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**A5016 – Apr. 17, 2005 – Revelation 2:1-3:22 – Introduction to the Seven Letters**

**Lesson 7**  
***Intro to the Seven Letters***  
***Rev 2:1-3:22***

Today I hope to give you the keys to unlocking the seven letters to the seven angels. I just prepared this lesson last night. I actually prepared an entire lesson on Rev 2:1-7 with the title in your bulletin but was discontent with its length and the amount of information. There are simply too many new elements in these letters. And so, I prepared a new lesson last night that I pray is going to help our understanding of these seven letters tremendously. So, what I'm actually going to do is "Introduce the Seven Letters". The interpretation of these seven letters is a very controversial topic in evangelicalism today. How do we identify the angels? Are these letters written to believers or a mixed group? Who are the overcomers? And do these churches line up with chronological periods of church history. I have personally struggled with the contents of these letters for some years and have debated them with others on numerous occasions. So, let's try to answer some of these questions because the contents are very important according to chapter 1:3 which introduced the...

**A. 1st of 7 Blessings (1:3)**

Revelation 1:3 "*Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near.* This is the verse that says that prophecy is practical. Knowing the future gives moral impetus in the present. It drives us to live a certain way. And everyone has an view of the future. And these future beliefs are powerful motivators. Chapters 2-3 introduce the present application of the future prophecy which follows in chapters 4-22. Application normally follows doctrine, for example, in Ephesians we have doctrine in chapters 1-3 and application in chapters 4-6. But here we have a unique structure, the application actually precedes the doctrine. The

reason is because John is writing what he sees as a chronology and the present application to the church age precedes the tribulation, millennial kingdom and new heavens and new earth.

This blessing, the first of seven in the book (Rev. 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7, 14), is supposed to motivate you to pay close attention as we study Revelation. The blessing is for those of you **who hear the words of the prophecy and keep the things written in it**. So, we need to pay close attention and obey the moral and ethical commands given in chapters 2-3. There is no doubt that Revelation is a gold mine of prophetic details but learning the details is not an end in itself. Learning prophetic details is stimulating and interesting but it is a means to an end. The end is godliness in the present age; keeping the things God has commanded. So, the key is to concentrate on the words you are hearing and store them away in a framework so you can access them later. It doesn't do much good to listen to information if your not storing it away in an organized fashion so you can access it later. To keep God's commandments requires that you can remember the commandments. For information to be usable it must be accessible (e.g. office, filing cabinet). Importantly, Revelation has various clues and memory devices to help us remember the information. And these are included in order to help us recall information about the future so we can live in the present. The first of those memory devices is found in Rev 1:19 where the book is divided into three parts.

## **B. Rev 1:19 - 3-Fold Division**

This verse is the key to unlocking the structure of the book. This is a memory aid to help you keep the whole book in mind so you'll want to remember this verse and refer back to it whenever you get confused. *"Therefore write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after these things."* Notice the three divisions. *First*, John is commissioned to *write the things which he has seen* (aorist tense in contrast to present tense in v. 11). What has John seen so far? Beginning in v. 11 John saw a vision of the Glorified Son of Man. *Second*, John is commissioned to *write...the things which are*. When John wrote this in 96AD what age/dispensation was he living in? The church age. Chapters 2-3 describe the present spiritual condition of the seven churches in Asia and throughout the period until the events foretold in Rev 4:1ff. So, the first division is Rev 1:11-20, the second division is chapter 2-3 and lastly we have the third division. John is commissioned to *write...the things which will take place after these things*. *the things which will take place after these things* begin in 4:1. Turn to Rev 4:1 to see this. Revelation 4:1 *"After these things I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven, and the first voice which I had heard, like the sound of a trumpet speaking with me, said,*

"Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after these things." Notice the two-fold use of *after these things*. That is the same phrase as the one in 1:19. So, we have a three-fold division of the Book of Revelation. 1) 1:11-20 "The Things Which John Saw". 2) 2:1-3:22 "The Things Which Are". 3) 4:1-22:21 "The Things Which Will Take Place After These Things". This is the most important verse for outlining the book. You must keep this verse in mind as we move forward. This verse also reveals a crucial bit of information. Does anyone see what this verse also assumes? (Wait for an answer). This verse assumes a chronology. The things in 4:1-22 must take place AFTER the things mentioned in chapters 1-3. The things mentioned in chapters 2-3 refer to the Church age. The Church is NEVER mentioned after chapter 3:22 until the close of the letter in chapter 22:16. That's because the events of the Tribulation must happen AFTER the Church. The spiritual conditions in the Church described in chapters 2-3 will continue until a point and then AFTER these things the Tribulation will take place. So, this verse gives us the three-fold divisions as well as showing us that these things happen chronologically. Now let's look at chapters 2-3, the second division of Revelation. First, each letter can be broken down into five parts.

