

Letters From Heaven

by Tom Macartney

The sermon emphasizes the importance of understanding the letters from Jesus Christ to the 7 churches in Revelation, which contain lessons for the church throughout history on faithfulness, holiness, and exclusive devotion to Christ.

Scripture: Isaiah 22:22, Matthew 7:21, Romans 8:37, 1 Corinthians 15:58, 2 Corinthians 3:5, Revelation 21:7

Topics: "Church Discipline", "Christian Perseverance"

Description

Tom Macartney preaches on the importance of the first three chapters of the book of Revelation, which contain letters from Jesus Christ to seven churches in the 1st century, relevant for His church throughout history. These letters address issues such as spiritual decline, persecution, false teaching, and the need for genuine devotion to Christ. Each church faced specific challenges like decline, testing, pollution, false religion, reputation without reality, lack of stamina, and complacency. The letters highlight the enemies to overcome, the issues to face, and the call to faith in Christ as the all-sufficient Savior and Reward.

Transcript

The importance of the first three chapters of the book Revelation - be sure to read them - can hardly be exaggerated, for they contain letters from heaven - letters from Jesus Christ in glory, from the Head of the church to seven churches in the 1st. century and through them to His church throughout history. But before we consider the startling relevance of these letters for us today, we must first note their background.

This marvellous book was written in a time of persecution and spiritual decline in the church, probably at the close of the 1st. century. John himself is suffering on Patmos, the tide of persecution is rising everywhere and the enemy is working overtime within the church to destroy its testimony through false teaching, lifeless orthodoxy and every other means at his disposal. How up-to-date it is, for this is our situation today.

The first words, "The revelation of Jesus Christ", are most significant, for they tell us that Jesus Christ Himself is both the author and the subject of the book. Everything here is seen in the light of His judging and saving presence. Chapter 1 is dominated by our ascended and glorified Lord Jesus, and the letters which follow must be read in this light. At least twelve things are said about Him here, apart from the nine-fold description in verses 13-16. We mention a few.

The first verse reminds us that the Father has given everything to His Son and that He is in charge. Then, He is called the ruler of the kings of the earth. At a time when Caesar seemed and claimed to be supreme, John writes, "No, Jesus Christ is Lord of all, even though I am an exile on Patmos!" How we need to see the true position of world-rulers and to pray accordingly. Here we see Him as the glorified Son of Man, in whom alone all God's purposes in man's creation are realised. Christians belong to a new race. Here we see His Deity. He is Jehovah, He is the God-man. And He has conquered death, and so has authority over it. It is death that spoils everything. Death is the great enemy. We read that the devil had the power of death, but now Christ, the Living One, Who holds the keys Whereas once Satan could always write the last chapter - death - for everyone and everything, because of sin, he can no longer do so. Christ now always has the last word! Praise God!

Then, looking at verses 13-16, what a stunning picture of Christ in glory is presented to us! Here He stands among His churches as King, High-priest and Judge, as everlasting Father, with eyes ablaze with discerning love, with feet swift and strong to subdue every foe, and with a voice of irresistible power. His right hand proclaims His absolute sovereignty over His churches. From His mouth comes forth the sword of the Word of God, which divides truth from error, pierces the depths of the human heart, and with which He will smite the nations. And from His face radiates the light of His holiness and the warmth of His love. What an overwhelming picture of majesty, sovereignty, wisdom, love and power! And this is Christ as He now is. No wonder John fell at His feet as one dead. Even he had never seen his Lord like this before. And this is how we shall see Him, for this is how He is now. Have we realised this? Is this how we are seeing Him even now by faith? What a marvellous Christ we have. Have we been overwhelmed as John was? Or is our conception of Him inadequate and unworthy? Our Christian life and experience is determined exactly by how we see Him. So many of our problems stem from an inadequate or false view of Christ. Our greatest need is to see Him as He is.

Note that this majestic figure is seen walking among His churches. We acknowledge Christ as Head of His church and yet we tend to think and act as if He were a mere figure-head. John sees Him as a real head, observing everything in every church, claiming His rightful place at the centre and in control, and presenting Himself as the answer to every need. Where is He as far as we are concerned? Is He in His rightful place, or is He perhaps outside the door, as at Laodicea?

Note too that His first concern is with His church. We tend to give priority to other things, but the Lord is more concerned with us. He knows that if the churches are right, everything else will take care of itself. This book begins with Christ among His churches and ends with Christ in His church in glory. The church is central to God's purpose and kingdom - it is His capital.

