

They did not repent

The four angels released at the sound of the sixth trumpet are not the same as those we read about earlier (7:1). These angels bound at the River Euphrates were evil angels and the river represented Assyria and Babylon, symbols of this wicked world. They unleash war on the earth and John saw a vast army of horsemen whose sole purpose was to kill and to destroy (the figure of two hundred million is symbolic). These were not ordinary horses. They had heads like those of lions; fire, smoke and brimstone came out of their mouths. The horses are pictures of war with its terrible weapons. They killed a third of the human race (15–18).

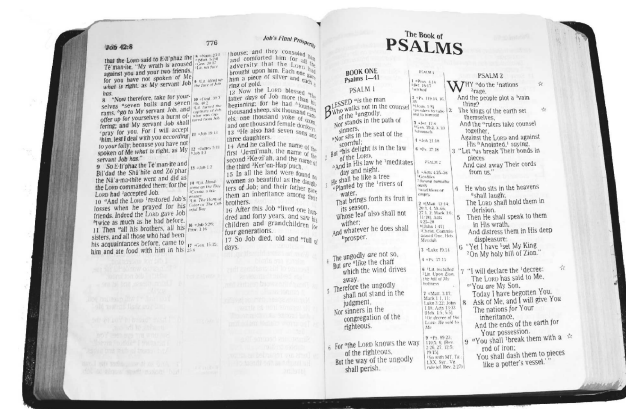
Notice that these evil angels can do nothing until God permits. He had prepared them for their destructive work and he ordered their release (14–15). What does all this tell us? The Lord Jesus Christ brings war and disaster on those who rebel against him and who persecute his people. This rebel world will not heed the Word of God or be warned by the disasters that God visits upon them. They want to know why God allows suffering, but they generally scorn any teaching that God actually punishes sinners.

The survivors of the destruction described here *did not repent* of their wickedness but rather became hardened in their sin. God's commandments were broken as they persisted in their worship of demons and of useless idols and in their sins against their fellow-men (20–21). Sin has such a hardening effect that even visitations of divine judgment will not move impenitent hearts as Pharaoh of old demonstrates (Exodus 9:7,12,34–35).

In our godless society many people are turning to the religion of demons – spiritism, astrology, witchcraft, new age religion, paganism and other occult practices. At the same time there is an increasing disregard for the sanctity of human life, the sanctity of marriage and honesty. **Let us be determined to shine as lights in the surrounding darkness.**

PILGRIM BIBLE NOTES

God's holy Word simply explained and applied



October 2020

Bible readings from Jude and Revelation chapters 1 to 9

JUDE

30 OCTOBER

Revelation 9:1–12

Men will seek death and will not find it

Jude identifies himself as the brother of James (1). In the early church, the only James (except the brother of John) known to everyone was the Lord's brother (Galatians 1:19). It seems therefore that Jude (or Judas) was the half-brother of the Lord Jesus (Matthew 13:55). These half-brothers of Jesus did not believe in him until after the resurrection (John 7:3–5; Acts 1:14). The warnings in Jude against false teachers (3–4) are very similar to those in 2 Peter chapter 2.

John's first two letters also warn us again and again to be on our guard against false teaching. These warnings are more relevant than ever! Some television evangelists and teachers are peddling all kinds of strange views and many thousands are being deceived. Some claim that the Holy Spirit is working through them to perform miracles and that he is speaking through them. Their claims are like their doctrine – highly questionable!

Outline of Jude

1. Opening greeting – verses 1–2
2. The purpose of the Letter – verses 3–4
3. Three examples of God's judgment on the wicked verses 5–7
4. False teachers denounced – verses 8–19
5. Exhortation to true Christians – verses 20–23
6. Doxology – verses 24–25

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The opening verses of this chapter reveal a frightening and terrifying picture. John saw *'a star that had fallen from heaven to the earth'* after the fifth angel had sounded his trumpet (1). This star is a person; it is Satan (cp. Luke 10:18). The devil was given the key to the bottomless pit enabling him to release an army of locusts which came from the dense smoke belching out of the abyss. The description of the locust army recalls Joel's description of judgment in *'the day of the LORD'* (7–10; cp. Joel 1:2–4; 2:1–11). These were no ordinary locusts, but were fallen demonic angels (2–3; cp. 2 Peter 2:4; Jude 6). The bottomless pit is another name for hell (cp. Luke 8:31).

Satan, the demons and people who serve him can only do their terrible work within the limits set by God. They were not allowed to harm the land or the people of God (those who had the seal of God on their foreheads; 7:3), *but only those men who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads* (4). They were permitted to torment their victims for a set period (described as *'five months'*, 4–5) but not to kill them. Satan, the king over the demons is here described by another name; the Hebrew *'Abaddon'* and the Greek *'Apollyon'* both mean *'Destroyer'* (11). The devil promises so much to those who will listen to him but he robs men and women of light, understanding, peace and joy.

In those days men will seek death and will not find it; they will desire to die, and death will flee from them (6). Any suffering and misery of the ungodly on earth is only a small foretaste of the relentless torment that they will endure for ever in hell, the place prepared for the devil and his angels (20:10,15; cp. Matthew 25:41,46). **There will then be no escape from hell! If you are not a Christian, I urge you to forsake your sin and to cry to God for mercy before it is too late.** If you are a Christian, you have a solemn responsibility to make known the gospel of Christ to those who do not know the Lord.

Woe, woe, woe to the inhabitants of the earth

The parallelism in the symbolism found in the book of Revelation is seen by comparing the trumpets of judgment and the bowls of wrath and their effects (chapters 8 to 11 and chapter 16).

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|-----------------------------|---|--------------------------|
| 1. First trumpet and bowl | — | judgment on land |
| 2. Second trumpet and bowl | — | judgment on sea. |
| 3. Third trumpet and bowl | — | judgment on rivers, etc. |
| 4. Fourth trumpet and bowl | — | judgment on sun, etc. |
| 5. Fifth trumpet and bowl | — | darkness and pain. |
| 6. Sixth trumpet and bowl | — | River Euphrates. |
| 7. Seventh trumpet and bowl | — | the end of the world. |

Natural disasters are often called ‘acts of God’ and so they are! The acts of judgment described in these verses took place when the Lord Jesus opened the seventh seal. He is in sovereign control over all the universe. The judgments following the trumpets are more intense than those coming with the first four seals (6:3–8). A third of the trees, the sea, the rivers, the sun, moon and stars were now touched with judgment. Those who attack God’s church touch the apple of his eye (cp. Zechariah 2:8). They will know the most fearsome terror when God strikes – scorching of the earth, disasters at sea, pollution of rivers and inland waters. These judgements remind us of the plagues visited upon the Egyptians when their king dared to oppose God and his people (Exodus 7:15–25; 9:22–25; 10:12–15, 21–23).

The name ‘Wormwood’ speaks of bitter sorrow (11; cp. Lamentations 3:19). Worse is to follow for the wicked however, and an angel (some translations have ‘eagle’) cries out, ‘Woe, woe, woe to the inhabitants of the earth’ before the fifth trumpet is sounded (13).

