

CHAPTERS TWO AND THREE

Chapters 2 & 3 will complete our discussion of the introductory vision by viewing what many call "The letters to the seven churches of Asia." There is much debate regarding whether or not John actually wrote seven individual letters to these seven specific churches. Because the book is an apocalyptic book, full of symbolism, I believe we truly know the answer, which should not warrant a debate: John wrote only one scroll as God commanded him to do. I refer you to Revelation chapter one, verse 11 where it is recorded, ***"The great voice, as a trumpet, said to John, "I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last: and, What thou seest, write in a book, and send it unto the seven churches which are in Asia; unto Ephesus, and unto Smyrna, and unto Pergamos, and unto Thyatira, and unto Sardis, and unto Philadelphia, and unto Laodicea."***

I have emphasized a portion of that text with an underlined selection. Did you notice that God told John to write ***"a book,"*** singular. One single book was to be written and ***"it"*** was to be sent ***"unto the seven churches..."*** The book John wrote is the book we are reading, Revelation, and it was circulated to the church universal as represented by the symbolic number seven - the "perfect in the sense of complete" church. And as time went on it was copied and more widely circulated until all had access to it.

You probably noticed that nowhere in the text are these warnings called letters. I believe John did write the statements included in chapters 2 and 3, but he also wrote everything after those two chapters. Those "seven letters" spell out problems that exist in the church universal, not just in those seven mentioned here. The repeated plea is ***"He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches."*** The implication appears to be that everyone should hear what is written to the churches – plural – all of them. Together, these two chapters express the remainder of the first vision but John does not stop there. He continues to write until all that God wants His servants to know has been written. Therefore, I view the admonitions contained in chapters 2 & 3, not as seven separate, independent and individual letters, but as the whole – the completeness of Jesus' review of the church universal that has existed for about 60 years and enduring much persecution for their stance.

The text:

To the Church in Ephesus:

“Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus write; These things saith he that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand, who walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks; I know thy works, and thy labor, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil: and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars: And hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name's sake hast labored, and hast not fainted. Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love. Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent. But this thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God.”

To the Church in Smyrna:

“And unto the angel of the church in Smyrna write; These things saith the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive; I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich) and I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan. Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death.”

To the Church in Pergamum:

“And to the angel of the church in Pergamos write; These things saith he which hath the sharp sword with two edges; I know thy works, and where thou dwellest, even where Satan's seat is: and thou holdest fast my name, and hast not denied my faith, even in those days wherein Antipas was my faithful martyr, who was slain among you, where Satan

dwelleth. But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balac to cast a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication. So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate. Repent; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna, and will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it.”

To the Church in Thyatira:

“And unto the angel of the church in Thyatira write; These things saith the Son of God, who hath his eyes like unto a flame of fire, and his feet are like fine brass; I know thy works, and charity, and service, and faith, and thy patience, and thy works; and the last to be more than the first. Notwithstanding I have a few things against thee, because thou sufferest that woman Jezebel, which calleth herself a prophetess, to teach and to seduce my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed unto idols. And I gave her space to repent of her fornication; and she repented not. Behold, I will cast her into a bed, and them that commit adultery with her into great tribulation, except they repent of their deeds. And I will kill her children with death; and all the churches shall know that I am he which searcheth the reins and hearts: and I will give unto every one of you according to your works. But unto you I say, and unto the rest in Thyatira, as many as have not this doctrine, and which have not known the depths of Satan, as they speak; I will put upon you none other burden. But that which ye have already hold fast till I come. And he that overcometh, and keepeth my works unto the end, to him will I give power over the nations: And he shall rule them with a rod of iron; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers: even as I received of my Father. And I will give him the morning star. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.”

To the Church in Sardis:

“And unto the angel of the church in Sardis write; These things saith he that hath the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars; I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead. Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God. Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent. If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee. Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with me in white: for they are worthy. He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.”

