The Book of Revelation

Zanesville, OH | Wednesday PM Bible Study

**Letters to the Seven Churches**

* These letters form an integral part of the message of the book. The command to John given at the end of chapter 1 to write what he sees now comes to fruition in the immediate messages to the seven churches. There is a common structure observed in all 7 letters:
  + **Command to write to an angel of each church**
  + **Description of Jesus corresponding to the *“Son of Man Vision”***
  + **Acknowledgement of positive deeds**
  + **Accusation of some form of sin or wrong doing**
  + **A call to repent with warning of judgment**
  + **Encouragement to know the truth**
  + **A promise made to those who overcome**
* These seven elements are not present in every single church (Smyrna, Philadelphia, Laodicea, Sardis). As such, it is not to be taken as an iron clad rule but a general one observing the elements composing the message of each letter to each church. It should be noted that what is said to each of these churches is specifically with concern to their situations. However, it is also relevant for the universal church today.
* The seven churches may fall into three distinct groups. The first and last churches (Ephesus and Laodicea) are in danger of losing their lampstand altogether. They are in danger of losing their identity as Christians because of their sin and misdoings. Therefore, Jesus urges them to repent and return to do the deeds that will allow them to live before it is too late.
* The second and sixth churches (Smyrna and Philadelphia) are pictured as being faithful to Christ despite their trials, persecutions and temptations. They have not compromised nor denied Jesus even in the face of some devastating situations. Jesus commends them for this and encourages them to excel still more.
* The third, fourth and fifth churches (Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis) complete the chiastic structure and they are described as having some who are faithful but some who are not. They exhibit characteristics of compromising the faith but they are admonished to make changes and improve before it’s too late.

