

WHEN JESUS WROTE TO THE CHURCH

Part 1: A Glimpse of the Author

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Face to Face

Have you ever wished you could sit down and have a conversation, face-to-face, with Jesus? The closest most of us will come to that is in our most intimate times of prayer, when our list of needs has been laid aside and our heart says to him, “Lord, what’s on Your mind today? What would You like to say to me just now?”

Of course, two thousand years ago, the first disciples of Jesus spent nearly every day of almost four years with Him and had many conversations. During that time, Jesus spoke directly to individuals, to small groups, to crowds and to great multitudes.

But after His death and resurrection and His return to Heaven and the throne of His Father, He dictated seven letters to the Church on earth. These letters were scribed and delivered by His Apostle John through what we know as the Book of the Revelation. It was the last of the biblical record to be written and passed on. We could consider it the final words of Jesus.

I realize Christ still speaks today, to many people and in many ways, but Revelation constitutes the completion of the Scriptures, the written Word of God. These are the *last things* that Jesus wanted recorded for all future generations to read.

In fact, the reading of the Book of the Revelation brings its own special blessing. Listen:

Revelation 1:3 *God blesses the one who reads the words of this prophecy to the church, and he blesses all who listen to its message and obey what it says, for the time is near.*

So, you may expect a special blessing as we read what Jesus wrote to the Church!

Seven Letters, One Church

Those who comment on this Bible text frequently describe chapters 2 and 3 as seven letters written to seven individual churches. Some interpret the letters as descriptions of seven time periods in the overall history of the Church on earth — seven ages of the Church, culminating with the return of Jesus. I will not propose these things today. Rather, I will suggest simply that *each* of the seven letters was to be read in *all* of the churches, as was also the custom with the letters of Paul and others:

Colossians 4:16 *After you have read this letter, pass it on to the church at Laodicea so they can read it, too. And you should read the letter I wrote to them.*

Today we would send an email blast to everyone we know at one time, but then, the craft of letter-writing was much more labor intensive and costly. One had to purchase a scroll of parchment and a jar of ink. Not everyone could write, much less write well, so one would also have to find or hire a scribe. Then, the letter must be dictated, slowly enough for the scribe to clearly and correctly write it all on the parchment. For letters the size of Paul’s smaller ones this could be an all-day project. Fi-

nally, someone had to be found to hand-deliver the scroll to the intended recipient. This could involve days, or even months of travel.

That each of these letters had a particular application to the church that initially received it is unquestioned in my mind. But that they had a wider application is equally clear, for at least three reasons.

First, there is a strong similarity of concern throughout the letters. Second, perhaps more telling, the subjects they address are common to us all over the course of our lives. Thus, you may not need them all today, but you will surely need at least one, and eventually, you will need them all. And third, each letter concludes with the admonition to listen closely to what the Spirit is saying to “the churches.” Thus, what He has said to one church, He has said to all.

However, the topics that each letter addresses will have to wait for next week, because my central point today is to identify the Author and His style and His overall purpose.

Glimpses of Jesus

Each letter begins by introducing its Author from a particular point of view, emphasizing a unique aspect of His character and person.

To Ephesus, He writes:

Revelation 2:1 This is the message from the one who holds the seven stars in his right hand, the one who walks among the seven gold lampstands.

To Smyrna, He says:

Revelation 2:8 This is the message from the one who is the First and the Last, who was dead but is now alive.

To Pergamum, He notes:

Revelation 2:12 This is the message from the one with the sharp two-edged sword.

To Thyatira, He declares:

Revelation 2:18 This is the message from the Son of God, whose eyes are like flames of fire, whose feet are like polished bronze.

To Sardis, it is:

Revelation 3:1 The message from the one who has the sevenfold Spirit of God and the seven stars.

To Philadelphia, He writes:

Revelation 3:7 This is the message from the one who is holy and true, the one who has the key of David. What he opens, no one can close; and what he closes, no one can open.

To Laodicea, He says:

Revelation 3:14 This is the message from the one who is the Amen—the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God’s new creation.

These are not mere appellations (titles that He bears). All of these things are actually true of Him. And each of these descriptions is significant for those who receive and read His letters.

Of greatest significance is the simple fact that this is the first time Jesus Christ has been introduced to His Church in such terms. Even John, who served as His scribe, was stunned to learn these things about Him.

An Extra-Ordinary Day

It all began as an ordinary day — a Sunday — in a private time of worship.

Revelation 1:10 It was the Lord's Day, and I was worshiping in the Spirit.

Picture it for yourself. It is Sunday. If you should pause now and begin to lift praises and thanksgiving to the Lord, you would soon find the heart posture in which John found himself. Suddenly, and without warning, he was startled by a very loud voice from behind him, “like a trumpet blast!” Terrifying.

“WRITE IN A LETTER EVERYTHING YOU SEE, AND SEND IT TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES IN THE CITIES OF NOVATO, SAN RAFAEL, GREENBRAE, FAIRFAX, SAN ANSELMO, MILL VALLEY, AND SAUSALITO!”

To that auditory shock, was added a stunning, psychedelic visual, as John turned to see who was speaking to him:

Revelation 1:12 I saw seven gold lampstands. ¹³ And standing in the middle of the lampstands was someone like the Son of Man. He was wearing a long robe with a gold sash across his chest. ¹⁴ His head and his hair were white like wool, as white as snow. And his eyes were like flames of fire. ¹⁵ His feet were like polished bronze refined in a furnace, and his voice thundered like mighty ocean waves. ¹⁶ He held seven stars in his right hand, and a sharp two-edged sword came from his mouth. And his face was like the sun in all its brilliance.

