

Circulating the Book

Revelation 2, 3 - The Letters to the Seven Churches

March 5-6

I always love to have the opportunity to study the scripture and share together in our weekend worship services, but I'm afraid this time John has left me with an impossible task. You know that for the last several weeks John has been leading us through a study of the many ways in which God spoke to people in the past and the many ways in which he desires to speak to us today through his word, the Bible. We've looked at **The Story of a Bible: Psalm 119, Receiving the Book: Exodus 24, Finding the Book: 2 Kings 22 & 23, Applying the Book: Nehemiah 8, Rejecting the Book: Jeremiah 36, Interpreting the Book: Luke 4, Understanding the Book: Acts 8, and Enriching the Book: Matthew 5.**

Today's sermon title is "**Circulating the Book,**" and the impossible task that John has given me is to preach on Christ's letters to the seven churches of **Asia Minor** (this is the modern day countries of Turkey, Syria and Jordan) as recorded by his servant, John in the book of Revelation. Preachers throughout history have used this material to create a sermon series of at least seven weeks, and it could easily go much longer. Today, we're going to cover it all.

We don't have enough time to go into the level of detail that I would like. So I decided to dedicate more time to the reading of the seven letters as recorded in Revelation one through three, assuming that it's more important for you to hear the scripture for yourself than to hear any comments I might make about the scripture.

What I'd like to do today is make some brief introductory comments to explain why I believe the message of these ancient letters are extremely

relevant to us today, skip over the “thorough explanation of the text” in hopes that you’ll re-read the passage for yourself later, and offer some ways in which we can apply the meaning of this passage to our daily lives. Without this time of application at the end, we are in danger of being like the man James writes about, the one who looks into the mirror of truth but then walks away forgetting what he has seen.

Let’s begin by stepping away from this immediate passage for just a moment and talking about our current sermon series on the power of God’s Word to mold our lives, or perhaps even more broadly on what we hope is happening when we gather each week for worship.

I start with the assumption and a strong desire that the weekend worship service is a place of spiritual formation for all who gather here. The Bible teaches that we become what we worship. Sort of like the old saying “you are what you eat.” Psalm 136 and other passages indicate that those who worship lifeless idols become lifeless themselves, and Paul writes that as we behold the glory of the Lord:

**...we... “are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.”
2 Cor 3:18**

So we become what we worship. That’s why it’s important for us be reminding ourselves that we’re not here to hear great music, be wowed by the technology or acquire more data about the Bible, we are here to experience the presence of Christ through scripture reading, prayer, worship and praise.

So as a pastor, I’m always concerned that there is a meaningful link between what we experience here in worship and the habit of our daily lives. For example, our first core value as a church is the value of

scripture, we began the year with a public reading of the entire Bible here in the sanctuary and we're devoting eleven weeks to a study of the Bible's influence in our lives. But how many of us own our own personal copy of the Bible, not just the family Bible on the coffee table, and we know where it is right now? How many of us, not counting the reading we might do for a school assignment or to win an argument with a friend, opened the Bible with a view of hearing God speak to us this past week? I'm not trying to be judgmental; I realize everyone leads very busy lives and we all go through seasons of spiritual drought. I'm just wondering if what we do here on a weekend is making any difference in our lives on Monday through Friday.

I'm convinced that just as Christ desired to communicate to the seven churches of Asia in the first century, he desires to speak to each of us today. As we turn our attention back to Revelation 1, I'd like to share three assumptions I make about this passage, and then offer some thoughts on why this passage is relevant to us.

First, as I read these letters I realize that at various times throughout my spiritual journey, I represent one of the seven churches. Sometimes I am Pergamum, standing up for Christ when it's unpopular to do so. Sometimes I am Thyatira, tolerating things in my life that should not be there. Sometimes I am Laodicea, neither hot nor cold, floating along day to day without any real passion for Christ. These letters are for me and speak to me where I am.

Second, at any given worship service all seven churches are represented among us. Some here today are standing firm in the midst of persecution. Some among us have forsaken their first love, their love for Christ. Some are suffering poverty but are being strengthened by the presence of Christ. When your youth group or home small group meets

this week, the seven churches will be there. These letters are for us and speak to where we are.

Finally, the truths revealed in this passage about Christ and his church are also true about Christ and me. This is where I find application to our lives in this text, and I'd like to spend the rest of our time focused on ten brief statements that I'll entitle "True for the churches – true for me." It's possible that only one or two of these ten statements will speak into your circumstances right now, so I encourage you to hear from God's word and allow it to apply to your situation.

True for the Churches – true for me.

1. Christ desires to reveal himself to me

To the church in Philadelphia he says, **"See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut."** Revelation 3:8. Jesus' own life and ministry shows us how accessible he made himself to the masses. The beauty of these seven letters is that they begin a new time in the story of God's church. This was the start of distributing the word beyond the borders of Israel. The Old Testament law was given for God's people the Jews, but now the book was going out to the ends of the earth. Jesus leaves the door open for you and me to receive what he desires to reveal to us.

2. Christ takes the initiative to reveal himself to me

To the church in Laodicea he says, **"Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me."** Revelation 3:20. Notice that

Jesus doesn't just show his willingness to knock on the door, but he also wants to come in and eat with me. This kind of table fellowship was meaningful in the time of Christ. It was more than just Sunday lunch after church. In our time it is more like asking someone to move into your home for six months. Christ desires to reveal himself to his church, and to you, and to me in this kind of intimate way. He is standing at the door knocking, the question for us is: "Do we recognize his voice?"

