

The Message of Jesus Christ

by T. Austin-Sparks

The book of Revelation is a revelation of Jesus Christ and the challenge of the Lord Jesus to the Church to uphold the Testimony of Jesus and be willing to give up the comparative and partial for the absolute and complete.

Scripture: Revelation 1:1-2

Topics: "Revelation of Christ", "Church's Responsibility"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the revelation of Jesus Christ as central to understanding the spiritual conflict throughout history, particularly in relation to the Church's role in God's governance. He highlights the importance of the Church's responsibility to uphold the testimony of Jesus, which is foundational for the ultimate establishment of His kingdom. The messages to the seven churches, especially Ephesus, serve as a reminder that God desires not just good works but the absolute best in our relationship with Him. Sparks challenges believers to reflect on their spiritual condition and the intrinsic value of their testimony, urging them to return to their first love and fulfill their divine calling. The sermon calls for a deeper understanding of the significance of Christ's authority and the Church's role in His eternal purpose.

Transcript

"Revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave him..." Revelation 1:1.

"John, to the seven churches which are in Asia..." Revelation 1:4.

"What thou seest write in a book and send it to the seven churches, unto Ephesus, and unto Smyrna, and unto Pergamum, and unto Thyatira, and unto Sardis, and unto Philadelphia and unto Laodicea." Revelation 1:11.

"To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These things saith he that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand, he that walketh in the midst of the seven golden lampstands: I know thy works, and thy toil and patience, and that thou canst not bear evil men, and didst try them which call themselves apostles, and they are not, and didst find them false; and thou hast patience and didst bear for my name's sake, and hast not grown weary. But I have this against thee, that thou didst leave thy first love. Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent and do the first works; or else I will come to thee, and will move thy lampstand out of its place, except thou repent. But this thou hast, that thou hatest the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches. To

him that overcometh, to him will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the Paradise of God." Revelation 2:1-7.

We have been led at this time to be occupied with revelation or the unveiling of Jesus Christ. We began by taking note of the fact that this book which has that as its title and which has that as its very comprehensive content, is the book which reveals Him inclusively, comprehensively as coming forth at last to settle all those issues which have been underlying the spiritual conflict of this universe. All through the ages there has been a mighty conflict in process. This earth has felt its repercussions; all that has been taking place here has been related to a great conflict in the heavens. And the issue which has been in all that long, drawn out and many sided conflict is none other than the issue of God's intention as to the government of this earth from heaven. His purpose, in the first place, concerning His Son as the appointed Lord of lords, King of kings, supreme Ruler in heaven and earth. And in the second place, the eternally chosen or elected vehicle of that government, what we now know as the Church. These two things as two parts of One have been back of, and the occasion of, all this tremendous swirl and welter of conflict through the ages. And this book is the revelation of Jesus Christ coming out to settle that issue once and for all and finally. And in this book we see the processes of that settlement - how it is headed up, in different connections and relationships - a steady, progressive movement until at last... the kingdoms of this world are the kingdom of our Lord and His Christ. The issue is settled and He is established with His Church as forever in an unchallengeable supremacy. Well, that is the revelation of Jesus Christ in very few words.

In our former three sessions we have been considering the introduction to that. First, in noting how everything in this book is consummatory. It gathers up everything from the beginning of the Bible all the way through. In its some four hundred allusions to the Old Testament, it is very comprehensive and quite clearly it is the bringing of all that to consummation. And then we went on to contemplate the two aspects of the Lord Jesus as presented in chapter one, as foundational to all that is to follow. First of all, His personal victory: "I am He that liveth, I became dead, behold I am alive unto the ages of the ages, I have the keys of death and of Hades." His victory... And we spent quite a lot of time seeing what that victory was and how it was. And then we went to the second aspect of this foundation: His person, that is His character. This matchless description of Himself which we have in chapter one... and we saw that it is upon the basis not only of what He has done, but of what He is in His intrinsic character, nature and worth that He has the right to decide anything - to judge either Church or nations or the devil himself. His authority is based upon what He is, His real character. And that is always a law with God; the power rests upon what a person is more than what a person does. With God the matter of authority, of dominion, of government, or of any kind of trust or responsibility, always depends upon the character of the person or the persons in view. With the Lord Jesus that is perfectly evident that He triumphed because of what He was. And therefore He is in the right of judgment of all others because no one can ever point at anything in Him that Satan could encamp upon and say, 'That's a contradiction'.

