

## **Letters To Seven Churches (Part One): Introduction**

### **A Form of Personal Communication**

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**Given 01-Dec-18; Sermon #1463**

Letters, the kind you write on real paper with a pen, are rapidly becoming a thing of the past. When was the last time you wrote a newsy letter to somebody far away? It seems that the closest I come anymore is to write something encouraging or pithy on a card that we send to somebody, or maybe it is to express some condolences. We just do not sit down and write letters like we used to. Most of our correspondence nowadays is in the form of emails or texts. Or maybe you are writing some kind of post on social media. We tend to type rather than write, and we can see it in our children. Many of them do not learn cursive anymore because that has gone out, with the typewriter coming in. The typewriter and the keyboard is more useful these days than actually being able to write in cursive.

But we are quickly losing all the good that can come from a well written letter. I am sure that even some of our kids do not even know how to write a letter or even how to address an envelope. It is just not something they are taught anymore because we hardly do it.

Letter writing was once considered an art, and if not an art, it was the mark of a cultured, educated individual. And throughout our history there have sometimes been some very rigid rules about the wording of certain parts of a letter, particularly the salutation and the closing. The address, the date, the salutation, the body, the closing all had to be in a certain form. It had to look set up properly, and other matters like post scripts and attachments, had to be dealt with in a proper way or the recipient of the letter might very well look down a very long and straight nose at the sender because he was not or she was not keeping up with the proper etiquette of letter writing.

Like I said, it was an art. It was a mark of a cultured person to be able to write a good letter and to present it in a proper way. Even the weight or the

quality and even the color of the stationary that one sent it in and the envelope were evaluated one way or another—that this was a quality individual, or this was a person who would send you the very least.

These days standards in this area have fallen dramatically. They are still used in business. There is a certain amount of this kind of letter writing going on, but it is not as important as it used to be. Nowadays, it is the resume and the cover letter that have to be perfect and normal business correspondence tends to be just kind of mediocre.

In II Samuel 11:14 is the Bible's first mention of a letter being written, and it might be one of history's first notices or whatever of a letter being written. The letter was written by King David to his general, Joab, instructing Joab to kill Uriah the Hittite, to set him up in the formation on the front line so that he would surely die. That is a very ominous start to letter writing, if you ask me. But since it is mentioned so matter of factly there in II Samuel 11 it is pretty certain that letter writing was a common practice already in 1000 BC when David lived, and it likely had been something that had been going on regularly for centuries. Homer even mentions letter writing in the *Illiad*. He wrote in 800 BC, and he supposedly wrote about things that happened in about 1200 BC. So, we are getting pretty far back in history.

Historians, who generally do not believe the Bible and do not credit it with anything, say that the first substantiated letter was written by a Persian queen named Atossa around 500 BC. That seems kind of late, if you ask me. But we can safely say that letter writing has been around since early antiquity, with evidence of it coming from places as far spread as India, Egypt, Sumer, Rome, Greece, and China. You know, the Chinese and the Japanese have very rigid rules about writing and calligraphy and that sort of thing, so they have taken it very seriously for many centuries.

Now, the need to write letters, that is to send private, secret, or personal information to another at a distance, may have been one of the reasons why we have writing at all. It might have been the reason why writing systems were created in the first place. Just think about it. It would be very difficult to rule a wide area of people without the ability to communicate your wishes, your commands, your decrees to those people that you were ruling over. You have to be able to find some way to transmit information and orders, so some

method had to be devised to do this so you could send a message to your chief lieutenant to tell him to attack a certain city or to guard a certain place. So symbols or marks of some kind that were recognized by both the sender and the receiver, scratched on wood or on a potsherd or something like that, or pressed into clay or wax, were likely mankind's first letters.

We know from the Bible that letters are significant, especially in the New Testament. But I have to mention that they are pretty important in the Old Testament too because there are several important letters that were written, or there are decrees that are given by various kings in books like Jeremiah, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther that are very important to God's record. I am thinking particularly of Jeremiah's letter to the exiles that he wrote after the fall of Jerusalem to tell them that it would be 70 years before they would be able to come back. Also the decrees of Cyrus and Darius and the other king of Xerxes who were telling the Jews certain things like, "Go back and build your temple" or "Go ahead and build a wall" or whatever it is.