- 1) Recipient & Description of Christ
- 2) Commendation
- 3) Condemnation
- 4) Exhortation
- 5) Promise

Second, let's identify the...

### **C. 7 Recipients of the 7 Letters – (2:1; 2:8; 2:12; 2:18; 3:1; 3:7; 3:14)**

Notice first, in chapter 2:1, the recipient of the letter is not the church itself but an **angel**. It's the same way for all 7 of the letters. They are written to an angel. However, the Greek word here is *aggelos* and means "a messenger" or "an angel". The translators of the NASB took it upon themselves to interpret it **angel** but the word can also be used of human messengers (Matt 11:10; Luke 9:52; James 2:25) and the proper translation must be decided on the basis of context.

There are actually four different interpretations but we'll only look at the two prominent views for the sake of clarity. First, *aggelos* can refer to an angel. In this context it would certainly be an elect angel, not a fallen angel. This would mean, interestingly, that some of scripture was written directly to these seven elect angels. This interpretation has three lines

of argument. *First*, it is argued that every other use of *aggelos* in the Book of Revelation refers to angelic spirits and never to human messengers. This is an accurate observation Rev. 1:1, 5:2, 11; 7:1f, 11; 8:2ff, 8, 10, 12f; 9:1, 11, 13ff; 10:1, 5, 7ff; 11:15; 12:7, 9; 14:6, 8ff, 15, 17ff; 15:1, 6ff; 16:1, 5; 17:1, 7; 18:1, 21; 19:17; 20:1; 21:9, 12, 17; 22:6, 8, 16). *Second*, it is argued that individuals have guardian angels (Matt 18:10) and nations have guardian angels (Dan 10:13, 20, 21; 12:1). Therefore, why can't churches have guardian angels? This too is also a valid argument. *Third*, this view also argues that angels ordained the giving of the Mosaic Law so why couldn't they mediate the giving of these seven letters? Turn to Acts 7:38, 53. It is true that there was some form of angelic involvement in the giving of the Mosaic Law on Mt. Sinai (also cf. Deut 33:2, Gal 3:19; Heb 2:2).<sup>i</sup> Do we have something similar here with the seven letters? This sounds like a really solid case, but is it? There are actually a couple of problems with this interpretation. *First*, how would the communication process work? This would mean that God gave the revelation to Christ who gave it to an angel who gave it to John who gave it back to an angelic representative who then gave it to the earthly churches? The real problem is in how would an angelic representative communicate the letter to the earthly churches? There may be some mechanism for this to work but if there is it is totally unknown to humans. So, there seems to be a communication problem. *Second*, and the bigger problem is that these angels are accused of sinful behavior in most of the letters. For example, look at Revelation 2:4 '*But I have this against you, that you have left your first love.*' Who is you? You is a singular genitive. Christ is talking directly to the *aggelos*. He's not directly addressing everyone in the church. He's only addressing their representative and their representative is the *aggelos*. The question is, "how could an elect angel who cannot sin have left his first love?" This is not the only place the *aggelos* is condemned. Most of the rebukes Christ gives are in the singular as well pointing directly to the *aggelos* of each church, singling out the angel as the sinner (2:20). But unfallen angels don't sin. So, this makes this view extremely difficult, if not impossible, to maintain.

Second, these *aggelos* refer to human messengers. Indeed, *aggelos* is occasionally used of human messengers. For example, turn to Matthew 11:10-11 "*This is the one about whom it is written, 'BEHOLD, I SEND MY MESSENGER AHEAD OF YOU, WHO WILL PREPARE YOUR WAY BEFORE YOU.'*"<sup>11</sup> "*Truly I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist!*" This would mean the letters is addressed to a human messenger who is a spiritual representative of the church. Some commentators try to say this human messenger was the pastor but pastors are never identified as *aggelos*. Nevertheless, Rev 2-3 have been used by many Bible teachers to support the idea that the pastor-teacher is the ultimate authority in each church. But this form of church government is totally foreign to the NT (and condemned in 3 John). The

