

Revelation 1:9–3:22

Messages From the Living One

Pictures of the Church

The City Harvest Church in Singapore was founded in 1989 by pastor Kong Hee and his wife, Sun Ho.

It became well-known for its slick image and its commitment to a wealth-focussed brand of Christianity.

At its peak, it was estimated to have 30,000 members in Singapore and elsewhere.

However, in October last year Kong and five other church leaders were convicted of fraud amounting to 50 million Singapore (which is about the same as 50 million \$AUS).

The charges related to the church leadership's attempts to boost Sun Ho's music career worldwide.

She had already cut several Mandarin singles that had modest success in Asia.

Then it was decided to give her a makeover in order to crack the US market.

She was restyled as a vampy rapper-singer nicknamed Geisha.

Then she sang in a song called 'China Wine' which depicted her as a Chinese exotic dancer in Jamaica.

The new image was accompanied by a new and flashy lifestyle in Los Angeles.

Anyway, the endeavour failed.

The church-based music production company was left with millions of dollars in losses.

Six church leaders were found guilty of varying counts of criminal breach of trust and falsification of accounts.

They are facing lengthy jail terms.

City Harvest Church is one of many churches around the world that has bought into a personality-based leadership model and prosperity doctrine.

Here is one picture of the church around out world today.ⁱ

But let's take another one.

The date is yesterday, Tuesday 5 January.

A group of Christians were meeting for prayer at a church in the Indian state of Karnataka.

They were surrounded by a radical Hindu mob.

Reputedly the authorities arrested the Christians to protect them.

However, none of the attackers were arrested.

And when the Christians were released, they were warned against proselytizing and told they must in future warn the authorities before any prayer services or celebrations.

Or consider a growing number of Christians in rural Australia whose churches can no longer afford pastors.

Who meet in old buildings and listen to audio or watch video sermons because they have no one trained to teach the Bible.

These folk have a deep faith grounded in Scripture.

They remain faithful to Jesus.

They meet regularly as his people.

But they have no formal or regular pastors.

Friends, these are true stories from around the world of Christian churches.

Many more could be told.

More details could be fleshed out.

But this is Christ's church, meeting in the name of Jesus.

Friends, today we are going to look at some churches from the first century.

We will hear the examination of them by Jesus.

And we will get a glimpse as to how we might examine and assess churches in our own day.

So, let's get started.

The Structure of Revelation

Now, the first thing I want to do with you, is to give you an overview of the structure of the book of Revelation.

As you might know, a key to understanding revelation is to know and look for the number seven.

We even see that today.

There are seven churches examined.

However, let me give you an overview of the book.

It's not perfect.

However, I think it is a good representation of how the book is structured and holds together.

Now, I've included it in your outlines for you.

So, check it out with me.

It is largely based on the work of a man called Dan Liroy.

1:1-8	Prologue
1:9-20	A Heavenly Peek (1)
2:1-3:22	Prophetic Messages to Seven Churches
4:1-5:14	A Heavenly Peek (2)
6:1-8:1	The Seven Seals Revealed
8:2-6	A Heavenly Peek (3)
8:7-11:18	The Seven Trumpets Revealed
11:19	A Heavenly Peek (4)
12:1-14:20	A Woman, A Dragon, and Their Seed
15:1-16:1	A Heavenly Peek (5)
16:2-17a	The Seven Bowls Revealed
16:17b-21	A Heavenly Peek (6)
17:1-18:24	The Destruction of the City of Blood
19:1-10	A Heavenly Peek (7)
19:11-22:5	The Establishment of the Garden City
22:6-21	Epilogue

I want you to notice a number of things.

First, there are seven core sections.

These are introduced by a prologue that includes a start to the letter of John to the churches.

They are closed off by an epilogue than finishes the letter of John.

Second, for each major section, there is a peek, or a glimpse, or an insight into the heavenly realm.

In each case, this is worked through by a new movement by God in the earthly sphere.

Third, there are seven churches, seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls.

