

(Revelation) 02 Letters to the Seven Churches

Part 1

by David Pawson

The Book of Revelation is a letter to seven churches, and Jesus is facing the acid test of whether his church will remain faithful to him in the face of Greek and Roman culture and the pressures of the leisure industry.

Duration: 44:28

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, John 20:19-20, Revelation 1:17-18, Revelation 2

Topics: "Jesus Christ", "Spiritual Hope"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker shares a story about a woman on a plane who took a photograph of a storm and miraculously, the storm stopped as soon as she took the picture. The woman later discovers that the photograph captured a figure of Jesus in perfect peace and control. The speaker then reflects on his own experience of having a vision of Jesus and emphasizes the hope of one day seeing Jesus face to face. The sermon also touches on the importance of visiting biblical sites like Ephesus to make the teachings of the Bible more real and tangible.

Transcript

Over forty percent of Christian scripture is in the form of letters or correspondence. That's one of the biggest contrasts between the Old and the New Testament. There are very few letters in the Old, but the New, nearly half of the scripture is in the form of correspondence.

Some are quite short, addressed to one person like the letter to Philemon. We actually have the longest letter from the ancient world in the letter to the Romans. No other letter has been preserved from those days that is as long as that letter, and that's addressed to a church.

Now the whole of the book of Revelation is a letter. It is in the form of a letter. It is addressed to all seven churches.

Within the big letter are seven smaller letters, but we mustn't lose sight of the fact that the whole of the book is a letter. Tucked away in the beginning are these seven small letters to the seven churches. Now last night we talked about why the book was written and how it was written.

But this morning I want to begin with where it was written. Not only is history important to the Bible, but geography is also very important. The whole of Revelation takes place in a small area in the southwest

corner of what is now Turkey.

In the days of the Roman Empire it was a province called Asia, but we now know it as southwest Turkey. I did show you last night a picture of the fortress monastery in Patmos, the island. I found I had another little picture taken from down at sea level looking up to the top of the hill in Patmos, and the fortified monastery is even more clear, and that marks the site.

But let's begin to look at the geography which is fascinating. Here is a photograph of the whole area taken from 200 miles out in space, and we can see very clearly Greece here and Turkey here, the Mediterranean in the south with Cyprus and Crete just below here, the Black Sea up there, Istanbul, and the Bosphorus which leads through to the Black Sea here, and here is Turkey. The Roman province of Asia was around here.

Now you notice that the whole country is pretty barren and dry, high mountainous plateau. It has little rain, and what rain does drop on the mountains of Turkey flows west through rivers. You notice that the northern part of Turkey is green because it gets some moisture in rain from the Black Sea.

But I want you to notice that even from space there is a green circle down here in the southwest corner, and it's green because of the rain dropping in the mountains here flowing through rivers through this very area. It is therefore the most fertile part of Turkey and therefore the richest part of Turkey in many ways. So we're looking down on the whole scene.

Let's begin to see it in more detail and a little more clearly. I'm now replacing that whole map with this sketch. Here we have modern Greece and here we have modern Turkey, Black Sea up in the corner, the Aegean Sea here with the Greek islands which are now holiday resorts, and the Mediterranean Sea with Crete down here.

Now we can see the rivers that run into the Aegean Sea from the high mountains of Turkey, and here is that fertile circle. One of the rivers, this one, is very meandering. You may not be surprised to learn that the name of it is the River Meander from which we get the word which describes all rivers which do this.

So here is the area we're talking about. The big question which we must ask and try and answer is, why did Jesus only write letters to this little area? Did it ever surprise you when you read that Jesus never wrote a letter to the church in Jerusalem or Antioch or Rome? Only these seven churches. Why were they so important to Jesus? Well, we'll hope to answer that this morning.

Let's zoom in now on this little area on a map that will show us more clearly what we're talking about. We're now looking at the southwest corner of Turkey, this green circle, very fertile circle fed by these rivers. There's the River Meander, meandering its way into the Aegean not far from Ephesus.

There's another river here, the River Hermas, and what have we got up here? The River Beqa. Those are the rivers that make this area such a fertile and prosperous area. Here's Ephesus and that city and its church plays a larger part in the New Testament than any other.

