

THE LORD & HIS CHURCHES

Revelation 1-3



Intro: The opening of this letter emphasizes the immediacy of the Lord's message to His people living in John's day: "The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants, the things which must soon take place..." (1.1). As we will note in future lessons, these "things which must soon take place" would include the Lord's judgment on the Roman Empire, the oppressors of His people. However, it is significant that this letter begins not with a denunciation of the Lord's enemies, but with a picture of the Lord and His relationship to His people. His churches needed to understand that the Lord who would deliver them from their enemies, was also the Lord who observed their works and would judge them based on those works. He is Lord of the earth and Lord of His people. So, the emphasis in Revelation 1-3 is on the Lord and His relationship to His churches.

The Lord Described (1.4-7, 13-16)

1. As John begins to address the saints of the 7 churches, he does so by praying that they would receive grace and peace from each member of the Godhead (vs. 4-5)
 - a. Note: the "seven Spirits" would seem to be a description of the Holy Spirit, not seven different spirits. The number 7, which reoccurs throughout the letter, signifies completion and may refer to the complete work of the Spirit. An interesting comparison is found in Isaiah 11.2 where the Spirit is described in 7 ways (of the Lord, of wisdom, understanding, of counsel, strength, of knowledge, and the fear of the Lord.)
2. While each member of the Godhead is referenced, the most attention is paid to Jesus. Note the ways He is described in vss. 5&7.
 - a. *The faithful witness:* "witness comes from the Greek *martus*, which is transliterated *martyr*. A martyr is one who bears witness by his death." (Ferrell Jenkins)
 - b. *The firstborn of the dead:* Emphasizing His resurrection and how that proclaimed His sovereignty (see Psalm 89.27; Col. 1.18).
 - c. *The ruler of the kings of the earth:* throughout the Old Testament the Lord is said to rule over the nations (see Isa 10.5,7,15,25; Dan. 4.17; 5.21). That sovereignty is claimed for Jesus (Rev. 17.14; 19.16).
 - d. *Coming with the clouds:* as absolute sovereign, He comes to judge (note Isaiah

- 19.1; Ezek. 30.3; 32.7; 34.12)! While this language could be used of the final judgment, it seems best that here the reference is to the Lord's judgment on Rome.
3. Later in the first chapter, John is instructed by Jesus to "write in a book what you see and send it to the seven churches," (vs. 11). The description of Jesus in this passage (vss. 12-16) is important to note.
 - a. *One like a son of man*: not only referencing Jesus' humanity, but identifying Him as the One prophesied to receive the Kingdom (Daniel 7.13-14).
 - b. *Clothed in a robe reaching to the feet, and girded across His chest with a golden sash*: clothing reminiscent of the Old Testament high priest (see Exodus 28.4). "It is interesting that Jesus is described in this chapter with terms which suggest that he is our prophet (1.1), priest (1.13) and king (1.5)." (Wayne Jackson)
 - c. *His head and His hair were white like white wool, like snow; and His eyes were like a flame of fire. His feet were like burnished bronze...*: all similar to attributes of God given in Daniel 7.9. They emphasize purity (white hair), penetrating knowledge (eyes like fire) and might (feet like burnished bronze).
 - d. *His voice was like the sound of many waters*: again an attribute of God in the Old Testament (see Ezekiel 43.2). Denotes the commanding quality of His voice.
 - e. *Out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword*: the Word by which God has always judged! (see Isa 49.2; Heb. 4.12).
 - f. *Face was like the sun shining in its strength*: glorious as was His appearance at the transfiguration (see Matthew 17.2).
 4. While the interpretation of various aspects of the Lord's appearance may vary, what cannot be denied is the effect it had on John (vs. 17). His presence was/is awe inspiring and too glorious to behold by mortal man.
 5. Finally, we must note how Jesus describes Himself in vss. 17-18.
 - a. *I am the first and the last*: eternal, emphasizing His ability to know the end from the beginning (see Isa 41.4; 44.6; 48.12).
 - b. *The living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore*: He has mastered death.
 - c. *I have the keys of death and of Hades*: Pointing to the fact that those with Christ will also master death.

What The Lord Has Done For His People (1.5-6)

1. *He loves us*: note that this is present tense. While His love for us was clearly seen in His sacrifice on the cross, His love for His people continues perpetually.
2. *Released us from our sins by His blood*. An allusion to the Passover where Israel was released from bondage by blood. Now, the spiritual Israel has been released from her sins by His blood.
3. *Made us to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father*: Note that KJV and NKJV translate this as "kings and priests". However, while we rule with Christ, He alone is King. We are part of His Kingdom! (Col. 1.13; Exodus 19.5-6; 1Peter 2.9).

The Lord Examines His People (1.12, 16-20; chapters 2-3)

1. The pictures of Jesus found in Revelation 1 are given for a reason; they set the stage for the Lord addressing His people in chapters 2-3. As the Lord and the One who redeemed His people, He has every right to examine their works and to give them instruction.
2. Jesus' continuing relationship with His people, His churches, is described in two ways in chapter 1:
 - a. He is standing in the middle of seven golden lampstands (vss. 12-13). These lampstands represent the seven churches of Asia (vs. 20). Jesus' presence among the lampstands emphasizes His relationship to the churches. "The churches are inseparable from their Head; He moves among them as their King and High Priest, beholding and knowing every facet of their life and conduct, giving counsel and leadership in time of need and comfort of affliction." (Homer Hailey)
 - b. He is holding seven stars in His right hand (vs. 16). The seven stars are identified as "the angels of the seven churches," (vs. 20). While interpretations of this vary, the idea seems to be that the angels represent the spirit or spiritual character of each church. Consider that in chapters 2-3 as Jesus addresses the angel of each church, but exhorts in each one, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."
3. Understanding Jesus' relationship to His churches as described in chapter 1 sets up His letters to each of the churches in chapters 2-3 (see chart on next page). Each letter follows a form involving:
 - a. A description of Jesus
 - b. Commendation (except for Laodicea)
 - c. Rebuke (except for Smyrna and Philadelphia)
 - d. Exhortation to repentance and/or faithfulness.
 - e. Promised reward for those who overcome.

The Seven Churches of Revelation

	Commendation	Criticism	Instruction	Promise
Ephesus (2:1-7)	Rejects evil, perseveres, has patience	Love for Christ no longer fervent	Do the works you did at first	The tree of life
Smyrna (2:8-11)	Gracefully bears suffering	None	Be faithful until death	The crown of life
Pergamos (2:12-17)	Keeps the faith of Christ	Tolerated immorality, idolatry, and heresies	Repent	Hidden manna and a stone with a new name
Thyatira (2:18-29)	Love, service, faith, patience is greater than at first	Tolerates cult of idolatry and immorality	Judgment coming; keep the faith	Rule over nations and receive morning star
Sardis (3:1-6)	Some have kept the faith	A dead church	Repent; strengthen what remains	Faithful honored and clothed in white
Philadelphia (3:7-13)	Perseveres in the faith	None	Keep the faith	A place in God's presence, a new name, and the New Jerusalem
Laodicea (3:14-22)	None	Indifferent	Be zealous and repent	Share Christ's throne

Taken from Nelson's Complete Book of Bible Maps and Charts