

Seven Churches of Asia

Introduction

INTRODUCTION:

- I. This morning we're going to begin a brief series of studies of the first THREE CHAPTERS of the LAST book in the Bible – the book of Revelation. So if you have your Bibles with you, open them to the first chapter of Revelation.
 - A. Perhaps some of you are wondering why study just the first THREE chapters? Why not the entire book?
 1. To go through the entire book of Revelation in great detail, and interpret it properly, would FIRST require spending a significant amount of time studying the Old Testament prophets and their writings.
 - a. Why? Well, because much of the SYMBOLIC and FIGURATIVE language found in the book of Revelation is similar to symbolic and figurative language found in the writings of the Old Testament prophets.
 - b. So, to properly INTERPRET the symbols and figures in the book of Revelation, we would first need to understand the meaning of those same symbols and figures found in the writings of Old

Testament prophets like Ezekiel, Daniel, Jeremiah, and a whole host of others.

c. The late Homer Hailey, who wrote one of the most definitive commentaries on the book of Revelation, told me he spent 20 YEARS studying the writings of the Old Testament prophets in great detail before he ever attempted to teach the book of Revelation.

2. I can't claim to have spent 20 years studying the prophets, but in the not-too-distant future I'm planning to do a brief OVERVIEW of the book of Revelation.

B. However, in THIS series of lessons we want to focus our attention on the FIRST THREE CHAPTERS of Revelation because it is in these chapters that the Lord, through the apostle John, specifically addressed SEVEN CHURCHES, or CONGREGATIONS of the Lord's church, that were all located in the Roman province known as ASIA – which today is Western Turkey.

1. John wrote this letter as he was in exile – banished by Rome to the small Island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea.

2. In fact, THIS ENTIRE BOOK was addressed to these seven churches of Asia.

3. However, in CHAPTERS TWO AND THREE the Lord has some VERY SPECIFIC and VERY PERSONAL things to say to each of these seven churches or congregations.
- C. And so, for the remainder of our time this morning I want to do TWO THINGS as we look at the letter to the seven churches:
1. FIRST, I want to put this book in its proper HISTORICAL SETTING. By that I mean I want to explain what was happening to Christians during this period of history so we can better understand WHY this book was written to these seven churches in the first place.
 2. And SECOND, I want to briefly take us through REVELATION CHAPTER 1 and understand a little of the symbolic and figurative language we're going to encounter throughout this study.
 3. So.... let's begin.

BODY:

- I. For us to understand the message of the book of Revelation, we need to FIRST understand something about its historical setting. What was happening to Christians during the latter half of the first century when this book was written?
 - A. At the time John received this message from the Lord and recorded it in what we now know as the book of Revelation, the Roman Empire ruled the world.

1. But with the rise and expansion of the Roman Empire also came a rise in the power and authority of the Roman EMPERORS.
 2. During the time Jesus was on earth, He made it VERY CLEAR to His disciples that they were to *“render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s” (Matthew 22:21)*.
 3. The apostles PAUL and PETER wrote to Christians during the early part of the first century telling them to *“be subject to the higher powers,” (Romans 13:1)*, and to *“pray for kings and all that are in high places,” (1 Timothy 2:1-2)*, and to *“be subject to every ordinance of man,” (1 Peter 2:13-14)*.
 4. The TRUE DISCIPLES of the Lord tried to the best of their abilities to do these things.
 5. However, there was a problem that eventually made this all but impossible.
- B. As Roman Emperors became more and more powerful, they were NOT ONLY seen as the universal ruler of the Empire, they eventually were seen as GODS – as having divine origin – and therefore worthy of worship by all citizens of Rome.
1. This is where the clash began between Rome and Christians of the first century.
 2. As Emperor worship spread throughout the Empire it was seen by most as simply a means of showing ones POLITICAL ALLEGIANCE

to the Emperor and to Rome, rather than actual worship of someone who considered himself a god.