There is more about the Ephesian church in Scripture than any other church, and again we ask, why? There is of course Paul's letter to the Ephesians. In the book of Acts we have a lot about the church in Ephesus, and then here we have another epistle to the Ephesians in the book of Revelation written by Jesus himself. What is so important about Ephesus? Many apostles came to this town.

Paul spent more in the city, more time in the city of Ephesus than anywhere else. Why? Other apostles came here, some were killed here. Philip the apostle was killed right here.

What's going on? What is focused in this little area? Now I want you to notice the roads in this area. This was covering the most important road in the ancient world which led from Europe to Asia and Africa, and everything came through this road. The road came from Rome, crossed the sea from Philippi to Troas, or ancient Troy, and then came down the coast of Turkey.

But when it got to Pergamum the road split and there were two ways you could continue on to Africa and Asia. One was down the coast to Ephesus, and from Ephesus it cut east up the river valley of the Meander and went on through Tarsus and then on to India, China, Africa. But you could also take the inland route which went up this river valley and then cut over into the next river valley and the next and joined up with the coast road here, a place called Laodicea, and from Laodicea it went on as a single road.

All the ancient traffic of the ancient world therefore passed through either the coast road or the inland road before going on to other continents. It was right on the most important trade route. Furthermore, this was the area where east met west, where the mystery religions of the east collided with the religions of Greece and Rome from the west.

Because of its prosperity it was a highly cultured area. Today it's fascinating to spend, as we did a week there, looking at the ancient ruins, magnificent ruins, some of which I will show you. But you've got something probably in your pocket that came from this area.

Have any of you got any coins in your pocket? Money was invented right here by the king of Lydia and his name was Croesus. Before then, whenever you wanted to buy something you had to exchange goods for it in barter. But King Croesus was so wealthy he wanted his wealth in a different form than goods, and he invented coinage, money.

There is a proverb - we have it in English, I wonder if you have it in America - called, as rich as Croesus. Anybody heard that proverb? A few, yes. Well it came from this area, and with that money of course came culture.

When you have enough wealth you can build magnificent buildings, you can develop libraries and sports stadiums, and you're the richest country in the world here in America. I marvel at some of the buildings that you put up and the money you have to spend on culture, which is of course a luxury activity. In poorer countries they haven't money to spend on leisure, they just have to scrape a living and survive and keep an existence.

But when you get wealth you get culture developing. There's a very interesting history here. This is probably the most prominent area to which the Greek culture was exported.

Their theatres, above all their sports. You know, sport has no place in the Bible at all, as far as I can see, except for one text - bodily exercise profits little. That's the only text I can find in the Bible related to sport.

Sport came from ancient Greece, from two centres of sport. One was Olympia, from which we still have the Olympic Games, but the other big sports centre was the Ionic Games, and they took place right here. So here we have a centre which was wealthy enough to develop Greek culture.

Along came the Romans after that, and they brought all their law and order, their magnificent buildings, temples to the emperor. So if you want to study ancient culture you go to this little circle. You'll find two of the seven wonders of the world in that little circle.

The best known one, of course, is the temple of Diana in Ephesus itself. So here was a whole area of the highest of pagan culture and with it pagan religion. All the Eastern mystery religions had temples here.

The Western gods of Greece and Rome all had temples here. It is a magnificent place if you're interested in archaeology, and what a civilization it must have been. But that still doesn't explain why Jesus should write letters to seven churches right here.

Now comes the great surprise, and this is probably new to most of you here. This was the area where at the end of the first century AD Satan had his headquarters. Satan, of course, can only be in one place at once.

He's not everywhere. He has agents everywhere, demonic agents to do his will. But he has to go to and fro in the earth or up to heaven.

He has access to heaven, as Job chapter 1 will tell you, so he moves around. But on earth he always has a base, a headquarters, and it is always high on a mountain because he loves looking down on people. He loves surveying his kingdom and so he chooses always a mountain as his headquarters.

We know from Jesus' letters to the churches that Satan at that time had his headquarters in Pergamum, and from there he travelled to and fro in the earth but always came back here as his residence. When Jesus wrote the letter to the church in Pergamum he said, I know where you live, it's where Satan resides, it's where he has his seat. Now what does all that mean? When we went to Pergamum I understood it, I never understood it before.

