

# **Truth for Today**

*The Bible teaching radio programme*

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## **The Seven Churches of Revelation: Introduction to the Seven Churches**

### **The mutterings of a dope addict?**

"The mutterings of a dope addict": Such was the opinion on the Book of the Revelation of a well known British intellectual of the first half of this century, and such is indicative as to the understanding of this part of the Holy Scriptures by a great number of people. I, myself, have come across one translation of the New Testament that omitted the whole of this book; presumably the translator did not think it worthy for inclusion in the Canon of Scripture, and even some Christians are put off from reading it, thinking that it is too difficult to comprehend. But it is Scripture and therefore, according to 2 Timothy 3:16, it is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.

During these eight weeks, if the Lord will, *Truth for Today* intends to study two particular chapters of Revelation, namely Revelation 2 and 3, where we may read the seven different letters that the Lord Himself addressed to the seven churches of Asia. The purpose of our address today is to provide an introduction to these forthcoming meditations, to lay a background and to provide information that the time allowed would not permit the prospective speakers to give.

### **Read and hear the words of this prophecy**

First of all a word on the book of the Revelation itself. Revelation 1:1 tells us that "it is the Revelation of Jesus Christ given to [John] by God", passed on to John for the benefit of His, that is the Lord's, servants. So, it is important to notice that those of us who would seek to be faithful servants of the Lord should be acquainted with the content of this book. Then we are told that it is a prophecy. Revelation 1:3 says "Blessed is he that readeth and they that hear the words of this prophecy". It tells about forthcoming events. Also, it is a book of judgement, as reading it will palpably demonstrate. Apart from Revelation 19:1-10 where we read of the marriage of the Lamb and Revelation 21:9-27 where we have a vision of the New Jerusalem, the contents of the book are of a judicial character.

Revelation 1:3 also promises that there is a blessing for those who read and hear and keep its writings. This is emphasised in Revelation 22:7 where it says: "Blessed is he that keepeth the words of the prophecy of this book." There is surely blessing for reading the whole of the Bible but it seems that the Lord gives a special blessing for those who read this last book.

Surely then, we Christians should be eager to read it, to understand it and receive the special blessing that is available for those who so do. And then John, at the very end of the book, Revelation 22:10, is told that the words of this prophecy are not to be sealed: "Seal not the words of the prophecy of this book." That is it must be continuously available for those who wish to read it. The reason is given; it is because the time is at hand (Revelation 22:10). In the Old Testament the book of Daniel is a kind of counterpart to the book of the Revelation; it too is an apocalypse. But Daniel was told that he was to seal his book. Daniel 12:4 "But thou, O Daniel, shut up the words, and seal the book, even to the time of the end." The fulfilment of Daniel's prophecy was far off. The fulfilment of what John has to say is, for the Christian, to be expected imminently. You might say, "Well, two thousand years have already passed." Yes, but the coming of Christ for the believer is always looked upon in the New Testament as an event that is to be expected at any day.

### **Seven letters**

Now let us turn to Revelation 2 and 3 that are to be the portions for our meditation in the coming weeks. The seven letters written therein are letters to seven churches that existed at the time when John had his vision. They were seven distinct companies of Christians, forming part of the one church of God of which they were a representation.

### **The church in responsibility**

In the former part of his vision, John had seen seven golden lamp stands, or candlesticks, and we are specifically told in Revelation 1:20 that "the seven candlesticks which thou sawest are the seven churches". They are lamp stands,

candlesticks; whatever we call them, they are light bearers. Light bearers to show forth the glories of Christ. So here we see the church in responsibility. Moreover, they are golden lamp stands they are a product of divine workmanship. Gold in scripture always represents Deity in some way or another. In Revelation 1 John sees the Lord walking amongst them but he is walking in a judicial capacity. For example, he has eyes as of flame of fire in Revelation 1:14. He has feet like unto fine brass, the metal of judgement in Revelation 1:15. In Revelation 1:16 a sharp two-edged sword goes forth from his mouth. He is walking amongst these companies of his assembled disciples to discern their spiritual state and discover how they are answering to their responsibilities.

