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# Revelation

## 2020 - Lesson

### 2A

## Chapter 2:1-7

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- A proper study of Revelation is not an exercise in mysticism or speculation
  - It's a practice of careful observation of text combined with a systematic searching of Scripture
    - Last week in Chapter 1 we saw just how systematic our study could be when we observed what John wrote
    - First, we noticed that John was told to write what he sees, not what he is told
  - And that detail explained why this book is so challenging to understand
    - Normally, interpreting the Bible means interpreting explanations
    - But in this case, John simply provides descriptions of events that he sees
    - Which means we must first makes sense of what he describes, and then we have to interpret the meaning of his visions
  - This style of Scripture puts a premium on our skills of observation and on our knowledge of Scripture generally
    - Our observation skills will help us makes sense of the scenes John describes to us
    - And our knowledge of the Bible comes to bear on interpreting the visions
  - And that's the second thing we learned last week...the meaning of the symbols used in this book will be found somewhere in Scripture
    - If the meaning of a symbol is important to the story, then the Bible will have explained it somewhere for our benefit
    - And often that explanation will be found in the immediate context
- And then third and finally, we learned that the book itself has a very simple but important structure that will guide our understanding
  - That structure is provided in an outline that Jesus gave to John in Chapter 1
    - The outline is found in v.19, and we broke it down last week
    - But we had some unfinished business in it, so let's go back and begin our study tonight there

**Rev. 1:19** “Therefore write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after these things.

- John was told by Jesus to write this book in three parts
  - The first part was: write the things which you have seen
  - The second part is: write the things which are
  - And the third part is: write the things which will take place after these things
- Last week we identified the chapters of the book that correspond to each of these parts
  - And we did that through simple observation beginning with the tense of the verbs Jesus used
    - The first part Jesus called the thing which John had seen

- Jesus used a past tense verb, so Jesus was referring to things that John had already seen by the time we reach v.19
  - What had John seen by the time of Chapter 1:19?
    - The obvious answer is the things that took place prior to that verse, which are the things John described in Chapter 1
    - In other words, Chapter 1 is the first part of the book, the things John had seen
  - And what did John see? He saw Jesus in His resurrected, glorified form
    - And he saw the lampstands and the stars in Jesus' hand
    - He described all that he saw and how the vision came to him
  - And in all these details, John gives authority to what he writes, which was the point in Part 1
    - Beginning with the chain of custody and John's identity as an apostle and then moving to how John encountered Christ
    - Finally concluding with Jesus' appearance and His direction to John...by all these details we have confidence to accept John's testimony
    - If we accept the validity of Scripture at all, then we have equal reason to accept the truth of John's account
- Now we move to the things which are, and like Part 1 it's easy to identify which chapters are associated with Part 2
  - The second part must start in Chapter 2, since Part 1 only included the things that John had seen before v.19
    - So where does Part 2 end and Part 3 start in the text of Revelation?
    - The simple answer is that if we could identify where Part 3 started, then by a process of elimination we would know
    - By definition Part 2 ends where Part 3 begins
  - As we saw last week, there is an obvious clue in the text that tells us where Part 3 starts:

#### **Rev. 4:1 After these things I looked...**

- Jesus called Part 3 “the things which will take place after these things”
- And then we find those key words to start Chapter 4, which is not a coincidence....it's the marker we're supposed to notice
- They tell us that Chapters 2 & 3 are Part 2; the things which are
- But the term “are” poses some confusion for us at this point
  - That present-tense verb seems to suggest Jesus was showing John things that were only relevant in John's day
  - But that's not true...based on the outline Jesus gave us, the things of Part 2 must remain relevant until Part 3 begins
- Logically, the things which “are” (Part 2) will continue to be true (i.e., remain “are”)

