

Class 2—The Opening Vision and Message to the Churches Rev 1-3

Outline of Rev 1-3

- The Prologue (1:1-3)
- The Greeting (1:4-8)
- John sees the Son of Man (1:9-20)
- The Letters to the Churches (2:1-3:22)

Overview of Rev 1-3

- John introduces what Revelation is, greets the seven churches, and describes his vision of Jesus
- Jesus, walking among the lampstands (churches), has a message for each that emphasizes the need to “overcome” and “witness” in a hostile world
- Major takeaway: Jesus wants his churches to follow him in faithful, uncompromising witness to the truth of the gospel, overcoming the world even if we must suffer.

Key Lessons in Rev 1-3

- Jesus is ruler—even when it doesn’t look like it
- Rightly seeing Jesus inspires us to better service
- Jesus knows our circumstances and how we are responding
- Jesus warns us against compromising with the surrounding culture
- Jesus will reward us if we suffer for him
- Earthly defeat can ironically mean spiritual victory
- Sometimes we must overcome our own sin

The Prologue (1:1-3)

- 1:1 is patterned after Daniel’s revelation of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream (Dan 2:28-30, 45-47)
- John views his Revelation as picking up Daniel’s prophecy — the time is near whereas for Daniel it was distant
- “Soon”(v. 1) and “near”(v. 3) show they deal with imminent future
- John introduces the idea of “witness”(v. 2) which will be important throughout Rev
- 1:3—We are intended to *keep* what is in the book, implying that there are ethical changes needed
- “The time is near” does not imply that the end of all things is near, but that Jesus acting in judgment is imminent
- (I believe that Rev teaches that God is soon to judge Rome for its abuses)
- (I also believe that Rev threatens that God would soon judge his churches if they do not repent)

The Greeting (1:4-8)

- 1:4 – 7 is a number of completeness. While these 7 are addressed, surely all churches are intended to “hear” (2:7 et al)
- Trinity/Godhead are present in the greeting (1:4-5) because seven spirits represent Holy Spirit
- 1:5 – Jesus is faithful witness, firstborn, and ruler. This could be a picture of death, resurrection, and ascension.
- When we are faithful witnesses, we follow Jesus
- 1:6 – Alludes to Ex 19:6 – we are the new nation/kingdom of priests
- 1:7 – Combines the allusions of Dan 7:13 and Zech 12:10 (same combination found in Matt 24:30)
- Always have to ask: which coming is this?
- Have to understand that “coming” often means physical judgment in history (Eg Micah 1:2-5, Isa 31:4-5, 35:4, 66:15-17; Matt 24:27-31)
- Major message of Rev is that Jesus is about to come in judgment on Rome. I think this is the meaning of 1:7
- 1:8 – First, last, and everything in between

John sees the Son of Man (1:9-20)

- 1:9 – John implies that he has been exiled for his faith
- He, like his audience, shares in tribulation and need to endure
- He first hears a voice telling him to write and send to 7 churches (1:10-11)
- He turns and sees “one like a son of man” in midst of lampstands
- This passage has strong echoes of Dan 7:9-14
- The lampstands are the churches (1:20) – representing their witness before God and the world (see Rev 11:1-3)
- Jesus is in a glorified state (echoing Dan 10:6, 7:9), tending to his people
- He is empowered by his victory over death (1:18)
- John is to write what he has seen and what is to soon take place (1:19)

The Letters to the Churches Generally (ch 2-3)

- Command to write to the angel
- Description of Christ
- Commendation of good works
- Accusation because of sin
- Command to repent
- He who has an ear, let him hear
- Promise to the one who overcomes

The Church at Ephesus (2:1-7)

- Ephesus the center of Artemis worship, center of two temples for imperial cult
- 2:1 – Jesus is always in their midst and aware of how they are living
- 2:2 – They have endured and tested false “apostles”
- The problem at Ephesus is **abandoning their first love** (2:4)

- Beale thinks this refers to zeal to witness
- They need to repent and return to their previous zeal (2:5) if they want the reward (2:7)

The Church at Smyrna (2:8-11)

- Smyrna was a center of Roman religion
- Often Jews had negative views of Christianity and would inform the government about Christians' unwillingness to sacrifice to the emperor
- This letter **entirely positive**, encouraging them for their endurance
- 2:8—Jesus' title here is essential to them because they are facing the possibility of death
- 2:9—Despite their poverty, Jesus tells them that they are rich
- The "slander" of the Jews is likely about their opposition to Christians
- 2:10—Some of them will suffer by imprisonment
- Being tested for 10 days recalls Daniel's experienced in Babylon (Dan 1:12-15)
- If they are faithful even though they might be killed, they will receive eternal life. Ironically, their death will lead to life (lion and lamb)

The Church at Pergamum (2:12-17)

- Pergamum was the first city to build a temple to a Roman ruler and was the area capital of the imperial cult
- 2:13—Jesus knows they live where Satan's throne is
- Some have already been killed for their witness
- The problem at Ephesus is **compromise** (v 14, 16)
- Balaam promoted the compromise of God's people with idolatry and the accompanying sexual activity
- Sexual immorality here is likely figurative
- Pressure here is to participate with pagan culture, perhaps because of economic or social threats
- 2:17—Overcoming includes overcoming our own sin

The Church at Thyatira (2:18-29)

- 2:19—This church has done well in terms of general service
- The problem at Thyatira is **tolerating those who preach compromise** (v 20)
- 2:20—Jezebel is someone who encourages assimilation into pagan society
- 2:21-23—Jesus promises to judge this woman for what she is doing to his people
- The goal of this judgment is so that all the churches will know that God knows their hearts (2:23)
- 2:24—Others who have not accepted this are encouraged
- Overcoming such situations leads to us ruling with Jesus (2:26-28)

The Church at Sardis (3:1-6)

- Sardis has a reputation that it is doing better than it is (3:1). Jesus knows the difference
- Beale: "They have become lethargic about the radical demands of their faith in the midst of a pagan culture"

- Sardis needs to **wake up** (3:2, 3)
- Jesus promises to “come like a thief” to judge them (3:3), implying an imminent judgment
- Some are innocent and are encouraged (3:4)

The Church at Philadelphia (3:7-13)

- Since Jesus has authority over his kingdom (3:7), he opens the door for Philadelphia (3:8)
- Despite their little power, Philadelphia has **kept his word**
- 3:9—Jesus will make the Jews to learn about God’s love for his people
- If this means their conversion, it is an ironic fulfillment of similar OT passages about conversion of Gentiles (Isa 45:14, 49:23, 60:14; Psalm 86:9)
- 3:10—They will have spiritual protection from coming suffering, like the sealing (ch 7) and the nourishment of the woman (12:14-17)

The Church at Laodicea (3:14-22)

- The problem at Laodicea is **lukewarm, complacent service** (3:15-17)
- Jesus is unhappy with their witness and will spit them out
- 3:17—Their physical wealth has dulled them to their spiritual need. This is the opposite of Smyrna (2:9)
- Jesus has what they need (3:18)
- 3:19—As Jesus tends to his lampstands, his words are a product of love
- 3:20—This is a reference to Song 5:2, emphasizing his love for his people
- Again we are promised an opportunity to rule with Jesus if we overcome (3:21)