Well, again, we spent a long session on the character of the Lord Jesus and the challenge of that character to everything. But when we have said all that we can say, and a great deal more could be said about chapter one; all that is but preparatory to what follows. It is as though the Spirit of God had laid down a foundation for everything now that is going to transpire. As though He had said, "Now this is our ground for everything and of everything; it is upon that and from that that we move to everything else".

You notice that the first movement of the Spirit, here described symbolically as the seven spirits of God (the meaning for that which we may consider at some time) is the Holy Spirit undoubtedly in sevenfold

expression. It is the Holy Spirit moving in the first place toward the Church, to deal with the Church inclusively and comprehensively upon the basis that He Himself has laid down. That is a thing that we must bear in mind and which will become more and more apparent as we go on.

Now, if chapters two and three - which contain this first movement to the Church - if these chapters have any relation to our own time, then, dear friends, surely with them we are in the presence of the most solemn and the most momentous issues. What is taken up in the first place where the Church is concerned is nothing less than the very testimony of Jesus Himself in this universe. The Testimony of Jesus... that IS the supreme and the ultimate thing for all history and for all realms. We've seen what that testimony is - the absolute Lordship of Jesus Christ in every realm. That is the Testimony of Jesus. And that matter is the first thing that governs the Spirit in moving toward the Church. We see that more fully as we go on. Then of course there follows quite clearly by the patent conclusion that has to be drawn, the Church's responsibility for that Testimony. It is not some thing that is detached and unrelated, abstract and apart in itself. The Church was chosen in Christ Jesus before the foundation of the world to be the vessel and the vehicle of the Testimony of Jesus. And so, what is here in the second place is the great and honourable responsibility of the Church in relation to the greatest issue in this universe; the divinely appointed place for Jesus Christ in the whole system of things. And these two things lead on, as is made perfectly clear, to the ultimate government of the world FROM heaven, BY Christ, THROUGH the Church. Those three things are not small things. If that is what is here, then I am justified in saying that when we begin with this first movement of the Spirit to the Church, we are faced with the most solemn and momentous matters. And taking it (and with all our human insignificance, smallness and weakness, all that we would not be and are not that we would be, we are a few of the Church, therefore we must not think too objectively at this time) but when it says "the Spirit saith to the churches", the Spirit is speaking to us here in this place concerning these very matters in this time.

Well, what is here then, is for the enlightenment of the Church as to the meaning of things that happen. Dear friends, things are happening. And things are going to happen. That is what it says right at the beginning. Things are happening and things are going to happen, we are in the midst of these happenings now. There are movements of tremendous significance, very portentous in this creation with an impact of spiritual forces upon this earth, and a lot of things are happening and a lot of developments are in process. We shall see more and more of these things happening. The important thing is that we understand the MEANING of these happenings.

It is a tremendous thing to understand what is happening to us, conscious that things are happening to us, they are happening to us spiritually, in our own spiritual experience and life; conscious of being taken into and through things that are difficult to bear and to understand. We don't know what is it that's happening to us; why are we involved in this... this stress, this pressure, this strain, this tension, this conflict? If we are really God's people going on with God, putting Christ in His place, we're involved in something; every one of us personally. It strikes upon us individually in some way or ways. It strikes upon every relationship of our lives, it strikes upon our families, and upon our homes, upon our businesses, it strikes upon our relationships with other believers, it strikes upon the whole question of spiritual fellowship, it strikes upon the work of the Lord, it strikes upon the local companies. Yes, things are happening, it's like that, we're involved in something.

