

The Letters to the Seven Churches: Preparing to Read the Letters

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The Seven Letters to the Seven Churches that existed in Asia Minor back in the first century and these letters are found in Revelation 2-3. We must remember that the writings in Revelation 1-3 are not related to the future prophetic events but to the church age in which we live right now!

What if we could ask Jesus what HE thought about the Church today? About the church in general and about this particular church?

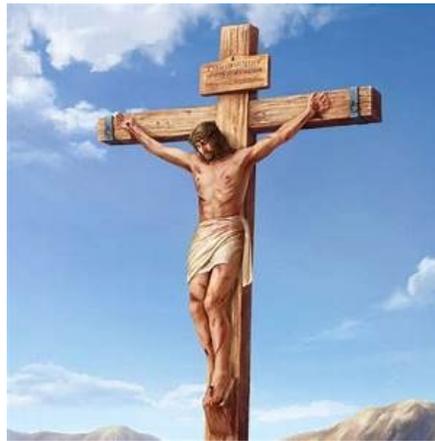
Do you see Jesus pulling out a big binder with thousands of pages that reference each church that ever existed and HIM looking for this church? I don't think so.....

There are 7 letters to 7 actual churches that were in Asia Minor at the time of the writing of this book, that are representative of ALL churches and Jesus uses these 7 letters to these real churches to define what HE thinks of any particular church at a given point in time.

More on that later in the sermon..... but now as we prepare to read the letters, we need to look at the central figure in this book of Revelation and in all books of scripture for that matter: The Lord Jesus Christ!

We will take a view of HIM that you may not recognize, but it is what HE looks like today in this current church age.

When you think of Jesus what images come to mind?





These are not bad images of Jesus, they have their place and point in time, but the key is for us to see HIM as HE is today and before we get to the actual letters, we need to see what HE looks like from Revelation 1.

There are 3 Pictures of Jesus in the book of Revelation that will change your image of HIM; we see HIM described by the Holy Spirit through John in ways that define who HE is during that period and point in time and how we should see HIM. The first picture is here in chapter 1, the second in chapter 5 and the third is in chapter 19. We will only focus on Chapter 1 for the sake of time and the context of this series.

John, the human writer of this book, introduces himself as a brother and companion in tribulation, he described himself in the gospels, as the “disciple that Jesus loved”, so it goes without saying that Jesus and John has a special and close relationship. John had a mental image of Jesus from their time together on earth and now he sees his Lord again and it is not what he expected.

Remember how John related to Jesus while they were on earth together, i.e. John 13:23, as he lay on the bosom of Jesus and in John 19:26, when he was there at the foot of the cross to see his Lord die in agony. Now John sees Christ in a completely different way in this vision.

In vs 12-16, Jesus is described how HE should be viewed today, since we are in the church age and this is a picture of HIM post ascension as HE is in the midst of HIS churches today! The lampstands are the churches (see vs 20), what a great picture of what the church of Christ should be, a light amid dark world!

The features of Jesus paint a picture of HIM that will be used throughout the book of Revelation, especially in the letters to the 7 churches in chapters 2-3.

Garment down to HIS feet (v13) – show HIM as a Priestly King who rules HIS kingdom with all knowledge and wisdom

Golden band around HIS chest (v13)– completes the picture of Christ serving as the HIGH PRIEST of God.

HIS head and hair are white like wool, white as snow (v14)– this is not a flat white that is on your house walls, but a blazing, blinding and glowing white light (Daniel 7:9) like the glory cloud or Shekinah glory of the OT, as it represents HIS supreme and total Holiness! This feature also signifies HIS all-knowing wisdom, this is why the old English judges wear the “white” wig to signify wisdom!

His eyes are like a flame of fire (v14)– like 2 laser beams, HIS eyes see all that is happening in HIS church all over the world (7 churches = complete, all). The eyes of the exalted Lord penetrate into the depth of the church to see and know what are the motives and intents of the people. You and I cannot hide from this ONE who is both Lord and Christ over HIS church. You may can fool the elders, you may can fool the deacons, you may even fool your friends, but you cannot fool the ONE with whom you will one day stand give an account of your very being!!!

His feet are as fine brass (v15) – this glowing, hot, refined brass is a clear reference to divine authority to act as judge. Jesus Christ is moving throughout HIS church and the world to exercise judgment on those who are not HIS, as well as those who are HIS, as Peter said that judgment begins in the house of the Lord. The OT altar was covered in fine brass and that is where judgment took place ad Jesus is pictured here as the ultimate Judge!

HIS voice is as the sound of many waters (v15)– like strong waves crashing against the rocks on the shore, very loud and clear. This represents the power of HIS word and the authority of HIS word. There will be no mistaking who is speaking!

HE has in HIS right hand, the 7 stars (v16) - these are the pastors of the churches, the right hand indicates complete control and attention. Jesus knows each pastor / elder who watches over their flock of sheep and HE cares for them, nothing happens to them without HIS knowledge.

Out of HIS mouth, a sharp, 2-edged sword (v16) – a large broad sword with 2 sharp edges that will attack and destroy those 2 influences which will attempt to destroy HIS church, the outside influence of evil and the inside influence of counterfeit doctrine and false teachers. HE will judge by and with HIS eternal and Holy Word!

HIS countenance (face) was like the shining of the sun in its fullness (v16) – How long can we stand to look directly into the sun while it is blazing high in the summer sky? This comparison is futile to that which Jesus is shown here. HE is the bright and morning star; HE is the light of the world and it is HE who will light Heaven in all its glory at the very end of book.

