

The Seven Churches

by W.J. Erdman

W.J. Erdman's sermon explores the messages and significance of the seven churches in Revelation, emphasizing the challenges and promises for believers.

Scripture: Revelation 1:9, Revelation 2:1, Revelation 2:8, Revelation 2:12, Revelation 2:18, Revelation 3:1, Revelation 3:7, Revelation 3:14

Topics: "Church Authority", "Revelation Studies"

Description

W.J. Erdman preaches on the powerful vision of Christ among the churches in the Book of Revelation, emphasizing His presence and authority over the Universal Church. The vision reveals Christ's priestly and judicial role, offering praise, warnings, and promises to the churches. The seven letters to the churches address specific commendations, rebukes, and promises, reflecting the various conditions of the historic and present-day church. Each letter follows a structured format, highlighting the Author's description, praise or censure, words of encouragement or warning, and promises to the overcomers.

Transcript

Introductory Vision

CHRIST AMONG THE CHURCHES. Chapter. 1:9-20.

9 I John, your brother and partaker with you in the tribulation and kingdom and patience which are in Jesus, was in the isle that is called Patmos, for the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. 10 I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a great voice, as of a trumpet 11 saying, 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. 12 And I turned to see the voice that spake with me. And having turned I saw seven golden candlesticks; 13 and in the midst of the candlesticks one like unto a son of man, clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girt about at the breasts with a golden girdle. 14 And his head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; and his eyes were as a flame of fire; 15 and his feet like unto burnished brass, as if it had been refined in a furnace; and his voice as the voice of many waters. 16 And he had in his right hand seven stars: and out of his mouth proceeded a sharp two-edged sword: and his countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength. 17 And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as one dead. And he laid his right hand upon me, saying, Fear not; I am the first and the last, 18 and the Living one; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades. 19 Write therefore the things which

thou sawest, and the things which are, and the things which shall come to pass hereafter; 20 the mystery of the seven stars which thou sawest in my right hand, and the seven golden candlesticks. The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches: and the seven candlesticks are seven churches.

The candlestick, more accurately the "lamp stand" was a familiar Old Testament Symbol for the People of God. The sacred oil which was supplied to the lamps typified the Holy Spirit, through whose operation God's people became the light of the world.

Here Christ is pictured as standing among "the seven golden candlesticks," or lamp stands, which are designed to represent the Universal Church of Christ. He holds in his hand seven stars; and John explains: "The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches and the seven candlesticks are seven churches."

The Lord Jesus is seen among the Churches as the Son of Man, in a priestly and yet searching judicial attitude, meting out praise, and uttering warning and promise, and holding out to the overcomers various blessings and especially conjoint sovereignty and rule with him and on his own throne. 3:21.

He is the Living One, the First and the Last; and in relation to his Church and in confirmation of his word that the gates of Hades should not prevail against it, he is heard saying, "I have the keys of Hades and of Death." And he has now, and until the Kingdom comes, a peculiar priestly relation to "the Church which is his body." 1:17-18; Heb. 1:13; Eph. 1:22.

The question has been raised as to whether verse 19 suggests a threefold or a twofold division of the book. Probably the latter is the case. The Vision and the Seven Letters together constitute "the things that are," and "the things which shall be hereafter", refer to the visions beginning with chapter 4.

In this connection it is interesting to note the use in the Revelation of the phrase "And I saw." This phrase is used not only for the introduction of a vision, but it suggests a principle of interpretation; it is a formal word leading to new matter, like the Old Testament phrase "And the Lord spake unto Moses"

It indicates when prefatory to even only one brief vision that its subject is of great import demanding a pause of due contemplation.

But especially remarkable is the fact that when only one "And I saw" covers an extended range of objects, it indicates that all such objects are in a unitous relation to each other either as to time or theme or both.

For instance, one such formal phrase introduces the vision of the Son of Man and the Seven Churches, and there is no repetition of it throughout the entire section concerning them. 1:9-3:22.

This fact suggests that what things John saw and was commanded to write in a book and send to the churches should not be separated into three but only into two parts, "Write therefore, the things which thou sawest; Both what things are, and what things are about to come to pass hereafter." The same conclusion is reached by comparing the two commands to write. 1:2, 19; 1:11; 22:7, 9, 16, 18; 1:19.

The first "And I saw" accordingly belongs to the things of the period of the churches timeless and present, and then the second begins the series of visions to follow. 1:12; 4:1.

