

## THE LORD'S SEVEN LETTERS

### Introduction

Revelation 1:9-10

**Intro:** In looking at a number of commentaries to find out why it may have been that the Apostle John wrote to these seven churches when we know that these were not the only churches in the area of the western part of the Roman province of Asia, now western Turkey – the area where these seven churches were located – I was disappointed that those commentaries which I consulted did not deal with that question at all. So I decided to come up with some ideas of my own. I am always very hesitant about this because I don't want to go beyond the bounds of Scripture in my teaching. But I have gathered my ideas from what we find in the text, plus some suggestions that some of the commentaries have mentioned without dealing in particular with this problem.

Of course the first and clearest reason why the Apostle John wrote to these seven churches is because *this is what the Lord told him specifically to do. Look at verse 11 in chapter 1.* (Read.)

See also verse 4. Undoubtedly he wrote this verse because the Lord had revealed to him what he wrote in verse 11.

Then I think that John wrote to those seven churches because they must have been the strongest churches in the area, and therefore able to exercise the greatest influence upon the smaller and weaker churches.

A third reason was that the Apostle John was acquainted with them. This is the only book of the NT written by the Apostle John in which he mentioned his name. And so that would give him authority with them. They knew him, and had confidence in him.

And we have to realize that he was also that he was, on the best evidence that we have, the sole survivor of the twelve and of the Apostle Paul. So a letter, or book, however you might refer to this book of the Revelation of Jesus Christ, which is the title he gave it in chapter 1, verse 1, which otherwise might have seem very questionable because of its unusual contents, would more likely be accepted by the churches because it had come from John.

It has always been accepted as a circular letter, that is, a letter sent primar-

ily to all seven of the churches. So the believers at Ephesus would be able to read what the Lord said to the other six churches, and *vice versa*. Some scholars who have looked into the background of this book, believe that each church probably had its own copy. The Lord had a message for each church, but each church was to profit from what the Lord said to the other six.

Actually these two chapters contain material from our Lord Jesus Christ, sent personally from Him, which finds no parallel in any of the other epistles of the NT. “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God,” but this is a section, chapters 2 and 3, which we could also say was given by *divine dictation*. But we see how the Holy Spirit cooperated with our Lord in the writing of the letters in chapters 2 and 3 because each letter contains the words, “He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.”

So what could the Apostle John have done in addition to what he did, to show us two thousand plus years later how very important this book is? Those who study prophecy (which includes all of us to differing degrees) are to learn that in entering upon such a study, it is important that we give special attention to our relationship with the Lord and to the status of our fellowship with Him. It is not my purpose in this series to go through the entire book. I did that recently in our Tuesday Bible Class. But it is my intention to focus upon these seven letters, and to turn the focus of each letter upon ourselves and our walk with the Lord.

This morning is introductory to the letters and, I hope, a spiritual preparation for the study of the letters themselves. And for this I am limiting myself to the first chapter.

First of all, let’s think for a moment about:

## **I. THE WRITER, THE APOSTLE JOHN.**

I am calling him “the Apostle John,” but that is not how he referred to himself. He called himself the Lord’s “servant,” His bondservant, in verse 1. But in verse 9, identifying himself with the people in the churches to whom he was writing, he called himself “your brother, and companion in tribulation, and in the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ.” As a “companion in tribulation” he was saying he was a co-participant with them in troubles that were brought on them all because

they were living for and serving God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

You know, there were four men (three besides John) who were all born about the same time. I am referring to John the Apostle, John the Baptist, our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Apostle Paul. Possibly the Apostle Peter's name could be added to this list. There may have been others who were born about the same time, but we can be quite sure of these four. John the Baptist was beheaded when he was just a young man, our Lord was crucified, buried, raised from the dead, and had ascended back to heaven. So he was not physically present on earth. The Apostle Paul, as far as we know, was martyred for his faith. Only John the Apostle remained, and he was an old man, probably in his late eighties or early nineties. And he was living in exile on the island called Patmos.

Patmos was a small island off of the coast of the province of Asia where the seven churches were located. Patmos was a place where Roman prisoners were sent. It was a barren island, about 10 miles long and 6 miles wide, where Rome sent its prisoners and made them work hard in rock quarries. Physically it must have been a very difficult situation for the Apostle John. What was his crime? It was that he lived "for the Word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus Christ." But by these words he was not referring just to what he had done in the past to earn this exile for himself, but he meant that he was still doing it. And when he called himself a "companion in tribulation" with the churches to whom he was writing, he was indication that they were in trouble too. The world never has like the Word of God; it never has wanted to hear about Jesus Christ. Our world is the same way today.

So John on Patmos, and the believers in their churches, were all facing daily trials because they loved the Lord. John did not try to make out that he was in worse trouble than they were, but readily recognized that they were all in trouble.

But then John went on to tell them that a wonderful thing had happened to him. It was:

## **II. THE APPEARANCE OF THE LORD HIMSELF (Rev. 1:10=20).**

At first he only heard a voice, "a great voice, as of a trumpet." The voice gave His Name, and then told John what he was to do. Not all of the MSS have "I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last," but we do have

it in verse 18 and again in 22:13. This means that He is the ever-living One. He was here at the beginning. He will be here at the ending. And He is here all the way in between. What a comfort that would have been for John, for the believers in the seven churches, and what comfort it should be for all of us today!

