

Commentary on the Revelation

Reflections:

As I have progressed in the study of the book thus far, a couple of clarifications have emerged, at least in my mind.

1. John's visions are a product of his meditation on prophet passages of Scripture (Ezekiel, Daniel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Zechariah), passages that he struggled to understand. The "shadows," revealed in the prophets, are clarified to him by direct messages from Jesus. The unclear in OT statements are progressive clarified by NT revelation!
2. While it is often suggested that the outline of the book is found in 1:19 (John told to speak of "things that were...are, and...shall be), I think a slight modification is warranted. The difficulty is the identity of "were" as the contents of chapter one (not "are" as chapters two and three and "shall be" as future, the "end of times").

Perhaps it would be better to identified the "were" with the OT prophecies of future events, the "are" as the contemporary, timeless-in-time churches (2-3), and "shall be" (4-22). Because of the proclamations, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the "shadows" became clearer (the "are"). This not only makes the "were" more understandable in that it is not identified as the prologue (1:1-8), but with the vision in 1:9-20 since it is tied directly with the messages to the churches (2-3). Also, it interconnects the "were" and "are" with varying degrees of shadows, though the "are" era has greater clarity in terms as it's the final, ultimate meaning ("shall be," 4-22) of all the shadows.

- I. Prologue, 1:1-8
 - A. The Introduction, vv. 1-3
 - B. The Salutation, vv. 4-8
 - C. The Vision, vv. 9-20
- II. The First Vision ("The Things Which Are"), 1:9-3:22



A. The Church in Ephesus, 2:1-7

(Faded glories, Empty hearts: A Church with only a past)

B. The Church in Smyrna, 2:8-11

(Spiritually Strong, yet Physically Suffering)

C. The Church at Pergamum, 2:12-17

(Faithful and Enduring, but Morally Weak)

D. The Church at Thyatira, 2:18-29

(Spiritually Strong, but Morally Concessive)

The city was a trading center known for its many guilds, each with its own patron deity. It was particularly known for its wool industry (it was the home of Lydia [Acts 16:14]), but also for its leather and metal craftsmen.

1. The address, v. 18a

This is the longest of the seven letters to the churches, a church that seems to be the smallest of them.

2. The speaker: the identification of Christ as Judge, v. 18b

That Jesus is given the title “the Son of God” contrasts to that of the emperor who was considered “a son of god.”

Christ is portrayed as the indignant discernor (“His eyes...a flame [1:14,15]”) with polished bronze feet suggestive of His glory. The situation here is much the same as in Pergamum.

3. The commendation, v. 19

Four characteristics of the life of this assembly are mentioned: love (the cardinal virtue), trust and faithfulness

to the Lord, service, and developing perseverance.

4. The accusation, v. 20

The charge is tolerance of falsity both doctrinally and morally. This church was strong in expressing love, but weak on doctrinal integrity (the opposite of Ephesus). Also, the obedience expressed in this church is greater than their beginning (v. 19).

The problem, as at Pergamum, in contrast to Ephesus, was that the church seems to have followed false teachers to compromise with the idolatry of the prevailing society. The prized, “secret knowledge” had to do with “Jezebel (v. 20, I Kings 16:1),” a feminine false prophet, suggestive of misplaced Christian freedom that comprised spiritual immorality and idolatry (interconnected with temple religious practices, commerce, and social organization of the culture, so-called “deep secrets [v. 24]”). “Jezebel” is likely a figurative designation for a person who acted like King Ahab’s wife.

5. The warning, vv. 21-23

Without prompt repentance, dire judgment waits for the unrepentant. The “sickness” and “distress” of v. 21 is delineated in v. 22 (here a carry-over from the fate suffered by Ahab and Jezebel’s sons [II Kings 9:7, 10:7]).

6. The exhortation, vv. 24-25

Hold fast

7. The promise, vv. 26-29

An outcast, socially marginalized people, will someday rule with Christ over the nations (v. 26).

The church is promised to be the “morning star” (v. 28). For those who obey the exhortation of the apostle, the true kingdom of God awaits the crushing of God’s enemies (Gen. 49:10, Ps. 2:8-9, Dan. 7:9-22, Zech. 12:10); they will share in the eternal reign of Christ.

8. The concluding command, v. 29

E. The Church at Sardis, 3:1-6

(The Church of Empty Claims, but the Strength of a Few)

Located south of Pergamum, the city was known for the production of dyes for the woolen trade. It was the center of the emperor worship, as well as Roma, Artemis, and Zeus.