3. All that Christian of the first century needed to do was simply go into a temple, burn a little incense and say “Caesar is Lord,” and they would receive a certificate proving their allegiance to Rome, and then they would be free to worship any way they pleased.
4. But this is one thing Christians of the first century simply could NOT do. JESUS CHRIST is the ONE AND ONLY Lord of lords, and King of kings, and the disciples of the Lord would NEVER compromise their EXCLUSIVE devotion to Jesus Christ as God the Son.
 - a. They would NEVER proclaim that “Caesar is Lord.”
5. The RESULT of all this was that Christians of the first century were FIRST viewed with SUSPICION, and LATER were seen as DISLOYAL to Rome and the Emperor, and therefore a threat to the security of the Empire.
6. Because of this, intense persecution against Christians began to spread throughout the Empire.
7. However, persecution against Christians was not the SAME in every place. In fact, disciples of Christ in CERTAIN cities experienced LITTLE OR NO persecution, while Christians in OTHER locations were being put to death in the most horrible ways imaginable.

8. But even though persecution was not UNIVERSAL, the THREAT of persecution had a devastating impact on the faith of many Christians during the first century.
 - a. Some simply walked away from the Lord.
 - b. Others chose to blend in with unbelievers – to not stand out in the crowd – so they could spare themselves and their families from suffering persecution at the hands of Roman officials.
- C. Therefore, to give much-needed HOPE and ENCOURAGEMENT to those disciples who were undergoing intense persecution, the Lord sent a message through the apostle John to churches of the first century.
 1. The message was simple – the persecution they were suffering was coming from Satan himself who was intent on destroying the Lord's people.
 2. Satan was using the ruthless power of the Roman Empire as a weapon to persecute the Lord's church.
 3. Although this persecution would continue for a while, the Lord wanted His disciples to know that He was still the Lord of heaven and earth – He was the Lord of lords and King of kings.
 4. The Lord also wanted His disciples to know that He will eventually bring an end to the persecution by gradually weakening the power of the Roman Empire until it eventually collapses under the weight of its own corruption.

4. The Lord wanted Christians of the first century to know that they will eventually come through this whole ordeal victorious – gaining an eternal home in heaven – even if it means they will lose their lives in the process.
- D. However, there was a problem.
1. As the Lord looked into the spiritual life of various churches during this period of time He found a MIXTURE of FAITHFULNESS and UNFAITHFULNESS.
 - a. He found those who were TENACIOUSLY LOYAL to the Lord, and He found those who were COMPROMISING their convictions and were becoming more and more WORLDLY.
 2. Satan was not only attacking the church from the OUTSIDE through persecution, he was attacking the church from the INSIDE by leading some Christians to become INDIFFERENT about their commitment to the Lord, while leading OTHERS further and further into SIN.
 3. This needed to STOP. And so, the Lord sent STERN WARNINGS to those churches who were compromising and indifferent, warning them that He would NOT TOLERATE those conditions among His people.
 4. The Lord's people needed to be strong, committed, faithful, and willing, if necessary, to actually lay down their lives for the cause of Christ.

- a. Without THIS level of faithfulness and commitment they would NEVER be able to endure persecution and Satan's relentless attacks against the church.
 - b. And without this level of faithfulness and commitment, the message of the gospel of Christ would cease being preached, and the Lord's church would all but disappear from the face of the earth.
5. Therefore, the Lord warned these compromising and indifferent churches that He will bring about HIS OWN divine judgment against THEM unless they repent.
- E. But all this raises another question. Why did the Lord address only THESE SEVEN CHURCHES in the province of Asia? Weren't there others?
1. The answer is simply this – the SPIRITUAL CONDITION of these seven churches, and the things that were happening WITHIN each of them, were representative of EVERY CONGREGATION of the Lord's church during the first century.
 - a. EVERY CONGREGATION, no matter WHERE they were located, could see THEMSELVES in ONE OR MORE of these seven churches.

- b. These seven churches were like a MIRROR that reflected every spiritual condition that could possibly exist among the people of God – and the same is true even today.
 - c. This means as WE look at these seven churches, we will see OURSELVES – we will see our OWN spiritual condition mirrored in one or more of these churches. We will see our OWN strengths and weaknesses, and we will see what the Lord specifically wants us to CORRECT.
 - d. And the WARNING to those seven churches will be a warning to US AS WELL – the warning to remain faithful to the Lord, or suffer the Lord’s wrath and the Lord’s avenging judgment.
2. Therefore, as we look at those seven churches we need to ask ourselves, “are WE like this... are WE strong and faithful, willing to lay down our life for the Lord, or have WE lost our zeal and become indifferent, perhaps even compromising our convictions, and becoming more and more like the world around us?”
- II. Now that we understand something about the HISTORICAL SETTING of this message, let’s briefly look at some of the SYMBOLIC AND FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE we will encounter in this study.
- A. The book begins with these words:

1. **Revelation 1:1-3** – *The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show His servants — things which must shortly take place. And He sent and signified it by His angel to His servant John, 2 who bore witness to the word of God, and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, to all things that he saw. 3 Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written in it; for the time is near.*

- a. The word “REVELATION” means to REVEAL, or to UNCOVER or UNVEIL. Therefore, this book is a REVEALING or an UNCOVERING or UNVEILING of the DIVINE CHARACTER and NATURE of Jesus Christ.
- b. The message ALSO carries a sense of IMMEDIACY since it deals with things that were about to SHORTLY TAKE PLACE – for the time of the Lord’s judgment against Rome was NEAR.
- c. Furthermore, the message was “SIGNIFIED” – meaning the message was concealed in signs and symbols, much like writing a message in code.

(1). The reason for this was to keep the message from being understood by anyone EXCEPT the disciples of the Lord.

B. Notice ALSO that this message came directly from the Lord, Jesus Christ Himself:

1. He identified Himself with these words: **Revelation 1:8** – *"I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End," says the Lord, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty."*
 2. The Lord told John: **Revelation 1:11** – *"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."*
- C. But the LAST 8 VERSES of chapter one are MOST significant, because in these verses John described the DIVINE ATTRIBUTES and CHARACTER of JESUS CHRIST – the Son of God.
1. **Revelation 1:12-20** – *Then I turned to see the voice that spoke with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands, 13 and in the midst of the seven lampstands One like the Son of Man, clothed with a garment down to the feet and girded about the chest with a golden band. 14 His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and His eyes like a flame of fire; 15 His feet were like fine brass, as if refined in a furnace, and His voice as the sound of many waters; 16 He had in His right hand seven stars, out of His mouth went a sharp two-edged sword, and His countenance was like the sun shining in its strength. 17 And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as dead. But He laid His right hand on me, saying to me, "Do not be afraid; I am the First and the Last. 18 I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I*

am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and of Death. 19 Write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after this. 20 The mystery of the seven stars which you saw in My right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands which you saw are the seven churches.

D. Let's look more closely at these verses.

1. First, in **verses 12 and 13**, notice that John heard a voice and turned in the direction of the voice to see a vision of "*seven golden lampstands, 13 and in the midst of the seven lampstands One like the Son of Man, clothed with a garment down to the feet and girded about the chest with a golden band.*" (**vs. 12-13**)
 - a. Jesus, who is described as "*One like the Son of Man*" was clothed in ROYAL GARMENTS as a KING, and He was seen walking among seven golden lampstands – or seven golden candlesticks (as some translations read).
 - b. Later, in **verse 20**, we learn that, "*the seven lampstands which you saw are the seven churches.*" (**v. 20**)
 - c. Therefore, John saw Jesus as He walked among those seven churches – almost as if the Lord was INSPECTING each church and taking INVENTORY of everything He saw.

2. John went on to describe the Son of God in the SAME WAY the Old Testament prophet DANIEL described the Ancient of Days in **Daniel chapter seven.**
 - a. In JOHN'S vision of the Lord in REVELATION he said: *"His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow..."* **(v. 14a)**
 - b. The prophet DANIEL had a similar vision: **Daniel 7:9** – *"I watched till thrones were put in place, and the Ancient of Days was seated; His garment was white as snow, and the hair of His head was like pure wool. His throne was a fiery flame..."*
 - c. Notice the symbols here: His hair and garments were WHITE AS SNOW – white was always used as a symbol of purity and holiness, with which the Lord's head is crowned.
3. John ALSO said of Jesus: *"and His eyes like a flame of fire..."* **(v. 14b)**
 - a. John described the Lord Jesus Christ as having a BURNING and PENETRATING VISION with which He could see into the heart and soul of every congregation and of every member of that congregation.
 - b. NOTHING escaped his penetrating vision – He saw EVERYTHING.
 - c. In fact, one phrase that will be repeated over and over in chapters two and three is the phrase "I KNOW." The Lord told

each church that NOTHING escaped His notice. His penetrating vision reached into the dark recesses of each and every church.