THE LETTERS TO THE CHURCHES. Chapter. 2:1-3:22.

The fact that the whole Book is given to the Seven Churches, indicates that they represent the Universal Church in its various phases during the present age. There were seven Christian churches in the cities of Asia which John names. They embodied the characteristics which are described and to them the living Christ sends a message appropriate to each. They may also represent in general the course and character of the historic church in certain phases from the days of the apostles until the coming of Christ. The messages addressed to them are pertinent to all churches in similar conditions now; they are also full of encouragement and warning to individual members of any and every church.

The letters are written in accordance with a careful and exact literary scheme. The structure of each letter is as follows: (a) An inscription, in the words "To the angel of the Church" in the city named, (b) A description of the Author of the letter given in language borrowed from the Introductory Vision of Christ in the midst of the Churches, (c) The message of praise or censure, (d) The words of encouragement or warning, (e) The promise "to him that overcometh."

The group of seven letters is subdivided into a division of three and four. Among other distinctions, in the first three, the promise to the "overcomers" is introduced by the phrase "He that hath an ear let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches." In the last four, this phrase follows the promise. In every case the promise is specially pertinent to the form of temptation indicated in the letter.

1. TO THE CHURCH IN EPHESUS, Chapter. 2:1-7.

1 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 candlesticks: 2 I know thy works, and thy toil and patience, and that thou canst not hear evil men, and didst try them that call themselves apostles, and they are not, and didst find them false; 3 and thou hast patience and didst bear for my name's sake, and hast not grown weary. 4 But I have this against thee, that thou didst leave thy first love. 5 Remember therefore whence thou art fallen, and repent and do the first works; or else I come to thee, and will move thy candlestick out of its place, except thou repent. 6 But this thou hast, that thou hates the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. 7 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.

The "angel" or "messenger" to which the letter is addressed, is commonly understood to mean the "minister" or "pastor" of the church. Some suppose the word indicates a literal "angel," and some "the characteristic spirit" of the particular church. The message is surely intended for the church, whatever may be meant by the representative "angel."

Ephesus was a city of great wealth and beauty and culture. It was called "The Light of Asia." It was celebrated for its temple of Diana, one of the "nine wonders of the world," and was a great commercial and political and religious centre. Furthermore it was of great importance in the history of the Christian Church. Here Paul laboured for three years, and here John carried on and finished the work of his declining years. It is not unnatural that John sent the first message to the church in the largest city, and to the church nearest his own heart.

The description of the author, "he that holdeth the seven stars," etc., links the letter at once with the vision of "Christ in the midst of the churches" (ch. 1), and indicates the presence of Christ and his power to control.

The church is praised for its toil and patience, and its hatred of evil men. It is blamed for losing its "first love" for Christ. It is called to repent lest its "candle stick" be moved out of its place.

To him who overcomes the temptation to lose spiritual fervour is promised the privilege of eating of "the tree of life," that is of life in its fulness, of sharing in a Paradise regained.

2. TO THE CHURCH IN SMYRNA. Chapter. 2:8-11.

8 And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These things saith the first and the last, who was dead, and lived again: 9 I know thy tribulation, and thy poverty (but thou art rich), and the blasphemy of them that say they are Jews, and they are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. 10 Fear not the things which thou art about to suffer: behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days. Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee the crown of life. 11 He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches. He that over cometh shall not be hurt of the second death.

It is natural that this city should have been next in mind, for it stood next to Ephesus in position and importance. The city was known as "The Beauty of Asia." Even in modern days the city has been known for its great importance, and has likewise been associated with suffering, for "the Church in Smyrna" was the suffering church.

Whoever "the angel of the Church in Smyrna" may have been, none can forget that, possibly at this time, Polycarp, the famous Christian martyr, was the head of this church. In any case the name of Polycarp helps one to remember the church of Smyrna, and to understand this letter of encouragement, which has ever brought cheer to those who were persecuted and tormented for the sake of Christ.

The description of the author is significant, "The first and the last, who was dead, and lived again." The Christ who tasted the bitterness of death, and rose in triumph, can comfort those who suffer for his sake.

He assures them that he knows all their tribulation and poverty, and the blasphemy of their enemies. He encourages them to be brave even in the face of greater trials: "Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life."

The overcomers are promised exemption, not from the death of the body, but from the death of the soul. One who is loyal to Christ never knows real death, "the second death."