1. The address, v. 1a
2. The speaker, the identification of Christ as Judge, v. 1b
Christ is depicted as the source of the Spirit and the “seven stars,” angelic messengers (1:16, 20).
3. The accusation, v. 1c
There was spiritual deadness in the church. Here is a church content with mediocrity living on a false reputation indulging in heresy and too weak to promote anything but toleration. Does this not sound like churches that we know?

“Dead” must be taken in a figurative sense of fruitless or non-fruit bearing, the lampstand imagery. The declaration that they are in the book of life is a figure for the redeemed state. John is writing to redeemed communities. The ineffectiveness of the church has to do with the tolerance of sin; the church had come to reflect the morals of the culture (v. 4), resulting in an ineffective witness.

The problem in the church parallels that of the Ephesians; they had so embraced the culture that they ceased to be a witnessing church. They have become so lethargic in bearing witness that they were in danger of losing it entirely. Another parallel between the two churches is that the exhortations are three-fold (2:5, 3:3). The cost of feeding their fear of social and economic ostracism led them, as in Pergamum and Thyatira, to condone idolatrous practices.

4. The remedy, vv. 2-3a
The commands are four: “wake up (twice),” “remember,” “keep,” and “repent.”

5. The warning, v. 3b

Sudden judgment is the negative promise (I think the potential loss is the privilege of being a lighted lampstand).

6. The exhortation, vv. 4-5

The promise to “overcomers,” the faithful, is that they will be clothed in righteousness (“white” images holiness) in continual fellowship with God in the “New Jerusalem” forever (v. 4)!

The language employed in warning the Sardians (v. 5) seems to suggest that they were capable of losing their salvation though he writes, “I will not erase his name from the Book of Life...”). If they fail to overcome, will they lose their redemption? Are we using a negative to assume a negative? The answer is no for these reasons: first, the emphasis in the passage is not on the loss of salvation (v. 3:5b), but the loss of privilege with an exhortation to continue. John is writing to believers. Second, unbelievers are never associated with the Book of Life in John’s writings. You cannot erase a name from a book that was never inscribed there in the first place! Third, if any church would be erased it would be the Laodecian, but that is clearly not the case. “Those whom I love, I prove and discipline; be zealous therefore, and repent (3:19).” Having said this much, it is best to expand my answer because this may indeed be difficult for some to understand.

Parenthesis: How do you read Rev. 3:5?

Do the sometimes strident, even shocking, warnings of God imply that believers can forfeit, through sustained dereliction the promises that He has made to us? Does an exhortation imply uncertainty? If there were no uncertainty about some things, why would God speak as though such may be the case? Do warnings imply contingency, the possibility of ultimate loss of what was once gained? John does not imply by his exhortations to discontinue of certain conduct that redemption is somehow contingent upon continuance in the things of Christ. The purpose of an exhortation may be to warn, but it may also be to instruct. I take it that dire warnings do not imply the loss of something, but are given to emphasize the seriousness of disobedience with a view to curbing an improper behavior if the recipients if the warnings are Christians. John’s

exhortations are about this stifling spiritual possibility, not suggesting by doing so that salvation can be lost. No one, I would imagine, would teach, that the eleven disoriented apostles that remained after Judas' departure were not beloved of Him. In our Lord's great prayer on the night of His betrayal he asked the Father to keep them through the turbulence ahead ("Holy Father keep them in your name... I have guarded them" [John 17:11]). Though it would be unwarranted to think that Jesus would not have His prayer answered, their (the disciples) keeping would be unquestionable. Yet, He prayed for their safety and exhorted the apostles that remained to abide or remain faithful ("Abide in me," [15:4]). Moral exhortation and certainty are not antithetical. When God ordains an end, such as the security of all who believe in Him through His Son, He ordains means unto the end as well. The fact of means, in this case the presence of commands, is the human sphere of the ways of God. Human beings are not robots, the subject of forced determinism; we all have choices that must be made. To reveal right options, we have been given the commands of God. That we surrender our wills to His is evidence that someone we cherish more than ourselves is of greater value in shaping our lives than ourselves.

A second line of argument in thinking through the apparent dilemma of certainty and yet exhortation is that God commands us to do certain things so that we would recognize our helplessness and inability within ourselves and seek the guiding, protective enablement of the Spirit. While God speaks outside of us through His Word, the Spirit speaks through His indwelling presence to remind us of the right path and to dissuade us from temporal deviation from it. We have been given two wonderful sources for our strengthening: the witness of God through His Word and the witness of the Spirit in our very beings. Clearly the written Word and the Spirit are always in agreement (John 17:17, I John 5:7). The direness of the warning is indicative of the seriousness that comes with stumbling rather than the possibility of being cast out of God's family. God promised to save us if Jesus paid the penalty for us; Jesus paid the penalty for us!

