

# **Truth for Today**

*The Bible teaching radio programme*

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## **Revelation 1-5: The Church on Earth and in Glory**

My cousin spent part of her teaching career in the French city of Angers, which is famous for its tapestries of the Apocalypse, displayed in its medieval chateau. She told me that although she had been able to study these tapestries in detail during her stay there, her difficulty was relating them to the visions of John, even though she had used an English Bible for reference! This was because they are medieval works of art. But God is not complicating matters by using difficult symbols in the Revelation. Rather the reverse is true - He is unveiling the glory of Lord Jesus to us as is made clear in Revelation 19:10: "the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy".

### **Divisions of the book**

In the words of Revelation 1:1-3, which form the inspired title of this book, the subject is stated as being "things which must shortly take place". God uses symbols for us to understand His will for these future events and to allow them to have a practical effect upon us: "Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written in it; for the time is near". Twice over in chapter 1, John is commanded to write: First in verse 11, then in verse 19, which divides the prophecy into 3:

Part 1, "the things which you have seen", that is chapter 1;

Part 2, "the things which are", covering chapters 2 and 3;

Part 3, "the things which will take place after this". The rest of the book, chapters 4-22.

That is:

- The past vision of the Son of Man (chapter 1)
- The present Church age (chapters 2 and 3); and
- The future prophetic events (chapter 4-22)

### **The church as a witness to Christ**

However, our talk today is entitled 'The church on earth and in glory', which brings us to a study of the first five chapters of Revelation. As we do so, we should not find the main symbolism puzzling. In fact, the Lord himself gives the secret to the first vision when He says in chapter 1:20: "The mystery of the 7 stars which you saw in My right hand, and the 7 golden lampstands: The 7 stars are the 7 angels of the 7 churches, and the seven lampstands which you saw are the 7 churches". The church on earth is not only seen here in its completeness and in His hand of strength, power, and resource; but also in its responsibility as a witness to Christ. The Lord addresses His words to angels, representatives of each church who, like the Philippians, were expected to be "blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world" (2:15).

### **The Son of Man**

John records his first vision in Revelation 1:10-18. The Gospels give the name "Son of Man" to the Lord Jesus but the description here is taken from Daniel 7:9-14 where, first of all, the Ancient of Days occupied the divine throne from which the final judgement was decreed. Then "One like the Son of Man" was seen "coming with the clouds of heaven" to be given everlasting, universal dominion. Here in Revelation, the two images from Daniel combine in the one Person. With irresistible purity, stability, power, glory, and victorious might, this Judge, who is coming to rule the nations, now in all His wisdom and honour confronts the churches. As Peter says in 1 Peter 4:17 "For the time has come for judgement to begin at the house of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God?" This question of Peter's is answered from Revelation 6 onwards. But here from Ephesus which seems so good, humanly speaking, through to self sufficient Laodicea, no detail of any church escapes He who has "eyes like a flame of fire".

## A common format

His letters “to the seven churches which are in Asia” are all formatted in the same way. First, there is some part of the description of this Judge from the initial vision, used either to encourage, rebuke or correct. For example, Pergamos operated in Satan’s stronghold and needed the One with His two-edged sword to protect them from corruption, immorality and idolatry. Then the Judge pronounces His judgement - words of encouragement first, then warnings over failures, because each church was under threat or in some danger. Notice that only Smyrna and Philadelphia did not receive any adverse comment from the Lord. Next there is a call to repent and a promise is held out for the overcomer who responds in faithfulness to His word. Finally, there is the exhortation to everyone to listen and to learn from everything said to all of the churches. The symbols used would be immediately obvious to the local church, enabling all to understand, and the overcomers to act.

## Ways of looking at the letters

For us today, there are two major ways of looking at these letters to the seven churches. The first way is to continuously apply the lessons to our own churches in their cycle of witness to Christ: “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches”. When we do so, we shall always find Him sufficient to answer every situation. For example, He remains “the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life” for today’s suffering Church. But what does He see in my church? Is it that although we hate what He hates, our love for Him is lacking? Or that we are allowing what He hates? Or that He must condemn our doctrine and practices despite our commendable love and growth? Or that we are asleep and we keep Him on the outside? I need to hear what He is saying by His Spirit and to be an overcomer.

The other way is to notice how these two chapters show prophetically the successive phases of church history upon earth, especially here in the western world where Christianity has been so dominant. This can be done because the church age is still current:

## The Seven Churches

**Ephesus** then is the post apostolic period, when the church immediately fell from its prime estate, which the Lord so desired (see 2:4: “... you have left your first love”).