To the Church in Philadelphia:

“And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write; These things saith he that is holy, he that is true, he that hath the key of David, he that openeth, and no man shutteth; and shutteth, and no man openeth; I know thy works: behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it: for thou hast a little strength, and hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name. Behold, I will make them of the synagogue of Satan, which say they are Jews, and are not, but do lie; behold, I will make them to come and worship before thy feet, and to know that I have loved thee. Because thou hast kept the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth. Behold, I come quickly: hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown. Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out: and I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, which is new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God: and I will write upon him my new name. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.”

To the Church in Laodicea:

“And unto the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write; These things saith the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God; I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth. Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked: I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eyesalve, that thou mayest see. As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent. Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me. To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.”

Typically, in a classroom setting, these seven “letters” are discussed individually (which in a different type of study would be a good thing to do) but for the overall picture we need to form in our minds here in Revelation, we are going to discuss these letters as one cohesive unit. Since this may be the first time you have viewed them this way, you may want to read the text again – keeping “the whole” in mind rather than the individual. It will help you to make a chart in which you create columns for the positive characteristics, the negative characteristics, the warnings, the promises, and the description that Jesus gives himself. Afterwards, looking at those 5 columns will give you a good overall picture. But, keeping “the whole” in mind, listed below are three things that we do NOT see in the universal church:

1. ***There is a total absence of any collective earthly organization.*** We should be impressed with this because these varied congregations existed without any form of an earthly hierarchy so prevalent in present-day denominations. They had Jesus as their Head and each local congregation’s organization consisted of elders, deacons,

preachers, teachers, and members. There was absolutely no other form of governing body, either by a single individual or group of individuals. Instead, each local congregation existed as a complete, separate unit, independent of all the others, but operating under Jesus Christ's authority. That is unusual in the religious world today.

2. ***There is a total absence of instruction for one church to not associate with another because of immoral conditions.*** We see instruction for individuals to not partake of another's sin, but there is no instruction for any one congregation to have nothing to do with another congregation – in fact the opposite is implied.

3. ***There is a total absence of instruction for any member or group of members of a congregation to withdraw themselves for any reason from one congregation and to form a new congregation somewhere else.*** They were instructed to repent and to “strengthen the things which remain, and to remember from whence you are fallen. Even the congregation at Laodicea – about whom our Lord did not find a single good thing to say – was not guilty of any of the three things listed above. Yet all three are commonplace among churches in today's society.

But, looking at the other side of the coin: Aside from those things listed above which were NOT seen in the church universal, there are several things that we DO see:

1. ***the command from Jesus to change whatever sinful condition exists within the congregation before degradation goes any further.*** The apostle Paul said in his first letter to the church at Corinth, “a little leaven leavens the whole lump.” (1 Cor. 5:6) Certainly, sin does exist and is seen being practiced in the churches. If it is left alone it will destroy the church, therefore, the admonishment given by Jesus was to get rid of it before it became necessary for Him to remove *the lampstand*. There is some question about what is meant by Jesus' removing a church's lamp-stand. As I see it, there is only

one possible meaning. Jesus said back in verse 20 of chapter 1 that the lampstands were the churches and John saw that Jesus was standing in the "midst" of these lampstands inferring that He stood in the midst of the churches. That forces the conclusion that Jesus was among or "within" the churches. We have already quoted Jesus as saying, ***"Wherever two or three are gathered together in My name, I am in their midst."*** So, to have a lampstand removed can only mean that Jesus would no longer be with, or a part of, that particular lampstand (church). If Jesus is not in it, then that church is no longer recognized by Him as one of His. Therefore, His admonition was for them to expunge the sin, repent and do that which was right. That is still true today. He has not changed!

2. ***We see that Jesus, as the Head of the church, addresses each congregation individually, yet all are bound together by common faith, spiritual life, and a Heavenly goal.*** Each congregation was to hear what was said not only to its own congregation, but to all the others as well. Also, each individual hearer was to heed the total of what was said to the churches.

