

The Letters to the Churches

SPEAKER	Matt Ryniker
DATE	Sunday, September 17, 2023
PASSAGES	Revelation 2:8-11; Revelation 3:1-6; Daniel 1:12-14; Daniel 3:17-18; Matthew 6:21; Exodus 32:32
MESSAGE	Begins at 1:04:35 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

Revelation was given to ordinary Christians to hold them steady — a call to stay loyal to Jesus regardless of circumstances, powered by a larger and larger picture of who he actually is. Two of his letters make the point by contrast: Smyrna is poor, slandered and about to be imprisoned, and Jesus calls it rich. Sardis has a fine reputation and no visible trouble, and Jesus calls it dead.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ◆ Revelation is not the property of a fringe movement or a political program. It is part of the inheritance of the whole church, given to encourage and strengthen God's people.
- ◆ When God explains an image in Scripture, that explanation can be taken to the bank. Where he does not explain, humility is the right posture — not cleverness.
- ◆ Everything promised in the seven letters shows up again, fulfilled, in the visions. The letters are not a preamble; they are the whole book in miniature.
- ◆ Poverty and tribulation went together in Smyrna for a practical reason: refuse the city's worship and you lose your trade, your customers and your safety net.
- ◆ "Synagogue of Satan" is not a slur about ancestry. *Satan* means accuser, and Jesus is telling a slandered church that he knows exactly who is lying about them.
- ◆ It is entirely all right to be motivated by reward. Jesus only insists that the treasure, the honor, and the one handing it out be his.

- ◆ Sardis proves that a reputation is not a condition. What a church was twenty years ago does not count for it now, and clinging to the story can be the very thing that keeps it asleep.
- ◆ Both churches face opposition. Smyrna's opponents are pagan neighbors; Sardis's opponent is Christ himself. Only one of those is survivable.

► 1:04:35

Matt has been working through Revelation for several weeks, and he admitted that when he first announced the plan he felt defensive before anyone had said a word. The book carries odd associations. So he keeps re-laying the foundation, and he did it again before reading a line.

Whose book this is

► 1:06:30

“This is part of the inheritance of the saints,” Matt said. “This is no specific fringe group or political motive group — this is not their property. This is ours.” Its first phrase names its subject: the revelation of Jesus Christ. As best he can tell, the book exists to inspire faithful endurance in the saints whatever their circumstances, and the engine driving that endurance is a greater and greater sense of how thoroughly Jesus is at the center of everything — which matters enormously to a church that is cowering, or tempted to.

How to read a book full of strange pictures

► 1:08:15

Before opening Revelation the church spent time asking how the Bible itself handles bizarre imagery. Pharaoh dreamed of cattle coming up out of the Nile, and the years of plenty and famine really arrived — but nobody had to watch for amphibious cows. The pattern holds: God shows something strange, and where he supplies the interpretation, that interpretation is solid. Matt counted roughly fourteen such places in Revelation. Everything else he holds open-handed.

► 1:09:18

“There were people who memorized the Torah and were super expert in Hebrew and Hebrew customs who stood right in front of Jesus and missed him,” he said. It is not a matter of being smart enough. Two things anyone can do: find where the text explains itself, and notice where it deliberately reaches back into the Old Testament, then go ask what that meant the first time. The call for discernment that closes each letter — *he who has an ear, let him hear* — belongs to the same tradition as

Isaiah's commission to a people who hear and do not hear. Strange imagery is part of how God gets the attention of people who are not paying attention.

The shape of a letter

► 1:10:51

Each of the seven follows a rough outline: John is told to write to the angel of the church — a job description, Matt noted, not a species, since Scripture lets a man, a celestial being or even a donkey speak on God's behalf. Jesus then describes himself in terms that fit what he is about to say. Then the commendation. Then the accusation. Then a call to repent or to hold fast, a call for discernment, and a promise to the one who conquers. Not every letter carries all seven parts — some get no commendation, some get no charge laid against them.

