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**

* **3:14-22– Letter to Laodicea**
* The seventh and final letter is addressed to Laodicea. Located 40 miles SE of Philadelphia, it lay in the Lycus valley at the junction of two important imperial trading routes. Mounce says that *“its sister cities were Hierapolis, six miles to the north across the Lycus River, and Colossae, ten miles on up the Lycus glen”* (Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*).
* This is attested to in Paul’s letter to the Colossians (2:1; 4:13, 15-16). We do not know much details about the condition of the church at Laodicea from the letter to the Colossians, but it would seem that they were faithful at the time Paul wrote the letter. Additionally, Paul seemed acquainted with the church (Col. 2:1) and he may have also written them a letter (Col. 4:16).
* The city was founded by Antiochus II (261-246 B.C.) and was likely named after his wife, Laodice. During the Roman era, Laodicea became one of the wealthiest cities if not the wealthiest city in the region. They were known for producing black wool which was in high demand and it made them famous.
* Mounce reports, *“Agricultural and commercial prosperity brought the banking industry to Laodicea. Cicero, the Roman statesman and philosopher of the last days of the Republic, wrote of cashing his treasury bills of exchange there”* (Mounce, The Book of Revelation).
* Laodicea was so wealthy that after the devastating earthquake of AD 60/61, they refused financial help from the Romans and the citizens rebuilt the city with their own money. Tacitus says, *“Laodicea arose from the ruins by the strength of her own resources, and with no help from us”* (Tacitus, *Annals 14.27*).
* In addition to being known for its wealth and wool, Laodicea was touted for its medical school built in connection with a temple associated with Asklepios (god of healing, medicine). Here they produced a famous eye-salve from “Phrygian powder” and spikenard ointment for the ears.
* **Verse 14**– Jesus begins by identifying Himself to the saints at Laodicea as the *“Amen.”* This is probably echoing Isa. 65:16 (cf. 2 Cor. 1:20) which speaks of God as the *“Amen”* or the *“Truth.”* The word indicates that something is both valid and binding which is why it is said at the end of prayers and used in many of Jesus’ teachings (Matt. 5:18, 6:2, 5, 16; 8:10; 10:15; 16:28; 19:23).
* The idea is that was Jesus has to say should be considered as being both valid and binding. It’s a message not easily dismissed and one which is indisputable. This is evidenced further by stating He is the *“faithful and true Witness”* (1:5; 3:7; 19:11). Christ is the essence of God’s truth and He witnessed faithfully to that truth while on earth (Jn. 3:32-33; 18:37; 1 Tim. 6:13).
* The final description of Christ as the *“Beginning of the creation of God”* may be tying two ideas together. In one sense Christ is the firstborn of God’s creation (new creation) in the sense that Paul discusses in Col. 1:15. It relates to the idea that Christ’s resurrection forms the foundation for God’s new creation by which all men can be made new (Jn. 3:1-5; Rom. 6:3-4; 2 Cor. 5:15, 17; Eph. 4:22-24).
* The second sense is that Christ is the source or ruler of God’s creation which Paul also discusses in Col. 1:16-18. Christ is the source of two creations, if you will. He created everything in the beginning but He also ministered in that creation to make possible the new creation which leads to eternal life.
* **Verses 15-16**– Christ acknowledges the deeds of this church and they are nothing but negative. Their attitude is very much indicative of half-heartedness and pride (cf. 1 Kings 18:21). They do not take neither extreme (cold/hot) and maintain a constant sense of being lukewarm. Consequently, Christ will vomit them out of His mouth.
* Their neither being hot nor cold is indicative of their spiritual relationship with Christ and likely with the community. They are people who exhibit an indifferent and compromising attitude (Matt. 6:24). Jesus is disgusted with such attitudes which result in complete severance from Him.
* **Verse 17**– The irony runs deep in vv. 17-18 which Christ contrasting His observance of their situations with their own. Christ indicates the reason for His vomiting of them and their lukewarm state. The historical circumstances of the city clearly was a part of the church’s atmosphere.
* Many of the saints were likely very affluent people and they felt secure, confident and proud about their physical conditions that they were blind concerning their spiritually deteriorating state (Jn. 9:39-41; 2 Pet. 1:9). Christ indicates that His concern is primarily about their physical state but rather their spiritual conditions.
* The saints were more concerned about riches and wealth and it plummeted them into a dangerous state with God (Prov. 23:4-5; 1 Tim. 6:9-10, 17-19). They placed their trust in their money rather than God and they even touted the belief that they garnered it all on their own (Lk. 12:19-21).
* The reality of their situation which Jesus saw but they didn’t was that they were pitiful, miserable, poor and of course blind. To their family, friends and city folk, they have come across as needing of nothing but when one does not have God and the right relationship with Him, it doesn’t matter what he/she has in the world because they are lacking the only thing that matters (Lk. 16:19-31; 1 Cor. 13:2 cf. 1 Jn. 4:8).
* **Verse 18**– Jesus advises the saints to buy gold refined by fire. This phrase indicates the genuine and sincere faith needed in all of God’s children (Prov. 23:23; 1 Pet. 1:7). Only with this kind of gold will they then become truly rich. In addition, they are told to purchase white garments indicative of righteousness and purity in this book (3:4-5, 4:4; 6:11; 7:9, 13-14; 19-14).
* These clothes will cover their shame of their spiritual nakedness brought on by their arrogance, half-heartedness and complacency. The idea of being naked in the scriptures is associated with humiliation and judgment (Isa. 20:1-4). These clothes can be purchased freely by them since Christ has already paid the price (Isa. 55:1).
* Finally, they are counseled to buy eye-salve to fix their root problem of spiritual blindness. Again, the irony is striking since the city was known for its exportation of the “Phrygian powder” which was hailed for its powerful healing of eye problems. Christ’s eye-salve is the only kind that can heal them of their biggest problem (cf. Jn. 9:6-11).
* **Verse 19**– Jesus states to the saints that He does not hate them nor does He want to inflict judgment or harsh language on them because He is sadistic in nature. This is all done in accordance with His great love and that demands that sin be taken care of. Therefore He is reproving and disciplining them before the time should come when it’s too late (Job 5:17; Psa. 94:12; Prov. 3:11-12; Heb. 12:5-8).
* Taking note of this and their spiritual condition, they should not be those who wallow in their miserable situation but instead they need to be zealous unto repentance because God does not give us forever to improve and make the changes necessary to be with Him (2 Pet. 3:9).
* **Verse 20**– The implications of this verse are such that it points to a sad reality that the church in Laodicea, through their actions, had excommunicated Jesus from their midst. The more remarkable observation, however, is Jesus’ willingness to re-establish fellowship with them despite their taking Him for granted.
* He will always be willing to have fellowship with us if we are willing to love Him and get rid of sin (Jn. 14:21-23; 1 Jn. 1:7, 9). The mention of a dinner is no surprise as the ancient tradition of sharing a meal together indicated a strong bond and companionship between the parties at the table. Jesus desires an intimate connection with anyone who is willing to listen to Him.
* **Verse 21**– The overcomers are promised a seat with Christ on His throne (next to Him; 4:4) just as Christ achieved His seat by overcoming (Eph. 1:20-23). This promise is well attested to in the NT (Matt. 19:28; Lk. 22:30; 2 Tim. 2:12) and naturally implies that those who would sit with Christ are those who give their all and their best for Him and to Him.
* **Verse 22**– The commendation to listen is stated as the letter to the Laodiceans come to a close. If there was ever a church and ever a group of people who needed to use their ears to listen, it would be this group. All hope is not lost as long as they heed the words of the Spirit and act upon them.