The Letters to the Churches

A Preliminary Peek into the Throne Room (1:9-20)

Okay, with that all done, let's now begin our section for today.

The letters to the churches is preceded by a preliminary peek into the throne room.

We looked at this a bit in our previous session.

However, it will be good to remind ourselves of what that consisted of.

Open your Bibles at Revelation 1.

Look at verse 9.

John is in Patmos because of his gospel ministry.

It is on the Lord's Day.

That is, it on the day that Christians met together.

And on this day, he is given a message for a group of churches in Asia.

Those churches are not all the churches that existed in the province of Asia at that time.

Nevertheless, they are probably representative of the churches of Asia.

They are probably also representative of the whole church in the then known world.

Anyway, John sees a divine figure in the midst of the golden lampstands that represent the churches in question.

He is one who was dead but is now alive forever and ever.

He holds the keys of death and Hades.

And this one gives instructions to the angels of these seven churches.

This is our first, behind-the-scenes peek.

It is typical of apocalyptic literature.

We have been given a peek into heaven.

Heaven's curtain has been rolled back for us.

Now we will be taken back to earth.

And there we will be given a glimpse of life among the churches of Jesus there.

And what this does is that it tells the churches that the One with whom they have to do is the divine Son of Man, the judge of the earth, the master of God's church.

It is he who is speaking to them.

This is greatly assuring to them.

After all, he holds them in his hand.

However, it might also be somewhat disturbing.

After all, this is his church and not the church of those involved.

It is he with whom the disobedient will have to deal.

An Overview of the Letters

The Structure and Common Elements

So, now let's take a look at what he has to say.

Now, let's take a quick skim through the letters addressed by him to the angel of each church.

Oh, by the way, I should tell you that the word 'angel' in both Hebrew and Greek simply means 'messenger'.

I tell you this just so you can rid your mind of those white and winged images in your minds.

No.

Simply a messenger.

We've got no idea what the messenger actually looked like.

Okay, let's see if we can get some general idea of the structure of the message the messengers were to take.

First, each messenger is to write something.

Presumably the written message is to be delivered to them.

Second, each messenger is to say something that begins with the words...

These are the words of...

Then, in all but the sixth and seven letter, this formula is followed by some words taken from the vision of the son of man in chapter 1.

For example, the messenger of the church in Ephesus is to write...

These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands.

Messenger six to Philadelphia echoes the words of Isaiah 22:22 and looks forward to Revelation 6:9 and 19:11.

⁷... These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. [Revelation 3:7; NIV]

Messenger seven echoes the words of Revelation 1:5.

¹⁴... These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation. [Revelation 3:14; NIV]

So, the messengers write.

They deliver an introduction that identifies the source of the words, that is, Jesus.

Then Jesus is said to 'know' certain things about them.

In all but two cases (2:9 and 13), he is said to know the deeds of the church.

So, look at the first church, Revelation 2:2.

Jesus says to the church of Ephesus...

²I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance.

I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. [Revelation 2:2; NIV]

The next standard element is that there is a standard saying that Jesus used in his earthly ministry that is now used of his ministry to the churches.

Look at verse 7.

Through his messenger, Jesus says...

⁷Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. [Revelation 2:7a; NIV]

Then, finally, there is a statement about what happens to the one who is victorious.

Sometimes this statement is in a slightly different order.

Sometimes the wording is tweaked.

Nevertheless, it goes something like the first one in verse 7.

⁷... To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God. [Revelation 2:7; NIV]

So, what do you think is accomplished by these patterns?

Well, let me suggest some things.

First, it repeatedly and individually pushes home that the Lord Jesus, the heavenly Son of Man oversees his church.

Second, it shows that he knows what is going on in each of these churches.

What's more, it communicates that he knows that they know that he sees and has communicated.

But there is one more thing.

Jesus rewards the victorious.

But what does a victorious one look like?

Well, we have some glimpses here.

But we'll have to wait for the whole book to unfold to see exactly what it means to be victorious.