There were a lot of communications going back and forth between peoples at that time, but in the New Testament it is ramped up significantly, this letter writing, such as the epistles of Paul. Most people who are more fundamentalist in their beliefs, and traditional, believe that he has 14 letters in the New Testament. Of course, you have to add the the epistles of the other apostles and when you come down to it, 21 out of 27 New Testament books are letters. Very significant. And Luke and Acts, if you read their introductions, you find that though they are technically not letters, they are more like biographies, or a history, those books seem to have been written under a cover letter to Theophilus, who had perhaps commissioned both of those books. We also should not forget that Jesus Himself writes seven letters to the churches in Revelation 2 and 3. So even the many of the books that are not letters actually have letters in them.

By the time of the Greeks and the Romans, and this is the period we are talking about, the first century, all Greek and Roman schools taught a similar formula for writing letters. There was a certain way it had to be done. So they began with a salutation—Hello, Hey, Greetings. But this salutation had to have certain elements in it. It had to identify the writer of the letter, and it

also had to identify the recipient of the letter. The salutation contained both elements and in our modern day we do not do it that way. We say, Dear Jim or whatever, and then at the end, we say who wrote the letter in our closing.

They did it differently so that the first thing you saw was who it was from and who it was addressed to. This salutation was often followed by a short greeting. "Greetings." That is often what it was, Greetings, and this was often followed, or included, thanksgiving for their health and safety. You know, saying something nice about them. "We hope you're doing well." "We hope that you prosper." "We hope that you are doing all the good things that will bring you blessings." Or they would actually ask for a blessing right there at the beginning of the letter. "May God bless you in all your endeavors" or whatever.

Next came the main body of the letter that the writer was trying to get across, his real message to whoever the recipient was. And after that was done, the author would conclude with another greeting. Often that is what it was again, "greetings" or "greetings from my wife" or greeting from this or that person, which also might include well wishes for good health, and they would also then say "farewell." That was often the formula that they used and New Testament writers follow this almost exclusively. There are a few letters that are not quite like that where they leave something out or whatever, but most of the New Testament letters follow this formula, this Greco-Roman formula to a T.

So we have an understanding of this, and I hope I am not treating it too much like you do not understand. But I want to show you in an epistle how this works. We are going to look at the book of Philemon for a moment to see how Paul used this same formula in this letter. We could have gone to pretty much any one of Paul's letters to see how he wrote these letters. The only one that would not have worked would have been the book of Hebrews. But we will see this in Philemon. We are just going to read a few verses to get the sense of how he used these various parts of the formula.

**Philemon 1-3** Paul [He is the the writer, the author. He describes himself], a prisoner of Christ Jesus and Timothy our brother [Timothy is also included as one of the authors of this letter], to Philemon [Now he tells who he is addressing it to, who is supposed

to receive this] our beloved friend and fellow laborer, to the beloved Apphia, Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house [This letter has multiple authors and multiple recipients, and they are all there, right in the first two verses. And then we get to this place where we have a short greeting.]: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

He does not use "Greetings" in this one. He does in a couple other letters where it will actually say "Greetings." But this "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" includes that as a greeting, includes thanksgiving and invokes a blessing on them, "Grace and peace" from God and the Son.

We could go through and read verses 4-22 but I will not because that is the body of Paul's letter. Paul writes to Philemon to get him to accept the fact that Onesimus, who used to be his slave and who ran away from Philemon, came and found Paul and he was converted. And he is asking Philemon to accept Onesimus, not as his former slave necessarily, but as a brother in Christ. Because Onesimus had done wonderful things for Paul. He had helped him in many ways, and he wanted to make sure that Onesimus going back to Philemon was not going to cause any kind of rift either between Onesimus and Philemon, or between Philemon and Paul. He wanted to make sure that all of this was worked out properly. So he wrote in this letter and said, make sure Philemon gets this before Onesimus gets there so that all of this will be understood. And Paul masterfully writes this letter using psychology to help Philemon accept Onesimus as a brother.

But then we get to verse 23, which is when Paul begins closing the letter. So he says, "Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus greets you [So there is new greetings at the end of the letter], as do Mark, Aristarchas, Demas, Luke, my fellow laborers. [And then he adds the ending, which includes these well wishes.] The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen."

So that is the general way a letter would go in the Greco-Roman world. This is very typical of how one would be written. This is how Paul wrote most of his letters. And because of this, because of the way it is followed so well, so strongly in the Bible, that is why they balk at Hebrews because it is not

written like one of these. It is a little bit different. It starts out more like a treatise, that is one side of an argument, almost like it is a term paper, something where he is arguing one opinion. But then when you get to chapter 13 it ends like a letter, with all the the things that are supposed to be in a formal letter. So they are saying, "Yeah, maybe it sounds like Paul at the end, but maybe not in the first part. But, like I said, all of his other letters, as well as those from James and Peter and John and Jude pretty much followed this same formula. You know, when you first start to read a letter in the Bible that that is what it is. It is a letter, an epistle.

