

Among The Lampstands

Memory Text: “ ‘He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’ ” (Revelation 2:7)

Setting The Stage: Some years ago, the Harry S. Truman Library in Independence, MO made public 1,300 discovered letters that the late President wrote to his wife, Bess, over the course of a half-century. Mr. Truman had a lifelong rule of writing to his wife every day they were apart. He followed this rule whenever he was away on official business or whenever Bess left Washington to visit Independence.

Scholars examined the letters for any new light they may throw on political and diplomatic history. But what they discovered instead was the simple fact that every day he was away, the President of the United States took time out from his dealings with the world's most powerful leaders to sit down and write a letter to his wife.

No doubt there are many things that occupy Heaven's Commander-in-Chief. There's a universe to attend to. But in the midst of the never-ending activity of heaven, Christ, Heaven's ruler, stopped everything to ensure a letter...no, seven letters were written to His bride, to His people, letters of love. Of course, I'm referring to the seven letters of Revelation, written down by John in Christ's stead, to be given to seven respective churches.

Understanding Revelation. Many want to understand Revelation, but because of the symbolic language many give up trying to understand it. Many feel that the book applies largely to the past or to the future and that, furthermore, it's a closed or sealed book and not meant to be understood. But the truth is, the book isn't sealed.

Revelation 22:10: “And he said to me, ‘Do not seal the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is at hand.’ ”

Revelation is an open book. It is especially written for our time (see Rev. 22:12). And it's important to know that a special blessing is pronounced on those who study it and understand it (see Rev. 1:3).

Revelation is a summary of the entire Bible in which the main themes of the Bible are reviewed in order to stress their importance. As an acorn embodies the oak, so Revelation embodies the great key points of the entire Bible.

The key to understanding Revelation lies in Jesus method of Bible study: “And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself.” (Luke 24:27) Out of the 404 verses in Revelation, 278 are direct quotes, references, or allusions to the OT. If we want to understand Revelation, then we need to know the OT.

Why was Revelation written using symbols? The same reason Jesus spoke parables: so those who were seeking for truth might know it, and that the truth might be protected from the enemies the book exposed.

Sunday – On Patmos

Revelation 1:9; 2 Timothy 3:12

Revelation 1:9. *“Patmos, a barren, rocky island in the Aegean Sea, had been chosen by the Roman government as a place of banishment for criminals; but to the servant of God this gloomy abode became the gate of heaven. Here, shut away from the busy scenes of life, and from the active labors of former years, he had the companionship of God and Christ and the heavenly angels, and from them he received instruction for the church for all future time.”* (The Acts of the Apostles, pp. 570, 571)

John found himself on the island due to his witness of Christ. Like many before him, John endured persecution from the hand of those who wanted to silence the voice that spoke truth to them. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel and his three friends, Stephen, and many others all suffered because they lived righteously and spoke the truth.

2 Timothy 3:12: “Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.”

If you live godly you will one way or another and eventually suffer some form of persecution. But if you live ungodly, you can't call your suffering persecution. That would be receiving what you deserve. But, all who live for Christ have the assurance of His companionship and His abiding presence through the Holy Spirit.

Monday – On The Lord's Day

Revelation 1:10, 11; Isaiah 58:13, 14; Mark 27, 28

Revelation 1:10. 11. This is none other than Christ. We'll see that clearly a few verses later. But He's come to not only provide companionship to John, but to also relate a message He wanted passed on to some of the existing churches of the time. Christ has always comforted and encouraged His people by His presence (see Dan. 3:25; Acts 21:11; Matt. 28:20; Heb. 13:5, 6).

What day is the Lord's day? It's commonly thought in Christianity that it's Sunday. Christianity views Sunday as a special day. If you ask why that is, you usually get a blank stare or they will say something about the resurrection. Strangely, the same people who know which day the Lord rose on (the first day of the week), don't know what day the Sabbath is on (the seventh day of the week), or say the days of the week were changed so we can never know. If that was the case, then Sunday can't

be the day Jesus rose from the dead on because no one knows for sure. But it was, because nothing was altered or changed.

While the resurrection is vitally important to the Christian, there is no indication given in the Bible that the seventh-day Sabbath was changed to the first day of the week, Sunday. So when did Jesus appear to John? On the Lord's day. And when is the Lord's day?

Isaiah 58:13, 14: “If you turn away your foot from the Sabbath, from doing your pleasure on My holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight, the holy day of the Lord honorable, and shall honor Him, not doing your own ways, nor finding your own pleasure, nor speaking your own words, then you shall delight yourself in the Lord;”

Mark 2:27, 28: “And He said to them, ‘The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. Therefore the Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath.’ ”

Tuesday – John's Vision Of Christ On Patmos

Revelation 1:12-18

Revelation 1:12-18. In Rev. 1 we see a glorious picture of Christ, the One walking in the midst of the seven candlesticks. Of course these candlesticks aren't referring to the ancient temple services, because that was one candlestick with seven branches. But here we have seven candlesticks upon which lamps are set to give light in the room.

