



2014 Reflections on a Higher Call

From Lent to Pentecost:

Part 1



Welcome. Once again, Ash Wednesday heralds that winter is departing and spring will surely arrive. I grew up in a liturgical tradition that marked the church year by changing colors, candles, stoles and banners. I didn't understand the LIFE those rich symbols signify until I was introduced to the **real** Jesus. My life has included seasons of faithfulness, rebellion, abundance and drought. In all of them, even times of suffering, I have gradually "*tasted and seen that the Lord is good.*" (Psalm 34:8)

Why observe Lent? I once considered Lent a cheerless, legalistic observance—usually involving a diet of some kind; but viewed correctly, the Lenten season offers a 40-day period of preparation, restoration and refreshment by a loving God. Lent is not about gloomily giving up a guilty pleasure, but about creating the space for something new to happen.

Preparation. Advent and Christmas focus on Jesus' birth. Easter centers on Jesus' death and resurrection. Our vantage point will be Christ's kingdom, the "now" and the "not yet" of his rule. Near the end of the first century, Jesus sent an angel to the last living apostle to reveal "*the things that must soon take place*". We too are recipients of the promised blessing for those who hear and who keep the prophecies it contains.

Restoration. The Revelation was passed among seven churches along a postal route in Turkey. Greetings for each church had a local purpose, to point out the state of each congregation. They also have a *universal* purpose, to appraise our hearts. Each begins with "*I know*" [OIDA] a Greek word meaning full knowledge. Unquestionably many were embarrassed, especially since it was to be read aloud. Jesus challenged each group to "overcome" [prevail, triumph, conquer] and claim a glorious future promise.

Refreshment. John sent tidings of grace and peace from God the Father, God the Spirit "*and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings on earth . . . who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us **a kingdom [and] priests** to his God and Father.*" You can anticipate great rest and renewal during these days.

Watch for Signposts. There will be for your journey, but God Himself will walk with you and teach you. By Holy Week, you will be prepared to fully enter into the celebration of Christ's great work on our behalf. Since Easter actually lasts fifty days, we will continue through Pentecost Sunday, which celebrates the promised Holy Spirit, who is present in every believer and completing God's work in us until Jesus returns to Earth again or returns to take us to Heaven.

From the Desk of Elaine Everett Atchison



I'm All Ears. As a graduate student of Speech-Language Pathology, I interned at the Houston School for Deaf Children, where profoundly hearing impaired preschoolers learned to use oral speech rather than sign language. Through a complex multi-sensory training process, children learned to speech read and produce the sounds, syllables and words their physical ears could not perceive.

This was before 1990, when cochlear implants became accessible for children. A cochlear implant is a device providing stimulation directly to the auditory nerve, bypassing damaged areas. It can't restore hearing, but allows a person to perceive sounds.¹ Hundreds of thousands worldwide have received cochlear implants with marvelous results, albeit a startling adjustment period. Learning to listen for God's voice can be disconcerting too.

Captivated. Over a two year span I read through the entire Bible.² Some parts were familiar but many were totally new. Taking in the whole narrative instead of little snippets transformed my experience. I caught myself passionately reading aloud as great themes and threads jumped out at me. By the final book I could hear old John **gasp** as he saw one mind-blowing vision after another. How good of God to record the inexplicable for future readers.

Who's speaking? The Revelation begins with a striking foreword to seven churches. Jesus identifies himself in a distinct way to each: "*The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands*" (Ephesus); "*the words of the first and the last, who died and came to life*" (Smyrna); "*the words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword*" (Pergamum); "*the words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze*" (Thyatira); "*the words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars*" (Sardis); "*the words of the holy one, the true one, who has*

¹<http://www.asha.org/public/hearing/Cochlear-Implant/>

² Carson, D.A. For the Love of God: A Daily Companion for Discovering the Riches of God's Word. Volume I and II, Crossway, 1998.

the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens" (Philadelphia); "the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God's creation" (Laodicea). You may be less acquainted with these mysterious descriptions so we will explore each one.

Can you hear me now? "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." Jesus repeatedly used this saying to reinforce our need to pay closer attention to God's voice. Do you believe that God has words for you? You can have the ability to hear without really listening. Moses warned about spiritual deafness (Deuteronomy 29:1-4). The prophet Jeremiah lamented over "uncircumcised ears" (Jeremiah 6:10). God said most were rebellious and unwilling to hear, yet assured Isaiah that he is the Teacher of all who will call on him. "And your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, 'This is the way, walk in it,' when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left.'" (Isaiah 30:21) Take courage and let him know that you are all ears.