There are big spiritual movements afoot and I repeat it is of TREMENDOUS importance that the people of God know the MEANING of what is happening; WHY we are passing this way, WHAT the Lord is trying to do with us, what the Lord MEANS by what is taking place. Yes, it's tremendously important that we have

understanding of these things. These things will happen. That is what is here in these messages. The Lord is moving in, so to speak, and is bringing every thing to some particular issue. That's a very impressive thing you know, that the Lord seems to be concentrating upon one specific issue!

I don't know how you felt when I read again that first message to the Church at Ephesus. I'll tell you how I have felt as I have read it, I've read it: "I know thy works, thy toil, thy toil and thy patience, that thou canst not bear evil men, and didst try them which call themselves apostles, and they are not, thou didst find them false..." Remember this same writer John, who had the responsibility in the church at Ephesus, had written in his letter "beloved, try the spirits, for there are many false prophets gone abroad". Try them! They had done it. "Thou hast tried them that call themselves apostles, and they are not, thou didst find them false. Thou hast patience and didst bear for My Name's sake and hast not grown weary..." "What more do You want Lord? What more can You ask for? If You want more than that, You're very exacting. What can You expect of any people more than that, what are You asking for?" Is that how you feel? You have to react like that in order to get to the heart of things. "All that Lord! All that! We've given You all that, You've got all that, and that means a lot, you know! It means a lot for any church in a day of persecution especially, as in this case. You've got all that; what more do You want, what more can You have? And with all that, You come back and say, with all that, 'I'm on the point of removing your lampstand out of its place, there's something, with all that, which not being present, does not justify My preserving you as a vessel.'" That's terrible isn't it in one way? That's searching, that would drive us to our knees. WHAT IS IT, that with all that, is essential to our continuation as a vessel of the Lord?

We'll have to come back to that before we are finished. I say that it's important that we understand why such people can be dealt with by the Lord in condemnation, yes in correction, with an effort by encouragement and confirmation to get that something else; that essential. Dear friends, there is one thing that surely is such a contemplation and consideration will bring home to you and to me: that is that the Lord is never satisfied with the comparative. He must have the absolute. The Lord will never ultimately, ultimately settle down to accept something good, something good. He's going to have the best. A church may be good in many respects, a group of the Lord's people may have many commendable things, that even the Lord commends, but in the final analysis, His attitude is, "A good thing, with many good things is not what I set out to have. At the beginning I set out to have something not good, but the best. Not comparative, but absolute. Not partial, but complete." That, I say, is the conclusion to which we are driven if we read this right; we have to decide that.

Now then, here we have to answer one question; do these messages to the seven churches in Asia have an application to the Church today? Of course there are these schools of interpretation to which I have referred earlier. I'll not even mention their technical names, but there is the one school that holds and concludes that what is here in this book was confined to the time of its being written, it was just a matter of contemporary history, it had only to do solely with the churches in Asia as they were at that time, and all this was contemporary history. Very well, if so, it may be interesting to read it, to know what happened and how things happened; but you don't get over all your difficulties that way.

There is the next school that interprets all this as having commenced in apostolic times, in late apostolic times, and been spread over to the time of the coming of the Lord, that is, that all these seven churches are like seven phases of history which fill up the big gap between the two comings of the Lord. Alright, we are not going to argue about that. And then there is the third school which holds that it all belongs to the end, to the end of the age and afterward, all this is going to come up as the day of the Lord draws near and going to be all cleared up and settled in the last phase of this age and then what follows afterward.

I would say here, that not by way of convenience or compromise, I'm thinking that they all hold truth, they all hold truth and they all hold error - or if that is too strong a word - they all hold weaknesses and flaws. But I'm not going to discuss them, that is not the point at all. What I'm after is this: if this is the word of the Lord, if this has come from God, if this is the word of the Holy Spirit, you can confine it to no particular time. It ranges ALL time in the principles which it embodies.