until the things that will take place (Part 3) start

- Furthermore, when we look at what Chapters 2 & 3 contain, it makes more sense that Jesus called this section the things that “are”
- Because in these chapters we have letters written to the church, that is to you and me
- So Jesus’ counsel given to His church must remain true and in effect for as long as His church itself remains
  - So in John’s day, the letters Jesus wrote to the Church are the things that “are” for the church
  - Likewise, the letters Jesus wrote to the Church are the things that “are” for the church today
  - Only after the events described in Chapters 4 and onward begin can we say that the things that “are” have finished
- So let’s move into Part 2 and understand Jesus’ counsel to His Church, the things which are, seven letters written to seven churches of John’s day
  - Beginning with an understanding of how we must approach the interpretation of these letters
    - Based on how these letters are structured and what they contain, we must use three, complimentary methods of interpretation
    - All three methods are valid and each provides us with unique insight Jesus wanted us to have
  - First, we must read these letters literally, taking them exactly for what they say
    - They are real letters, written by Jesus through John’s hand
    - They had real audiences in mind, men and women who lived in John’s day
    - These letters made their way to their intended audiences in Ephesus, Smyrna, and elsewhere exactly as Jesus intended
  - And the things Jesus spoke to each of these churches were literally true for each community
    - Ephesus was standing fast against false teachers
    - Smyrna was suffering persecution, and so on
    - In that sense, the letters are specific and historical
  - But as we just learned, the letters are not merely historic in focus
    - The letters continue to have present-day significance (“are”) for the Church, even 2,000 years later
    - Moreover, we remember that Jesus gave us exactly seven letters, and the number seven in the Bible stands for 100%
    - So these letters were written to the entire church, not merely seven communities in ancient times
  - So we must also understand that these letters also speak to situations and perspectives that remain true throughout the time of the church
    - At every moment, somewhere in the world we can find a church community

- experiencing the same issues as Ephesus or Smyrna
    - There are always churches battling false teachers, persecution, apostasy, etc.
    - And these letters bring comfort, wisdom and correction to those situation just as they did in John's day
    - Therefore, the letters are universal and timeless in application
- But there is yet one more way we must understand these letters, and this third method is easy to overlook
  - We know the book of Revelation is prophecy, but the prophecy isn't limited to Chapter 4 and beyond
    - Every chapter in the book has a prophetic element
    - For example, though Chapter 1 recorded a moment that happened in the past, nevertheless it included a prophetic detail
    - The appearance of Jesus in glorified form is prophetic in showing us Jesus' future appearance when He returns
    - In fact, that's the purpose of the entire book: to show us the events that will accompany the second coming of Jesus
    - And every chapter contributes to that purpose in some way
  - So we must look for the prophetic elements in the letters given to the churches and by careful observation we find them
    - It requires we step back and gain an overview of all the letters
    - To do that, I use a simple graphic to represent Part 2 of Revelation, the things which are in Chapters 2 & 3
  - Let's start by noting the locations of these seven churches in John's day
    - They all existed in Asia Minor, present-day Southwest Turkey
    - Looking at them on a map reveals an interesting pattern
    - The order of the letters happens to proceed in a clockwise pattern
    - That pattern suggests that the letters are representative of the passage of time
  - Now a clever student of history might point out that mechanical clocks weren't invented until the 14th century
    - But sundials have been in use since 3,500 BC
    - And sundials track the movement of the sun across a clock face
    - When viewed from the North pole, the earth spins counterclockwise
    - And so sundials represent the procession of the sun clockwise, which is how Romans understood the movement of time
    - Later, the first clock makers chose to represent the passage of time in the same direction to match sundials of the day
- So the curious geography of these letters suggests they represent how the church changes over the passage of time during the times that "are"
  - In other words, the letters have a prophetic perspective that is symbolic and eschatological