*"Behold, I am doing a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert."
Isaiah 43:19*

In His Joy,

Elaine E. Atchison

2014 Calendar of Reflections: Lent to Pentecost (21)



Part 1: Preparation

- ✿ March 9 First Sunday
- ✿ March 16 Second Sunday
- ✿ March 23 Thirds Sunday
- ✿ March 30 Fourth Sunday
- ✿ April 6 Fifth Sunday
- ✿ April 13 Palm Sunday
- ✿ April 14 Holy Week Monday

Part 2: Restoration

- ✿ April 15 Holy Week Tuesday
- ✿ April 16 Holy Week Wednesday
- ✿ April 17 Maundy Thursday
- ✿ April 18 Good Friday
- ✿ April 19 Holy Saturday
- ✿ April 20 Easter Sunday
- ✿ April 21 Easter Monday

Part 3: Refreshment

- ✿ April 27 First Sunday
- ✿ May 4 Second Sunday
- ✿ May 11 Third Sunday
- ✿ May 18 Fourth Sunday
- ✿ May 25 Fifth Sunday
- ✿ June 1 Sixth Sunday
- ✿ June 8 Pentecost Sunday

**Lenten Scripture Focus:
Seven Exams & "Overcoming" Statements
(Revelation 2 and 3, ESV Translation)**

1 Examen of Ephesus

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. (2:7)**

2 Examen of Smyrna

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches . . .
He who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death. (2:11)

3 Examen of Pergamum

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches . . .
**To him who overcomes, to him I will give some of the hidden manna, and I
will give him a white stone, and a new name written on the stone which no
one knows but he who receives it. (2:17)**

4 Examen of Thyatira

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches . . .
**He who overcomes and he who keeps my deeds until the end, "TO HIM I WILL
GIVE AUTHORITY OVER THE NATIONS; AND HE SHALL SHEPHERD THEM WITH A ROD OF
IRON [quotes prophesies from Psalm 2:8-9], AS THE VESSELS OF THE POTTER
ARE BROKEN TO PIECES [quotes prophesies from Isaiah 30:14 and Jeremiah
19:11]," as I also have received authority from my Father; and I will give
him the morning star. (2:26-27)**

5 Examen of Sardis

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches . . .
**He who overcomes will thus be clothed in white garments; and I will not
erase his name from the book of life, and I will confess his name before
My Father and before His angels. (3:5)**

6 Examen of Philadelphia

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches . . .
**He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God, and he
will not go out from it anymore and I will write on him the name of my
God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes
down out of heaven from my God, and my new name. (3:12)**

7 Examen of Laodicea

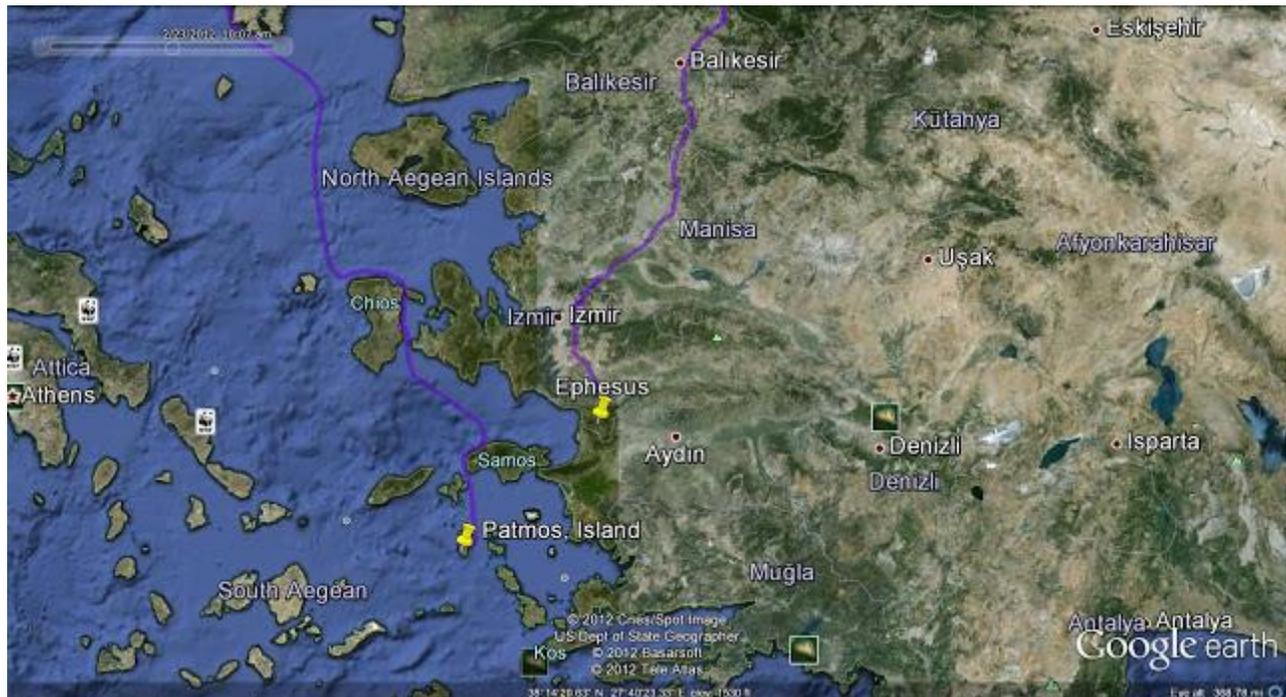
He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches . . .
**He who overcomes I will grant to him to sit down with me on my throne, as
I also overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne. (3:21)**

