

Revelation
Lesson III
Revelation 2:1-3:22

The Letters to the Seven Churches

Introduction:

1. The seven churches of Asia were about to experience a great testing of their faith in the hands of mighty Rome.
 - a. In chapter one, Christ was represented as walking among the churches to comfort, encourage, and sustain them.
 - b. In chapters two and three, he is among them to inspect, warn, and prepare.
2. These seven churches must have been fairly typical of the churches generally throughout the Roman Empire.
3. Each letter follows a standardized form.
 - a. Jesus is described in terms of some part of the vision of his glory John witnessed in chapter one.
 - b. An examination of the church is conducted.
 - c. Encouragement to faithfulness is given.
4. In this lesson, we shall examine each of the letters in turn.

Body of Lesson:

I. The Church That Left Its First Love: Rev. 2:1-7

A. Ephesus (on main route from Rome to the East) was an important city of the first-century world.

B. The church was established here through the work of Paul on his second missionary tour. Acts 18:18-21

1. He returned on his third tour and spent about three years in the city.

Acts 20:31

2. In addition to Paul, Priscilla, Aquila, Timothy, and John labored with this church.

C. Christ's self-identification (loving concern). Rev. 2:1b

D. Christ's judgment. Rev. 2:2-4

1. Good things: good works, sound doctrine, and opposition to false teachers.

2. A terrible flaw: had allowed its early love for Christ and one another to grow cold.

E. Christ's appeal. Rev. 2:5-7

1. Remember the early faith and zeal.

2. Repent

II. The Rich and Poor Church: Rev. 2:8-11

A. Smyrna was known as the "Ornament of Asia" due to its beauty (modern Izmir, Turkey).

B. No concrete information about the establishment of the church there. Cf. Acts 19:10

- C. **Christ's self-identification. His resurrection is the promise of their own. Rev. 2:8b**
- D. **Christ's judgment. Rev. 2:9**
 - 1. Only praise for Smyrna.
 - 2. Poor in material things and social prominence but wealthy in spiritual things.
- E. **Christ's appeal. Rev. 2:10-11**
 - 1. Warns of intense period of "ten days" ahead.
 - 2. Assures them of victory, even if through the passageway of death – as his own victory came.
- F. **Note: Polycarp martyred here in AD 155. Burned at the stake for his faith.**

III. Where Satan's Throne Was: Rev. 2:12-17

- A. **Pergamus was the capital city of the province of Asia.**
 - 1. Famous library (200,000 volumes) , parchment manufacturing, and pagan shrine of serpent-god Asclepius (god of healing).
 - 2. The center for emperor worship in Asia, thus called the city "where Satan's throne is." First temple ever built to Rome, 29 BC.
- B. **No information available on the origin of the church in Pergamus.**
- C. **Christ's self-identification. Rev. 2:12**
- D. **Christ's judgment. Rev. 2:13-15**
 - 1. Good quality: ability to endure pressures of the emperor cult, even in the face of martyrdom of Antipas.
 - 2. Problem: tolerating false teachers.
 - a. Balaamites (cf. Num. 31:16) and Nicolaitans (cf. Rev. 2:6) both here.
 - b. Both groups apparently taught a doctrine of compromise with idolatry and pagan life.
 - c. Church's sin was not in following after this heresy but in tolerating its presence without challenge.
- E. **Christ's appeal. Rev. 2:16-17**
 - 1. False teachers would have to be dealt with.
 - 2. Great promises are held out to those who will resist both pressures of emperor worship and subtle seductions of false teachers.

IV. The Home of Jezebel: Rev. 2:16-17

- A. **Thyatira was the least significant of the seven cities of Asia identified in this group.**
- B. **We know nothing of the origin of the church here.**
- C. **Christ's self-identification. Rev. 2:18b**
- D. **Christ's judgment. Rev. 2:19-20**
 - 1. Good points: works, love, faith, ministry, patience and growth in zeal.
 - 2. Bad point: a wicked "Jezebel" in its midst.
 - a. A prominent female member who claimed the authority of "prophetess".

b. She taught a doctrine of compromise with the world similar to the Nicolaitan and Balaamite heresies already noted.

E. Christ's appeal. Rev. 2:21-29

1. Jezebel and her followers are warned of their fate for impenitent sin.
2. The faithful were told to "hold fast" their good works and faith.

V. A Dead Church: Rev. 3:1-6

A. Sardis was a city living in memory of a glorious past but with nothing in the present.

1. Original city had acropolis with a single entry point, virtually impregnable.
2. Failure to keep watch against the enemy led to two humiliating defeats by Cyrus (546 BC) and Antiochus (218 BC).

B. Condition of church paralleled that of the city.

C. Christ's self-identification. Rev. 3:1b

D. Christ's judgment. Rev. 3:1c,4)

1. Church had a "name" (i.e. reputation) as a living and active church; Christ knew its true condition as a dead church.
2. Evidently holding services and little, if anything, more than this.
3. A zealous and evangelistic church will face danger of persecution. Cf. 2 Tim. 3:12
4. A small minority of its members is praised for its faithfulness.

E. Christ's appeal. Rev. 3:2-3, 5-6

1. Watch, repent, fan the sparks remaining.
2. The Lord's power is sufficient to restore such a church to life.

VI. The Church With an Open Door: Rev. 3:7-13

A. Philadelphia was founded as a missionary center for Greek language, culture and lifestyle.

B. We know nothing of the founding of this church with which no fault is discovered.

C. Christ's self-identification. Rev. 3:7b

1. "Key of David" motif traces to Isa. 22:22.
2. Refers to exclusive right of Christ to admit people to heavenly fellowship of deity. Jn. 14:6

D. Christ's judgment. Rev. 3:8-10

1. Experiencing difficulties and opposition but the church was faithful to the Word and had not denied Jesus' name.
2. The "door opened" is a door of evangelistic opportunity before this church.
3. Their "little power" in size, money and social prominence was more than made up for by the power they had through Christ.

E. Christ's appeal. Rev. 3:11-13

1. An encouragement to continued faithfulness.
2. A promise of a secure reward.

VII. The Lukewarm Church: Rev. 3:14-22

A. Laodicea was famous for its wealth.

1. A center for trade and a place for weaving expensive black wool, much money was concentrated here.
2. A proud, wealthy and self-sufficient place.

B. The church was probably founded by Paul or one of his associates. Col. 4:16

C. Christ's self-identification. Rev. 3:14b

D. Christ's judgment. Rev. 3:15-18

1. Not a single good thing is said about this church.
2. It was a "lukewarm" church.
 - a. Traditionally understood in terms of a lack of fervor or enthusiasm for Christ.
 - b. May refer to the barrenness of their works for the Lord.
3. Proud and smug, like the city in which it was found.

E. Christ's appeal. Rev. 3:19-22

1. His chastening did not mean a lack of love, but the opposite.
2. He still offered victory and blessing to any who would turn to him.

Conclusion:

1. These churches represent a broad spectrum of spiritual possibilities.
2. Valuable lessons are to be learned from a study of their conditions and the counsel given them.

READING ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT LESSON:

Read Rev. 4:1-6:17 closely and reflect on the scene of the enthroned Father, Christ as the Lamb who has been slain but is alive, and the tightly sealed book which is exchanged between them.