If you ever had or used a kerosene lamp you'll know that they require a lot of work. After almost every use you have to trim or replace the wick, replenish the oil, and polish the chimney. In the OT sanctuary, the seven lights on the golden lampstand had to be cared for by the high priest in the same way every day (Lev. 24:1-4).

Rev. 2:1 says that Jesus “walks among the ...lampstands.” In Rev. 1:20 He says those literal lampstands in heaven's sanctuary represent something. They represent the churches. So He is our contemporary High Priest, serving in the heavenly sanctuary (Heb. 8:1). He always looks after our interests. Of course, Jesus doesn't actually cut wicks and replenish olive oil. How He cares for His churches is illustrated in the letters to the seven churches. Here He helps His “lamps” to shine with a brighter light.

Similarities Between Seven Churches. There are three statements that Jesus makes to the seven churches that are important for us to know:

1. “I know your works.” (Rev. 2:2, 9, 15, 19; 3:1, 8, 15) He knows everything there is to know about us, and yet, wonder oh wonders, He still loves us!
2. “To him that overcomes.” (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21) The word overcomer paints a picture Christians rarely visualize about themselves.

- God doesn't want us to barely make it to heaven. He wants us to enter in victoriously. That may require some effort. That may require cooperating with divine power. But the good news is, we can overcome by God's grace.
3. "Hear what the Spirit says to the churches." (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22) So Jesus is inviting us to listen up and pay attention. Don't miss what I'm saying here. It's vitally important.

Of interest, one church out of the seven was given no commendation, while two churches out of the seven weren't given any reproof at all.

Wednesday – Christ's Message for Then & Now

Revelation 1:19, 20

Revelation 1:19, 20. So John was to write the letters for Jesus and then send them to seven churches. Those churches were Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea (v. 11). By the time of this writing these churches had been raised up in these seven cities, and these cities were located on interconnecting Roman highways so that it would have been possible to visit each of them in the order in which they are listed. The Roman Imperial Post may have regularly visited them in this order.

But in the book of Revelation that abounds with symbols, are we to assume that the seven congregations in the seven cities were the only audience who were to receive these messages from Jesus? Or do the seven churches represent different conditions in different churches at any and all times? Are the seven messages general admonition intended for everyone? Do they stand for seven successive phases in the experience of the church from John's day down to ours? Are the message intended for everybody? The answer to those questions is , yes, yes, and yes.

1. Local/Literal Congregations. The seven letters speaks of some things that had already happened or that were in the process of happening at the time Revelation was written. "You [in Ephesus] have left your first love." (Rev. 2:4) "You [in Pergamum] have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam." (v. 14) "You [in Thyatira] allow that woman Jezebel...to teach and seduce." (v. 20) Obviously these statements must have been true in respect to local congregations at the time of John, otherwise, when the letters arrived the churches would have said to themselves, "John doesn't know what he's talking about!"

2. Everyone at all times. The letters can't be confined to just these congregations. The ending of every letter contains the words, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." If you have your ears on today, then these letters are for you and for everyone else who has the ability read and understand.

3. Denominations/Movements. Although the promises are for everyone, the letters are written to “churches.” They’re directed primarily to groups. As social beings, we are all organic parts of the organizations we belong to, influencing them and in turn being influenced by them. We are all, more or less, responsible for the faults of the group with which we identify and are worthy of their rewards.

4. Depict seven phases of Christian history. There are several reason we can know that this is true.

- a) *We know the prophecies of Daniel 2, 7, 8, and 11 parallel each other and run side-by-side through time from Daniel’s day to the end of the world. Daniel and Revelation were both inspired by the same God and reveal many interrelated similarities. It’s reasonable to assume that the prophecies of Revelation about the seven seals, the seven trumpets, and the seven churches, like the prophecies in Daniel, run parallel to each other and run side by side from John’s day to the return of Christ.*
- b) *We can know this because of the self-evident predictions. Certain elements, especially messages to Smyrna and Philadelphia, are predictive. Believers in Smyrna are informed that “the devil is about to throw some of you into prison” and that for “ten days you will have tribulation.” (Rev. 2:10) In the letter to Thyatira, however, not the devil but God would impose a “great tribulation” – one that would strike exclusively at the wicked lovers of “Jezebel.” (2:20-22) Again, the Philadelphia congregation was comforted in connection with the “hour of trial” that was going to come on the “whole world” (3:10), a fearful test that would challenge all people, both good and bad. So we see three different tribulations were predicted, one for true Christians, one for lovers of Jezebel, and one for the whole world. From these examples alone it is clear that the seven letters contain predictive prophecies dealing with situations future to John’s day.*
- c) *Lastly, we can know that the seven letters cover seven phases of Christian history because of the evidence of fulfillment. Consistent with this principle we can look back from our day through nearly 2,000 years of Christian history to see any correlation with the sequence of events in the seven letters. When we do this we can definitely see a rich relationship that exists between the two. The seven letters, taken in order, march in step with the predominant experience of the Christian church during seven successive eras.*

Thursday – Message to The Church In Ephesus

Revelation 2:1-7

About Ephesus. Ephesus was the principal city in the Roman province of Asia. It wasn’t the capital. Pergamum was. It had a fine harbor, and its location at the head of an important east-west highway helped it become a strong commercial center.