SETTING: MODERN TURKEY

The Seven Churches in Revelation 2-3



Patmos Island
Ephesus
Smyrna (Izmir)



First Sunday
"Get Over It"
Revelation 2:1-7 (Ephesus)



Crazy Love. I grew up on the cusp of sweeping cultural changes like civil rights, rock music and women's "liberation". As a kid, popular culture defined virtually everything I valued. At age 8, my very cool mom took my sister and me to see The Beatles during their second North American tour. That iconic moment launched my quest for true love. The same year, Barbie's Mystery Date game came out. It wasn't exactly feminist-driven so my ideal was someone between "Ken" and Paul McCartney—until I met Jesus.

In high school, **good news** was sweeping across the country via the Jesus Movement. Many of my friends were transformed by that message and they introduced me to Jesus—not the historical figure—but someone alive and present and relational. My adolescent world was rocked. My parents trusted it was just a phase. Others predicted I would eventually "get over it." I'm a grandmother now, and despite my wanderings and wonderings, I've never outgrown or gotten over my relationship with Jesus.

Signpost One ✨ Jesus' Appraisal

The Gospel also shook up Mediterranean cities from Israel to Italy. Ephesus was the "mother church" of seven congregations in Turkey. Ephesian church history reads like a Marvel Comics series. Deep magic arts were big business until the area was turned upside down by Priscilla, Aquila and Apollos, who moved there to lay the groundwork for Paul's lengthy ministry (Acts 18-20). Timothy was the pastor and John lived there for decades, overseeing the church. Ephesian Christians labored to exhaustion, remaining faithful in trying circumstances, rooting out sin and false teaching, and standing up for Jesus' name. Over time, however, their affection for Jesus cooled and they no longer found him irresistible.

Look closer. Jesus used the symbols of stars and lampstands to remind them that he was their head, the source of their inspiration and influence. Outwardly they displayed diligence, perseverance and courage but inwardly their blazing love was flickering out. *"But I have this against you that*

you have abandoned the love you had at first." **Abandoned** is such an alarming word . . . Despite their good works, they had fallen out of love with the only one whose devotion surpasses all knowledge and has no boundaries (Ephesians 3:19).

Signpost Two ❁ Jesus' Challenge

Remember. I don't recall the specific words my friend shared on that March night, but I became emotionally wrecked as he narrated the Jesus Story like scenes from a movie. In one moment, I resolved to spend the rest of my life loving Jesus and following him wherever took me. I started well, but that has not always been my experience. What is your story?

Return. "Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first" (Rev. 2:5a) The first verb means **keep on** remembering your earliest affection for Jesus. Repentance requires turning away from _____ [fill in the blank] and turning back to him. Once Paul prayed over the Ephesians: "I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit **in your inner being**, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being **rooted and grounded in love**, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be **filled with all the fullness** of God. (Ephesians 3:14-19) That prayer was also meant for us.

Signpost Three ❁ Jesus' Promise

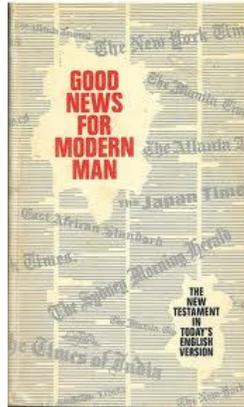
Recapture. Our faith in Christ has many seasons, but as Percy Bysshe Shelly wrote, "If winter comes, can spring be far behind?"³ Through his power, anyone can recapture a passion for God. Jesus warned that the church would lose its honored status if it would not listen, but in the next breath he made an undeserved and awe-inspiring promise: *The one who overcomes I will grant to eat of **the tree of life**, which is in the paradise of God.*" (2:7)

Can I overcome? Years before, John had written another letter of joy and assurance from Ephesus. "Whatever is born of God overcomes this world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world – our faith. Who is the one who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is God?"

(1 John 5:4-5) That transports us back to the Garden, our Paradise Lost, where there were no barriers between humans and God, who provided everything pleasant to the sight and good for food. Thanks be to God who is still at work redeeming everything! "Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, **the tree of life** with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations." (Revelation 22) I am longing for that healing today.

³ Shelley, Percy Bysshe. "Ode to the West Wind." Prometheus Unbound, 1820.

