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**

* **3:1-6– Letter to Sardis**
* The fifth letter is addressed to former capital of the ancient kingdom of Lydia, Sardis. Sardis was located approximately 50 miles NE of Ephesus and the city itself was an impressive citadel rising 1,500 feet above the valley below. Sardis was the most powerful city during the 6th century B.C. but by the time of this writing it has rapidly declined into a city of irrelevance.
* Ramsay notes that the people of the city, *“…lived rather on its ancient prestige than on its suitability to present conditions”* (Ramsay, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia*). The patron deity of the city was Cybele, the nature goddess, described as having the power to bring the dead back to life. Archaeological evidence suggests that there was an impressive temple built to Artemis as well.
* Under Croesus, the city established itself as one of great value and wealth and he himself was known as the wealthiest king of his day. Sardis fell to Cyrus ca. 549 B.C. then to Antiochus the Great ca. 218 B.C and eventually it was bequeathed to Rome in 133 B.C.
* In AD 17, Sardis suffered a crippling earthquake after which Tiberius assisted in its rebuilding by providing *“5 years tax remission and approximately one million dollars in financial assistance”* (Tacitus, *Annals* 2.47). Several years later, Sardis competed against 10 other cities to build a temple to Tiberius but failed.
* **Verse 1**– The description of Jesus noted here reverts us back to 1:4 and 1:16, 20 which illustrate the nature of His power and control. The church at Sardis had a name in the community that they were alive, but Christ who knows all things an sees all things indicates that they are really dead (cf. Mar. 11:12-14, 20). The attitude of the city has seeped in among God’s saints.
* The situation here at Sardis is a frightening situation indicating that a church may seem to be alive but if they don’t meet His standards then they are dead no matter what they say or what others perceive. These may be considered nominal Christians and Christ will have nothing to do with such people (1 Tim. 5:6).
* **Verse 2**– Jesus instructs the saints to be spiritually on the alert and to strengthen the things which remain. Their attitude has been lethargic at best leading to their dying state likely indicating a compromise with the culture and political forces (1 Pet. 5:8).
* To be on the alert indicates a heightened sense of responsibility and care for their spiritual health which is something they have not been consistent and constant in (Lk. 12:35-38). They are on the verge of dying but if they resort to strengthening the things that remain there is yet hope for them.
* They are called to be on the alert since their works have not been completed in God’s sight. In the sight of men, their works are probably considered to be enough (Matt. 6:2-4; 23:5, 28-38) but in God’s sight they have failed to maintain their zeal, service, love faith evangelism etc.
* **Verse 3**– The saints are called to remember what they received and heard since the evidence shows they have forgotten and forsaken it (Heb. 2:1; 2 Pet. 1:13; 3:1). This was a major problem with the Israelites of old and it can be a problem for those who become complacent with their conditions.
* What they remember, they are called to cling to (1 Tim. 6:20; 2 Tim. 1:13) so that they don’t fall back into the same predicament they are currently in. They are admonished like Ephesus and Pergamum to repent of their deeds. If they repent, their story will be likened to the prodigal son (Lk. 15:21-24, 32).
* If they do not go on full alert then the Lord’s return will be of harm to them and not for good (1 Thess. 5:2; 2 Pet. 3:10). No one knows when Christ will return but those who are on the alert will prepare for His return and they will enter into His eternal kingdom and dwell with Him forever (Matt. 25:34).
* **Verse 4**– While it would seem that majority of the saints are on the verge of death, there are a few in Sardis who have kept the faith and maintained their fealty to Jesus. This idea of a few being faithful to Christ is well established in the scriptures (Matt. 7:14; Lk. 13:23-30). Not soiling their garments is likely a reference to being pure (Psa. 23:3-4; Matt. 5:8; 1 Pet. 1:14-16).
* These who are faithful and who have not soiled their garments will walk with Jesus in white (Gen. 5:22, 24; Rev. 7:9-10, 13-17; 14:4-5). The idea of walking with Jesus in white is that they are justified with their Lord because they have applied effort and consistency in their relationship with Him.
* Concerning their being worthy Mounce says, *“They themselves have done nothing to merit their exalted position, but are worthy in the sense that they have withstood the pressure to apostatize and hence have done nothing that would result in forfeiting their position”* (Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*).
* **Verse 5**– The overcomers are promised 3 things here in this verse. As has been discussed previously, they will be clothed in white garments. In Revelation, this seems to be connected to the idea of having heavenly attire (4:4; 6:11; 7:9, 13; 19:14). One cannot get to Heaven without receiving these clothes and one cannot receive these clothes unless they have their sins washed away and are faithful to God (7:13-14).
* Jesus promises that those who overcome will not have their name blotted out from the book of life (13:8; 17:8; 20:12, 15; 21:27; 22:19). The faithful have their names in the book of life and it is up to them to be removed (Jn. 17:3; Phil. 4:3). One can fall from grace if they choose to go back to sin as evidenced by the previous verses.
* Finally, Jesus promises that He will confess the names of His faithful ones before His Father and the angels acting good on the promise He stated before in the gospel accounts (Matt. 10:32; Mk. Mar. 8:38; Lk. 12:8). That Jesus will personally commend us to God in the midst of the heavenly host is one of the greatest moments one can ever hope for.
* **Verse 6**– Those who want to be restored to life in Sardis and those who want to have some hope of achieving these promises must listen to what is being said by the Spirit lest they fall short.