

## The Letters to the Seven Churches- Introduction: Unlocking the Revelation

Call to Worship: Revelation 15:3b-4

Hymn #280- *I Love Thy Kingdom Lord*

1<sup>st</sup> Scripture: Revelation 2

Hymn #270- *The Church's One Foundation*

2<sup>nd</sup> Scripture: Revelation 3

Hymn #271- *How Sweet and Awful is the Place*

### Introduction:

In chapter one of Revelation (the introductory chapter), we have hopefully come to see the importance and urgency of the Book, while gaining an appreciation of how John received the Revelation. And following the glorious vision of the exalted Christ, we found John receiving his primary charge in verse 19, “Write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after this.”

And as we move forward into chapter two, we begin to consider the things *which are*. That is to say that we are now beginning to look at the present state of the churches from seven different standpoints, given in the seven letters to the churches of Asia. And brethren, I want to suggest to you this morning, that these next two chapters are the key, which unlocks the remainder of this Book. In other words, you cannot ignore the vital information given in these chapters, if you want to understand anything about the structure and framework within which the remaining symbols are to be interpreted. And sadly, this reality is often all but completely skipped over in the many futuristic models that are used to unravel the mysterious symbols of the Revelation. To be sure, all that is written in the remaining chapters, especially concerning the future, is meant to speak to the present day assessment, given by Christ, concerning the state of the seven churches, which again, represents the state of the churches of all times. Every single local church; the general atmosphere and spirit of every single local church can be identified in at least one of these seven categories of assessment.

And so, this morning then, before honing in on the first church addressed (namely, the church at Ephesus), I want to begin by laying down an overall introduction to these seven letters to the churches. I would like us to consider and examine a common pattern found within these

letters, from an aerial view, so that we will be better prepared to benefit from each individual letter and from the Revelation as a whole.

## **I. The Common Pattern of Address**

If you look inside of your bulletin for a moment, you will find an insert with a chart on it. This chart gives us a general understanding of the common pattern of address found in the seven letters to the churches of Asia, given in chapters 2 and 3 of Revelation. It might be helpful for you to have that chart in hand for this morning, as we seek to consider a general overview of the main categories listed on it. In the weeks ahead, as we work through each individual letter, we will gear our focus toward the specific data recorded in each column, which is of course taken from the seven letters sent to the seven churches of Asia. This morning, we will concentrate our focus primarily on the column *headings*, as they are significant toward helping us identify the common pattern found in each letter, which in turn will help us set the stage for unlocking all of the symbols that erupt throughout much of the Book.

Less the “text” column, which simply gives the Scriptural reference within which each individual letter is found, you will notice that there are seven vertical columns with headings. I want to work through those headings with you at this time, moving from left to right. Now before we work through each column heading *individually*, let me just list them collectively for you. As we work through the letters to the seven churches, you will generally find that each letter contains:

- 1) Christ’s opening address, identifying each recipient church
- 2) Christ’s self-designation, especially as He relates to the challenges facing each church
- 3) Christ’s commendation of each church’s strong points (barring Laodicea)
- 4) Christ’s words of rebuke concerning the sins of each church (barring Smyrna & Phil.)
- 5) Christ’s solution for the challenges facing each church
- 6) Christ’s warning to those who fail to respond properly (barring Smyrna & Phil.)

7) Christ's promise to those who overcome by persevering to the end

These are the seven common patterns of address found in the seven letters to the churches of Asia. Let us now look at each of these headings *individually*:

1) Christ's opening address, identifying each recipient church

Each letter begins with "To the angel of the church of...," followed by the identification of the specific church being addressed. And again, we have already considered that the "angel/messenger" of each church, represents the churches as a whole. This is further confirmed by the common phrase written at the end of each letter, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." We will look into this little, significant phrase further in a few moments as well. Suffice it to say for now that each letter is written to one of the seven churches/lampstands, which are further represented by the stars that were found in the hand of the glorious, exalted Christ, envisioned at the end of chapter one.