Ephesus enjoyed wide respect also as a pagan religious center. Artemis, a many-breasted goddess of fertility also known as Diana, was worshipped there (Acts 19:35). Her magnificent temple was known to contemporaries as one of the Seven Wonders of the World.

Aquila and Priscilla, a dedicated lay couple, founded the Christian church in Ephesus. Apollos, an eloquent evangelist, also helped get it started. So did the apostle Paul (Acts 18:18-26). In fact, Paul spent three years in Ephesus. During two of those years he taught the Bible daily in a rented hall during the hot hours (11 AM to 4 PM) when city business slowed and the hall was otherwise unused (Acts 19:8-10; 20:31).

Because of the work of sharing Jesus with the people of Ephesus, many people stopped purchasing silver souvenirs of the goddess Diana. As a result the local silversmiths staged an anti-Christian riot (Acts 19:23-41).

Upon visiting the leaders of the Ephesus Christians some time later, Paul warned them that some of their own number would soon start teaching heresy (Acts 20:29, 30).

The Commendation. The church in Ephesus accepted Paul's counsel. Thirty years later, in the book of Revelation, Jesus commended them because... **Rev. 2:2a.** Or it could be said this way, "I know what you have done, and I also know the toil and perseverance that were necessary in doing it."

Rev. 2:2b, 6. Just as Paul said, individuals rose up on the church teaching contrary to the apostles teachings, but this church was ready to meet the untruths and the spirit of rebellion head on. Sadly, unlike the early church, the church today "bears," or endures false teachings and sinful practices in its midst supposedly for the sake of peace.

The church of Ephesus was commended for making a clear distinction between truth and error, whether in doctrine or in life, and for taking a firm stand against error. They even weren't afraid to test the teachings of those who professed to be apostles.

But God isn't looking for Christians who while defending truth and right carry an attitude and aren't patient and kind. **Rev. 2:3.** While the saints back then didn't put up with falsehood, they still bore long/had patience/were kind to those who brought the falsehood.

Now that's not easy to do. We often view those who work contrary to the gospel as the enemies of the gospel, and what do you normally do with an enemy? But Jesus said, "Love your enemies."

Who were the Nicolaitans? Irenaeus, a second-century minister, grew up near Ephesus and referred to them in one of his writings. The Nicolaitans claimed to be Christians, he said, but they considered it “a matter of indifference to practice adultery, and to eat things offered to idols.”

It appears then that the Nicolaitans were antinomian Christians—Christians who felt that faith in Jesus released them from obedience to some of the Ten Commandments, essentially making them against God’s law.

Jesus used strong language when He said that He “hated” the teachings of the Nicolaitans (see also Matt. 5:18-20; 7:21-23). It’s sobering to think that Christ has a low view of any teaching that undermines the law of God – that teaches a faith that releases a Christian from the obligation of obedience (think Sabbath, adultery, etc.). **The Rebuke Of Love.** We’re glad the church in Ephesus rejected the teachings of the Nicolaitans and followed the counsel of Paul. Apparently, however, they had not done well in regards to another piece of Paul’s advice. In **Rev. 2:4** Jesus rebuked them for losing their first love.

The flame of love eventually cooled. This love had to do with wholehearted love for God, love for His truth, love for one another as brethren, and love for humanity in general. Perhaps the doctrinal controversies stirred up by false teachers had given rise to an argumentative spirit.

Jesus considered this a sin of great magnitude because He said... **Rev. 2:5.** Jesus dealt tactfully, yet firmly with the church in Ephesus. He talked about their good qualities first, and then told them plainly about their bad ones. And He deals with each of us the same.

Perhaps you have lost your first love. This isn’t referring to a falling away from grace, nor a love that’s been extinguished, but a love that has been diminished. Which means there is hope. The fires of love have waned, like that flickering flame on a candle about to go out. What can be done about it?

It’s like that 1990s ad campaign for Kellogg’s Corn Flakes: “Kellogg’s Corn Flakes - Taste them again for the first time”. When it comes to your spiritual life, if you have lost the delight you once found in the Savior, then Jesus calls you to return to your first love--to “taste” Him again, as though for the first time.

The Reward. And the joy of restoring a first-love relationship is just the beginning of the rewards available to the Ephesus Christians. **Rev. 2:7.** Eternal life in Paradise. When Adam and Eve sinned they were barred from eating of the tree of life lest they sin and live forever (Gen. 2: 8, 9). But the garden and the tree weren’t destroyed. God preserved it for those who would overcome by the blood of Jesus. Don’t you want an eternity with God in Paradise?