And then I did mention that there are letters that are not one book by themselves. Let us go to the book of Acts, chapter 15. We have read both of these letters in a recent sermon. It is the letter of James to the Gentiles.

**Acts 15:22-24** Then it pleased the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas, namely, Judas who was also named Barsabas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren. They wrote this letter by them: The apostles, the elders, and the brethren [That is who wrote it.], To the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia: Greetings. Since we have heard that some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls, saying, "You must be circumcised and keep the whole law"—to whom we gave no such commandment.

This is the body of the letter, what they are trying to mostly get across. We will drop down to verse 29. He is talking about these things that they told him not to do.

**Acts 15:29** [T]hat you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. [This was the blessing. And then he says] Farewell.

So James and the others who wrote this letter used the same format. Let us go to chapter 23 and we will go over a letter that Martin mentioned in his

sermons from a Roman centurion, who is writing to the governor Felix about Paul's being imprisoned with him. We will just read verses 25-26, and we will see that this letter is written the exact same way.

**Acts 23:25-26** He wrote a letter in the following manner: Claudius Lysias, To the most excellent governor Felix: Greetings. [And then he goes and talks about Paul in his situation.]

Let us just drop down to verse 30, skipping over the body of the letter.

**Acts 23:30** And when it was told me that the Jews lay in wait for the man, I sent him immediately to you, and also commanded his accusers to state before you the charges against him. Farewell.

So pretty much the same. This is more like an interoffice memo as it would be today. Some officer sending to his commander or his the governor of the region, telling him what was going on. There is not a whole lot of flowery stuff going on, not the blessings and such, but it is written essentially the same way. So it looks like everybody did it this way. This was just the way it was done, and our formal letters today are influenced by the letters of the Enlightenment period, like the letters of Washington or the letters of Jefferson or Adams and those men and others which were influenced by their classical reading, which they did quite a bit of. They read a lot of Roman and Greek stuff in their education. That has come down to us because our format of letters is remarkably similar. Like Solomon said, "There is nothing new under the sun."

Now that we are thoroughly educated on historical letter writing, we will plunge into the aforementioned letters to the seven churches. That will be my subject over the next several sermons. I do not know how many sermons it is going to be right now. It looks like it might be five—if I stick to my schedule. Who knows if I will, but I am going to try. But this particular sermon will be an introduction to the overall subject of the letters to the seven churches, and we will get into the nitty-gritty of the letters themselves in subsequent sermons.

I am going to try hard to do two letters for each sermon so next time would be Ephesus and Smyrna, then Pergamos and Thyatira, and then Sardis and

Philadelphia, and then Laodicea and a conclusion in the final sermon. We will see if I can stick to this. There is a lot of stuff in these letters, so just hold onto your hats. I know that we have been over these letters to the seven churches a lot. We have especially been over the ones to Philadelphia and Laodicea, and we know them pretty well. We could probably recite them or at least get a lot of the same phrases right. If I put you on the spot right now and said, "OK, tell me what Revelation 3:17 says" you think about it and you could probably tell me basically what it says.

But what I want to do is to look at these letters from a new viewpoint. And that is why I started with letter writing because I want to look at them as *letters* first and foremost. What is their content in terms of what is being said, rather than as being prophecy. I know Revelation is a book of prophecy, and that is going to be difficult. Sometimes the line will be very thin between actual letter content and the prophecy. I will probably be doing some speculating here and there about the prophetic parts of it. But I want to explain what is in the letter rather than try to really explain the prophecy—if you understand how I am thinking there. So I want to explain them as letters and their content first, and then how prophecy impinges on these things as we go. So that is secondary, to me.

It is important that we understand the letters to the seven churches in context, context is very important. Obviously, they appear in the 2nd and 3rd chapters of the book of Revelation, meaning they are right at the beginning of Revelation. And there is a reason why they are right at the beginning of Revelation. The context is key. Revelation itself, the book, I mean, the Apocalypse, as it is in Greek, is a book of unveiling, of disclosure. Most people think of Revelation as a book of weird symbols that they do not understand. But God put this book in the Bible, not to hide anything, but to disclose it, to reveal it. That is why it is called *Revelation*. The meaning of "apocalypse" in Greek, which is "revelation" in English, has to do with opening it up and making it understandable. So He is giving us the book of Revelation to teach us something, opening something up, revealing it to us. But like He did in the parables, our Savior likes to couch things in language that only those who He tells the symbols to can understand. It is open to those that He reveals the mysteries to, whom He gives the keys to the understanding of a certain thing. But it is very closed and dense, and not understandable to those who are not in on it.