- Eschatology refers to the study of the end of the age
    - And these letters point us to that time
    - How? They connect the dots between the events of John's day and the events of Christ's return
    - They tell us how Christ moves the world from His first coming to His Second Coming
  - And that's why Jesus called this period the times that "are" because they remain present day until we reach the events of the end
    - The first century church was in the same situation we are in now
    - Just as they were waiting for Christ's return so are we today
    - Chapters 4-22 detail how the final events of this age will go, how Jesus will return and what comes after that
    - While Chapters 2 and 3 explain the events that must take place between the first century and the end times
  - But in the way Jesus has crafted this prophecy, it wasn't immediately apparent to the Church that we should see the letters in this third sense
    - The eschatological quality of the letters remained hidden from the church for most of the past 2,000 years
    - Only in the past 150 years or so has the prophetic interpretation taken hold in the church
    - And let me show you why Christ intended it to be that way
- As we examine each of the letters, we're going to notice that the letters follow a very specific pattern
  - Each letter will have certain elements, and these elements are consistent across all seven
    - From that pattern, we will begin to see how each letter represents a period of church history
    - In other words, the entire period of time of the church residing on earth is represented by these seven letters
    - Not only does the number "7" symbolize 100% of the church, it also represents 100% of the church age on earth
  - We can represent the seven parts of the church age with a simple graphic
    - Each of the letters represent some length of time during the age of the church on earth
    - And collectively, all seven letters describe the total time (100%) of the church's existence on earth prior to Jesus' return
  - Looking at these letters in advance, we couldn't possibly know how long each of the seven periods would last
    - In fact, we couldn't even know that these letters represent periods of history at all
    - But with hindsight we can see how the contents of the letters align with events in history

- And by matching details of each letter with events in history, we can find the breaks between each letter
    - We can recognize the events that bring one of the seven periods to an end and the next one begin
- So a third way to interpret the letters is prophetic, recognizing that the letters stand for a period of history
  - And this perspective leads us to three fascinating conclusions
    - First, it explains why the prophetic interpretation eluded the church for most of the past 2,000 years
    - Because it required hindsight to appreciate it
    - Only by the nineteenth century did scholars start to notice the pattern and see the connection to the church age
  - Secondly, this perspective suggests that just as the Church had a beginning (at Pentecost) so it will have a conclusion in some sense
    - If Ephesus started the church age then Laodicea ends it
    - Which leads us to questions like how and why is the church ending and what does that mean for us?
    - And what comes next? The book of Revelation answers those questions
  - Finally, once we recognize that the church age has only seven stages, it becomes possible to understand how close we are to the end
    - If you told me we were living in stage 3 or stage 4, I would know we have a lot of time remaining until the end of the age
    - And yet that notion runs contrary to Scripture, doesn't it?
    - We can think of verses that remind us to be always prepared for the return of Christ because it is always imminent
  - And that's why this method of interpreting the letters to the churches was not revealed to the church until the nineteenth century
    - Because we are the period of the church age that needs to know about this pattern
    - And as we begin to study the letters you will soon see why
- So let's move now into the letters themselves, and the first one we study will set the pattern for all the rest

**Rev. 2:1** “To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands, says this:

**Rev. 2:2** ‘I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot tolerate evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false;