We should always view disasters and woes as a God-given reminder of the uncertainty of life, and as an opportunity to repent of our sin before it is too late. On once being told of a tragic event, the Lord Jesus warned his hearers, ‘Unless you repent you will all likewise perish’ (Luke 13:3,5). **Are you right with God?**

Called ... sanctified ... preserved

Jude’s greeting gives a description of what it means to be a Christian. He wrote *to those who are called, sanctified by God the Father and preserved in Jesus Christ* (1). Let us think about these words:

- *Called:* God has called us *out of darkness into his marvellous light* (1 Peter 2:9). We have been called out of spiritual ignorance and alienation from God (Ephesians 4:17–18), out of bondage to Satan and sin (Ephesians 2:2–3; Colossians 1:13). We are called to be holy (1 Thessalonians 4:7; 1 Peter 1:15).
- *Sanctified:* The early Christians were known as ‘saints’ (3), that is those who are *sanctified* (‘set apart’) by God through the Holy Spirit (2 Thessalonians 2:13). We have been set apart to serve the Lord. Notice how Jude describes himself as ‘a servant’ (Greek = ‘slave’) of *Jesus Christ* (1). What a great privilege it is to be in the service of God. The Lord has also set us apart to enjoy his special love and care.
- *Preserved:* Every true believer is kept in the Lord Jesus however difficult the times in which they live. The same Greek word is also translated *reserved* (6,13). The angels who sinned and false teachers are kept for judgment and hell but the child of God is kept for glory and everlasting joy (24). He is one of Christ’s sheep and he has eternal life. He can never perish nor be snatched from the hand of Christ or God the Father (John 10:27–30).

How does Jude pray for believers whose faith is under attack? He prays that God’s choice blessings of *mercy, peace and love be multiplied* to them (2). **Christian, is your faith being sorely tried? Do not lose heart. Look to your Saviour who loves you and who is rich in mercy.** He will never fail you, and as you seek to please him, he will give you his peace *which surpasses all understanding* (Philippians 4:7).

Contend earnestly for the faith

Jude had intended to write about our *common salvation* but the Holy Spirit directed him to exhort us *to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints* (3). We must be vigilant and fight against error. Warren W. Wiersbe rightly observes that ‘the Christian life is a battleground, not a playground’.

Error never announces its coming to a church. False teachers creep in unnoticed and craftily spread their poison (4). They may appear to love truth and seem to be faithful to God’s Word, but we must judge their teaching by the Bible. Beware of those who claim to have ‘new insights’ and who bring new doctrines. They may appear to be godly, but they are not (4; cp. 2 Timothy 3:5–7)! Some will use grace as an excuse for licentious behaviour by suggesting that if we are saved by grace, we are free to do as we please. Continuing in sin does not magnify the grace of God (Romans 6:1–7).

Jude not only urges pastors and other church leaders but **every** Christian *to contend earnestly for the faith*. Our word ‘agonise’ is derived from the Greek word translated *contend*. It carries the idea of an athlete exerting himself to win his race. *The faith which was once for all delivered to the saints* is not negotiable. Our faith does not change with the times or the culture in the world. We are not permitted to interpret Scripture in a way that denies its plain and obvious meaning. Some false teachers claim to be ‘born again’ and thus gain acceptance by unsuspecting Christians. **Confusion is all around us and you must contend earnestly for the faith. Are you able to do this?** If you feel insufficiently equipped for the battle, take time to give yourself to the study of God’s word, and obey its teaching.

The prayers of all the saints

The opening of the seventh seal introduces us to the seven trumpets of judgment but there was first *a silence in heaven for about half an hour*. Such silence comes from awe in the presence of God (1; cp. Habakkuk 2:20). John then saw seven angels and a trumpet was given to each of them. Trumpets were sounded to summon an army to battle but they are also associated with divine judgment (Joel 2:1). The trumpets of judgment reveal that God is glorified in the judgment of the wicked as well as in the salvation of sinners.

Before the angels sounded their trumpets, John saw another angel who was given a golden censor and much incense to *offer it with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne* (3). The rumbling of thunder, the lightning and the earthquake were given as a token that God had heard their prayers (5; cp. 5:8).

It is a great mistake to imagine that only the apostles and a few outstanding Christians are ‘*saints*’. All Christians are described as ‘*saints*’ in the New Testament (Acts 9:13,32,41; Romans 1:7; Ephesians 1:1,15,18). *The smoke of the incense* rising up to God with *the prayers of the saints* speaks of the intercession of Christ and of the Holy Spirit for all Christians (4). Persecuted, suffering believers do not cry out alone to God in their anguish. The Lord Jesus prays for them and the Holy Spirit intercedes for them, helping them in their prayers (Romans 8:26–27,34; Hebrews 7:25).

Who are the people with the power and influence in the world? Are they the world leaders, the media giants, the multi-millionaires? Where does the greatest power lie to bring *thunderings, lightnings and an earthquake* (5)? This power belongs to each Christian because he has the ear of God. Your prayers can accomplish far more than any great and powerful worldly person (cp. James 5:16). Does not this encourage you to pour out your heart to the Lord, to bring your worship, thanksgiving and needs before him? **How highly do you value the wonderful privilege of prayer?**

The Lamb ... will shepherd and lead them

In a second vision John saw *a great multitude which no one could number* from every nation and tribe; the people were standing before the Lamb with palm branches in their hands (a symbol of salvation, 9; cp. John 12:13). This multitude in heaven is the elect, the redeemed. The angels surrounding them joined their adoration with a seven-fold ascription of praise as they prostrated themselves before the throne (12; cp. 5:12). Hendriksen points out that each item of praise was preceded in the Greek by the definite article: *'Amen! the blessing and the glory and the wisdom, the thanksgiving and the honour and the power and the might be to our God forever and ever. Amen.'* He writes, 'It indicates that in the fullest, deepest sense these excellencies pertain to God, and to him alone' (MORE THAN CONQUERORS, page 112).

The multitude is described as the ones *'who come out of great tribulation'* (14). Alun Ebenezer writes, 'This multitude consists of everyone who has trusted, does trust, or ever will trust in the Lord Jesus Christ to save them. It is the same multitude which was once in a pitiable state, the ones who have come out of the tribulation (7:14). This multitude was once a minority, marginalized, misunderstood and mistreated by the world. ... The multitude includes ... all Christians throughout church history; Christians today, including me and you' (REVELATION, page 82).

Jesus is called *'the Lamb of God'* because he died to save sinners (cp. John 1:29; 1 Corinthians 15:3–4). Only those who are redeemed by the blood of the Lamb will be saved from the wrath of the Lamb (5:9; 6:16). We have before us a thrilling glimpse of heaven. What comfort there is here for the suffering child of God! The Lamb is our Shepherd. *The Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them and lead them to living fountains of waters. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes* (17; cp. 20:4). **This should cause our hearts to leap with joy and to praise God. We have a wonderful Saviour and a bright future. Hallelujah!**

The way of Cain ... the error of Balaam

The Bible teaches that it is possible to be identified with God's people, to taste the good Word of God and yet fall away (Hebrews 6:5–6). People who once appeared to be Christians, but who then renounce Christianity are known as 'apostates'. The apostasy of some is not always apparent and they continue to be identified with the church and they spread false teaching.

Jude reminds us that those who rebel against God will surely be punished:

- Some of those whom God delivered from Egypt were destroyed because of unbelief (Numbers chapter 14; 1 Corinthians 10:1–12).
- The fallen angels are reserved for judgment (6; cp. 2 Peter 2:4).
- The people of Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities around them who gave themselves over to sexual immorality and homosexual practices were severely punished (7; Genesis 13:13; 18:20; 19:1–13).