Second Sunday
"Conviction or Preference?"
Revelation 2: 8-11 (Smyrna)



Red Letter Day. My first New Testament was a "mod" little paperback.⁴ I was eager to learn what Jesus wanted me to do next and my friends assured me that everything I needed to know was in that book. For unknown reasons, I used a red felt tip pen to record the date on the inside cover every week: **3-7-72, 3-14-72, 3-21-72, 3-28-72** . . . after filling three columns and moving to the back cover, it finally hit me: I'm going to follow Jesus for the rest of my life. I gobbled up every word, idealizing the early church; nonetheless, my youthful inexperience and ignorance of global issues propelled me toward an "American gospel" which often presumes that God is obligated to tilt the universe in my favor.⁵

Signpost One ❁ Jesus' Appraisal

Fifty miles north of Ephesus, Smyrna held a suffering church (see previous maps). Mentioned nowhere else in scripture, the congregation was likely a church plant from Ephesus. Beautiful Smyrna was the birthplace of the ancient author, Homer. It was a center for science and medicine, with many Roman temples and curving pathways made of gold. At this point in history, Jesus had only good things to say about them.

Suffering and Rich. Jesus was fully aware of their pressures and the rejection they felt from pagan Romans and traditional Jews. He saw their invisible enemy, Satan, who longed to destroy their faith and left them literally begging. God's intention is not to keep us in comfort, but to reveal his **economy of opposites**. "*I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich)*" Jesus assured them. Rich? Yes, in salvation, holiness, grace, peace and fellowship. Paul got his meaning. At least once he was dragged out of a city and left for dead, but that didn't silence him. He continued "*strengthening the disciples by encouraging them to continue in the faith and by telling them, 'It is necessary to pass through many troubles on our way into the kingdom of God.'*" (Acts 14:22, HCSB) Is that a reality you accept or resist?

⁴ Good News for Modern Man. American Bible Society, 1966.

⁵ Miller, Rose Marie. From Fear to Freedom: Living as Sons and Daughters of God.

Signpost Two ❁ Jesus' Challenge

Conviction or preference? No one wants to hear these perplexing words: "Do not fear what you are about to suffer." But they came from one who conquered death and lives again, so we should listen. "Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days [or periods of time] you will have tribulation." This sparks a haunting question: Is my faith a conviction or just a preference? Do I merely favor Jesus' teachings? A preference is a fondness that may change when things become uncomfortable. A conviction is a stance that perseveres regardless of the cost. "Conviction" is a legal term like *judgment*, *verdict* or *sentence*. Have you come to grips with the possibility that following Jesus may cost you more than you first signed up for?

Signpost Three ❁ Jesus' Promise



Finishing Well. Christians from Smyrna have a "proud" history of suffering. Tradition says that John led Polycarp to Christ. Polycarp was a famous bishop who was killed for his faith. In 115 AD, the Romans burned him alive for refusing to forsake Jesus. He said, "Eighty-six years I have served Christ, and He never did me any wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?"

Today Smyrna is called Izmir, Turkey's third largest city. It is mostly Muslim, but contains nine synagogues, a few Greek Orthodox churches and one "tolerated" Protestant church. Pastor Fikret Bocek is a Muslim background believer who began exploring Christianity after meeting tourists from Texas in Istanbul. Later, he trusted Christ, graduated from Westminster Seminary and returned to Izmir as a church planter.

In 2007, in nearby Malatya, a member of Fikret's church and two other souls were killed for their faith.⁶ Pastor Fikret boldly spoke out after the travesty: "Please pray for the church in Turkey. Don't pray against persecution, pray for perseverance."

The crown of life. Jesus' promise to Smyrna is still timely: "Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life . . . The one who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death." (Rev, 2:10-11). Jesus died in faith. John died in faith. Polycarp died in faith. Will you and I?

⁶ <http://www.malatyafilm.com/index.php>

Third Sunday
"Too Many Voices"
Revelation 2:12-17 (Pergamum)



Sticks and stones. Because I always lived in the same house my parents would own for 53 years, I knew hundreds of neighborhood kids all the way from K-12. That didn't bode well for classmates like Debbie and Darryl, who were stereotyped and correspondingly named in kindergarten, then frozen there for the next twelve years. Even in high school everyone knew their category: **Jet** (athletes, cheerleaders), **Doper** (it was the 70s), **Surfer** (often Dopers), **Roper** (farm kids, 4-H), **Kicker** (ranch kids, rodeo) and **Freaks** (nerds, band, choir, special ed.). I didn't want to be stuck in any category, so I tried to mingle with all of them.

A big crash. After making the drill team, I was classified a **Jet**, but suddenly fell from grace when someone labeled me a Jesus **Freak**. At first, I liked feeling counter-cultural, eating lunch under trees with former hippies rather than squirming at the popular table with a cookie-cutter crowd. After a while, some old friends insisted there was no reason to be so *radical or straight*. Still ungrounded, I drifted from voice to voice. Later at a "Christian" university, I became skilled at moving in and out of any group. There were just too many voices. I had become a **Chameleon**.