The principles which regulated one congregation regulated all because they were united. About thirty years before John wrote these letters the apostle Paul saw some of the first hints of division in the church at Ephesus – one of the very churches listed here – and he wrote: ***"There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and in you all."*** (Ephesians 4:4-6) Therefore, they were to act, teach and live as one. Yet Jesus sees the need to send that message again by the pen of John. It seems obvious from Jesus' message to the church at Ephesus that they had made some correction, but their focus was still not right. They had lost "their first love," and needed to reset that focus and get back on track.

3. ***We see five distinct warnings to the whole of the church, indicating that every warning should be received and noted by each congregation,*** even though the reason for that particular warning might not be evident in every local church. Don't let the significance

of there being five warnings pass your notice. Since early times, the number 5 has been considered to be the symbol for "teaching." [Remember the five foolish virgins and five wise virgins? Whenever we see groupings of five, we need to understand that we are being taught for the purpose of changing for the good.]

Look then, at these five warnings and notice what we should learn from each of them:

- a. **The first warning is against paganism in general.** If indeed this book was written in the late 1st century, we know that emperor worship was prevalent, even demanded, at that time. That practice is addressed in this general warning against paganism. According to Merriam-Webster, paganism is defined *as "a religion that has many gods or goddesses; that considers the earth holy, and does not have a central authority."* In actual practice, paganism endorses a wide variety of traditions that emphasize reverence for many things other than God and Christ. Paganism is not a traditional religion per se, because it does not have any official doctrine. Instead, it involves a great variety of traditions, but one constant does abide: *monotheism (the worship of one God) is almost universally rejected.*

- b. **The second warning is in regard to Jewish harassment,** but the actual point being made is that showing disdain or partiality based on ethnic background is wrong. I believe the truth being taught here is that ANY partiality or favoritism is wrong. While Judaism is not nearly as prevalent today as it was then, we still might be inclined to show favoritism among the membership of the church by esteeming one over another. To this point, if we are not careful, we can become "followers" of a particular individual, be they a preacher or otherwise, and come to believe and accept what that person says above all others. Or, we can show favoritism based on status, money, or some other criteria. All of that is wrong. We are to be one – united as one entity. God is not a respecter of persons, but is fair and shows no partiality. We should do the same.

- c. The third warning is in regard to the temptation toward materialism and lawlessness** similar to that of the Nicolaitans or of Balaam and Jezebel. You may recall when Jesus was here on earth, He denounced the Pharisees as being hypocrites. He considered the chief priests and officials, along with the teachers in the synagogues, as having corrupted the truth of God with the doctrines of men, which is similar to the guilt of the Nicolaitans [a sect among several early churches, possibly begun by Nicolaus of Antioch, practicing unrestrained indulgence.]

Then, there was Jezebel. Such a universally evil person that I doubt any mother would choose that name for her daughter. After a major showdown between Elijah, the prophet of Jehovah, and the prophets of Baal - in which most of the prophets of Baal were killed- Jezebel threatened Elijah with death.

All these things were done for personal gain. The participants were putting their own desires before those of God, and that is not acceptable in the Lord's church.

- d. The fourth warning is about the loss of zeal.** Some people had grown weary of following God and had chosen spiritual laziness instead. We can be guilty of that as well. It is easy to get comfortable in the daily routine we have established for ourselves. We allot time for work, fitness, shopping and recreation, and get so caught up in these things that, next thing you know, there's no time for God. One of the outward, early signs of this is lack of regular attendance to worship services. It may be sporadic at first, but eventually we are missing more than we are attending. While this is the outwardly visible sign that something is wrong, there is often another one going on behind the scenes: a lack of time spent in prayer, talking with our Father in Heaven. This open line of communication directly to heaven is one of the greatest blessings we have as Christians.