Let us go back to Matthew 13 just to pick up this principle from the parables, to see how Jesus words it there.

**Matthew 13:10** And the disciples came and said to Him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" He answered and said to them [His disciples], "Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given."

To disciples of Jesus Christ they have been given the key to unlock these things. They have been given permission to understand. They have been put in a place to understand and given all the tools to understand. But these other people who are listening in or reading and have not been given this wonderful gift, will not understand. They may get a sense of it just from the plain words that are used, but they will not really understand the heart of what Jesus is really trying to get across.

**Matthew 13:12** "For whoever has, to him more will be given, and he will have abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him."

This really makes a great separation between those who have been given the keys and those who have not. Those who have been given the keys are promised that their understanding is going to grow *greatly*. While those who do not understand, who have not been given the keys, they are going to be totally flummoxed, and even what they think they understand they will never get verification for until they become part of what we are. So in a sense, they lose it all.

**Matthew 13:13-15** "Therefore I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. And in them the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled, which says: 'Hearing you will hear and shall not understand, and seeing you will see and not perceive; for the heart of this people has grown dull. Their ears are hard of hearing, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, lest they should understand with their heart and turn, so that I should heal them.'"

This gives us a great clue about where Jesus is going with these mysteries, the keys to the mysteries. We have been given these things because He is turning us to Him. He is changing our hearts. So these things that He is giving are not just fulfillment of prophecy, so that we can have an intellectual knowledge of how they work. He is giving these things to us to change our hearts, to change our direction. He is more interested in the spiritual side of these things rather than, let us say, in a prophecy, the physical fulfillment of those things. He wants us prepared for these times and then, more than that, prepared for His Kingdom. So He is closing off the understanding of these things to those whom He has not called because it is worthless to them. They have closed their eyes. They will not hear because of their hardness of heart.

But to those whose eyes He has opened, whose ears He has opened, whose hearts He has opened, these are fundamental, spiritual things that He wants His people to know, to understand, and to put into practice. Because He is working out a work to bring us to salvation, and these keys to the mysteries of the Kingdom of God are going to help us get there. But they are worthless to those He has not called yet. So, He says,

**Matthew 13:16-17** "But blessed are your eyes for they see, and your ears for they hear [Yes, we have been given a *huge* blessing by God to have these things opened up to us.], for assuredly, I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it."

It is our possession of the Holy Spirit which has opened up our minds, combined with our trust, our faith in God's Word, in its Author, and in its consistency so that we can have faith in what it says, that allows us to understand the mysteries revealed to those who have eyes to see and ears to hear. We have faith that these things in the Book have been written by one fantastically brilliant mind, and He has put all of these things together and all the clues that we need so that we can understand these things once our mind is opened.

This does not mean that we will understand them fully. I do not think we have come to that point yet. I do not think we have them completely figured out. We still have questions, but if we get out of our own way and if we trust God, we at least will have a solid grasp of what God, Christ, is trying to get across to us and how, then, to put them into our lives so that they help us along the way. I think we have done a fair amount of good over the past 25 or so years explaining the parables. We are beginning to understand how they really are supposed to work and what they really mean.

And I think we need to apply more of this to the prophecies so that we understand them in these terms as helps toward the Kingdom of God, rather than just being right about a speculation of how they are going to be fulfilled. That is probably the least thing that is important in the end.

I started off this section of the sermon talking about context, so I wanted to get that principle firmly in mind as we go into the context of Revelation 1. So if you would turn their please to Revelation 1, we are going to start peeling back some layers of the context here, so we can then fit the letters in. Actually, Revelation kind of starts like a letter. At least there is an introduction and once you get into about verse 4, you see that John addresses it like a letter. But let us just read the first three verses here.

**Revelation 1:1-3** The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show His servants—things which must shortly take place. And He sent and signified it by His angel to his servant John, who bore witness to the word of God, and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, to all things that he saw. Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written in it; for the time is near.