biblical form of local church government is a plurality of elders ruling as authoritative officers in the church. One of those elders may serve in the capacity of pastor-teacher but he is not the ultimate authority in the church. Pastor-teacher is not even an office but rather a spiritual gift. Therefore, ultimate authority in a local church rests in a group of elders not a single man. Therefore, these human messenger cannot be used as evidence to support the pastor-teacher as the ultimate authority in the church. Alternatively, and better, this human messenger is simply a representative of the church. He need not hold any specific office. He need only be a man who was sent from his local church to visit John on the Island of Patmos and who returned to his church with the entire Book of Revelation which included the particular message to his church. This view has the least problems and is certainly the easiest to defend. Therefore, each letter is addressed to a human messenger who represents the church. “These were moral representatives, so to speak, who as individuals epitomized the conditions of the churches they represented.”<sup>iii</sup> So, for example, 2:1 could be translated something like...**To the *human messenger who represents the church in Ephesus write*...**After the recipient is revealed each letter follows this with a...

#### **D. Description of Christ**

Most of these descriptions come from Rev 1:4-18. They are being repeated from chapter 1 to indicate that the one who is evaluating each church is the Glorified Son of Man, Jesus Christ. The only two descriptions that don't come from chapter 1 are found in the last two letters, chapter 3:7 and 3:14. But all describe the Glorified Son of Man (2:1 = 1:12, 16; 2:8 = 1:17, 18; 2:12 = 1:16; 2:18 = 1:14, 15; 3:1 = 1:4, 16; 3:7 = none (key, 1:18); 3:14 = none). After Christ is described each letter includes a...

#### **E. Commendation**

Where Christ evaluates the church and commends them for certain things. Every church is commended by Christ except the last church Laodicea (3:14-22) in which He has nothing to say except bad things. After the commendation each letter includes a...

#### **F. Condemnation**

Where Christ evaluates the church and condemns certain practices or doctrines that they hold to or tolerate. Every church is condemned by Christ except two: Smyrna (2:8-11) and Philadelphia (3:7-13). After the condemnation each church is given an...

#### **G. Exhortation**

These exhortations are for the church as a whole as well as individuals. Even the two churches who are not condemned for anything, Smyrna and Philadelphia, are exhorted. Smyrna is exhorted to continue and be faithful even to the point of physical death. Philadelphia is exhorted to “hold fast” what they have until Christ comes.

However, only the five that are condemned are called to “repent” (Ephesus, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Laodicea). “Repent” is a key word in these seven letters. The word for “repent” is *metanoeo* and it means “to change one’s mind”. While we don’t talk about this much at this church it is true that unbelievers “repent” at the point of salvation. They “change their mind” in one sense. True belief in Jesus Christ requires a change of mind about the person and work of Jesus Christ. Dr. Chafer says,

It is true that repentance can very well be required as a condition of salvation, but then only because the change of mind which it has been involved when turning *from* every other confidence *to* the one needful trust in Christ. Such turning about, of course, cannot be achieved without a change of mind.<sup>iii</sup> (emphasis mine)

See, from Chafer’s perspective repentance is a part of believing, or, put another way, repentance and believing are inseparable. This is the biblical way to think of repentance and belief. Repentance should never be thought of as a second requirement for salvation. In fact, the entire Gospel of John, written for the purpose that men might believe (John 20:31), does not even use the word *repent* a single time, nor does the great discourse on salvation by Paul in the epistle to the Romans. There are over 150 passages that mention that on the human side of salvation, man must merely believe. However, this does not imply that repentance is not necessary to salvation, it is necessary. None could be saved apart from it. But this repentance is so wrapped up in believing that it cannot be separated from it. Repentance is therefore, merely a part of the actual change of mind taking place during belief. Repentance and belief are two sides of the same coin.

However, in the five letters where there is a call to “repent” (Rev. 2:5, 16, 21f; 3:3, 19) it is quite clear that the call is not for unbelievers but for believers. Believers should “repent” whenever they get stuck in a habitual sin pattern. “Repentance” is not the same as “confession”. “Confession” simply means to acknowledge one’s sins, to name them. “Repentance” means “to change one’s mind”. “Confession” is necessary for one time occasional sins but “repentance” is necessary to escape habitual sin patterns. Neither confession nor repentance have anything to do with feeling guilt, sorrow, remorse, or promising to do better. These things may accompany confession or repentance but they are

not a part of them. The believers in these five churches are being called to “repent”. Thus, they must be in a habitual sin pattern and they need to “change their minds” from their present course of action to Christ’s course of action.