Several other arguments seem relevant. First, the instruction of God, the warnings of God, is in themselves evidence that we are the objects of God's affections. "...those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and he scourges every son (Heb. 12:6)." Instruction, warnings, and chastisements from a loving Father is love expressed. "...if you are without discipline... then you are illegitimate children and not sons (Heb. 12:8)". Second, the audience to whom John is writing is believers and they are seen as being together in a church or churches. John makes this point clearly when he writes, "To Him who loves us, and released us from our sins in His blood (Rev. 1:5)." Third, the warnings

have to do with the removal of the privilege of being a “lampstand,” the shining forth the light of Jesus’ claims. The point is that the frightening warning of dire consequence of failing as a light, a witness, is that the privilege of witnessing may be removed (indeed, this happened eventually in all of these churches). Fourth, nowhere in the book is it explicitly stated that unbelievers are in the Book of Life. The names in the Book of Life were inscribed there before the creation of time according to 13:8 and those not there were never there according to 17:8. Therefore, human derelict cannot erase what God has placed! Fifth, in context the warnings function as encouragement to action. Sixth, it seems entirely unlikely that the warnings include the possibility of the loss of life since none of the other warnings have this dire consequence attached; all the other statements of consequence are positive. It would seem that this one should not be read as an exception to all the others. The point of the statement is that those who remain faithful in their witness will definitely receive the promise they deserve.

In conclusion I think the best way to read the verse is not as a negative warning at all, but as a positive promise and comfort. Those who persevere God promises, “I will not erase their names....” It is most appropriately read as an encouragement. Jesus does not say that He will erase them from the Book of Life; on the contrary He makes the opposite claim.

7. The concluding command, v. 6

F. The Church at Philadelphia, 3:7-13

(A Church That Got It Right)

This city was known for its textiles, leather working and agriculture, particularly the production of wine (Bacchus, the god of wine, agriculture, and fertility [Dionysus to the Greeks], was one its primary deities), as well as emperor worship among other gods.

1. The address, v. 7a

This church has much in common with Smyrna: Both are praised and not chastised, both suffered under “Jewish” harassment, both were persecuted by the state, both are told the opposition is satanic, and both are promised a crown.

Like the church at Smyrna, Philadelphia had remained faithful, though also opposed by non-Christian Jews (“synagogue of Satan [v. 9]” means Jewish opposition to the

Gospel).

2. The speaker, the identification of Christ as Judge, v. 7b
Christ is seen as sovereign, holy, and true. This is an instance where the titles of Christ are not specifically derived from the vision of chapter 1 unless the identity is found in the “keys (1:18),” suggestive of authority to judge accurately.

“Keys of David,” taken from Isa. 22:10, suggests authority to make determinations, to open and shut access to the things of redemption. Here the reference likely has to do with the “new” city of David, the heavenly city, the new Jerusalem, that is only accessible through Christ.

3. The commendation, v. 8
This church was a faithful “lampstand,” obedient though of little strength (fearful, intimidated).
4. The encouragement, vv. 9-11

Opposition to the church, like in Smyrna, seems to have been Jewish in origin (“Synagogue of Satan,” v. 9); however, the saints needed not to be fearful because of the promise that the opposition will ultimately fail (even though the eventual fulfillment waits the final triumph of Christ).

This church will be spared the suffering of the final and climatic rebellion at the end of times while others will endure much suffering (7:14 consists of a heavenly scene of those before the throne during the final period of judgment).

5. The exhortation, v. 12
The instruction is to persevere, to continue in what is right, to hold fast

The comfort is the promise of divine security, though difficulties will come, security (“pillar [v. 12],” intimacy, ownership, and protection (“a new name” [v. 10]) in the New Jerusalem (heaven is described as on the earth, “coming down,” restored and renovated, the “new paradise).

The inscribing on names on the saints suggests ownership and citizenship (the name of God suggests ownership, the name of the city of God suggests citizenship or place of dwelling, and “my new name” suggests the source of such privileges [identification with Christ bearing His name]).

6. The concluding command, v. 13

G. The Church at Laodicea, 3:14-22

(A Church Gone Flat)

This city, some 50 miles south of Philadelphia, was known as a banking and agricultural (black wool) center. It was also a center for the worship of the god of healing, Asclepius, being known for a healing salve for the ears and eyes (v. 18).

