

LETTERS TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES

Introduction:

1. The book of Revelation begins with the image of Jesus in close fellowship with His followers, the churches.
2. This vision is followed by a letter addressed to each of these seven congregations.
 - a. Commission – *to the angel*
 - b. Character – *description of Jesus*
 - c. Commendation – *exception: Laodicea*
 - d. Condemnation – *exception: Smyrna and Philadelphia*
 - e. Correction – *warning*
 - f. Call – *hear what the Spirit says*
 - g. Challenge – *to overcome*
3. Each of these letters emphasizes the character of Jesus, the truth of His words and the need to submit in obedience to Him.
4. Furthermore, each letter promises victory to those who endure and overcome.
5. An important aspect of study is the symbolism used in each letter.

I. Things Commended in the Seven Churches

- A. The churches are commended for their works (2:2, 3, 9, 13, 19; 3:1, 8).
 1. God knows and remembers our works (Heb. 6:10).
 2. Christians must work (Matt. 5:16; Eph. 2:10; Gal. 6:10; 1 Tim. 6:17-18; Titus 2:14; 3:1; etc.).
- B. The churches are commended for rejecting evil (2:2, 6). (Cf. 1 Cor. 5:13; 2 Thes. 3:6)
- C. The churches are commended for holding truth (2:2, 9, 13; 3:8).
 1. This demands knowing the Truth (John 8:31-32; Rev. 22:18-19).
 2. This demands rejecting error (Gal. 1:6-9; Eph. 4:14; 1 Thes. 5:21; 2 Pet. 2:1-3; 1 John 4:1; 2 John 9-11).
- D. The churches are commended for endurance (2:3, 10, 13; 3:8).
 1. This is an important theme of the book of Revelation.
 2. Consider the idea of “bearing” (Mark 15:21; Luke 14:27; Heb. 13:13).
 3. Patience (Luke 8:15; 21:19; Heb. 6:12, 15; 10:36; 12:1; etc.)
- E. The churches are commended for spiritual wealth (2:9).
 1. A person may be physically poor and spiritually poor (Prov. 30:9).
 2. A person may be physically rich and spiritually poor (3:17-18).
 3. A person may be physically rich and spiritually rich (Luke 19:1-11).
 4. A person may be physically poor and spiritually rich (2 Cor. 8:1-9; 6:10; James 2:5-6).
- F. The churches are commended for love (2:19).
- G. The churches are commended for growth (2:19).
- H. The churches are commended for purity (3:4).
 1. There is an individual responsibility to remain pure.
 2. Purity comes by the blood of Jesus (7:14; 19:8; Jude 22-23).
 3. The pure walk with God (Gen. 5:24; 6:9; 1 John 1:7).

The Book of Revelation

Lesson Three

Revelation 2 – 3

- II. Things Condemned in the Seven Churches
- A. The churches are condemned for coldness (2:4).
 - 1. They were still laboring, but without true love.
 - 2. The church must grow in love (1 Thes. 4:9-10; 2 Thes. 1:3; Heb. 6:10-11).
 - B. The churches are condemned for tolerating error (2:14, 15, 20).
 - C. The churches are condemned for lack of life (3:1).
 - 1. Many put on an act of being alive spiritually.
 - 2. Mere movement or action does not equal work and service.
 - 3. Sometimes, peace exists because the church is dead!
 - D. The churches are condemned for lukewarmness (3:15-16).
 - 1. Self-reliant – *had no need of God or His Word*
 - 2. Complacent and apathetic – *let someone else do it*
 - E. The churches are condemned for spiritual blindness (3:17-18).
 - 1. There are many things that may blind a person – bribes (Exo. 23:8), selfishness (Isa. 56:10-11), ignorance (Matt. 15:14), prejudice (John 9; 12:37-40), sin (2 Cor. 4:3-4; 1 John 2:11), laziness (2 Pet. 1:8-9), materialism, etc.
 - 2. Through His Word, God gives sight to the blind (Acts 26:18; 2 Cor. 4:6).
- III. Things Challenged of the Seven Churches
- A. The churches are challenged to remember (2:5; 3:3).
 - B. The churches are challenged to repent (2:5, 16; 3:3, 19).
 - C. The churches are challenged to hear (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22).
 - D. The churches are challenged to endure (2:10, 25; 3:11).
 - E. The churches are challenged to grow (3:2).
 - F. The churches are challenged to watch (3:3).
 - G. The churches are challenged to open to Jesus (3:20).
 - H. The churches are challenged to overcome.
 - 1. 2:7 – *Tree of life in paradise of God*
 - 2. 2:11 – *Not hurt of the second death (cf. 20:14; 21:8)*
 - 3. 2:17 – *Hidden manna, white stone, new name*
 - 4. 2:26-28 – *Power over nation, the morning star*
 - 5. 3:5 – *White clothing, name in book of life, confessed to Father*
 - 6. 3:12 – *Pillar in God's Temple, name of God, Christ and city*
 - 7. 3:21 – *Sit in Christ's throne*