2) Christ's self-designation, especially relating to the challenges facing each church

Following the opening address, we find the words, "These things says..." followed by a self-designation given by Christ, describing Himself especially in some way that would relate to the challenges facing each individual church. In other words, each letter is not prefaced with some *random description* of the glory of Christ, but rather, they are prefaced with a *specific description* of Christ's glory and character that best speaks to the specific challenges of each church. And so, those churches which are in serious sin, perhaps being in grave danger of having their lampstand removed or judged in some way, are addressed by the exalted, kingly Christ, according to certain of His glorious, threatening and "to be feared" qualities, especially described in the vision of Christ given at the end of chapter one. And those churches which are faithful and persevering (like Smyrna and Philadelphia) are addressed in such a way that they would be reminded of those glorious attributes of Christ that are meant to comfort and ensure such churches, that Christ has conquered for them and is mighty on their behalf. Each one of

Christ's self-designations (which we will consider as we come to work through each of the individual letters) is very significant for meeting the challenges of each church.

However, one more thing must be noted here before we move on to the next column heading. Again, you will notice that Christ's self-designations are prefaced with the words, "These things says..." And brethren, when we hear these words, we are not meant to pass them over too quickly, as if to assume that they only serve to simply point to that which is really relevant, in the words that follow. No, what we have here are very significant words that would have rung loudly in the ears of the first century readers. These are the opening words of a king, who is pronouncing a royal edict. The Caesars of that time *alone* would have used such language. And to be sure, all were expected to give due and proper credence to whatever words followed, as an immediate priority and without fail, to the threat of their very lives. Well, here Jesus; here King Jesus is speaking as One who is, in fact, higher than any Caesar, as if to say, "Thus says your King, who is endowed with the greatest authority above and under heaven." "Thus says the One who is to be heeded over and above Caesar, and if Caesar contradicts—the One whose eyes are like a flame of fire, the One who holds the seven stars in His hands and walks among the lampstands, the One whose feet are burnished bronze, whose words are a sharp, double edged sword...etc—if Caser contradicts, heed this glorious King Jesus even unto the loss of your physical life." "For Caesar can, at best, harm the body, but this King Jesus has power to throw both body and soul into hell." In other words, brethren, when we read, "These things says..." here in each letter, we are meant to recall those precious, divine words of the Old Testament, often spoken by the prophets of God, "Thus says the Lord!"

### 3) Christ's commendation of each church's strong points (barring Laodicea)

It is wonderful to consider that our Lord does not immediately rebuke the churches concerning their faults, without first commending them for their strong points. With the exception of Laodicea, our Lord begins His charge by first recognizing and acknowledging those areas of faithfulness, which were predominant and strong within each individual church. And brethren, it would do us a lot of good to study and borrow from the pattern of the righteous Lord of glory here, when we sinners seek to lovingly confront and rebuke our fellow sinners within the church. Proper commendation goes a long way when preparing to tenderly point out areas of sin and weakness in others.

However, in our Lord's case, two very significant things emerge out of His commendations of the churches in Asia. First, in each of the six churches that He commends, He begins with the words, "I know your works..." And then He moves on to describe the specific ways in which they were being faithful. And the significance here is found especially in the words, "I know..." Once again, brethren, we are here brought back to that vision of chapter one, where the exalted, omniscient, Christ stands among the lampstands. And we are reminded of the fact that He is indeed among us. He sees all, He understands all...He knows our motives; He knows our strong points and weak points; He knows our works. When perhaps no one else sees, He sees everything, from the inside out. Some of you are working faithfully behind the scenes, praying, serving, encouraging, exhorting, sacrificing, giving...etc, and you might feel unappreciated by your fellow dust in the church, but Christ sees and He knows...everything. And furthermore, others may be doing nothing; maybe you are drifting away, maybe you are consistently engaged in some secret sin...He knows everything. Brethren, that is a prevalent theme in this Book, and in the Bible as a whole; the reminder that though we hear no voice speaking to us when we move about in our daily living; though we see no physical person near us, when we move about in our daily living, Christ is always right there...He knows your works.

And then, a second significant thing emerges here as well. Our Lord gives no commendation to Laodicea whatsoever, as if to assume that everything she does is wholly marred by her spiritual lukewarmness. And yet, from the standpoint of Christ, she is indeed a church; indeed a church which is loved by Christ, as we will see when we come to that letter. Suffice it to say for now, brethren, that there are churches out there, that may be presently offering little to no light, which Christ may, at least for the time being, still consider a true church. It may be on the verge of collapse, but it presently sits among the lampstands, where Christ walks. Let that speak loudly to the incomprehensible patience and love of our blessed Savior, not to take it for granted, but to revel in His glorious grace all the more, being compelled to cast ourselves further into His worthy service.

