

(The Lord and His Church) 3. the Risen Lord

by Zac Poonen

The sermon emphasizes the importance of the local church, its primary function of giving light, and the Lord's presence in the church.

Scripture: Revelation 1:11

Topics: "The Church", "The Risen Lord"

Description

Zac Poonen emphasizes the significance of the local church as independent entities under the headship of Christ, contrasting them with man-made denominations. He highlights the vision of the Risen Lord amidst the seven golden lampstands, symbolizing the churches, and underscores the church's primary role as a light in the world. Poonen explains that Jesus, depicted in His glory, reassures believers not to fear, as He holds the keys of death and Hades, signifying His authority over life and death. The sermon calls for a reverent understanding of Christ's holiness and the empowerment of the church to fulfill its divine purpose. Ultimately, Poonen encourages believers to seek revelation from God with humility and a healthy fear of the Lord.

Transcript

"Write in a book what you see, and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea. And I turned to see the voice that was speaking with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands; and in the middle of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed in a robe reaching to the feet, and girded across His breast with a golden girdle. And His head and His hair were white like white wool, like snow; and His eyes were like a flame of fire; and His feet were like burnished bronze, when it has been caused to glow in a furnace, and His voice was like the sound of many waters. And in His right hand He held seven stars; and out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword; and His face was like the sun shining in its strength. And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as a dead man. And He laid His right hand upon me, saying, 'Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living One; and I was dead, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and Hades.' Write therefore the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall take place after these things. As for the mystery of the seven stars which you saw in My right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches." (Revelation 1:11-20).

Seven Local Churches

God gives us messages not only for ourselves but also for others. When God speaks to us, it is a good habit to write down what we hear, as John was commanded to do here (verse 11). He might otherwise have forgotten what God had spoken to him.

The message in this case was for the seven churches in Asia. What was known as Asia then is today a small part of Turkey. All these 7 churches were located within a radius of 75 miles of each other. But notice that even though they were so close to each other, they were still NOT collectively called "The CHURCH in Asia". They were called "The CHURCHES in Asia".

This is a small point but a very important one, nevertheless. "The church in Asia" would have meant that these churches had become a denomination with a central headquarters. But "The churches in Asia" indicate that each church was a local church directly under the headship of the Lord.

The church is a work of God, built by Christ. But denominations are the work of men. All the teachings and the writings of the apostles make it clear that the will of God is for each church to be directly under the headship of Christ, and not part of a denomination.

There was no bishop or superintendent in charge of these seven churches, to whom John could send these letters for distribution to the churches. Each letter had to be sent individually to the messenger of that church - for each church was an independent unit. The Lord had given apostles to the church. John himself was one of them. But the Lord had not appointed any bishops or superintendents.

There is no such thing, for example, as "The church in India". There are churches in India, and these are built by the Lord in different localities, each one directly under His headship.

Satan's final aim is to build his counterfeit world "church", Babylon. And his first step towards that goal was to group churches into denominations, many centuries ago. He knew that the task of building Babylon would have been impossible otherwise. We should not be ignorant of Satan's schemes.

The seven golden lampstands symbolise the seven churches (see verse 20). Under the old covenant, the temple had ONE seven-branched lampstand. This was because all the tribes of Israel were branches of one "denomination" with its central headquarters and leaders at Jerusalem.

But it is different under the new covenant. There are seven different lampstands, each completely separate from the other. The reason, as we saw above, was because each church was independently under the headship of Christ, although in fellowship with the other churches, through the Head.

The church being called a lampstand indicates that, in God's eyes, its primary function is to give light. The lampstands being golden indicate the Divine origin of a true church. It is built by the Lord and not by men.

A lampstand is not meant to be a mere decoration. Neither is a church! The light that every church should hold forth is God's Word, which alone is a light for our path in this dark world (Psalm 119:105). Instead of holding forth that light, when so-called "churches" begin to major on running schools and hospitals and on doing social work, we can be sure that they have strayed from God's primary purpose.

