

An Introduction to the Letters to the Seven Churches

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Revelation 1–3

Our purpose in this talk is to introduce to our thinking the topic of our Lord's letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor, as we find them in the book of Revelation. We begin by reading some verses from the beginning of the book and then from the close of the book.

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.

John to the seven churches that 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 of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen. Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen. 'I am the Alpha and the Omega,' says the Lord God, 'who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.'

I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet saying, 'Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea.' Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man.

...

'I, Jesus, have sent my angel to testify to you about these things for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.' The Spirit and the Bride say, 'Come.' And let the one who hears say, 'Come.' And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price. I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book. He who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming soon.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen. (Rev 1:1–13, 22:16–21)

Let me first say a brief word about the book in which these letters are found. The book of the Revelation is in fact the personal testimony of the Lord Jesus Christ. If you enjoy testimony meetings—hearing your fellow Christians testify to what Christ has done for them, and you get hope that he shall do likewise for you—then you should enjoy this book much more so, for it is a kind of testimony. It is the testimony of Jesus Christ our Lord, of what God is doing for him at this present moment and shall yet do for him.

Our blessed Lord is the supreme testimony bearer. Chapter one reminds us that he is the faithful and true witness. On earth, that witness cost him his life. Before Pontius Pilate he witnessed the good confession (1 Tim 6:13) and it led him directly to the sacrifice of his life. How it warms our hearts then to hear him now in resurrection bearing witness again, to us his people who share his patience and sometimes his sufferings, to what God will yet do for him. ‘Behold, he is coming with the clouds’ (Rev 1:7). ‘The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ’ (11:15). It must cheer every Christian’s heart to hear our Lord testify that God is faithful. He was faithful to God in his testimony until death. God has raised him and will yet vindicate him, ‘He shall have dominion also from sea to sea’ (Ps 72:8 KJV).

It is encouraging too, to hear him testify to what God is doing for him now in this age. If you ask yourself the questions, ‘Where is Jesus Christ now?’ and ‘What is he doing now?’, the books of the New Testament will give you varying answers. All of them are true of course. Many books will tell you that Jesus Christ our Lord is enthroned, seated at the right hand of the Father. That is perfectly true. Other books will tell you that our blessed Lord stands in the presence of God to intercede for his people. He has entered into the holiest of all, he makes intercession and ‘is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him’ (Heb 7:25). That is likewise true. But when we come to the book of the Revelation, where is Jesus Christ our Lord now?

This book will reply that he is on earth. John saw him on earth. John was on the isle of Patmos, which is very literally on earth. It was a kind of prison to which John was banished by the authorities to be under house arrest, very much on earth. On that very island did John hear the voice and feel the hand of the risen Lord upon his shoulder, and see him on earth? You say, ‘It was a vision, surely.’ It was indeed a vision. Then we have to ask, was it a vision of something real or a vision of something made up? When John saw those lovely lampstands and a figure walking among them, and felt a hand upon his shoulder, was it merely a dream of infant unreality, a fit of imagination, or was it a vision of something real? Was there actually someone there? Was it a warm, living hand that touched him?

There could be no doubt about the answer. Symbols though they be that are used to describe the Lord Jesus, those symbols are describing something exceedingly real. As we sit here, is it not true that that same figure has drawn near, is watching our words, leading our prayers, rebuking our sins, ready to lay his hand of comfort upon our shoulders?

The book of the Revelation is for many people a difficult book. One reason is that it is full of symbols, sometimes very difficult symbols—beasts and dragons and angels. Yet we shouldn’t complain too much about the symbols, because they needn’t be quite as difficult as sometimes we make them. There are many symbols in these letters, so let’s think now what they are for. They are not there to make life difficult or to make plain truth mysterious. Nor

are they there to make simple things complicated. You say, 'But Mr Preacher, I wish that the thing had been written in simple language. Why do we have to have all those visions of beasts and things, harlots and whatnot? Why couldn't we have been told who the man in this is, just like that? His name is James Smith or somebody, or whatever. Then it would have been very simple. Why do we have to ask, "Who is this beast?"'