Signpost One ❁ Jesus' Appraisal

The church at Pergamum had every reason to become hypnotized by Asia's Roman capital. A thousand feet atop a conical hill, the royal city was called the "home of all authority." Instead, Jesus called it **Satan's throne**. Over 200,000 handwritten volumes were housed in a library rivaled only by Alexandria, North Africa. Galen, a prominent Greek surgeon and philosopher, studied medicine there. The Healing Temple of Snakes was just one of many traps for gullible pilgrims. Pergamum's Christians were excluded and persecuted every day for "*holding fast to Jesus' name*." (2:13); but Jesus also discerned that some in the church embraced false teachings. Today we call that "syncretism," the combination of different systems of philosophical or religious practices. He was repulsed by the deeds of the Nicolaitans, free thinkers who tried to mix Christ's teachings with occultism (2:8). He compared them to Balaam, a prophet for hire, who misled God's people into believing they could inhabit both worlds (Numbers 22). Jesus would not tolerate anything destined to perish.

Signpost Two ❁ Jesus' Challenge

Jesus, the one who "has the two-edged sword," demanded that they **repent**. *If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth.*" (2:12, 16) Listen carefully. He would contend for the supremacy of God's word over all human wisdom "for the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account." (Hebrews 4:12-13) Whose voice are you trusting in today?

Signpost Three ❁ Jesus' Promise

Making A Name. Pergamum's Christians were constantly tempted to worship human knowledge. The fabulous library exposed that authority and expertise were supreme. Around 92 AD, the bishop Antipas stood up for Jesus' name and was martyred under Emperor Domitian. Tradition says he was roasted to death inside a brass bull used to cast out demons worshiped by the locals.

Remember Pastor Bocek from Izmir? Today there are only a handful of known believers in Pergamum. Fikret makes the 1.5 hour drive from Izmir regularly to meet with that tiny church plant. Because of the threat of persecution, it takes new converts an average of 2 to 3 years to willingly attend a church. Jesus knows the name of every dear soul and his promise still holds: *"To the one who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it."*

Hidden Manna. John's Gospel includes Jesus' rich word pictures. *"I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst."* (John 6:35) Here too, Jesus mentions the honey flavored bread that God sent to his people in the wilderness. Moses explained its spiritual purpose: *"He humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but **man lives by every word** that comes from the mouth of the LORD."* (Exodus 16)

White Stone. This may reference the gemstones in a priest's breastplate that symbolized God's guidance (Exodus 28), or the white stone of acquittal used in Greek courts. There was also a Roman custom that an athletic victor was awarded a white stone inscribed with his name. This admitted him to lavish celebrations afterwards. We are invited as well.

New Name. Many times in the Bible, God changed people's names to symbolize transformation and belonging. Here the word means qualitatively different or unique. Only Jesus knows the secret name by which you will be called in Heaven. Picture Jesus sustaining you with his words of life each day. Think warm sopapillas with honey! Then imagine him pressing a smooth engraved stone into your palm, guaranteeing your entrance into his wedding feast. I'm hungry for words like these, aren't you? And I am longing to shed all these earthly labels and to know my new name.

Fourth Sunday
"Facing the Darkness"
Revelation 2:18-27



Somehow my parents began receiving Daily Word, a monthly publication striving to "help people live true to their divine potential." Positive affirmations were followed by a Bible verse like "*Put a new and right spirit within me.*" (Psalm 51:10) As I became more grounded in God's word, my spiritual radar indicated that something was off . . . but what could be wrong if "each writer is a channel for the expression of **Spirit**, and the truth they share is universal"?⁷ At the time, I had no words to explain it, but I felt a dark shadow enveloping me whenever I picked it up.

Lady in purple. Thyatira was the smallest city in the area, but they received the longest message. We don't know how that church was formed, but it was the hometown of Lydia, one of Paul's first European converts (read Acts 16 and Philippians 1). Thyatira was a city run by guilds, and Lydia was a wealthy textile dealer and expert in indigo dyes. At one time Lydia graciously housed the Philippian church and likely shared the gospel of Jesus in her native community. Most Thyatirans worshipped Apollo, son of Zeus, the chief Greek god. Under the Romans they designated the emperor Apollo Incarnate. Regardless, Jesus praised the recent works, love, faith, service and patient endurance of his followers. At the same time, he perceived that within the same flock, something was terribly "off."

Signpost One ❁ Jesus' Appraisal

She's no lady. I loved visiting my grandparents' small town where everyone knew each other by name. One day I asked my grandmother about a lady dressed in unusual clothing. All she said was, "Agnes Louie is no lady." I guess I remember that because it had never before occurred to me that people aren't always as they appear. This was the case with "*that woman Jezebel*". Jesus identified her by what he saw in her heart. Jezebel is a name even non-believers associate with evil (1 Kings 16-21). This "Jezebel" claimed to speak for God, but enticed others to participate in vulgar festivities in the marketplace. Despite many warnings, she would not stop, and no one in the church had the guts to stand up to her. Christians faced a real dilemma. If they withdrew from the communal

⁷ <http://www.dailyword.com/>

feasts, they would lose their status and their livelihood. Jesus knew there were worse consequences of the spirits she was peddling.

