest in being holy themselves.”²

¹ Eugene Peterson, *Reversed Thunder: the revelation of John & the praying imagination*, 45.

² *Ibid.* 51.

In addition, the church might also, at times, be less than advantageous at getting what culturally we've been conditioned to desire as the best in life, costing too much in time, resources, relationships, and restraints. It can be hard to get ahead when you're constantly being encouraged to give things up.

Still, as the Revelation reminds us, "A believing community is the context for the life of faith," and the "life of faith is developed under the image of the Trinity in the context of community."³ After all, we are the "them," baptized "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" by others so baptized (Matt. 28:19). "The gospel is never for individuals but always for a people,"⁴ as John reminds "those who hear and who keep what is written" (Rev. 1:3); that is, the church.

What follows the identification of the revealed and revealer, Jesus who is priest and king, prophet and sage (1:13-14), is this Jesus speaking directly, intimately, passionately, and pastorally to seven groups of God's servants, his followers. **The fantastic story of the Revelation springs from prophetic, pastoral counsel.** While the spoken words in chapters 2-3 are unique to each faith family, there is a general pattern that we see across all seven prophetic utterances.

As a quick aside, the phrase translated in the ESV "The words of him who..." which introduces each new section, actually reads "these things says the ONE..." and is as an Old Testament formula used in the Prophets well over a hundred times to introduce a new, specific word from Yahweh himself. So, "this formula demands that chapters two and three be seen as a group of prophetic messages [words calling God's people to right living/relating] rather than as mere letters."⁵

What we will see, contends Robert Mounce, is "The orderliness and symmetry of the seven letters betray a purpose that goes beyond ethical instruction to seven particular churches in the Roman province of Asia. The entire sequence is a literary composition designed to impress upon the church universal the necessity of patient endurance,"⁶ between Jesus' resurrection/ascension and return. Here is the pattern that we'll see repeated week-in and week-out through this series.

THE PATTERN

- Relationship Acknowledged
- Identity in the Person of Jesus
- Encouragement
- Admonishment
- Promise

³ Ibid. 43, 44.

⁴ Ibid. 43.

⁵ G.K. Beale, *The book of Revelation: a commentary on the Greek text*, 229.

⁶ Robert E. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, TNICNT, 65.

PATTERN

- Each letter or address begins by acknowledging the “angel” of that geographical assembly of ordinary believers. Here is **an acknowledgment of the divine and human unity** of those in submission to Christ Jesus and guided by his rule, words, and actions. The churches are not referred to in terms of their size, status, reputation, purity, or heroic feats, but rather their location and the “spirit” that indwells them. This is a relational acknowledgment. The church is never only physical nor only spiritual.
 - While “the angel has the basic biblical function of ‘messenger’ to the church...the angels function as more than messengers here. **In several places in the NT** (e.g., 1 Cor. 11:10 [perhaps 4:9 if “angels” there are good rather than evil angels]; Heb. 13:2; 1 Pet. 1:12) **angels function as authoritative ‘witnesses’ overseeing the plan of God as it works out among his people.** Their presence in a passage always adds eschatological force to the message as a reminder that divine forces are at work...the presence of the angel stresses that each church is a spiritual entity with a celestial or heavenly life ‘living figuratively in the *right hand* of Christ, under his guidance and protection.’ [The angels] are servants of God carrying out his orders to reform, challenge, and help these churches.”⁷
- While the church is referenced geographically, it is **identified through its relation to Jesus**. Who Jesus is, **his Person defines the church**. “Every church,” contends Eugene Peterson, “is located in a specific place; all churches exist under the conditions of geography, politics, and economics; each church is visible. At the same time, **every church gets its identity from Christ and what he does**; churches exist only in derivation from Christ.”⁸
 - We’ll notice that the description of Jesus’ person both matches the description of Jesus in chapter 1 and is different for each faith family. While Jesus wholly provides the church with her identity, **no singular church depicts wholly the Jesus with whom they relate**. “each congregational identity is partial; each church is defined by only a piece of the vision. No single congregation exhibits the wholeness of Christ. It is not possible to look at any one instance of the church and find an entire representation of Christ, although we very certainly can be led to that wholeness as we listen to what ‘the Spirit says to the churches and respond in worship.”⁹
- From the person of Jesus comes **a word of Encouragement**. He knows each faith family, particularly in ways to specifically speak to them. Jesus speaks to his people as one who lives among them. He knows them in their lives and affirms them not (as we will see) for their contributions to society or meeting their idealized potential but for their steadfastness. Whatever the world might think (and we along with them) the church to be or to do, Jesus affirms the

⁷ G.R. Osborne, *Revelation*, 110–111.

