

The Gospel in Revelation

This brings us to another important truth central to the message of the seven churches: the Biblical concept of solidarity or corporate-ness. His Father's words of favor embraced Christ as a representative of the whole human race. Likewise, in Revelation 1 Jesus stands among the seven churches as a corporate whole. There are, for example, two churches of the seven that have nothing against them, Smyrna and Philadelphia. It is significant that Jesus did not position Himself between those two churches only, but among all seven. The message here is irrefutable. Jesus upholds the weak as well as the strong, those who are overcoming as well as those who fail. He loves all equally and His promise of salvation is for all who believe in His Word.

The Bible encourages us to take the same attitude of corporate solidarity. After His conversion to Christianity Paul considered himself:

- 1) the "chief of sinners" (1 Timothy 1:15-16).
- 2) the "least of all saints" (Ephesians 3:8).
- 3) the "least of the apostles" (1 Corinthians 15:9).

Corporate solidarity will lead us to have a humble attitude of repentance, not just for our sins, but for the sins of others (Daniel 9:5-19; Ezra 9:5-6). As Jesus, though sinless, was baptized by John for the remission of sins, so we, following our Savior's example, will always see ourselves as part of the great web of humanity. We will, like Christ, intercede for the sins of the world (1 Timothy 2:1-6).

It is essential to understand that we need Christ's assurance to repel the assaults of Satan even when we appear faultless, because even our good deeds and our accomplishments can work to destroy our assurance in Christ. Paul summed this up in Philippians 3:

"For we are the circumcision, which worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh. Though I might also have confidence in the flesh. If any other man thinketh that he hath whereof he might trust in the flesh, I more: circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless. But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ, and be found in Him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith" (Philippians 3:3-9).

Paul gladly exchanged all his piety and blamelessness in the law for the righteousness of Jesus Christ. But he went a step further and called his

righteousness not only "dung" or "rubbish" but also "loss" or "damage" in comparison with knowing Christ as Lord and Savior. He further encouraged us to forget those things that are behind (verse 13).

The context in which Paul is speaking not only includes our failures but also those attainments in which we place a false confidence. He is calling us to abandon the self-righteous attitude that imprisons Laodicea, the final church—that of feeling rich, increased with goods and in need of nothing. (See Revelation 3:17.) Don't think this way, Paul warns. Forget your achievements. Think of them as damaging to your ability to push on to the mark of the high calling in Christ Jesus. Oswald Chambers summarized this plea when he said, "The greatest enemy to our love for Christ is our service for Christ."

As you begin each day, approach God's throne of grace as if you had never lived a day for Him . . . had never done a good deed . . . had never attended church . . . had never given money to God's work or a word of encouragement to a weary soul. Still the mouth that cries for merit and hold the tongue that summons applause. Allow grace—rich, abundant and free—to be your only hope.

Relate to God as if there was nothing good you could offer Him in exchange for the salvation you so desperately need. Why? Because this is the reality of His grace. There is no goodness you can offer Him in exchange for salvation. It comes to us entirely through His unconditional mercy. It is not the good works of the Pharisee that moves the very heart of heaven, but it is the soul cry of the publican, "God be merciful to me a sinner," (Luke 18:10-14). This is the faith that Jesus will look for upon His return (Luke 18:8).

Summary

With few exceptions, God's people are pictured from beginning to end as fallen and self-deceived (Revelation 2:5; 3:17). Yet, in spite of our failures, Jesus stands firmly in the midst of the churches. The Heavenly Physician stays with His patients through their relapses, as He did with His erring disciples while on this earth. We may leave Him, but He will not leave us. Therein lies the gospel of Christ: the full assurance of His love and acceptance. Those two unfathomable gifts face down the most haunting of our sins and refuse to give us over to despair as we trust our lives to Him. This is just the message we need now and for eternity. It is truly a Revelation of Jesus Christ and a picture of God. Amen.

