

Revelation 2–3 — The Things Which Are: The Seven Churches

Notes on The Revelation with Practical Reflections

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In the second and third chapters we have presented to us the next section of THE REVELATION -The things which are {Rev. 1:3, 19}.

That these seven assemblies really existed at the time there can be no doubt, and it is very profitable to have the Lord's judgment recorded of the condition they were in, and of what He had to command or to reprove. We thus get a line of instruction that is most valuable to us both individually, and as connected together on assembly ground. Believers, in this dispensation, have a high, holy, and heavenly calling, are brought into very wonderful privileges, receive most blessed spiritual gifts, and, therefore, have solemn responsibilities. God is also building together those who are saved by grace. There are, therefore, corporate as well as personal obligations to Christ, who is over His house {Heb. 3:6}.

Hence Christ judges, commends, instructs, rebukes, and chastens. We must bear in mind, as before remarked, that it is not the Church as seen in heaven, or truth of one body that is here considered; but local assemblies on earth, associated not only with Christ and His truth, but with evil and failure, and exposed to outward persecution and conflict with Satan. The circle embraces those who were standing out under the profession of the name of Christ. The Lord, therefore, judges. Peter says: The time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God {1 Pet. 4:17}.

We can judge ourselves by these just weights of the sanctuary. But while it is plain, that these addresses strictly represent the condition of seven actual congregations, there are good reasons for believing that they are intended to give us a prophetic sketch of the Church on earth to the very end. 1. Because we have no mention in the Revelation of churches on earth after the close of these chapters; that is, the Church is never seen on earth, after the conclusion of "the things which are." the saints are seen in heaven from the fourth chapter onward, having been caught up to meet the Lord at His coming. 2. Christ speaks of the seven candlesticks as a mystery, giving us the idea of there being something symbolic in their meaning (chap. 1:20). The Lord is seen only in the midst of these seven; but no one doubts that Christ was in the midst of all the perhaps hundreds of assemblies on earth at that time. Again, the number seven, called a perfect number, is frequently used in this book as symbolical of a whole. Thus we have seven spirits before the throne, seven lamps of fire, seven stars, seven candlesticks, seven

eyes, seven horns, seven seals, seven angels, seven trumpets, seven vials, and seven last plagues. 3. The first assembly named exactly corresponds with the earliest failure of the Church in this dispensation -- declension of heart: Thou hast left thy first love {Rev. 2:4}.

This was the beginning of falling away -Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen {Rev. 2:5}.

The last church of the seven is so thoroughly self-satisfied, heartless, and indifferent to Christ's glory, that He is ready to disown it altogether: I will spue thee out of my mouth {Rev. 3:16}.

This, too, is what we expect at the close. The word of the apostle concerning this dispensation is Be not high-minded, but fear. For if God spared not the natural branches, take heed lest He also spare not thee. Behold, therefore, the goodness and severity of God; on them which fell, severity, but toward thee goodness, if thou continue in His goodness; otherwise thou also shalt be cut off {Rom. 11:20-22}.

These are solemn words. We know that they are not intended to shake the security of the true believer in Christ, but to intimate that God will disown apostate Christianity, as He has apostate Judaism. The intermediate assemblies remind us also of outward persecution, the polluting ravages of Balaam's doctrine -- carnality and worldliness; the abominations of adulterous Jezebel and her children -- Popery, with the coming in of hope of the Lord's return; dead formality -- Protestantism, with a few walking with the Lord; some spiritual reviving, with promise of being kept from the hour of temptation, just before the awful indifference sets in: ending in being disowned by Christ altogether. If it be asked, What is meant by "the angel" of the church, to which each letter is addressed? We reply, There is no scriptural ground whatever for identifying it with "the pastor." While pastors are blessed gift of the ascended Jesus, the idea of "the pastor" is not found in the New Testament; for there might have been many "pastors" in each assembly. There were many overseers at Ephesus, and also "bishops" and "deacons" in the church at Philippi. It is easier to say what the angel is not, than exactly to define what it is. We would speak humbly on a subject of such controversy. But finding the expression, The mystery of the seven stars, which thou sawest . . . are the angels of the seven churches,