The Lord's words were not a command just to write the letters, but to write the whole book, and to send it to the seven churches.

And then John turned to see who was speaking to Him, but when he turned, he saw seven golden (lit.) lampstands. And right in the middle of the seven lampstands he saw the Lord. But he had never seen the Lord as he saw Him on this occasion.

This was the Lord in all of His glory. Perhaps the primary meaning of this description of the Lord's glory was that of the high priest. But some see this as the Lord in His royal robes. And still others see the Lord here as a Judge. Probably there is some truth to all of these ideas, and maybe even as a Prophet. And in all of these roles the Lord was the ever-living One. We need to dwell upon this appearance of the Lord until we are impressed by the Holy Spirit with the power, the wisdom, the glory of our living Savior.

But notice in verse 16 as we go down through these verses that "He had in His right hand seven stars."

But with all of this the Apostle John was overwhelmed, and He fell down at the Lord's feet "as dead." He was completely overwhelmed with the appearance of the Lord as he saw Him on that "Lord's day." It was more than he could take. He knew immediately how the children of Israel felt when then told Moses to speak to them, but not for the Lord to speak to them because they might die if He did. None of us can fully appreciate what the Apostle John experienced. It was obviously more glorious than John had ever experienced even though he was one of the three apostles who saw the Lord transfigured before them on the mount. It was both awesome and comforting.

The latter part of verse 17 and all of verses 18, 19, and 20 are words spoken to the Apostle John and especially for the Apostle John! The Lord was ministering to him as well as preparing him for the task that He had for him to do.

I am encouraged to see how the Lord was dealing with His aged servant. We could easily believe that after John had walked the with Lord so faithfully all of those years, that there was not much left for him to learn. But that is not true. There is always more for us to learn, and the more we learn, the more we realize that we know so little of all that is to be known.

Now apart from this added revelation of the glory of our Lord, what was the Lord seeking to impress upon His servant, the Apostle John, as he made Himself known to John in this way?

Let me mention three important answers to that question.

First, the Lord was seeking to impress upon the heart of the Apostle John the truth that, while the Lord's people come, and they go, yet the Lord was living at the beginning, He continues to live throughout all of the years of time, and He is going to be right with His people when the end of all things takes place. His work doesn't depend upon us; His work depends upon HIM! We may go through difficult times of different kinds. And we may have Spurgeon called, "fainting fits." By this he meant times when we fail the Lord. So in our times of the greatest opportunities that come our way, or when we are overwhelm with the greatness of the problems, the Lord is the One we all need to remember. We need to keep our eyes on Him. Our sufficiency is in Him, not in ourselves. What the Lord has been, He still is, and what He is now, He always will be.

Secondly, we are told in the last statement of the chapter that the seven candlesticks, or lampstands, represent "the seven churches." Individually we are lights in this dark world. This is true of us individually, but it is also true of us as churches. The people of this world are blinded by the darkness which overwhelms them. God has graciously called us out of darkness into His marvelous light, and He has made us to shine in this dark and evil world. But we are not to attract attention to ourselves; we are to live so that people are pointed to Christ.

Thirdly, we are told that the stars in the Lord's right hand are the angels of the seven churches. Now it may be that an angel, or angels, have been assigned to assist us in our ministry as a local church of believers. I don't know that the Bible teaches such a thing, but neither do I know that the Bible would deny such a ministry. But here I think we have to take the word "angel," and apply its basic meaning. An angel is primarily a

messenger. And I agree with those who believe that these angels are the pastors of the church. It is not saying that we are angels, but it is saying that we are messengers, like John was, ministering to the people of God in the church. Now I don't believe this is talking about all pastors. There are many pastors who are not even Christians, pastors who do not know the Lord. But where there are men who know the Lord, the Lord has them in His hand. And He controls their ministries. He is not going to let His work die. He provides the power for the ministry. He directs His servants. He restrains us when we might do the wrong thing. He picks us up when we fall. He strengthens us when we get weak. He never leaves us nor forsakes us. That is true of all believers, but it is especially true of those who minister to the churches. And how do you become a minister to the people of God. The Lord calls you. Spurgeon used to tell his students in his school, "Don't preach if you can do anything else!" He meant if you can be happy doing anything else, then you haven't been called to the ministry. And if you have been called, but are doing something else, you are not going to be happy until you respond to your call from the Lord. God gives the desire, and then opens doors of opportunity.

**Concl:** But let us look upon this passage as our preparation for the letters that are to come. They are letters designed for the church in every generation. The work is the Lord. We are the Lord's people. He doesn't need us, but we need Him. And yet we are to be instruments in His hands, doing His work in His way for His glory. When the going gets rough, as it had gotten in these later years of the Apostle John's life, and as it was in the lives of the people in these seven churches, that is when we need to stop, turn from all of the discouraging things that are taking place, not to forget them, but to have our souls refresh as we look to the Lord, and learn once again to delight ourselves in the Lord. Then we can go back to the work with renewed strength and a stronger faith in our dear Lord Who holds us in the palm of His hand, and who will never let us go.