Pergamum is quite a small city nestling at the root of a mountain, a sugarloaf-shaped mountain about a thousand metres high which towers over the city and over the whole area. You can only get up there through a narrow winding track, a little road you can get up. You can get a bus up there now.

On the top are the most magnificent ruins. One of the... well, the third largest library in the ancient world was up there on top of Mount Pergamum. There are theatres up there, stadiums, and temples.

The biggest temple of all was a gigantic square stone temple, bigger than this room. It was a unique temple. It was built up on a platform with steps up to it at the front.

On the top there was a row of columns on three sides, if you can imagine, tall columns on three sides and in the middle an altar. This was the temple of Zeus, the king of all gods in ancient mythology. This was the residence of Satan.

And from the altar, every day, every night, there was smoke rising from a fire that was kept going by the priests. What a sight it must have been! From little Pergamum, the city below, you look up to the top of this mountain and you see the smoke as if it's a volcano ascending to Zeus, king of the gods. But when we went there it was gone.

You can still see the square where it was. It's now planted with trees, but the temple is gone. Do you know where it is? It's in East Berlin.

If ever you go to Berlin, go down the main highway through the Brandenburg Gate, a little further on down the Unter den Linden, and then look to the left and you will see a large museum called the Museum of Pergamon. Inside you will find Satan's residence. A German archaeologist at the end of the nineteenth century transported it stone by stone to Germany and rebuilt it.

Here's a picture of it which I got from that museum. Here are the steps up to the temple, here are the three sides of the column, and the altar was here. Now then, just to give you the size of this, I wonder if you can see.

Can you see a person standing there above my finger? That's a life-size person who had climbed up when this photograph was taken. That's the size of the temple. Now imagine all this built on a thousand-meter sugarloaf mountain, towering above the surrounding countryside.

From here you could see miles and miles. This was Satan's seat. It's like a huge armchair, it is a throne.

Jesus says in the letter to Pergamon, I know where you live, that's where Satan resides, that's where Satan's seat is. And you are now looking at Satan's seat. This does not mean that he is now residing in Berlin, though Christians in Berlin have gathered by the hundreds here to pray that it may go back to Turkey.

Turkey wants it back, as others want things back from the British Museum. There's something wrong. It's rubbing against my coat.

I saw it in your face. Many Christians have the idea that moving this to Berlin at the beginning of the twentieth century had a profound effect on Germany and what happened in the last century there, whatever. I'm quite sure Satan is not living here now, and don't all come and ask me afterwards where I think he's living now.

I have my ideas but they're only my speculation and that's not worth listening to. However, to go back to the map we had, this had an amazing influence on the churches in the area. The churches that were nearest to Pergamon had one kind of problem.

As you move further away from Satan's residence, the churches had a different kind of problem, and the two churches furthest away had a very different problem from the others. To put it simply, the two churches that were nearest to Satan's residence were both being corrupted from the inside by idolatry and immorality. The next two churches further away were both suffering not from the inside but by persecution from the outside.

In both cases, Satan was using the Jews to persecute the Christians and Jesus even dared to call their synagogue a synagogue of Satan. The Jews were used in the earliest days of the Christian church to persecute the Christians. Alas, the Christians got power after the days of Constantine the Emperor, after he was converted.

Christians took their revenge and became anti-Jewish and persecuted the Jews for the next seventeen centuries. It's a very sad part of church history that we were responsible for the persecution of the Jewish people for so long. But the story must be told truthfully in its totality, and the truth is that in the earliest days Paul himself and his converts and the churches he founded were quite bitterly attacked by Jewish people.

They saw these Jews believing in a false... sorry, they saw the Christians as believing in a false Messiah. They did not believe that Jesus was the Christ and that was the root of their hatred of the Christians. So the two churches that were furthest away from Satan, he wasn't bothering at all.

So what went wrong with those two? Well one was Ephesus and they had lost their first love, and the other was Laodicea and they had become lukewarm. Churches that have lost their first love and become lukewarm, Satan doesn't bother them at all. He doesn't need to.

They're not a threat to him. They're not likely to attack his kingdom. They will just carry on as they are.

So have you got the picture? Pergamum. Satan resides. That's his base on earth.

Why would he choose Pergamum? I've given you the answer. This area was the most important area in the whole world to control. It sat right over the east-west road, the road between Europe, Asia, and Africa, passed right through here.