The Risen Lord

When John turned around to see who was speaking, he saw Jesus (verses 12, 13). But he saw Him in the midst of the churches. It is through the local church that the Lord seeks to reveal Himself and to speak to

others.

The first dwelling-place of God mentioned in the Bible is the burning bush that Moses saw in the wilderness (Deuteronomy 33:16). Like John at Patmos, Moses also turned aside at that time to see that marvellous sight. And that's when God spoke to him (Exodus 3:3).

Today the church is God's dwelling place. God desires every church to be aflame with His Spirit like that burning bush was. When people look at a local church, they should be able to see the life of Christ revealed through the members of that church. Then God can speak to people through the church.

John then goes on to describe the Lord Jesus as he saw Him. Even though the Lord is risen, He is still called the "Son of man", emphasising the fact of His identification with humanity permanently.

His long robe (undoubtedly white in colour) reaching to His feet, points to His High-Priestly ministry of intercession for us - for this was how the Jewish High-Priest was dressed when He went into the Most Holy Place of the tabernacle, on the day of atonement every year (verse 13).

The Lord was wearing a golden girdle (belt) across His breast (verse 13). Gold symbolises what is Divine. The girdle symbolises righteousness and faithfulness (according to Isaiah 11:5). This emphasises the perfect righteousness of God that was seen in Jesus' earthly life and the perfect faithfulness with which He keeps His promises to us.

His head and His hair were white like wool (verse 14). Daniel 7:9 uses this very same symbolism to refer to God's eternity (His endless age). The white hair also speaks of wisdom. So this emphasises the fact that Jesus, although the Son of Man, is nevertheless also the Eternal God, perfect in wisdom.

His eyes were like a flame of fire (verse 14). That means that "all things are open and laid bare" to Him (Hebrews 4:13). His eyes penetrate through all religious veneer, and can see through the flowery and pious language and the "form of godliness" of the religious hypocrite. It also sees beyond the broken, stuttering words of the God-fearing soul into the sincerity of his heart. As a result, His evaluations are totally different from man's.

His feet were like burnished bronze (verse 15). Bronze was the material with which the altar of sacrifice was made (in the outer court of the tabernacle), where the sin-offering was slain. Bronze therefore symbolises God's judgment of man's sin at Calvary. While crushing the serpent's head, Jesus' feet had to be pierced on the cross (Genesis 3:15).

His voice was like the sound of many waters (verse 15). The rivers of living water symbolise the Holy Spirit (John 7:37-39). The speech of Jesus was always full of the gentleness and the wisdom of the Holy Spirit.

He held seven stars in His right hand (verse 16). The seven stars are the seven messengers of the churches (verse 20). God has ordained that the New Testament church be led by a plurality of elders (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5; Acts 20:17). But God usually equips one among the elders with the gift of proclaiming the Word in the church, as His messenger. This one is referred to here as "the messenger of the church". (The word translated as "angel" is a Greek word which actually means "one who brings news" or "a messenger").

These messengers are held by Christ in His hand. That is why we are commanded to give double honour to the elders "who work hard at preaching and teaching" (1 Timothy 5:17).

It is necessary however, to mention that many elders of churches and many who preach God's Word today are NOT held by Christ in His hand, for they are self-appointed and not appointed by Him.

A messenger appointed by the Lord will be a man of God, who inspires your confidence, and through whose life and ministry you will be fed, led and blessed. Such a man should be respected - for he is held by the Lord in His hand. There are few men like that in the world today - but praise God there are a few.

God's servants are special targets of Satan. Therefore they are specially kept by the Lord in His hand. As long as they remain there in humility, Satan cannot touch them. But when they are puffed up, or if they sin and do not repent, then God allows Satan to inflict them in various ways so that they can come to repentance. It is a tremendous privilege to be held by the Lord as His messenger in His hand. But it has awesome responsibilities as well.

