



REVELATION

THE LORD OF THE CHURCH

REVELATION 1-4

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SERMON SERIES & BIBLE STUDY GUIDE
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Introduction

If Jesus were writing to All Saints Peckham today what would He say?

That's the question I'm praying that this series teases out over and over again. Our God Jesus is a speaking God! The Greek word "voice" in 1:12 is pronounced "phone-ay" – and our God is always communicating with, caring for, and speaking to His churches throughout the world. His phone lines are ALWAYS open. What is He saying to us?

When we get to chapters 2-3 we'll read these words 7 times: **"whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches."** And so will you, in your personal reflections, and in your home groups this term, pray with me that we'll all, with one accord, have attentive listening ears, hearts and minds. Let's use this opportunity to let Jesus speak into all that is going on at All Saints Peckham. Amen.

Firstly though, we need to appreciate that when studying Revelation we're studying apocalyptic literature. 'Apocalypse' comes from the Greek word 'unveiling' – I like to think of curtains being pulled back. So, imagine you're at the theatre, the big theatre curtains are closed. You presume there's some action going on behind the curtains, but it's only when they're pulled back that you see, yes there is a whole world of script and drama behind the curtains. At first it doesn't make immediate sense, but after a while you're enthralled. Revelation is a bit like that, it's a glimpse the Apostle John has, whilst exiled on the Island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea. He gets a glimpse of all God has, is, and will continue to do behind the scenes in the spiritual dimensions.

And, it's worth a pause just here. I just said has, is and will do. So note, this isn't just about what God has done in the past (people call this a preterist view). Neither is this simply about what God will do in the future (people call this a futurist view). This is about all time because our God is the beginning and the end! That means that Revelation has something present to say to every generation, but also that we need to be super careful in pinning certain events or characters from Revelation down to specific people or events in history.

The hope of this series is to focus in on the Letters to the Churches in chapters 2-3, but you'll have noticed that I've included chapter 1 and 4 in this series too. Why? So that you might appreciate all the more that Jesus is the Lord of the Church. If anyone has the right to speak into the life of our church then it's Him.

Chapter 1 makes it clear that John's been exiled on Patmos due to a period of persecution. Church tradition, on the whole, believes this to be John the Apostle, known as a prominent figure in early Christianity, who therefore can simply introduce himself as John. Similarly, it's widely held that this persecution came at the hands of the Roman Emperor Domitian placing the writing of Revelation some time around 95-96 AD. John was an old man. But I share these dates, not necessarily because it matters when this was finally written, but more because this 'John' was experiencing real suffering. We all, at times, experience real suffering. And, if you've experienced acute suffering you'll know how easily it is to be trapped by it, mentally and physically. John's vision shows us what God is doing behind the scenes of our suffering. It reminds us that victory is ours, and that suffering will not, and therefore does not, need to define us. John teaches us the beauty of allowing the reality of the supernatural to seep into our present thought patterns, especially when our present feels a bit gloomy.

Chapter 4, despite opening up a new section of Revelation all about the One who has authority to open up highly secretive seals – is also a great book end to the Letters to the Churches in chapters 2-3. If we were ever tempted to think, “Who is this telling the church to do this or that? Who do they think they are?” Well, chapter 4 answers that kind of response with absolute clarity. This voice, this “phone-ay” is the Lord God who all of heaven never stop praising with the words, “Holy, holy, holy...” It would be good for us all to think a little bit more about the scene in heaven. Especially when life feels tough in the present!

So, a brief introduction to chapters 2-3 then. For anyone who’s ever read Revelation you’ll know that numbers are deeply significant through their symbolism. For example: the number 12 signifies the number of tribes in the Old Testament, and the number of Apostles in the New Testament. Therefore, when we read numbers like 144, or 144,000 we recognise that this is going to symbolise a full number of all God’s people, from all generations. Similarly, it becomes apparent that the number 7 signifies perfection. Which is why the number 6 conveys upset, that feeling of just falling short, and which is why the number 666 is not a good one at all – it’s sad, sad, sad – note the triune repetition!

Anyway, although we largely evade the confusing number symbolism in chapters 1-4, I stress numbers mainly because in chapters 2-3 we have 7 letters to the churches. And remember 7 signifies perfection.

The 7 churches: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea, were all in what would now be modern day Turkey. And yet, back then, there were at least 10 towns known to have churches.

This is important, and becomes ever clearer as we read on. These 7 churches have been picked to represent every church in the world. 7 being that full perfect number, and Jesus knows everything there is to know about every single church on planet earth, demonstrated to the finest detail in the 7 churches we'll be studying.