3. TO THE CHURCH IN PERGAMUM. Chapter. 2:12-17.

12 And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These things saith he that hath the sharp two edged sword: 13 I know where thou dwellest, even where Satan's throne is; and thou holdest fast my name, and didst not deny my faith, even in the days of Antipas my witness, my faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwelleth. 14 But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there some that hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to cast a stumbling-block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit fornication. 15 So hast thou also some that hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans in like manner. 16 Repent therefore; or else I come to thee quickly, and I will make war against them with the sword of my mouth. 17 He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches. To him that overcometh, to him will I give of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and upon the stone a new name written, which no one knoweth but he that receiveth it.

Like Ephesus and Smyrna in beauty and wealth, it was more exclusively a religious centre. It was a perfect Pantheon of pagan deities. Paganism and impurity are almost synonymous. Pergamum is well described as the place "where Satan's throne is."

However, even in Pergamum, a Christian church can be established. It is not easy, however, to be a Christian there. The followers of Christ need encouragement. They are reminded that their Lord can and will punish sin. "It is he that hath the sharp two-edged sword."

He sees the faithfulness of his followers, who like the unknown hero Antipas, are willing to lay down their lives for his Name.

He sees, however, others in the church. They are like Balaam. They make loud protestations of loyalty to God, but their influence is corrupting. They would lead men into idolatry and impurity.

To them comes a call to repentance, lest they suffer the judgment of the Lord. To those who withstand all these solicitations to evil, to the "overcomers," is the promise of fuller communion with Christ and of more perfect knowledge of God. They will be admitted to his Holy Place, will eat "the hidden manna" like the priests in the tabernacle; like them too who saw the jewels on the breast-plate of the High Priest, they will receive, each one, "a white stone, and on the stone a new name written."

4. TO THE CHURCH IN THYATIRA. Chapter. 2:18-29.

18 And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: These things saith the Son of God, who hath his eyes like a flame of fire, and his feet are like unto burnished brass: 19 I know thy works, and thy love and faith and ministry and patience, and that thy last works are more than the first. 20 But I have this against thee, that thou sufferest the woman Jezebel, who calleth herself a prophetess; and she teacheth and seduceth my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed to idols. 21 And I gave her time that she should repent; and she willeth not to repent of her fornication. 22 Behold, I cast her into a bed, and them that commit adultery with her into great tribulation, except they repent of her works. 23 And I will kill her children with death; and all the churches shall know that I am he that searcheth the reins and hearts: and I will give unto each one of you according to your works. 24 But to you I say, to the rest that are in Thyatira, as many as have not this teaching, who know not the deep things of Satan, as they are wont to say; I cast upon you none other burden. 25 Nevertheless that which ye have, hold fast till I come. 26 And he that overcometh, and he that keepeth my works unto the end, to him will I give authority over the nations: 27 and he shall rule them with a rod of iron, as the vessels of the potter are broken to shivers; as I also have received of my Father: 28 and I will give him the morning star. 29 He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches.

The author describes himself as the "Son of God" who has power to discern and to punish sin, "who hath his eyes like a flame of fire and his feet like unto burnished brass."

The church is praised not only for its love and faith and service and patience, but for its increase in these virtues. The church is rebuked, however, for its voluntary submission to evil influences. A woman, a professed prophetess, a veritable Jezebel, was allowed to remain in its fellowship, while teaching that Christians were free to practice immorality and idolatry.

Then follows the call to repentance. Punishment, long graciously withheld, is sure to fall, both upon this corrupt teacher and her followers. The fault has been in a false charity, which allowed such doctrines to

continue in the church unrebuked.

However, the whole church was not corrupt. To those who had not been misled comes a message of gracious encouragement and promise. They had not accepted the false teachings, had not fathomed the depths of the Satanic mysteries. Upon them "no other burden" was to be placed than continued opposition to these evil influences. They must, however, hold fast the truth and purity which they have, until Christ returns.

To the overcomer is promised a share in the victorious reign of Christ. They are even promised Christ himself; his virtues, his holiness, his brightness are to be imparted to them: "I will give him the morning star."

5. TO THE CHURCH IN SARDIS. Chapter. 3:1-6.

1 And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: These things saith he that hath the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars: I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and thou art dead. 2 Be thou watchful, and establish the things that remain, which were ready to die: for I have found no works of thine perfected before my God. 3 Remember therefore how thou hast received and didst hear; and keep it, and repent. If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee. 4 But thou hast a few names in Sardis that did not defile their garments: and they shall walk with me in white; for they are worthy. 5 He that overcometh shall thus be arrayed in white garments; and I will in no wise blot his name out of the book of life, and I will confess his name before my Father, and before My angels. 6 He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches.