Preludes of Hope

The Seven Churches

Having moved quickly in our overview through the book of Revelation, highlighting the gospel theme, let's go back now and focus on these powerful messages. As we noted, the first chapter (verses 12-20) introduces the gospel message that flows through the entire book of Revelation. This first prelude of hope describes Jesus Christ as the "Son of Man," standing in the middle of "seven candlesticks" or "lampstands" with "seven stars" in His "right hand" (Revelation 1:13, KJV, NKJV). The last verse of this chapter explains what these candlesticks and stars represent: "The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches: and the seven candlesticks which thou sawest are the seven churches" (Revelation 1:20).

According to this verse, the candlesticks represent the churches—the people, not buildings. The church is the *ekklesia* or "assembly"—not the place where people assemble, but the assembled ones themselves. It is "a gathering of called-out ones."

The "stars" in Christ's right hand represent the "angels" of these churches. The word for "angels" is *aggelos*, meaning not only literal angels but also "messengers, envoys, those who are sent." It also implies "pastors." So these stars designate the churches' appointed leaders who are sent to give the good news of the gospel.

Therefore this introduction to the book of Revelation contains an underlying message of hope. Christ is in the midst of His assembly. He holds the appointed leaders and pastors in His right hand. These churches refer not just to the time of the apostle John. In the symbolism of *seven* they take in all of God's people from the apostolic church down to the close of this world's history. (The number seven symbolically represents "completion" or "finishing up," as first illustrated in Genesis 2:1-3.) So

The Gospel in Revelation

Study No. 3

The Gospel in Revelation

the message of this prelude of hope is: “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:20, NIV).

God is with us to the very end. The message is even more significant when we consider the condition of His churches. The first is characterized as “fallen,” and the last as “self-deceived.” In these descriptions we find that God has journeyed with us from the beginning and will see us through to the end. In spite of our failures, He does not give up. The world turned against Him before the flood, but God still sent Noah to preach salvation for 120 years, even though only eight people were willing to be saved. Sodom and Gomorrah could not even produce eight willing people, but God still sent His messengers to rescue three. He did not give up when His disciples forsook Him in Gethsemane or when the world condemned Him on Calvary. In Christ’s dying words we see forgiveness extended to all, even His worst enemies. And His forgiveness for the chief of sinners extends to this day. This expression of God’s unconditional love brings us the assurance that God will accept and hold onto all who place their trust in Him.

Take the disciples of Christ, for example. Jesus knew they would all forsake Him when He was taken by the mob in Gethsemane. Following their last supper together, as they had set out for Gethsemane, He had lovingly forewarned them of their abandonment: “Then saith Jesus unto them, All ye shall be offended because of Me this night: for it is written, ‘I will smite the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock shall be scattered abroad’” (Matthew 26:31).

Peter had been the first to vehemently dispute Christ’s prediction, but he was not the last. All the disciples had refused to believe Christ’s warning: “Peter answered and said unto Him, ‘Though all men shall be offended because of Thee, yet will I never be offended.’ Jesus said unto him, ‘Verily I say unto thee, that this night, before the cock crow, thou shalt deny Me thrice.’ Peter said unto Him, ‘Though I should die with Thee, yet will I not deny Thee.’ *Likewise also said all the disciples*” (Matthew 26:33-35).

The disciples had been unwilling to confront their weaknesses. Yet, in the midst of this sad revelation, which was soon fulfilled to the letter, Jesus had offered these amazing words: “But after I am risen again, I will go before you into Galilee” (Matthew 26:32).

Here we find the essence of the gospel—the assurance of God’s love for us despite our treachery. Even before they had denied their Lord, Jesus had given His disciples the assurance of His forgiveness. In so doing, after His death and resurrection they would know that they were forgiven and were still cherished in the heart of their Savior. The weakness of our human nature does not bar our access to God. Jesus loves us though we err and are betrayed into sin. He will forgive and pardon us abundantly.

If, as we have learned, the prologue to Revelation is all about the gospel, then this first vision of the seven churches is all about the assurance that the gospel brings. The apostle Paul noted the connection between the gospel and the assurance of salvation in his first letter to the Thessalonians: “For our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance; as ye know what manner of men we were among you for your sake” (1 Thessalonians 1:5).

