

# WHEN JESUS WROTE TO THE CHURCH

## *Part 2: What the Spirit is Saying*

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The Book of the 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, and they include seven brief and pointed letters to the Church on earth.

Last week, we got a glimpse of the Author of those letters recorded in Revelation, chapters 2 and 3. His image there is quite different from that of the Gospel accounts. Crucified, risen, and exalted — His weakness and limitations are now gone — He appears glorious, mighty, and authoritative.

These seven letters, we noted, were written not for *one* church alone, but for “the churches.” That is, they were intended for the benefit of all who would read them. What Christ has said to one church, He has said to all. This underscores an important fact: there may be many congregations in any given region, but there is only one Church.

The Church of Jesus Christ is not defined by a denomination, or a building or campus, or a weekly schedule of meetings, or a host of programs. The Church is people who love Jesus Christ supremely and seek to live in ways that please Him — wherever, whenever, and however they congregate to worship and serve Him.

### **Receive a Blessing**

Not everyone will derive benefit or blessing from these seven messages, although there is a special blessing connected to the reading of this book:

*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.*

I’m sure you noted that the potential blessing is reserved not for those who hear alone, but for those who *listen and obey*.

Apostle James concurs:

*James 1:22* *Don’t just listen to God’s word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves.* <sup>23</sup> *For if you listen to the word and don’t obey, it is like glancing at your face in a mirror.* <sup>24</sup> *You see yourself, walk away, and forget what you look like.* <sup>25</sup> *But if you look carefully into the perfect law that sets you free, and if you do what it says and don’t forget what you heard, then God will bless you for doing it. (As an example, he adds:)* <sup>26</sup> *If you claim to be religious but don’t control your tongue, you are fooling yourself, and your religion is worthless.*

### **Revolution Now**

Jesus was a Revolutionary. Those who follow Him truly are also revolutionaries. They are not content with the religious norm. They seek to break new ground, expressing radical faith in a glorious Savior.

You see, every generation — standing on the shoulders of all the radical believers who have preceded them — has the hope of advancing the Kingdom of God in an earth-shaking way. But every generation also faces the danger of drifting into religious irrelevance and insignificance.

What is the choice — the behavior — that determines their outcome? While it is not a *single* choice or behavior but a stream of them, they do have this common aspect: their choices consistently demonstrate that they love Jesus and His purposes more than their own lives and accomplishments.

## Jesus Knows

I concluded last Sunday by reminding you that Jesus' love for you is everlasting. He will never reject you nor abandon you, even if you once chose to abandon Him. These seven letters constitute His final reach for every person's soul, His last appeal for the kind of faith that trusts and obeys.

After introducing Himself, each letter expresses what Jesus knows of the church's character, condition, and commitment. Jesus begins each message by saying, "I know..."

To Ephesus, He wrote:

*Revelation 2:2 "I know all the things you do. I have seen your hard work and your patient endurance. I know you don't tolerate evil people."*

To Smyrna:

*Revelation 2:9 "I know about your suffering and your poverty—but you are rich! I know the blasphemy of those opposing you."*

To Pergamum:

*Revelation 2:13 "I know that you live in the city where Satan has his throne, yet you have remained loyal to me."*

To Thyatira:

*Revelation 2:19 "I know all the things you do. I have seen your love, your faith, your service, and your patient endurance. And I can see your constant improvement in all these things."*

To Sardis:

*Revelation 3:1 "I know all the things you do, and that you have a reputation for being alive—but you are dead."*

To Philadelphia:

*Revelation 3:8 "I know all the things you do."*

To Laodicea:

*Revelation 3:15 "I know all the things you do, that you are neither hot nor cold."*

Look again at the list and ask yourself, "Do any of these apply to me?"

- Patient endurance
- No tolerance for evil
- Suffering and poverty
- Opposed by blasphemers
- Remaining loyal to Christ
- Constant improvement in love, faith, and service

- Alive only by reputation
- Little strength
- Lukewarmness

Jesus has your number!

While your circumstances or your feelings may suggest that the Lord has forgotten about you or is unaware of your efforts or your plight, these letters remind us that He is thoroughly aware. How marvelous is this?! The Creator of the universe *knows* about you. He knows what you have gone through. He knows how you have been tested. He knows your strengths and weaknesses. You have not been abandoned or ignored by God.

More than all this, He also knows your *potential*. He knows what the next choice can mean for you and for your future.

