

19.01.2018 JESUS' MESSAGES TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES

“To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.” Revelation 3:21

This week we study the messages to the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3. We were introduced to them in the last week's study.

Before we study each message, let us look at the main themes and structures of the messages:

Common Structure:

- (1) Jesus addresses each church by name.
- (2) He then introduces Himself to each church, using characteristics of Himself drawn from the vision chapter 1:12-18.
- (3) He offers an analysis of the strengths and/or weaknesses of each church.
- (4) Jesus provides counsel suitable to His analysis of each church.
- (5) An appeal is made to the church to listen to the Spirit.
- (6) Each message concludes with a promise or promises to those in each church who overcome.

Chiastic Structure of the Letters (the Chiasm of the Seven Churches):

- 'Chiasm' (from the Greek letter X [pronounced "key"]) a literary form that is based on Hebrew logic.
- The structure of the seven messages follows this form.
- In chiasms, writers reason full circle, coming back to the beginning point of an argument.
- The first point parallels the last point. The second point parallels the next-to-last point, and so on, with the climax at the centre rather than the end.

So the seven letters follow this structure:

1st letter, 2nd letter, 3rd letter, 4th letter (centre), 5th letter (parallels the 3rd), 6th letter (2nd), 7th letter (1st).

The letter to Smyrna (second letter) shares many similarities with the letter to the Philadelphians (sixth letter); both are largely positive messages. The letters to Pergamum (third letter) and Sardis (fifth letter) are to churches in steep decline. The message to Thyatira (the fourth and middle church) is twice as long as the others and is different from all the others. This arrangement means that the first and last letters (to Ephesus and Laodicea) also are parallel. This structure suggests that Laodicea, like Ephesus, suffers from a deficiency of love.

The Messages:

A study of Christ's messages to each of the churches clearly shows that many of them were struggling with issues that Jesus had to point out to them. But in every case, He Himself is the answer to the church's need.

The epistles of John which preceded Revelation were written to address the fact that the church was falling away from the gospel, from the truth as it is in Jesus. In Acts 19:10 we are told that in the space of 2 years, all that were in Asia had heard the gospel. But at the end of his life, Paul writes to Timothy, '*This thou knowest, that **all** they which are **in Asia** be turned away from me*' 2 Tim 1:15. Before that, he wrote to the Philippians '*All seek their own, not the things of Christ*' Phil 2:11.

The messages to the churches are given in this context – within the church the issues of the Great Controversy are being played out. Instead of falling for the lies of Satan, Christ calls us to be overcomers and gives great and precious promises to all who will be overcomers. An overcomer is one who holds fast to his faith against enemies, temptations and

persecutions, even unto death if need be. Our strength to overcome lies not in ourselves, but in the fact that Christ has overcome the world (John 16:33, 1 John 4:4; 5:4) and in Him we are victorious too.

Christ Himself speaks to each of the 7 churches.

I heard behind me a loud voice, as of a trumpet, saying, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last,"... "What you see, write in a book and send it to the seven churches which are in Asia: to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamos, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea." Revelation 1:10, 11

I saw seven golden lamp stands, and in the midst of the seven lamp stands One like the Son of Man... 'The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lamp stands which you saw are the seven churches.' Revelation 1:12, 20

Though He addresses one church at a time, it is clear that the messages were to be heard and responded to by ALL the churches: *'He that has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches'*.

Ephesus: the Loveless Church

Jesus wants His church to love Him (Revelation 2:1-7)

To the church at Ephesus Jesus reveals Himself as *'him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lamp stands'* Revelation 2:1.

Commendation (Revelation 2:2, 3): Jesus commends the church for *'your works, your labour, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars; and you have persevered and have patience, and have laboured for My name's sake and have not become weary.'*

Nevertheless, this will be worth nothing if you do not repent and love Jesus above all else. Works, labour, being zealous for the truth, perseverance – all this is worth nothing if Jesus does not hold the first place in our hearts.

If we repent and return to our first love, Jesus, and love Him to the end as He loves us (John 13:1) Jesus promises that we will eat from the tree of life which is the midst of the Paradise of God (Revelation 2:7).

