

The Seven Letters
an overview
Rev. 1: 19. 2: 1-7
mdb

Last week, we ended our session together looking at Revelation 1:18-20, and you may recall me saying that the 19th verse of this section is where Jesus Christ, the giver of the Revelation, gave to John the pattern or the outline of the book he was to write. John was told by the glorified Christ that he was to write about 1) "the things he had seen"; 2) "those that are"; and 3) "those that were to take place after this".

In other words, the content of the Revelation would contain a past element, a present element and a future element - some things that were past tense to John, some things that were taking place present to John and some things that would come to pass, future to John - and this is the way the Revelation unfolds:

1) That which John saw is recorded in Rev. 1:10-16 - meaning, the vision of the risen, glorified Christ. He heard a voice, turned to see the voice that was speaking, and he saw Christ among seven lamp stands and with seven stars in his right hand;

2) Those things which "are" is what follows chapter 1:10-16 and are contained in chapters two and three of the book; so those things which were present day for John, the writer of the Revelation, were those things that pertain specifically to the seven churches in Asia Minor who were John's immediate target audience - the church in Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyra, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea;

3) Then, he was to write about those things which were to take place after this (v.19c) or, the things that must soon take place (v.1); and those things comprise, for the most part, chapters four to twenty one - and the reason I say "for the most part" is because, in chapters four to twenty one, there are some things recorded that had taken place in the past (see chapter 12 as an example).

We have spent a full eleven weeks on chapter 1: 1-20, so tonight, we move into the portion of Revelation that has to do with things that were present tense, to John - that is, the things that had to do with these seven specific churches in Asia Minor; and this is found in chapters two and three of the Revelation.

What we have in this section of the Revelation are seven letters to the seven angels of the seven churches of Asia Minor dictated to John by Jesus Christ Himself. Later, we will see how an angel gives John what he was to write - and this is consistent with what we have in the very first verse of the book - but here, it is Jesus Himself who dictates these seven letters to these churches. And each letter contains a message from Christ for that particular church.

I. Who were these 'angels' who received these letters?

As we saw last week, traditionally, there have been four interpretations in identifying the seven stars - the seven angels of the churches:

1) Some hold that they represent un-fallen angels who are the guardians of the churches;

2) Others say they were a personification of the spirit of each of the churches - or put another way, the particular personality of the church;

3) Still others believe these angels (or messengers) represent **men** who are either bishops or chief teachers of the churches (we might call these men 'lead shepherds') - and there were bishops over churches, according to the scriptures, as well as according to the writings of the early fathers who lived at the end of the 1st and opening of the 2nd century - so this could be a viable interpretation;

4) And finally, others hold that they were representatives of each church but who held no particular office. These would be men who may have gone to visit John on Patmos and who would act as mail carriers - those who would carry back to their respective churches the letter from Christ.

Question is, which view is right? As I said last week, there is no solid consensus - good people hold to all of the four views. What I **didn't** say though, is that there is a majority view - and that would be that the angels of each church was either #3 or was the equivalent of the president of the synagogue - a man we would call the 'first among equals' among the leaders of the church.

The Seven Letters
an overview
Rev. 1: 19. 2: 1-7
mdb

I tend to understand these 'angels' as from group #3 - because I have a difficult time understanding how an angelic being could be held responsible by Christ for the well being of a church; and I have a difficult time understanding how a church's 'personality' could be held responsible for a church; and it seems unlikely that someone who held no position of leadership and/or authority in a church - no role - could be held responsible for correcting the church either - so **view #3 - that these angels - or messengers - were the bishop or the primary spokesman for each church** - seems the most plausible explanation, given the evidence and the responsibility Christ seems to place on each of these 'angels' or 'messengers', for their churches.

II. What do these letters contain? Interestingly, the content of each letter is similar; and the structure or form of the letters are also similar. As for content, Jesus is writing to each of these churches in order to commend, to correct, and to condemn what needs to be commended, corrected or condemned.

The letters contain praises of their Christian life (see 2: 2, 13);

They also contain reproofs for their insufficiencies (v.4, 3:1b-2);

There are exhortations and consolations in these letters (v. 10, 11b, 25-26);

Some of the letters also contain threats and warnings (v. 5; 14; 20-22; 3:16);

And there are also some great and precious promises (v.10b; 3:10-11).