A Quick Run Through

Ephesus (2:1-7)

Okay, so, there's an overview of the structure and the common elements.

Now let's take a quick run through each of the churches.

The words that begin the address are slightly stronger than in the previous vision.

Jesus Christ has form and absolute control over the congregation and his leadership.

He holds the seven stars.

He walks among the lampstands.

That is, he rules and sustains them all and moves among them unseen.

The Ephesian church members are commended for rejecting evil, persevering in their faith, and demonstrating patience.

However, he criticises them for losing their first love.

Now this could mean their love for others.

Or it could mean their love for Christ.

However, the other real possibility is that they have lost their love for their prime mission on earth, witnessing to their Lord (Matthew 24:12-14).ⁱⁱ

This would explain why their Lord threatens to remove their lamp of witness.

Lamps were witness to the presence of God in his world.

God's people were to be his lamp, put on a lampstand to shine.

The Nicolaitans in verse 6 are possibly some libertine group who taught that some degree of accommodation to the idolatry of Ephesus was okay.

If they overcome or are victorious, the Ephesian believers will be given the right to eat from the tree of life (verse 7).

Smyrna (2:8-11)

Now we move to Smyrna.

Their Lord commends them for their spiritual riches among their afflictions and poverty.

He has not criticism of them but simply urges them to be faithful until death.

He promises to reward them with the crown of life.

If they overcome...

If they are victorious...

Then they will not be hurt by the second death (20:6, 14; 21:8).

The second death is the eternal punishment of the wicked that will follow their physical death.

Pergamum (2:12-17)

Now for Pergamum in verses 12-17.

This time the Lord identifies himself as the one who had a symbol of judgment, a sharp two-edged sword.

They live where Satan has his throne.

Although Satan has a strong influence, they have remained faithful.

However, the Lord is not without criticism of the believers in Pergamum.

They tolerated immorality, idolatry and heresies.

So, in verse 16, he urges them to repent or face the consequences.

Those consequences would be that he would present himself among them and do battle with the using the sword of his mouth, that is, his word.

The other side of this is that those who overcame, that is, who were victorious, would be given hidden manna.

Hidden manna could possibly be a metaphor for eternal life.

But in addition, they will be given a white stone on which he would write a new name known only to the receiver.

This is probably a symbol of the Lord's ownership and protection.

They would be his, guarded and protected by him.

Thyatira (2:18-29)

In verse 18, we move on to Thyatira.

The believers in Thyatira are commended for steadily improving in their love, service, faith, and patient endurance.

However, they tolerated a cult that promotes sexual immorality and idolatry.

The leaders of that cult will be punished if not repentant.

And the churches who see it will know that the Lord is he who searches the hearts and minds and repays according to deeds.

The Lord then urges the faithful to hold firm to the true teaching that they had received.

Those who hold firm are promised that one day they will rule with Christ over the nations.

Sardis (3:1-6)

We begin chapter 3 with the church in Sardis.

His first words to them are stark.

They have a reputation for being alive but are spiritually dead.

So, they are urged to repent and strengthen what remains.

Those faithful will be clothed in righteousness, clothed in white to symbolise their worthiness and their victory.

They will never have their name blotted out of the book of life.

In fact, their Lord will acknowledge their names before his Father and his angels.

Philadelphia (3:7-13)

In verse 7 of chapter 3 we meet the church in Philadelphia.

There are no criticisms of this church.

All is commendation.

They have persevered and he in the midst of their trial will protect them, even from the tough times that are coming upon the whole world.

He will bring them into his temple, that is, his presence.

He will write on them the name of God, his city, and even his own name.

Laodicea (3:14-21)

Laodicea was a place noted for its tepid, unpalatable, and nausea-creating water.

It was the sort of water than made you want to spew.

And the Laodicean Christians were apparently made their Lord feel the same.

They claim spiritual riches but the reality perceived by their Lord is that they are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked.

There is no commendation of these Christians.