What would you do if you saw someone who looked like that?!?!?!?

Probably just what John does in verse 17.

“When I saw HIM, I fell as dead at HIS feet”!! Wow.....this same John was lay on the chest of Jesus and stood at the foot of the cross, now sees HIM as HE really is and falls face down in presence of the Almighty God and Lord of all.

Letters to 7 Churches in Revelation 2-3

Introduction

These 7 churches were actual churches in Asia Minor in the time that John lived. These words from Jesus to these churches are relevant to the churches in our day as well.

Each letter was meant to be read in all the churches, not just the one to which the letter was scribed.

The letters can be viewed that Jesus is giving HIS appraisal of the church based on its performance to HIS standards. The big difference is the things we believe matter, are not the same as what HE thinks matters. HE tells us what things HE commends and which things HE condemns very clearly in these letters and no amount of time or cultural advancement will ever change HIS standards! In other words, just because we live in a more modern society does not mean HIS standards change.

Applications

There are 2 applications of these 7 churches that we need to see during this study. The number of the churches being 7 represents completeness and perfection in that ALL churches fit into one of these “molds”, none are exempt, in a book whose numbers are nearly always symbolic.

- Every “church” that ever existed or exists today is represented by one of these 7 churches; a church can shift based on the majority of the characteristics of its current membership.
- Since the church is made up of individual people, it is correct to conclude that at any point in time a church member will exhibit the behavior and act like one of these 7 churches. Depending on how many people are in the church and the dominant characteristics are in that church will determine where that church stands before Christ.

What is the character of these 7 churches in Revelation 2-3?

Two were very good (Smyrna, Philadelphia)

These churches were composed of a humbler class of people and were facing persecution, they viewed Jesus as the true head of the church and followed HIS will enough of the time to please HIM. The key factors of this church were humility and holiness (a passion for Jesus to follow HIS will, way and word.)

Two were very bad (Sardis, Laodicea)

These churches were composed of the ruling class of the day, the mostly "well to do" people, they were Christian in name but lived pagan and ungodly lives, they were neither humble or holy or did not see the need to practice either.

Three had some good mixed with some bad (Ephesus, Pergamum, Thyatira)

- Ephesus was orthodox in doctrine and hardworking but left her first love (Christ).
- Pergamum was faithful to the name of Christ but permitted and allowed doctrinal error.
- Thyatira was growing in zeal and fervor but tolerated the heresy of Jezebel.

As you can see, each church and person does fall into one of these churches at any point in time in the church or person's life cycle. It is proper and correct to use the names of these churches as adjectives as to how we should or should not behave and conduct ourselves, as we should strive to be more Philadelphian and certainly not to be Sardian!

If we remember the description of Christ in Revelation chapter 1, we will see each of these characteristics as HE defines HIMSELF to that particular church. HE provides a title or aspect of HIMSELF as defines in the picture in Chapter 1 that is relevant for each particular church situation. This truth will be seen as we study the letter to each church and see number 2 in the following section of this document.

These 7 letters follow a similar cadence or pattern consisting of the same 7 elements. Going back to the "appraisal" concept, Jesus uses the same pattern with each of the churches and therefore each person as HE critiques the work and labor of the church. This pattern is intentional and in keeping with the character of Christ and HIS perfect love for us!

1. Opening instruction to John that is the same in each letter: "To the angel of the church in Ephesus write"..... HE writes to the pastor of the church and intends for this message to be read and proclaimed to the church just as HE wrote. If that does

not happen, then each church member is responsible to read, intake and digest the writing and act accordingly and Jesus will deal with the pastor as HE sees fit.

2. The title or aspect of HIS person as defined in the picture in chapter 1 that is relevant for that specific church situation, for example to the church in Thyatira, HE defines HIMSELF as “the ONE who has eyes like flame of fire and HIS feet are like brass”, which are aspects of Christ we see in Chapter 1, as this church was facing the judgment of the Lord for her behavior.
3. Jesus then commends the churches by what actions and behaviors HE sees that they are doing that HE likes. For example, HE starts with, “I know.....”. (It is interesting and sad that Sardis and Laodicea miss this section)
4. Jesus now condemns the actions and behaviors that HE sees that offend HIM and make HIM angry. For example, but / yet is used to transition between the 2 attributes. (It is interesting that Smyrna and Philadelphia miss this section.)
5. Jesus now offers some instruction, counsel or correction to the churches as to what they can do to remedy the condemned action or behavior.
6. Jesus provides the same admonition to all the churches in this section as HE says, “To him who has an ear to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches”.
7. Jesus gives a special promise to each church (the overcomers or TRUE believers in each church) and these promises can be received by each member as we recognize our shortcomings and become right with HIM!

As we study the letter to each church, we will look at the pattern as our outline to see what is up with that specific church. This format makes it easy to identify each church and to know where it stands with Jesus and what HE says to them / us!!

For the next 3 weeks we will look at 6 of the churches in details, 2 per week and analyze what Jesus says about those churches.

In the final week, we will look at the church that is our target, the one we want to be most like, as Jesus does not hide who HE would want us to be most like!

We will know where we want to go, we only must figure out who we are today and then there is a straight line to the target!

The spiritual practice for the week is Scriptural engagement, as the Book of Revelation is the only book of the Bible with a specific promise to the person who reads and practices what is said in the book.

Rev 1:3; “Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy and keep those things which are written as the time is near.”