

REVELATION - THE SEVEN LETTERS

Revelation 1-3

Lesson Aim

To impress upon students the warnings and encouragements found in the seven letters to the seven churches in Revelation.

Memory Verse

Jeremiah 31:39 - "The measuring line will stretch from there straight to the hill of Gareb and then turn to Goah."

Lesson Background

Near the end of his life, the elderly Apostle John was arrested in the city of Ephesus, where he was serving the church, and sent into exile on the rocky island of Patmos off the coast of Turkey. While he was there, he saw the visions that make up the book of Revelation. The record of these visions was sent to the seven churches located along the main Roman road through western Asia Minor. John's arrest was only one small act in a general persecution directed against the Christians during the reign of the emperor Domitian (81-96 A.D.). Domitian was the younger brother of the famous Roman general Titus, who had destroyed Jerusalem in 70 A.D. Constantly living under the shadow of his brother made him insecure, and he spent most of his reign trying to discover plots that he imagined people were making against his life and rule. He insisted that others address him by the title "Lord and God"; anyone who refused to do so was suspected of being an enemy of the state. Domitian hated the Jews above all other peoples in the Roman Empire. He considered them disloyal because they would not take part in the patriotic rituals of emperor worship. In the early nineties, he began to crack down on all dissident groups, but especially the Jews. He even went so far as to have his officials seek out all descendants of the line

of David in Palestine, with the intention of ridding himself of these supposed rivals to his throne. According to the story, they were only able to find two - grandsons of Jesus' brothers. Domitian had them brought to Rome, but when he saw that they were simple fishermen, he released them. The emperor's harassment of the Jews involved the Christians as well, since they were still considered a sect of Judaism. Many Christians were executed during this time, including Flavius Clemens, the emperor's own cousin. The persecution was particularly severe in Asia Minor, where many of the magistrates were zealous to earn the emperor's favor. It was to these persecuted Christians that John wrote, giving them Jesus' own encouragement in a time of great trial.

We will be spending two weeks on the book of Revelation. This week, we will look at the cover letters addressed to the seven churches, which contained specific warnings and encouragement directed to their own particular needs. Next week, we will examine the symbolic descriptions of the book, and see how these were intended to bring comfort to suffering Christians. The seven letters in Revelation 2-3 were intended not only for the churches to whom they are addressed, but to all churches. Their descriptions of dangers and opportunities are universally applicable, and can show your students what Christ wants His church to be.

The letters share a common structure, though not every letter contains every piece. They begin with a description of Christ, the author of the letters. Most of these are taken from John's vision in Revelation 1, and each is particularly appropriate to the needs of the church to which Christ is speaking. The description is then followed by a commendation for the things the church is doing right and a condemnation for what it is doing wrong. These are followed by a warning, and finally a promise. In the same way that the descriptions of Christ are keyed to the vision in chapter one, the promises are taken from the final vision in the book, the vision of the New Jerusalem in chapters 21-22. Thus the letters are structured in such a way as to personalize the content of the visions for the various churches to whom the book is addressed.

One comment needs to be made concerning the so-called Church History view of the seven letters. Many throughout history have interpreted these letters as representing seven ages in the history of the church. Such a view is untenable. Not only does it obscure the fact that these letters describe seven very real first-century churches, but it also forces the complex events of history into a very simplistic mold (How could anyone possibly identify the church at Sardis, which is called "dead," with the Protestant Reformation?!). Another problem is that every interpreter who has expounded such a view of Revelation 2-3, from the ancient church down to the present, has unfailingly identified his own era as the Laodicean age. Obviously, the identification of the seven letters with eras of church history is too flexible to be of any significant value. It is much better to see all seven letters as describing aspects of the church throughout its history, and thus come to the letters expecting to learn something of value for us today from each one.

Lesson Procedure

Begin the lesson by showing your students a map of Asia Minor (from a Bible atlas, Bible handbook, or even the back of a Bible) that includes the island of Patmos and the seven cities where the churches to whom Revelation was addressed were located. Show the students that the seven cities were located on a roughly circular Roman road running through the region, and that the order of the letters, beginning with Ephesus and ending with Laodicea, is the order in which a messenger traveling the road would arrive at the cities. Then describe for your students the circumstances under which the book was written, and outline for them the structure used in each of the letters.

