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**

* **2:12-17– Letter to Pergamum**
* The third letter is addressed to the political capital of Asia Minor, Pergamum. Pergamum was located approximately 40 miles northeast of Smyrna and 15 miles east of the Aegean Sea. Pergamum was built on a cone-shaped hill near the Caicus river and its name means citadel.
* According to Mounce, *“Its rise to prominence came in the third century B.C. when it became the capital of the Attalids. Under Eumenes II (197-159 B.C.) Pergamum became ‘the finest flower of Hellenic civilization’”* (Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*.) It boasted a library of over 200,00 volumes which made it the second largest at that time in the ancient world. Parchment may have been made here when papyrus became limited.
* Pergamum was bequeathed to Rome in ca. 133 B.C. after which it became a center and emphasis for pagan worship to Roman deities. The upper terrace of the citadel was one of the major attractions of the city particularly because of the sculptures and altars to the gods. Four in particular were worshipped in this city: **Zeus** (god of sky and thunder, king of Greek gods), **Athena** (goddess of war, daughter of Zeus), **Dionysus** (god of wine, grapes, fertility, religious ecstasy) and **Asklepios** (god of healing, medicine).
* In addition to this, there were temples to Dea Roma, Augustus, Trajan and later Severus (Tacitus, *Annals* 3.37). It was likely the center for the imperial cult evident by these shrines and Jesus’ statement, *“I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is…”* (2:13). Without a doubt, it was extremely difficult for the saints to live and shine in the midst of such circumstances.
* **Verse 12**– The description of Jesus in this verse reverts us back to the vision of the Son of Man in 1:16. This would have been compared and contrasted to the sword held by the Roman proconsul at the time. The Romans may have had the power to execute and kill by the sword for failure to compromise their faith and worship the imperial cult and/or the pagan gods, but Jesus has the true power over judgment, life and death.
* **Verse 13**­– The one who walks among the lampstands knows that the saints at Pergamum dwells *“where Satan’s throne is.”* There are a few things this could mean but the meaning is likely that it is where the activity of Satan is most present and overwhelming. This would certainly fit especially with the firm establishment of the imperial cult here among the worship of other pagan gods.
* It denotes his ruling via the Roman authorities and other opposers to the will of God (Rev. 13:2, 7). The city of Rome itself was certainly the center for all things blasphemous and in opposition to God and their influence in Pergamum likely produced similar actions and behaviors.
* In the midst of such hostile circumstances, Jesus notes the positive deeds of the church which includes remaining faithful despite the environment they live in. The faithfulness is demonstrated by the mention of a single disciple by the name of Antipas who is described as Jesus’ witness and faithful one. He truly has lived up the meaning of what it means to be Christ’s disciple (Matt. 10:32-33; Acts 7:54-60; 22:20; Rev. 1:5).
* The saints at Ephesus are contrasted with Antipas because unlike them, he has not left his first love and even in the heart of Satan’s throne, he stood up for truth and witnessed for his Lord and Savior which ultimately cost him his physical life. Notice the tone is this verse is positive and not negative. Jesus is proud of Antipas (Matt. 24:13). Even though they have lost one of their own, they have not denied Christ.
* **Verse 14**– Jesus after noting their positive deeds, now turns His attention to their negative doings. Even though they hold fast to the name of Christ, there are some who are guilty of allowing the teaching of Balaam to permeate among them. The teaching of Balaam contained to key components: idolatry and sexual immorality (Num. 25:1-3).
* We are not told until Num. 31:16 that it was in fact Balaam who was behind the wickedness of Num. 25. In the NT, Balaam became sort of a blueprint for false teaching encouraging the saints to compromise with worldly activities including these mentioned (2 Pet. 2:15; Jude 1:11). Balaam was a stumbling block and so are these people (Matt. 18:7; Rev. 9:1-21).
* The eating of food sacrificed to idols mentioned here is likely connected to the eating of food at pagan feasts (Acts 15:20, 29; 21:25; 1 Cor. 8:4-13; 10:18-31). The sexual immoralities here seem to be connected to these pagan festivals as well and it would have especially been associated with Dionysus.
* **Verse 15**– As mentioned previously in the letter to the church at Ephesus, the Nicolaitans (2:6) are a group of false teachers who we do not know a lot about. Because of the construction of vv. 14-15, it seems likely that their teaching is closely connected to that of Balaam if not identical. Some of the saints at Pergamum have done wrong is holding to their teaching.
* **Verse 16**– The indifference of some of the saints at Pergamum with the false teaching and idolatry/sexual immorality is of serious concern to Jesus and He admonishes them to repent before they face His judgment. Only a portion of the church is involved in this wrong doing but the entire church is responsible to hold one another accountable (cf. 1 Cor. 5:1-2, 6-7, 11, 13).
* If they do not repent, Christ will come and make war with them with the sword of His mouth (1:16; 2:12). This is clearly a reference to judgment according to God’s word (Isa. 11:4; Jn. 12:48; 2 Thess. 2:8; Heb. 4:12). Jesus’ coming quickly may refer to His judgment of the Romans and thus if they don’t repent they will fall with them.
* **Verse 17**– The commendation to listen to what has been said is here stated to the saints at Pergamum. The one who overcomes will be given some of the hidden manna by Jesus Himself. As to what exactly this hidden manna is, has been speculated by some. It seems to be connected with that which was placed in the ark of the covenant (Ex. 16:32-34; Heb. 9:4).
* The manna was the main sustenance given by God to the Israelites when they were in the wilderness enroute to Canaan. It fell from Heaven and thus its origin is from the eternal destination all saints eagerly await. It could be a way of stating we will be with God in Heaven enjoy the wedding feast (Lk. 12:37).
* In keeping with the idea of the wedding feast, the white stone may be symbolizing the token (tessera) that was given to the attendees in order that they would be let in to the banquet. According to Suetonius, *“They were distributed to the poor in Rome by the emperors to ensure a regular supply of corn, given to the victor at games and to gladiators who had won the admiration of the public and had been allowed to retire from further combat”* (Suetonius, *Life of Augustus* 40.2; 42.3).
* The fact that the stone is white indicates innocence and their triumph according to their faith. They are pure as Christ is pure since they have washed their robes in His blood and remained faithful (Rev. 7:14). There will be a new name on the stone that only those that receive it will know.
* This new name is much like that of the name of the Rider on the white horse who is clearly Jesus Christ (Rev. 19:12). These saints will be like their Lord in the eternal age and the wedding feast. The point of the name on the stone is the fact that there is a special reward given by Christ to each and every saint emphasizing the intimacy He shares with them.