Then we must note three things about the letters. Firstly, there is a pattern common to all seven. In each letter the risen Lord reveals Himself in a particular way, taking titles appropriate to that church, and revealing His intimate knowledge of it. He commends whatever He can; He complains and judges where He must; He warns and gives counsel; and then finally He makes rich promises to those who listen and are victorious through grace. Christ comes to confront and challenge, to comfort and encourage, to enable and reward. The rewards are something more gained of Christ in our experience. Secondly, we should note the importance of sensitiveness to the Holy Spirit. In each letter we read, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches," which implies that not all will listen, understand and respond. John was in the Spirit when he received them and we shall need open hearts and the Spirit's help to benefit from them. Thirdly, we should note how the Lord presents Himself as the answer before He raises the problem. We work through problems to the answer, but God has the answer from the beginning! Each

letter begins with Christ the answer, then deals with the particular enemy to be overcome, and ends with Christ the reward for the victorious. So these are very positive as well as challenging letters.

In considering them, we shall leave aside much written about them and much valuable detail in them, and concentrate on the crux of the situation in each church and of the Lord's message to each. Of course all seven churches received the entire book and read the seven letters, but each received its own particular letter. What is it that Christ said to each, and to all, and now says to us today? This will be our concern. In these seven churches we find conditions which constantly recur in the church and in churches throughout history. These letters are like windows through which we can see the great issues of the Christian life. Here we find seven enemies to be overcome if we are to gain Christ as our prize. Understood in this way these letters speak with immediate power and relevance to our hearts, for in them we find all the problems we can ever encounter as individuals or as churches. We may find ourselves more particularly in one letter than in another, but we shall learn something from each.

Isaiah 9:6; 44:6; 1 Cor. 15:24-28; Eph. 6:17; Phil. 3:7-16; Heb. 1:1-3; 2:14, 15; 4:12, 13; Rev. 19:11-16.

EPHESUS A Church in Decline

Ephesus was then the greatest city in the province of Asia. Although its heyday as a centre of trade was over, it was a free, self-governing city and the custodian of the great temple of Artemis. This was a great tourist attraction, one of the wonders of the world, and made Ephesus a centre of pagan superstition, crime and immorality. But Ephesus was already a city in decline for the river on which it was situated was silting up, and today it is a place of ruins, miles inland.

Yet this godless city was to witness one of the most amazing instances of the power of the gospel to transform men recorded in the New Testament. Here Paul and his fellow-workers worked for three years until the whole town was affected. Here a church was born and grew to which he wrote one of his profoundest letters. So the church at Ephesus must be reckoned among the most privileged. Through Paul's ministry they had received the highest revelation of the whole will of God. They had seen and responded to the glorious purpose of God in Christ for the individual and the church. Their love and devotion to Christ and to one another - the two always go together - then knew no bounds. Then they wanted to climb the highest ranges of full salvation - no question of settling for a second-best. But now, when Christ comes among them, active in authority, He finds a church in decline, falling instead of climbing. True, there is much self-sacrificing work going on and a commendable devotion to the truth of the gospel, but the inner fire of love's devotion and aspiration is burning low. Everything is tending to become formal and mechanical instead of being motivated by love. "You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen."

How true to experience this tendency to decline and decay is, whether we consider the church in history, companies of believers, the work of the Lord, or ourselves. Here is our first enemy: the tendency to decline, to fall, to move gradually from love's devotion to duty in our relationship with the Lord Jesus; from the warmth of true fellowship to formal smiles and handshakes in our relationships with one another; from aspiring to climb higher in the knowledge of the Lord to the acceptance of something less because it is easier.

The enemy: Declension, our tendency to silt up, stagnate, drift, fall back, mark time, merely go through the motions.

The issue: Devotion to Christ, seen in progress, growth, movement, climbing higher. Are we climbing or falling?

The call: Keep climbing in the love and knowledge of Christ.

Christ is our sufficiency and reward.

Acts 19:1-41; 20:17-38; Ephesians

SMYRNA A Church under Testing

As a city Smyrna had died and risen again, for it had virtually ceased to exist for some 400 years but now was famous for its beauty, vitality and culture, and noted for its faithfulness to Rome and Caesar. This is the background of this letter from the risen Christ, "The first and the last, who died and lived again."

For the church there, Smyrna was a place of destitution, persecution and martyrdom, and so the word of Christ to it is, "Fear not be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life."