This is packed with a lot of stuff, and I do not know that I am going to unpack it all. But first of all, what this does is confirm the idea that God intended this book, the book of Revelation, as a *disclosure of vital information*. I mean, think about it The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God, meaning the Father, gave Him to show His servants. This comes from the very top! This is the first thing, the first bit of information that were given in this book of Revelation. That it is certified from God the Father to

be given to us through Jesus Christ because it is very, very important. It is vital to us. It is something special. It is a special instruction, if you will, from the Father to the Son to us.

It is supposed to show us something. It is supposed to warn us about something. It is supposed to prepare us about something, and then he tells us *what* it is. It is for those things that are shortly going to take place, or will quickly take place. That is how the margin has it. So he hits us with this immediately. "Hey, this is something special. Listen up! This is a communique from the Father. It is something you need."

Then in verse 3, "Blessed is he who reads" or "hear the words of this prophecy and keep those things which are written in it." So as the book begins, God confers a blessing on those who read and hear—who pay attention to what is being said and who keep. I think that *keep* is the most important part of that. *Keep* what He reveals.

You know what this tells me? It tells me that it is not just information. It is not just times or dates or places. This is spiritual instruction. This is something that is going to help us as we move toward our complete salvation in the Kingdom of God. This is stuff that is going to help us along the way. And though it is couched in terms of prophecy, there is a lot of good, deep spiritual meat there, and we need to keep it, observe it, handle it properly, use it. Because what He says here is going to be very important for us to have in our arsenal whenever these things begin to take place. Like I said, not just names and dates and places, but the spiritual armor, the spiritual weaponry, the spiritual nutrition, the spiritual "get up and go" that these things teach us. In the book of Revelation they are going to be very important.

So what we have here, in wrapping up the canon of the Bible, is the Father and the Son's special instruction for His people as a *final* warning and aid to prepare us for His Kingdom. This was no afterthought book. This was precisely prepared for us. And it is something that we, and especially those who are right on the cusp of the Day of the Lord and the return of Christ, need to know inside and out if we are going to make it through. Of course, He wants us to make it through. That is His job, Christ's especially. It is His job to help us to endure to the end and to be saved. That is what he is

working out. And so They put this book together through the visions of John the apostle so that we would have this warning and this instruction. Let us pick up in verse four, where we left off. We will read down through verse eight. This is another paragraph.

**Revelation 1:4-8** [This is where it starts to sound more like a letter.] John, to the seven churches which are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from Him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler over the kings of the earth. To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood, and has made us kings and priests [or a kingdom of priests] to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. Behold, He is coming with clouds, and every eye will see Him, even they who pierced Him. And all the tribes of the earth will mourn because of Him. Even so, Amen. "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End," says the Lord, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty."

This is a slam bang crescendo of an opening, if you know what I mean. This is like the orchestra coming to a fever pitch, almost, because what is being said here is so significant and important.

Now I want you to notice here that as we begin this in verse four that John addresses this to the seven churches themselves. The whole book is for the seven churches, not just of specific letters in chapters two and three. But the whole book is to the seven churches, and we know the number seven is a number of completion. In other words, we could say that in the symbolism here He is saying: John, to the whole church, to everybody in the church of God, to the whole organization, the whole spiritual organism that is the church. You need this information, you need this instruction.

Now the majority text and the modern critical text do not include the phrase that is after that "which are in Asia," and I tend to agree that it probably should not be there, because if you have it as the seven churches which are in Asia, then it is just down to these few churches there that are on the coast, the first 100 miles of western Asia Minor in what is now Turkey, And you

know, Turkey is a Muslim nation, and there are hardly any true Christians there. Why would God the Father send all this information to just a few people on the western shores of Turkey. It does not make sense. It makes more sense that He sent it to all the churches. This was supposed to be worldwide—global. All the people in the world are supposed to receive this message. I mean, it has been 1800 years or so since there were true churches that in that area. But now there are true Christians all around the world. They were the ones that need this information.

Remember years ago Worldwide put out that Feast film about the seven churches in Asia. It was probably back in mid-80s sometime, and Art Gilmore was talking about these seven churches were along a mail route in Western Asia Minor and it is true that the this book was probably *first* passed along that mail route that went from Ephesus to Thyatira to Laodicea, and you know that makes sense. Those were the church's under the apostle John's purview at the time, they would have gotten this directly from John at some point, and they would have passed it along from church to church to church.

But it did not end there. It eventually got written, copied, sent all over the Christian world, and now it is part of the Bible and has been for many, many hundreds of years, nearly 2000 years. So it is more than likely that we are looking at here is the mail route and these seven churches being a symbol of the whole church—that this was passed along to the seven churches to symbolize the fact that it was going to the whole church. The number seven is a number of completion, so it it's directed there to those seven churches as a symbol of going to the whole of Christianity. True Christianity, I should say.