You are not dealing here finally and ultimately and conclusively with anything that belongs to any one fragment of time. You're dealing with the thoughts of God which govern ALL times. And wherever and whenever you have those things that are found in these churches which are condemned by the Lord; at any time in history they're still condemned - condemnation does not belong to any one place or one time. They are principles of universal application. And where you find, and whenever you find that which the Lord here commends and is seeking to have, that is an eternal something which compasses all time! And I hold that as the answer to all interpretations; that we are not dealing with mere history, and localities and phases in time; we are dealing with eternal principles. And I am certain that that is the sum of the significance of this book. As we have pointed out, it goes RIGHT back to the eternal counsels of God and what took place THEN and He decided. And what has been disputed and challenged and fought over through all the ages and now on the threshold of the ages of the ages - it's THAT that is being settled as much in Ephesus as anywhere else. And the same everywhere else as in Ephesus. These are no issues for some period or some place; we are in it as much as ever Ephesus in apostolic times was in it. This is to us, because the word of the Lord is forever! He speaks and when He speaks He expresses an eternal mind and a universal mind.

Well now, this book clearly compasses all time - past, present and what there remains of the future. And it does so in one inclusive respect: this issue of the utterness, the utterness - not the comparativeness, not the partialness - the utterness of the place of the Lord Jesus. That's the issue, and that was the issue for Ephesus, no doubt about it. We'll see that as we look into this message.

You see, it is the full revelation of Jesus. The FULL revelation of Jesus. This is no partial revelation of Him, He's here in fullness; and THAT'S the challenge. Churches, times, are not being challenged on something about Jesus, some, even true part of Jesus; the challenge is upon the fullness of Christ, the FULLNESS of Christ - that's the issue. And that is where we are in this book. And so I repeat for you, certainly that this book holds principles for all time.

Now then, to Ephesus. He is heading up, we have said, to a final conclusion all these outstanding questions and controversies through the ages. He's heading them up at last, saying "Now we are going to settle this and settle it forever." And where does He begin? He begins with the Church. Rightly so! It's in the right order of God to begin this with the Church. He cannot pass to the nations and call them to account until He has dealt with the Church. He cannot even dispossess the evil powers of their place and cast them out until He has dealt with the Church. Tremendous principle involved in that. Without giving mystical interpretation to this and this is not my intention at all because I believe this is historic and by descent, nevertheless the principle does apply in this way; that you and I will never see the evil powers and the evil one cast out of our realm while there is something wrong with us before the Lord. Isn't it true? If he has some rightful foothold in us; no hope of his being cast out. You've got to take the ground from him before you can do that. That is true in principle. In dealing with any life where Satan has really got power, you've got to get down to know WHY he has got the power in that life, that there is something there that is of himself. It's got to be removed before that life can be saved. That is the meaning of our Lord's own words "The prince of this world cometh to me and hath nothing in me; hence the prince of this world is cast

out". See the basis. It's like that.

And that is what is here: how can you deal with the world in judgment or with the great kingdom of Satan which will be dealt with in the third place, until the Church is put right? Because presently it will be the accuser of the brethren who is cast down, but that will not happen until the ground of his accusation has been dealt with in the brethren. You got that? His is not official power, his is not just objective power, his is spiritual power. His strength and his hold rests upon a condition, a condition. "Simon, Simon, Satan hath obtained thee by asking that he may sift thee as wheat but I have prayed for thee, when thou art turned again strengthen thy brethren..." WHY does Satan have his request granted, to sift Simon Peter as wheat... and he did it, mark you, he did it very thoroughly. Why? Because the Lord saw there was something in Simon Peter that had got to BE sifted that Satan had a right over. And so the Lord dealt with that, and you have an authoritative Simon Peter after that, a man in spiritual ascendancy indeed, who cares for neither men nor devils. That was not the original Simon. You see the working of this law; power rests upon character.