For Christians there the test was clear: loyalty to Christ in the way of the cross, or desertion and compromise through fear. This is how Peter was tested under the shadow of the cross. This is how Demas, who loved this world, was tested. And for us the test is no less real. Even though we may not be called to martyrdom, the challenge comes, "If anyone would come after Me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow Me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for Me will save it." Again and again Paul tells us of his full committal to the cross of Christ in his life and service. He not only preached 'Christ crucified', his whole manner of life and way of service were consistent with his message. We too are called to be loyal to Christ unto death, that is, not just until death, but to this extent; to follow Him openly in a world that rejects Him, to follow Him in the way of self-denial, to lay down our lives daily for others, in His service. And is it not easy to desert this way, to be secret disciples perhaps, to pander to ourselves in countless ways, even to gratify ourselves in His service, or to choose and justify an easier version of the Christian life, thereby denying Christ crucified in practice?

The enemy: Desertion; our tendency to give in to fear or self-interest; to forsake the way of the cross and its implications.

The issue: Faithfulness to Christ and His cross; the rejection of our self-centredness. Are we following or deserting?

The call: Take up the cross daily and follow Him. So shall we enjoy the crown of life.

Christ is our sufficiency and reward.

Luke 9:23, 24; 2 Cor. 4; Gal. 2:20; 6:14; 2 Tim. 4:10.

PERGAMUM A Church succumbing to Pollution

The letters to Pergamum and Thyatira reveal two basic problems which arise from the church having to live out its life in a fallen world. For the church in Pergamum the problem was mainly spiritual and moral contamination, for Thyatira it was the infiltration of the false religion of this world.

Pergamum was where Satan's throne was. It was the administrative capital of the province of Asia, a great religious centre and the headquarters of emperor worship. Here was the great altar to Zeus the saviour and the temple of Asklepios, the god of healing, whose emblem was the serpent. So the Christians here knew the full power of the prince of this world working against them, for in Pergamum Christ and the world confronted each other face to face.

Now what are we tempted to do under extreme pressure? We are tempted to conform, to compromise. So it was in Pergamum. For Christians there the issues were quite clear, but there were those among them who advocated a working arrangement with the pagan society in which they lived, who said there was no harm in involvement with this world. We do not know exactly what the Nicolaitans taught, but it is clear it was essentially the same thing as the teaching of Balaam, and that of Jezebel at Thyatira, and what they stood for is quite clear. Balaam managed to ensnare Israel into intermarriage with Moab, and idolatry, and so Israel compromised its holy, distinct and special calling to be God's own people and servant. And now in Pergamum there were those in the church advocating exactly the same kind of compromise. They would have argued, 'What is the harm in burning a little incense to Caesar - it means nothing? We shall never influence people unless we go along with their ways. We simply must work out a policy of peaceful co-existence, of judicious compromise, to live in a society like ours'. They simply refused to face the issue of pollution, the issue of worldliness.

This problem is always with us: how to walk with God in a polluted environment, how to live and work in this fallen world without being contaminated by its ways, how to have human relationships without compromising our loyalty to Christ, how to be attractive yet true witnesses, avoiding the loveless legalism of the Pharisees.

The enemy: Pollution, spiritual and moral, through compromising an exclusive attachment to Jesus Christ and His will.

The issue: Holiness; separation from the way the world thinks and lives; loyalty to our high calling as Christians.

The call: Be holy, you belong to Christ; be distinct in the way you live in this world.

Christ is our sufficiency and reward.

Num. 22-24; 25:1; 31:8,16; John 12:31; 17:14-18; 1 Cor. 3:23; 6:19, 20; 1 Pet. 1:13-16; 2:9; 2 Pet. 2:15; 1 John 2:15-17; Jude 11.

THYATIRA A Church infiltrated by False Religion

While the problem the church faced at Pergamum arose mainly from its godless environment, the problem at Thyatira was chiefly the more subtle operation of false religion inside the church. The key to understanding these letters is seeing what Balaam and Jezebel stood for in the Old Testament. The situation at Thyatira was much more serious than that at Pergamum because Jezebel posed a much greater threat to God's people than Balaam. It is always much more difficult to combat the enemy when he gets inside. When Ahab married Jezebel he introduced into Israel the whole false religion of Baal alongside the worship of Jehovah, so that the religious situation in Israel was one of total confusion, a mixture of true and false religion. This is what Elijah was called to deal with, and what was happening at Thyatira. And this is the situation in the church today.