That makes it a sober final word from the Lord to his church.

Nevertheless, where Christians overcome or are victorious, there is great reward.

They will sit with their victorious Lord just as he sat in victory with his Father on his throne.

A Final Exhortation (22)

However, before we finish this very quick overview, I want you to look closely at the final exhortation in verse 22.

Notice the plural.

It's been there all along.

All the letters are addressed in the singular to individual churches.

But the note at the end is in the plural.

The other churches are meant to listen in.

God's intention is that all the churches listen to all the correspondence.

One implication of this is that the sorts of things seen in these churches are common things.

All churches are in a world where there are heretics, morally bad people, pressures from the world, the flesh, and the devil.

So, every church can learn from these churches.

We may not have their specific problems at this time but we may have similar problems now or we may have them later.

And when we do, we know how Jesus views them.

What's more, when we have good things, we also know how Jesus views them, how he rebukes them, how he punishes them, and how he rewards them.

The Big Picture

A Mixed Bag of Churches

So friends, let's see if we can grasp the big picture here.

What have we found?

Well, first and foremost, we have found that Jesus knows his church.

He knows the condition and circumstances of his church.

Second, we've found some churches where their Lord finds no glaring weaknesses.

He has no strong rebuke for them.

They are simply encouraged to continue on.

To patiently endure affliction.

To maintain their devotion to Christ.

The first one is Smyrna (no. 2).

The second one is Philadelphia (no. 6).

These are the stars.

Third, we've found a number of churches that are a mixed bag.

They have weaknesses and failures.

They have strengths and things to commend.

These include Ephesus (1), Pergamum (3), Thyatira (4).

And then there are two others: Sardis (5) and Laodicea (7).

Both have little commend.

One is simply dead.

The other is so lukewarm that the Lord is tempted to spew up.

So, there is the big picture

A mixed bag.

Friends, I want you to grasp this.

You see, we tend to think that there was a golden age of the church.

There was no such thing.

Why not?

Because humans are humans.

They may be forgiven humans.

They may be humans filled with God's Spirit.

They may be under the oversight of the Lord and have a charge from him.

But they are still humans.

The flesh still struggles within them.

However, the letters to the churches indicate that the Spirit is strong and he can produce significant groups of people who together bear the likeness of Christ and whom Christ has little to rebuke.

With Diverse Problems

The second element in the big picture is the sorts of problems that can be found in these churches.

They all pain the Lord of the church.

Just skim through the letters again and note them.

Loss of love.

Loss of love for doing God's work.

Idolatry.

Sexual immorality.

Ears that are open to false teaching.

Lack of discipline.

Lack of growth and unwillingness to change.

Tepid Christians that just make their Lord want to spew up.

Under Assault

The third thing to notice is the cause of the problems afflicting the churches of the Living Lord Jesus Christ.

We've already noticed one source: Human sinfulness.

But there are other sources as well.

Do you remember them?

False teachers such as the Nicolaitans (2:6, 15).

Or those who hold to Balaam's teaching (2:14).

Or those who follow Jezebel's instruction (2:20, 24).

Persecutors, some of whom even kill (2:10, 13).

But underneath all of these is the Evil One, Satan himself.

He has his own synagogues (2:9; 3:9).

He has his throne (2:13).

He actively opposes God and his purposes (2:10, 13, 24).

Presumably he is the behind the false apostles (2:2);

The false Jews (2:9; 3:9).

The false prophets (2:14, 20).

Moreover, his forces can maim, imprison, and kill (2:10; 13).

The Overall Message

So, there are a couple of perspectives on the big picture.

But what about the overall message.

What is here for us?

What does God want to teach us?

Well, let me suggest some things.

First, we must hear the introductory picture from chapter 1 that is then picked up time and time again in the letters.

The Lord Jesus Christ, the Living One, the Son of Man, is in the midst of his church.

He stands there.

He walks there.

He watches there.

He sees the faithful.

He commends them.

And he will reward them.

