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**

* **2:8-11– Letter to Smyrna**
* The second letter is addressed to Smyrna which is modern day Izmir. It is the only one of the seven cities mentioned here in Revelation currently still in existence. It was located approximately 35 miles north of Ephesus along the Aegean Sea. Because of its location, it was second to Ephesus in terms of economic exportation.
* By all accounts Smyrna was a beautiful city and like Ephesus, it boasted several high-profile edifices including the largest public theater in Asia. It also contained two temples; one to Cybele and the other to Zeus. The acropolis located on Mt. Pagus was perhaps the most popular attraction in the city. Its population was somewhere near 200,000 during the 1st century.
* Smyrna had a special connection to Rome dating back to the 200’s B.C. Mounce says, *“During the period when Rome was engaged in a struggle for supremacy against the Carthaginian empire (roughly 265-146 B.C.) Smyrna had placed itself squarely on the side of the Romans, and in 195 B.C. it became the first city in the ancient world to build a temple in honor of Dea Roma”* (Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*).
* According to the historian Tacitus, *“Later, in 23 B.C., Smyrna won permission (over ten other Asian cities) to build a temple to the emperor Tiberius”* (Tacitus, *Annals* 4.55-56). There was a relatively large Jewish population who lived in Smyrna at the time and in conjunction with the already hostile Roman presence, one can imagine the difficulties Christians would have living in this city.
* Mounce further adds, *“The most famous martyrdom of the early church fathers was that of the elderly Polycarp, the “twelfth martyr in Smyrna,” who, upon his refusal to acknowledge Caesar as Lord, was placed upon a pyre to be burned”* (Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*). While we do not know for certain when the church was established in Smyrna, it is likely that Ephesus and Paul played an important role (Acts 19:10, 26).
* **Verse 8**– The letter to Smyrna comes from Him *“who is the first and last, who was dead, and has come to life”* (cf. 1:17-18). This description of Jesus fits perfectly with what the saints at Smyrna are going through. The point of Jesus using this description is to sympathize with His people (Heb. 4:15). For further information on this description of Jesus, see the outline on chapter 1.
* **Verse 9**– Since Christ walks among the churches (1:12-13, 20) He knows very well what the saints are experiencing in Smyrna. He does not turn a blind eye to His people. He knows about their tribulation (suffering; 1:9) and their poverty (material). That they are suffering for their faith is not surprising since Jesus Himself warned that this would come about (Jn. 16:33; Acts 14:22; Rom. 5:3). Note that in this letter, there is no accusation of sin or admonishment to repent.
* Their material poverty may be connected with their tribulations. The fact that they live in a hostile society which stands in opposition to their faith may indicate difficulties in getting jobs or maintaining them. Despite this, Jesus notes, more importantly, that they are rich spiritually. They have not allowed their economic despair to come between them and their relationship with God (Matt. 6:20, 25-34; 2 Cor. 8:9; Jam. 2:5).
* Jesus also knows about the blasphemies being spoken against His people by those who say there are Jews. Jesus was personally familiar with this (Matt. 26:59-68; Jn. 19:15). These were Jews in the sense that they would have claimed to belong to the Jewish religion but in reality, Jesus says, they were a synagogue of Satan (Matt. 3:9; Jn. 8:39-44; Rom. 2:28-29).
* The Jews have already been portrayed in the book of Acts as enemies to the gospel and the saints (Acts 7:54-60; 13:50; 14:2, 5, 19; 17:5) The Jews may have been trying to get the Christians in trouble with the Roman authorities since they held no power of their own. They are blaspheming against the saints because they are of Satan (in Hebrew means: slanderer, adversary, accuser).
* **Verse 10**– Jesus encourages the saints not to fear what they are about to suffer (Isa. 8:13; 51:7, 12; Dan. 3:10-18; Matt. 10:28; Lk. 12:4-5; Rom. 8:35-39; 1 Pet. 3:14). It seems likely that the Jews would have their way and the Roman authorities would be stirred up so as to bring persecution on these Christians. Even though they would carry this out, Jesus points out that it is really Satan who is behind it (Eph. 6:12-18).
* Since Jesus has already given Satan his crushing blow through His death and resurrection (Gen. 3:15; Jn. 16:11; Heb. 2:14), they need not fear him. Some will be thrown into prison which sometimes meant they awaited execution. They will have tribulation for 10 days. 10 days ought not to be taken literal but it probably refers to a prolonged but definite period of time (cf. Dan. 1:12-15).
* Jesus encourages them to be faithful until death or even in the face of death and they will receive the crown of life (Jam. 1:12; 1 Pet. 5:4). This is to be understood as the crown which is life everlasting. This reverts us back to the description of Jesus at the beginning of the letter.
* Because He is the first and last, the one who was dead, but has come to life, signifies His ability to impart life everlasting. Jesus knows what it’s like to be in their shoes and so He encourages them to do as He did (Heb. 12:1-2) so that they may receive glory in the end. They will be put to the test but if they pass, they will be rewarded.
* **Verse 11**– The commendation to listen to the truth is here stated as a close to the letter. Those who heeds these words and remain faithful to Jesus will overcome and not be hurt by the second death (Matt. 25:41; Mk. 9:43-49. This is significant and relevant to the church at Smyrna since some would die (first death) but in comparison to the second death, the first death is nothing.
* If they should die physically for the sake of eternal life, it would have been worth it (Matt. 10:39; Lk. 9:24; 17:33; Jn. 12:25). Jesus encourages them to think about this especially if they are faced with the decision of whether or not they should give their lives up for Him.