and that they are held in the right hand {Rev. 1:20}

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of the risen and ascended Jesus, we are inclined to believe that the angel is symbolic of gifted persons mentioned in Eph. 4, those who have the Lord's work at heart, through whom the Lord could communicate His mind, and whom He holds in a certain sense responsible, both as to faithfulness and failure of the assembly. In each of these epistles the Lord presents Himself in a character suited to the peculiar condition of the assembly. He asserts His rights as Son over His own house and judges. The saints are taught their responsibilities to Him, and to view everything in relation to Him. Many grieve at having offended a brother, but how have we treated Christ? Have we honored Him? Have we been faithful to His truth? Have we given to Him His right place? Has He had our affections? Have we walked worthy of Him? He informs each assembly that He is thoroughly acquainted with it. I know thy works {Rev. 2:1, 9, 13, 19, 3:1, 8, 15}.

Observe that Christ's rule is to commend everything He can first, and then to enter upon failure. We commonly find this in the New Testament. If Christ had to reprove one for doubting, He first acknowledged the faith: O ye of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt? {see Matt. 14:31}

and when Paul wrote, by the Holy Ghost, to the saints at Corinth, who were dishonoring the Lord in so many ways, he began his epistle by enumerating the things he could approve in them. This is always a mark of spiritual-mindedness. We are looking at persons carnally, if we think only of their failures. We do well to be imitators of God, as dear children, in this respect. In those addresses, while corporate responsibility to Christ is fully owned, yet each individual conscience is appealed to: He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches {Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22}.

Observe, too, that each is to hear what is addressed to all the assemblies, according to the truths of the one body and one Spirit. This makes every part of these addresses of deep personal import to all. The promise is also to the individual that overcomes -Him that overcometh, etc. {see Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21}.

A word of instruction, remonstrance, or exhortation is also given to each assembly, calculated to restore; and also an encouragement set before the overcomer. If it be asked, What is meant by “him that overcometh”? We are answered by the same apostle in another letter: Whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world; and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith. Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God? {1 John 5:4, 5}.

The overcomer, then, is the true follower of Christ. He it is that holds fast to the end; for He that has begun a good work in us will perform it until the day of Christ. The promises, therefore, to the overcomer are generally similar to the promises of the gospel; such as, he shall eat of the tree of life which is in the midst of the paradise of God {Rev. 2:7}; thou shalt have a crown of life {see Rev. 2:10};

he shall not be hurt of the second death {Rev. 2:11}, etc.

Now let us look a little at the peculiar features of each assembly.

Ephesus The Lord commends these saints for their labours and patience; their faithfulness in testing those who said they were apostles, and proving them to be liars; their patient continuance in labouring for Christ’s name sake, and not fainting; for their hatred to the deeds of the Nicolaitanes, and intolerance of evil persons. But with all these good qualities the Lord had something serious against them, and could only regard them as “fallen,” notwithstanding all their outward zeal; for they had inwardly declined in affection to Himself. Thou hast left thy first love {Rev. 2:4}.

This was very deep failure; for it is the affections and desires of our hearts that are to be guarded -Keep thy heart, etc. {Prov. 4:23}. We love Him because He first loved us {1 John 4:19}.

It was failure, then, most grievous to the heart of Jesus, and which weakened, if not corrupted, the very spring of all spiritual power. They are exhorted, therefore, to repent, and do the first works {Rev. 2:5},

and threatened to lose the honor of being God’s witness in the earth, if they turned not from this declining course. I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except that thou repent {Rev. 2:5}. 1

Observe, that repentance and returning to the first works are the prescribed means of restoration; for we must not only know our privileges rightly to feel our responsibilities, but we must also carry out our responsibilities, if we would enjoy our privileges. The overcomer is encouraged by the promise to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God {Rev. 2:7}:

not in the midst of God's creation, but of God's own paradise, and may mean not only unceasing satisfaction in Christ, but to share with Him, the last Adam, the life, joy, and blessings of the new creation.

