The Book of Revelation

Zanesville, OH | Wednesday/Sunday 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 3**

* **3:7-13– Letter to Philadelphia**
* The sixth letter is addressed to Philadelphia which was located approximately 30 miles WNW of Sardis. Philadelphia was built on fertile land suitable for vine growing producing surplus amounts of grapes and wine. Thus, the economy was largely based on agriculture and industry enjoying years of prosperity and wealth because of its closeness to major trading routes (Phrygia, Mysia etc.)
* The wine and grapes industry meant that Dionysus was its chief deity and worshipped as such by the city at large. Philadelphia like Sardis was rocked by the great earthquake of AD 17 and so it was rebuilt with the help of Tiberius. Philadelphia became known as Neocaesarea as an expression of their appreciation to Tiberius for his help.
* Mounce says, *“At a later date, under Vespasian (AD 69-79), the name Flavia began to appear on coins. Philadelphia was remarkable for its many temples and religious festivals. For this reason, in the fifth century AD it was called ‘little Athens.’ Between AD 211 and 217 a provincial temple to the imperial cult was built, and Philadelphia was honored with the title Neokoros, warden of the temple”* (Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*).
* Philadelphia was the last of all the 7 cities mentioned in Revelation to be established in Asia minor. It is unclear who was the actual founder of the city: Eumenes II (197-159 B.C.) or Attalus II Philadelphus (159- 138 B.C.). Attalus achieved the epithet Philadelphus (brother lover or lover of his brother) because of his loyalty to Eumenes II.
* Philadelphia was established with the purpose of bringing Hellenistic culture to this part of the region. Ramsay reports that before AD 19, *“the Lydian tongue had been replaced by Greek as the only language of the country”* (Ramsay, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia*).
* **Verse 7**– The description of Christ in this letter is not particularly drawn from the *“Son of Man”* vision in chapter 1 like the rest of the letters have done. It’s not that the descriptions have run out but Christ describes Himself this way because it best suits the situation of the church.
* Christ describes Himself as the holy one and true one reminding us of Rev. 1:5 and drawing our attention to Yahweh in the OT. The phrase, “Holy One,” is used multiple times in the book of Isaiah stressing God’s quality of holiness (Isa. 5:24; 10:20; 12:6; 29:19; 30:15; 40:25).
* In the NT, this idea of the Holy One is attributed to the Messiah, the one promised in the OT who assumes the role of Yahweh (Mk. 1:24; Lk. 4:34; Jn. 6:69). Jesus is indeed reminding them He is Yahweh and He is the Messiah. This is further reinforced with the idea that he is true (faithful/genuine?). Together, these titles are later used to address Christ in Rev. 6:10.
* Christ is said to have the key of David (cf. Rev. 1:18) and who has the power to shut and close a “door.” The background for this description is taken from Isa. 22:15-25 where Eliakim is given the key of David and he will have authority over the royal household. That passage has for a long time considered to be Messianic and strongly associated with later servant prophecies in the book of Isaiah.
* Its use here seeks to draw the attention of the saints to the reality that Christ, the descendant of David (Matt. 1:1), is the one with absolute authority and He controls the entrance into the heavenly kingdom (cf. Jn. 10:1, 7-10). Mounce says, “it means the undisputed authority to admit or exclude from the New Jerusalem” (Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*).
* The local synagogue may have exclusively claimed that only those who worshipped within its doors were considered to be God’s true people. Hence, many Christian Jews were excommunicated because of their faith in Christ and thus this description of Christ admonishes them to consider who truly controls entrance into the kingdom.
* **Verse 8**– It would seem that the idea of the door (entrance) Christ controls in verse 7 is used here as a positive indication of their deeds. The door of His kingdom is open to them because: (1) They have a little power, (2) They have kept His word, (3) They have not denied His name. The “little power” probably refers to their witnessing of Christ in the community. They may have been small in number and their impact on the city was likely not a major one.
* Even so, Christ commends them because they have not grown discouraged or lackluster in their service, evangelism and relationship with Him and their brethren. This is evidenced by their keeping of His word and their perseverance in not denying His name (cf. 2:13).
* **Verse 9**– The conflict between Jews and Christians is once more stated in this letter. It was an issue in Smyrna (2:9) and it seems to be an issue here as well. The Jews claimed to be God’s people but in the gospels and the book of Acts they rejected Jesus and His teachings. Thus, they began to persecute Christians and excommunicate them for the synagogues (Acts 7:54-60; 13:50; 17:5).
* The truth, however, was that the Jews according to their beliefs and their behavior were a synagogue of Satan (Jn. 8:39-44; Rom. 2:28-29). Jesus will make them fall down at the feet of the Christians to show them who is really His (Isa. 49:23; 60:14). Jews could no longer claim exclusivity of God and His precepts since Christ died for all so both Jew and Gentile could have access to salvation (Eph. 2:15).
* Many Jews failed to recognize this and in denial believed they were still the true Israel, the people of God. Jesus will demonstrate that the true Israel, God’s people, are those who recognize His word, persevere for His name’s sake and submit to Him regardless of race, gender, culture etc.
* **Verse 10**– The saints have heeded Christ’s command in His word concerning patiently enduring for His name’s sake (cf. Matt. 24:13). In the midst of some difficult circumstances, they have been true to God and held fast to the faith. Christ will reward their hard work by preserving them from the trial to come upon the whole world.
* This “trial” or “hour” seems to be connected to God’s judgment upon the earth-dwellers who are the enemies of God and the saints and followers of the devil (Rev. 6:10; 8:13; 11:10; 13:8, 14; 17:8). This hour begins playing out in chapter 6 and continues largely throughout the remainder of the book.
* Christ’s preservation of His people is not to be understood primarily as keeping them physically safe (cf. 2:10, 13) but it is a promise that He will spiritually protect them from the forces of evil. They will be tested and tried but He will ensure, by His power, that they will not experience eternal punishment like the earth dwellers (Jn. 17:15).
* **Verse 11**– Christ once more advises He is coming quickly (1:7, 2:5, 16; 3:3). His presence in the coming judgment against His enemies will be shortly manifested and these saints are called to cling to what they have (faithfulness to Him and His word) in order that their crown not be taken away.
* The crown in the scriptures is given to those who endure the race and cross the finish line (1 Cor. 9:25; 2 Tim. 4:8; Rev. 12:1). The implication is that they are so close to achieving the crown but they must not allow that to turn into premature celebration lest they fall along with God’s enemies.
* **Verse 12**– The overcomers are promised to be made pillars in the temple of God. The idea of being a pillar is said of the apostles (Gal. 2:9) and the church (1 Tim. 3:15). It most likely refers to a state of stability and permanence further emphasized by the proceeding phrase, *“he will not go out from it anymore.”*
* The overcomers will also receive the name of God, the name of the city of God and Christ’s new name. The three-fold identification promise highlights citizenship and intimacy with God and Christ in Heaven. The faithful belong to God (Rev. 7:3; 14:1) and they will dwell with Him in Heaven (Phil. 3:20).
* That Christ will give them His new name indicates a special relationship with Him since He Himself is pictured as the cause for which they are saved in Revelation and the cause for which they can access God and Heaven (1:5-6; 5:9-10). The fullness of God’s blessings are realized in Heaven.
* **Verse 13**– The commendation to listen is stated on the heels of a church that has done well but they must keep doing well in order to receive the crown and the magnified, majestic blessings of God (1 Cor. 10:12).