Now back here in Revelation 1:4-8. Let us think of this personally. You are a true Christian. You are one of these, you are a member of one of these seven churches, and you are getting personal greetings from the Father and from the Son. Grace to you and peace from Him who is and who was and who is to come. Also, the seven Spirits chime in, who are before God's throne. And of course, the longest bit is about the greetings from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, firstborn from the dead, ruler over the kings of the earth. And He is also the one who loved us, who washed us from our sins in His own blood.

Can you understand? Can you get the feeling of the personal relationship here that is trying to be emphasized by this introduction? John is just the messenger. His name appears first because he was the one that was writing it down and passing it along. But God and His Son want us to read this so that we we believe, we know that this is direct communication from the Father and the Son to us. Yes, They did this for us? Yes, the Father is the Great God of all the universe and He has done all of these things. And yes, Jesus Christ has done this, and this, and this for us. We need to understand that.

But they are also personal to us. They are our Father and they are our Elder Brother, and they are giving us something very important here. They do not want us to treat it lightly. And so they wrote a letter to us *personally*. It is like they got together around a table and wrote it for Themselves and handed it to John. It happened to occur a little bit differently than that but this is the feeling They want you to have as you read this, that this is personal information from Them that we need to understand. And They give their stamp of approval on these things and They highlight its important by the wording that is in here.

And then verse seven just *jumps* out. It jumps out to me, puts the book in its proper time frame and ratchets up the imminence of Christ return. "Behold, He is coming with clouds!" I mean, it just seems to come out of the blue. They had been giving this salutation from the Father, from the seven Spirits, from Jesus Christ and this is what He has done, may we have glory and dominion forever and ever, Amen. And then *behold, look*, it is supposed to grab your attention. "Hey, He's coming. Don't ever let that slip from your mind." Also here, "after behold He is coming," he says, "the world's not going to like this." Those who pierced Him, those who were His enemies, and all the tribes of the earth will mourn. Look, this is not going to be a good time. Yes, He is coming, and that is wonderful. But this is a time of great tumult, of there is not going to be any peace in the world. There is going to be natural disasters happening here, there, and everywhere. Well, natural. I should put that in air quotes.

There is going to be things happening all over the world, armies and what not, and it is going to be terrible, and people are going to be mad at *God*. They think He is the one that is doing all of these things and partially they

are right. But they do not understand that they deserve every bit of it because of their sins. And so he says, right there the verse 7, he says. "Even so, Amen." So be it. You know, if that is the way it is going to be, then that is the way it is going to be. So be it.

Okay, now what? Now that we know it is going to be a glorious time of Christ's coming, but yes, full of all these terrible things that everybody is going to be mad at God. And if they cannot strike out a God, who are they going to strike out? Well, it is going to be those who believe God and especially those who keep His commandments and all those things and are His true servants. It is going to be rough! But even so, we will take care of it. We will get through it.

How? "I am the Alpha and the Omega." That is your answer right there. "The Beginning and the End," says the Lord, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty." The ones on our side are much more powerful than what the other side has. There is no comparison. So Jesus here chimes in with His name, the name of God, the name of God that sanctifies us, that saves us, that secures us. That is the answer to how we get through this—the Almighty, eternal one who is everything. That is how we could rephrase what He said here—the Almighty, eternal one who is everything to us. He is the one that is going to save us. He is the one that is going to get us through this. By the way, this first and last, Beginning and the End, all that is a merism or a series of merisms. It means first and last and everything in between—the beginning, the end, and everything in between. So what He is saying to us is that He is *everything*. He is everything to us. And so if we trust in Him, we will get through this terrible time.

Like I said, this is a crescendo of an opening. It is supposed to shake us. It is supposed to rattle us. It is supposed to excite us, supposed to make us feel like, yeah, God is right here. He knows me. He is writing a letter to me. He is giving me a warning and help so that I will make it through this time. So if we think of it that way, we come away from verse eight in awe of Him and the Father, of course. But mostly it is concentrating on Christ because He is the one who works with us most intimately. And we know that the coming revelation that is in the rest of the chapters of these books is something that we can trust. But we need to treat it with respect and the seriousness that it deserves. Because, like I said, this is a personal letter to us giving us all the



information that we are going to need to make it into the Kingdom of God through this terrible time.