#### 4) Christ's words of rebuke concerning the sins of each church (barring Smyrna & Phil.)

Following His commendation of each church, our Lord then moves on to expose any significant faults that are found within them. He brings forth His rebukes. Now, for the time being, let me just emphasize one important observation here. Lest we think for even a moment

that our Lord is nitpicking here or lest we assume that the things for which he rebukes these churches are perhaps small matters, we notice that two out of the seven churches are given no rebuke whatsoever. Both the church in Smyrna and the church in Philadelphia are addressed without a single rebuke. Now, we must understand that our Lord was by no means saying that these churches were without sin. To be sure, they too were working through a process of ongoing sanctification. However, our Lord who is overly gracious, and slow to wrath, knew that these churches, though imperfect, were in the battle. They were sincere and they manifested a life of consistent, faithful fruit bearing. In other words, brethren, our Lord is realistic with His expectations, but at the same time, when the spirit of a church regresses into a stationary, habitual lull of some sort; when their Gospel light is hindered in some significant, ongoing way, then He must and will step in, to offer a rebuke of displeasure, accompanied by a warning to repent. These two churches were in the battle; they were sincerely committed to sacrificially serving and following Christ; Christ was at the center of their life and worship, and so, as they continually confessed their sins and shortfalls, He was more than gracious and willing to pass them right over, leaving them buried beneath His own cross. No, our Savior is not stern or tyrannical in any sense of the word, and the fact that two of the churches receive nothing but commendation, clearly proves this. In other words, brethren, if we lose our lampstand, then we have really had to regress into a state of great darkness and lethargy.

5) Christ's solution for the challenges facing each church

Following His rebuke of each church, He gives them specific instructions regarding what they are to do in moving forward. The five churches that are sinking in their sinful rebellion must act and repent, according to the instructions given by Christ to each church; instructions that address their specific need and condition. And the two faithful churches, are also given instructions regarding what they must do to continue to remain faithful to the end.

6) Christ's warning to those who fail to respond properly (barring Smyrna & Phil.)

For the five sinning churches, there are consequences, should they continue on in their rebellious disobedience. And so, Christ gives them each fair warning against remaining in their present condition, all the more as a means of exhorting them to follow the instructions (to actively change in accordance with that), which He has just given. Since the two faithful

churches (of Smyrna and Philadelphia) have not been rebuked, no such warning/exhortation is given them at this time.

Let me just make a quick comment about the phrase I had mentioned before, which is found in all seven of the letters to the seven churches of Asia. At the end of each letter, we find the words, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” For the time being, two things must be noted about this statement:

1- Clearly, it confirms that these letters are not meant to *solely* address *these churches in Asia alone*, but rather, all churches of all times. Notice, it does not say, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the *church in Ephesus* or Smyrna or Pergamum or Thyatira...etc. No, the Spirit is speaking these truths to all churches of all times. In other words, we are to examine ourselves in the light of each of these letters to assess where we truly stand in the present, and to respond accordingly.

2- Secondly, this language ought to remind us of the language our Lord used when He spoke to people in parables (“He who has an ear, let him hear...”). In other words, the hidden truths revealed in Revelation; the truths contained in all of the symbols...etc, are spiritually discerned. They will ultimately only convince and affect those who are indwelt by the Spirit of Christ. Only those who have “spiritual ears” will hear. And though, the truths themselves may turn out to be blatantly obvious at times, they will be incapable of benefitting the heart or the soul that is presently unregenerate and unoccupied by the living Spirit of Christ. The Revelation is a message that must and will speak to the true people of God. And those who respond will give heed to both the warnings and encouragements given therein. At times, you might be tempted to say, “Why are there warnings in Scripture, if we can do nothing of our own to respond anyway?” Well, the answer is quite simple. From a profitable and non-condemnatory standpoint, these warnings are meant for those who have “ears to hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” And those who hear, from the heart, will, by their God-given faith, respond accordingly.

#### 7) Christ’s promise to those who overcome by persevering to the end

Finally, a warning against failing to give heed to Christ’s exhortation is followed by a promise to those who do give heed unto the end. In other words, there is not only “threat” upon

continued disobedience, but there is also “promise” upon repentance or continued perseverance for those who are faithful in the church.

### **Conclusive Thoughts Concerning These Headings**

Brethren, let me bring this all together with a few closing thoughts concerning the headings we have just gone over:

On at least a few occasions, you have heard me say that these letters to the seven churches of Asia hold the key to unlocking the Revelation. Let me now begin to introduce my reason for making such a bold statement about the Book.