Verse 8 sums up the sins of these people; those of Sodom and Gomorrah defiled the flesh, the fallen angels rejected God's authority and the Israelites spoke evil of Moses and Aaron (Numbers 16). God's Word is quite clear: *Speak evil of no one* (Titus 3:2). If you are too ready to criticise your pastor and others whom God has placed over you, beware!

Scripture gives us no other details of the dispute between the archangel Michael and the devil over the body of Moses (9). If Michael dared not accuse Satan, how much more should we take care in the way we speak about others. When false teachers despise godly leaders they rush in where angels fear to tread. Jude again turns to the Old Testament to reinforce his warnings. *The way of Cain* is to reject God's way of salvation through the shedding of blood. *The error of Balaam* is to gain influence through encouraging immorality (Numbers 25:1–3; 31:16). *The rebellion of Korah* is to reject the authority of God's appointed leaders (11). **Beware of false teachers and their ways. They are leading many on a slippery slope to hell.**

The Lord comes with ten thousands of his saints

Jude paints five pictures of apostates in verses 12 and 13. They are:

- *Spots* in the fellowship gatherings (*'love-feasts'*) of the church (cp. 2 Peter 2:13). The word *spots* can be translated 'hidden rocks'. Many have had their faith shipwrecked through false teaching which lay hidden under snippets of truth and thus went undetected. Jude indicates that the apostate teachers who had gained influence in the church served themselves rather than the Lord and his people.
- *Clouds without water* which promise rain but fail to produce it. False teachers may appear to give good spiritual help but they are unable to live up to their promises. They promise freedom, but they bring bondage to those who follow them (cp. 2 Peter 2:19).
- *Late autumn trees* showing themselves to be *twice dead*, rootless and fruitless.
- *Raging waves of the sea* whose restless waters cast up mire and dirt (cp. Isaiah 57:20). They should be thoroughly ashamed of the spiritual flotsam and jetsam which they produce (cp. Philippians 3:19).
- *Wandering stars* on an aimless course. Travellers are able to determine their bearings by fixed stars, but would be led astray if they followed wandering stars. Just as meteors burn out in the blackness of the night, eternal darkness is reserved for these people (cp. verse 6; 2 Peter 2:17).

Enoch, seventh from Adam, prophesied of the doom of the apostates when *the Lord comes with ten thousands of his saints* (14). When Jesus comes again, he will punish all who have rebelled against him (15). **Are you rebellious, refusing to obey God's Word, or do you gladly submit to the Lord?**

The seal of the living God

John saw two further visions before the opening of the seventh seal (8:1). In the first of these visions he saw four angels restraining the north, south, east and west winds. These angels were about to unleash destruction on the wicked. They heard the voice of another calling them to wait until '*we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads*' (3). Who were those from the tribes of Israel (4–8)? * Christians are not agreed. Some believe them to be all God's people drawn from the Jews, the one hundred and forty-four thousand symbolising completeness, while the great multitude (9) represents all the rest of the elect from every nation. I believe that Hendriksen and Ebenezer are correct in seeing both groups as one and the same. The church is the Israel of God (Galatians 6:16).

What is the significance of *the seal of the living God* (2)?

- Hendriksen points out that a seal protects against tampering – the tomb of Jesus was sealed for this purpose (Matthew 27:66). It is also a mark of ownership (cp. Song of Solomon 8:6) and it is used to guarantee authenticity. Royal decrees were sealed with the signet of the king (cp. Esther 3:12).
- Christians are also sealed in this threefold sense:– by the Father so that we enjoy his protection at all times; by the Son who has purchased and redeemed us with his own precious blood and by the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 1:13) who bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God (Romans 8:16). **When God pours out his wrath upon the wicked at the end of time, Christians will be spared (3). What a privilege it is to have the seal of the living God upon us!**

* Jehovah's Witnesses believe that the 144,000 are the anointed class who alone will go to heaven. All others who believe will live on earth for ever. They have turned things upside down! The 144,000 are on earth, not in heaven. In heaven there is a multitude from every nation, tribe and language group which is so vast that it cannot be numbered. There is no anointed class among believers. All Christians are anointed, all receive the Holy Spirit (cp. Romans 8:9; 1 John 2:20). If we insist that the 144,000 is an actual number, we must also accept that they are actually from the tribes of Israel and this excludes Gentiles.

The wrath of the Lamb

The sixth seal paints a vivid picture of the end of the world with upheavals in space and on the earth bringing terror to all classes of people. Christians living when Jesus comes again will be taken up to be with him for ever but it will be a day of indescribable terror for the ungodly (1 Thessalonians 4:13–18; 2 Thessalonians 1:7–9). The whole universe will be shaken with awesome cosmic disturbances (12–14). Though there is much symbolism in the book of Revelation, the Lord Jesus spoke of a terrifying and catastrophic cosmic upheaval that will actually occur at the end of the age (Matthew 24:29–31; cp. 2 Peter 3:10–13).

All kinds of people, from kings to slaves, will be so terrified of the wrath of the Lamb that they will hide themselves. They will cry out to the mountains and rocks, *‘Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of his wrath has come, and who is able to stand?’* (16–17). It will then be too late for them to repent. Too late to pray to God for mercy! What a day of terrible despair it will be for those who had no interest in seeking God’s mercy and forgiveness when they had the opportunity! They will despairingly ask, *‘Who is able to stand?’* Derek Thomas observes, “The question is not, “Will I survive the trouble that lies in the world?”, but, “Will I survive the judgment of the Lamb?”” (LET’S STUDY REVELATION, page 59). The answer to the question, *‘Who is able to stand?’* is found in the next chapter. Those who have washed their filthy, sinful robes in the blood of the Lamb are seen standing before the throne of God (7:9,14).

How is it with you if you are not a Christian? If you continue to refuse to turn from your sin, and come to Christ for salvation, you will be among those terror-stricken people when Jesus returns. If you die before then, you will be raised to join them at the judgment. **Oh, be sure that you are right with God! ‘The wrath of the Lamb’ is too dreadful to contemplate.**

Building yourselves up on your most holy faith

Jude now describes the methods used by apostates and false teachers to gain a following. Some undermine godly men by murmuring and complaining against them. They talk big, using great *swelling words* and flattery (16). Others mock the righteous and are *sensual persons* (the opposite of ‘spiritual’) who cause divisions among God’s people (19). A spiritual person will always seek to *keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace* (17–18; cp, Ephesians 4:3).

What must we do to guard ourselves from deception? How can we equip ourselves *to earnestly contend for the faith?* Jude tells us:

- We must *remember the words* of the apostles (17). We have these words in the New Testament.
- By *building* ourselves up on our *most holy faith* (20). This is done through the prayerful and thoughtful reading of the Bible and by placing ourselves under a sound ministry of God’s Word. We must be keen to learn and to obey the teaching of the Bible.
- By *praying in the Holy Spirit* (20). This has nothing to do with working ourselves up into an ecstatic state or with speaking in tongues. It is to look to the Holy Spirit to lead us in our praying (cp. Romans 8:26) and to pray according to that leading.
- We must *keep ourselves in the love of God* which comes from obedience to the commandments of the Lord Jesus (21; cp. John 14:15,23; 15:10).
- By *looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life* (21). The Greek word translated *‘looking’* means to wait with expectation. We are to look with expectation for the return of the Lord Jesus (cp. Titus 2:13). The second coming of Jesus will bring eternal darkness to the ungodly but eternal glory in heaven for the Christian.