The Book of Revelation

Lesson Three

Revelation 2 – 3

- IV. The Symbolism in the Letters to the Seven Churches
- A. Again, by studying the symbolism used in these letters, a foundation is built for later uses of symbolism in the book.
- B. The symbolism in the **descriptions of Jesus** (2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14)
1. These are the same symbols revealed in chapter 1 (vs. 12-16).
 2. They illustrate symbolically the character of Jesus.
- C. **Ten Days** (2:10)
1. This passage gives the second use of numerical symbolism in the book.
 2. The ten days of tribulation was likely not to last for a literal period of ten days.
 3. Instead, the number 10 is symbolic of a complete, but short and definite period of time.
 4. Numerical Symbols in Revelation
 - a. $\frac{1}{4}$, **1/3**, $\frac{1}{2}$ - fractions represent a part of the whole
 - b. **1** – unity; supreme unity, single purpose
 - c. **2** – usually, strength or power (cf. Ecc. 4:9-12)
 - d. **3** – God, deity, the Trinity; thus, divine perfection
 - e. **4** – the world, creation (in fullness or completion)
 - f. **5** – short but definite period of time
 - g. **6** – man, weakness in relation to perfection (7)
 - i. **666** – the fullness of man’s imperfection
 - h. **7** – perfection, completeness
 - i. **10** – nothing lacking, completion
 - i. **100**
 - ii. **1,000** – multiples of 10 mean a larger scale
 - j. **12** – the religious number
 - i. **24** – the saved of both covenants
 - ii. **144,000** – all of the saved
 - k. **3 ½**; **1,260**; **42** – period of persecution that will not last to completion ($\frac{1}{2}$ of 7)
- D. **Satan’s Seat** (2:13)
1. The church at Pergamos was said to dwell where Satan’s throne was located.
 2. Obviously, Satan did not have a literal throne in this city.
 3. It symbolizes a place where Satan was allowed to rule and reign through the people who practiced wickedness.
 4. It was a reference to the rampant idolatry in the city as well as to the terrible persecution against the church in that place.
 - a. Satan was enthroned politically – *Rome*.
 - b. Satan was enthroned religiously – *idolatry*.
 - c. Satan was enthroned culturally – *theaters, libraries*.
 - d. Satan was enthroned morally – *wickedness*.
 5. Yet, one can remain faithful to God even where Satan lives.
- E. **Balaam** (2:14)
1. What does the Bible student think of when he hears the name “Balaam?”
 2. His story is found in Numbers 22 – 25.
 - a. Balak, king of Moab, was afraid of the Israelites.

The Book of Revelation

Lesson Three

Revelation 2 – 3

- b. Thus, he hired a prophet named Balaam to curse the people of God (22:5-6).
 - c. God forbade Balaam to go with Balak (22:12), but the king offered great honor to the prophet (22:15-17)
 - d. When Balaam was determined to go, God allowed him to follow his own desires.
 - e. Yet, every time he attempted to curse Israel, God inspired him to bless them (24:10).
 - f. Thus, Balaam returned home.
 - g. However, he still desired to help Balak, so he came up with a plan to curse Israel – by enticing them to sin (25:1ff; 31:16).
3. Thus, Balaam cast a stumbling-block before the children of Israel (cf. 2 Peter 2:15; Jude 11).
 4. The symbol referred to those who were teaching or enticing Christians to compromise with the world.
- F. **Jezebel** (2:20)
1. What does the Bible student think of when he hears the name “Jezebel?”
 2. Her story is recorded in 1 Kings 18 – 2 Kings 9.
 3. Of particular interest is the story of Naboth’s vineyard (1 Kings 21)
 - a. Naboth owned a piece of land that bordered King Ahab’s palace in Jezreel (21:1).
 - b. When the king desired this land, Naboth refused to sell it.
 - c. So, Ahab went home and pouted (21:4).
 - d. When his wife, Jezebel, saw his sadness, she promised to get the vineyard for him (21:5-7).
 - e. Thus, she conspired to have Naboth accused of blasphemy and put to death (21:8-14).
 - f. Then, Ahab took the land for himself – but Elijah pronounced the curse of God upon Ahab and Jezebel.
 4. So, Jezebel is a symbol of a woman who ruled over a king – unafraid to take matters into her own hands and violate God’s law to get what she wanted.
- G. **The Key of David** (3:7)
1. The fact that Jesus possesses the key of David signifies that He is reigning as King on David’s throne.
 - a. This was prophesied (Isaiah 22:22).
 - b. This was promised (Luke 1:32-33).
 - c. This was preached (Acts 2:29-36).
 2. The key symbolizes authority – to rule and to open and close doors (cf. Matt. 28:18-20; 16:19).
- H. The symbolism in descriptions of **victory in Heaven** (2:7, 11, 17, 26-28; 3:5, 12, 21)