

What sort of Church are we? Introduction to the Seven Churches in Asia

Text: Rev 1:1-20

Introduction

The book of Revelation for many people is a scary book to read and many preachers do not even touch preaching from it so not to scare people. But we should not be scared about it instead, we should be excited and grateful for such a privilege of knowing what was, what is and what is to come. As believers in Jesus Christ it is a real and rare privilege. It will enable us to get prepared for the future.

Although we would not study the whole book now, we are just going to look at the seven churches in Asia which in now in modern Turkey. (Show the maps)

The original word for the book is apokalupsis in Greek and from this we derive the English word Apocalypse which means to unfold, to reveal, to make manifest a future event or incident.

Leon Morris says that the book of Revelation is not a book of human wisdom neither is it a book of discussion of philosophical or theological problems but a book that uncovers what we could not find out by ourselves, a book of the revelation of Jesus Christ by God to Jesus Christ and from Jesus Christ to an Angel who revealed to John the Apostle.

The Author:

The book is self explicit that John wrote the book as He mentioned his name as the author. He was the brother of James the sons of Zebedee who wrote the Gospel of John and the three epistles.

Wiersbe states that the Holy Spirit used Apostle John to give us three kinds of inspired literature with the following purposes:

John's Gospel	John's Epistles	Revelation
Believe in Christ, John 20:31	Be sure, 1 John 5:13	Be ready, Rev 22:20
Life received through Christ	Life revealed by Christ	Life rewarded by Christ
Salvation through Christ	Sanctification through Christ	Sovereignty of Christ
Christ as the Prophet	Christ as the Priest	Christ as the King

The Date:

There are two arguments on this. Some believed he wrote it around the time of Emperor Titus Flavius Domitian 90-95 AD and the other around the time of Emperor Nero 60-68 AD. But the Former claims seem to be the most popular and I tend to go with that. Domitian had demanded that he be worshipped as Lord and God and refusal to obey this edict by both Christians and Jews led to their severe persecution.

The Place:

During this persecution, it is believed that Domitian sent John into exile in an island called Patmos which is a small Greek island in the Aegean Sea, which is part of North of Mediterranean Sea. One of the northernmost islands of the Dodecanese complex, it has a population of 2,984 today and an area of 34.05 km (13 square miles). The highest point is Profitis Ilias, 269 meters above sea level.

The Municipality of Patmos, which includes the offshore islands of Arkoi (pop. 54), Marathi, and several uninhabited islets, has a total population of 3,044 (2001 census) and a combined land area of 45.039 km². (Show Map)

Tradition has it that as part of John's persecution, he was exiled to the island of Patmos where they believed that he was cut off from all people and amenities to live. But it was the place where people think is worst of conditions is the place where John encounters God in a profound way. Who can stop God from his work?

The Message:

The main message is about the victorious, glorified, exalted and King Jesus, his reign and dominion and what will happen before the millennial reign of King Jesus.

This book is full of signs and symbols which could mean miracles as John is fond of using signs for miracles of Jesus. It is believed that John choose signs instead of miracles because he believed as he

explains in the Gospel that there is much more spiritual meanings in what Christ did than the physical appearance of them.

It is believed that John used symbols for some reasons:

1. Symbol is a kind of spiritual code of which only those who Christ personally can understand it.
2. Symbol is not weakened by time. John was able to draw the great images in God's revelation and assembled them in an exciting drama which has encouraged persecuted Christians for centuries and will continue to do until the consummation of which is prophesied in the book
3. Symbols not only convey information but also impart values and arouse emotions to be curious to know and see the fulfilment of them. For instance, John could have said a dictator will rule the world; instead he used 'the beast'.

To the Readers:

In understanding the symbols and signs of John we must be careful not to allow our imaginations to run wild. All Biblical symbols and signs are consistent with the whole of Biblical revelation. Some are explained, some not and some are understood from the Old Testament. In essence what I am saying is that we must interpret Revelation in line with the rest of the Bible otherwise we get it totally wrong.

Although the original letter was sent to the seven Churches in Asia Minor (now Turkey) John makes it clear in v3 that any believer may read and profit from it. In fact, God promised special blessing to anyone who would read the book and obey its message. Please not that the verb read means to read aloud and that what happens in the early Church which I believe must continue until he comes back.

Today's text:

The portion we read today is called the Prologue meaning introduction or preface to the book of Revelation and it contains some of the things I have discussed with about the book, its author and the main point of its message. But in addition, this book contains things in sevens (the book of the sevens) as everything it are in sevens. Letters to the 7 churches 1 – 3:22, the 7 seals 4:1-8:1, the 7 Trumpets 8:2-11:18, the 7 signs 11:19-15:4, the 7 bowls 15:5-16:21, the 7 Spectacles 17:1-20:3 and the 7 sights of the consummation 20:4-22:5.