3. **Christ is able to reveal himself to me** (overcoming all external opposition as well as the obstacles presented by my weakness)

John writes, "**Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the people of the earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be! Amen.**" **Revelation 1:7.** Jesus will make himself known to all people, even those who had a hand in his death. When thinking of the story of the Christian faith we may sometimes wonder why God doesn't just come down from heaven and make his existence and plan plainly known. Wouldn't that silence all of his critics and get the atheists' and agnostics' attention? We read in this passage that at the right time, God will come with the clouds and all people will recognize Jesus' true identity as the sovereign king.

Jesus is not only able to overcome the obvious opposition to faith when he makes himself known, but he is also able to overcome the unseen opposition to faith that lies inside my soul. Augustine famously wrote, "**Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee.**" C.S. Lewis popularized this idea in the concept of a God-shaped hole in the human heart.

Some of us may have a good understanding of this desire for God, but what we all surely have experienced is the obstacle to faith that our own weakness brings. We doubt, we fail, we question, we struggle and we are weak. What the seven letters of Revelation tell us is that Jesus Christ can even overcome my weakness and your weakness. He is abundantly able to show himself to me.

4. Christ walks with me

Jesus says, **“I know your afflictions and your poverty – yet you are rich!” Revelation 2:9.** How profoundly true of Jesus who is: the baby born in a borrowed stable, the prophet rejected in his own home town, the king who wears a crown of thorns, the suffering servant, and the messiah slain by God’s chosen people. I’ve sometimes wondered why God didn’t execute this amazing story of salvation differently. Because the real story seems too difficult; couldn’t God have made it easier? I find myself daydreaming about other ways that God could have brought both fulfillment of his law and spiritual freedom. I’ve wondered what a 21st century messiah would have looked like rather than a 1st century one.

Do you know what I come back to time and time again? God’s story happened the way it did so that I can know that Jesus has walked alongside me in every area of life. When the unthinkable tragedy strikes us, we are only left to question: why this happened? When we meet our great God through the life of Jesus, we can only realize that he has walked this path before, he has suffered and on the other side we can find joy in knowing him. So, Jesus says, “I know your afflictions and your poverty – yet you are rich!” The riches Jesus speaks of are not found in wealth, but in the spiritual promises of God.

5. Christ knows me fully

To the Church in Thyatira John writes: **“Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols.” Revelation 2:20.** Jesus Christ knows his church so completely that he even knows what we tolerate, what we overlook, what we fail to confront within the body of Christ. Jesus not only knows his church but he also knows me. He knows my desires, my dreams, my thoughts. He knows me fully.

6. Christ loves me supremely

John writes of Jesus, **“To him who *loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood.*” Revelation 1:5.** John himself is known as the disciple whom Jesus *loved*. His writings give us the most magnificent portrait of Jesus as an instrument of God’s love. But what does it mean that Christ loves me supremely? This word supreme can help us understand Christ’s love. Supreme means paramount, sovereign, chief or highest degree. Some other words we might use in the place of supreme are maximum, superlative, ultimate, unmatched, infinite or utmost. The seven letters are meant to convey that Christ’s love is complete. The number seven itself is the number of completion.

7. Christ confronts my apathy and sin

Still writing of the false prophetess Jezebel John says, **“I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling. So I will cast her on a bed of suffering, and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely, unless they repent of her ways. I will strike her children dead. Then all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you**

according to your deeds.” Revelation 2:21-23. We are confronted by Christ not only in our sin, but also when we just don’t care or when we are lazy in our faith. Jesus moves us beyond belief and into action. When not only my sin is addressed but also my apathy Christ motivates me beyond the simple act of confession, but I’m motivated to change and move and grow.

8. Christ joyfully affirms my devotion and obedience

To the church in Ephesus John writes, **“You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.” Revelation 2:3.** Throughout the seven letters the refrain **“To him who overcomes”** is repeated again and again. This is a picture of a devoted life: one who overcomes fear, one who overcomes temptation, one who overcomes hardship, one who overcomes suffering, all for the name of Jesus Christ and all by God’s grace. Christ’s response to our devotion and obedience is joyful affirmation.

9. Christ strengthens me for suffering

“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 the crown of life.” Revelation 2:10. It is vital that we understand something about suffering because suffering leads to many questions about God and his plan for us. God does not cause us to suffer, but allows suffering because it points us to the need for a savior. We often cannot understand why suffering happens. The good news of the seven letters of Revelation is that Christ strengthens me for suffering. I am not left alone to suffer for Christ has known what it is to suffer.

10. Christ will ultimately be victorious for me

“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.” Revelation 1:8. The Alpha and the Omega are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. This is like God saying I’m in charge of everything from A to Z. God also says he is the Almighty, this is a title which means one who has the mightiest power over all things. Christ’s power is beyond compare and we already know how the story ends. Jesus’ victory has been secured and our future can be secured through faith in Christ.

These ten truths can speak powerfully into our lives in the same way they spoke to God’s people when John wrote them down during the era of the early church. The Bible began its circulation during this unique time in history, but it is still being circulated around the world through the lives of God’s people. John’s revelation of Jesus Christ to the seven churches speaks powerfully today. One of John’s introductory comments summarizes the power of God’s word, **“Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take heart what is written in it, because the time is near.” Revelation 1:3.** Are you ready to read the words, hear them and take them to heart, because my friends, the time is near.

Let us pray.