It is not any kind of wacky, phantasmagoric dream like some people think it is, that John was just out there on the beach, maybe had a little bit too much rum and had these weird dreams that he wrote down. It is not that at all. He may have had some visions, but they were very specific and orchestrated visions so that this information could be passed on to us in a way that it would be make sense to us and not to others.

So the book of Revelation is a true, spiritual, vital warning and a teaching tool. It is not just the warring, it is not just a prophecy, but it is there to teach us something, to get us ready. And it has the unqualified backing of our great Savior and High Priest and His Father, so we can trust it. Let us go on in verse 9. We will read the first three verses here.

**Revelation 1:9-11** I, John, both your brother and companion in tribulation and kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was on the island that is called Patmos for the word of God and for the testimony of Jesus Christ. I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day, and I heard behind me a loud voice, as of a trumpet, saying, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last," and "What you see, write in a book and send it to the seven churches which are in Asia: to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamos, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea."

John, after this crescendo of a beginning, provides the setting for us. He lets us know the physical time and place and that sort of thing. He tells us who is—John. He is the one who is writing this, so he tells us who the writer is. He tells us the place, the Isle of Patmos, and he tells us the time that he is writing about, not writing in, but about the: Day of the Lord, or the Lord's Day as it is put in most English Bibles.

Now notice when John tells about himself giving us his bona fides, if you will. He doesn't say John the apostle who was with Jesus from the very first, who did this, and that, and the other thing throughout his long life in his illustrious career. He pastored these churches, started this church, did that, did this. No, it does not say any of that. He says, "I, John, your brother and

companion in tribulation and kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ." That is how he identifies himself. A brother and a companion, not some highfalutin leader with all kinds of authority. He does not approach it that way at all. I mean, think of it. This was written in the mid-90s AD he was the last and only apostle left. He was the big guy. The big kahuna, the head of the organization, the Pastor General, the chief apostle. You name all the titles we could give him. He did not come out at it that way. "I'm your brother. I'm your companion, the one who suffers alongside you, the one who is patiently striving toward the Kingdom of God with the help of Jesus Christ."

So he does not try to fluff his resume at all or make us try to do something because of his authority. He just comes at it, at us, as a brother, as a servant of Christ doing his job despite the suffering that he or we may be going through. He puts himself on our level and says, "We're all in this together. This is just as much for you as it is for me." You get the sense of humility from him that this is one of the chief ways that we are going to move through this book, understanding that we are just human. We all need this instruction and that we need to bow toward God and respect Him for giving us this precious information.

Then he goes on and tells us that he received all of this information while he was an exile on the Isle of Patmos. It is an island in the Aegean Sea. It was often used by Roman emperors to exile certain people, people who are not worthy of death. They had not been seditious or anything, but they needed to be taken out of the way for certain political or whatever reasons, so they would be put into exile at Patmos and be given fairly extensive freedoms on the island. They just could not leave. They just had to stay there. So in this way such people could be gotten out of the way, put in a corner on a small island somewhere where they could not make any more trouble for a while. And so John evidently was one of these people. He had been preaching and it had come to the emperor or someone in charge, and they said, "Well, he's really not worthy of death. He's not preaching sedition against the throne, against the emperor, but he's a little embarrassing to have around. So we will just put on Patmos and take care of the problem there."

And finally, he tells us that he was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day. Now, a less literal but more understandable translation or rendition of this would be, "I received this information through God's Spirit *about* the day of the Lord."

That is not literal, but that is essentially what he is trying to get across, that God had plucked him up from this time and given him a vision of how it would be when He returned and the times before and after. He was supposed to write what he saw and bring it back to the present.

So he was in the Day of the Lord in the vision. But it was not Sunday. He is not trying to tell us which day of the week it was. He was trying to tell us what the subject or the time period of these prophecies are, and it is the Day of the Lord. He is telling us about the time of the end, the day or the time of God's intervention in world affairs to usher in the Kingdom. That is what this is about. That last great push of God's enemies against Him, and God's response, and then, of course, God defeating them and setting up His Kingdom on this earth. This is the crucial subject, the Day of the Lord, that He wants the members of the seven churches to know and to keep. It is very important that they know about this particular time in history and how to endure it, how to get through it.

Let us go to verse 12. This is after he had been given the order to get this to the seven churches.