Picking up the imagery from chapter 1 – the lampstands are the churches. Jesus walks among them all. He is familiar; examining and caring for them all. He knows all about All Saints, what has happened, what is happening, and what will happen. We, like every local church, are His. All Saints Peckham is His church. And therefore, we don't primarily ask what's important to us, or even what's important regarding our societal standards. We ask: what's important to Him?

Finally, as you read through each of these 7 letters, notice the repeated pattern:

- A name of Jesus
- An encouragement from Jesus
- A warning from Jesus (5/7 of the letters)
- A call to repentance
- A reward

Yes, this series has been titled 'The Lord of the Church', but it could've just as easily have been titled 'The Judge of the Church.' For we learn that what happens in and through a local church matters a great deal – it's as serious as life and death, but all too often gets missed due to a misplaced hyper-focus on things like nice coffee being served. Wonderfully though, in all 7 churches, even those that seemed all but lost, there is always a promise to the one "who conquers" – our God is overflowing with grace.

Please do make the most of the space for notes included in each session, either during the sermon on Sunday, during your own time midweek, or during your home groups. And allow God's repetition to sink in and change you: these 7 letters proclaim 7 times the big idea of the entire book of Revelation, namely that we Christians are conquerors because Jesus the Lamb of God has won the victory.

Session 1: The Church Key Holder

[Revelation 1]

This is both a revelation from Jesus (1:1) and of Jesus. And what an important chapter it is – how many titles of Jesus can you count? And what about the way He’s described? There’s a sharp, double-edged sword coming out of His mouth, and His eyes are like blazing fire. This is a great corrective for any Christmas and Easter Christians who either focus solely on a cute but helpless baby, or a noble but helpless man pinned to a cross. John gives us the full picture, and understandably this living Jesus has to reassure John, “Do not be afraid...”

Study Questions:

- Find as many titles of Jesus as you can. Which moves you the most and why?
- If coming out of Jesus’ mouth there’s a double edged sword, what do you think we should expect when listening to Him?
- How do vv.5b-8 helpfully reframe your life and any hope that might have been dashed through suffering?
- What do you make of every church having an angel? Every nation? Every individual? Is it something you’ve ever thought about before?

Session 2: To the church in Ephesus

[Revelation 2:1-7]

Ephesus was probably the largest city of the 7 churches mentioned, and it's believed John himself was a bishop there for many years. This makes perfect sense of the themes of zeal and love in this letter: zeal – John was a “son of thunder”, and love – John was “the disciple whom Jesus loved.” They had a zeal for the truth, it was said by Ignatius that no unorthodox sect could get a hearing among her members. But they'd become loveless. And we learn here that Christ is just as concerned about love as He is truth – it's not one or the other; we need both. In Spirit and Truth! It's worth mentioning the Nicolaitans here, whom we know very little about. They're mentioned again in v.15 in the context of the sin of Balaam, and we know from Numbers 25 & 31 Balaam's temptations were that of persecution or seduction. The spirit of Balaam wildly attacks the church of today too – the Devil has a pretty boring script, and yet we seem to fall into the trap far too often.

Study Questions:

- Why should the particular personal title Jesus shares in v.1 cause them the church in Ephesus to listen?
- How do you think the title Jesus uses for Himself relates to the warning He gives them in v.4?
- In what ways do you think the Church of today is caught up in the tension between truth and love? What lessons can we learn from Ephesus here?

Session 3: To the church in Smyrna

[Revelation 2:8-11]

Interestingly Smyrna is the only one of the seven churches mentioned where a thriving city still exists – Izmir. Hundreds of years before John wrote these words Smyrna had been destroyed by the King of Lydia. It had then been rebuilt beautifully with an excellent harbour on the Aegean Sea, boasting all sorts of temples, libraries and stadiums, and supposedly being the birthplace of Homer. At that time Smyrna was known for having an exceptionally strong relationship to Rome. Join that with the fact that a large number of Jews lived in Smyrna hoping to become established there then the themes of the letter begin to make more sense. Jesus talks of “dying then coming back to life,” like the city herself, resurrected from the scrapheap. Similarly, He talks about their sufferings, and in church history we learn of Polycarp, who refused to bow down to Rome as Lord, and who became the 12th martyr at Smyrna. History records that Jews joined everyone else there in hostility and in finding the wood needed to make the pyre for Polycarp’s martyrdom! Finally, this letter is one of only two where Jesus mentions no faults.

Study Questions:

- Jesus highlights no faults for this church, and yet life there seems super challenging – what does that tell us about what being a ‘successful’ church looks like through His eyes?
- How do you think Jesus’ personal title and the reward He offers are bespoke for Smyrna? What do you think He might be saying to All Saints at the moment?
- How does remembering Satan is called the Accuser (12:10) help you to understand vv.9-10.
- We didn’t consider the number 10 in our introduction, but it’s used throughout the Bible and specifically in Revelation to symbolise something’s scope and magnitude. With that in mind, do you find v.10 comforting or challenging ?