**Rev. 2:3** and you have perseverance and have endured for My name's sake, and have not grown weary.

**Rev. 2:4** ‘But I have this against you, that you have left your first love.

**Rev. 2:5** ‘Therefore remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place — unless you repent.

**Rev. 2:6** ‘Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

**Rev. 2:7** ‘He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God.’

- These seven letters are highly structured, and that structure repeats from letter to letter, and it makes it easier for us to study
  - The churches have names of cities, and the letters begin with salutations
  - Then Jesus offers commendations, condemnations, exhortations, promises and warnings
- So we will take each letter apart according to this structure and examine each letter from all three perspectives
  - We will look at each from the literal, historical perspective
  - The universal, timeless perspective
  - And finally, from the prophetic, eschatological perspective
- And we start with the name of each church and its historical setting
  - Ephesus was a port city located on the Mediterranean Sea
  - Its name meant “desirable” or “desired”
  - It was one of the chief seaports connecting the Eastern and Western ends of the Roman Empire
  - The tremendous flow of goods through this port helped make the city very wealthy
- Seaports bring ships and ships bring sailors and travelers, so this city featured many temples devoted to many Roman gods
  - The largest was the temple to Artemis or Diana filled with prostitutes
  - And in the midst of this hustling, bustling city we also have one of the largest most influential churches in the first century
  - It counted Paul, John and Timothy among its leaders over the years and it features prominently in Acts and the Epistles
- Jesus addresses the church by calling Himself the One with the seven stars in His right hand, walking among the seven golden lampstands
  - Here we see another of the key patterns in the letters, where Jesus assigns an element from John’s description in Chapter 1 to each church
    - The specific element Jesus selects for each church tells us something about that church’s situation
    - In this case, Jesus assigns the symbols of stars and lampstands
  - From our study last week, we learned that the imagery of stars represents angels



- under Christ's authority ministering to the saints
    - And the lampstands represent the church's role to represent the truth of Christ to the world, bringing light into darkness
    - The imagery of Christ standing in the midst of the lamps and holding the stars indicates His ruling authority over the Church
  - So the not-so-subtle reminder to Ephesus seems to be that Jesus is in charge and He still has His hand on the wheel
    - The Church is His and He commands it even from Heaven
    - He wants the church in Ephesus to keep that in mind, and it becomes clear as we look at what Jesus says to the church
  - Jesus starts with a commendation for this body, saying they toil away in perseverance doing deeds of one kind or another
    - Furthermore, they cannot tolerate evil men who come calling themselves apostles but are not
    - They test such men and find them to be false, so Jesus commends them for their commitment to true authority
    - Finally, they persevere and endure for the sake of the name of Christ without growing weary
- This church certainly seems to be a good example, and we can make a universal application to every church
  - Every church should test those who come in authority or teaching
    - In the case of someone calling himself an apostle, the test was whether they possessed the power of an apostles
    - Apostles were men commissioned by a personal appearing of Jesus Who appoints apostles personally
  - In the first century, an apostle possessed unique power and authority
    - Apostles had miraculous powers and authored Scripture according to the leading of the Spirit
    - Christ appointed the first twelve while He was alive, and He appointed more after He resurrected
    - But Jesus stopped appointing Apostles sometime in the first century, and the final apostle to die was John
  - And during that time, false men tried to call themselves apostles in the hope of obtaining positions of power over the church
    - But churches like Ephesus were careful and attentive to teaching, knew better than to buy such claims
    - If a man couldn't produce the miraculous signs common to all apostles, then the church knew these men were not true
    - They tested them, and when the men couldn't pass the test, they were put out of the church
  - Though apostles are no longer walking the earth, we still need to follow Ephesus' example in testing those who offer to teach us or lead us

- No one is perfect, but we look for good fruit in their lives and we test their teaching to the Bible
  - And when we do this, we please Christ, just as He commended those in Ephesus for the same
- Notice in v.6 Jesus says they hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans
  - Scholars debate the meaning of this statement
    - We know the name means “victorious over the people”, which suggests a movement to conquer the congregation
    - So many believe the Nicolaitans were introducing the heresy of a ruling class in the church called clergy
  - But the Bible never suggests nor supports such a separation
    - There is no such thing as clergy vs. laity
    - The body of Christ is one, and we are all priests the Bible says
  - Yes we have leaders in the church, but they are not especially holy nor do they guard the way to God for us
    - They simply serve the body in their gifting as we do in our gifting
    - They have authority and we respect that authority, but as individuals they are not set apart from the rest of us
  - Finally, we can learn a lesson from Ephesus’ perseverance and endurance in the work of serving Christ
    - Jesus notes they have deeds, and they accomplish these deeds consistently and without growing weary
    - That is a high compliment, because that’s a hard thing to do
    - Many of us are eager to jump into serving Jesus, but the real test of service is in sticking with that work
  - The Bible says endurance is the key ingredient to spiritual maturity and eternal reward

**James 5:11** We count those blessed who endured. You have heard of the endurance of Job and have seen the outcome of the Lord’s dealings, that the Lord is full of compassion and is merciful.