**Smyrna** describes the persecutions of the church starting with Nero in AD 64, and ending with the accession of Constantine in AD 312. Revelation 2:10 is key: “Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation 10 days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life”. Here 10 days would refer to the 10 years reign of Diocletian.

The word **Pergamos** means “spurious marriage” and denotes the establishment of the church under the patronage of the secular government from Constantine onwards. A pertinent expression “where Satan dwells” occurs twice in 2:13. During that period the church was commended: “you hold fast to My name, and did not deny My faith” (2:13). This is a comment on the creeds, derived by the first 4 general councils, and which defined the faith when there was so much controversy about the Person of Christ.

**Thyatira** represents the dominance of Papacy from the end of the sixth century until the Reformation.

The **Sardis** period followed the Reformation, beginning in the sixteenth century. The recovery of the truth in the Reformation evidently did not go far enough, for the Lord says in 3:2: “I have not found your works perfect (that is complete) before God”. It resulted in His condemnation: “you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead”! (3:1).

**Philadelphia** was the next church period, during which special opportunity, “the open door” of 3:8, was given to the church by the Lord. Despite their little strength, they were encouraged to “hold fast” (3:11) in the knowledge that this door could not be shut by human means.

**Laodicea** brings us to the present time of general indifference to Christ in Christendom. With no word of commendation, because such a condition is nauseous to Him, this state will culminate in the false church. Ultimately it will be rejected by Christ at His second coming, when He vomits professing Christendom out of His mouth. Meanwhile it is up to you and me as individuals to redeem the situation by responding to His continuous knocking. In 3:20, the gracious position and wonderful promises of our Saviour are described “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If any one hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me”. To hear His voice is to listen and respond to this word to Laodicea, and to find out His will for His testimony by communion with Him. Then, with other true believers, to be Philadelphian in character and “keep His word” (3:10).

## Until the second coming of Christ

A final point about the prophetic view is that the last 4 church states all remain in existence until the second coming. This is proved by the Lord's references to His coming to Thyatira, Sardis and Philadelphia. They are

- in 2:25: "hold fast what you have till I come";
- in 3:3: "Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you"; and
- in 3:11: "Behold I am coming quickly! Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown". It is the overcomer in each of these churches who looks for Him!

### **The church in glory**

Now we need to think about the church in glory. This is described for us in chapters 4 and 5. In chapter 4:1, John hears again the Son of Man's voice: "After these things I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven. And the first voice which I heard was like a trumpet speaking with me, saying, 'Come up here, and I will show you things which must take place after this.'" The reference to "things which must take place after this" definitely introduces the third division of the book, describing events which commence when the present church age ends. The church, according to 1 Thessalonians chapter 4:16-17, hears the Lord's "shout" and is caught away at His coming. This is symbolised here in Revelation chapter 4:1-2, John being called up to heaven and being found there "in the Spirit." This position of John in heaven contrasts with his exiled place on the island Patmos. He was there "for the word of God and for the testimony of Jesus Christ" (1:9). Patmos pictures the conditions that all believers who remain true to Jesus will encounter in some way or other while in this world. But like the Master, the glory is to follow! These contrasting positions reflect the Church first on earth and then in glory. How comforting is the fact that John is located now in heaven! It shows that the Lord keeps His promise of chapter 3:10. The Church is "kept from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world".

The first scene of glory in heaven is described in chapter 4:2: "...and behold, a throne set in heaven, and One sat on the throne." In verse 4, sitting on thrones around this central throne, there are 24 elders, representing the whole company of redeemed believers in heaven. They have previously been described by John as "kings and priests" (1:6). Now glorified, they continue to have access to God's presence in that same dual capacity. Later chapters in Revelation will unfold to us the judgements upon earth which issue out of the Throne of God. Before this, we learn here that this throne of absolute purity and justice is established in heaven. As priests, the elders are occupied with the worship of God as Creator of all things. The 4 living creatures, described in verses 6-8, are similar to the higher order of angels in Isaiah chapter 6. They symbolise the features of the divine throne. They praise, and the elders respond in verse 11: "You are worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power; For You created all things, and by Your will they exist and were created." God is described in other references as "the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End" (1:8 and 22:13). It is right that He who had the first word in creation, will have the final word in judgement. This is good to know in a day when the truth of the Creator is so often denied!