**Chapter 2**

* **2:1-7– Letter to Ephesus**
* **Verse 1**– The first church addressed is Ephesus. Ephesus was a very prominent city in Asia minor. Mounce says, *“Situated at the mouth of the Cayster River on a gulf of the Aegean Sea, it flourished as an important commercial and export center for Asia. The traveler from Rome landing at Ephesus would proceed up a magnificent avenue thirty-five feet wide and lined with columns that led from the harbor to the center of the city. Ephesus was part of the kingdom of Pergamum, which Attalus III bequeathed to Rome in 133 B.C. By NT times it had grown to more than a quarter of a million in population”* (Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*).
* In addition to this, Ephesus was a very important political city as well where at times the Roman governor would try court cases. They had many important edifices including that which is well-known: Temple of Artemis (Eph. 19:23-41). Mounce also adds that *“temples were built to Roman emperors including Claudius, Hadrian and Severus”* (Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*).
* In terms of the gospel coming to Ephesus, the bible tells us that Aquilla, Priscilla, Paul, Timothy and various others played an important role in preaching Jesus there (Acts 18:18-22; 19:1-22; 20:17-38; Eph. 1:1; 1 Tim. 1:3; 2 Tim. 1:18; 4:12). In later years, it was the residence of John before he was exiled to Patmos. He may have been an elder at this church at one point.
* The letter comes from Him who holds the seven stars is His right hand (1:16, 20) and the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands (1:12, 20). Each description of Jesus in these letters refer us back to the entire vision of the Son of Man for the purpose of understanding who He is, what He has done and what their responsibility to Him must be.
* Christ’s power and supreme control is seen in His handling of the seven stars in His right hand and He is well aware of the actions and behavior of the Ephesian church because He walks among all the churches. He is actively involved in the affairs of His people (Lev. 26:12).
* G.K. Beale argues in his commentary that verse one of this chapter presents the similar structure apparent in prophetic literature: “*Thus says the LORD.”* The prophets used this formula to illustrate the origin of their messages and so Christ is in one sense a prophet but in another He is on equal footing with YHWH.
* **Verse 2**– The church at Ephesus is the only one of the seven churches mentioned in Rev. 2 and 3 about which we are given detailed information in the scriptures leading up to this particular point in time. Thus, we have a more extensive background about them than we do the others that will shed light on the things Jesus has to say.
* Jesus who walks among the lampstands, is readily able to tell of what they have been doing and they are commended for their hard-work and their perseverance. When Paul wrote to the Ephesians (Eph. 4:1-6:24) when he was in prison (cf. Acts 28:16, 30), he encouraged them to do exactly that: work-hard and persevere. It seems that they received that message well and maintained it for some thirty years after.
* The second thing Jesus commends them for is their intolerance of evil men. To be sure, Paul warned them about this very matter before His departure to Jerusalem (Acts 20:29-30). Ephesus had already seen its fair share of opposition against Christ and the gospel (Acts 19:11-20; 23-41) and more was to come.
* Jesus here specifically says those who are *“evil men”* are those impersonating apostles (2 Cor. 11:13-14) but are absolutely not. When tested by the brethren (1 Jn. 4:1) they do not succeed and they are found to be false. Jesus compliments them for the very thing He Himself admonished (Matt. 7:15-16; 24:11). That they denounce and reject these men groups them into one accord with Jesus.
* **Verse 3**– Jesus reverts back to His first commendation and this time places more emphasis on their toil and perseverance. Perseverance implies that difficult situations are being experienced and certainly with Ephesus being an important socio-economic-political center for all things Roman, the saints were sure to face strong opposition and varying levels of persecution.
* He says they are doing this for *“His name’s sake”* drawing our attention to passages such as Matt. 10:32-33; Lk. 9:23; Col. 3:17. They are fighting the very things Paul told them they would need to battle (Eph. 6:11-12). No doubt some grew discouraged and some doubted but they have endured so far and have no grown weary or given up.
* **Verse 4**– This accusation and note of sin seems almost entirely out of place based on what we have already read and discussed in the previous two verses. How is it that a church that is so good at persevering, working hard and not tolerating evil men is denounced for wrongdoing? One would be hard-pressed not to read this as an oxymoron.
* The commendations by Jesus mentioned in vv. 2-3 and v. 6 all seem connected to their inner work of maintaining themselves faithful. Thus, that leaves open the other large part of serving Christ which is preaching the gospel of being a witness to the world. This is the idea that Christ is conveying when He says they left their first love.
* Paul seems to point out the fact that the Ephesians were in the habit of evangelizing and witnessing early on (Eph. 1:15; 3:8-13). While they were zealous about rejecting false doctrine, increasing in their own faith and enduring, they had failed to maintain this zeal in witnessing Christ to the world.
* **Verse 5**– Christ admonishes them to repent of this wrong doing and to return to the deeds they did at first. That leaving their first love is likely connected to their lack of witnessing Christ to the world is evident since the judgment warned by Christ is that of removing their lampstand.
* The imagery of the lampstand is well-founded in the scriptures (Isa. 42:6-7; 49:6; Matt. 5:14-16). The saints together who make up the church should be illustrating this light to the world hence the illustration of the lampstand. Evidently, the Ephesians hid their lamp under a basket and Jesus admonished them to undo that lest he remove their lampstand altogether and they would not able to shine at all.
* This verse together with v. 4 illustrate the importance of preaching the gospel, teaching the lost and witnessing Christ to the world (Matt. 28:19-20; 1 Tim. 3:15). If the so-called disciple of Christ is not doing this then they have no business being a disciple and thus Jesus will hold us all accountable for whether or not we are shining our lights.
* **Verse 6**­­– Christ having warned the saints to repent of their wrong doing, now reverts to one final commendation related to second compliment in v. 2. We do not know a lot about the Nicolaitans and most of what we know is told to us here, in the letter to Pergamum and the letter to Thyatira. This group or sect seems to be associated with false teaching and false prophets who encouraged idolatry and sexual immorality.
* This is arrived at based on the correlation between vv. 14-15 in the letter to Pergamum. The Nicolaitans teach something similar if not identical to that which Balaam passed on to Balak when he tried to get Israel to sin (Num. 25:1-3; 31:16). The same teaching is present in Thyatira (vv. 20-21) even though the mention of the Nicolaitans is absent.
* In the OT idolatry is illustrated as that which is utterly detestable in the sight of God (Ex. 20:4-6). The sin of idolatry was in particular a big deal for the Gentiles since that’s who they were before they became Christians (Acts 15:29; 1 Cor. 8; 10:14).
* Jesus’ final commendation to them is one that encourages them to keep abhorring the evil (Rom. 12:9; 2 Jn. 1:9-10) but this in conjunction with v. 5 also invited them to strongly consider their ways lest they become the object of God’s hate as well just as the Nicolaitans were detested by Him.
* **Verse 7**– The commendation to listen is also apparent in the gospel accounts (cf. Matt. 11:15; 13:9; 13:43; Mar. 4:23) but largely based on Isa. 6:9-10. It speaks to the significance of what has just been said and the sobering reminder that at times even though we have ears, we do not incline them to listen to that which is true and that which is able to build us up and give us life. This also reminds us of the opening words of the Revelation (1:3).
* The Christians addressed in the Hebrew letter were not using their ears and thus they were severely malnourished and lacking (Heb. 5:11-14). James encouraged the saints in his letter to be quick to listen (Jam. 1:19). The Israelite nation were infamously known for being stiff necked and stubborn because they did not want to listen.
* Even more importantly, Jesus points tells them not to listen to just anyone or anything but to listen to the Spirit (1:1-2, 4) which is another way of telling them to listen to Him. What Jesus has said must be take precedence lest their lampstand be removed and they fail to acquire the gift which He is about to promise.
* The one who overcomes is not to be understood as one who has physically defeated an enemy of some sort but rather he/she who has remained steadfast to Christ despite whatever circumstances they have undergone (cf. Rom. 8:31-39). To overcome is to overcome the world and sin through Christ which is connected with His death and resurrection which we are a part of through baptism and faithful living (Rom. 6:3-4; Gal. 3:26-27).
* The overcomer will be able to eat of the Tree of Life which draws our attention back to the garden of Eden (Gen. 2:9; 3:22-24). After Adam and Eve sinned, they were expelled from the Garden lest they eat of this tree and gain immortality. The victor will gain life everlasting which is connected with the Paradise of God.
* Eden was God’s paradise not because of what was in it per se but because of what was happening. God held a perfect and intimate relationship with man since sin had not yet entered the world. The overcomer will be restored to this glorious state with God in Heaven.