Whoever controlled this situation could control the world, could influence the world. From here news went out in every direction to all three of the continents of the then-known world. Can you begin to see how strategic it was? Satan certainly thought so.

He said, that's where I can control the world. And Jesus thought the same. So we have here a direct conflict.

The church is caught in a spiritual battle and it's going to be very fierce. So we have Satan, Pergamum. Then we have two churches being attacked from the inside by Satan through idolatry and immorality, compromise within the church.

Then you have a little further away Satan attacking churches from the outside and even using God's chosen people, the Jews, to do it. They are the two churches about whom Jesus has no criticism whatever. Jesus has nothing but support and sympathy for churches that are suffering.

His major criticisms are directed at churches that are not suffering for him. I find that interesting. And particularly, those two churches furthest from Satan that Satan doesn't need to bother with, Ephesus and Laodicea.

We're going to be looking in more detail at those two in a moment. But have I painted a picture for you? Remember that this is the end of the first century AD. We're into second and third generation Christians.

I'm afraid church history is full of examples of a church that was full of enthusiasm and life at the beginning, but gradually as they failed to pass on that zeal for the Lord to the second and third generation, the church becomes respectable, cool, not very loving, still doing all the right things, but somehow the fire has died down. Satan doesn't bother with those churches. Now on a very simple principle, I look around the world today and I say, where are these kinds of churches? And I've come to the conclusion that Satan's headquarters cannot possibly be in America or Britain or Europe.

I see the signs of his activity in the third world. That's where the church today is growing most rapidly and where the tensions and spiritual battles are most fierce. So somewhere in the third world I believe Satan has his residence today.

I'm not going to be more specific than that. But when I look at some of the lukewarm churches and some of the loveless churches in our western world, I know that Satan wouldn't even put them on his list that he needs to pay attention to. They're really not much threat to him.

Well now, let's move on from that history and geography lesson. But you see how the background is so important when we come to the book of Revelation. And because these are second and third generation churches, Jesus is really facing the acid test of whether his church is going to remain faithful to him.

Quite simply, if the churches could survive here they would survive anywhere. If the churches could get through the end of the first century A.D. in the pressure of Greek and Roman culture and the money and the pleasure and everything going on here strangely reminiscent of the modern world, they had everything that you've got on television except the television set. They had drama, they had comedy, they had sport, they had everything that people are watching in the western world today but they had to go out for it and watch it in situ whereas we can lounge at home and switch it on and watch it in comfort.

That's the only difference. The preoccupation of the leisure life here was exactly what it is in the world which you and I live in. Their great, gross industry was leisure and it is ours too.

They had to have entertainment then because every person in that area had an ambition to retire early and get a slave to do their work for them. That was their ambition. Two-thirds of the people in this circle were slaves, imported from other countries to do all the manual labour and the dirty work.

Does this sound strangely modern to you? So they had imported, conquered enemies to do the work so that they could be people of leisure. Of course, that meant they had so much time on their hands they had to fill it. So the leisure industry developed, libraries, sports stadiums, everything that we have they had too.

That's the kind of place. And in those places little churches had begun. They'd all been established through the major port of Ephesus because from Ephesus everything went up the rivers to affect the interior.

For example, there's a place over here called Colossae which Paul never visited. But one of Paul's converts in Ephesus went up the Meander River to Colossae and started a church, and Philemon was a member of that church. Paul wrote a letter to the Colossians, though he'd never been there, hadn't started the church, but one of his converts had done so.

So Ephesus was a key city and the early church's missionary strategy was to establish a church in a key city and move away, and leave that church to evangelize its area around it. That's a good strategy. Go for the key centre of population, establish a church there, and let that church evangelize the whole area.

And that's why Paul moved from one strategic city to another. He didn't try and evangelize everywhere. But you find him telling the Ephesians that from Ephesus the gospel went out into the whole of Asia.

His converts did the evangelizing. So Ephesus was the key place, and not only did Paul come there, not only did Timothy come there, but John came there as an old man and he brought with him Mary, the mother of Jesus. At the cross, John had been told to look after Mary and he wisely decided to take her right away from the scene of her son's death and agony.