Sin Makes Us Addicts. Our true spiritual condition is revealed by our deeds. Pastor Tim Keller defined how Sin traps us: "When you replace God with something or someone, the result is an addiction of spirit. There is an attraction at the spiritual level every bit as powerful as sexual attraction at the physical level: You cannot produce your own meaning in life, your own worth, your own security. Spiritually speaking, if it's not God who is the source of your meaning, then you're in bed with something else."⁸ What seemingly harmless messages actually threaten to enslave you?

Signpost Two ❁ Jesus' Challenge

Jesus presented himself as a terrifying judge, *"the Son of God, [with] eyes like a flame of fire, and feet like burnished bronze."* (2:18) Flaming eyes and bronze feet symbolize divine truth and strength ready to stamp out evil (2:18) Jesus made it clear that he alone has authority. He was dead serious about Jezebel's judgment and what would become of unrepentant Christians who plunged headlong into deception. *"And all the churches will know that I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you according to your works."* Actions reveal the heart.

That should unsettle anyone trying to make case for a "wimpy" Jesus. He also discerned those who had not fallen under the influence of Satanic teaching and told them not to be burdened by his warning. *"Only **hold fast** to what you have until I come."* That reminds me of the first Bible passage that deeply touched my heart. *"Love must be completely genuine. Hate what is evil, **cling to what is good.**"* (Romans 12:9, Good News Version)

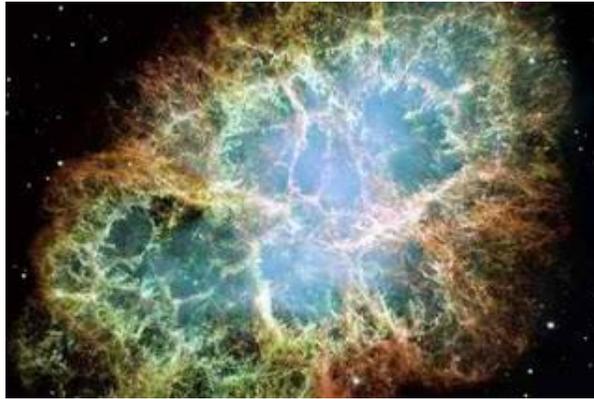
Signpost Three ❁ Jesus' Promise

The overcomer's promise is for *"the one who keeps **my works** until the end"* (2:26). This is difficult to interpret because it quotes Old Testament predictions about Messiah's ultimate judgment and reign. Jesus said *"I will give [you] **the morning star.**"* Did he mean the bright planets which are visible just before sunrise? There are many mythological references to "morning star" but Isaiah 14 gives this as Satan's angelic name before he fell from heaven (Lucifer in Latin).

Revelation 22:16 reveals which Spirit is genuine: *"I Jesus . . . am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star"* (read also 2 Peter 1:19). The good news for us is that the darkness of Sin, evil and death will finally give way to never ending day. Our time on Earth is relatively short. Until Jesus comes for us, we are to live in the Holy Spirit's light, walking in the ways that honor him. *"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life."* (John 8:12) With whom are you walking today? Do your actions match what is in your heart?

⁸ "How Sin Makes Us Addicts. <http://sermons2.redeemer.com/sermons/how-sin-makes-us-addicts>

Fifth Sunday
"A Dead Star"
Revelation 3:1-6 (Sardis)



The glowing Crab Nebula is a spectacular and colorful object imaged by the Hubble telescope, but it is really only the leftovers of a supernova that exploded in 1054 AD. The dead star ran out of fuel, so it collapsed under its own gravity. It still emits spinning, pulsing lighthouse beams of radiation, but the cloud of high speed particles has no more protons or electrons and will slowly, eventually fade out of view.

Signpost One ✿ Jesus' Appraisal

Dead church walking. Jesus said, *"I know your works."* Wait for applause; wait for it . . . This was the only church that received no praise from Jesus. Just this pronouncement: *"You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead."* Sardis was a wealthy city, just south of Thyatira. It was the capital of the Lydian kingdom, known for its royal trade, textiles, and gold ("rich as Croesus" refers to their king.) They had a beautiful city on top of a hill, but there was no room to grow so they built another one at the foot of the hill. The city above became a retreat in times of danger. Invincible, they claimed.

During the Greek empire, Sardis' overconfidence led to their downfall. Some unobserved climbers took over the city and in John's day, there was still a proverb about it, "To capture the acropolis of Sardis is to do the impossible." Under Roman control, the city was once again rich and thriving . . . and arrogant. They even advertised hot springs where the gods give life to the dead. We can convince ourselves of almost anything.

A Musty Museum. Among all the other temples and gods, the church at Sardis had built a great name. Like the city's idols, their congregation was full of "artifacts" Sin had killed. Though their liturgical forms were still in place they were unaware that the Spirit had departed from them. In light of all they had received and heard at their beginning, Jesus called their works incomplete, insufficient and unacceptable.