Well, of course, if you will persist in coming to it that way, it will be difficult. That's not really the right way to read the book of Revelation, to constantly ask, 'What is this particular symbol—who is it?' Let me take two symbols to use as an illustration. In chapter 5 we hear John speaking of the vision he had of the throne room of heaven. He saw a vision of God sitting upon his throne with a book in his hand, and a loud voice cried, 'Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?' (v. 2). And presently another voice proclaimed, 'The Lion of the tribe of Judah . . . has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals' (v. 5).

Now you're saying, 'I wish it wouldn't talk in symbols like that. Who is this lion? That's what I want to know. What does it stand for?' And somebody who's knowledgeable says, 'Well, the lion is a symbol of the Lord Jesus.' And you say, 'Why didn't it say the Lord Jesus in the first place, then we would all have known at once what it meant? Why muddle things up by calling him a lion?' Then we proceed to the very next verse and John looks around and he says, 'I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain' (v. 6). And you say, 'There's another one of these symbols. Now, what is this lamb?' And another knowledgeable Christian will come along and say, 'Well, the lamb is really the Lord Jesus.' And you say, 'Why couldn't the Bible have said the Lord Jesus and then we needn't have troubled about all these mysterious symbols?'

I wonder if that's how you feel. Of course not, because you knew it was the Lord Jesus to start with! But why then do we have the symbols? Well, because the Lord Jesus is someone exceedingly magnificent and marvellous, there are wonders and depths about his personality that God would have us enjoy.

A man courting his wife-to-be, if you're not careful, will break out into poetry and he'll say, 'My pearl, my lotus flower!' and all this kind of stuff. And you'll say, 'She's not really a pearl or a lotus flower,' but you know what he's trying to get across. He's discovered all sorts of wonderful things and he's using these symbols to get it across.

And when the Holy Spirit wants to talk to us about our blessed Lord, what else can he do but use symbols to move our imaginations and get our dull old hearts working to perceive these things in Christ? If we aren't careful, we might think of our Lord Jesus as the carpenter of Nazareth and no more. God lets us hear the mighty roar of that king of beasts, the lion. Can you imagine a lion roaring? His majestic mane and his tail wagging, his roar silencing every other beast in the forest. If you can imagine one of those—not one of those tame affairs up in the zoo, but a real lion—now you have the beginnings of your imagination stirred to see something about the Lord Jesus. Is there something in his character that's like that? Oh, if I could get hold of it! I can hear him roar with his kingly voice of authority; Lion of the tribe of Judah that he is, he shall yet come out on top. You may think that this modern world is still very much of a jungle, but there is a king of beasts and the Lion of the tribe of Judah has prevailed.

So why then call him a lamb? What a marvellous thing that is about Christ! This world has seen some very powerful rulers and dictators. Even the nations use symbols, like the Russian bear. Did you ever know a nation that used the symbol of a lamb, or another monarch that used the symbol of a lamb to represent himself? I don't know of any. Oh the wonder of the character of Jesus Christ our Lord; although he is a lion, yet there is about him the tenderness and innocence of a little lamb who, for our sakes, allowed himself to be butchered and torn by evil men, and he gave his life for our sins. There is a marvellous balance in him, so that in these chapters, particularly the chapters relating to the churches, when we come across the symbols we shall be wise men and women if we enjoy them. Let them work our imaginations, picture what they are talking about and we shall find them a rare feast of good things.

The book of the Revelation can be divided into two parts: what's present and what's future. In our Lord's letters to the seven churches we are going to deal with what's present. As the Son of Man he walks among them, as John saw him, to exalt them, to encourage them, to correct them, rebuke them, to reward them. Our blessed Lord wrote a letter to each one of them individually: to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamos, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia and to Laodicea. We're going to think, therefore, of him and what he was doing to those churches, and his relationship with them.

First of all then, let us notice that the vision was of two components. There were these seven lampstands on the one hand, and then there was the figure of our Lord in the midst of them. John saw them in that order; he saw first of all the lampstands, but he doesn't appear to have asked, 'Now, what do these lampstands represent?' Perhaps he was wise. It might have spoiled his enjoyment if he'd asked that too quickly. Can you picture the vision? He turned and he saw seven golden lampstands. Few people could afford golden lampstands in their homes and these would have been glowing with a glow and a light, the source of which John wouldn't immediately have perceived. What beautiful objects, themselves a light—seven stars—all with a lovely glow of light and glitter that came from the sheer worth of solid gold. What a delightful vision it was. Must you know what they represent? All right, if you can face it!

