

## INTERPRETATION OF REVELATION CHAPTERS ONE – THREE

### 1. THE FIRST CHAPTER OF REVELATION CONSISTS OF SEVEN EASILY RECOGNIZABLE PARTS:

- a. **First**, the title of book. The title of the book is: The Revelation of Jesus Christ. At this point we do not know what is going to be revealed, but we will find that it is a revelation or unveiling of the plan of God for the history of the world, especially the church. It is, therefore, a direct communication from God and is not derived from any human source. It is called the Revelation of *Jesus Christ* because Jesus Christ showed it to John and through him to the church.
  - i. The various links in the chain of the revelation are:
    - (1) First, God. We read: “which God gave to him.” It was God who highly exalted the Mediator and committed to him the government of the world in the interest of the church (1 Cor. 15:24-28; Phil. 2:9). God also gave the Mediator the *plan* for the history of the world and of the church (Revelation 5:1,7). God gave him this plan in order that he should make it known, in its general **principles**, to his servants. This plan pertains to things which must shortly come to pass. As a matter of fact, they begin to happen at once.
    - (2) Second, Jesus Christ. This is not the Revelation of John. It is the Revelation of Jesus Christ. He both reveals this plan to his church, and as Mediator enthroned in glory, causes it to be realized in history. He reigns on high.
    - (3) Third, his angel. Jesus, in turn, commissions an angel to guide John and to exhibit to him, by means of visions, the elements of the plan which are to be revealed. Sometimes this angel-guide shows John a vision of heaven; then, of earth; of the wilderness; of the new heaven and earth (Rev. 1:1,10; 4:1; 10:4,8; 11:1; 12:1; especially 22:8-9).
    - (4) Fourth, his servant John. The apostle John is meant. John did not conceal these visions. He “bare witness of the word of God and of the testimony of Jesus Christ, even of all things that he saw.”
    - (5) Fifth, the reader: “Blessed is he that reads.” Books had to be copied by hand. Hence, they were few in number. Therefore, a reader was appointed to read to the people assembled for worship. But surely we must include all who read this book. The reader who reads with a believing heart is pronounced blessed. This is the first of the seven beatitudes (1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7; 22:15).
    - (6) Sixth, they that hear words of the prophecy. All believers who study this book with the proper attitude of heart are pronounced blessed.
    - (7) Seventh, they that keep the things written. The general teaching of scripture is that it is not the hearer only, but the doer that is blessed.
  - ii. Remember: the time is at hand; the predictions begin to be fulfilled immediately.

..... *Death Is Swallowed Up In Victory*.....

- b. **Second**, the salutation and adoration, verses 4-6. The book is addressed to “the seven churches that are in Asia.” These churches are mentioned in verse 11. They were located in the Roman province of Asia, that is, the western part of Asia Minor.
- i. The seven, beginning with Ephesus which was nearest, and perhaps dearest, to John in Patmos; then proceeding north to Smyrna and Pergamos; then southeast to Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea, formed a kind of irregular circle. What was written to these seven congregations represents what is written to the entire church throughout this dispensation.
  - ii. Notice the peculiar and very beautiful form of the salutation: “Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come,” etc.
    - (1) Grace is God’s favor bestowed upon those who do not deserve it.
    - (2) Peace is said to be the reflection of the good favor of God in the heart of the believer who has been reconciled to God through Jesus Christ. It is the result of God’s grace.
    - (3) “From him who is . . . was . . . and who is to come,” is said to be good Greek and good English. This expression very beautifully indicates the unchangeable God of the covenant.
  - iii. The expression “seven spirits” likely refers to the Holy Spirit in the fulness of his operations indicated in John 14-16 or human messengers.
  - iv. With respect to Christ, we notice that he is described:
    - (1) First with reference to his ministry on earth – the faithful witness.
    - (2) Second, in connection with his death and resurrection – the firstborn of the dead.
    - (3) Third, in terms that express his present exaltation – the ruler of the kings of the earth.
  - v. The mention of Jesus Christ in the salutation results in this spontaneous adoration: “Unto him that loved us . . . be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.”
  - vi. It is interesting to note that the KJV translation of “washed us from our sins,” verse 5, is rather the understanding “loosed” or “released.” In light of the context of Revelation and the victory that we have in Christ, there is a whole sermon in that one word.
  - vii. Observe also that the characterization “kingdom . . . priests,” which was formerly applied to Israel (Exodus 19:6), is now applicable to believers collectively, that is, to the church. In the church Israel lives on. Can anyone read these words and still maintain that Christ is not the king of the Church?
- c. **Third**, we have the announcement of Christ’s second coming, verse 7.
- i. Though Revelation surely teaches that Christ is coming again, this is not the central theme of Revelation (See page six of this study).
  - ii. Yet, it constitutes a real source of comfort for afflicted believers. It is the hope of believers and the consternation of the enemies of the church. He comes “with clouds,” that is, with glory (Dan. 7:13; Mark 14:62; Rev. 14:14; Ezek. 1:4-28) and with anguish, wrath, judgment (Zeph 1:15; Psa. 97:2). The Bible knows nothing