⁸ Peterson, 47.

⁹ Ibid.

unnoticed, courageous lives of those who are vigilant, brave sufferers, bold witnesses, growing and developing as apprentices of Jesus.

- But the church, as we know, is not perfect. We are prone to wander, even—and perhaps most significantly—in the guise of faith. And so, **a word of Admonition** from Jesus is necessary so that our religious motions do not lose their Spirit-motivations. This is not condemnation; this is care. It's the loving act of a friend to call the ones he loves out of a way of self-destruction and into a way of abundance.
- What I love about our Lord, Savior, and Friend is that he does not leave us with a warning but with **a promise**—even to those whom he could find no affirmation. Each prophetic utterance concludes with **what Jesus gives: a Promise** to those who “conquer.” He assumes they/we will achieve what he has set out for us to accomplish. **These promises are not so much rewards but “the destiny which completes life begun in faith.”**¹⁰ The motivation of life eternal, a life that is not only the life we experience here but continues beyond what we can see, sustains us amid the here and now as we long for more—helping us to be like John, siblings, and partners in the tribulation and the kingdom through the patient endurance that are in Jesus (1:9).

READ | Revelation 2:1-7

See if you can see the pattern in the first prophetic utterance in Revelation 2. Read with me 2:1-7:

‘To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: ‘The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.

‘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 are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name’s sake, and you have not grown weary.

But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.

Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

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.’

¹⁰ Ibid. 52.

EPHESUS | Cultural Background

Let's briefly look at the first letter to Ephesus's faith family.

- City & Culture
 - In ancient times, Ephesus was described as 'The first and greatest metropolis of Asia.'¹¹ Ephesus was the highway to Rome and the gateway to and from Asia, in what is modern-day Turkey. Ephesus was, therefore, an important city economically for all of the eastern Roman empire. Politically, it was a *free city*. Its wealth and influence allowed it to be self-governing, no Roman troops could garrison there, and it was a place where essential political and judicial cases were tried.

The prosperity of the city was matched by its ancient religiosity. It was the center of worship for Artemis, or as the Greeks called her, Diana. The temple of Artemis was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, 425 feet long, 220 feet wide with 120 sixty-foot columns, thirty-six of which were gilded with pure gold. While the temple was gloriously crafted, Artemis herself was portrayed rather modestly as a squat, black, many-breasted figure, "so ancient that no one knew where it had come from."¹² From this ancient root of religion sprung a city that was a "notorious center for superstition"¹³ and the marketing of religious good and services to cure every ill and reverse every misfortune.

Ephesus was a prosperous, influential, profoundly religious and spiritual, and a culturally diverse city. Add to this description that it was the postal entrance for the correspondence to each of the following six faith families referenced in the Revelation, and it's no wonder the words of Jesus start with his brothers and sisters here.

- We actually know quite a bit about the faith family in Ephesus. While on the surface, Ephesus would seem to have been "unpromising soil for the sowing of the seed of Christianity...yet it was there that Christianity had some of its greatest triumphs."¹⁴

Paul nearly turned the city upside down when faith in Jesus started to impact the economics of religion, as Acts 19 details for us. We know it was the city in which Paul stayed the longest (Acts 20), and the city which called Timothy its first overseer or elder (1 Tim 1:3). In Ephesus, we find the fruitful and faithful Aquilla, Priscilla, Apollos (Acts 18). It was to the elders of Ephesus whom Paul so intimately and vulnerably address in his farewell remarks before his final imprisonment (Acts 20).

John, the writer of our letter today, would later become the leading figure in the faith family of the city as he, legend has it, brought Mary the mother of Jesus there. It is in Ephesus that many believe Mary was buried. The Ephesian community of faith was solid, respectable, and faithful, though Paul knew

¹¹ William Barclay, *The Revelation of John*, 65.