**Heb. 10:35** Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward.

**Heb. 10:36** For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised.

- So Ephesus is an example to us of discernment, unity and endurance
  - But all was not perfect in that church, because Jesus had some critiques to offer also
    - And in one of the most iconic and chilling statements in all the Bible, Jesus

- says this church had left its first love
    - The statement is so intriguing and at first it seems easy to understand
- Clearly, the “first love” of the church must refer to Jesus, since what other love comes before a believer’s love for Jesus?
  - Yet, we wonder how this could be true for a church that persevered for Christ’s name?
  - They resisted false teachers that tried to divide them, and yet they forgot what the church was all about?
  - How exactly did they lose their first love?
- The letter gives us a couple of clues to help us understand the situation, beginning with the description of Jesus
  - Jesus reminds the church He is the one ruling His church
  - And He ministers to His church by means of angels under His authority
- So we find this interesting dichotomy: the church was very resistant to false leaders and to those wishing to establish a special class of rulers
  - Yet Christ felt the need to remind them He was in charge
  - It would seem that their resistance to being led by false leaders had evolved into an unwillingness to be ruled by Christ either
- They left their first love in the sense that a teenager turns from obedience to defiance
  - They move from depending upon and appreciating a parent’s care and support, to chafing under that parent’s authority
  - They have left their first love in the sense that they forgotten the early days of that relationship and have taken it for granted
- A second clue to support this conclusion is found in the remedy Jesus gives the church in v.5
  - Jesus tells them to remember where they have fallen, and do the deeds they did at first
    - They are to think about their missteps and repent of those past mistakes
    - The call to repent means to reconsider their current path, back up and move in a better way
  - Jesus’ remedy is especially interesting when we remember He just commended them for their deeds so we know they were active
    - And yet that activity wasn’t the right activity, it wasn’t motivated by their love for Christ
    - In other words, somewhere along the way, this church community lost sight of why Christ put His church on earth
    - They left their first love, and church became about something other than Jesus and His Gospel
    - They were very busy and they endured in that work for the name of Christ, but they lost sight of why the work mattered

- Jesus is talking about one of the greatest threats to the mission of the church: the self-satisfied Christian
  - Being self-satisfied means finding satisfaction in the life you have rather than in the life Jesus desires we have
  - A self-satisfied Christian isn't necessarily someone who doesn't come to church to get involved in ministry
  - Remember, Ephesus was doing many deeds, Jesus said
- A self-satisfied Christian has forgotten Jesus is in charge, both of the church and of your life
  - You come to church every week, park in the same spot, say hello to the same people, sit in the same pew
  - You sing the same songs, recite the same prayers, hear the same vague motivational sermon every week, give the same amount of money
  - It's comfortable, it asks nothing of you and it's under your control
- And you've left your first love...you've forgotten why you do this thing we call church
  - Churches that leave their first love are churches that start clinics or schools as a means of outreach to the lost
    - But in time the work becomes merely about healing physical wounds or teaching earthly knowledge
    - They forget about the mission
  - And on an individual level, it looks like church programs that forget to share the Gospel
    - Or Bible classes or small groups that never actually read the Bible
    - Or men's and women's groups that fill their calendars with potlucks and horseshoes and never talk about Jesus
    - It's the mission of sharing Jesus with the world that's the reason we even get together in the first place...that's our first love
  - Think back to where you have fallen...when did it all just become about fellowship, routine and appearances?
    - And if you are a ministry leader or church employee, when did it just become about a job and a paycheck?
    - You may be busier than ever, but it's been a long time since Jesus has been controlling your calendar or setting your priorities
    - Your walk as a Christian is on automatic pilot, and Jesus says He has that against you
  - Remember He runs the Church, and since you are a member of the body, He runs your life too
    - But are you following Him? Are you listening to the Spirit?
    - When we follow Jesus, He brings us from horizon to horizon, from trial to trial, triumph to triumph
    - Following Jesus is never boring or routine, because Jesus won't let us find self-satisfaction...He wants us to grow