**Revelation 1:12-20** Then I turned to see the voice that spoke with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the seven lampstands One like the Son of Man, clothed with a garment down to the feet and girded about the chest with a golden band. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and His eyes like a flame of fire; His feet were like fine brass, as if refined in a furnace, and His voice as the sound of many waters; He had in His right hand seven stars, out of His mouth went a sharp two-edged sword, and His countenance was like the sun shining in its strength. And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as dead. But He laid His right hand on me, saying to me, "Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and of Death. Write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after this. The mystery of the seven stars which you saw in My right

hand, and the seven golden lampstands: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands which you saw are the seven churches."

There is a lot here, and I have gone through it very quickly because I do not intend to spend a lot of time on it. It is very important, though, that we understand what we have seen here. So what it is that John describes here is the glorified Jesus Christ standing amid the seven lampstands, which we find in verse 20 are the seven churches. It is a vision, a sight of Jesus Christ *inside the church* doing His work of bringing us salvation. It is like, what is what is Jesus doing now? And this is what we are directed to see, that Jesus is at work. He is in the midst of His church. Remember, seven is a number of completion, so He is in the *whole* church, He is working through and with the whole church doing His job, which is to bring each individual into the Kingdom of God, to make sure that they are saved.

So in the description of Jesus within the church here, we are given a vision to help us grasp His power, His glory, His beauty, His Majesty, His Holiness, and His pure awesomeness, if you wanted to say it like that. This is a wonderful, just glorious Being! And He is in and among us, and He is working. His Father works and He works. He is working to bring us to salvation. And this is punctuated, this awesomeness that we see here, by John falling senseless at His feet. It is so overwhelming that he cannot take it. His human body just shuts down because he is looking at this glorified Jesus Christ and he is totally in awe. This super powerful, glorious immortal Being is working in us—with us.

How can you lose? How can these things not come to pass that he says will come to pass and the same kind of reaction that John had, maybe not quite falling senseless at His feet, but this is the kind of reaction that *we* should have to Christ. The living, exalted, powerful Jesus Christ, our High Priest is there and He is always there, and He is working with us constantly. And as members of the seven churches, part of the church of God, the true church of God, we are to keep this glorious Personage in mind. Forefront of the mind, as we read the instruction that He gives in the letters. That is why this vision is first. *Who* is writing the letter? *Who* is giving the instruction? *Who* is telling you what you need to do to make it? It is this glorious One, this awesome holy God, who is telling you these things? This is the awe and

respect that we need to have when we read the letters to the seven churches because they are personal from Him.

He reminds us of this in the letters because He identifies Himself as the one who is writing the letter.

**Revelation 2:1** "To the angel of the church of Ephesus write, 'These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands.'

What does he do? He takes us right back to this vision in the first chapter and says, "This is the one who's writing this letter to you. Listen up."

So when we read the letters to the seven churches, He has to be right there at the forefront of our mind. We have to know that He is the one who is speaking, and He has all this power to help us and to punish us, to correct us, to rebuke us. We have got to understand that this is the One who is driving the information of this book, and particularly the letters to the seven churches, as we will be going through.

Verse 20 speaks of the seven stars being the angels of the seven churches. This is a rather big controversy among commentators. They cannot figure out who the angels are because angel is a rather nebulous term. It is Greek, *angelos*, which literally means a messenger or an envoy or one who is sent. The verb form, *angelo*, means to deliver a message. It could imply all kinds of things. You can imply a guardian or representative, in addition to some of those other things that I mentioned already. Messenger, envoy, one who is sent. We know that is often used for spirit beings, both those who are servants of God, as well as those who are now God's enemies. Remember the angels who sinned?

So it is uncertain whether Christ means a human messenger or a leader or some sort of representative or a spiritual guardian of some sort. You know, like Michael the archangel is over Israel. You find that in Daniel 12:1. Most likely, though, it is a human representative of some sort that He is talking about.

I do want to mention in the time that I have got left, that there is a slim possibility, and I mean *slim*, and I am not going to say that this is so, but it makes it even more personal to us if it is the case. Mostly this particular possibility is disregarded by the commentators because they do not think that it is possible. But it could be that angel refers to each individual representative or member of the church. So if you are among Ephesus, you are an angel of the church in Ephesus. If you are of Smyrna, you are an angel of the church in Smyrna. Now, I do not know if this is the case.

Back in Daniel 12 again and verse 3. The wise are seen to be stars and stars, of course, is the symbol we are talking about here as angels. But if we look at it this way, that the letter is addressed personally to each one of us, His praise, His warnings, and His rebukes become extremely personal and intimate. But if nothing else (Remember, I said, this is a very slim possibility, so I am not going to say that that is what it is.), it is something to consider as we study. You know, the old "put your name in this verse and see how it applies to you" sort of thing.