They represented seven churches. I wonder whether John would have immediately recognised them as such, because, when our blessed Lord allows us to listen in to what he had to say to some of them, they were in a sorry state. But when our Lord wanted to use a symbol to get across to John, and to us, what those churches were like and what were their functions, he used golden lampstands.

Smyrna, that delightful church of valiant heroes, was a golden lampstand. Thyatira, that poor, compromised church, in Christ's sight was a golden lampstand. I wouldn't have said that. Knowing what I know about those churches, I might have said, 'Yes, Smyrna is a golden lampstand; Thyatira is brass, I should think; Laodicea is copper that's gone a bit mouldy-looking.' But to our Lord all seven were golden lampstands. Let us take courage in our Lord's evaluation of these people. There is with him no flattery, no exaggeration. When he chooses his symbols, he chooses them deliberately because he means what he says.

These symbols then, these lampstands, were to bear light, weren't they? What to? Well, in one sense they were there to bear light to him who stood in their midst and to shed light in this dark world around them. That was their function. Did not our Lord say before he left—through the pen of that same John, that when the Holy Spirit would come to his people, the Holy Spirit in his people would glorify the Lord Jesus? That's our task, to shine in this dark world so that we may glorify Christ in the eyes of men.

But there was another sense in which their light would have been overpowered. Presently, as the whole of the vision dawned upon John, he saw one in the midst of those seven lampstands whose face shone as the very sun. As all the light of that sun glittered on those lampstands, we too shine with a reflected beauty. What are we in ourselves but base metal? But let us only walk near to Christ, know the risen Christ with us and among us, and we shall find something of his glory reflecting itself off us.

Then there was another source of light—did you notice there's a lot of light in this first chapter of Revelation? There's light from the lampstand, light from our blessed Lord's face that shines as the sun and then there were the seven stars. They are called angels, or messengers. 'I, Jesus, have sent my angel to testify to you about these things for the churches' (22:16). He sent and signified these things through his servant John, a messenger of Christ.

When we study the churches themselves, folks want to debate exactly what those angels represent. Some people believe that they are literal angels of the winged type. I find that very difficult to believe because John was told to write these letters and send them to these angels. If you were required to send a letter to a literal angel, where would you post it to? So I think that they can't be literal angels of the winged type, can they? I take them myself simply to be sons of God, perhaps the elders, for it is to the angels in particular that our Lord writes. He holds them responsible for the churches and therefore I presume they represent the elderhood of those churches.

They are also described as stars, so what are stars for? Genesis chapter 1 tells us what the stars, amongst other things, were for. But as far as we're concerned, stars are for signs and seasons, and for directions. Until recent centuries mankind was dependent upon the stars. Farmers used the stars—the rising of some and the descending of others—to know when it was time to drill their fields. If you were a farmer in the middle of Ireland, how would you know if it was summer or winter with some of the weather we have? So in the early days you went by the stars. If you were a mariner, trying to cross to England, there weren't any radio beacons so you went by the stars. And our Lord takes these stars as very fitting symbols of those in the church that are responsible for being guides and leaders.

Now I shall have to watch what I say. Have you ever thought how a star goes about its business of guiding? It goes about it by being on the move itself—stars in their courses are ever moving. Out of the creatorial hand of God, by moving they become our guides.

But there are two kinds of stars that aren't any good to follow. One lot are called wandering stars—that's the name the ancients gave them because they didn't know about planets. But if you watch a planet in the sky, instead of moving sensibly in one direction, it goes there a bit and down a bit and here a bit, and it moves all over the place. It's no good

taking a planet for your guidance. If a star is going to be any good for guidance, it's got to move in a deliberate line; not one minute forwards and the next minute backwards.