1. The Church in Ephesus (2:1-7).

The Ephesian church had a long and noble history. In its early years, it had been visited twice by Paul. He had stayed there for several years during the Third Missionary Journey, and had written a letter to the church. Paul later sent Timothy to supervise the church's growth. Later still, the Apostle John came to live in Ephesus, and became a beloved pastor of the church there. Yet the church apparently had lost much of its early zeal for the faith. It is therefore appropriate that Christ speaks of Himself as the One who walks among the lampstands (cf. 1:20). He is really present with His church - something of which the Ephesian church needed to be reminded. They are commended for their hard work, their orthodox teaching, their perseverance in trial, and their opposition to false prophets. Christ criticizes them because they have lost their love. Orthodoxy rapidly becomes dead apart from love. Christ describes this lovelessness as sin, and tells the Ephesians to repent. Like many second-generation Christians, the Ephesians needed to understand that it is not enough to be right. In the same way that Christ threatened the Ephesians with removal of their lampstand - the disappearance of the church - so your students, many of whom are second-generation Christians, need to realize that the church cannot be sustained on orthodox doctrine alone. When your students become the leaders in the church in future years, will the church die? It will, unless truth is coupled with a genuine love for Christ. To those who do repent and return to their first love, Christ promises an eternity in His presence. But such a promise can only be meaningful to those who value Christ's presence now.

[A couple of brief comments might be appropriate at this point. Each letter is addressed to the "angel" of the church in question. The word literally means "messenger," and has been understood by commentators in three different ways. Some believe it to refer to an actual angelic being who is in some way associated with the church (cf. that cryptic reference in I Corinthians 11:10). Others see it as referring to the pastor of the church - God's messenger to His people - while still others believe it is a reference to the messengers who delivered the letters from John to the churches. Frankly, I don't know the answer, and I'm not convinced that the solution of the puzzle has any great impact on the interpretation of the letters. Secondly, there is the matter of the Nicolaitans. There is no independent evidence in church history for the existence of such a sect (references to a heretical group called the Nicolaitans by some of the church fathers are no more than an attempt to identify the group mentioned here in Revelation). Some have attempted to identify the group by etymology (the word literally means "victory over the people"), concluding that it must have been some sort of authoritarian sect that made a sharp distinction between the clergy and the laity, and implying that it was a forerunner of the same sharp distinction in the Catholic Church. I believe the most satisfactory explanation, however, is the one drawn from context. The mentions of the group in these letters seem to indicate that it advocated compromise with the world - something the Ephesians stalwartly avoided, but a real problem in Pergamum.]

2. The Church in Smyrna (2:8-11).

The church in Smyrna was facing particularly severe persecution, so Christ appropriately speaks of Himself as the One who came to life from the dead. The church in Smyrna is the only one for which Christ has no condemnatory words. They receive only praise and encouragement. He tells them that the persecution will get worse for a brief time, but if they are faithful to the point of death, they will receive life. Though physical death may overtake them, they will never know the pain of spiritual death. Your students need to realize that, like the church at Smyrna, they must evaluate the events of their lives on the scale of eternity. The troubles of this life are indeed insignificant in the light of the promised blessing awaiting the people of God.

3. The Church in Pergamum (2:12-17).

The main problem in Pergamum was compromise. They had suffered persecution and, though they had not denied the faith, they were being sorely tempted to accommodate themselves to the world around them. Christ therefore introduces Himself as One who bears a sharp sword -

He is able to divide the true from the false, the godly from the ungodly, the church from the world. The references to Satan's throne probably allude to the centerpiece of the city of Pergamum, a temple to Aesculapius, the god of healing. The symbol of this god was a snake wrapped around a sword (still used as a symbol of the medical profession today). To the Christians in Pergamum, the great snake adorning the temple of Aesculapius reminded them of another Serpent. The reference to Balaam (interestingly enough, his name in Hebrew means the same thing as "Nicolaitans" in Greek) again has to do with compromise - he was the one who convinced the king of Moab to corrupt the Israelites with sexual immorality and idolatry when he was unable to direct a prophetic curse against them. To those who resist the temptation to compromise, Christ promises hidden manna and a new name - He will sustain them, and they will belong to Him exclusively. The same promise goes for those who resist compromise today. Your students face the temptation to be like the world around them every day. They must understand that Christ will care for those who are His alone, and do not succumb to divided allegiance.

4. The Church in Thyatira (2:18-29).

The church at Thyatira was also having a problem with compromise. It appears that their major temptation was in the area of immorality. They were serving Christ faithfully, and even expanding their avenues of service, but their personal lives were a shambles. Like so many Christians today, they had compartmentalized their lives, so that what they did on Sunday had little to do with their activities on Saturday night. The focus of this immorality seems to have been a woman in the church whom Christ refers to as Jezebel. Those who followed her were risking destruction, as many of today's religious leaders who have fallen because of immorality have discovered. Christ presents Himself to them as a holy judge, and promises to those who keep themselves pure that they will take part in the judgment of evil. Your students need to realize that those who follow Christ cannot involve themselves with the evil practices of this world. There is no room for singing on Sunday and swinging the rest of the week.