The application for these churches is very clear. What the Lord Jesus Christ shows in the letters he dictates to the seven churches is that He is

- 1) in the midst of the church;
- 2) He is aware of what is strong and what is weak - what is good and bad in the church;
- 3) he knows who in the churches are faithful versus who troubles the churches; and
- 4) He acts in the midst of the church - and has the authority and power to raise people up and remove people and churches from their places! And this leads to a second application for all churches.

Application #2: That these letters were written to seven literal churches on the one hand while applying to all of Christ church on the other is clear in a couple of ways. First, the number denotes both the seven literal churches AND the full church, since seven symbolizes fullness and completion; but also, each letter ends by exhorting all the churches to hear the message of each letter (see v. 7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22) - meaning Christ Jesus is also in the midst of the modern church, is aware of what is strong and weak, good and bad, knows who are faithful to Him in the church and who troubles the church and has the power to act in the midst of the churches today, as He had and did in the first century.

This should be sobering - in a good way - for all who are in leadership in the church today - sobering for elders, for deacons, for SS teachers, for CG leaders - for these are all people in roles of spiritual influence over others; and for all members of Christ's church, who are being influenced toward either spiritual growth in Christ or away from it - because there is great and awesome reward for faithfulness to Christ as well as great peril for the opposite; and this should inform how we relate to the church and how we act toward each other, in her midst.

I believe **this was the point Jesus was making** to the seven churches and to the angels of the seven churches through these letters. These letters are an evaluation of sorts - commending the good and the strong, encouraging the church to strengthen that which was weak, calling the churches to repent of that which was evil - sinful; and warning that the same spirit of evil that afflicted the people of God in Israel of old is still present and if allowed, will not only afflict but destroy the effectiveness of the church of Jesus Christ in the modern age - and those who succumb to that spirit of evil are warned of severe consequence if they don't self correct before the Lord. And we will see this clearly as we consider each letter to each church and what the Lord Jesus says to the churches.

The Seven Letters
an overview
Rev. 1: 19. 2: 1-7
mdb

III. As for structure, the letters are also similar. How are these letters structured? Interestingly enough, each letter follows a similar general structure. In each letter we have:

- a) A greeting: "To the angel of the church in. . . ."
- b) A title of the Risen Christ, often taken from the vision of the risen Christ from chapter one;
- c) The 'I Know' section, which give spires to the church for what is good and right (accept for Laodicea);
- d) The 'but I have this against you' section (with the exception of the church in Smyrna);
- e) Warnings;
- f) An exhortation or encouragement;
- g) A promise, given to 'him who overcomes';

There is also a pattern which is found in the way the churches are arranged. Churches 1 and 7 are in grave danger; churches 2 and 6 are in excellent shape; and churches 3, 4 and 5 are middle of the road - neither good nor bad.

IV. What was the first church to be addressed? The very first church Jesus writes too - which is a strong church but a church in grave danger, is the church in the city of Ephesus. Where was this church, what was the city it was located in like as a city, and how did the church come to be?

1) **Where was this church?** Ephesus was a significant city in Asia Minor in John's day, and was located on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea where it meets the Aegean Sea; meaning today it's ruins are found outside Kusadasi, Turkey. Today, the old city is simply-ruins-but in John's day Ephesus was a very important city of the ancient world.

2) **What was the significance of Ephesus as a city?** Ephesus was an important city for a couple of reasons. Ephesus was a port city, and because it was it was a center of commerce AND it was a cross roads city-meaning people from all over the ancient world passed through Ephesus as they came into western Asia by sea, en route to various destinations or as they came to Ephesus from West Asia en route to Greece, Italy or elsewhere around the Med.

Ephesus also boasted **the temple of Artemis** (Diana), which was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, as well as several other significant structures. There was **a theater which seated 20,000** people, and looking north there was a processional way leading to the temple of Artemis. There was also **a large stadium** where games were hosted; and in the midst of the city stood a huge marketplace, with its various structures.

Ephesus was a wealthy city. There were many lavish terrace houses in Ephesus; and in the 4th century, when the temple of Artemis burned down, the people of the city raised the funds themselves to have it rebuilt.