It is noteworthy that after Revelation 3:22, the church is not mentioned, despite the fact that it is the one new thing that is brought out in the New Testament. The Lord, in response to Peter's great confession, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God," (Matthew 16:16) had said "Yes, and on this rock I will build my Church." (Matthew 16:18) The Acts of the Apostles speaks of its birth and its development over the following years. The letters of the Apostle Paul were mostly addressed to companies of believers, similar to those of which we are speaking today, and he tells too of how it will finally be caught up by the Lord into the Glory of Heaven. But as we have said, after Revelation 3:22 we do not read of it in the book of the Revelation. Why? The construction of this book I think clearly gives the answer.

### **An earthly scene**

In Revelation 1 to 3 we have an earthly scene. John is on Patmos, he has his vision, and he sees the Lord walking amongst the assemblies here upon earth.

### **A heavenly scene**

In Revelation 4 and 5 we have a heavenly scene. Revelation 4 opens with "A door was opened in heaven" (Revelation 4:1) and John is permitted a glimpse therein.

### **Judgments on this earth**

And then with Revelation 6 we have the beginning of the judgements which are to be poured out upon this earth. In these latter chapters the Jewish nation again comes into prominence. Formerly that nation had, so to speak, been suspended by God and for two millennia subsequent to the early chapters of the book of the Acts, the gospel has gone out to all nations, Gentiles and Jews. Jews that would come into the blessing of God come in on the same ground as the Gentile, that is by believing in the Lord Jesus Christ. But God has not forgotten that it was that nation that put his Son to death and they must bear the awful wrath and judgement for that dastardly deed. And so begins that time of Jacob's trouble, as Jeremiah 30:7 states, or as is stated in Revelation 7:14: The "Great Tribulation".

### **The future of the church**

In the Scriptures both the Jews and the Gentiles are the subjects of prophecy; you can read such throughout the whole of the Old Testament. Not so the church. The church is the subject of revelation, not prophecy. There is no direct reference to the church in the Old Testament but all is fully brought out in the New. But having been established, as we read in Acts 2, the Holy Spirit baptising the then believers into one body, we might well ask, "Well, is there no divine disclosure of its future history?" There is, and we believe that it is contained in these seven letters.

In Revelation 1:19 John is commanded, "Write the things that thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be after these." The things that are were the churches themselves, existing at that very time in the various provinces of Asia. The things that are about to be after these are those judgements to which we have already referred and which shall be poured out upon this earth. But where will the church be then? Not down here; it will be in glory with Christ. Hence, the non-reference to the church in the greater part of this book.

These churches were seven in number, and I think that this is not without its significance. It indicates completion and, moreover, divine completion. These churches were selected because they bore present characteristics of the whole church which would be demonstrated throughout its history, from its beginning to its calling up. The church is now 2,000 years old and, as Scripture says, is the pillar and ground of the truth (1 Timothy 3:15). But contrast the testimony that it now renders to that which we find in those halcyon days of the early chapters of the book of the Acts. Whilst there have been periods of revival, generally there has been one continual decline which is depicted in the spiritual condition of these local churches, and in its final state Christ has to spew this professing church from His mouth (Revelation 3:16).

Let us now look in brief at each of these churches. In thus so doing I will give their names, and also the meaning of their names for I believe that they are pertinent to the periods that they cover.

**Ephesus: Desired - Revelation 2:1-7**

Ephesus means *desired* and covers those early times during and immediately after the period of the apostles themselves. In all but two of these churches the Lord has criticisms to make and to Ephesus it is this: "Thou hast left thy first love." Revelation 2:4. Ephesus would cover the period from the apostolic age to approximately AD 200.