Session 4: To the church in Pergamum

[Revelation 2:12-17]

In Greek the name Pergamon means “citadel”. And Pergamum was an impressive city sitting on top of a hill about 1000ft in height. It was also the first city in Asia to build a temple dedicated to the worship of a living Roman ruler (“to the divine Augustus and the goddess Roma”), pipping even Smyrna to the post. It’s also widely believed that parchment was invented there when a supply of papyrus ran out. Perhaps this makes sense of Jesus’ description “of the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword” – both an acknowledgement that He is the original communicator, and that the sword of ultimate justice belongs to Him, not to any imperial courts on the earth belong. We’re told twice that Satan lives in Pergamum, which perhaps is a play on words with it being Satan’s citadel, but either way Christians here are undergoing intense persecution in a way none of the other churches have experienced so far.

Study Questions:

- We know very little of Antipas. A particularly gruesome early legend concludes that he was slowly roasted to death during the reign of Domitian. How does his brief mention help you appreciate Matthew 25:23 all the more?
- Is it sinful to live where Satan lives? What does it mean to be in the world but not of the world?
- You might want to read Numbers 25 & 31. There Balaam becomes a prototype of all corrupt leaders who lead people astray through compromise. What’s the issue in Pergamum? What are the issues for the Church today?
- “There are some among you” (v.14)... “repent therefore!” (v.16) – what do you think these verses are saying about unity in the body and accountability?
- How do you think Jesus’ rewards in v.17 relate to the battles the church in Pergamum was facing?

Session 5: To the church in Thyatira

[Revelation 2:18-29]

The church in Thyatira, I think it's fair to say, receives the sternest rebuke. Under Roman rule from 190BC it had fast become a commercial city attracting a high concentration of specialised guilds and unions for various trades like potters, bronze-smiths and dyers. We read in Acts 16 that "Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira," and it's highly likely that Lydia traded in 'Tyrian Purple', which was the costliest and fanciest, so presumably the high and mighty would've known Thyatira for its excessive shopping mall! Anyway, it's Christ's description of the church here which is most worrying. He writes (v.16), "you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet." One just has to skim read 1 Kings 16 - 2 Kings 9 to see how much damage the wicked wife of King Ahab wrought on Israel; constantly luring Israel into religious syncretism with the Canaanites. Enticing them away spiritually through physical idolatrous worship: either sexually or through food. The danger in Thyatira is not from without, it's from within. The church are giving a Jezebel-like woman, whoever she was, a podium. And, it's possible that "Satan's so-called deep secrets" involved her promoting the church to compromise - for respect in the city she encouraged full participation in all the guild ceremonies even when they were pagan and involved immoral sexual practices. I once heard an Anglican chaplain, donned with a clerical shirt, proclaim from the pulpit in a top English boarding school that there are many ways to God. Here Christ's words are clear - have nothing to do with such teaching.

Study Questions:

- In the Thyatira there was a large Temple to the pagan sun-god Apollo, guardian of the city and patron of all the guilds. To whom does our society most pay homage? And how do you think Christ's self-description here boosts our security in Him?
- How does this letter tease out some of the themes of Hosea 2?
- How do vv.21-22 reframe how we speak of repentance & urgency?
- How does Christ's reward cosmically smash any guild recognition, or any other successes we might achieve in life?

Session 6: To the church in Sardis

[Revelation 3:1-6]

Christ's words to the church in Sardis remind me of His encounter with the fig tree outside the Temple, "he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs." (Mark 11:13). The tree gave the appearance of being full of tasty fruit, but upon closer inspection there was nothing, just leaves. Similarly, this church looked alive and kicking, other churches were asking the team at Sardis to come along and share tips about church growth and how to provide a warm welcome. But like with the fig tree, looks can be deceiving, and Christ who can see past any false veneer says: "but you are dead. Wake up!" As an aside it's apt for Christ to talk about stealthily coming like a thief in the night at Sardis, because more than once the city's impregnable citadel was captured through unexpected attacks when its defenders were sleepy and lacked vigilance. Beware any church that thinks those thoughts: "we've arrived..." or "what else is there for us to do?"

Study Questions:

- Here Jesus' self-description reminds us of the 'control room' scene John sees in 1:20. When everyone else thinks they're great why might this self-description be particularly poignant for Sardis?
- Think of the churches deemed 'successful' in any Christian magazines we might read. Do they share any similarities? How do we define church success, and how does v.4 act as a corrective here?
- As a church, what steps would have to occur for us to become sleepy? And, where does the notion of being versus doing fit in?
- What one step could you take this week in walking more closely with Jesus?