Thyatira was a great commercial centre with many trade-guilds or clubs. Membership of these clubs was a great feature of the Roman world and essential if you wanted to get on. They involved common meals, formal sacrifices to the gods, drunken revelry and loose morality, and new religious ideas usually spread through them. Clearly no Christian could join. But Jezebel--probably this was not her real name--and those with her in the church, stood for involvement and the inclusion of human religion in its many forms. Jezebel wanted a place for Baal, who represents any object or way of worship other than the worship in spirit and truth of the true God revealed in Christ. Jezebel would have argued, 'Why not Jehovah and Baal? Why must we insist on the exclusive claims of Christ? Surely we must be broad-minded and open to everyone's religious views? And by joining these clubs , we shall be able to influence people

Now all this is very up-to-date within Christianity today. Baal worship, which is just false religion of every kind, crude and refined, abounds, and embraces false Christianity. Jezebel and Baal are everywhere. We have religious leaders denying the very fundamentals of the faith, and the air is thick with appealing, yet false, religious ideas. And remember, Jezebel knew all about make-up. She knew how to make herself attractive.

Jezebel, looking her best, stands for a religion of consensus, a kind of all-embracing religious humanism which originates with, satisfies and exalts man himself. In this Christ has a place, but He is not unique. He is not the authentic Christ of the Bible, but just one among many great religious leaders. He is thus removed from His unique, rightful and central place in our thinking and lives. 2 Peter and Jude show us where this leads.

Now while we may spot false religion in its more obvious forms, we may still be caught by modern, unbiblical religious trends, or be led astray into some cul-de-sac, some emphasis on an aspect of truth. Whatever distracts us from Christ alone, and whatever is offered as an extra with Christ, is of the essence of false religion, whatever it seems to be. This is Jezebel's work. Are we jealous for the exclusive rights of Christ?

The enemy: False religion, error; the many-sided religion of this fallen world; religious mirages and cul-de-sacs.

The issue: Christ is unique; He alone is the truth. We only need Him; there are no extras. Are we abiding in the truth?

The call: Let absolutely nothing divert us from Christ, the true Christ of the Bible.

Christ is our sufficiency and reward.

1 Kings 16:30-33;.17-19; 21;.2 Kings 9:30-37; 2 Cor. 11:2-4, 13-15; 1 John 5:18-21; 2 John 9.

SARDIS A Church with a Reputation without Reality

The church in Sardis had in many ways become like Sardis itself, a city of failure, unjustified pretensions, unfulfilled promise, and appearance without substance. Sardis had been one of the great cities of ancient history, but now it was of small account. It had been captured by the Persians in one of the most astonishing reverses of all time through over-confidence and a fatal weakness in its foundations. The upper city stood high above the surrounding plain and appeared to be an impregnable fortress built on rock, but the rock was not solid and genuine; it was little more than compressed mud so that the weather produced cracks upon which the enemy climbed to surprise the unsuspecting city.

Now here was a church with a name, but without reality, a church merely going through the motions of Christian faith. Its foundations were suspect. It looked impressive but behind the facade there was nothing. Like much modern furniture, it was not genuine through and through; it was mainly veneer. It was well spoken of on earth as a lively, flourishing church, but the verdict of heaven was different. Unreality had crept in through pride and lack of watchfulness.

How easy it is to imagine that a mere hearing of Bible truth is sufficient, to forget that it is only doers of the word who are actually building on rock, that a form of godliness will not do, that a second-hand knowledge and experience of the Lord is useless. This letter warns us of the dangers of the merely mechanical in spiritual things. Are we merely going through the motions, deceiving ourselves and others perhaps?

A useful check on unreality is given us here: "I have not found your works completed." How often the Lord says something to us and we intend to do it, but somehow it never gets done or finished.

The enemy: Unreality, pretence, mere outward appearance; formal, mechanical Christianity; not seeing things through. The issue: A humble, dependent, first-hand and up-to-date knowledge and experience of the Lord. Are we genuine?

The call: Watch for unreality; check foundations; see things through; pursue reality.

Christ is our sufficiency and reward.

Matt. 7:21, 24-27; John 17:4; 1 Cor. 4:20; 2 Tim. 3:5; 4:7; James 1:22-25.

PHILADELPHIA A Church in Need of Stamina for Service

While there are many helpful details in this letter, the main point arises from the fact that Philadelphia lay on an important road and had been founded as a missionary city for the spread of Hellenism, the Greek way of life, the wisdom and ways of this world. So the Lord Jesus takes up this fact in the background to remind this church of its high calling to represent Him in the world, to be a witnessing church, to spread Him as the true way of life. Then He puts His finger on its need and ours in this matter. Having stressed His absolute sovereignty in opening doors, He says, "I know you have little strength ... hold on to what you have." Little strength. The need in Philadelphia is for spiritual stamina, endurance, faithfulness in service against the odds. "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up." The saints in Philadelphia lived in days of intense pressure, as we do. They were being tempted to give up, to give way to discouragement, to surrender their calling as Christ's witnesses.

