

The Revelation of Jesus Christ

The Village Church of Rancho Santa Fe

Winter 2010 – *La Costa Glen, Women’s Fellowship, Thursday Morning Men’s Study*

Lesson Two – January 12, 13, 14

Revelation 2:1 – 3:22

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The Text

GENERAL NOTES

1. These 2 chapters must be understood in light of appearance of Risen Christ at end of Chapter 1
2. Best way to understand the 7 letters is to look at themes and issues common among all of them, rather than to treat each individually.
3. Each “letter” is more like a “prophetic message,” written about a specific congregation, but intended for all congregations
4. These letters tell us what is going on in the real churches of John’s time, and then (chapter 4 and following) we will hear about what is happening in the divine realm

STRUCTURE OF MESSAGES

1. The Angel of Each Church
 - a. Risen Christ tells John to address the “angel” of each church
 - b. Apocalyptic worldview: each earthly church has a corresponding heavenly angel (a guardian, if you will)
 - c. Upshot: earthly congregations are nothing less than manifestations of the structure and reality of heaven itself
2. The Cities
 - a. Seven – symbolic of completeness
 - b. Why these 7 and not others?
 - i. Each on main Roman road
 - ii. Each contained Roman law court, where Christians could be tried
 - c. Christians in this period were struggling with issues of how to be faithful to Christ in their contemporary civilized culture
 - d. Note: Revelation will contrast two cities: Jerusalem and Babylon
3. Prophetic Message
 - a. The prophet (John) speaks in OT style: in the person of the Lord (God, Jesus)
4. Ascription to Christ
 - a. Each message speaks of Christ in similar terms as first description of chapter 1
 - b. Remember, these are messages from the Risen Jesus to his churches

- c. Christian life is about how we live based on reality of Christ
- 5. Divine Knowledge
 - a. God knows what is happening in his churches; he is involved
 - b. Jesus' knowledge sometimes reveals deeper truth about a church than is immediately obvious, or even known by the church itself
- 6. Body of the Message
 - a. Discussed below, the theological message to the Christian situation of the 1st Century
 - b. Praise & blame, promise & threat
- 7. Attention and Obedience
 - a. Hearing and Doing – believing and acting
 - b. “He who has an ear, let him hear”
 - c. Echoes OT prophets as well as Jesus himself – we are called, not forced, into faithfulness to God
- 8. Eschatological Promise
 - a. Blessing (finding and living by the right path)
 - b. Conquering – “to the one who conquers”
 - c. Blessing is about what will happen in the future victory of God – not just “living a moral life” in the present
 - i. Eat of tree of life
 - ii. Not be hurt by second death
 - iii. Receive hidden manna
 - iv. Receive white stone
 - v. Given power over nations
 - d. “Winning the victory” is a key theme in Christian life:
 - i. As Jesus conquered (life and death)...
 - ii. ...So will faithful Christians conquer (life and death)

THE MESSAGE OF THE LETTERS

- 1. Tribulation
 - a. The constant context of Christian living (not a “period of time”)
 - b. Christians: religious minority within a minority
 - c. Social & Business consequences of following Christ
 - d. Life & Death consequences as well (in Roman law courts)
 - e. Earthly troubles reflect cosmic battle between God and Satan
- 2. Divisions Within Churches & Among Christians
 - a. Problem of competing Christian leaders & philosophies
 - b. Jezebel, Balaam, Nicolaitans – false leaders
 - i. Jezebel – promoted foreign cults
 - ii. Balaam – tempted Israel to idolatry
 - iii. Nicolaitans (literally – conquerors of the laity/people) – perhaps John's own symbolic name for Balaam followers (Balaam, in Hebrew, literally “ruler of the people”)
 - c. Issues

- i. Can Christians participate in idolatrous cults associated with their businesses, in pagan festivals, in eating meat from sacrificed animals?
 - ii. How can Christians withstand potential threats of martyrdom?
 - iii. Theological Truth:
 - 1. Who decides what is “good” theology?
 - 2. Criteria developed over time – does it square with life/death/resurrection of Jesus?
- 3. Works
 - a. Risen Christ knows the “works” of the churches
 - b. The churches will be judged by their “works”
 - c. NOT about “works righteousness,” but about faithful witness and living
 - d. What is true Christian conduct?
- 4. Repentance
 - a. 5 of 7 called to “repent”
 - b. Repentance not about “feeling sorry and getting saved”
 - c. Is about “continual reorientation” of life to be consistent with gospel of Jesus
- 5. Holding Firm
 - a. Greek “hypomone”
 - b. Vs 2:2, 2:3, 2:19, 3:10 – patient endurance, standing one’s ground
 - c. In the face of cultural pressure to do otherwise, will Christians hold firm in their belief and practice of the gospel?
- 6. Love
 - a. Not emotion, but active care for others
 - b. Thyatira – praise for its love
 - c. Ephesus – blamed for abandoning love
- 7. Summary of Christians’ Responsibility (3:21)
 - a. God is sovereign, ruling on his throne
 - b. Christ Jesus is God, also sovereign, because he conquered
 - c. Christians will share in the conquering as they share in the life (and death) of Jesus

NOTES ON INDIVIDUAL MESSAGES

- A. Ephesus
 - a. Doctrinally pure, resist false teachers
 - b. But...have lost their first love, their focus on centrality of Christ as definitive for all other truth, knowledge, and function
- B. Smyrna
 - a. Rich Christians in a rich town, but who are “poor” in other ways (spiritually)?
 - b. Or, perhaps, poor Christians living among wealth?
 - c. In either case, they need not fear their suffering, or Satan, because God has the last word
- C. Pergamum
 - a. Beset by sins of idolatry and interpersonal immorality
 - b. Still, they have example of Antipas, faithful martyr

- c. White Stone – common Roman symbol – award for valor, symbol of new identity
- d. Hidden Manna – of lost Ark, or of Eucharistic bread
- D. Thyatira
 - a. Loving and faithful church
 - b. But tempted to forget and go astray by Jezebel
 - c. Idolatry – temptation to participate in pagan trade guilds
 - d. Note ravaging effect of sin – “great distress & death”
- E. Sardis
 - a. Name of being alive – outwardly flashy, but not inwardly strong?
 - b. Like a thief – Sardis twice conquered by surprise attacks
 - c. Blotting out of “book of life” – problem of whether “once saved always saved”
 - d. Christian’s job – daily vigilance, a daily relationship with God – and God will take care of the rest
- F. Philadelphia
 - a. Church has been faithful
 - b. As a result, an “open door” will allow Jews (and others?) to come to Christ
 - c. God/Christ is the one who brings people to himself – our job is faithfulness
- G. Laodicea
 - a. Church is doing well (outwardly) which masks their inward malaise (lukewarmness)
 - b. True Christians realize their spiritual need before God and never become complacent or comfortable in their faithfulness

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Christians pattern their whole lives based on the reality of the Risen Christ who is still powerfully at work in the world. How does this truth inform and inspire what you are doing today to follow Jesus?
2. Churches are not just earthly clubs of normal people, but reflections of a larger reality in heaven. How does this perspective inform your role as a member of a church?
3. What are the modern “tribulations” that Christians face?
4. What challenges do modern Christians in our nation face regarding our faithful witness to Christ? What challenges exist in other nations?
5. For what things might Christ praise your congregation?
6. Of what things might your congregation need to “repent” and then learn more closely to follow Christ?
7. How do you (individually) and we (together) accomplish the act of “holding firm” in our faith and action as we follow the example of Christ?

i Primary Sources: Earl Palmer, *Communicator's Commentary*, and M. Eugene Boring, *Interpretation Commentary*