¹² Ibid. 66.

¹³ Ibid. 67.

¹⁴ Ibid.

there would be wolves in sheep clothing who would come to try and take advantage of their Christlikeness. Writing to the Ephesian elders one last time, Paul says,

Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained by his own blood. I know after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore, be alert. (Acts 20:28-31a)

This alertness was necessary but had its issues as Jesus' words to this faithful faith family reveal to us. Let's look a little closer at the pattern

WHO JESUS IS (Person) | v. 1

the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches. (Rev. 1:20)

Now, as we said, each prophetic utterance or letter begins with a vision of the person of Jesus. In the words to the faith family of Ephesus, Jesus is described as “he who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.” (2:1) These descriptions echo what John saw in chapter 1, verses 12 and 16.

The seven stars, as Jesus told us in 1:20, are the angels of the seven churches. Here Jesus is described as having every church in his hand. No spirit of any church exists outside of his person and purposes, no matter our opinion of said church. They are under both his authority and his judgment (“right hand”).

The lampstands, as Jesus said in 1:20, are the seven churches themselves, and Jesus is not any one of them but rather “walking among” all of them. Their light comes from his light. His presence is the one thing that brings them together, and Jesus is the center. They orbit around him. This image should be both encouraging and challenging for the way we view “the church,” other churches, and our faith family as well.

If Jesus is the center, the One around whom we orbit, whose authority and judgment we are under, and the light of our existence whom we can only partially reflect, then what does that mean for the way we judge our church, other churches? The way we compare and contrast and compete and condemn?

Ephesus was the greatest of the named cities in the seven letters. They were a faithful faith family, and it would be easy for them—and others—to hold them as the standard. Yet Jesus reminds them that he is their standard and the only standard. Ephesus, and Christ City, are but one of many, not in contrast or comparison, but in orbital unity with others whom Jesus holds and knows, leads, and shines his light through.

ENCOURAGEMENT | v. 2-3, 6

Having acknowledged their identity as one of the churches whom Jesus gives life and works through, Jesus now encourages the Ephesian believers in their particular life of faith.

Jesus knows their work, toil, and patient endurance to discern and courageously stand against those among them “who are evil,” having “tested those who call themselves apostles (specially sent messengers),” but who “are not,” finding “them to be false.” Such discernment is no easy task. It is no small endeavor to hold fast to the person and words and practices of Jesus amid a city full of other options. To hold fast in life among people who have known only (or mostly) these options. And to remain faithful to Jesus alone amid a culture that sells every religious good and service known to humanity. It would be easy to get tired, become lax, and give in out of sheer fatigue or convenience.

It would have been easier to be like the Nicolaitans, who thought there was no need to fight the flow of religious intermingling. Redeem it, they would say, or at least let grace cover it and take advantage of what the city and culture offer. There is no need to stand apart. Freedom in Jesus means we can participate fully as long as we keep Jesus a part of the conversation.

Apparently, Jesus hated such *works* (the relational and daily results of such faith), for they were the works of the flesh and not the fruit of the Spirit as Paul so aptly described to the Galatians. Works born not out of love for Jesus and others, but out of love for self and base appetites rather than a pang of hunger and thirst for right relating to God and others.

The Ephesians saw through the shallowness of the Nicolaitan ethic and held fast to Jesus: who he really was, what he really taught, and the life he really called people to share in with him. An example that can encourage us to do the same, that we *can* do the same.

ADMONISHMENT | v. 4-5

Yet, as is often the case, constant battles harden even the softest hearts. “But I have this against you,” Jesus says, “you have abandoned the love you had at first.” “at first,” has two meanings.

The Jesus followers in Ephesus had abandoned the love, the tenderhearted passion, and compassion that was the first fruit of their faith in Jesus. The early days of faith, though difficult, were joyous and complete and overflowing as zeal for Jesus and life in him were budding and blooming. They were eager to help the weak in faith and physicality. Hungry to know God intimately and thirsty for more of him in the lives of neighbors and friends.

Yet a long faith always goes through valleys of shadows and boredom and can result in passion only for causes and not for relationships that are the heart of faith. This brings us to the second meaning. The Ephesians had lost their first love. What they were willing to live for was not a relationship with Jesus through which they related to one another and the world, but for *right* faith, truth alone. **They were protectors, not lovers.** Fighters, not lovers. Praying not for those that made life hard on them, but praying against them.