This meant that, in addition to Ephesus being a port, it was also a cross roads city in that it was a 'tourist center'. People from all over Asia and the Med came to Ephesus either to see this great temple or to worship Artemis there, or both. **Ephesus was a cross roads city, and a tourist city, and a hub of cult worship in the ancient world.**

3) **How did the church come to be where it was and why?** Unlike the church in Colossi, which was planted by one of Paul's colleagues, the church in Ephesus was planted, not by the Apostle John, but by Paul. Paul came to the city or was in contact with people from the city on behalf of Christ's church three times in the course of his gospel labors, after which he wrote his letter to the church at Ephesus - our book of Ephesians; and these visits and contacts are all recorded in Acts.

Paul's first contact (c. AD 57) with the Ephesians is found in chapter 18: 18-21. After Paul left Athens he wanted to travel to Syria to visit his sending church-the church in Syrian Antioch-and on his way, he stopped briefly in Ephesus. On this **first visit**, he focused primarily on his fellow Jews, going into their synagogue and preaching that Jesus was

The Seven Letters
an overview
Rev. 1: 19. 2: 1-7
mdb

the Christ (vs. 19). These Jews wanted Paul to stay with them, but he declined but told them he would return if he was able.

He was able, and he returned for a second visit; and the account of his **second visit** to Ephesus is found in Acts 19 (c. AD 58-60) and Paul remained in Ephesus for near three years. It was during this second visit of Paul that the church in Ephesus was really established - and if you take some time to review Acts 19, what you will find there is that:

- 1) the church started with just a few people-12 men to be exact (19: 1-7)-*don't despise small beginnings*;
- 2) as a result of these 12 men receiving the Holy Spirit, Paul stayed for three months teaching in their synagogue, and many, many people believed (vs. 8)-*one small event can lead to big results*;
- 3) when some became stubborn, Paul left the synagogue, rented the hall of Tyrannus, and continued for two years in that situation; *there's a lesson here. Paul didn't allow stubborn ppl to hijack the gospel vision-and if necessary he MOVED the believers to avoid the resistance and continued his labors..*
- 4) The gospel was having such an impact on the people of this city that some tried to imitate what Paul was doing (vs. 11-16). *This makes me ask a question-what ppl outside the faith are so impacted by us that they try and imitate us?*;
- 5) Many, many people were repenting and believing on Christ (vs. 17-20). *This is what we need to pray for, for our city*;
- 6) The gospel had such an impact that the economy of the city was changing (vs. 23-27). *What would this look like if it happened here in Morgan Hill?*; and this resulted in:
- 7) A riot, for fear that Diana of the Ephesians was losing glory to this Jesus Christ who Paul preached (28-41); and this resulted in Paul staying for a while longer and then leaving for Macedonia.

Paul's third visit was actually NOT to Ephesus itself but it was with the elders from the church in Ephesus, who he visited as he was on his way to Jerusalem. The account of this is in Acts 20: 17-38; and on this visit he gave the Ephesian elders their charge for overseeing the church there at Ephesus; and his charge is rich, simple and clearly understood.

In addition to these facts about Ephesus and about the church at Ephesus, which is the subject of this first letter in Revelation, it was to Ephesus that Paul sent Timothy at one point during his ministry - and while Timothy was in Ephesus Paul wrote him the letter that we know in our NT as 1 Timothy - and it was the Ephesian church Paul was referencing in that letter - for that was where Timothy was serving Christ at the time.

Further, John the apostle eventually found his way to Ephesus and in his later years, served there as bishop over the church at Ephesus. He served there before his exile to Patmos; and it was to the church in Ephesus that John returned after being released from Patmos; and it was in Ephesus that the disciple who Jesus loved - and Apostle John, went home to be with the Lord.

With a history like that of the church at Ephesus, what was the church at Ephesus like, by the time John wrote the Revelation? Let's **read Revelation 2: 1-7** - and as we read, pay attention to the characteristics of the church.

Tonight, we don't have time to go further and work through this letter of Jesus Christ to the church at Ephesus. That will be our study for next Tuesday, Lord willing. I will say this though. What we see in this letter to the Ephesian church - which is actually the second letter to the church in Ephesus that we have in our NT, is this:

The church of Ephesus had started well - but had lost one crucial element as they travel their journey with Christ. Doctrinally, they were were sound - they were solid - they were strong and stable. BUT, when it came o passion for Christ, they had lost their heart - for here was the church that had departed from love for Christ.

The church at Ephesus, when Jesus Christ wrote a letter to them, had become the church with Solid Doctrine but a Cold, Loveless Heart.

Any church can become the same - and next week, we will look at what Jesus wrote to them and commended them for, what he corrected them over, and what he promised them, if they overcame.