Sardis, the capital of ancient Lydia, was as well known for its wickedness as for its wealth. It lay a short distance southwest of Thyatira.

In addressing the church in this city, the Author describes himself as "He that hath the seven Spirits of God," that is, the Christ, the Anointed one who was filled with the Spirit, upon whom rested the Spirit, "without measure." He also held "the seven stars," the "angels" of the seven churches, for all ministers are the "gifts" of the risen and ascended Lord.

In spite of its reputed life and activity, the church is rebuked for its spiritual deadness. It is exhorted to be watchful in its present position and peril, and to strengthen the things that remain; for the coming of Christ may be near, and Christians should be ready for his return.

Some in Sardis had not defiled their garments with sin. They had walked in white robes, by the grace of God; they would yet walk in the white robes of glory. Their names would be in the Book of Life; they would be confessed before the Father and his angels,

6. TO THE CHURCH IN PHILADELPHIA. Chapter. 3:7--13.

7 And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: These things saith he that is holy, he that is true, he that hath the key of David, he that openeth and none shall shut, and that shutteth and none openeth: 8 I know thy works (behold, I have set before thee a door opened, which none can shut), that thou hast a little power, and didst keep my word, and didst not deny my name. 9 Behold, I give of the synagogue of Satan, of them that say they are Jews, and they are not, but do lie; behold, I will make them to come and worship before thy feet, and to know that I have loved thee. 10 Because thou didst keep the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of trial, that hour which is to come upon the whole world, to try

them that dwell upon the earth. 11 I come quickly: hold fast that which thou hast, that no one take thy crown. 12 He that overcometh, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go out thence no more: and I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God, and mine own new name. 13 He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches.

Philadelphia is the church of privilege, the church of the "open door." The message of this letter is an encouragement to faithful use of opportunities, in order to secure eternal satisfaction and freedom from regret.

The church was not large in numbers. The city suffered greatly from earthquakes. However, this was the last of the churches of Asia to survive.

The Author describes himself as "Holy none other could. He is "true," none other fulfills every ideal, none other embodies reality. He "hath the key of David," he only can unlock the gates of the Kingdom of heaven.

So those who are holy and true and belong to Christ will find open before them opportunities for patience, for sympathy and for service.

They must hold fast the word of Christ, they must be true to the name of Christ; then they will be kept in every hour of testing and trial, and no man will be able to deprive them of their crown.

Their influence will abide, in years to come or in the life eternal. They will be pillars in God's temple, citizens of the New Jerusalem, possessors of a deep and deepening knowledge of Christ.

7. TO THE CHURCH IN LAODICEA. Chapter. 3:14-22.

14 And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: These things saith the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God: 15 I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. 16 So because thou art lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spew thee out of my mouth. 17 Because thou sayest, I am rich, and have gotten riches, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art the wretched one and miserable and poor and blind and naked; 18 I counsel thee to buy of me gold refined by fire, that thou mayest become rich; and white garments, that thou mayest clothe thyself, and that the shame of thy nakedness be not made manifest; and eyesalve to anoint thine eyes, that thou mayest see. 19 As many as I love, I reprove and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent. 20 Behold, I stand at the door and knock: if any man hear my voice and open the door, will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me. 21 He that overcometh, I will give to him to sit down with me in my throne, as I also overcame, and sat down with my Father in his throne. 22 He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches.

The letter to the Laodiceans gives us the picture of an apostate church. Christ has been excluded. "Luke warm" describes a body of professed Christians who lack spiritual life and yet are unconscious of the fact that they are spiritually dead. The cause for this lukewarmness is their self-satisfaction. They have "need of nothing." In reality, they are "wretched, miserable, poor, blind and naked." They are counselled to secure those spiritual necessities which Christ alone can supply.

The call to repentance is followed by the blessed invitation, "Behold I stand at the door and knock: if any man hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him and he with me." No

matter how dead and cold and lifeless a church may be, Christ is willing to enter into the most intimate and blessed relationship with any individual believer who admits him into the life and heart. Nor is this fellowship for the present alone. To the overcomer belongs the blessed promise "I will give to him to sit down with me in my throne." To the church in the most desperate condition is this most tender and beautiful of all promises. The rebuke administered has been most severe; the encouragement is most full of heavenly hope.

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