- about an invisible or secret second coming. Nowhere is this taught. On the contrary, every eye shall see him.
- iii. “And they also which pierced him . . .” – those who pierced his side, nailed him to the cross. It is possible that this expression also indicates all others who have pierced the Christ by means of their disobedient life. The expression is taken from Zech. 12:10ff. See also John 19:34,37; 20:25,27. Consider Hebrews 10:29: “Of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace?” If so, then the Jews who literally pierced him and all of us who have sinned and rejected him are then going to see that Jesus of Nazareth, is indeed, the Christ!
  - iv. “Shall wail because of him” (KJV). This is not a mourning of repentance, but that of hopelessness. The expression refers to beating the breast in mourning and despair.
- d. **Four**, Christ’s self-designation, verse 8.
- i. That this glorious title refers to Christ should not be open to doubt. Both the immediately preceding and the immediately succeeding contexts have reference to Christ (see verses 7, 13). The expression, “I am Alpha and Omega,” is found in a slightly modified form in verse 17, “I am the first and the last,” where it refers to him who was dead and is alive for evermore. Observe also the parallel passages 21:6-8 and 22:13.
  - ii. Alpha and Omega are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. Hence, Christ here describes himself as being the complete and perfect and eternal revelation of God. He says, as it were, “I am from the very beginning to the very end, that is, the Eternal One. Take courage, your enemy cannot destroy your Christ.” He himself tells us that he is fully equal with the Father, for he adds “saith the Lord, which is, and which was, and which is to come the Almighty.”
- e. **Five**, John’s commission to write what was revealed, verses 9-11.
- i. In verse 8 it was Christ who was speaking. Here, in verse 9, John himself begins to speak. He tells us that he was their brother, suffering as they suffer, in the isle that is called Patmos, for the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. We do not know the specifics of John’s banishment to Patmos. We do know that in some way or other his loyalty to Christ and to his Gospel had resulted in John’s condition.
  - ii. It is the Lord’s day, that is, Sunday, the first day of the week, the day upon which Christ rose, the day we commemorate his death, burial, and resurrection.
  - iii. John hears a great voice as of a trumpet. It was common in the Old Testament, whenever God had anything to impart to his people, that he gathered them by means of a trumpet sound (Ex. 19:16,19; Lev. 25:9; Josh. 6:5; Isa. 58:1; etc.).
  - iv. The voice said, “What thou seest, write in a book, and send it unto the seven churches . . .” We are to understand that the voice was that of Jesus Christ himself.
- f. **Sixth**, the vision of the Son of Man, verses 12-16.
- i. When John turns he sees seven golden candlesticks (lampstands). In the midst of the lampstands he sees one like unto the Son of man. It is the very savior upon

- whose breast John had reclined. It is the same savior, yet he is different. He is not the suffering savior, but the gloried savior.
- ii. Interpreting the picture as a whole, note that the Son of man is here pictured as clothed with power and majesty, with awe and terror. That long royal robe; that golden belt buckled at the breast; that hair so glistening white, that like snow on which the sun is shining, it hurts the eye; those eyes flashing fire, eyes which read every heart and penetrate every hidden corner; those feet glowing in order to trample down the wicked; that loud, reverberating voice, like the mighty breakers booming against the rocky shore of Patmos; that sharp, long, and heavy great-sword with two biting edges; yes, that entire appearance as the sun shines in its power, too intense for human eyes to stare at – the entire picture, taken as a whole, is a symbol of Christ, the Holy One, coming to purge his church (2:16,18, 23), and to punish those who are persecuting his elect (8:5ff - the seven angels).
- g. **Seventh**, the effect of this vision on John and Christ's tender words of comfort and instruction, verses 17-20.
- i. When John saw him, he fell at his feet as one dead (See Gen. 3:8; 17:3; Exo. 3:6; Num. 22:31; Josh. 5:14; Isa. 6:5; Dan. 7:15; etc.).
- (1) Genesis 3:8 "And they heard the voice of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day: and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God amongst the trees of the garden."
  - (2) Exodus 3:6 "Moreover he said, I *am* the God of thy father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. And Moses hid his face; for he was afraid to look upon God."
  - (3) Numbers 22:31 "Then the LORD opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the way, and his sword drawn in his hand: and he bowed down his head, and fell flat on his face."
  - (4) Joshua 5:14 "And he said, Nay; but *as* captain of the host of the LORD am I now come. And Joshua fell on his face to the earth, and did worship, and said unto him, What saith my lord unto his servant?"
- ii. Yet, the real purpose of the vision was not to terrify, but to comfort John. We have something very similar in Habakkuk 3. After a very vivid description of the awe-inspiring march of the Lord, we read: "thou wentest forth for the *salvation* of thy people" (v. 13). That also is the point here. He is in essence saying, "Fear not, I am with thee, O persecuted flock." Hence, the Son of man tenderly lays his right hand on John.
- iii. To understand that he who was once slain is "alive for evermore" is a glorious comfort for all those who were being persecuted unto death.
- iv. Now, in harmony with the central meaning of the entire vision, there were two details in need of additional comment. Christ gives us his own explanation.
- (1) The seven stars in his right hand indicate the angels of the seven churches.
  - (2) The seven lampstands are seven churches. It is interesting to observe that the same word is used in Matthew 5:15.