5. The Church in Sardis (3:1-6).

The church in Sardis was living on past laurels. They had been a strong church at one time, but now they were little more than an empty shell, bearing the name of Christian but having no spiritual life. Jesus presents Himself to them as the One who bears the life-giving Spirit, and warns them to awake from their fatal lethargy. The image of a thief in the night was particularly appropriate for Sardis. The city was located atop a cliff, and thought itself impregnable to outside invaders. Twice in its history the city had been invaded successfully, however, and both times it had happened the same way. Soldiers had scaled the narrow path up the cliff in the middle of the night and had found the guards asleep. Having dispatched the guards, they easily were able to sneak into the city and capture it while the inhabitants were sleeping. Christ threatens the church with the same sort of destruction while it sleeps. He praises the few who have remained faithful, and promises them eternal life with Him. Unfortunately, there are many churches today like Sardis. Once they were bastions of the truth, but today they are lifeless; only a few faithful

servants of God remain among many who are doing no more than going through the motions of Christianity. Your students need to be aware that such churches exist, and that, while they may have a few true believers in them, such churches are dead, and should be avoided by those who seek to serve Christ.

6. The Church in Philadelphia (3:7-13).

The church at Philadelphia was located at the crossroads of the two major Roman highways in western Asia Minor. Christ thus stands before them as the holder of the keys. They have a great opportunity. The many travelers who passed through such a crossroads town, if reached with the Gospel, could then take it with them to the far reaches of the empire. Christ promises to give them strength in their weakness, and to preserve them through the persecution that has not yet arrived in their town. They may be weak and small, but Christ promises to make them great and eternally stable. Your students need to realize that it does not require great strength or great ability to serve God - simply a willingness to trust Him and obey Him, realizing that He will produce results in response to faithful service.

7. The Church in Laodicea (3:14-22).

The letter to Laodicea is perhaps the best known among the seven in this book. The Laodiceans were cultural Christians. They maintained a profession of faith, but they were in reality no different from the world around them. The city of Laodicea was located in the Lycus River valley, near the towns of Hierapolis and Colosse. It was on a high plateau overlooking the river, on the other side of the mountains from Hierapolis. The town of Hierapolis was famous for its mineral hot springs. Crowds flocked to the springs to bathe in their healing waters. The water from the springs flowed over a waterfall to Laodicea, but by the time it got there, it was lukewarm, and the high mineral content made it impossible to drink; anyone who tried became violently sick to his stomach. The Laodiceans thus had to bring water up from the Lycus River near Colosse through an aqueduct. This cold, pure water could easily be cut off by any prospective invader, so the Laodiceans were highly vulnerable to attack. They thus became masters of compromise. The city was also very wealthy. It was a banking center for the region, contained a famous medical school that produced an eye medication known as Phrygian powder, and exported a fine black wool used to make fashionable clothing. Christ uses all of these images to illustrate the pitiful condition of the Laodicean church. Like the people in the city, they were self-satisfied and totally unaware of their precarious state. Your students need to realize that security never can be found in the things of this world, and that those who seek it there will deceive themselves into a false sense of security that will ultimately be spiritually fatal. The dire state of the Laodicean church can be seen by the famous picture in verse 20 - Christ, the head of the church, is standing outside of the door seeking entrance. They don't even realize that He is not in the church, and yet He is gracious enough to offer fellowship to those who will admit Him. Even if your students should find themselves in the position of the Laodiceans - false professors with no spiritual reality whatsoever - assure them that a gracious Christ continues to invite them to fellowship with Him.

Conclusion

You know the needs of your students. Conclude the lesson by focusing on the applications from the letters that are most appropriate for them. Are they Christians who know what is right but don't really care about God or others? Are they suffering for the sake of righteousness, and in need of encouragement? Are they in danger of compromising with the world around them, either morally or otherwise? Are they children of Christians who have never really come to know Christ for themselves? Are they false professors with an unwarranted sense of security who need to be awakened from a potentially fatal sleep? Whatever they may be, Christ has a message for them. Bring it to them in whatever way is most appropriate for your students.

FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

REVELATION THE SEVEN LETTERS

Fill in the following chart using the letters in Revelation 2-3:

CHURCH	VIEW OF CHRIST	COMMEN- DATION	CONDEM- NATION	WARNING	PROMISE
EPHESUS					
SMYRNA					
PERGAMUM					
THYATIRA					
SARDIS					
PHILA- DELPHIA					
LAODICEA					

What is the personal application of each of these letters to your life?