Session 7: To the church in Philedelphia

[Revelation 3: 7-13]

Here we come to the second of the 7 churches that receives no fault. And, yet like at Smyrna, it's clear that the church in Philadelphia have been undergoing verbal oppression from Jews at the local synagogue. One reminisces a little of what Jesus experienced at the hands of the Pharisees, "you blasphemers... he is possessed by Beelzebub..." And so here, Jesus calls these Jewish accusers at Philadelphia "the synagogue of Satan." Satan being the Father of Lies. Those who through national identity and religious heritage thought that's what cemented their status as God's children will ironically acknowledge God's true children of faith, of which they're not! This is what the Apostle Paul was at pains to tease out: with all his Jewish pedigree he said that those things didn't matter at all - it's about circumcision of the heart, which makes the Church now synonymous with God's true Israel. Here this is linked with Christ's talk of the "Key of David", alluding to Isaiah 22:22, where back then Eliakim acted as door keeper/keyholder, only allowing the righteous entrance into the House of David. The righteous have always been 'righteous by faith'. Finally, it's worth noting that Jesus is always incredibly intentional. The reward of being a "pillar in the temple" would've struck a particular chord with those in Philadelphia who as recently as 17AD had experienced a devastating earthquake causing many to flee for their lives. The idea of permanence in the new Jerusalem would've spoken directly to their deepest longings.

Study Questions:

- How might the lies and accusations mentioned in v.9 have rocked the Philadelphian church's faith? What are the lies we're particularly susceptible to today: corporately and individually?
- In a world of fake news how does Jesus' self-description provide a sure foundation? What might wearing noise cancelling headphones tuned into Jesus' voice practically look like in our day to day lives?
- How do Jesus' rewards here speak directly to those Christians who feel: powerless in a domineering secular society? belittled by family and friends around them? worthless because they haven't succeeded on the treadmill of life like some of their contemporaries?
- What's the encouragement and the challenge of Jesus speaking about "placing an open door before them?"

Session 8: To the church in Laodicea

[Revelation 3:14-22]

Laodicea was a wealthy city. Tacitus wrote after a big earthquake in 60AD, "Laodicea arose from the ruins by the strength of her own resources, and with no help from us [speaking of Rome!]." With reference to Christ's words to the church two points are worth noting about the city. Firstly, Laodicea had become famous for producing a black glossy wool enabling them to produce a sought-after tunic called the trimita. Even at the Council of Chalcedon in 451AD Laodicea was referred to as Trimitaria! It's striking that for all their fashionable attire Christ charges them to buy new clothes from Him because despite their fancy trimita they were spiritually naked! Secondly, and despite its wealth, it had a poor water supply. Its water was brought in via a system of stone pipes from a spring about six miles south. Therefore, it's quality and quantity could be questionable and intermittent. I'm certain the church there wouldn't have missed Christ's allegory about their spiritual health – it was like the dirty water trickling out from their taps, unsatisfying, and potentially making people sick!

Study Questions:

- What does it look like to be spiritually lukewarm? How does remembering that Christians are Christ's ambassadors on earth help reconcile the firmness of His words here?
- What do you think it would look like for us to be spiritually refreshingly cold or piping hot for Jesus?
- In what ways can our surroundings, including being involved in a large church, lead to self-delusion?
- We often use 3:20 in individual evangelism. In what ways is there an extra shock when we remember that this is primarily a picture of Christ knocking on the door of a church asking to be let in?
- How do you navigate the tension between love and rebuke/discipline (v.19)?

Session 9: The ultimate glory of Jesus

[Revelation 4]

I've included chapter 4 as the closing bracket of our studies on Christ's letters to the seven churches simply that we might remember He is the glorious One who has all authority in heaven and earth, and is therefore able to speak as He does to each and every church. Do read chapter 4 as a continuation of chapter 1, in that this is the same gracious invitation to John to peer behind the curtains of the physical present into the unseen heavenly places where both good and evil are seen for what they really are. And, it is abundantly clear throughout chapter 4 that just one ruler is on the throne. Again, what an encouragement to John in exile on Patmos, and what an encouragement to any Christian who's ever been maligned for bearing the name of Jesus. He rules and reigns. Hallelujah!

Study Questions:

- What do you think about John's description of the one on the throne? And what do you think it suggests about the limitations of our vocabulary in trying to describe God?
- What do you make of the 24 elders casting their crowns before the throne? In what ways does this image speak straight into the task of discipleship, and into the longing we have for justice in the world?
- How could reflecting on this chapter more regularly influence the direction of your life?
- The Westminster Shorter Catechism in part reads: "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever." It's not too dissimilar from v.11. In what ways are you on board with this?