He took her here, and they will show you what they claim to be Mary's house in Ephesus. I can't prove that that is, and they can't. But what I have seen and prayed at is the tomb of John.

The apostle John's tomb is most certainly there, and you can go there. As I stood at that tomb I thanked the Lord for his gospel and his epistles and above all the book of Revelation. It was a very moving moment to be right there knowing that John's remains were there, but knowing that he is alive and with the Lord right now because God is the God of the living, not the dead.

You can see therefore that Ephesus is the key and these roads and the rivers, the whole rich cultural area was the biggest challenge to the church of Jesus Christ. If the churches here survived into the second century then Jesus' church was secure for all time. But if they went under here then it would be a bad day for the whole of church history.

Have I conveyed enough to you to realize what a key area this was? So let's move on now to look at some of these letters. Jesus, of course, appeared to John in prison and John was completely overawed by his appearance. When I was preaching in Australia, a lady was in the congregation who had been travelling by air from Australia to New Zealand over the Tasman Sea.

Halfway across to New Zealand they had run into a violent electrical storm and the clouds seemed to be on fire with lightning all around the aircraft. She was quite frightened. The plane was being tossed around with the wind and the air pockets and the passengers panicked.

They were screaming, they were holding on to each other. I think they all thought the plane would break up and they would all die. The lady noticed that the lady sitting next to her against the window was praying.

Well anybody would pray in that situation. But she said to her, excuse me but are you a Christian? The lady said, yes. And so they said, well let's pray together.

Together they said, Lord you stilled the storm two thousand years ago, please do it again. But please still the storm inside the plane as well as outside. Within two minutes everybody in the plane was at peace and had stopped screaming and was sitting quietly.

But the storm continued outside and she had a camera so she leant over across the new friend and she held the camera at arm's length against the window and pressed the trigger, hoping that she might get a picture of this extraordinary sight of the lightning apparently setting the whole sky on fire. Well she took the film to be developed in New Zealand after she'd landed safely because as soon as she took the photograph the storm outside stopped as well and they came into clear air and landed safely in New Zealand. She took the film to be developed and the shop rang her up later and said, your photographs are ready but will you please come and pick them up yourself? I want to talk to you.

And when she went to collect the photograph she said, why do you want to talk to me? And the photographer said, where did you get this photograph? And she told how she'd held the camera against the window of the plane and how the storm had stopped as soon as she took the photograph. And the photographer and his family all became Christians that afternoon. It was originally a colour photograph.

I've only managed to get it on black and white in this transparency, but this was how the photograph turned out. I don't think you'll be able to see the face. You will one day.

But that was what the camera saw, she didn't. A figure in perfect peace in control of the situation. I have only once in my life had the sheer privilege of having a vision of Jesus.

I saw him. I can't describe his face to this day, but just to know that he was there and he was real. But one day we shall see him and see his face and we shall be like him for we shall see him as he is.

Well John had that vision, but it was frightening as I told you last night. He fell in a dead faint and a well-known voice said, don't be afraid, I was dead and now I am alive forevermore. You know of every other great world leader, every other founder of a religion, you have to say they were alive and they are now dead forevermore.

Only of Jesus can you say he was dead and is alive forevermore. Confucius is dead, Buddha is dead, Muhammad is dead, but Jesus is alive. Well, that overwhelming vision was followed by the order to write some letters down, and John was simply the secretary to take them down.

There are seven letters, each with seven parts to the letter, and they are addressed to seven churches. That's not a coincidence. Seven is the perfect number to God.

He does everything in sevens. Creation was complete in seven days. You find seven all the way through the book of Revelation as we'll see.

But here are seven letters to seven churches and each has seven parts to it. Before we do that, I want you to realize that the places to which he wrote were all real places. One of the great joys of taking people out to see these places and to praise God in each was the joy of seeing their faces as they understood it really did happen.

I'm afraid too often we treat the Bible as a book of fairy stories for children, but they were real events. In fact, our Sunday school superintendent or director once said to me, David, I can tell which of our Bible school teachers you have had to Israel with you and which haven't. I said, how do you tell? He said, it's not because they say, when I was in.

Though a lot of people have been to Israel they can't deny the temptation of saying, when I was in Galilee, when I was in Jerusalem. But he said, it's not that. He said, it's the tone of voice in which they tell the story from the Bible that has completely changed.