Smyrna There is nothing in this Church calling for reproof. They were poor as to this world, but rich in faith, suffering much outward persecution and trial. One of these trials was the blasphemy of some calling themselves Jews, who were not; but the Lord assures

1. By the removal of the candlestick, we understand that the one united testimony would be no longer upheld. It need hardly be said that the candlestick has been removed, so that the members of the body of Christ are found almost everywhere divided and separated. It was because of sin that the kingdom of Israel was rent into ten tribes and two. This is very solemn.

them that He knows that, and also informs them that the persecution will be only for a limited time -ten days {Rev. 2:10}.

The overcomer is promised to feast on the hidden manna {Rev. 2:17};

this may be the unrevealed glory and beauty of Christ, the Sustainer of His people. The

He encourages them to fear not {see Rev. 2:10}.

He presents Himself to them as the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive {Rev. 2:8},

and thus stands on the other side of death with a crown of life {Rev. 2:10}

for any who are faithful unto death. James tells us that God has promised the crown of life

to those who love Him {James 1:12},

and speaks of it in connection with enduring trial. The overcomer is encouraged and comforted with the assurance, that though he may die the first death for the name of Jesus, yet he

white stone {Rev. 2:17}

may teach us that he is to be publicly and specially honored before men. He is also to have a new name, which no one knoweth saving he which receiveth it {see Rev. 2:17}.

Jacob had a new name -Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel; for as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed {Gen. 32:28}.

Whoever knew the depth and meaning of this new name like Jacob, the supplanter, who received it? We may notice, that after this third address a promise is not given after the exhortation, He that hath an ear, etc. {Rev. 2:29},

Pergamos

but before it. This divides the seven addresses into three and four. The sevens in this book are often divided in this way. It is also important to observe that each of the remaining assemblies has the coming of the Lord or His reign set before it; intimating that the principles of these four assemblies go on to the end.

We have seen that declension of love characterized the first assembly in

Thyatira

shall not be hurt of the second death {Rev. 2:11}.

the things which are {Rev. 1:3, 19},

and persecution with poverty the second. In the third, seducing doctrines, carnality, and worldliness, were inside the assembly. Baalim's doctrine which so successfully damaged and overcame the Israelites, was that God's people might have association with the Moabites -- thus they lost their separate position as a people, and fell into grievous sin. From the Lord presenting Himself as He that hath the sharp sword with two edges {Rev. 2:12},

we might expect there was much to reprove, and so it was. Still, as usual, the Lord commends all He can first. He informs them that He knows that Pergamos is Satan's seat; has not forgotten that one of their company, Antipas, had been a faithful martyr, and that they still hold fast His name, and have not denied His faith. But there were some among them holding the doctrine of Baalim, and others holding the evil doctrines of the Nicolaitanes. The Ephesian saints were commended for hating the deeds of the Nicolaitanes; but, alas! there was now bad doctrine inside the Church. This is very sad, and Christ must deal with such things in His own house. How terrible the thought of Satan having such power in the Church on earth! some like Baalim, seeking to ensnare the sheep and lambs, to turn them to idolatry, and filthiness of flesh and spirit; others were holding an evil doctrine connected with "deeds" which Christ hated. Sooner or later we may expect error in "doctrine" to be connected with evil "deeds." As we might suppose, Christ calls upon the assembly to repent, and threatens to fight against them (the holders of evil doctrine) if there be not repentance.

Here we have a greater power of Satan and evil within the assembly; it becomes the birth-place of evil. The Lord, therefore, introduces Himself not only as the Searcher out of evil, but as mighty to judge and crush under His feet -the Son of God, who hath His eyes like unto a flame of fire, and His feet are like fine brass {Rev. 2:18}.

There were some points in these saints worthy of commendation -faith, love, patience, zeal, and continuance in the service of God; but there was also something very false and evil in their midst. The spirit of wicked Jezebel had been terribly at work, and brought forth children. The mother of harlots is here. Her assumption had been tolerated; her adulterous and idolatrous principles taught. Some had been led away, and had fallen into her uncleanness. Their spiritual idolatry was flagrant; not only the friendship of the world, but friendship with the world. Like as in Ahab's day, the teaching and authority

of God were set aside by the idolatry and religion of the world. What is so bad as the world's religion? "Repent!" "Repent!" was the Lord's command. She had had space given to her for repentance, and had repented not. Therefore said Jesus, Behold I will cast her into a bed, and them that commit adultery with her into great tribulation, except they repent of their deeds. [Mark again, evil doctrine always leads to evil deeds. And I will kill her children with death, and all the churches shall know that I am He that searcheth the reins and hearts; and I will give unto every one of you according to your works {Rev. 2:22, 23}.