Who has ever seen anything like this?!

John was the disciple who was emotionally closest to Jesus, resting his head on the Christ's shoulder and caring for His mother after Jesus' death. Yet, He was so overwhelmed by what He saw that he reported:

Revelation 1:17 I fell at his feet as if I were dead.

From ancient days, when Israelite scribes recorded the words of Moses, or David, or Isaiah, the images of the Messiah-who-was-to-come included a strong ruler, a conquering warrior, and a merciful shepherd, but no composite of such words could have depicted this regal majesty and holy power! John had never known Him in this way before (nor had any of the Church).

To add to the impact of His presence and image, Jesus explained:

Revelation 1:17 “Don't be afraid! I am the First and the Last. ¹⁸ I am the Living One. I died, but look—I am alive forever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and the grave.

¹⁹ “Write down what you have seen—both the things that are now happening and the things that will happen. ²⁰ This is the meaning of the mystery of the seven stars you saw in my right hand and the seven gold lampstands: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

What book of the Bible am I reading from? Revelation. And what is its revelation?

Jesus said, “Write down the things that are now happening and the things that will happen.” It includes disclosure of the spiritual realities of John's day and of days to follow, including the end of time itself.

But its chief aim in doing so is to reveal the One who is marshalling those events, the Judge of all who have ever dwelt on the earth, and the Champion of our salvation.

Revealing Jesus

If we know Him well, we will be able to endure all that may come our way. We can argue premillennialism, postmillennialism, or amillennialism — but whatever our theological position about God's schedule for the last days, our strength to remain faithful to God comes not from our intellectual interpretation of Scripture, but from our personal apprehension of Who it is that saves us and keeps us.

Who Jesus is to you personally — how you see Him and how you believe He relates to all things in our lives — is critical.

If you know Him only as a Gentle Shepherd, you are in for a rude awakening. If you think of Him only as a Harsh and Unbending Judge, you're in for a pleasant surprise. But in either case, your experience here — in the Church and in your daily life — will be a stunted version of what it should be, because you see Him only from one angle.

Now, the fact is, experientially, we *can* only see Him from one angle at a time. But the full picture is gained over time, and in different situations, as we keep looking to Him to try to understand His purposes and to discover His fullness. That's why there are *four* Gospel accounts. And that's why there is a Book of the Revelation.

At first, each new angle of view is startling, perhaps even threatening. I am certain that John felt threatened by what he saw that day, which is why the Lord had to say to him, "Don't be afraid!"

When I first met Jesus, He seemed to me all-merciful — forgiving me, cleansing me, healing me, rebuilding me. He called me into the ministry and I was thrilled to know Him and to serve Him. To me that meant thinking up the kind of ministry I could imagine to do for Him and making it happen. So I dreamed of becoming a minister to young people, to help them know Him as I did, and I set out to do that.

Imagine my surprise when He interrupted me on my way and threatened to leave me altogether! I was shocked. What had happened? What had I done to displease Him? I desired only to honor Him, yet He seemed upset!

As I struggled to understand this new appearance of Jesus in my life, I gradually learned this lesson: To truly honor Him, I had to do what *He* wanted me to do, not what seemed best to *me*. In other words, He already had a plan for my life, for how I could serve Him, and I needed to align myself with His plan. It was a strong lesson of His lordship and my humility.

Later, I also learned that He not only had a plan for *what* He wanted me to do, but for *how* He wanted me to get there and *how* He wanted me to do it. Shocked again! But growing.

Stacking Images

Every new angle of view lends a fresh perspective of who Jesus is and how He operates in our lives and in the world in which we live. The good news is that each new revelation does *replace* the ones I have known (unless they were false to begin with), but *supplements* them.

When I began to discover that Jesus was *Lord* of my life, He didn't cease also to be *Savior*. When I learned that He *demand*ed things from me a certain way, He did not cease to be *merciful* or *kind*. He was not changing; *I was*. I was gaining a fuller image of who He always had been.

One Sunday evening, I stood in the congregation to testify about the Lord's activity in my life. I explained, "I feel like the Lord is becoming more real to me every day, but tonight I realize that it is actually *me* who is becoming more real every day; He never changes."

Hebrews 13:8 ***Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.***

Revelation 1:8 ***"I am the One who is, who always was, and who is still to come—the Almighty One."***

It is *we* who are just getting acquainted with Him who is eternal.

And the wonderful reality is this: When we arise from the shock (lifted by His gentle hand), we will be stronger, our faith will be firmer, and our path will be clearer.

These letters, and their revelation, is for us. They are for our benefit. They are for our healing and our growth.

I suppose that the heart of every fear, is the fear of the unknown and our sense of helplessness in the face of it. But you need not fear what you do not yet know of Jesus. For all that you have yet to learn about Him will be perfectly harmonious with all that you know already. His actions may startle or confuse you, but He will not harm you. He will never leave you, never forsake you. He will always stay near you, always protect you. Nothing and no one can ever snatch you from His hand. No matter what comes your way, you will be kept by the power of God.

Next week, we will consider how this assurance plays out in our everyday lives.