- Jesus is so serious about this concern that He tells His church there will be a penalty if they fail to heed His call to repent
  - In v.5 Jesus says I am coming to you to remove your lampstand out of its place unless you repent
    - We know the lampstand is a symbol representing the church itself
    - So to remove a lampstand must mean to bring a certain church body to an end
    - And since this church was the church of an entire city, Jesus is threatening to bring the church in that city to an end
  - Jesus wanted Ephesus to act in keeping with their name: desired
    - Jesus wanted the church to desire Him as Paul says:

**1Cor. 2:1 And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God.**

**1Cor. 2:2 For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.**

- There are a lot of things we can desire in our church life, but we can't leave Jesus behind and expect to continue serving Him
- So what happened? Did the church of Ephesus repent?
  - We can only assume not, because by the beginning of the second century, the city was in steep decline
  - Silt began to build up in the famous and busy harbor port causing the harbor itself to retreat from the city
- As the harbor moved farther and farther away from the city, it eventually lost its main source of income
  - And with the death of trading, the city was eventually abandoned
  - The ruins of Ephesus are now located miles inland rather than on the coast
  - As Jesus promised, He would bring an end to that lampstand, which reaffirms that He walks among His churches ruling
- Nevertheless, Jesus tells us that no matter what may happen to the Church in any one place, our personal relationship with Jesus doesn't change
  - In v.7 Jesus calls to all believers (those who have ears to hear) saying that the Spirit affirms to us that we will eat of the tree of life
    - Here's another pattern in all the letters...they all end with an encouragement to all believers to look forward
    - No matter what else may go wrong on earth in our various churches, our eternal future is secure
    - And in that eternal future, we will receive all that has been promised
  - In each of the seven letters, Jesus makes reference to some detail from the eternal realm that we will know in the future
    - Here it's a reference to the tree of life that we will all eat from in a day to come

- Rather than address the detail here, I'll save that for Chapter 22
- So we've looked at the first letter from a literal, historical perspective and from a universal, timeless perspective, but what about the prophetic perspective?
  - How does this church represent the first period of the church age?
    - Well first, it's easy to say this church represents the first age of seven since it's the first letter
    - That would mean that this is the letter that represents the nature of the church from the start of the church until some later point
  - We know the church officially started at Pentecost, based on the definition of a Christian Paul gives us in Romans

**Rom. 8:9** However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him.

**Rom. 8:14** For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.

- Those who have the Spirit of God living inside them are Christian, and sons and daughters of God
- And all who have the Spirit of God are considered part of one body called the church

**Eph. 4:4** There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling;

**Eph. 4:5** one Lord, one faith, one baptism,

**Eph. 4:6** one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.

- All those indwelt by the Spirit of God are part of the church
  - When you come to believe that Jesus is God and that He came to live and die as a man to save you from your sins
  - By His death He paid the price God demands for your sin and by His resurrection He proves He can give you eternal life
  - By your faith in that Gospel you are born again spiritually
  - And as a downpayment of that eternal future, God sends His Spirit to live in you joining you to all other believers in one body
- So the letter to Ephesus gives us a general overview of how the church collectively evolved in its earliest days
  - It started with its first love, fully aware that it was all about Christ and eagerly awaiting His return
    - Remember this commentary from Acts:

**Acts 2:41** So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls.

**Acts 2:42** They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

**Acts 2:43** Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles.

**Acts 2:44** And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common;

**Acts 2:45** and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need.

**Acts 2:46** Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart,

**Acts 2:47** praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.

- That's what it looks like when someone is living for Christ
- And in the first years of the church, people were living like there was no tomorrow on earth
- Because they expected Jesus to return right away, and when Jesus' return is first on your mind, then you give little thought to this world
  - They were spending their time continually in prayer, continually together, sharing all they had in common, selling possessions
  - That's the behavior of someone who knows it's all about Jesus
- But over time, as the church began to realize that Jesus' return might take longer than they assumed, things changed
  - And it had to...the church had to exist in the world
  - Which means it had to strike a balance between looking forward to an eternity with Jesus and living for today
  - That was the whole point of the Church remaining behind while Jesus departed... that we would witness to the world