Remembering – building – praying – keeping – looking. How do these things feature in your life?

Faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy

What should our attitude be to those who have been influenced by false teachers? We ought to do everything possible to rescue them from the snare of Satan. Matthew Henry writes that ‘we must distinguish between the weak and the wilful.’ *On some have compassion, making a distinction* (22). Our approach will be different with those who are unstable waverers to those who are hardened in their error. We must have pity on the waverers, seeking to win them back to the Lord. Others have become thoroughly involved with apostates and defiled by sin. They are in the fire! We must seek to snatch them from the flames, at the same time showing caution (*‘fear’*), lest we be tainted by their false teaching and ungodly ways (23).

Jude ends his letter with a very reassuring benediction and doxology. We are in a fierce battle when we *contend earnestly for the faith* but we know that the Lord Jesus is able to keep us from stumbling into error and sin. When Jesus comes again, he will present us *faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy* (24). This exceeding joy will last for ever because we will be with our Saviour in glory and we will be perfect at last, never to sin again. What a glorious hope! What a precious faith! This is worth contending for with tireless energy. We can be confident that the Lord will preserve us to the end because he is infinite and eternal in his wisdom, glory, majesty, dominion and power (25). He cannot fail in his great purposes

*To God the only wise,
Our Saviour and our King,
Let all the saints below the skies,
Their humble praises bring.*

*He will present our souls
Unblemished and complete
Before the glory of his face,
With joys divinely great.* (Isaac Watts)

*Now ... to God our Saviour, who alone is wise, be glory and majesty,
dominion and power, both now and forever. Amen.*

Those who had been slain for the word of God

The persecution of the church and the judgements described in the first six seals will intensify before the Lord Jesus comes again but there will be great opportunities to testify of Christ (cp. Luke 21:9–13). Faithfulness to God’s Word often leads to persecution. The opening of the fifth seal revealed *the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held* (9). They were crying out from beneath the altar in heaven for God to vindicate them and to avenge their blood on those who dwell on the earth (10). They were each given a white robe which symbolised righteousness. Their enemies would be punished once the roll of martyrs was complete (11). **Though their enemies had destroyed their bodies, they were unable to destroy their souls (cp. Matthew 10:28).**

What is the symbolism in these souls being *under the altar*? The blood of animals sacrificed to God was poured out *at the base of the altar of the burnt offering* (Leviticus 4:7). The life of the flesh was seen to be in the blood (Leviticus 17:11). The martyrs described in these verses had offered their lives as a sacrifice for the sake of the gospel. They had been *faithful until death* (cp. Revelation 2:10). Their blood had been poured out as a drink offering to God (see Paul’s testimony – Philippians 2:17; 2 Timothy 4:6).

Why were the martyrs crying for vengeance especially when they were at rest in heaven? Should they rather have been praying for their enemies as the Lord Jesus and Stephen had prayed for those who killed them (Luke 23:34; Acts 7:60)? William Hendriksen writes, ‘Does not God himself affirm that the blood of his saints cries for wrath (Genesis 4:10; Hebrews 11:4)? ... Unless full retribution be rendered, God’s righteousness and sovereignty will not shine forth in its full and perfect lustre. No, the saint in glory does not desire personal vengeance any more than did Stephen, but he yearns for the coming of that great day when the majesty and holiness, the sovereignty and righteousness of God in Christ shall be publicly revealed’ (MORE THAN CONQUERORS, page 106).

He went out conquering and to conquer

The Lamb then opened the seals, which speak of the persecution which will continue against the church until he returns in glory and of God's judgment upon the inhabitants of the earth. The four living creatures said to John, 'Come and see' at the opening of the first four seals. What are we to make of these seals which bring before us 'the four horsemen of the Apocalypse'? The horse is a symbol of strength, warfare, terror and conquest (see 9:7; 14:20; 19:11; Job 39:19–25). God is sovereign in all this; he gives the horsemen their power (2,4,8).

1. The first rider was on a white horse, having a bow and a crown. *He went out conquering and to conquer* (2). Many commentators (eg. Hendriksen, Ebenezer) identify the rider with the Lord Jesus Christ (cp. 19:11–16). Derek Thomas believes the rider to represent Satan, who often mimics Christ (LET'S STUDY REVELATION, page 56).

2. The second rider on the fiery red horse with a great sword provides a picture of the hatred, war and destruction which will continue until Jesus comes again. It was granted to this rider *to take peace from the earth* (4).

3. The third rider was on a black horse with a pair of scales in his hand. The need to weigh wheat and barley speaks of famine and great hardship when a day's wage would buy only sufficient wheat for one man, or barley for three people. Luxury items such as oil and wine were plentiful (5–6); the rich survived while the poor starved.

4. The fourth rider on a pale horse was named 'Death'. The Greek for 'pale', 'chlōros', means pale green (cp. 8:7; 9:4), the colour of disease and death. 'Hades' (the state of disembodied existence) followed 'Death' to gather the slain. They are not sovereign however. They were only permitted to operate within the bounds set by God and they were given authority *to kill with sword, with hunger, with death, and by the beasts of the earth* (8; cp. Ezekiel 14:21). **These judgments present a bleak future for those without Christ. There is hope only for those who belong to the Lord Jesus.**

REVELATION

In the latter half of the first century AD the church suffered great persecution at the hand of Roman emperors Nero (from AD 64) and Domitian (AD 81–96). The book of Revelation is full of help and comfort for persecuted and suffering Christians. Satan and his helpers **seem** to be victorious over Christ and his church, but things are not what they **seem**. Jesus is Lord of lords and King of kings and he will overcome all his (and our) enemies (17:14; 19:11–21; see William Hendriksen's commentary on Revelation, MORE THAN CONQUERORS, pages 8–9).

Revelation is one of the most difficult books of the Bible to understand and because of this it is little read. Even the great Reformer John Calvin is reputed to have said that he did not write a commentary on the book of Revelation because he did not understand it! The problem that we face is that of interpreting the rich symbolism found in the book. Some symbols are clearly explained to us (eg. the seven stars and the seven golden lampstands, 1:20) but others are open to widely differing interpretations. Many of the symbols come in groups of seven, eg. seven seals, seven trumpets, seven bowls. The number seven which speaks of completeness is found 54 times in Revelation.

There are differing methods of interpreting the book of Revelation:

- **The Preterist View** which sees the book as having relevance only to the first century AD with no prediction of future events. This view can hardly be correct since the book calls itself a prophecy (1:3; 4:1).
- **The Historicist View** which sees Revelation as presenting the course of church history from the first century AD to the end of time. There are many variations within this view.
- **The Futurist View** which places all that is described after chapter 3 to things that will happen at the end of the age.
- **The Parallelist View** which sees the rich symbolism in the book as an expression of the conflict between God and Satan. There are seven parallel sections in the book, each spanning the entire Christian dispensation from the first to the second coming of Christ. These seven

sections fall into two divisions, chapters 1 to 11, and 12 to 22. I favour this view which is held by many Bible scholars (including the late William Hendriksen). I have sought to interpret the symbols in the light of the teaching of the rest of the Bible. You may not agree with my views but please take the lessons of Revelation to heart.

Outline of Revelation (from Hendriksen)

A. The struggle on earth – chapters 1 to 11

The church persecuted by the world. The church is avenged, protected and victorious.

