

Explore: Let them hear

July 13, 2015

• *The Explore the Bible lesson for July 26 focuses on Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 26-28; 3:5, 12, 21.*

Believers overcome this world through faith in Jesus Christ—a point that becomes crystal clear in Revelation 2-3 in the address to the seven churches of Asia. Remember, these churches actually existed and would have been quite familiar with the life, writings and ministry of John. Each church had significant issues about which God offered corrective measures.

Keep in mind, however, these seven churches also represent the local church today. God's word not only applied in the first century church, but also applies to all churches that claim to follow Christ today.

Each address follows a basic pattern of salutation, commendation for faithfulness and obedience, accusation of disobedience, a corrective, a promise of reward or blessing, and an invitation to listen and understand Jesus' words with spiritual insight. Consider the issues being addressed in the emphasized passages for this lesson.

The church at Smyrna

The church at Smyrna had a long and rich history among believers. One of the great scholars of Christian history, Polycarp, ministered there. Yet, Smyrna was not a popular place for Christians in ancient Rome. Believers had to live in abject poverty and were labeled by Jews as practitioners of an illegal religion. Jesus, however, called the believers rich. He also called them to be faithful even unto death for 10 days—a number significant in apocalyptic literature for meaning a completed time in human terms. The persecuted and faithful believers also were promised a crown of life, a special crown awarded to those victorious in the ancient Olympics.

The church at Pergamum was positioned in a hotspot of Roman culture and style. The residents of Pergamum were among the first to worship the Roman emperors, and Jesus chillingly referred to the city as Satan's hometown. Jesus criticized the believers there for holding to the teachings of a group called the Nicolaitians, who were known for their libertinism and loose sexual ethics. If they did not repent, Jesus would fight against the disobedient ones with his sword, or the truth of God's word.

The church at Thyatira had great difficulty with compromising their Christian faith and ethics. Jesus accused them of having adultery with Jezebel, a reference to the Old Testament foil of Elijah who led God's people astray into sexual hedonism and idolatry. Those who remained faithful were promised divinely guided authority and "the morning star," which many scholars suggest means they will experience greater intimacy with Christ himself.

Rebuke of the church at Sardis

Jesus gave a brief but pointed rebuke of the church at Sardis. Sardis was a city of great wealth, and believers there gave the impression they were pure and holy. Yet, there were few who actually practiced what they preached. They walked around with soiled garments. Jesus, however, promised the faithful ones would receive white robes, symbolizing purity and hope.

The church at Philadelphia received a great commendation from the Lord. The city was well-known for its many deities and idol worship, but the believers there had remained obedient in spite of tremendous pressure. Jesus promised his protection and peace to them.

Many modern Christian churches widely recognize the Lord's rebuke of the church at Laodicea for being lukewarm. The rebuke makes even more sense when one considers the popular hot springs that flowed in the city.

Even so, Jesus stood at the door of the church knocking and awaiting an invitation to fellowship with the tepid congregation.

Having 'ears to hear'

Jesus spoke to each church about having ears to hear. Christ spoke these same words to his followers many times during his earthly ministry (Matthew 11:15; 13:9; Mark 4:9). The Lord not only was talking about attentiveness to his voice and the Bible, but also was talking about our sensitivity to the Holy Spirit in the midst of a chaotic culture. Even today, we cannot help but to consider the moral decay in our context. We are living in a time of tremendous cultural climate change. How will we respond? Perhaps we ought to take note of Jesus' forceful words to the churches of ancient Asia.