To this hardness of heart, Jesus warns them that to abandon the most primary reality of their faith—love—the one thing that will remain when faith becomes sight and hope is realized; will mean that they will no longer have the place they think is theirs among the churches. What they value in relation to both humanity and God will no longer be theirs.

Instead of giving in to the hardening of heart, Jesus says **remember and repent**. Remember the grace that they had received—how far they had fallen from the heights of their love and how far they have fallen in their sinfulness before Jesus and after—and turn towards the love that first drew them to Jesus, empowered their lives in Jesus, and changed their community through Jesus. Remember and repent, rejoice and let go of hate as we cling to the One who loves. Perhaps we need this word most earnestly today.

WHAT JESUS GIVES (Promise) | v. 7

After the warning comes the exhortation to hear what the Spirit says to the churches, to listen and respond, and then the promise to “the one who conquers, I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.”

Jesus’ promise takes us back to the Garden of Eden in Genesis, the place where God and humanity dwelt in harmony. The tree of life, the tree from which came life forever, was cut off from humankind after Eve and Adam’s rebellion, but the hope of enjoying its fruits again was not lost to the Jewish people. Proverbs 3:18 calls wisdom “the tree of life to those who embrace her; those that hold her fast are called blessed.”

Jesus, remember, was depicted as a prophet, priest, king, and sage (Ancient of Days) in chapter one, verses 14-15. As a sage, he offers wisdom, and to lay hold of what he gives is to live forever, in a relationship with God and others in perfect (Matt. 5:49) fellowship, i.e., paradise.

Such a destiny comes through conquering, overcoming all in life that takes away life, life that can be known only in relation to God, not through conquering “an earthly foe by force, but,” by remaining faithful to Christ Jesus, a victory of obedience that “is analogous to the victory of Christ on the cross.”¹⁵ A triumph of faith that comes by remembering, repenting, and holding fast to our first love.

Let’s pray.

¹⁵ Mounce, 72.

SONG #3

INTO TO A CORPORATE WORD | Jeremy

*Blessed is the one who reads about the words of this prophecy, and blessed are **those** who hear and who keep what is written in it; the time is near. (1:3)*

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. (2:7)

A CORPORATE WORD | Ryan Kernes

CONGREGATIONAL CONFESSION w/ COMMUNION

Father God, we kneel before you in humble adoration as we set our face to the tasks and interests of another week and season. **Thank you** for the blessed assurance that we shall not be called upon to face them alone or in our own strength, but that at all times, we will be accompanied by your presence, strengthened by your grace, and encouraged by your family.

Thank you that throughout human life run the footprints of our Lord and Savior, King and Sage, Priest and Friend: Jesus Christ, who for our sake was made flesh and tasted all the different challenges of daily living as well as the end we need no longer fear.

Thank you that as we go about our work and play, in pursuit of relationships and aspirations, we can be conscious of the spiritual presence of the heavenly host.

Thank you for the saints who rest from their labors, the patriarchs and matriarchs, prophets and prophetesses, apostles, noble martyrs, for all the holy and humble, for our dear departed friends and family who have shown us your way.

As we remember them, we bless and adore your great name. **We rejoice, O Father, that you have called us to be members of the Church of Jesus Christ.**

Let the awareness of this holy fellowship follow us wherever we go, cheering us in loneliness, protecting us in company, strengthening us against temptation, and encouraging us to act in love and justice.

O Lord Jesus Christ, you called the disciples to shine as lights in a dark world. In shame and repentance, we acknowledge before you the many faults and weaknesses of which we are guilty, we who in this generation represent your Church to the world. **We as Christ City Church especially acknowledge our part in this brokenness.**

Forgive us; we pray, the feebleness of our witness, the meagerness of our giving and loving, and the mediocrity of our zeal. Help us live equal in measure to love received, following the One who cared for the poor and the oppressed such as we. **Let the strength of your Spirit, O Jesus, be in us all,** to share the world's suffering and redress its wrongs, in the fullness of your joy.

Through Jesus' life given, we live.

Amen.

SONG #4

BENEDICTION