- 1. Christ in the midst of the seven golden lampstands 1 to 3
- 2. The vision of heaven and the seven seals 4 to 7
- 3. The seven trumpets of judgment 8 to 11

**B. The deeper spiritual background
of this struggle – chapters 12 to 22**

There is a conflict between the Christ and the dragon (Satan) in which the Christ, and therefore his church, is victorious.

- 4. The woman and the Man-child persecuted by the dragon and his helpers (the beasts and the harlot). 12 to 14
- 5. The seven bowls of wrath. 15 to 16
- 6. The fall of the great harlot and of the beasts 17 to 19
- 7. The judgment upon the dragon (Satan) followed by the new heaven and earth, new Jerusalem 20 to 22

There is a blessing promised for all who read the book of Revelation and who keep the things which are written in it (1:3). May the Lord bless us as we now turn to its pages.

Recommended commentaries for Revelation:

William Hendriksen: *More than Conquerors – An interpretation of the Book of Revelation* (Baker Books).

Alun Ebenezer: *Revelation* (Evangelical Press) closely follows *More than Conquerors*.

Derek Thomas: *Let's Study Revelation* (Banner of Truth Trust).

Worthy is the Lamb who was slain

This wonderful passage of Scripture focuses our attention on the Lamb of God as he is worshipped by the inhabitants of heaven. There are three great hymns of worship found in these verses. The Lord Jesus takes the scroll while the cherubim (the four living creatures) and the church of all ages, represented by the twenty-four elders, fall down to worship him. Each elder has a harp and a golden bowl full of incense which we are told represents *the prayers of the saints*. The saints are Old Testament and New Testament believers.

Why is the Lord Jesus worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals? By his death and resurrection he has conquered Satan and all the dark forces of evil (Colossians 2:15; Hebrews 2:14; 1 John 3:8). He was slain to redeem a people from every tribe, tongue, people and nation (9). Though redemption is worldwide in its scope, it is limited to God's elect. The Lord Jesus was slain to redeem sinners and all those he has redeemed will be in heaven. The church will always have tribulation and suffering but we must never forget that our almighty Saviour reigns. He is in control of all things. He alone is *worthy to take the scroll, and to open its seals* (9). We may suffer now but he has prepared wonderful things for us and he *has made us kings and priests to our God* (10; cp. 1:6; Romans 8:18).

John then heard a great company numbering many millions singing the second hymn of praise to the Lamb. All the angels, the cherubim and the church (the elders) are there, and one day we will be among them (11). Every creature in the universe is singing the third hymn (or doxology). The Lord Jesus is worthy of our unceasing worship and praise (12–14). Christian, doesn't it make you long to see him and to be able to worship him in a sinless state? **Anyone who can read these verses, and still deny that Christ is God, is blind indeed. O come, let us adore him!**

Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom, and strength and honour and glory and blessing!

Do not weep ...The Lion of the tribe of Judah ... has prevailed

John saw in the right hand of God the Father, a scroll (Greek = ‘biblion’, 1). The readers in the seven churches would have recognised that a ‘biblion’ sealed with seven seals was a will and testament. When the testator died, his will was opened when possible in the presence of the seven witnesses who had sealed it. It was then read and its orders carried out.

The scroll seen by John represents God’s eternal plan and purpose for the whole universe and of all its creatures throughout history. If the scroll remained sealed, God’s plan would not be carried out. The strong angel proclaimed with a loud voice (so that everyone in the universe could hear), ‘*Who is worthy to open the scroll and to loose its seals?*’ (2). John *wept much* because no one in the entire universe was found worthy to open the scroll (3–4). The great warriors and kings of the past, the wisest of men, the great philosophers all fail to respond. The great religious leaders dare not come forward to take up the challenge. None of the great saints are worthy, nor is Mary whom so many wrongly honour as ‘the Queen of heaven’. Why is this? They are all weak, fallen sinners. The sinless angels who excel in strength are not worthy to open the scroll because they cannot possibly save sinners.

One of the elders comforted John, saying, ‘*Do not weep. Behold the Lion of the tribe of Judah ... has prevailed (conquered) to open the scroll and to loose its seals*’ (5). The Lion of Judah is the mighty Messiah who comes from the line of King David of the tribe of Judah. John then sees not a Lion, but *a Lamb as though it had been slain* (6). The almighty, sinless Son of God humbled himself and died as a sacrificial lamb to save sinners. His seven horns signify his complete power and authority, and seven eyes indicate that he is filled with the Holy Spirit. John saw him approach the throne to take the scroll out of the right hand of God the Father (7). He has all authority to rule the universe according to God’s eternal decree (Matthew 28:18; Philipians 2:9–11). **He has prevailed; he is worthy of our love, worship, and service.**

Blessed is he who reads ... the words of this prophecy

The title of this book is taken from its opening words, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*. God the Father gave the Lord Jesus this revelation *to show his servants — things which must shortly take place* (1). The Lord Jesus gave this revelation to John through his angel who guided the apostle through his visions of the things that are to happen (1; cp. 22:6,8). God the Father speaks through his Son. *God, who at various times and in different ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by his Son* (Hebrews 1:1–2). The Lord Jesus is later called in this book ‘*The Word of God*’ (19:13). The word ‘revelation’ in Scripture means an unveiling to show us things which we would never discover unless God showed them to us. William Hendriksen writes of this book, ‘It is a revelation or unveiling of the plan of God for the history of the world, especially of the Church’ (MORE THAN CONQUERORS, page 51).

John’s greeting is to the seven churches which are in Asia (4) but the message of the book is for every believer, as are the New Testament epistles (3; 22:18). There are seven beatitudes in the book of Revelation (1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7; 22:14). Let us think about the first of these beatitudes: *Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written in it* (3).

We are blessed when we read the message of Revelation because it is a great encouragement to believers in troubled and discouraging times. We live in a turbulent, uncertain world. Evil-doers have become more bold in their wickedness, there is widespread indifference to the gospel message, the church is generally weak and despised. As we read the words of Revelation, our eyes will be turned to look on the Lord Jesus who is our all-glorious, all powerful, all conquering Saviour who loved us and gave himself to die for us. **It is a great blessing to have our gaze fixed on our glorious Saviour and to know that he has the last word over evil and suffering.**

I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End

The greeting to the seven churches in Asia begins, ‘Grace to you and peace’ (4). Hendriksen observes, ‘Grace is God’s favour given to those who do not deserve it, pardoning their sins and bestowing upon them the gift of eternal life. Peace, the reflection of the smile of God in the heart of the believer who has been reconciled to God through Jesus Christ, is the result of grace’ (MORE THAN CONQUERORS, page 53).

The greeting is from all three Persons of the Trinity (4–5). Look how John describes the triune God:

- God the Father; *Him who is, and who was, and who is to come*. We are reminded that our God is eternal.
- The Holy Spirit ; *The seven Spirits*. This speaks of the Holy Spirit in all his perfection (‘seven’ is the number of perfection).
- The Lord Jesus; *The faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler over the kings of the earth*. He reveals the Father, he conquered death, and he is the King of kings and Lord of lords (cp. 19:16).