1. The address, v. 14a

The city was located at the intersection of three major roads with Hierapolis to the North and Colossae to the South. It was a center for banking, the wool industry, and medical care.

2. The speaker, the identification of Christ as Judge, v. 14b

Christ is seen as faithful and true. Here is the only clear case where the identity of Christ is found outside the vision (“the faithful witness [1:5]”).

“The beginning of creation (v. 14)” suggests that Christ is the inaugurator of new life or first cause (as “first born from the dead [1:5]”); this Christ accomplished through the resurrection. A new era had begun.

“Amen (v. 14)” suggests finality and is defined by “faithful and true witness.”

3. The accusation, vv. 15-17

Worthless, even Repulsive

The reference to the water supply of the city is interesting (vv. 14-15); water had to be brought from a distant source through piping. The water was lukewarm and barely

drinkable. Hierapolis had hot springs; a cold mountain stream quenched the thirst of the Colossians. The former city was celebrated for its healing waters, the latter for its refreshment. Laodicea had neither, though they were prideful without cause. Like their water, the church was neither refreshing nor healing (the issue is not the temperature of the water! If so, Colossae would have been commended for being cold).

The church reflected the city for its self-sufficient attitude (v. 17). It fell victim to the delusions of material prosperity!

4. The encouragement, v. 18

Christ offers help. Gold may suggest refining, white clothes may suggest purity (the region was known for its black wool!), and salve may hint at healing (the city was known for its guild of physicians who specialized in caring for eyes with a substance called “Phrygian Powder”). Christ desired to correct their deficiencies with true cleansing, purity, and healing.

The instructions are to pursue true wealth and spiritual prosperity would result. “From me” indicates the source of the three things to “buy.”

“Gold refined by fire” speaks of righteous conduct, not empty treasures and needs unrecognized (“poor,” v. 17).

“White garments” speak of true holiness, the opposite of empty, false appearances (“the shame of miserableness, v. 17).

“Spiritual sight” instead of ignorance of their true condition (“blind, v. 17)

5. The exhortation, v. 20

Repent

Love motivated Christ's rebuke (v. 19). He promises to come and fellowship with them if they confess their need of Him. Their case is not hopeless!

V. 20 is often used in our evangelistic efforts explaining the manner of appropriating Christ. Christ is the One who is requesting a response, not a human being; it is He who is asking for the church to enter the door of renewal and progress. These are Christian folks that Jesus is inviting to come back to what they had left. The context is not about coming to salvation; it is about returning with a faithful response to the One they already know.

6. The promise, vv. 21

Co-reign with Christ.

7. The concluding command, v. 21

Applications:

1. While the church at Thyatira struggled with immorality among its membership, as the church at Pergamum, there is something wonderfully said of the church. Apparently, it was also an assembly of saints whose gospel witness was growing, not declining. Can that be said of your church? Are the churches we attend, those blighted by the immorality of some, growing in influence in our communities? What would the greater influence of your church look like in your community?
2. The warnings to the Thyatira church are as dire as is their spiritual weakness serious. Cultural mores had become a very large part for some in the church. Their socializing (likely dining in pagan temples where the fare was cheaper) had led to the embrace of the favors of false religion (sexual permissiveness, job security, social acceptance). It is an expression of divine love and favor that judgment comes to God's children, as is the case here. The warnings are serious. I wonder if we sometimes live thinking that our freedom in Christ is a license to live life less than circumspectly. When you see this in yourself or members of your assembly, what do you do about it? Should you do anything about it? Do you take the threatenings of God seriously?

3. If there is a lesson from the church at Sardis, it is that God is not done with us yet no matter how low we sink at times. There were remnants of faithfulness among them and much that had died, but there was hope for them. For those in despair that God would see them as only dead (3:1), they are told to “wake up.” This is the wonder of grace and mercy in the darkest of nights. There is never a time to despair of the hope of recovery if you are a child of God. God will never abandon His children no matter how low they allow themselves to sink! If your night is dark remember, after the darkness of night the morning dawns! “Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in His wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace.”
4. In all these messages to the churches, the dire warnings are followed by wonderful promises. Are these promises the reward for moral redirection? Does God deal with us on a rewards basis (Jesus loves me when I’m good and threatens me to be good when I’m not)? While it may look it, that is far from the truth. It is love that motivates divine warnings that when heeded results in divine blessing. But obedience is not the cause of blessing; it is caused by the manifestation of love. Further, no action on our part can assuage the holiness and truthfulness of God. Blessings cannot be earned, even when wrapped in threats; in fact, even the threats are the gifts of love. It is love that rewards, not that rewards are the fruit of our love expressed in obedience and repentance.
5. In every church, no matter its spiritual state, there are those who have a consistent walk with the Lord and shine as saints. Do you know people like that in your church, people that stand out for their maturity? What are the consistent characteristics of these people? Does this give you a clue as to the meaning of godliness? Would you say that it has anything to do with either natural or spiritual abilities? Does it have more to do with inward qualities than it does outward manifestations?
6. It has been observed that spiritual ministries have a discernible cycle from emergence to recession: inception through a visionary, initial organization and structure involving a certain dynamism and growth, a plateauing characterized by increased structure and routinization, and decline characterized by living in the memory of