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We see here not only the Lord's hatred to evil, but His longsuffering, His readiness to accept a change of mind, and to restore, whatever be the character of evil. But further. The Lord considers those who are ignorant, who have not known the depths of Satan, as they speak,

and also those who have not this doctrine,

and lays upon them none other burden {Rev. 2:24};

that is, I suppose, no further trial than the common suffering that had come upon all the assembly through these evil things. It is helpful to notice how the Lord thus distinguishes persons in the same assembly. The faithful are cheered with the prospect of the Lord's coming, and are exhorted to hold fast till He come. The overcomer is promised to share in the rule and reign of Christ over the nations, and to know as his own personal enjoyment what he now so ardently longs for -the Morning Star {Rev. 2:28}.

This is now the blessed hope of our hearts, and for this we wait (Rev. 22:16).

This is cheering. It also shows us that whatever be the general state of the Church on earth, the Lord is ever ready to strengthen and lead on any who trust Him for it; and perhaps the more so because truth has so failed in the hands of those professing its care. Such are to expect special honor and blessing from the Lord -They shall walk with me in white; for They are worthy {Rev. 3:4}.

Surely this is very encouraging. The Lord threatening to overtake the unrepenting -- coming as a thief -- does not refer to the Lord's personal return from heaven, but to His dealing with them. Living as they were in the spirit of the world, they would be treated like the world, and as of it, by the Lord's coming as a thief {Rev. 3:3}.

Notwithstanding the failure, the overcomer is taught to expect the bridal dress -white raiment {see Rev. 3:4},

to find his name in the book of life, and to be publicly owned by Christ.

Philadelphia Here there is no reproof. Though there is little strength {Rev. 3:8},

Sardis Dead formality generally characterized this assembly. Respectability in man's eye there might be, for they had a name to live;

but, spiritually speaking, they were dead {Rev. 3:1}.

Lamentable condition! With an orthodox confession and outward decency, there was a Christless, lifeless religion. This is very solemn, because some of the Lord's own people were, doubtless, involved in it. The Lord, therefore, is presented to them as the One who has all fulness of spiritual power, and gifts for edification, having the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars {Rev. 3:1}.

He also exhorts them to repent;

and seeks to restore, by enjoining them to remember how they have received and heard, and thus to hold fast {Rev. 3:3};

for the way is cleansed only by taking heed thereto, according to God's word. They were exhorted also to be watchful, and to strengthen the things which remain, which are ready to die; and were reminded that like a dying branch brings no fruit to perfection, so their works, which were often begun well, were not ripened by patiently abiding in Christ. It is well to notice that there were some exceptions to the general condition. Thou hast a few names, even in Sardis, which have not defiled their garments {Rev. 3:4}.

and trial from false things -- things of Satan around, yet the Lord was with them, and saw not a little to commend. Christ greatly encourages them. He reminds them that He is holy and true, that He has the key of David (authority and power in relation to the promises made to David and his throne), that He openeth and no man shutteth; and shutteth and no man openeth {Rev. 3:7}.

The frequent use of the word "my" in this address, "my word," "my name," "my patience," "my God," seems to show that they were remarkable for personal attachment to Christ Himself. They kept Christ's word. They not only read His word, but treasured it up in their hearts; often meditated on it, mixed faith with it, and esteemed it a precious treasure. This, I apprehend, is keeping His word. The Psalmist said: Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee (Psa. 119:11).