**John 17:15** "I do not ask You to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one.

**John 17:16** "They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world.

- During the first century, the early church mirrored the things Jesus says to Ephesus in this letter
  - Generally, the church held to sound teaching, since the Apostles themselves were alive, teaching and leading the church
    - They resisted false doctrine while preserving the Apostles' writings to eventually form the NT canon
    - They did impressive works in moving the Gospel outward in a short time
    - The church spread as far as Rome and even Spain before the end of the first century

- It was also a church of perseverance against Jewish persecution and did not grow weary under their attacks
  - When Jewish persecution broke out in Jerusalem the church moved into the Diaspora
  - And later when Roman persecution broke out under Nero, the church maintained its witness even to the point of death
  - Though false teachers tried to infiltrate the church and establish unbiblical leadership at times, the church held strong
  - So the positive things Jesus said of Ephesus were generally representative of the nature of the early church overall
- But as the century progressed and the final apostle died, the church began to change in ways that also mirror Jesus' negative comments
  - Jewish Christians largely died out while pagans, Romans began to convert and enter the church by the thousands
  - These Gentile believers were far more willing than their Jewish predecessors to mix Christianity with Roman culture
- As a result, the church became a fixture of Roman society
  - In cities like Ephesus, the church found a place alongside Roman temples and government
  - And the believers remained fairly immature and carnal
  - We can see this clearly in the letters Paul wrote to one of the most Gentile and Roman churches of that day, Corinth
  - The believers were self-satisfied, busy building the church but much in the same way Romans built Roman society...
  - ...simply for its own sake
- So what did Jesus do to shake things up in His church? In Ephesus, the Lord took away the church's place
  - And for the church as a whole, the Lord took away the church's place of privilege and security in the Roman Empire
    - The Lord allowed sustained, widespread persecution to enter the church and it broke the church free from its self-satisfaction
    - No longer was the church complacent and comfortable nor could it find a place in Roman society
    - Instead it went underground and those who were not truly Christ's quickly gave up the game
  - What remained was a true, committed body that suddenly remembers what being a slave of Christ meant
    - And what it meant to suffer for Christ
    - And that leads us to the second church, the one called Smyrna, which means "death"
  - So what period of history do we assign to this first church letter?
    - The start date is easy, since it's the first period of the church and the church



started at Pentecost

- I'm going to use round numbers, since the exact dates is not known nor is it important
    - So we can say the Church started around 30 AD
  - But when does it finish? There is no exact science to selecting these dates
    - The goal is to anchor our dates by some historical event that ties to the detail of the letters
    - What event can mark the end of the first age of the church?
  - We know that the key shift between the first and second period is the rise of persecution
    - And when we study Smyrna next week, we will see that shift clearly
    - But there is no one day when persecution started, so we don't have a clear marker
- But there is one marker that clearly marks a turning point for the earlier church: the end of the apostles
  - When John died, the final apostle was gone and for the first time the church was without apostolic leadership
    - In their place we had something far more important and powerful to lead the church: the word of God
    - The apostles were the New Testament prophets who produced the New Testament canon
    - And once the last apostle, John, had written the final book of Scripture (Revelation) the need for apostles ended
  - Moreover, John's death at the end of the first century also coincided with the reign of terror brought by the Emperor Domitian
    - It ushered in a terrible period of Roman persecution that waxed and waned for the next two centuries
    - So based on those details, we can date the first period of Church history foretold by Jesus' letter to Ephesus to 30-100 AD
    - And we can call this period the Apostolic Age
  - So the age that bridges the church from Christ's First Coming to His Second Coming begins with the period of Ephesus
    - And next week we move to the second, third and fourth periods