the past in the midst of a decaying presence. This seems to be the life cycle of many organizations, even churches. This seems to have been the state of the church at Sardis. Could this cyclical pattern characterize our lives, our families, our businesses? Where are you in your Christian life in this pattern? Has the excitement passed into ritual and routine? Is it not time to return to former days?

7. The church in Philadelphia was rather wonderful. Yes, there are churches like that in our cities. God has placed before them an open door of ministry; He has entrusted them to carry His message. Has God entrusted your church with an “open door” of service? What does that look like in your church? Does the leadership in your church recognize “open doors” or are they rooted in the past believing that status quo is the blessing of God?
8. “Open doors” are rarely, if ever, presented to us without opposition and adversities at the same time. There is an old adage. “No gain, no pain.” In the work of the Lord the path of least resistance is often not God’s path for us because it frequently leads to little advance of His kingdom. What doors has God opened for you that you are reticent to walk through because of feared consequences? Are you going to stand still and miss the blessing of God that comes through obedience?
9. Is it not amazing that opportunity often comes to those who think they lack the strength and ability to accomplish a task? The Philadelphia church is recognized as a rather successful church in reaching out, but they are described as fearful and weak. Is it not amazing that God does not make the measure of our service for Him equal to our strength or perception of abilities? These people were fearful, but were strong on endurance. Perhaps, endurance is better than strength! What does this tell us about the Lord? What does this tell us about ourselves? What lessons for yourself can you derive from all this?
10. Pride was the affliction of the Laodiceans; they were self-confident and self-secure. While pride was the root of their problem, the manifestation was arrogance and a false perception of their wellbeing. Pride is the deadliest of sins, humility the greatest of virtues! This church had the former, but, as is normally the case, none of the latter. God’s view of the matter should cause all of us to be cautious about the ground of our happiness. Where is your

confidence? Is it in the Lord or in the prosperity that accompanies your days? Have you seen the damage that pride brings in a life, a family, a church?

11. “All those I love, I rebuke and discipline (3:19).” We often see rebuke and discipline as negative, an expression of rejection and dislike; however, God sees it as an expression of love. Do you see it that way? Are you often disappointed in the ways of God in your life? Do you see His ways as detrimental to yours? Do you need an attitude adjustment? Do your children have the same attitude when you say “no” to their plans or activities? Do you act the same way when God says “no” to you?
12. It is often difficult to know whether rebuke from the Lord is remedial, a corrective measure, or a judgment from a disgruntled “father,” because the feeling of pain and rejection is the same in either case. How are we to determine if God’s action is helpful or punitive? The answer is found in the motive for action, not the degree of disappointment consequent to the action. You must know that God, unlike earthly parents and employers, even mates, never acts out of any motive other than our good, His actions being a manifestation of His eternal love. Do you believe this? How has it changed your view of disappointment? Rebuke and discipline are evidences of love; correction is God’s love expressed. Have you experienced God’s love in this form lately? Have you praised Him for His loving care in it?
13. The riches of the Laodiceans were actually evidences of their impoverishment. They had “stuff,” but no real wealth. What a message to the churches in the West where size of building and membership can be a source of false security. Prosperity perceived may be a veil hiding the barrenness of the soul! True wealth for a person, as well as a church, is not in material things, but in the use of our wealth to obtain true wealth. We are to use our assets for the Lord; they are gifts to be dispensed, not possessed. Is that how you see the wealth God has granted you? Are you misusing your wealth only to become poor? Are you using your wealth to become truly wealthy in the eyes of God? If there is a lesson here, it is that cultural values are not divine values.

14. Maybe the message to the Laodicean church is one that should be for all of us. "So be earnest and repent (3:19)." There are things in all of our lives that we should seriously think about that are detrimental to our spiritual lives and those about us. What should we be doing about them? What should you be doing in regard to them? How do you think we should go about addressing them? Should it not begin with seriousness of attitude about them? I have my list. Do you have yours? Pick one and repent!