And so, if the Church is God's eternally chosen vessel for the administration of the kingdom of God by Jesus Christ, it's got to come to a spiritual position which justifies that government, that control. Hence the Lord MUST begin with and be thorough and exact with the Church and not just accept good things, but sift down and sift down. So the ultimate issue is bound up with these messages, no less an issue than that that we have called, dear friends, we have called, (the wonder and amazement of it, it has perhaps by familiarity lost some of its impress upon us): called into fellowship with Jesus Christ to take the place that the prince and principalities and powers and world rulers of this darkness now hold. Not so difficult to understand if you think about it... this world is governed spiritually. No doubt about that. It's a spiritual government that's behind all that's happening here. Even men who make no profession whatever of being spiritual, even in any particular sense Christian; never give us anything to indicate that they are born again people and know the Lord... nevertheless they see. They see through, and they know that there are forces of evil behind the movements in this world. They say, they speak of it as "that evil thing, that evil thing"; they know. And so it is. Back of all this there is spiritual government of this world, "the world rulers of this darkness" what a rich full phrase that is. Where's it coming from? Principalities and powers and hosts of wicked spirits in the heavenlies.

The ultimate vision of God's purpose realized is the Church in the symbolic presentation of the new Jerusalem, heavenly City, taking THAT place, occupying THAT place. So difficult to move in our minds from a literal symbolism to a spiritual meaning... That's what it means! Church is a heavenly body, with a heavenly calling, to occupy a heavenly position for heavenly government with Christ in the ages to come. And if I have not misread my Bible, that is what the Church is called to and that is what we are called to. Now, you cannot have such a calling and such a vocation, such a divine intention, without the Lord being very exact. VERY exact! And, as I say again, being unprepared to accept what is comparative.

Well, here we have the seven messages and I haven't got to Ephesus yet. But here we have then the sevenfold symbolism and representation and it's that we must note first of all. Seven churches in Asia. Yes, but there were plenty MORE churches in Asia besides these seven! All the churches in Asia are not mentioned when you've mentioned these seven. Are the others alright, they did not need to be mentioned, nothing wrong with them, they're alright; is that what it means? Why select these? Why select just seven? Well, because seven is always a representative number, that's all. Seven is the number which symbolizes spiritual completeness. It represents spiritual completeness or fullness. And so seven here selected are just lifted out, so to speak, to be representative of all others and the whole Church and what the Lord says

to the seven He says to the whole. It is here a representation of the whole Church - that is all that is meant by selecting seven - to embody a complete expression of spiritual principles. Is that clear? If that is true, then it's more than for Asia, it IS the whole Church and what was in Asia, inside of Asia in these seven, is only taken as a kind of sounding board or platform for the Church universal and all time.

These are united in the right hand of Him that walks up and down in the midst of the golden lampstands. United in His right hand, "Who holdeth in his right hand", you notice "who HOLDETH in his right hand the seven". Well, the right hand is another symbolic idea, it's the place firstly of honour and then of authority and then of strength. He holds... all there in His right hand, in His authority, in His strength. The word 'hold' as used here or 'holdeth' is a very strong word in the Greek; different from other words which mean just 'to have', here it's what we might call 'to have a grip'; He's got a grip on this. He is in charge, in possession. He has not let go what He intended here, He is not regarding this loosely, carelessly, indifferently, weakly. This whole matter of the Testimony of the Church and the churches is with Him something very definite, very positive, He holds in His right hand for His honour.

The golden lampstands... the golden lampstands; that is essentially a divine idea. And as we, I think, earlier said, gold in the Old Testament is always the symbol of that which is most precious amongst metals. You speak of gold there; you always have the idea of value, of preciousness, of something that counts. Here it's in the churches that which is precious to Him. That which is precious to God. That which is of intrinsic value. That which is incorruptible. We've tried to set this forth in a fuller way in a book, "The Gold of the Sanctuary" but that is it. What is He after, what is His thought about the Church and the churches, what is His thought about us as companies of the Lord's people; what is it? His thought is that there is where we are - or there ought to be where we are - something of transcendent preciousness to Himself and to the Father. Something of real value; REAL value. It's that that He's after.