We tend to make excuses for our loss of interest in spiritual things. Sometimes we blame sickness or medical problems or claim to be too busy with work and family

obligations. But the truth is, it all boils down to a lack of zeal for God. I'm sure you have noticed how a new member of the body of Christ is full of eagerness and enthusiasm. They want to work. They want to share what they have with all who will listen. Most likely you were that way too. What causes that to go away? Can we say, "the newness wears off?" After a while, we grow accustomed to the peace of mind that accompanies Christianity so much so that we begin to take it for granted, and allow the world to creep back in. If there's one thing Satan hates, it's enthusiasm for Jesus, so complacency is his friend. If we unplug ourselves from our power source - Jesus- then the temptations the devil throws in our path can have their way with us.

e. The fifth warning is in regard to what Jesus calls "one who is lukewarm."

Almost no one begins their Christian life "lukewarm" – it generally happens over time. People sometimes become indifferent. Their faith wavers. It may be because they are negatively influenced by someone, or because they've decided to "straddle the fence" instead of taking a stand for the truth. Over time they decide the world will like them better if they no longer admonish others or take a stand against things that are unpopular and politically incorrect in today's society. Nevertheless, what mankind determines to be incorrect or unpopular has no bearing on what God deems: God says in regard to those who are lukewarm, ***"I will spew you out of my mouth!"***

Those are the five specific warnings Jesus gave to the church universal late in the first century AD. But in addition to these, we are also warned against succumbing to any of the various lifestyles spoken of in the previously mentioned passages, because they are not only fatal to the one practicing them, but can be detrimental to the spiritual life of the church overall. A church absorbed in these lifestyles is extinguishing the light emanating from the lampstand. The end result can only be the removal of that lampstand from the presence of the Lord.

But there is something else meant to draw our attention in these letters! There are three specific expressions. [Yes, there is that number "three" again.] They are the following:

1. **I know** – We see this throughout these seven letters, *"I know thy works," "I know thy tribulation," "I know where thou dwellest."* Regardless of where we are or what our circumstances may be... *The One who stands in the midst of the churches KNOWS all there is to know about each church and about each one of the members that make up the church!* Nothing is hidden from Him. As the Hebrew writer says, *"all things are naked and laid open before the eyes of Him with whom we have to do"* (Heb. 4:13) Whatever it is that tests our faith: be it our work or trying circumstances... ***He Knows!***

2. **"He that overcomes -- "** This is stated in each letter as the basis of reward. The Greek word is "Nikao," and it means exactly what the translation says: *"to overcome."* It is used 28 times in the entire New Testament -- 24 of those times by John -- to encourage his brethren: He used it once in his Gospel, six times in the letter we call I John, and 17 times here in Revelation. Regardless of the immense love Jesus has for each of His followers, the ones who are fearful and yield under the pressure of tribulation or persecution will have their part in the lake of fire. Being sinful will condemn us to eternal punishment, but, because of His love for us, Jesus provides a way of escape: *"He who overcomes inherits the glory of heaven!"* (Rev 21:7)

3. ***"He that hath an ear to hear."*** This admonition simply means if you can hear anything at all, listen and obey what is said to the churches, ***"Because I come!"***

And that ends the discussion of the first vision. As I said at the beginning of this segment, a careful analysis of what is written to the churches as a whole will clearly show that the conditions found in those congregations may be found in any congregation of the Lord's church at any time in history. The letters are practical and worthy of consideration beyond a cursory reading. Don't simply skim over what is written assuming those words have no value in

A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Ron Roberts

Lesson Four

our modern times. We still need to heed what is said. Just for the purpose of keeping track, the breakdown of the churches might be as follows:

- those with commendable as well as condemnable traits: *Ephesus, Pergamum, Thyatira and Sardis*
- those with nothing said to condemn them but bearing admonitions all the same: *Smyrna and Philadelphia*
- And the church about which nothing good was said: *Laodicea*.