The letters are the whole book in miniature

► 1:14:25

This was the part Matt said he needed help to see. False apostles are named in the letters; the true apostles' names are on the foundations of the New Jerusalem. Churches are faltering lamps here; there God himself is the light. Here the church struggles with purity; there the bride is stunning. Promises made in the letters — the tree of life, dining with Jesus, a place in the temple, a new name, white clothing, protection from the second death — all come back fulfilled in the visions.

"Here is a call for the endurance of the saints" is stated plainly twice in the middle of those visions, in case the pictures lose you.

► 1:17:56

His clearest example: Thyatira is rebuked for tolerating a false prophet Jesus calls Jezebel. The queen of that name married into Israel, brought her idolatry, killed prophets, and at the end painted her face, looked out a window, was thrown down and eaten by animals. Later in Revelation a woman decked out in finery says "I sit as a queen, I am no widow", feasts on the saints, and meets the same end. The letters and the visions are saying one thing in two registers.

Smyrna: poor, and rich

► 1:20:34

“And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: ‘The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life. I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.’”

REVELATION 2:8–9 ↗

► 1:22:05

The tribulation and the poverty are named together, and Matt thinks they are connected. Smyrna was devoted not only to Rome’s empire but to Rome’s religion, emperor worship included, and the city’s Jewish community had stopped sheltering Christians under its own respected antiquity. If you would not worship as your trade guild worshiped, you could lose the guild — and with it your work, your customers, your pension, and anyone who might help you in a bad month. Add looting and mob violence with no authority who cares that you were robbed, and poverty arrives fast.

► 1:23:15

“Synagogue of Satan” sounds like fighting words until you hear the word. *Satan* is Hebrew for accuser, slanderer, opponent. These believers were being accused and slandered, and Jesus opens by telling them he sees it. “Sometimes it’s really encouraging to know that the authority figure you care about most understands when someone’s lying about you,” Matt said. “People might slander you, but God knows what’s real.” His books are what everything will finally be graded by.

Ten days, like Daniel

► 1:24:35

“Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life... The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.”

REVELATION 2:10–11 ↗

► 1:25:52

Daniel and his friends were heroes of the faith to the early church, and “ten days” is a hint back to them — the kind of echo that is obvious if you live in the Old Testament and invisible if you do not. Taken to Babylon, pressed into the king’s service and the king’s food, Daniel asked to be tested for ten days so that everyone would know where his loyalty lay. His friends said the rest of it

in front of the furnace: our God is able to deliver us, but if not, we still will not bow. That, Matt said, is the comfort and the warning together: “Be faithful whether I rescue you or not.”

It is all right to want a reward

► 1:27:07

Jesus never motivates by failure and loss. He motivates by treasure, honor and reward — he simply insists the treasure be his kind, in his economy: “where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” The crown of life is not handed out lightly. To have Jesus stand before the Father and speak your name would be an incomparable honor — a true riches moment, and by his accounting Smyrna is not losing at all.

Sardis: a reputation for being alive

► 1:28:38

“I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent.”

REVELATION 3:1-3 ↗

► 1:29:41

Jesus fits his self-description to the church. To Smyrna, facing death, he is the one who died and came to life — not asking them to go anywhere he has not already been. To Sardis he is the one holding the seven stars, which chapter one has already identified as the angels of the seven churches. “I am the top CEO of this whole operation,” Matt paraphrased. “These are my lampstands. This is my church. I am running the show.” And then: you have a reputation for being alive, but you are dead. Matt was honest that he is not sure he could have taken in the rest of the letter after a line like that.

► 1:31:38

Wake up means pay attention, watch out — which is not what you say to a lost cause. Perhaps there had been a remarkable beginning, a story everyone still tells, and things changed spiritually without anyone admitting it. Strengthen what remains. Even the prophets, who regularly announced that it was too late, kept calling for repentance anyway, because God is generous.

Soiled garments and the book of life

► 1:32:13

“Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy. The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels.”

REVELATION 3:4-5 ↗

► 1:34:58

White garments are later explained as the righteous deeds of the saints; the contrast is soiled cloth, something meant to provoke disgust. The book carries its own history. After the golden calf, Moses told God to forgive Israel or else blot him out of the book he had written — forgive them, or take me with them. The same book appears in Psalm 69:28 and Daniel 12:1: to be in it is to belong to him, to be alive, to be able to stand in front of him.