I said, what do you mean? He said, well the teachers who haven't been to Israel, they have the tone of voice as if it's not really true. Now children, I'm going to tell you about a man called Daniel who was thrown into a den of lions. There's a kind of tone of voice when you tell children a story that isn't true.

But he said, the people you've had to Israel and come back, they use the same tone of voice as if they were describing Saturday's football match. I found that a remarkable comment and observation on his part. One of the reasons I took people out to Israel from our church regularly until two-thirds of them had been out with me, and they said they learned more in two weeks from me out there than six months back home.

I wasn't sure that that was a compliment, but anyway. Because it all suddenly became real. The dust, the smells, it all brought it down to earth, out of the stained-glass window.

These were all real places. For example, here's Ephesus and they have reconstructed the facade of the library in Ephesus that had thirty thousand volumes. But to give you an idea of what Ephesus was like underneath the surface, there is an underground passage tunnel from the library across to this corner where there was a brothel full of prostitutes.

Husbands used to say to their wives, I'm just off to the library to change my library book, and straight through the tunnel. In fact, you can still see the prostitutes' advertisements scratched into the marble. So though on the surface it was a cultured, wealthy, marvellous city, underneath it was foul, it was corrupt.

That was true of this whole area. And here were little churches struggling against all this culture, all this immorality, all this idolatry. But there's Ephesus and you can still walk down the main street.

And when we were out there, the film crew decided they would like to film it from the air. And for only fifteen pounds they hired a little plane on a nearby airfield to go up and photograph it for us. And they got up there and when they looked down, to their astonishment, Ephesus was empty.

Now it's usually crowded with thousands of tourists, but it was empty. And then they saw one woman walking down this street and they flew low and waved to her and she waved back. And then to their horror they noticed there were dozens of guns pointing at them, a whole circle of men with guns all round Ephesus were pointing at the little plane.

And it was Hillary Clinton who was walking through Ephesus and they hurriedly beat a retreat before they were shot down. But there it was, she wanted to see it as well. Here is Sardis and they had a huge temple of Diana with stone columns ninety feet high.

There are only one or two of them still standing. But what moved me so greatly in Sardis was that at the edge of the temple of Diana, this magnificent ninety feet high columned façade, there was a little brick building. And when I went into it I realized it was a Christian church.

And after the great temple was no longer used for pagan worship, the Christians built a little brick building where they worshipped and that went on far longer than the pagan temple. This happened all over this area when the Christian church grew and all these pagan temples fell into ruin. Now what have we got up here? Philadelphia.

And these are the remains of the Christian church in Philadelphia. There's just a great pillar still standing of the ancient church. And do you know it was in the letter to Philadelphia that Jesus said, he who overcomes I will make him into a pillar in the church of his God and never to be removed.

And all that's left of the church there is the pillar. Interesting. Here's Laodicea.

I'm going to tell you much more about that place later, but for the moment I want you to notice that big rock with a hole in it. That's part of an aqueduct of lukewarm water, but I'll tell you all about that later. There's Laodicea.

Nobody lives there now. Down below we've got Thyatira, and once again there are ruins of the Christian church that was built in Thyatira. In all seven places there's no church now except in Smyrna.

As I told you last night, that is a suffering church in modern Turkey. We've got Smyrna up here, and this is a picture of the ancient marketplace. But above Smyrna there's a huge hill crowned with temples and castles and it's literally called the Crown of Smyrna.

So when Jesus wrote to the people of Smyrna he said, I will give you the crown of life. The letters show that Jesus not only knew everything that was happening in each church, he knew all about their city and their situation and the pressures on them and their circumstances. And here's the last one, which haven't I

forgotten? There's Pergamum.

This is on top of that thousand-metre Sugarloaf Mountain, and they carted the stone all the way up and built these magnificent... the size of them is overwhelming. Now all this pagan culture now lies in ruins. It was replaced by the church which spread from what is now Istanbul, used to be Byzantium, and these were Byzantine churches.

But when Constantine took it over he changed the name to Constantinople and moved the headquarters of the Roman Empire from Rome to Constantinople. So it was from there that these churches came. It's fascinating to go and look at all this.

But now let's get to the seven letters. We really must get down to that. Time marches on, doesn't it?

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