## The Choices We Make

*1 Corinthians 10:13* *The temptations in your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will not allow the temptation to be more than you can stand. When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so that you can endure.*

So, with each revelation of His attentiveness, He offers an escape plan, a way to turn your heart around and radically advance God's Kingdom through your life. Here's what He offered in the seven letters:

*Revelation 2:5* *Look how far you have fallen! Turn back to me and do the works you did at first.*

*Revelation 2:10* *Don't be afraid of what you are about to suffer.*

*Revelation 2:16* *Repent of your sin.*

*Revelation 2:25* *Hold tightly to what you have until I come.*

*Revelation 3:3* *Go back to what you heard and believed at first; hold to it firmly. Repent and turn to me again.*

*Revelation 3:11* *Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take away your crown.*

*Revelation 3:19* *Be diligent and turn from your indifference.*

Permit me to summarize His counsel: *Turn from your indifference. Diligently repent of your sin and turn back to Me again, returning to what you first heard and believed, and doing the works that you did at first. Then, hold on tightly to what you have until I come and do not be afraid of any circumstance.*

## The Sum of the Letters

From this, I draw three key points:

1. Indifference or casualness is the enemy of your faith-life. Your pursuit of Christ must be diligent or it will fail. That means it must be *daily*. Routine is not the answer; *thoughtfulness* is.

When routine becomes the end in itself, thoughtfulness dies. Any routine that does not build thoughtfulness of faith should be discarded.

2. Repentance means rejecting temptation to sin and practically pursuing Jesus again. When Jesus refers to “what you first heard and believed” He does not mean “your initial experience of faith.” He means the things that *He* first taught His disciples. We are inclined to simple sentimentality about our religion, but Jesus is calling for something more robust: *practical faith in the true message from Jesus Christ*. Thus, He emphasizes “works.” Real faith in Christ changes the way we behave. We need to get back to doing the things that result from real faith.
3. After doing the first two things I just mentioned, hold on tightly to what you have regained — that is, what you thoughtfully believe and practice. You must hold them *tightly*, because of two major challenges: those who oppose your practice of faith, and your own fears due to circumstances beyond your control. From without and from within, your faith and practice will be tested.

Of the first, James advised us:

*James 4:7* ***Humble yourselves before God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.***

Of the second, King David sang to God:

*Psalms 56:3* ***“Whenever I am afraid, I will trust in You.”***

When opposition comes from without, you must resist it — actively holding your ground in a Christ-like manner. Sometimes, it requires forcefulness, but never hatred.

When opposition comes from within, you must lift it to the Lord — acknowledging your weakness and trusting Him for supernatural strength to overcome in that moment.

Paul wrote:

*Romans 8:37* ***Overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us.<sup>38</sup> And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God’s love.***

## Heavenly Promises

“More than conquerors” is who we are in Christ. So, Jesus concludes each letter with the appropriate promise to those who heed His words and overcome by faith. Interestingly, every one of these promises is “other-worldly,” that is, heavenly. None of them is a promise for this lifetime!

Jesus calls His Church to live for Him with radical faith and practice, not for what we will gain in this lifetime, but for what we will have in the next. If that’s not enough for you, then you don’t share the faith of Jesus. And your disappointments will outweigh your joys.

Yet, this kind of reasoning is foreign to many Christians today — perhaps even to you — and is an evidence of the general self-centeredness of religion and the pervasive weakness of contemporary faith.

Paul admonished the Greek believers:

*1 Corinthians 15:19* ***If our hope in Christ is only for this life, we are more to be pitied than anyone in the world.***

Or, as Eugene Peterson renders it:

***“If all we get out of Christ is a little inspiration for a few short years, we’re a pretty sorry lot.”***

Christianity is not another self-help program, nor even the best self-help program. It is the utter liberation from self-centeredness and the need for self-help programs.

Christianity puts a person in touch with their Creator, not simply their creativity. Christianity tunes our hearts to the purpose of God, not to some harmonious vibration of the universe.

Therefore, the timeliness and universal appeal of these seven letters. They *are* for us today. All of them are for all of us.

### **So What?**

If you are not doing *something for Jesus* with your life, then you are doing *nothing* with your life that has eternal value.

These letters can show you how to get back on track. These letters can give you an eternal perspective of your life. These letters can build in you an everlasting hope and joy and peace.

Let everyone who has ears to hear, *listen* to what the Spirit is saying to the churches:

*Turn from your indifference. Diligently repent of your sin and turn back to Me again, returning to what you first heard and believed and doing the works that you did at first. Then, hold on tightly to what you have until I come and do not be afraid of any circumstance.*

It's not all bad news. Jesus knows your efforts. He knows your love and faithfulness. He knows your service to others. And He has reserved for you a place at His side, a new name, and a crown of life.

But there is room for improvement. In some cases, for a thorough overhaul.

Of what are you willing to repent today? What have you heard the Spirit saying *to you*? Will you give Jesus Christ first place in your life, not merely in name but in deed? Will you make what He wants more important than what you want? Will you declare your choice to someone today?