**Smyrna: Myrrh - Revelation 2:8-11**

Smyrna means *myrrh* and is one of the only two churches to which the Lord does not have any adverse word to say. Rather He says: "I know thy tribulation and thy poverty but thou art rich." (Revelation 2:9) This would represent that period of suffering and martyrdom through which the early church passed. Approximately from AD 167 to the time of Constantine in AD 311.

**Pergamos: Marriage - Revelation 2:12-17**

Pergamos means *marriage* and the words of the Lord here are: "I know thy works, and where thou dwellest, even where Satan's seat is." (Revelation 2:13) Constantine embraced Christianity and the church became wedded to the state and to the world. This would cover the period from the 4th to the 7th century.

I break in here with a word of explanation. In all these letters there is the word of exhortation, "He that hath an ear let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches." (Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22) And also there is always a word to the overcomer. In the first three churches the exhortation to hear comes before the word to the overcomer, but in the last four churches these two statements are placed in the reverse order. There is a reason for this. In the first three churches there is no mention of the Lord's return. Decline had not fully set in, so the Lord is able to urge all to hear and there is a word of encouragement to the whole assembly. But in the last four churches (Revelation 2:18-3:22) things have got worse. The church is riddled with spurious invaders and the Lord has to address his remarks firstly to the overcomers and then exhort all who will to listen. And then the Lord's coming is mentioned or, in the case of Laodicea, implied in all of these last four churches, indicating that the conditions represented will go on side-by-side until the Lord Himself comes.

**Thyatira: Incense - Revelation 2:18-29**

So we pass to Thyatira, *incense*, which gives a portrayal of one of the worst trends of all in church history "Thou sufferest that woman Jezebel to teach and seduce my servants." (Revelation 2:20) Popery was established in the early 7th century and goes on to the coming of the Lord.

**Sardis: Remnant - Revelation 3:1-6**

Sardis means *remnant* and the Lord's words here are: "Thou hast a name that thou livest and art dead." (Revelation 3:1) The 16th century saw the Reformation and the establishment of Protestantism. Here without doubt there was a real work of the Spirit of God, but the reality of it soon withered and died. Such a condition goes on to the end.

**Philadelphia: Brotherly Love - Revelation 3:7-13**

Sixthly, we have Philadelphia, meaning *brotherly love*, the second church for which the Lord has no condemnatory word. Here he says: "Thou hast a little strength and has kept my word and not denied my name." (Revelation 3:8) Since the Reformation, the Spirit has worked, bringing outbreaks of revival. If we think of this country, perhaps names such as John Wesley, George Whitfield, CH Spurgeon come to mind, and teaching on doctrines long neglected, such as the second coming of the Lord, are again being given prominence. These revivals, some great and some small, are mostly associated with the 18th and 19th centuries. So, according to this prophecy, we may expect such works of the Spirit up to the coming of the Lord.

**Laodicea: The People's Right - Revelation 3:14-22**

Finally, we have Laodicea, which means *the people's right*. "Because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew thee out of my mouth." (Revelation 3:16) Such are the Lord's words to the professing church. I emphasise that word, for even in Laodicea there are those who are true but the professing church is very much in evidence today. Christendom is to be rejected at the coming of the Lord.

### **History plus moral teaching**

In 1 Corinthians 10:32 we read of the Jew, the Gentiles and the Church of God. The Bible tells us of the beginning, history and future of each company; and in these seven letters we are instructed as to the history of the church, together with the moral teaching that can be derived from each one of these local assemblies.

I trust that what has been said today will interest all those who have listened to the extent that you will wish to hear the forthcoming broadcasts when these two chapters will be expounded in greater detail.

Shall we pray:

*Our God and Father, we thank Thee for Thy hold word, graciously given by Thee that we may not be left in ignorance of the things that Thou dost desire that we should know. May we, with the help of the Holy Spirit, both read it, and take in its precepts, that we may thus be equipped to walk worthy of the One whose name we bear, Thy beloved Sion, our Lord Jesus Christ. We ask it in His name. Amen.*

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