These symbolic representations of lampstands of gold is simply this - here and there in the intention of God shall be a representation and an embodiment of that which is supremely precious to God. If it's like that, if it's like that, well of course that will explain a very great deal why the enemy would like the fine gold to become dim, why the tremendous conflict for the PURITY of any corporate expression of the Church - its purity. To corrupt, to corrupt - it's one of the things the Lord is dealing with in the churches - to corrupt, to spoil and mar the fine gold, to rob the Lord of the preciousness. Oh, let us be very much given to this, brethren and sisters; see to it that so far as we are concerned, we take this responsibility. I am not one of those who can conclude that the angels of the churches are the single ministers of the church; I don't believe that because it contradicts so much that is in the New Testament. But I believe that the angel of the church is simply the principle or the focal point of responsibility. We are ALL responsible people in the Church and we're all called to take responsibility for the Church and so I say the Lord help us every one to take responsibility where we are and where we are concerned, to see that there is something precious for the Lord, that our gatherings and our companies are not just preaching places, teaching places with a lot of truth and head knowledge of divine things... but really in character there is something very precious to the Lord - it could be said that there is something there that is very precious to the Lord. If that were spoiled, if that were lost, something of real value to the Lord would go. It MUST be like that dear friends, very practical, but you see this is what the Lord is after: the intrinsic value, not the comparative value, not the size of things at all, not what is external but the INTRINSIC value, the gold... refined in the fire. That which is PRECIOUS TO THE LORD.

Seven golden lampstands. Lampstands, that is a better translation than candlesticks because a candlestick burns itself away or the candle burns itself away. The lamp, it burns by a supply, an endless

supply from outside of itself. However, that by the way, the function of the lampstand, that's the point; what is it? Of course, obviously, it is LIGHT, by the Holy Spirit. Let's qualify that. It is light, but it is light by the power, the illumination, the energy, the resource of the Holy Spirit. A Holy Spirit testimony in every place where there is a company, small or large, of the Lord's people. LIGHT in that place!

I cannot emphasize the importance of this enough although it seems SO obvious. But this ought to really concern our hearts, really be a burden on our hearts, that where we are, as the Lord's people together, however few, people can see Christ. People can really SEE Christ because we are there. Isn't that searching and challenging... Just the matter of seeing the Lord Jesus. I've seen a lot of people going to meetings in a certain place, hearing them sing and wondering what's happening amongst them, but you meet those people and you meet more than those people. If you have any idea of God at all or what God ought to be like, if you have any information as to God's character and nature, you see it in those people. You meet it with those people, you've got it right in your very presence, that's where it is. That is the essential function of the Lamp; it is not an ornament, it is not a [code] to get something, it is not a form and a shape; it's a living Life, a living History. That is what the Church is here for and the churches are but local representations of the Church. It is that there, where the Lord's people are, that is where what is Christ is found. Just what is Christ! Yes, these are the seven golden lampstands.

I must stop there I think, before we come to Ephesus after all, but that is enough to search our hearts. It begins to show us, it begins to lead us to this thing that the Lord cannot do without, He cannot do without. With all the works, the labour, the patience, and all the conscientiousness, and integrity and all the hatred of evil men, and all the testing of people's professions and judging whether things are right and wrong, with all that, there's some intrinsic value which is more than all and without which the Lord cannot be satisfied and the vessel is not justified in its continuing. Very solemn thought, that is.

May the Word this afternoon provoke us to this and I would close here, this part, by saying again that as with Ephesus, so with us all - there can be no substituting of something good for the best. I'm sure that searches us here in this place. There may be a lot of good things, we may be wanting a lot of good things and doing a lot of good things but remember there is a FULL thing for which God brought us into being. A full thing for which He brought us into being, and He will never, never allow anything less than that to pass with Him. He'll hold to that and ask: "Why did I bring you into being? This or that, something else... quite good, yes, nothing wrong with that at all... quite good, BUT... is that all, IS that all?" That's His interrogation here. "Repent and do the first works". And we shall have more light on this as we actually look into this message to the Church in Ephesus. The Lord hold our hearts.

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