John’s mention of the Lord Jesus Christ leads him to break out in adoration of his precious Saviour. Jesus is the eternal, almighty God, ‘the Alpha and the Omega’ (first and last letters of the Greek alphabet), ‘the First and the Last’ (8,11,17; 22:13). This is a title of God (Isaiah 44:6). In this doxology John ascribes glory to *him who loved us and washed us from our sins in his own blood* (5–6). Alun Ebenezer writes, ‘Instead of God directing his anger at me, on the cross, Jesus Christ was like a shield and turned that anger away from me. All my sin, guilt and shame were washed away by his blood’ (REVELATION, page 30).

The world may hate us and deride us but we are loved by the almighty King. He loved us enough to die on the cross to wash us and to free us from our sins in his own blood. Not only that, he *has made us kings and priests to his God and Father*, and one day he will return for us (7). **If you are discouraged, take heart and remember who he is who loves you and cares for you. Let us now worship, praise and adore him.**

You created all things, and by your will they exist

The cherubim (*four living creatures*) worship God day and night with the refrain:

*‘Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty,
Who was and is and is to come!’* (8—9).

Alun Ebenezer comments, ‘It is impossible for a human being to comprehend the holiness of God. It creates within us a sense of awe and absolute nothingness. The holiness of God also means he is completely separate from evil and sin. Because God is holy he cannot have any communion with sin (Job 34:10; Habakkuk 1:13). He is perfect. When a man or woman is confronted with the holiness of God they have an overwhelming sense of impurity and an awareness of sin (Isaiah 6:5). We are totally unworthy to stand in the presence of this holy God (REVELATION, page 56). Much that is called ‘worship’ today is nothing of the kind. True worshippers are in awe as they adore and magnify the One who is holy and eternal and who created all things (8,11).

The Bible has no place for the theory of evolution. God created all things for his own glory (cp. John 1:3; Romans 11:36; Colossians 1:16; Hebrews 1:2; 11:3): ***‘You are worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power; for you created all things, and by your will they exist and were created’*** (11).

The Reformers always reminded themselves of this with their watchword. ‘To God alone be the glory.’ He wisely and sovereignly planned and made all things for his own glory. He alone is worthy of our adoration, worship and praise.

*Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty!
All thy works shall praise thy name,
in earth and sky and sea
Holy, holy, holy! merciful and mighty,
God in three persons, blessed Trinity!*

(Reginald Heber)

A throne set in heaven

We now come to a new section of the book of Revelation (chapters 4 to 7). John saw *a door standing open in heaven* and he heard the Lord Jesus, whose voice was like a trumpet (1:10). Jesus called him up into heaven, ‘*Come up here, and I will show you things which must take place after this*’ (1). John was again ‘*in the Spirit*’ and he saw ‘*a throne set in heaven*’ and the dazzling splendour and awesome beauty of the Lord, likened to different jewels (2–3).

Notice how often John mentions the throne of God in heaven (seventeen times in chapters 4 and 5). Derek Thomas writes, ‘From the poverty-stricken state of the church below, John’s gaze is taken upwards to things as they truly are. The upward glance is often the signal for a new perspective on things. John is being reminded that God is in control. The church may be languishing; Satan may be doing his worst; but God is reigning on high’ (LET’S STUDY REVELATION, page 44).

John then saw twenty-four elders, each sitting upon a throne. They probably represent the church of both the Old and New Testament (there are twelve patriarchs of Israel and twelve apostles of the church, cp. 21:12–14). The four living creatures are cherubim (6–9; cp. Ezekiel 1:4–28; 10:20–22); these angelic beings guard the holy things of God (cp. Genesis 3:24; Exodus 25:20).

The Lord God Almighty is sovereign over all the universe. He is in control of all our circumstances. His throne towers above all the trouble and turmoil around us and he is graciously working all things together for good to those who love God (Romans 8:28). *The LORD reigns, he is clothed in majesty* (Psalm 93:1). Let us worship and be encouraged!

*Jehovah reigns, he dwells in light,
Girded with majesty and might;
The world created by his hands,
Still on its first foundation stands.* (Isaac Watts)

I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s Day

During the persecution instigated by Roman emperor Domitian the apostle John had been banished to the island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea (see map, page 16). He wrote to his persecuted readers about 96 AD as their ‘*brother and companion in tribulation, and in the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ*’ (9). We must learn patience in affliction. Suffering comes to every Christian in one form or another and in varying degrees; it is part and parcel of the Christian life (Acts 14:22; Romans 5:3–5). John would have remembered what the Lord Jesus said to him and his fellow-disciples the night before he was tortured and crucified on the cross, ‘*In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world*’ (John 16:33).

The exiled apostle could not be with his fellow believers on the Lord’s Day (the first day of the week) but he was able to worship God and pray. His persecutors had parted him from his church at Ephesus but they were not able to separate him from his Saviour (cp. Romans 8:35–37). He was *in the Spirit on the Lord’s Day* (10). Time and suffering were forgotten as the Lord Jesus met with him, lifting up his soul to hear the precious words. John heard a loud voice, like a trumpet with which the Lord Jesus announced himself as *the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last* (11; cp. verse 8). He told the apostle to write in a book all that he was to see and to send that book to the seven churches in Asia. Turning round, he saw the risen, exalted Christ in great majesty and glory (12–13). Alun Ebenezer writes, ‘What was true when Revelation was written is still true today. God is still on the throne. He is still the master of the universe. The bully in your school, your teachers and lecturers, your boss, workmates, family, friends, neighbours, the rich and famous, presidents, prime ministers, kings and queens are all in his hand’ (REVELATION, page 32).

In the Spirit on the Lord’s Day. How do you spend the Lord’s Day? Is it a delight when you eagerly go to meet with the Lord’s people, to worship God and to hear his Word expounded? Do you seek to be in the Spirit or is your mind on earthly things?

His countenance was like the sun shining in its strength

John saw the Lord Jesus standing in the midst of seven golden lampstands with seven stars in his right hand. The symbolism is explained for us. The seven golden lampstands are the seven churches of Asia and the seven stars are the angels (Greek = ‘messengers’) of the seven churches (12–13,16,20). Jesus is ‘*the Son of Man*’ (13; cp. Daniel 7:13–14; Luke 19:10), a title which speaks of his real humanity as well as his deity (Matthew 26:64–65). Though the Lord Jesus became man and knew the limitations of human flesh (he is sinless), he never ceased to be God.

Alun Ebenezer comments, ‘His hair shows us that he is the “ancient of days” (Daniel 7:9), pure, eternal and wise; his eyes can see everything, even inside you; his voice is commanding and powerful, like the deafening roar of many waters, and shows his sovereign authority over all the earth; his feet like bronze glowing in a furnace warn us of his approaching judgment; a long robe reaching down to his feet was, in those days, the mark of a person of distinction and shows the dignity and honour of the Lord Jesus Christ’ (REVELATION, page 38).

His countenance was like the sun shining in its strength (16). Here is splendour, majesty, power and burning purity. John was so overwhelmed by this vision of Christ that he *fell at his feet as dead* (17). I once heard a religious broadcast in which a young woman ‘gave her testimony’. She recalled how a friend told her about ‘this guy called Jesus’. To her, our glorious Saviour was just a ‘guy’, not the majestic, almighty God. I felt, with great sadness, that she had no idea of who Jesus really is. John, who had been so close to the Lord Jesus during his earthly ministry, had no sloppy, light view of Christ but was awestruck and prostrate in his holy presence. **If the fear of God is lacking in our approach to Christ, can we really say that we know him?**

Lukewarm

The apostle Paul had written to the church at Laodicea many years earlier (Colossians 4:16) but they had drifted into spiritual decline. The Lord Jesus had no word of commendation for this church which he called ‘*lukewarm*’ (16). They were not troubled by persecutors or false teachers but their spiritual life was being drained by lukewarmness. The church was situated in a very prosperous city and its members had acquired all the material comforts that come with wealth. They had deluded themselves into thinking that they were spiritually rich but they were poverty-stricken. They boasted, ‘*I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing*’ but they did not recognise that they were ‘*wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked*’ (17).