4. John continued describing the Lord by saying: *“His feet were like fine brass, as if refined in a furnace...” (v. 15a)*
 - a. With THESE words, John described the Lord’s ability to trample underfoot and utterly DESTROY ALL who opposed Him.
 - b. Similar language is found in the Old Testament prophecy of Malachi as he spoke of the judgment of Jehovah against His enemies: **Malachi 4:3** – Malachi said, *“You shall trample the wicked, for they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet...”*
 - c. In the same way, John pictured Jesus as having the ability to trample under foot and turn to ashes those who were HIS enemies and the enemies of His PEOPLE.
5. And yet, John also said: *“His voice as the sound of many waters...” (v. 15b)*
 - a. Similar language appears in the prophecy of Ezekiel: **Ezekiel 43:2-3** – *“And behold, the glory of the God of Israel came from the way of the east. His voice was like the sound of many waters; and the earth shone with His glory.”*
 - b. There are TWO possible interpretations here:
 - (1). John may have meant that the voice of the Lord was
POWERFUL and TERRIFYING to all who took their stand

against Him – like the terrifying sound of crashing waves against rocks, or of powerful, terrifying rapids, or of a massive waterfall.

(2). Or perhaps John meant that the voice of the Lord was SOFT and COMFORTING, like the sound of waters rushing over the rocks of a babbling brook.

c. Perhaps the best way to interpret the sound of the Lord's voice depends on who is hearing it – the sound would be TERRIFYING if He speaks to us as His enemies, and COMFORTING if He speaks to us as His children.

6. Finally, John said: *“He had in His right hand seven stars, out of His mouth went a sharp two-edged sword, and His countenance was like the sun shining in its strength.” (v. 16)*

a. What were the SEVEN STARS which the Lord held in His right hand?

(1). **Revelation 1:20a** – *“the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches...”*

(2). In ancient eastern cultures the right hand symbolized majestic power and strength.

(3). But what are the SEVEN ANGELS? Some believe they were perhaps GUARDIAN ANGELS, while others believe there is a more SYMBOLIC meaning.

- (4). Since angels are SPIRIT beings, perhaps the Lord was saying He holds the very SPIRIT – the VERY LIFE and DESTINY of each and every congregation in His hand. And He has the power to either bless them or curse them.
- b. And what was the SHARP TWO-EDGED SWORD that proceeded out of His mouth?
- (1). Some believe it represents the power of the gospel to convert the souls of mankind – the word that is said to be sharper than any two-edged sword (**Hebrews 4:12**).
 - (2). However, the word used by John here refers to the short, two-edged sword used by Roman soldiers in COMBAT.
 - (3). Most commentators believe the sharp two-edged sword that proceeds out of the Lord's mouth is symbolic of the Lord's AVENGING JUDGMENT – all He has to do is simply speak and Empires fall.
 - (4). A little later we will read that the Lord intended to bring judgment against the church Pergamos (**Revelation 2:12, 16**) for their compromising spirit – and that judgment would come when the Lord fought against them with the sword of His mouth.

(5). It is this same sword that proceeds out of the Lord's mouth by which He slays the nations and those that persecute His people (**Revelation 19:15, 21**).

c. And finally, what was the meaning of the Lord's countenance being like the SUN SHINING in its strength?

(1). The Lord's appearance shone as brilliantly as the sun in all its splendor – meaning His glory and majesty will not be hidden from the sight of all men as the sun might be hidden by clouds.

(2). Jesus is the glorified Christ – the light of the world! He is the Son of God. And as He brings judgment against those persecuting the church, EVERYONE will know this was the LORD'S doing.

E. Finally, the Lord concluded with these words as John fell at His feet:

1. **Revelation 1:17-19** – *“Do not be afraid; I am the First and the Last.*

18 I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive

forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and of Death. 19

Write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after this.”

a. Jesus said He is THE FIRST and THE LAST – an expression of the ETERNAL, DIVINE NATURE of Jesus Christ.