The Issue: God comes first. This is the message of the first commandment. God is to be loved supremely. Everything else we do, even in His name and for His sake is secondary to our love for Him. We are to love Him with all our heart and soul and might. *'This is the first and great commandment'* Matthew 22:38.

Smyrna: the Persecuted Church

Jesus wants His church to be willing to suffer for Him (Revelation 2:8-11).

Jesus reveals Himself as *'the First and the Last, who was dead and came to life'*.

The church is commended for her faithfulness in tribulation and trials. Jesus assures them that they need not be afraid even of death; all who are faithful unto death will not be touched by the second death, for Jesus Himself has keys of Death and the grave. Instead, the faithful will receive a crown of life.

The Issue: The church is called to be faithful unto the end, even in persecution and tribulation.

Pergamos: The Compromising Church

Jesus wants His church to stand for truth (Revelation 2:12-17)

Jesus is the One who has the sharp two-edged sword.

The Word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. Hebrews 4:12

The church at Pergamos, though holding fast to the Name of Christ, nevertheless had begun to compromise their faith. They were paying allegiance both to God and to idols. They were indulging in sexual immorality. It is often the case that 'spiritual corruption is associated with fleshly corruption' (*Matthew Henry*).

The Word of God, the Bible and the living Word, Christ Jesus, reveal to us what truth is. Jesus Himself is the Truth. The sword of the Spirit divides between that which is false and true. To all who listen and obey the voice of the Spirit, the promise is given that they will eat of the bread of heaven, the hidden manna and they will receive a white stone which means 'no condemnation' and a new name.

The Issue: if we refuse to repent and listen to the Word of God, that same Word will testify against us; that we have tried to serve two masters.

Repentance is for sinners and for saints; it is not a once-only thing. It occurs at conversion and occurs many times in our spiritual journey. It is not only for individuals; at times God calls the church to repent – a corporate repentance.

Thyatira: the Corrupt Church

Jesus wants His church to be holy (Revelation 2:18-29)

The message to Thyatira goes against the established structural pattern of the previous messages in several ways. First of all, the message to Thyatira is twice as long as the other six messages. This length is fitting to its role at the centre of the chiasm and the long period of persecution that it represents during Christian history. Second, within the church of Thyatira is a faithful remnant, just as at other difficult times for the people of God. Third, Thyatira is the only church about which Jesus says that their "latter works exceed the first" (Rev. 2:19). While all the previous churches were either in decline or holding steady, Thyatira already was improving. Placed at the centre of the history of the seven churches, this positive message means that God is bringing people out of apostasy and through the subsequent messages preparing the church for the second coming of Jesus. *R Stefanovic: Revelation*.

Jesus the Son of God, who has eyes like flaming fire and feet like fine brass, speaks to Thyatira. He is the Fire that refines and purifies His people.

Thyatira is commended for her '*works, love, service, faith, and patience...*' *Revelation 2:19*

Christ then details the sin of Thyatira (2:20-23); she is guilty of spiritual adultery. Spiritual adultery leads to sexual immorality. He warns them that God who examines the heart, will reward them according to their evil works.

In contrast, those who hold fast to their faith in Christ, whose works are found to be from Him, they will be given power, the power of Christ which He has received from God the Father. They will also receive the morning star; in Revelation 22:16 Jesus calls Himself the '*bright and morning star*'.

Issue: God's people are always to be a holy people, for He is a holy God. At the end of the cosmic conflict, they will be citizens of the 'Holy City, New Jerusalem'.

Sardis: the Dead Church

God wants His Church to leave aside its dead works of the flesh and accept God's righteousness (Revelation 3:1-6)

Jesus has the seven Spirits of God. The Spirit of God produces the fruit of righteousness in the life.

Sardis is a nearly dead church, even though it has a reputation for being alive. Christ has not found their works perfect. Only a few members have not 'defiled their garments'. What are defiled garments (in contrast to white garments)? They

are 'garments defiled by the flesh' Jude 1:23. The works that our produced by our natural strength (the flesh) are not found perfect before God; indeed, He counts them as filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6).

Sardis is called to repent of her dead works and trust in God alone who will clothe it the white garments of Christ's righteousness. Only those who have the righteousness of Christ will be found written in the Book of Life. Those with any other righteousness will be blotted out of the Book.