Greetings to the 7 Churches: 4-8

It is evident from the text that the greetings comes from God the Father who is eternal, the one is, who was and is to come; from the seven Spirits who are before God and from Jesus Christ who is described as the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead and the rulers of the kings and governments of the world.

One could wonder why Christ was called the firstborn from the dead, after all people have been raised by Elisha, and Jesus raised people up from the dead before. The reason is that all people that have been raised up before Christ died and those after him will die but He is the one who is alive forever because He is eternal. Eternal life is the original purpose of God for humans but our sins changed the course but through Christ, we are going to get it again. Hallelujah.

John ascribed glory and dominion to Jesus Christ, who loved us, washed us in his blood and through that has made us kings and priests to His God and father.

He announced confidently that Jesus is coming back and this time his appearance will be seen by everyone and there will not be any dispute about it even those who are against him.

It is interesting to note that John says that all the tribes will mourn because of Him. Why would this be? For various reasons, it will became clear that he was punished for no wrongdoing and people who have rejected him will feel sorry and regretted their action.

And Jesus backed that claim that He is the Alpha and Omega, beginning and the end and who is eternal.

Vision of the Son of Man 9-20

John now describes his vision of the Son of Man (Jesus Christ) who is the revealed the whole vision as He received it from God to John. We know the Son of Man is Jesus because He calls himself that name 85 times in the Gospel and Revelation.

The key things he saw were 7 lamp stands, the appearance of the Son of Man, 7 stars in the Son of Man's hands and two edged swords from His mouth. Scary thing, isn't it? It depends on who you are. If you are a believer, no it is not scary but awesome when you are in the presence of God you just feel so inadequate and unworthiness to be there but because you are there it is unbelievable and paralysing.

But after John's helpless and reverent fall, came a hand of love, a hand of compassion and a word of calmness that says 'don't be afraid'. What could be more calming and welcoming, it can only come from a high Priest who understands and sympathetic to whatever our situation as Hebrews 4:15 declares "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are — yet was without sin.

Are you being Persecuted, are you in a kind of prison or the other, have you been put in a place that people thought you will be cut off? Jesus hands can reach you, even in the midst of Chaos, in the midst of terrible noise? God can still speak to you. He can touch you and give the word 'don't be afraid.'

The same message Christ is passing on to you today; 'don't be afraid'. You can feel His gentle hands too. Just believe Him and put things in His hands, in the hands of the eternal one, the Alpha and the Omega, first and the last, the beginning and the end.

I tried to picture the scene in my mind and it is incomprehensible. Show slide

Just as it was incomprehensible for me, Jesus explained the situation to John that the seven stars are the 7 Angels of those Churches and the 7 Lamp stands are the Churches of Asia who are the recipients of the letters.

Jesus Command to John:

Unlike the book of Daniel when God commanded him to seal the book because it is not yet time, Jesus commanded John not to seal the book, rather than a close one it is an open book. He told John that he has the keys of Hades and death which Satan had control of before Jesus death and resurrection.

Conclusion:

My friends for the next few weeks we will be reading out the letters and discussing the letters to the 7 Churches, it's going to be exciting, rewarding and challenging too. And this makes me to inspire you with the reasons for this study which are:

- To read and understand its contents
- To use it as a mirror from which we examine our lives
- To adjust our lives to conform to His image
- To get mature in our faith
- To be assured that end is sure and sweet

Some people see the letters to the seven Churches as a panorama of Church history from the Apostolic time (Ephesus) to the 21st Century (Laodecia) but I think is much more than that. There is a possibility of every congregation having a bit of the elements of each Church. And like Wiersbe says, the letters were from the head of the Church and that He knows what is going on in every assembly and that our attitude to Him and His word determines the life and ministry of each assembly and we will account.

Remember that these churches were undergoing intense persecution hence they need encouragement and strengthening; correction and rebuke when they deviate. Remember that the father disciplines the child He loves.

In the developed world today, Christians are facing a different type persecution and in many parts of the world Christians face the same persecution as the 7 seven Churches. We need strengthening and encouragement, we need correction and rebuke on the areas we go wrong because all God wants the church is to be spotless without wrinkle and for us to reflect that beauty, we need some make up.

As you will continue to explore the 7 Churches, I encourage you not to miss anyone and invite your friend to come to listen as well and you will not regret it. Are enthusiastic, fired up and want to learn more, see you next Sunday.