They also kept Christ's name. They did not deny it. That name was above every name to them. They did not prostitute it for worldly purposes. To whatever bad things men now attach the name of Christ, these saints did not do so. It was sacred to them. They gathered together in His name, and felt something of the holy responsibilities connected with the confession of that name. They pleaded in prayer that name. They laboured in that name. They confessed that name. They well knew that at the name of Jesus every knee would yet bow, and every tongue confess, to the glory of God the Father. Christ assures them that He has set before them an open door {Rev. 3:8},

and that, however they may be tried by those who are of the synagogue of Satan, yet no man can shut that door. He also promises that those who now distress them shall yet pay them

honor, and know that He has loved them. This we judge will take place at our Lord's appearing. He keeps bright before them His speedy return from heaven, and promises the keepers of His word of patience, 2 deliverance from, or out of, the hour of temptation -the great tribulation that is coming upon all the world. He also exhorts them still to hold fast {see Rev. 3:11}

what they have -- His word and name -- and to beware of men, who will seek to hinder, their devotedness and zeal for Christ, and rob them, not of

a priceless garment -- the bridal dress, white raiment;

and the only anointing that can profit you, spiritual unction -Anoint thine eyes with eye-salve, that thou mayest see {Rev. 3:18}.

Then they would be “rich,” then their “nakedness” would be covered, then their “blind” eyes would see; for their hearts and minds would be fully set upon the beauty and work of Christ. Here alone true riches can be found. Happy those who can say, “Jesus shall our treasure be, Now and through eternity.”

the crown of life,

which seems to be the portion of all believers, but of -the crown of righteousness {2 Tim. 4:8},

which those may expect who love His appearing. Such can spend and be spent for His glory.

The Lord chastens as many as He loves, to bring their hearts off these carnal, fading things to Himself, and says that if there be only one person in the whole assembly that will open the door, I will come in to him, and sup with him, and he with me {Rev. 3:20}.

However weak and oppressed here, the overcomer is promised the place of strength and honor in the presence of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

What blessed encouragement this is to any individual saint who desires to own and serve Christ fully in an evil time.

I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God, and write upon him the name of my God, etc. {see Rev. 3:12}

The overcomer is promised the highest thing that Christ can give -- to sit with Him on His throne.

Laodicea There is nothing to commend here. It is full of indecision and indifference -neither cold nor hot {Rev. 3:15}.

Respectability before men, selfishness, worldly prosperity, and independence of Christ, characterized Laodicea. There was no felt need, and Christ was outside the door, obliged to knock for admission. He was ready to spue them out of His mouth. A terrible state, indeed, and yet a faithful picture of the conclusion of this dispensation. Christ presents Himself to them as the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God {Rev. 3:14}

-- the decided One, who always said Amen to God's word, and faithfully carried it out; and being the Head of the new creation, He is worthy of the affection and service of all His people, and is almighty to judge as well as to bless. The Church of Smyrna was poor in earthly goods, but rich in faith. Laodicea was rich in earthly possessions, but most miserably poor spiritually. We have here an assembly which is content to have Christ outside the door. Is it possible? Alas! it is too true. Orthodox doctrine held inside, perhaps; but Christ Himself neither the object of the affections, nor practically

owned as the Lord. They would have been ashamed to say so, but the fact was, they could get on very well without Christ's presence or power. This is fearful, but it is no uncommon sin of these last days. These elements seem now to be rapidly growing. Still Christ did not give Laodicea up. His patient grace as wonderfully brought out. He offers counsel, in case there should be one only in the whole assembly who hath an ear to hear. Get true riches, says He; gold tried in the fire;

2. Patiently waiting with Christ for His coming.

We now come to the end of the second part of the Revelation, The things which are {Rev. 1:19}.

We have seen, in thus briefly considering the letters to the seven assemblies, all the general features of gradual declension and falling away that have marked the history of the Church on earth. 1.

There was decline of affection to Christ.

2.

Outward persecution.

3.

Seduction and worldliness.

4.

The mother of harlots -- Popery.

5.

Formality and deadness, with outward respectability, and a faithful few -- Protestantism.

6.

Revival of evangelical truth, effort for the glory of Christ, and obedience to His word.

7.

Christless religion with worldly prosperity.

Can we doubt, then, that Christ gives us here a prophetic sketch of the course of the assembly on earth, that He furnishes us with instruction as to corporate and individual responsibility, and reveals His mind touching all the principles of good and evil brought before us? In the next chapter we shall enter upon the things which shall be hereafter, or after these things. This division occupies the remainder of the book. It is subdivided into several sections. The first is, The throne of God in heaven, and the, Lamb taking the book.

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