Signpost Two ❁ Jesus' Challenge

9-1-1. Though declared spiritually dead, there was still a glimmer of hope that the church could be revived. *"Wake up and strengthen what remains and is about to die . . . If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief and you will not know at what hour I will come against you."* (3:3)

Paul used similar imagery when talking about the **day of the Lord** with the Thessalonian church. *"While people are saying 'There is peace and security' then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape"* (read 1 Thessalonians 5:2-11). Jesus' three-fold remedy is repeated: **Remember. Return. Keep it.** Do you shine with the reflected light of a brilliant past? Stop and review all that that you have seen and heard about Jesus. Are you simply full of beautiful words or do you possess the breath of life?

Signpost Three ❁ Jesus' Promise



As the middle child, my baby book only had few snapshots and brief entries about my earliest years. I got an odd feeling when I first saw my 2-month old face, but today the glow on my mom's face stands out the most. She once reminisced that a friend asked if she had ever been dirty a day in her life. I can't recall ever seeing her less than squeaky clean.

Clothed by Christ. Even in the deadest of churches, God watches over his remnant. Appearances were important in Sardis so Jesus used imagery they could grasp. *"Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled [defiled, smeared, polluted] their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy."* (3:4) It was common for invited guests to wear white clothing at celebrations. Scripture often uses white to symbolize purity and clothing to symbolize character and salvation (read Isaiah 61:10). Without Jesus to clothe us we are naked and ashamed.

God remembers. In those days, rulers kept a register of citizens. If someone died or committed a serious crime they were actually erased from the register. Jesus assured the faithful that he would *never blot [their] name[s] out of the book of life.*" (3:5) What became of the church declared dead? Many decades later, Melito, a famous apologist and bishop from Sardis, wrote the earliest known commentary on Revelation. **Wake up** and **remember** all you have received so one day you be seen walking with him, beautifully clothed and celebrating your never ending fullness of life.

Palm Sunday
"Nietzsche and Other Isms"
Revelation 3: 7-13



Against Isms. Eugene Peterson wrote a bestselling discipleship book compellingly titled A Long Obedience in the Same Direction. He didn't coin that phrase. Philosopher and atheist Frederick Nietzsche called moral and religious systems "the long bondage of spirit" and "severe and magnificent stupidity."⁹ I used to become distressed about Marxism, Communism, Humanism, song lyrics of John Lennon, or even the philosophy of "Ferris Bueller".¹⁰ I would feel the heat rise from my chest to my face anytime someone suggested that the Bible was fabricated or that God is a force or a farce. Regardless of how much I studied apologetics, I rarely feel conversant enough to confront an outspoken atheist.

Signpost One ✿ Jesus' Appraisal

On Shaky ground. Philadelphia, now Alasehir, Turkey, was a gateway to the east, founded as a pilgrimage outpost of Greek culture and language; but all of its great philosophers and gurus couldn't stop the chronic, devastating earthquakes that plagued the great city. Historical records disclose that its citizens were psychologically scarred by the continual natural disasters. The church in Philadelphia was the youngest of the seven, but Jesus applauded these Christians more than the others.

On Solid ground. Jesus knew that this church was small in numbers, but they were strong, obedient, loyal and enduring. Unlike some of the other churches, they had kept his word. They weren't considered powerful, but they were solid and held to their convictions despite intimidation from the Jewish community. They must have been astounded by all of the promises he made before and after his challenge to them. We don't know if his first promises were more immediate and the second ones more distant, but he spoke as "*the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens.*" (3:7)

⁹Nietzsche, Frederick. Beyond Good and Evil. (1886)

¹⁰ Reference to "isms" from "Ferris Bueller's Day Off."
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IOH_70vV6_I

Signpost Two ❁ Jesus' Challenge

Guard your crown. Jesus' message did not contain a warning or command to turn away from sin, just strong encouragement to *"Hold fast to what you have so that no one may seize your crown."* (3:11) They would have possessed the book of James so they knew of the crown of life reserved for those who remain steadfast under trial (read James 1:12). History is full of tales about great thinkers and leaders who raged against the Church of Christ and thought they had wiped out Christianity. Jesus doesn't want you to be alarmed when a New Age sage, a brilliant skeptic or a crazed terrorist questions your faith.

Signpost Three ❁ Jesus' Promise(s)

The Christians at Philadelphia were already "overcomers" so the promises they were given must have felt like the shock waves that often overwhelmed their city. In the near future, Jesus claimed he would:

1. Open a door of service with great freedom to proclaim the gospel. Jesus empowers us to share our faith with all people in all places.
2. Orchestrate a confession from hostile Jews and unbelieving Gentiles that they were truly loved by Jesus. Ultimately, everyone will stop mocking and admit that Jesus is indeed the Lord (Romans 14:11).
3. Keep them from a time of widespread testing that would follow. Only bad theology suggests that our path will always be easy. The only other use of "kept from" [TEREO EK] is John 17:15 when Jesus prayed, *"I do not ask you to take them out of the world, but that you **keep them from** the evil one."*
4. He would come soon. Whether Jesus meant that he would intervene to preserve their lives or their faith, these words were meant to lift up their eyes with anticipation. Note: Some Christians interpret these verses as still future, when the entire Body of Christ will be removed from Earth before a final tribulation period. You may feel that a 2000+ year wait isn't "quickly" at all. In my mind, it's all relative to eternity. He may come for me tomorrow or in thirty years, but he will come back to get you.