Worse even than wandering stars are shooting stars—they make a big impression, but they 'whoosh' and then go out into darkness. Jude talked about some in the early church that were wandering stars. 'Wandering stars, for whom the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved for ever' (v. 13). 'Wandering stars?', you say. Wandering stars indeed. In the church, in the name of God and Christ, they encouraged permissive immorality and heresy of the darkest kind, leading people astray. As the people of God we give thanks for elders. They are neither shooting nor wandering stars, but stars nonetheless, as we shall presently see, in the hand of the risen Lord who controls them so that they in turn may guide and control us.

Then our Lord begins to speak and it becomes clear that there is a pattern in what follows. In each of the letters that he dictates to the churches he begins with something about himself. In Ephesus, 'The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands' (Rev 2:1). To the church in Pergamum, 'The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword. "I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is"' (vv. 12–13). In each of those letters he begins with some self-revelation of himself. It shows us that whatever the need of his people, there is in Christ what is suited to meet it.

Let's think then of the relation of these churches to the Lord Jesus; there were seven of them. Not now a seven-branched lampstand—just one lampstand with seven branches—but seven independent, self-standing lampstands. Our Lord was walking in the middle of them and you will notice that our blessed Lord is directly related to each one of them. He stands in the middle. As first of all he speaks directly to one church, he thinks that all the others will listen in. But for the moment he's talking to this particular one directly, dictating a letter through his apostle. Having finished that letter he dictates another, talking directly to that church, and so for all seven.

It's a magnificent thing, isn't it? The secret of our Lord's maintenance of the testimony that you bear upon earth to this glorious gospel is the fact that our Lord stands in immediate relationship with every single church. Let me emphasise what I mean. He didn't come to Ephesus and say, 'Now, look here, be so kind, Ephesus, as to tell my words to Smyrna and get Smyrna to pass them on to Pergamum. And if Laodicea wants to know anything it can come through you.' No, Laodicea could come direct to Christ and he direct to Laodicea; and Ephesus could come direct to Christ and Christ direct to Ephesus.

That's good news, isn't it? Because as churches we do need to have that direct experience of the blessed Lord; there's no need to go through some other church. Thank God for all the other churches, but we don't have to go through them to Christ. We need not go through some earthly headquarters in order to reach our Lord. There might be a little delay, mightn't there? The risen Lord stands among his churches and there is direct access to him. Isn't that how it was when you got converted? You had Christian friends to help you, but in the end you had to come direct to the Saviour and he direct to you. What happened in our individual case of conversion must happen in our churches. In this church we can, and must, come direct to the living Lord. That's what maintains us. If we think of our Christian friends on a

mission field somewhere, if the missionary is taken away for some reason, the risen Lord shall not stop his direct ministry to that group of believers.

When trouble like a gloomy cloud,
Has gathered thick, and thundered loud;
He with His church has always stood:
His loving-kindness, oh how good!¹

Increasingly we need that experience of a church in direct relation to the risen Lord. I'll tell you why. As we read these letters, we shall find that there are no two chapters the same. All the churches represented by the golden lampstands were different. Their virtues were different. Ephesus was marked by its hard work and virile and vigorous hate for evil. Yes, that was good. Our Lord hates things that are evil and he was able to commend Ephesus, 'Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate' (2:6). If you looked at Ephesus you would have seen something of Christ in them, perhaps more than you would have seen in any of the others—their divine hatred of untruths.

Thyatira was a pretty gloomy church by any reckoning, but they had one outstanding virtue that is not said of any of the others. 'I know your love,' says Christ (see 2:19)—the only church he can say it of. In Thyatira you would have seen something of Christ that you didn't quite see so well in the other churches; you would have seen their love. It's evident that it's something of Christ in the church that you're seeing. It takes all God's people, you know, fully to express his Name. No two churches are exactly alike and we wouldn't like to have them all the same, would we? God likes them to be different and no two churches are the same as far as their virtues go. Mercifully, no two churches are the same as far as their faults go. We should be dull if we all had the same faults, and mercifully we don't. Ephesus had a grievous fault—it hated, but it didn't love. Thyatira had a grievous fault—it loved, but it didn't hate. And Laodicea had a terrible fault—it neither loved nor hated, it was neither hot nor cold.