Out of Jesus' mouth came a sharp two-edged sword (verse 16). This refers to the Word of God that He speaks (Hebrews 4:12). We noticed in verse 15 that His voice was like the sound of many waters. These two verses put together indicate that Jesus always speaks God's Word in the power of the Holy Spirit. He speaks with great gentleness, but He also rebukes firmly, where necessary.

His face was like the sun shining in its strength (verse 16). This is how Peter, James and John saw Him on the mount of transfiguration as well (Matthew 17:2). This symbolises the "unapproachable light" in which God dwells (1 Timothy 6:16). The holiness of God is compared here to the noonday sun, which we cannot look at directly. The sun is a ball of fire in which no germs or bacteria can dwell. No sin can dwell in the presence of God either (Isaiah 33:14).

At the Feet of the Lord

The same John who leaned on Jesus' breast at the last supper now falls at His feet as a dead man (verse 17). John had walked with God for 65 years. He was undoubtedly the saintliest man on earth at that time. Yet He could not stand erect in the Lord's presence. Those who know the Lord the most, reverence Him the most. Those who know Him the least, pretend to have a cheap familiarity with Him.

The seraphs of heaven cover their faces before the Lord (Isaiah 6:2, 3). Job and Isaiah saw their sinfulness and mourned when they saw the glory of God (Job 42:5, 6; Isaiah 6:5). But "fools rush in where angels fear to tread" !! Such is the folly of the carnal believer.

The more we know the Lord, the more we will fall at His feet in adoring wonder, with our mouth in the dust. Only as we see the glory of the Lord constantly, will we see our own un-Christlikeness. Only then will we stop judging others and start judging ourselves. And only then will we experience His touch of power like John experienced at Patmos.

Jesus laid His right hand upon John (verse 17). This symbolised endowment with power and authority. He told John not to be afraid.

"Do not be afraid" and "Follow Me" are the two most oft-repeated statements of Jesus in the gospels. He speaks the very same words to us today.

Jesus went on to tell John that He was the First and the Last - the very same title used by the Father earlier (verse 8). He knows the end from the beginning and He Himself is before the beginning and after the end. This is why we need never fear.

Jesus then tells John how He has conquered death and the grave and now holds the keys of death and Hades (the place of departed spirits) (verse 18). Keys symbolise the power to open and close doors. Once it was Satan who had the power of death (Hebrews 2:14, 15). But when Jesus died and rose again, He took those keys from Satan.

Today Jesus has the keys of death and Hades. That means that if you are a wholehearted disciple of Jesus, seeking to do the will of God alone in your life, you cannot die until God's appointed time comes. No accident or sickness can claim your life, until Jesus decides that it is time to open the door of death for you to go through into His presence. This is a tremendous encouragement for all who are truly disciples of Jesus.

John may be persecuted by men at Patmos. But they could not kill him until God's time for him had come. And the Lord still had a ministry for John to fulfil.

John is now empowered and commissioned by the Lord for a new task - to write this wonderful book of Revelation (verse 19). We need to be empowered again and again by the Lord if we are to complete our ministry triumphantly.

The Threefold Division of "Revelation"

In verse 19, the Lord gives John the three-fold division of the book:

What John has already seen (Chapter 1) - the vision of a triumphant Lord Jesus saying, "Do not be afraid". Fear has absolutely no place in the heart of a disciple who has seen the glory of the Lord.

The situation in John's time (Chapters 2 & 3) - referring to the condition of the seven churches in Asia Minor. The Lord's messages to these seven churches are a warning and a challenge to all churches of all time and to their "messengers".

Events future to John's time (Chapters 4 to 22) - the phrase "after these things" that is used here, is used again in Chapter 4:1, indicating that the third part of the book begins there.

The Lord then explains to John the secret meaning of the lampstands and the stars (verse 20). We studied these when we looked at verses 12 & 16.

The Lord alone can give us revelation on the secrets of His Word. To receive such revelation, we need two indispensable qualities - the fear of God and humility.

"The secret of the Lord is for those who fear Himand He teaches the humble His way."

(Psalm 25:14, 9).

Let us study these letters to the churches then in that spirit.

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