An odd couple

► 1:35:46

Smyrna gets only commendation; Sardis gets none. And notice that Sardis has no reported trouble with its neighbors — possibly because it found a way to live more safely among them. Opposition comes either way. The difference is the source: Smyrna’s opponents are pagan, and Sardis’s opponent is Christ. Matt reached for David after the census, given his choice of judgments: “Let us fall into the hand of the Lord, for his mercy is great.” If Christ says he opposes you, the instinct is to hide. Walking straight into his arms is the right move.

“It doesn’t matter what was a long time ago. It doesn’t matter what our reputation as a church was in the past,” Matt said. “What good did it do the church in Sardis that they had a great reputation? Who cares. In fact it might have done some negative, because you could cling to it and lie to yourself.”

How do you get the attention of people who aren’t paying attention?

► 1:39:05

This was the question Matt kept circling, out of his years as an algebra teacher and his years as a parent. Make a general announcement and the people who comply are the people who were already

listening. Send the company-wide email and the ones who needed it did not read it. So he asked it of himself: what would it take for God to speak to me where I am not listening to him?

► 1:41:05

He declined to supply the applications. We want to be Smyrna even though it is harder — motivated by his approval, his glory, his reward. The pull toward Sardis is the pull toward coasting on reputation and easing into whatever draws no opposition. He left the room with the question rather than a list: how is God prompting you to respond?

One more thing

► 1:42:39

He had already prayed when he came back to the microphone, unwilling to end where he had ended. The entire reason Jesus writes to Sardis is that he wants them back. “He’s the one that pursues us when we’re out of whack. The reason why he chastises is because he loves us. On the other end of every chastisement is an invitation to restoration, an invitation to fellowship. That is his goal.”

► 1:43:22

Then a story from campus outreach at UT that week, with a person raised Christian who now calls themselves Buddhist and opened by asking why Matt was still a Christian. Isn’t it selfish to believe all this is for humanity’s sake? “If God made everything and it belongs to him, it’s for his glorious sake. I’m not the one at the center of the universe — he is.” Then doesn’t that make him selfish? “If he’s the best thing around, then him giving himself to us is the best thing he could do.” Both times the answer came back: yeah, I guess. So the closing line was not a threat. “He wants us to repent and fall into his arms. He doesn’t want to smash us to pieces. Compromise might feel good, but there’s nothing like walking in his wholeness.”

FOR FURTHER STUDY**SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE**

- Revelation 1:1
- Genesis 41:1–7
- Isaiah 6:9–10
- Revelation 14:12
- Revelation 2:20
- 2 Kings 9:30–37
- Revelation 18:7
- Revelation 2:8–9
- Revelation 2:10–11
- Daniel 1:12–14
- Daniel 3:17–18
- Matthew 6:21
- Revelation 3:1–3
- Revelation 1:20
- Revelation 3:4–5
- Exodus 32:32
- Psalm 69:28
- Daniel 12:1
- 2 Samuel 24:14

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. Jesus tells Smyrna he sees the slander against them before he tells them anything else. Where do you most need God to be the one who knows what is actually true about you?
2. Smyrna's poverty came from refusing the worship its city took for granted. What does loyalty to Jesus cost you in an ordinary week — socially, professionally, financially?
3. Matt said it is fine to be motivated by reward as long as the treasure and the honor are his. Whose approval have you actually been working for lately?
4. Sardis was living off a reputation. What story about your past faith — or this church's past — are you tempted to rest on instead of asking how things are right now?
5. Matt refused to hand out applications and asked instead how God was prompting each person to respond. What is your answer, and what will you do about it this week?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Matt Ryniker is Hope Chapel's senior pastor — his own description of the job — and reports to the church's governing board, who he cheerfully calls his boss. He and his wife Mandy have been held up from Hope's own pulpit as an example to the congregation. He spent a stretch of his working life as a public school teacher, and he still teaches the parent dedication classes where families commit to raising their children to follow Jesus — a theme that runs straight into this message.

Watch the full message:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_0SPC5VmkYI&t=3875s

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.