It is all too obvious that we are moving into days of increasing pressure. The whirling roundabout of life is going faster and faster and many Christians are finding it difficult to cope. Some are dropping out of the race through sheer exhaustion. There is much in the Bible about this problem, this enemy. Running the race to the end requires stamina and endurance. As the long-distance runner often only keeps going through sheer will-power, so we shall need to draw upon the power of Christ. Only in Him who has the key of David, absolute authority, shall we find the resources we need, but they are there!

The Enemy - Exhaustion - giving up under pressure - dropping out of the race - giving in to discouragement.

The Issue - Spiritual Stamina. Do we know Christ as our stamina, as our ability to keep running to the end?

The Call - "Be steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord." "Let us run with patient endurance, determination, perseverance, resolution, courage, the race set before us, looking unto Jesus."

Christ is our sufficiency and reward.

Isaiah 22:22-40:29-31; Matt.24:12-13; Cor.15:58; 2 Cor.4:1,16-18; 2:9-10; Gal. 6:9; 2 Tim.1:7; Heb.12:1-2, 2.

LAODICEA A Church Bankrupt through Complacency

Laodicea was a city of bankers, a great financial and commercial centre with a far-flung export trade. Renowned for its medical school, it had failed as a missionary city for Hellenism. Its wealth had made it feel self-sufficient and self-confident. The worship of money and property had made it accommodating, compromising, diplomatic, careful to avoid extremes, a city ruled by self-interest.

And this spirit had crept into the church. Instead of divine enthusiasm there was lukewarm complacency. Instead of humble dependence on the riches of God's grace, there was self-assurance and smug self-congratulation, the spirit of independence, the conviction that they knew it all, and a total unawareness of being spiritual beggars. The meetings went on as usual but Christ was outside the door. Here was orthodoxy without zeal, lip-service without heart, and work and witness without sacrifice. The calculating, worldly mind, always out to strike a bargain, had blinded the church to its true state. And so the Lord says in chastening love: "I counsel you to buy from Me gold ... white clothes ... eye salve (true wealth). Be zealous, hot, fervent and repent".

What a deadly enemy is spiritual complacency, so often the result of misunderstanding the meaning of grace. Paul's understanding of grace made him humble and red-hot for Christ. In him we see something of that life of pure devotion to the Father, that life outpoured, that life on fire with heavenly zeal, which we see in the Lord Jesus. This, of course, is something very different from human enthusiasm, the heat of our emotions. We are to have hot hearts, but cool heads. It is His own loving, calm and consistent enthusiasm and devotion that Christ would pour into our hearts. What is our spiritual temperature?

The enemy: Complacency; proud, loveless and legalistic orthodoxy; the conviction that we have the truth and need nothing.

The issue: Divine enthusiasm, springing from gratitude to Christ. Are we ruled by self-interest or outpoured for God?

The call: Be hot, boiling hot in spirit, serving the Lord.

Christ is our sufficiency and reward.

Matt. 5:3; 15:8; Luke 18:9-14; John 2:17; Rom. 12:11; 2 Cor. 5:13-15; 1 Pet. 1:8, 15.

So, through these letters the Lord Jesus identifies for us seven enemies to be overcome:- Declension - Desertion - Pollution - Error - Unreality - Exhaustion - Complacency;

and raises seven issues for us to face:-Progress - Faithfulness - Holiness - Truth - Reality - Stamina - Enthusiasm;

and makes a seven-fold call to faith:- to keep climbing higher in knowing Him better - to be faithful to Him in the way of the cross - to be true to our holy calling in Him - to be loyal to Him as the Truth - to pursue genuineness as His disciples - to prove Him as our stamina - to be red-hot in our devotion to Him.

And with the call, He presents Himself as an all-sufficient Saviour, and as our Reward. He only raises these problems and identifies these enemies for our understanding. He does not call us to solve or overcome them by our own efforts. He presents Himself as the One who is already the Answer, who is already the Victor. All He calls for is faith's co-operation with His all-sufficient grace. Then He will be our Reward through time and eternity.

"He who overcomes shall inherit these things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son." (Rev. 21:7)

"Who is sufficient for these things?" "Our sufficiency is from God." (2 Cor. 2: 16; 3:5)

"In all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us." (Rom. 8:37)

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