Lastly, under the heading of Exhortation, we have to identify the one’s who have an ear to hear. This phrase is used at the close of each letter (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). Who are the one’s who have an ear to hear what the Spirit says to the churches? Well, this phrase or similar phrases are used elsewhere in the Bible. For example, when Christ spoke in parables. Turn to Mark 4:9-12

Mark 4:9-12 <sup>9</sup> And He was saying, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." <sup>10</sup> As soon as He was alone, His followers, along with the twelve, *began* asking Him *about* the parables. <sup>11</sup> And He was saying to them, "To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God, but those who are outside get everything in parables, <sup>12</sup> so that WHILE SEEING, THEY MAY SEE AND NOT PERCEIVE, AND WHILE HEARING, THEY MAY HEAR AND NOT UNDERSTAND, OTHERWISE THEY MIGHT RETURN AND BE FORGIVEN."

See what Jesus was doing. He was speaking in such a manner that only those who were believers could understand what He was saying. This manner of speaking was quite common for Christ after his rejection by the nation of Israel (e.g. Matt 11:15; Matt 13:3, 9; Mark 4:9-12; Luke 8:8; 14:35; Rev 13:9 ). Additionally, we can follow the lines of 1 Cor 2:14 which says... “*But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised*” (1 Corinthians 2:14). Therefore, Christ says at the conclusion of each of these seven letters, “if you can hear what the Spirit says, hear it”. These words were therefore directed toward the genuine believers in these local churches, the one’s who had ears to hear. Additionally, notice that these believers are to hear not only what the Spirit says to their local church but **what the Spirit says to the churches** (plural) meaning all seven of the churches so that these seven letters become general letters that can be applied to any church that has similar problems. After this exhortation there is a...

## H. Promise

This promise is given at the close of each letter (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21). The question is, for example, in 2:7. Who are the **overcomers**? Are the **overcomers** a special class of believers who actually “repent”? Or are they simply all genuine believers? This is a very controversial question. I have alternated between these two views numerous times.

However, after studying these letters more in depth than I ever have before I think the best answer comes from John's use of "overcome" in his 1st epistle. What I'm doing here is moving outside of John's Revelation and looking in his other letters to try and find out how he uses the word "overcome" (*nikao*). And what do you know...John defines the "overcomer" for us in **1 John 5:4-5**

For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world-- our faith. <sup>5</sup> Who is the one who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

Who is the **overcomer**? The one who overcomes is the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God. So, this means that the promise at the end of each letter is a general promise given to all who overcome the world by believing that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. Therefore, the promises which follow are for all believers without distinction, not just a select group of believers. This is borne out by looking at the other promises given at the end of each letter. For example, Rev 2:11, "*He who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death*". Yet no believer will be hurt by the second death. Turn over to Revelation 20:14 "*Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire.*" How many believers are going to be thrown into the lake of fire? Zero. The 'second death' is reserved for all unbelievers (Rev 20:6, 14; 21:7, 8). Therefore, each of the promises that come at the end of each letter apply to all believers and not just a special class of believers.

## **I. Problem of Historico-Prophetic Interpretation**

Lastly let's deal with a popular scheme of making each of the seven churches reflect a chronological period of church history. Originally, this was the scheme of those who took a Historical-Continuous interpretation of Revelation. Remember, this view taught that the Book of Revelation was being fulfilled from John's day to the present. So, they divided up this history into seven periods. They claimed that each church was to be identified with one of these periods of history. This causes a lot of problems. If you believe this I would drop it like a bad habit. Let me tell you why. First of all, every church except Smyrna and Laodicea are given a promise of Christ's imminent coming (2:5, 16, 25; 3:3, 11). If each church stood for a chronological period of church history we would expect only the last to have a promise of Christ's imminent coming. But instead we find a promise of coming in 5 of the 7 churches and not the last one, Laodicea (2:5, 16, 25; 3:3, 11). If we order these churches chronologically it destroys imminency for the other periods of church history. This interpretation also tends to overlook the historical details given to each church.

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<sup>i</sup> The angel's role in the giving of the Mosaic Law seems to be that of courtroom witnesses in accordance with the suzerainty-vassal treaties of the ancient world (cf. Dt 32:1; Isa 1:2).

<sup>ii</sup> Robert Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 127.

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.*, 265.

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