- (1). Jehovah God used this same expression in the prophecies of Isaiah to describe HIS eternal and divine nature.
 - (2). **Isaiah 44:6** – “Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel, and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: ‘I am the First and I am the Last; besides Me there is no God.’”
 - (3). Jesus Christ is ever bit as DIVINE and ETERNAL as God the Father.
- b. Jesus ALSO said He LIVES – even though He WAS dead, He is ALIVE FOREVERMORE.
- (1). This is the Lord’s claim and assurance that He is the RESURRECTED Christ, and as such guarantees US resurrection at the end of time.
- c. Furthermore, Jesus said He has the keys of HADES (or the grave) and DEATH.
- (1). Death and the grave will have NO POWER over those who faithfully serve the Lord all the days of their lives.
 - (2). Those who are SO COMMITTED to the Lord that they are willing to lay down their lives for the cause of Christ HAVE NO FEAR of death or of the grave.
 - (3). WHY? Because Jesus has the power to UNLOCK BOTH, and the power to RAISE the faithful from the dead to ascend to be with the Lord in heaven FOREVER!

CONCLUSION:

- I. And so, with this introduction to the letter to the seven churches of Asia, we begin a journey of SELF-EXAMINATION perhaps UNLIKE ANYTHING we've EVER done before.
 - A. Just as the Lord could see into the dark recesses of each and every CHURCH, His penetrating vision could ALSO see into the dark recesses of each and every MEMBER of those churches.
 1. NOTHING – not one SECRET SIN, not one HIDDEN THOUGHT OR DESIRE – is hidden from Him. He sees EVERYTHING.
 2. And the Lord REVEALED everything He saw – He held NOTHING back.
 - B. Therefore, as we take this journey together the Lord will be revealing to each and every one of US what He sees in the deep and dark recesses of OUR hearts and souls.
 1. As we look into the mirror of these seven churches, we will see OURSELVES as a church – we will see ourselves as the LORD sees us in one or more of these churches.
 2. But perhaps even more disturbing, as we look into the mirror of these seven churches, we will ALSO see ourselves as the kind of Christian we REALLY are – we will see ourselves as the LORD sees each and every one of us as INDIVIDUALS.
 - a. Remember, a church is nothing more than a group of people.

- b. And whatever traits or spiritual condition characterized those people as individuals, will be the traits or spiritual condition that characterized the church as a whole.
- II. So, why am I preaching such a DISTURBING and NEGATIVE series of lessons?
- A. Simply because being a disciple of Jesus Christ requires FORSAKING EVERYTHING... it requires DEATH to our former way of life (of our old nature – our old man is CRUCIFIED)... and it requires taking up OUR CROSS (being willing to DIE for the cause of Christ, if necessary)... and it requires FOLLOWING HIM!
 - 1. Jesus told His disciples: **Matthew 7:13-14** – *“Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. 14 Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.”*
 - 2. See the “DIFFICULT” – DIFFICULT is the way which leads to life? Some translations use the word “STRAIT” – STRAIT is the gate and NARROW the way that leads to life.
 - a. The word comes from a Greek word that means “to GROAN... to AGONIZE... to STRAIN.”

- b. NO ONE will simply skate into heaven. We will only get there by AGONIZING and STRAINING ourselves to get there.
 - c. That takes DEDICATION, COMMITMENT, RESOLVE, TENACITY and DETERMINATION to faithfully serve the Lord all the days of our life.
 - d. We will NEVER get to heaven if we LACK those things!
 - e. And here's the TERRIFYING part: there are FEW who find it!
The MASSES will never make it to heaven – just the FEW.
- B. Therefore, I'm going to take us BOTH on a journey – you AND me – in which we will be FORCED to ask ourselves whether WE have the dedication, commitment, resolve, tenacity and determination to go to heaven when we die.
- 1. And the REASON I'm doing this is because I want us BOTH to be in heaven someday.
 - 2. I want to be there, and I want YOU to be there TOO – because the writer of the Book of Hebrews reminds us that the alternative is TERRIFYING. He said, **Hebrews 10:31** – *“If is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”*
 - 3. So, if there is ANYTHING that is standing in our way... if there is ANYTHING we need to change in our lives so we can BOTH get to heaven... those things will come into CLEAR VIEW as we take this journey together.

- C. But you don't have to WAIT to make changes you know you need to make.
 - 1. You can come to the Lord TODAY in faithful obedience, by coming in faith, repenting of all your past sins, and by being buried with Christ in baptism, washing away every sin you have ever committed.
 - 2. And, if you've simply drifted away from the Lord, you can COME BACK to the Lord today by repenting of your sins and confessing them to the Father in heaven.