The Lord Jesus was nauseated by their smug complacency and was ready to spew them out of his mouth. What had led to this lukewarmness? They had sought happiness in earthly possessions but this had sapped their spiritual vitality and had stifled their love for the Lord. It is little wonder that this church was not persecuted or troubled. They were no longer a threat to Satan’s kingdom and they were not shining as lights in this dark world.

Laodicea was an important centre for banking and finance, for clothing manufacture and for its eye-salve. The Lord Jesus counselled its Christians to buy from him spiritual gold, white garments to cover their spiritual nakedness and for his eye-salve to heal them of their spiritual blindness and lack of discernment (18).

We may be sound in doctrine and yet be ‘*lukewarm*’. We are ‘*lukewarm*’ if we are not putting the Lord first in our lives, if we neglect private prayer and the reading of God’s Word, if we have little enthusiasm to meet with God’s people for worship and prayer. We are ‘*lukewarm*’ if we are living a lie. Those who open the door of their lives to Christ and overcome will be privileged to sit with him on his throne (20–21). **If you are ‘lukewarm’, repent and respond to the Lord as he knocks at the door of your heart (19–20).**

I have set before you an open door

The city of Philadelphia (the name means ‘brotherly love’) was established to be a centre for the spread of the Greek language and culture. There is no criticism of its church from the Lord Jesus Christ *who has the key of David*; this key signifies the greatest authority and power in the kingdom of God (7; cp. 5:5; Isaiah 22:22;). This church was not strong; they had only *a little strength* but they had kept God’s Word and had remained faithful to Christ. Spurgeon observes, ‘The Lord does not blame us for having little strength, but for having little love, little faith, little zeal, little consecration’ (Sermon number 1,814, METROPOLITAN TABERNACLE PULPIT, volume 30, 1884).

This church may have been weak because it had few members and few gifts, but Jesus encouraged them, *‘I have set before you an open door, and no one can shut it’* (8; cp. 1 Corinthians 16:9). Even the persecuting Jews of the synagogue of Satan would be humbled and converted (9). Philadelphia was far more important as a centre for the spread of the gospel than as a centre for Greek culture. **Whatever setbacks we may suffer in the work of our church, it is a great encouragement to know that it is God who opens or closes doors.**

The Lord Jesus also promised that they would be kept from the wave of persecution that was to be unleashed on Christians and that those who overcome would be made pillars in God’s temple (10–12). This speaks of God dwelling among his people and the pillar denotes strength and stability. The name of God and of his city written upon us speaks of our belonging to him as citizens of heaven (12).

There is no room for complacency even when God commends and blesses us. We must *hold fast* what we have (11; cp. 2:25) and never release our hold on truth or godliness. When we recognise that we have no strength of our own but are dependent upon God, we are able to go through the doors which he opens for us (cp. 2 Corinthians 12:10).

Do not be afraid

The Lord Jesus is so powerful but oh, so tender. He laid his hand on the prostrate apostle and said to him, *‘Do not be afraid, I am the First and the Last. I am he who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive for evermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and death’* (17–18). William Hendriksen observes, ‘Hades as used here ... signifies the state of disembodied existence. It refers to the state of death which results when life ceases and when body and soul separate. Thus Hades always follows death (Rev. 6:8)’ [MORE THAN CONQUERORS, page 57].

Jesus told John to write the things which he had seen and explained that the seven stars in his right hand were the angels (or messengers) of the seven churches. The seven lampstands were the seven churches to whom the Lord Jesus would address his letters (20).

The Lord Jesus has conquered death and Hades (cp. Acts 2:27,31) and he is able to deliver the believer from fearing them. The persecuted readers of Revelation at the close of the 1st century AD needed to know that Jesus who is awesome in his holiness and majesty is also gracious and kind. He is alive for evermore and he sovereignly controls all that will happen. This message is also very relevant to all Christians in the 21st century. Many Christians are being persecuted and languish in labour camps or prison; many are being martyred. They need our prayers, but nothing can separate them from the love of God.

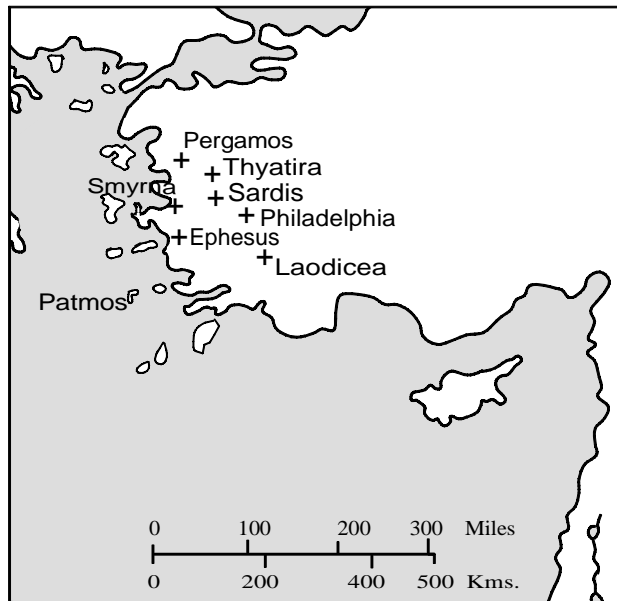
He lays his gentle hand upon us and as we come to him, he says to us, *‘Do not be afraid.’* Child of God, are you fearful? Remember who loves you and cares for you. **The Lord Jesus is in control of all your circumstances, and he still says to his troubled children, just as he said to John, ‘Do not be afraid.’**

The letters to the seven churches in Asia

The messages to the seven churches (chapters 2 and 3) cover differing circumstances and problems which are still to be found in churches. There is a similar pattern in each of the letters, with some slight variation:

1. The address — *'To the angel of the church in ...'* (most scholars believe that the angel refers to the pastor or leaders in each church).
2. Christ's self-designation (each time taken from 1:12–18), eg. *'He who holds the seven stars in his right hand ...'*
3. Christ's commendation — *'I know your works ...'*
4. Christ's criticism, eg. *'Nevertheless I have this against you ...'*
5. Christ's warning, eg. *'Remember therefore ... or else ...'*
6. Christ's exhortation: *'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'*
7. Christ's promise, eg. *'To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life.'*

In each church except Laodicea Christ finds something to commend. In five of the churches he finds something to criticise (the exceptions are Smyrna and Philadelphia).



16 OCTOBER

Revelation 3:1–6

You have a name that you are alive, but you are dead

The Lord Jesus had no commendation for the church at Sardis though it had a reputation of being a 'live' church. The Lord, who knows our works, viewed Sardis differently from the way men viewed her. There is no mention of persecution or of heresy in the church but the Lord Jesus said to them, *'You have a name that you are alive, but you are dead'* (1). A church may be busy with all manner of activity and offer what is described as 'lively worship' while in reality being dead; it may be correct in its doctrine and still be dead.

How was the church at Sardis 'dead'?