As we work through all of the visions throughout this Book, which contain the complicated symbols and their disputed referents, we will best be able to identify their meaning by considering them within the context of these headings that we have just gone over, and especially the last four headings. Remember, the things which “are to come” are meant to affect how we view and treat the things “which are.” Christ’s words of rebuke, Christ’s solutions, Christ’s exhortations/warnings and Christ’s promises to the churches, all deal with present and potential future realities (depending upon how each church responds to them). And the future realities are not hidden from those who “have ears to hear.” And so, we can know our future (in a very significant sense), or at least that which is relevant concerning our future, simply by analyzing where we currently stand as a church (and as individuals), and applying the given consequences (be they blessings or cursings) that most certainly fit our present position. And if we find ourselves heading in a dangerous direction, we have Christ’s specific solutions given to us, so that we can strive toward repentance and change. And if we find ourselves, overall, doing well, we can maintain our course and benefit greatly by embracing Christ’s solutions given to the faithful churches. And the rest of this Book, serves to unlock in much greater detail these very headings that we have gone over, as a means of strengthening and solidifying this main purpose. When we come to the end of the Book of Revelation, the question we have to ask ourselves is, “Do we indeed have ears to hear what the Spirit is saying to all the churches, including us?” Are we responding to the message, as it meets us right here in the year 2011, or are we simply lost in an array of interesting symbols, and identifying all manner of specific events and times and etc?

Let me give you an example that I hope will help bring this all together for you. Let's take the church of Ephesus for a moment. Christ's self-designation as the "One who holds the seven stars in His right hand and who walks among the lampstands" will speak authoritatively and directly to the sin that is predominant in that church. First, we will appreciate their commendations (doctrinal vigilance, labor, perseverance and patience), and then we will identify and ponder the nature and severity of their chronic sin of having "lost their first love." And we ought to expect that as we move through the Revelation, that we will find more of a descriptive understanding of what "losing one's first love" looks like. And then as we examine the solution that Christ gives, to "remember from where they have fallen, to repent and do their first works," we ought to expect to gain clarity with respect to this solution, throughout the Book as well. And then finally, as we ponder Christ's exhortation/warning to the church if she fails to follow the solution, and as we ponder the promise that He declares will be granted to those who do indeed repent and overcome, we ought to expect that throughout the Revelation, the realities of these warnings and promises coming to pass, will be made much clearer for us. We will be given visual illustrations that reinforce both the ideas of the coming judgment that will come upon the unrepentant, compromising wicked and the glorious blessings that will come upon those who overcome in Christ.

In other words, brethren, the rest of the Book finds its proper weight and place right here under the headings that are found in these letters. And all of the intense and glorious visions that Johns sees, come forth with the intention of revealing; of pulling back the curtain, allowing us to see that which really is (from the standpoint of God, and therefore, the only standpoint that matters) in light of "what seems to be" at a deceptively calm and grossly distorted surface, all in the light of a pre-determined future, that rests in the hands of the One who is "the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, and the One who was and who is and who is to come."

The world is blind to all of these realities; realities which have proven true throughout every age since the Revelation was first given, and which ultimately point to the final, glorious end of the return of Christ. Many, even in the church are blind to these realities, evidenced by the fact that though they hear these things, they do not really "hear them," because they are not, in fact, moved or affected by them. But to the remnant, these realities hit home, and accomplish their intended purpose, because they indeed have ears to hear.

## The Gospel

But perhaps there are some here this morning who have not “heard” all along, whom God just might choose to be gracious to, by opening their eyes and their ears by the power of His Spirit. Perhaps the Spirit may even be convicting some of you right now of the fact that you are presently outside of God’s *gracious* will. Your lostness has become evident. Your life of insubordination to the will of God, and your pursuit of personal lusts and material gains has begun to become evident to you, and it is frightening. God’s Law; His commandments are beginning to weigh down upon you (“Love God first above all else, have no idols, do not take His Name in vain, honor the Sabbath Day, Obey your parents, don’t murder or hate, don’t commit adultery or sexual immorality of any sort, don’t steal, don’t lie and don’t strongly desire something that belongs to someone else”).

If you are troubled in your soul, and realize that you are currently at enmity with your God. If God has perhaps begun to put His fear within you even this morning, then friend, respond to the grace of God by repenting of your sins and believing into the Lord Jesus Christ, who alone can save you. You see, He died specifically for sinners, and only He can give you a new heart that desires to know, love and serve your God in truth!

AMEN!!!

Benediction: Jude 1:24-25