Jesus will present those who trust in His righteousness faultless before God the Father and the angels in heaven.

Issue: The only true righteousness in the universe is the righteousness of God. The church is called to leave aside the dead works of the flesh and accept the white linen of Christ's righteousness.

Philadelphia: the Faithful Church

Jesus wants His church to take hold of the power of God (Revelation 3:7-13)

Jesus is holy, Jesus is true. He has the keys to the everlasting kingdom of David (Matthew 16:19), for He sits upon the throne of David. He opens the door to the kingdom and invites us to enter.

The church is commended for she has been faithful to Christ; she has kept His word and not denied His name, despite the fact that she has only a little strength. Those who formerly persecuted the church (the synagogue of Satan) will now acknowledge that the church is loved by Christ and will bow down in submission.

Christ promises to keep her from the hour of trial. He calls her to be faithful till He comes. He promises that she will be a pillar in the temple of God; she will have the name of God and the city of God and the new name Christ will give her.

Issue: God's grace is sufficient for the church; His strength is made perfect in weakness. God looks not for a successful church – He looks for a faithful church.

Laodicea: the Lukewarm Church

Jesus wants His church to be whole-hearted (Revelation 3:14-22)

Jesus is the Amen - in Him all the promises of God are 'Yes'! He is the Faithful and True Witness and He is the Beginning of the Creation of God.

Christ has no commendation for Laodicea. Instead:

1. Laodicea is a hypocrite – she does a lot of works, but God knows they have no true value.
2. Laodicea is not whole-hearted in her devotion to God – she is lukewarm.
3. Laodicea is deceived – she is ignorant of her true state (3:17)
4. Laodicea's works are devoid of *agape* love - she is counselled to buy (*'without money and without price – see Isaiah 55:1*) the gold of faith and love (3:18)
5. Laodicea denies Christ as her Righteousness – she is counselled to buy the white garments of Christ's righteousness.
6. She has no spiritual insight – she is counselled to anoint her eyes with eye salve.

Christ counsels Laodicea 'to be zealous and repent' 3:19. He rebukes and chastens her because He loves her. *'Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it' Hebrews 12:11.*

Laodicea must open the door of her heart to Christ. When He comes in and dines with us, He removes unrighteousness and fills us with His glory. He has promised that not only He, but His Father also will come and make their home with us (John 14:23).

Christ promises that to him who overcomes i.e. he who is victorious in faith will be granted to sit on Christ's throne.

Issue: In the Great Controversy, God looks for a people who will totally distrust self and turn to God whole-heartedly to do for them what they cannot do for themselves. Faith in Christ Jesus is the only way to win the victory over self, the world and the Devil.

Many inquire: Why are all these reproofs given? We love the truth; we are prospering; we are in no need of these testimonies of warning and reproof. But let these murmurers see their hearts and compare their lives with the practical teachings of the Bible, let them humble their souls before God, let the grace of God illuminate the darkness, and the scales will fall from their eyes, and they will realize their true spiritual poverty and wretchedness. They will feel the necessity of buying gold, which is pure faith and love; white raiment, which is a spotless character made pure in the blood of their dear Redeemer; and eye salve, which is the grace of God and which will give clear discernment of spiritual things and detect sin. These attainments are more precious than the gold of Ophir. EG White: The Laodicean Church.

Conclusion:

At the end of time, like her Leader, Christ Jesus, the church will be victorious over Satan. As the church overcomes daily by holding on in faith to Christ Jesus, He will cleanse her of every spot and wrinkle and present her to Himself a perfect church, a holy church. We are called to repent of every failure of faith, of every sin that so easily besets us, and keep looking unto Jesus who is the Author and Finisher of our faith. Such a people, such a church will be the Bride of Christ.

Who is she that looks forth as the morning, fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners? Song of Solomon 6:10

Now a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a garland of twelve stars. Revelation 12:1... Then I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, "Now salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren, who accused them before our God day and night, has been cast down. And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death. Revelation 12:10, 11

And I heard, as it were, the voice of a great multitude, as the sound of many waters and as the sound of mighty thunderings, saying, "Alleluia! For the Lord God Omnipotent reigns! Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready." And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints. Revelation 19:6-8