- Their works were *not perfect* ('complete') *before God*. The things that they were doing were not promoting true spiritual growth.
- They were lacking in true holiness. *You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments* (4). In other words, there were only a few in Sardis who were leading godly lives. Those who are comfortable with sin are 'dead' even if they appear to be alive.

The message of the Lord Jesus to this church was to wake up and to strengthen the things which remained among them, that were ready to die (2). They were exhorted to remember how they had received and heard the truth and to repent (3). The Lord Jesus warned them, *'Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief'* (3). This message had an added relevance because the city of Sardis was built on a steep hill. Its arrogant citizens had in the past taken their security for granted and the city had been taken twice through lack of vigilance (in 549 BC and 218 BC).

The faithful in Sardis who had kept themselves unspotted would walk with their Saviour wearing the white garments of glory. Their names would not be blotted out from the book of life (4–5). No genuine Christian can have his name taken from the book of life but we should not be presumptuous if we are not godly. **If everyone in your church were like you, would your church be dead or alive?**

Hold fast what you have

Thyatira was a prosperous trading city which had trade guilds for occupations such as wool and leather working, dyeing and pottery. Membership of a guild was essential for work and trading but each guild had its guardian god. The feasts which members were expected to attend were grossly immoral. Christians knew that to take part in the idolatrous and immoral activities of the guilds was a denial of Christ but if they dropped out of their guild, they would lose their standing in society as well as their livelihood.

The Lord commended those who had remained faithful at Thyatira, whose love for him was expressed in faithful, persevering service. They tolerated a wicked woman in the church, however, (likened to Queen Jezebel; cp. 1 Kings 16:31; 18:19; 21:25). This woman claimed to be a prophetess who with her ‘words from the Lord’ encouraged the Christians to indulge in the wicked activities of the trade guilds (20). They should have realised that this so-called prophetess, whose utterances contradicted God’s written Word, was not a servant of God but of Satan.

Christ, who has ‘eyes like a flame of fire’ (18), warned that he would surely punish this woman and her followers unless they repented of their deeds. The judgment would be so awesome that all the churches would know that the Lord Jesus ‘searches the minds and hearts’ (22–23). Sin in the church must not be tolerated; it is not Christian love to ignore it but cowardice and unbelief.

Jesus urged the faithful ones who had not known the depths of Satan, ‘Hold fast what you have till I come’ (24–25). He promised that they would then reign with him over the nations and would be given *the morning star*; that is himself (26–28; cp. 22:16). William Hendriksen writes, ‘As the morning star rules the heavens, so believers will rule with Christ’ (MORE THAN CONQUERORS, page 73). **Let us hold fast to what we have and resist every pressure to compromise – there is too much to lose!**

You have left your first love

The Lord Jesus commended the Christians at Ephesus for their perseverance in their work for him, mentioning this in verses 2 and 3. Here was an active church which persevered in its work and witness despite false teachers who sought to infiltrate it. These people tested those who claimed to be apostles and *found them to be liars*. Some evangelicals are very critical of those who warn against false teaching and criticise them for being unloving. The Lord Jesus commends this church because it would not tolerate false teachers and it hated the deeds of the Nicolaitans which he also hated (2–3,6).

They loved biblical preaching and teaching at Ephesus and were practical in their faith. The Lord Jesus said to them, however, ‘Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love’ (4). The church was busy and was sound in its doctrine, but the sparkle had gone out of its love for Christ. How can we know if we have left our first love?

- We do not long for personal communion with Christ and spend time alone with him in prayer each day.
- We do not delight in the Word of God.
- We are not eager to be at the prayer meeting of the church.
- Our Christian activity is motivated more by a sense of duty rather than a love for Christ.
- We no longer give generously to the Lord’s work.
- We do not tremble at the thought of grieving the Lord through sin.
- We find greater pleasure in our hobbies than in seeking to know the Lord better.

We may be highly respected in the church, faithfully serving God, but our love for the Lord may have grown cold so that we do not delight in him (it is possible to delight in God’s work without delighting in God himself). If this is true of you, then hear the words of the Lord Jesus, ‘Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else ...’ (5). **Have you left your first love?**

Be faithful until death

The city of Smyrna (modern Izmir) rivalled Ephesus for importance in Asia Minor. The letter to the persecuted church in Smyrna is the shortest of the seven but it is the warmest in its commendation. The Lord Jesus, ‘*who was dead, and came to life*’, knew all about their suffering and the poverty that persecution had brought to them. He did not encourage them to indulge in self-pity but reminded them that they were rich (in spiritual possessions; cp. 2 Corinthians 4:16–17).

The Jews prided themselves on being children of Abraham but those in Smyrna were the instruments of the devil in the persecution of Christians. They were *a synagogue of Satan* (9; cp. John 8:39,44). The believers in Smyrna were warned that the devil was about to throw some of them into prison but this testing would only be for a limited period (described as ten days). The Lord Jesus promised them, ‘*Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life*’ (10). These believers were faithful to God in the most harrowing circumstances. You may not be called on to suffer as they did but are you faithful to God in all that you say and do?

Polycarp, a disciple of John, may have been the pastor of the church at Smyrna at this time. Many years later (AD 155) the aged Polycarp was burned at the stake because he refused repeated attempts by the Roman proconsul to make him deny Christ and to say, ‘Caesar is Lord.’ He said, ‘Eighty and six years have I served him, and he never did me any injury: how then can I blaspheme my King and Saviour?’ When threatened with burning, he replied, ‘Thou threatenest me with fire which burneth for an hour, and after a little while is extinguished, but art ignorant of the fire of coming judgment and eternal punishment, reserved for the ungodly.’

Christians in some countries are now suffering terrible persecution. They are being imprisoned, tortured and put to death because they will not deny the Lord Jesus. What do you know about them? When did you last pray for them? **Are you faithful to the Lord Jesus?**

You hold fast to my name

Pergamos was the official centre of emperor worship in the province of Asia and is described as being ‘*where Satan’s throne is ... where Satan dwells*’; it was here that faithful Antipas was martyred. Jesus commended the church at Pergamos, ‘*You hold fast to my name, and did not deny my faith*’ (13). They would not deny their Lord despite the wickedness all around them or the opposition to their Christian testimony.

When persecution failed to destroy the church, Satan changed tactics and sought to seduce them away from Christ. They had among them some who held the doctrine of Balaam who taught Balak how to entice the Israelites into idolatry and sexual immorality (Numbers 25:1–3; 31:16). These people and the Nicolaitans encouraged Christians at Pergamos to attend the idolatrous, immoral banquets of the heathen. Christ hates false doctrine and ungodly living and the church at Pergamos should not have tolerated these people. The risen Christ who has a ‘*sharp two-edged sword*’ in his mouth (the Word of God – Hebrews 4:12) warned that he would quickly come and fight against them if they did not repent (14–16). He was warning of sudden disaster if they did not deal with this problem in their midst and repent of their compromise.

Notice again the reference to overcoming, as in the other letters. What great promises! To be nourished by Christ with the ‘*hidden manna*’, and to be given a ‘*white stone*’ which stands for beauty, holiness and purity. There is an urgent message for us in this letter. Satan is causing havoc through increasing worldliness in the church. Many Christians are falling into immorality; their homes are being broken up and their testimony is ruined. We must not allow the world to mould us in our thinking and behaviour. **We must always be watchful and prayerful and remember that it is possible to hold fast to Christ’s name even where Satan dwells.**