Even more? As if eternal life isn't enough, Jesus gives us undeserved gifts like honor and stability—*"I will make you a pillar in the temple of my God"* (3:12a); safety and security—*"You will never go out of it"* (3:12b); belonging and inheritance—*"I will write [three names] on you: the name of my God, the name of the new city, and my own new name."*(3:12c)

Do you feel small today? Do the circumstances that are shaking up your world make you feel like God has left you alone? Does opposition to the gospel cause you to question if your faithfulness to His name has been worth it? In 1882, Nietzsche wrote "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him." Someone else joked that on the day he died, God wrote, "Nietzsche is dead. He remains dead. And I am coming quickly." Forget all those Isms and bank on Jesus' promises. Remain content to be small but strong, obedient, loyal and faithful.

Passion Week Monday
"Don't Swallow the Water"
Revelation 3:14-22



A few years ago, I visited dear friends living in Kolkata, India, one of the poorest cities on the planet. That trip solidified the importance of clean drinking water. I panicked the first time I swallowed a few drops of water when brushing my teeth, certain that I would be struck down with a parasite. Laodicea had water problems too. Its citizens were rich and well-dressed but the only things they didn't possess were the hot springs of nearby Hierapolis or the cold springs of Colossae. Their water had to travel for miles through an aqueduct, so everyone knew it was filthy, foul and tasteless.

Signpost One ✿ Jesus' Appraisal

Jesus always used everyday images that were relevant to his audiences, so in Laodicea, he compared the church to the water. "*I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. [I wish that you were either one or the other!]*"(3:15) Next he jabbed at their pride by calling them lukewarm and sickening.

Rude. Jesus always tells it like it is. His is the final word "*the Amen.*" He is "*the faithful and true witness.*" He is the source of eternal life, "*the beginning of [the new] Creation.*"(3:14) They were deeply offended because they were self-righteous and self-deceived by their affluence. They had swallowed enough heresy to become spiritually ill.

Laodicea was a rich banking center.

Deception: I am rich. I have prospered. I need nothing.

Diagnosis: You are despicable, pathetic, and destitute.

Laodicea was famous for its medical school and eye salve.

Deception: I have hidden knowledge (gnosis). I need nothing.

Diagnosis: You are spiritually blind.

Laodicea was famous for soft black wool and dyed textiles.

Deception: I have the security of wealth and possessions. I need nothing.

Diagnosis: You are shamefully exposed in your "emperor's new clothes."¹¹

¹¹ http://www.andersen.sdu.dk/vaerk/hersholt/TheEmperorsNewClothes_e.html

Signpost Two ❁ Jesus' Challenge

Who is poor? Nothing adequately prepared me for the weeks I spent among the materially poor in Kolkata. The mass of people who constantly pressed in on us for money or food everywhere we walked or drove knew they were *"wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked."* Every morning we would leave our modest apartment trying to engage with neighbors who had slept on the sidewalk, in their taxi or on the ironing board in their trade booth. Still our hearts craftily downplay our spiritual poverty and nauseating attachment to appearances, possessions and achievements.

Come to Me. Many identify outwardly with Jesus but inwardly there is no spring or reservoir to draw from. Christians in this state may be harder to reach than one who is openly hostile to Christ. The compassion of the Lord continues to invite us to *"Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?"* (Isaiah 55)

Jesus counseled each church from their particular point of pride, not to shame them but because loving discipline includes both instruction and correction: *"Buy from me gold refined by fire so that you may be rich. (Buy from me) white garments so that you can clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen. (Buy from me) Salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see."* Do you realize that Jesus is your only source of life?

Signpost Three ❁ Jesus' Promise

The intangible. Laodicea was the last stop on the postal route, the farthest from Ephesus and the nearest to falling away in apostasy yet. . . Jesus pursued them. You may be hanging on by a thread, just realizing your true state. Gerald May, a gifted psychiatrist in the field of addiction wrote "To be alive is to be addicted, and to be addicted is to be in need of grace." After decades of research and personal addiction, he came to believe that Jesus is the "intangible", the only gift that can restore a captive to sanity.¹² Revelation's seven messages make one thing clear: Jesus offers us every opportunity for intimacy with him. *"Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me."* (3:20)

Sharing in Christ's glory is the final promise given. It wasn't accidental or arbitrary that the greatest gift was offered to a group of renegades. If you are lukewarm or have fallen away from faith, please be assured that you have not gone too far to be forgiven and restored. That's what is so incredible about our Redeemer. **"The one who overcomes, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne."** You can be an overcomer by placing total faith in him today. [Note: Complete this this series of reflections by reading Romans 8 before starting the Holy Week reflections tomorrow].

¹² May, Gerald. Addiction and Grace. Harper Collins, 1989