2. CHAPTERS TWO AND THREE TELL OF HOW THE SEVEN LAMPSTANDS ARE SEVEN CHURCHES.

a. The *general* structure (with some modification) of the seven epistles follows a pattern as is exemplified in the following chart.

		<b>Ephesus – 2:1-7</b>	<b>Pergamum – 2:12-17</b>
1.	<b>The salutation or address</b>	“Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus”	“And to the angel of the church in Pergamos”
2.	<b>Christ’s self-designation</b>	“He that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand . . .”	“He which hath the sharp sword with two edges”
3.	<b>Commendation</b>	“I know thy works, and thy labor, and thy patience . . .”	“I know thy works and where thou dwellest . . .”
4.	<b>Condemnation</b>	“Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee”	“But I have a few things against thee”
5.	<b>Warning and threat</b>	“Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent . . .”	“Repent; or else I will come unto thee”
6.	<b>Exhortation</b>	“He that hath an ear, let him hear . . .”	“He that hath an ear, let him hear . . .”
7.	<b>Promise</b>	“Will I give to eat of the tree of life . . .”	“Will I give to eat of the hidden manna, . . .”

b. I do not get tired of reminding that the seven epistles describe conditions which occur not in one particular age of church history, but again and again throughout time.

c. If we were to pause at this time and study the historical perspective of each congregation, it would deepen our understanding and appreciation for what was said unto them. However, in our study we will but make passing comments about the various cities and congregations.

d. **Revelation 2:1-7 – The church in Ephesus.**

i. The church at Ephesus was more than forty years old when this epistle was given. From what is said in this epistle, one might conclude that the zeal of those who became Christians years ago, or the zeal of their children, or recent converts did not match the former intensity. A similar condition existed in Israel after the days of Joshua and the elders (Joshua 24:31; Judges 2:7,10-11). The church had left its first love.

ii. The church at Ephesus is praised for its work, toil, and endurance. They stood for the truth of God’s word and did not give countenance to false teachers. Yet,

something was wrong. All these good traits can exist even though there is a decay in love. A husband may be faithful to his wife, defend and protect her, while still not love her as he used to. His sense of duty may cause him to remain faithful in all the details even though his heart is fainting. In like manner, a church member may be very regular in his attendance at services but, in spite of that, may not be as devoted of heart to the Lord as he formerly was.

- iii. The church is urged to reflect on its fall, to come to a “change of mind” (repent), so that it may again perform the first works.
- e. **Revelation 2:8-11 – The church in Smyrna.**
  - i. We might conclude from this epistle that the church at Smyrna had experienced very grievous tribulation. Their hardship likely included deprivation of financial resources and serving time in prison.
  - ii. Such hardships can take their toll of the faithfulness of the Christian. Even today it is not uncommon for one’s faith to waver when troubles in this life arise. The Christian will suffer persecution. The question is, what will it do to his faith.
  - iii. The Christians in Smyrna were promised a “crown of life” if they were “faithful unto death.”
- f. **Revelation 2:12-17 – The church in Pergamos.**
  - i. Just like the children of Israel in the days of Balaam (Numbers 25:1-2; 31:16), Pergamos had in it those who were casting a stumblingblock before its members.
  - ii. As with the other cities, the evil doers in Pergamos are told to “Repent.”
  - iii. Notice, however, that not all were led astray. Antipas, slain for his faithfulness, did not deny the faith.
- g. **Revelation 2:18-29 – The church in Thyatira.**
  - i. A church can do “many good works” and still hear “depart from me I never knew you.” The congregation at Thyatira must be careful that they not be cast out.
  - ii. Though some may suggest that fornication applies to immorality in the congregation at Thyatira likened unto the immorality which was found earlier in Corinth (1 Corinthians 5), we must also allow for any “spiritual” fornication and impurity.
- h. **Revelation 3:1-6 – The church in Sardis.**
  - i. Not much good is found in the congregation in Sardis.
  - ii. There are, however, a few who “have not defiled their garments.”
- i. **Revelation 3:7-13 – The church in Philadelphia.**
  - i. Even though a congregation may be faithful, that does not mean that all is at ease and all threats are gone.
  - ii. It takes constant vigilance fighting the wiles of the devil.
- j. **Revelation 3:14-22 – The church of the Laodiceans.**
  - i. The church at Laodicia seems to be completely deceived. Apparently they are not able to even assess their own condition.
  - ii. They are neither cold nor hot when it comes to spiritual matters.
  - iii. The Lord says of them, “Thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable . . .”