

Letters to Seven Churches

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Part 1

Jesus wrote letters to seven churches—eight, including yours. We are going to read and comment upon those seven letters later in this broadcast; but first let us make this observation.

Modern Christians are very familiar with Paul's letter to the Ephesians, but are largely ignorant of Jesus' letter to the Ephesians. Why is that? Isn't what Jesus wrote to the Ephesians just as important as what Paul wrote to them?

The reason why Christians are largely ignorant of Jesus' letter to the Ephesians is because it is found in the book of Revelation. Many Protestant denominations don't read from the book of Revelation very often because Revelation is thought by many to be a closed book, filled with prophecies that should be hidden and not read. This is ironic because the title of the book is Revelation—not Hiding.

Revelation clearly predicts a deadly danger that Christians must overcome. Quite frankly, that danger is the predicted apostasy of the Roman Catholic Church. Martin Luther recognized that, and said so. The Catholic response was two-fold. First, the Church invented fanciful explanations of the prophecies that did not involve itself. Second, the Church claimed that Revelation was a sealed book that wasn't meant to be read.

So, before we Jesus' letters to the seven churches, let's listen to some of Ellen White's comments about the importance of the book of Revelation in general, and these seven letters in particular.

In the days of the apostles the Christian believers were filled with earnestness and enthusiasm. So untiringly did they labor for their Master that in a comparatively short time, notwithstanding fierce opposition, the gospel of the kingdom was sounded to all the inhabited parts of the earth. The zeal manifested at this time by the followers of Jesus has been recorded by the pen of inspiration for the encouragement of believers in every age. Of the church at Ephesus, which the Lord Jesus used as a symbol of the entire Christian church in the apostolic age, the faithful and true Witness declared:

"I know thy works, and thy labor, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil: and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars: and hast borne, and hast patience, and for My name's sake hast labored, and hast not fainted." Revelation 2:2, 3.

At the first the experience of the church at Ephesus was marked with childlike simplicity and fervor. The believers sought earnestly to obey every word of God, and their lives revealed an earnest, sincere love for Christ. They rejoiced to do the will of God because the Saviour was in their hearts as an abiding presence. Filled with love for their Redeemer, their highest aim was to win souls to Him. They did not think of hoarding the precious treasure of the grace of Christ. They felt the importance of their calling; and, weighted with the message, "On earth peace, good will toward men," they burned with desire to carry the glad tidings of salvation to earth's remotest bounds. And the world took knowledge of them that they had been with Jesus. Sinful men, repentant, pardoned, cleansed, and sanctified, were brought into partnership with God through His Son.

The members of the church were united in sentiment and action. Love for Christ was the golden chain that bound them together. They followed on to know the Lord more and still more perfectly, and in their lives were revealed the joy and peace of Christ. They visited the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and kept themselves unspotted from the world, realizing that a failure to do this would be a contradiction of their profession and a denial of their Redeemer.

In every city the work was carried forward. Souls were converted, who in their turn felt that they must tell of the inestimable treasure they had received. They could not rest till the light which had illumined their minds was shining upon others. Multitudes of unbelievers were made acquainted with the reasons of the Christian's hope. Warm, inspired personal appeals were made to the erring, to the outcast, and to those who, while professing to know the truth, were lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God.

But after a time the zeal of the believers began to wane, and their love for God and for one another grew less. Coldness crept into the church. Some forgot the wonderful manner in which they had received the truth. One by one the old standard-bearers fell at their post. Some of the younger workers, who might have shared the burdens of these pioneers, and thus have been prepared for wise leadership, had become weary of oft-repeated truths. In their desire for something novel and startling they attempted to introduce new phases of doctrine, more pleasing to many minds, but not in harmony with the fundamental principles of the gospel. In their self-confidence and spiritual blindness they failed to discern that these sophistries would cause many to question the experiences of the past, and would thus lead to confusion and unbelief.

As these false doctrines were urged, differences sprang up, and the eyes of many were turned from beholding Jesus as the Author and Finisher of their faith. The discussion of unimportant points of doctrine, and the contemplation of pleasing fables of man's invention, occupied time that should have been spent in proclaiming the gospel. The masses that might have been convicted and converted by a faithful presentation of the truth were left unwarned. Piety was rapidly waning, and Satan seemed about to gain the ascendancy over those who claimed to be followers of Christ.

It was at this critical time in the history of the church that John was sentenced to banishment. Never had his voice been needed by the church as now. Nearly all his former associates in the ministry had suffered martyrdom. The remnant of believers was facing fierce opposition. To all outward appearance the day was not far distant when the enemies of the church of Christ would triumph.

But the Lord's hand was moving unseen in the darkness. In the providence of God, John was placed where Christ could give him a wonderful revelation of Himself and of divine truth for the enlightenment of the churches.

In exiling John, the enemies of truth had hoped to silence forever the voice of God's faithful witness; but on Patmos the disciple received a message, the influence of which was to continue to strengthen the church till the end of time.

...

This revelation was given for the guidance and comfort of the church throughout the Christian [world]. Yet religious teachers have declared that it is a sealed book and its secrets cannot be explained. Therefore many have turned from the prophetic record, refusing to devote time and

study to its mysteries. But God does not wish His people to regard the book thus. It is "the revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto Him, to show unto His servants things which must shortly come to pass." "Blessed is he that readeth," the Lord declares ... "I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book: and if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the Holy City, and from the things which are written in this book. He which testifieth these things saith, Surely I come quickly." Revelation 22:18-20.

In the Revelation are portrayed the deep things of God. The very name given to its inspired pages, "the Revelation," contradicts the statement that this is a sealed book. A revelation is something revealed. The Lord Himself revealed to His servant the mysteries contained in this book, and He designs that they shall be open to the study of all. Its truths are addressed to those living in the last days of this earth's history, as well as to those living in the days of John. Some of the scenes depicted in this prophecy are in the past, some are now taking place; some bring to view the close of the great conflict between the powers of darkness and the Prince of heaven, and some reveal the triumphs and joys of the redeemed in the earth made new.

Let none think, because they cannot explain the meaning of every symbol in the Revelation, that it is useless for them to search this book in an effort to know the meaning of the truth it contains. The One who revealed these mysteries to John will give to the diligent searcher for truth a foretaste of heavenly things. Those whose hearts are open to the reception of truth will be enabled to understand its teachings, and will be granted the blessing promised to those who "hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein." ...

It was Christ who bade the apostle record that which was to be opened before him. "What thou seest, write in a book," He commanded, "and send it unto the seven churches which are in Asia; unto Ephesus, and unto Smyrna, and unto Pergamos, and unto Thyatira, and unto Sardis, and unto Philadelphia, and unto Laodicea." Revelation 1:11. ...

Looking down through long centuries of darkness and superstition, [John] saw multitudes suffering martyrdom because of their love for the truth. ... And to all the faithful ones who were striving against evil, John heard the promises made: "To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God." "He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before My Father, and before His angels." "To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with Me in My throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with My Father in His throne." Verse 7; 3:5, 21.

John saw the mercy, the tenderness, and the love of God blending with His holiness, justice, and power. He saw sinners finding a Father in Him of whom their sins had made them afraid. And looking beyond the culmination of the great conflict, he beheld upon Zion "them that had gotten the victory . . . stand on the sea of glass, having the harps of God," and singing "the song of Moses" and the Lamb. Revelation 15:2, 3. ¹

[music – The Church's One Foundation]

¹ Ellen White, Acts of the Apostles, Chapter 57, "The Revelation", <http://www.whiteestate.org/books/aa/aa57.html>

Part 2

Years after his resurrection, Jesus appeared to the apostle John for the purpose of dictating letters to be sent to seven Christian churches. These were real, literal churches; and the messages were specifically meant for them, just as Paul's letters were meant for the real, literal churches that he had founded.

Just as Paul's letters to those churches have been preserved in the Bible because they contain timeless, universal messages, Jesus' letters to the seven churches contain a message that is just as important, if not more so, to us today.

The Apostle John was exiled to the island of Patmos for his testimony about Jesus. One Sabbath while he was praying, Jesus appeared to him. John tells the story in the first three chapters of the book of Revelation. Let's join John's narrative at chapter 1, verse 10.

On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, which said: "Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea."

I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, and among the lampstands was someone "like a son of man," dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance. (Revelation 1:10-16)

This is a more powerful image of Jesus than we usually see. He does not take the form of a humble carpenter's son. Jesus appears to John in his glorified post-resurrection body, speaking in a loud voice, like a trumpet, commanding reverence and respect. Jesus wants John to realize the importance of the letters He is about to dictate. The King of the Universe is speaking. He wants John, and the recipients of the letters, to listen carefully.

Jesus then dictates the seven letters to John. Each letter begins in much the same, powerful way. Instead of a casual greeting like, "Hi guys! Jesus here!" Jesus begins each letter with a one-sentence reminder about one of His attributes, designed to inspire reverence, respect, and compliance. Listen to this montage of the seven greetings, one right after the other.

To the angel of the church in Ephesus write:

These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands (Rev 2:1)

To the angel of the church in Smyrna write:

These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. (Rev 2:8)

To the angel of the church in Pergamum write:

These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. (Rev 2:12)

To the angel of the church in Thyatira write:

These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze. (Rev 2:18)

To the angel of the church in Sardis write:

These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. (Rev 3:1)

To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write:

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. (Rev 3:7)

To the angel of the church in Laodicea write:

These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation. (Rev 3:14)

Jesus reminds the readers that He holds the churches in His hands, rose from the dead, wields the sword of judgment, sees everything, knows everything, is everywhere, is holy, true, and undefeatable, is the creator, and is the ruler of all creation. Those are pretty impressive credentials. We ought to listen to what He says!

All seven letters end in pretty much the same way. All stress the necessity of listening and overcoming, and all promise a reward for overcoming. Here are the seven endings. See how similar they are.

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God. (Rev 2:7)

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death. (Rev 2:11)

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it. (Rev 2:17)

To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations—

**'He will rule them with an iron scepter;
he will dash them to pieces like pottery'—**

just as I have received authority from my Father. I will also give him the morning star. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. (Rev 2:26-29)

He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. (Rev 3:5-6)

Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on him my new name. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. (Rev 3:12-13)

To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” (Rev 3:21-22)

What is clear from each of these seven letters is that YOU MUST OVERCOME! And, if you do overcome, you will receive great blessings. Jesus could not be any more emphatic about this. You really, really, really need to overcome.

The body of the seven letters tells what must be overcome. So, let's look at the bodies of the seven letters and see what Jesus tells the churches.

To the Church in Ephesus

I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.

Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. (Rev 2:2-6)

He commends the Ephesians for their work and perseverance in the face of persecution and hardship. That's not surprising. What might surprise some people is that He praises them for judging, and not tolerating, wicked men who falsely claim to be apostles. Jesus hates the false doctrines of the Nicolaitans, and praises the Ephesians for hating them as well. Toleration of sin and false doctrines is not a virtue in Jesus' mind.

But simply opposing the false doctrines of the Nicolaitans is not enough. Jesus chastises them for having lost their first love. Jesus wants to see more passion from them. He warns them that if they don't rekindle that fire, He will remove their lampstand from its place among all the other churches. He will not abide half-hearted Christians.

Now, let's see what He says to the second church.

To the Church in Smyrna

I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life. (Rev 2:9-10)

This is the only church He does not criticize in any way. He praises them for enduring persecution, and warns them that their persecution will increase, but they will be rewarded for their faithfulness. The surprising thing in this letter is that the persecution will come from inside the church, from “those who

say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.” But even though they have been faithful up to this point, they must continue to be faithful to receive the crown of life.

Now, the third church.

To the Church in Pergamum

I know where you live—where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city—where Satan lives.

Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality. Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth. (Rev 2:13-16)

He praises them because a majority of them have been faithful in a difficult situation. But there are some members who have accepted the false doctrines of the Nicolaitans. Scholars don't know exactly what these false doctrines were, but that doesn't matter. False doctrines are false doctrines, no matter what they are. Jesus makes it clear that doctrines do matter.

Some people say that it doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you love Jesus. That isn't consistent with what Jesus says here. He clearly disapproves of the teaching of the Nicolaitans, and promises to fight against the church with the sword of His mouth if they don't reject it.

Furthermore, the church has adopted the worldly custom of eating food sacrificed to idols. Some people claim that Jesus doesn't care what we eat. If that is true, why does Jesus condemn them for what they eat? Jesus gave very specific dietary restrictions to the Jews in the Old Testament. Acts chapter 15 tells us that when the apostles met in Jerusalem to decide what Jewish rules the Gentile converts had to obey, one of those health laws was one of the few restrictions they insisted upon. Acts chapter 10 tells us that Peter never ate unclean meat, and was horrified at the thought of eating unclean meat, even though he was very hungry. When Paul addressed the issue of eating clean meat that has been sacrificed to idols, he did it very diplomatically. Paul basically said that there isn't anything really wrong with eating meat sacrificed to idols; but don't do it anyway. Jesus is not so delicately diplomatic. He flat out says it is a sin, so don't do it!

Jesus was also upset with them for their sexual immorality. He doesn't say whether this sexual immorality is adultery, homosexuality, bestiality, incest, or pedophilia; but does it really matter? Immorality is immorality. He warns them that if they don't repent, he will fight against them.

Now let's see what he says to the fourth church.

To the Church in Thyatira

I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first.

Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling. So I will

cast her on a bed of suffering, and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely, unless they repent of her ways. I will strike her children dead. Then all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds. Now I say to the rest of you in Thyatira, to you who do not hold to her teaching and have not learned Satan's so-called deep secrets (I will not impose any other burden on you): Only hold on to what you have until I come. (Rev 2:19-25)

Again, despite their love, faith, service, and perseverance, Jesus calls them out for their doctrinal errors. They are listening to Jezebel, who claims to be a prophet, who encourages them to eat food sacrificed to idols and commit sexual immorality. This is the second letter in a row in which Jesus warns them about false doctrines, immoral behavior, and forbidden foods. They must be important to Jesus. After threatening to punish those in the church who commit these sins, He encourages them to overcome so they can receive the promised blessing.

The letter to the church in Sardis is short, but not so sweet.

To the Church in Sardis

Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God. Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.

Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. (Rev 3:2-4)

He doesn't say specifically what they are doing that is so wrong; but apparently they aren't living up to the standard that Christians should. Merely belonging to the church isn't going to save them. Their deeds aren't complete. They are asleep. Jesus is going to return and they won't be ready. But He offers words of encouragement to those few church members who have not soiled their clothes and are worthy.

The sixth letter goes to the church in Philadelphia.

To the Church in Philadelphia

I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars—I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you. Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth.

I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. (Rev 3:8-11)

Here is yet another church full of followers of Satan who pretend to be good church members; but Jesus promises strength to the faithful believers, and assures them that they have the power to overcome the evil influence in their church.

Finally, Jesus wrote this to the Laodiceans.

To the Church in Laodicea

I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth. You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see.

Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. Here 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 him, and he with me. (Rev 3:15-20)

The members of the Laodicean churches don't take their faith too seriously. They don't give at least 10% of their income to the church. They don't give a full 24-hour Sabbath to God. Life is good. They have acquired wealth and don't need a thing, so they don't feel a strong need for a savior. They aren't bad Christians; but they aren't good Christians, either. Jesus is disgusted by their lukewarm devotion, and vows to spit them out of His mouth. Because He loves them, He is going to rebuke and discipline them. If they repent, He will forgive them.

Taken out of context, Jesus' statement that He is standing at the door, knocking, sounds very gentle. But following, as it does, immediately after His statements about rebuke, discipline, and repentance, it takes a somewhat harsher tone. Jesus is banging on the door of people who are so busy enjoying what they think is the good life that they can't be bothered to open the door. He is shouting, but they don't hear His voice over the noise of the party going on inside. He wants to come in and eat with them, but they don't hear the doorbell, and the door is locked, keeping Jesus out.

It is sobering to read the letters to these seven churches because God clearly expects more from them than they are giving to Him. Despite the fact that they have the Holy Scriptures, they have adopted other doctrines and worldly customs.

God cares what they do. God cares what they believe. God even cares what they eat. Nowhere in these letters does Jesus say He will let them slide because He loves them. Instead, He warns them of serious consequences if they don't repent, and promises rewards to those who overcome the temptations of evil.

The theme of the Jesus' preaching, both while He was in His flesh, and after His resurrection, was one of warning of the coming judgment. In these letters to the seven churches, He was obviously concerned that these churches were taking salvation for granted, and consequently many of the members were in danger of being lost.

The common theme in all seven letters is that every church has a few members who have remained faithful; but only a few. For the most part, the churches have become synagogues of Satan, adopting worldly values and customs. They have lost their first love of Christ, and become Christians in name only. Jesus' warning message to them is that they **MUST** overcome the world, and, if they do, they will receive great blessings. **He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.**

[music – Dave and Susan Pogge, “Find Us Faithful”]