Different churches, different needs. It was no good trying to write one circular letter that would put them all right, because they were all different. Therefore, the Lord had to write a different letter to each, just like we are different individuals. As the Lord knows us and our personalities, so he knows his churches. They are all different with different needs—different folks with different faults, different circumstances, different difficulties. Thank God, whatever the needs there is enough in the blessed Lord to meet them. What a supply there is in him.

There is not time to think and meditate upon all the symbols that are used to declare his glory in chapter 1; these symbols are mentioned again at the beginning of the letters. You may care to notice in your own reading how some of those symbols tell of his divine purity. 'Clothed with a long robe,' not an inch lacking, 'with a golden sash round his chest. The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow' (1:13–14). He has perfect wisdom and he is

¹ Samuel Medley, 1782, 'Awake, each saint, in joyful lays'.

absolutely pure. Affections that are not profligate, but properly girded—a personal robe of spotless white and immaculate length. ‘His eyes were like a flame of fire’, so they burn to devour any impurity that they should look upon.

Some of the symbols tell us of his power. When earthly sovereigns want to impress us with their power, they get a nice big stick and they get the goldsmith to put some gold on it and they make some knobs on the end. If they can afford it, they put the royal jewels around it and they hold it in their hand. They call it a sceptre and you’re meant to be impressed. When they would indicate to us their power, they hold up that little bit of rod with a bit of gold on. Such is Christ’s power that his hands reach to the heavens as they hold the seven stars.

And then there’s his voice ‘like the roar of many waters’ (v. 15). When you get near to the Victoria Falls or Niagara Falls you can begin to hear the booming of those waters. Can you just imagine standing and hearing a voice that boomed like the roar of many waters saying to you, ‘I’ve got something in your church I don’t approve of’? You’re unlikely to forget the roar and the authority and the power of the risen Lord. ‘From his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword’ (v. 16). At the synagogue of Nazareth they wondered at the words of grace that were coming out of his mouth, but on this occasion, as John listened, it was a sword coming out of his mouth. Discerning, keen to divide even to the sundering of soul and spirit, joints and marrow, to discern the intent of the heart. All things are made to tremble before him with whom we have to do.

Some of them tell us of his power, but in his lovely character there is also a lovely balance. How would you describe the Lord Jesus? In him opposites meet; there’s the heat of the noonday sun, the wetness of water and snow and then there’s a tenderness. His breasts, the word is of a woman’s breasts, so tender are our Lord’s affections. Yet it’s a sharp, steely sword that comes out of his mouth. We shall need to open our hearts to enjoy his affection, and to be so secure in the sense of his love that we can invite him to speak, even if his tongue proved to be a sword to cut away what is unworthy.

Almost all of the churches he will call to repentance. We shall have to rub our eyes, perhaps, and look back at the address on the envelope more than once. Did you ever have that experience? You get halfway through reading a letter and say, ‘Is this for somebody else? Have I picked up the wrong letter?’ The word we shall find in five out of the seven letters is the word ‘repent’.

You say, ‘Do true believers have to repent?’ They do indeed and I should think it’s a daily occupation. Not now a call for repentance to the world, but a call to us who are the readers to repent and go on repenting. How else shall we be holy? We don’t become holy automatically without knowing; we become holy as we allow the risen Lord to come into our lives and begin to expose to us what is not right, what is substandard, what is wrong in our attitudes and our ways. And then we humbly repent over it, admit we’re wrong and say, ‘Yes, Lord, you’re right. Difficult as it’s going to be, there’s got to come a change and by your grace it will come.’

That isn’t just something we do once when we first get converted. It’s a thing that we’ll have to be constantly doing, for none of us is perfect. May God give us the grace to be prepared to say to the risen Lord, ‘Now Lord, here we are, waiting to hear your voice. Praise

what you can; where we fall short, Lord, in your love show us in no uncertain terms. And give us the grace when we are wrong to change our minds and repent, for only your light will give us the determination, so that by your grace we may become more pleasing to you.'

About the Author

DAVID W. GOODING is Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University, Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. His international teaching ministry is marked by fresh and careful expositions of both testaments. He has published scholarly studies on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John 13–17, Acts, Hebrews and the New Testament's use of the Old Testament.