He is there also to rebuke.

And he is there to guarantee the future of his church.

Second, we need to hear the constant words that Jesus utters in these chapters.

He tells his church that he knows.

I know...

I know...

I know...

I know...

I know.

Friends, our Living Lord knows.

He knows his church.

He knows us.

He knows our frailty.

But he is able.

As we will see, he is able to accomplish his victory in his world.

And it will come about through an historically weak, personally imperfect, and often divided church full of people like us making choices to be God's people in God's world.

Third, these letters urge us time and time again to stand firm.

To be zealous for God and for the gospel.

This is to be done positively.

But it is also to be done negatively.

That is, our zeal for God and for the gospel is to be matched by rejection of false teaching.

God's people are to reject that which undermines the gospel.

They are to reject that which compromise the gospel.

They are to have no time or place for it.

Friends, this is not an easy thing to do.

You see, in a mixed church such as we see in Revelation 2 and 3, this will cost relationships.

It will cost friendships.

It will cost good will.

For Satan will use even Christians to oppose those faithful to God.

Those who oppose Christian truth will be found in the churches of God.

As will immoral people.

As will agents of Satan.

Then there is a fourth thing.

Live in a way that corresponds to the gospel.

This requires choices.

It requires saying yes to godly ways.

It requires saying no to ungodly ways.

It requires decision making.

And the fourth and final thing to say is that we must exercise church discipline.

Friends, this one is hard.

It is particularly hard in our contemporary tolerant age.

However, if there is wrong it must be labelled as wrong.

And where there are Christians doing wrong, they must be corrected and disciplined.

And where we are wrong, we must discipline ourselves for godliness.

A Final Encouraging Note From Laodicea

Friends, I wonder if I could point one additional point from the text.

It is one that I find so encouraging and have done for many years.

Look at chapter 3.

Remember the church at Laodicea.

It is not one of the stars.

The church that makes Jesus want to spew up.

However, look at verse 20.

This verse has often in the past been used for evangelistic purposes.

People have talked about it in terms of opening our hearts or lives to Jesus and inviting him in.

However, that is not what the verse says.

But what it says is, in my view, even more glorious.

Let me show you.

The Living Lord speaks to a church lukewarm and not that open to Jesus.

But in this verse he speaks strongly to individuals, not to the whole church.

And he says

²⁰Here I am! I stand at the door and knock.

*If anyone hears my voice and opens the door,
I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.
[Revelation 3:20; NIV]*

Friends, imagine you are in a church that is lukewarm.

Or a church that is languishing.

And he speaks about a door.

A door to what?

Well, I think it is crystal clear.

It is the door to this local church.

And hear the word of the Living Christ to you.

Jesus says...

*If anyone hears my voice and opens the door,
I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.
[Revelation 3:20; NIV]*

Friends, what a glorious thought.

Most of the New Testament speaks about two or three
gathered in the name of Jesus.

But here is one person.

One person who wants Jesus to come to this church.

And Jesus says to them.

I'll do it.

Simply ask me.

If you hear my voice, open the door of this church to me.

And I will come and sup with you.

I will be present with you.

How grand is this!

Thinking About Us

A Special Note For HTD

And now for my special note to those of you here at HTD.

Friends, a change of minister can cause all sorts of reactions.

Joy.

Pain.

Grief.

Fear.

Well, friends, if you are fearful about someone coming to replace me, then be aware that there is no one but Jesus who can guarantee the future of this church.

And he knows the situation.

He is present here with this church.

Turn to him in prayer.

Ask him to do what is good here.

Ask him to provide the right pastor that might help this church be a church he can commend.

Seek the Lord of church on this matter.

More Generally

And then finally, think back to those three churches at the beginning.

The one in Singapore.

The one in India.

And all the rural churches in Australia.

What would Jesus say to them?

How are you going to pray for them?

ⁱ Taken from <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-34589932>, cited 21 October 2015.

ⁱⁱ See Beale and Dumbrell.