The gospel of Jesus Christ comes with “much assurance” or “confidence” so that we will not focus on self and indulge anxiety and fear as to whether we will be saved. While we should carefully avoid presuming on God’s grace through self-confidence, we need full confidence in our Father’s acceptance, especially when under the assaults of Satan. Even Christ needed this assurance from the Father when He met the temptations of Satan in the wilderness.

In the wilderness Satan twice approached Christ with the challenge, “If Thou be the Son of God” (Luke 4:3, 9). The first affront was Satan’s attempt to confine Christ’s assurance of His Sonship to the condition that He change stones into bread. But Christ resisted Satan’s temptation, refusing to allow works to determine His acceptance by the Father. In doing this Christ clarified that God’s acceptance of us is not based on what we do, but on what God has done and can do. It clarifies the long-disputed issue of salvation by grace or works.

The idea that we are not saved by our good works is the basis of the warnings to both the first and last churches of Revelation 2 and 3. The churches of Ephesus and Laodicea have many works to their credit, yet they are in danger of being lost because their “first love” or “gold tried in the fire” is missing. The message here is simple. We may have done more good works than we can remember, but it is the love of God manifested toward us while we were yet sinners that saves us (Romans 5:6-10). God’s unconditional love for our lost world is the only basis for assurance (John 3:16). And appreciating God’s love and accepting it into the heart is the “first love” and “gold” needed by all churches from Ephesus to Laodicea.

Our good works do not lay any foundation for any assurance of salvation. Even Mother Teresa once said, “Pray for me that I would not lose my grip on the hand of Jesus in the guise of serving the poor.”

Jesus faced a second assault on His assurance from which we can gain hope. He was tempted by the devil to place Sonship assurance on temporal prosperity: “And the devil, taking Him up into an high mountain, shewed unto Him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. And the devil said unto Him, ‘All this power will I give Thee, and the glory of them: for that is delivered unto me; and to whomsoever I will I give it. If Thou therefore wilt worship me, all shall be Thine.’ And Jesus answered and

said unto him, ‘Get thee behind Me, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and Him only shalt thou serve’” (Luke 4:5-8).

This assertion that our acceptance with God is based on our economic prosperity is also an assault against our own assurance. Jesus rebuked the devil this second time, pointing to God as worthy of our worship in spite of economics. Job embraced this same truth when afflicted by Satan: “Then Job arose, and rent his mantle, and shaved his head, and fell down upon the ground, and worshiped, and said, Naked came I out of my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return thither: the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord” (Job 1:20-21).

We find this same message in the experience of Smyrna, the second church in Revelation 2. It is described as “rich,” although it is literally in “poverty.” The Bible clarifies what this means in the book of James: “Hearken, my beloved brethren, hath not God chosen the poor of this world *rich in faith*, and heirs of the kingdom which He hath promised to them that love Him?” (James 2:5).

Our wealth is found in our faith in Christ, not in our earthly possessions. This is our assurance that we are God’s sons and daughters, as Jesus testified when rebuking the devil. We are not God’s children based on our economic blessings. God calls us His children in spite of our social status. By faith we are to believe that He loves us whether we are economically rich or poor.

Satan’s third and final assault against Christ was calculated to induce Him to base assurance on divine intervention: “And he brought Him to Jerusalem, and set Him on a pinnacle of the temple, and said unto Him, ‘If Thou be the Son of God, cast Thyself down from hence: for it is written, He shall give His angels charge over thee, to keep thee: and in *their* hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone’” (Luke 4:9-11).

Jesus, for our sake, refused the temptation to fasten proof of God’s acceptance to His intervention or protection. We may suffer great loss or wealth, health or calamity, but this does not mean that we are not God’s children. The same adversary who took from Job family, friends, wealth and health is alive and active in the world today. Jesus our Savior and example lost all for our sake, and yet God called Him His beloved Son. Our assurance is found not in works, wealth or protection and care, but in the very Word of God spoken to us as it was spoken to Christ:

“Now when all the people were baptized, it came to pass, that Jesus also being baptized, and praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Ghost descended in a bodily shape like a dove upon Him, and a voice came from heaven, which said, ‘Thou art My beloved Son; in Thee I am well pleased’” (Luke 3:21-22).