### **The Lion and the Lamb**

The sovereign rights of God enthroned as Creator include the possession of the scroll in His right hand, which John sees in the next part of his vision in chapter 5:1. Then a question is raised in verse 2 by a strong angel: "Who is worthy to open the scroll and to loose its seals?" The scroll symbolises the plan of how God cleanses the earth to make it fit for His blessing and brings in lasting happiness for mankind. John's weeping in verse 4 highlights that fact that no ordinary man was capable of approaching this brilliant throne. So in verse 5 an elder, symbolically representing the Church in glory, reminds John of the age-old prophecy in Genesis chapter 49:9-12 about "the Lion of the tribe of Judah." However, John is utterly astonished by a new vision in verse 6. From the symbolism, he expected to see a Person of kingly strength and omnipotent power, but instead he saw "a Lamb as though it had been slain." He knew this Person from earlier days, as we find written in his Gospel chapter 1:29: "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world". But he now sees Him in an altogether different way: He is now honoured. At the centre of the Throne, fresh from sacrifice, He is risen from the dead and no longer the meek Suffering One but the glorified Redeemer! Cast out from earth, He is in the midst of heaven, in His rightful place, surrounded not only by the living creatures, but also by the 24 elders, who form a close circle around the Throne.

### **A new song**

John's initial ascription of praise in chapter 1:5-6: "To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood" is now added to by the glorified Church. When the Lamb in all His majesty takes the scroll, they fall down in worship as they see their prayers, long stored up in God's presence, have all finally been answered. Their new song breaks out in verses 9 and 10: "You are worthy to take the scroll, and to open its seals; for You were slain, and have redeemed us to God by Your blood out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation, and have made us kings and priests to our God; and we shall reign on the earth". In the full glory of heaven, they know that their Saviour's title to

open this scroll of destiny and to loose its 7 seals, is His work of redemption upon the cross. The seals are opened in chapter 6. They lead directly into the trumpet judgements (8:1), which result immediately in “the world kingdom of our God and His Christ” (11:13). Here He starts that ultimate chain of victory.

### **Worthy is the Lamb**

But this worship cannot be contained and it widens out to the next circle in heaven. Myriads of angels acknowledge the Lamb when the question “Who is worthy?” is answered in verses 12-14 in another way: “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom, and strength and honour and glory and blessing!” Jesus alone is the Man to whom these things rightly belong because He died and everything, including world rule, can be safely committed into His Hands to bring glory to God. To fully answer the question “Who is worthy?” the widest range of voices far beyond those actually present in heaven are heard in verse 13. The song spreads to “every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them”. The whole universe is vibrant with praise: “Blessing and honour and glory and power be to Him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb forever and ever!” This is the ultimate outcome of these future events: everything in subjection to God the Father and God the Son as described for us in passages such as Philippians 2:9-11 and 1 Corinthians 15:24-28. When this point is reached here in the Revelation we learn that the rights of God both in creation and in redemption have been vindicated. In reality, it will take John another seventeen chapters to detail how this is done, but just here the vision cannot be stopped and its runs over into eternity. Not only do the living creatures say “Amen” in verse 14, but the Church in glory is seen in active, intelligent worship of God. In this we get a glimpse at its eternal activity of beholding the glories and the beauties of the Lamb and continuing in the endless song of His worthiness!

### **Summary**

To conclude today’s talk we can summarise in this way: the Church on earth has the responsibility to give testimony to Christ during the time of His absence. But soon it will be with Him in glory to render eternal praise. We have seen that it is necessary for every one of us to hear and respond to “what the Spirit says to the churches” (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13 and 22), because the Judge still walks in the midst of today’s churches! Above all, you and I need to answer our Saviour’s knocking with its accompanying promise to the overcomer in Laodicea. And through fellowship with Him, we can worship Him now as well as in heaven.

*Come, let us join our cheerful songs,  
And thus approach the throne:  
Had we ten thousand, thousand tongues,  
Our theme of joy’s but one:*

*Worthy the Lamb that’s gone on high  
To be exalted thus:  
Worthy the Lamb that died, we cry,  
For He was slain for us.*

*Jesus is worthy to receive  
Honour and power divine:  
And blessings more than we can give  
Be, Lord, forever Thine.*

*Soon shall the saints, exalted high,  
A glorious anthem raise;  
And all that dwell beneath the sky  
Speak forth Thine endless praise.*

*Redeemed creation join in one  
To bless the sacred name  
Of Him that sits upon the throne,  
And to adore the Lamb.*

Amen!!

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