

LECTURES ON THE BOOK OF REVELATION

By

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LECTURE FOUR

THE SEVEN CHURCHES (Continued) (Lecture 3)

NONE of you can have a keener sense than I of the cursory nature of these addresses. Time forbids going into that detail on all points which alone would enable one to give anything like a complete exposition of this marvelous portion of the Word of God. But if I can but whet your appetite for further study, and start Christians searching the Word for themselves, and weighing, too, what others have written and published on this theme, I shall feel that these addresses have not been in vain. *

* It is always a pleasure to me to commend the writings of trustworthy servants of Christ, who are true to the Book. There are a number of excellent expositions of Revelation, each one of which would, I am sure, be a help in the further study of the subject:

“Exposition of the Revelation” by Walter Scott
“Lectures on Revelation” by Wm. Kelly
“The Book of Revelation” by A. C. Gaebelien

On the Seven Churches I especially commend, *“The Prophetic History of the Church”* by F. W. Grant.

We now go on to look at the next part in the marvelous series of this great annotated time-table of the church’s history.

“And unto the angel of the church in Sardis write; These things saith he that hath the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars; I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead. Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God. Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent.”

Sardis means “*a remnant,*” or, “*those who have escaped.*” This is surely very significant, and tells its own story too plainly to be misunderstood. It brings before us, prophetically, the great State-churches of the Reformation, who escaped from Rome, only to fall eventually (alas, that it should be so) into cold, lifeless formalism.

It is plainly to be seen, from the first verse, that there is a measure of return to early principles. The Lord’s introduction of Himself to this church is very similar to that in the letter to Ephesus, and yet the difference is most marked. Here He is said to have the seven stars; there He was said to hold the seven stars in His right hand. It is, at least, the recognition that ministry belongs to Christ. Ministers are Christ’s ministers - not the Church’s. Yet, even in the glorious days of the Reformation, the truth was not fully apprehended that ministers are to be controlled by, and subject to, Christ, without any human intermediary. While the Protestant ministry is very different from the Romish hierarchy, unfortunately human ordination has done much to becloud a proper conception of the servant’s responsibility to the Master.

The Lord declares solemnly, “**I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead.**” How sad and solemn the indictment!

One might well ask in amazement, How can such things be after the blessing and revival of Reformation days? But when we remember that the State-churches were, from the first, intended to include all the population of a given country, who were supposed to be made members of the church and kingdom of Christ by baptism in infancy, one can readily understand why such churches, though, possibly, strictly orthodox, may yet be largely composed of persons still dead in trespasses and in sins.

Nothing can be much sadder than vast congregations of people, baptized, banded together as Christians, taking the ordinance of the Lord’s Supper, zealous for church and Christianity, and yet largely devoid of personal, saving faith in Christ - trusting rather in forms and ceremonies, and what some have called “birthright membership,” than in new birth through the Word and Spirit of God.

What is needed everywhere is a great revival of decided gospel preaching, pressing home on the consciences of men and women their lost condition, despite church membership, if they have not personally received the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Word says, “**Break up the fallow ground**”; sow not among “**thorns.**” We often hear people say they would like to see more old-time conversions. Well, there must first be the old-time preaching of the exceeding sinfulness of sin, and the lost condition of all men by nature as well as practice, until the old-time conviction will seize upon the souls of Christless men and women, and then the old-time gospel will be hailed as the only relief.

No wonder the Lord says to Protestantism, “**Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die; for I have not found thy works perfect before God.**”

And He calls upon them to remember how they had received and heard, and to hold fast and repent.

Now, surely, it must be plain to anyone who carefully examines the Scripture, that this message would in no sense have been as applicable to the Thyatira as to the Sardis period. Such words would not have the same force when addressed to Rome as when addressed to the churches of the Reformation.

What did these latter receive and hear? Clearly the great truths proclaimed so fearlessly in the days of the Reformation, and embodied for the instruction of future generations in the creeds of the 16th and 17th centuries. And, may I say, I am not one of those who waste time denouncing creeds. *Credo* means “*I believe.*” Any man who believes anything has a creed. All the great creeds of Protestantism were but the carefully drawn-up declarations of the faith of those who had escaped from Romish superstition, who desired to make clear to their children what they recognized as the truth which they had received from God.

We need not be surprised if we find in these creeds some statements which fuller light and knowledge would lead us to refuse or revise, but I think we may say that there is not one of these symbols which does not hold within it every fundamental truth of the Word of God. Take the Augsburg Confession of the Lutherans; the Westminster Confession of the Presbyterians; the 39 Articles of the Church of England; and others too numerous to mention. Every one of them insists on the true deity of Christ and the efficacy of His atoning work on Calvary’s cross. All alike declare that salvation is only through faith, apart from works.

Those creeds stand, I repeat, for the fundamental truths of Christianity; and it is not to any minister’s credit to-day, if still attached to any such denomination as I have just referred to, to stand up in the pulpits of such churches and say, “I have thrown the creed of the church overboard.” When a man reaches that point he either ought to be thrown out of the church whose principles he no longer believes, or he should be honest enough to take himself out. One of the worst features of the present apostasy is that there are thousands of men occupying supposedly orthodox pulpits, who would, if they could, destroy everything for which their respective denominations are understood to stand.

And so we may thank God for the truths contained in these creeds; while, on the other hand, we recognize that, where the Word of God is bowed to, no humanly-drawn-up creed is needed. Nevertheless, it is in view of these very confessions, I am persuaded, that the Lord says, “**Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard.**” He calls upon Protestants to remember the great truths committed to them at the Reformation, and hold them fast, and repent for the slack way in which they have treated them in the past.

And now, for the second time in these letters, the Lord speaks of His approaching advent: “**If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee.**”

How different this to the word in the 5th chapter of I Thessalonians. There, the apostle speaking of the same wondrous advent writes, “**But ye, brethren, are not in darkness that that day should overtake you as a thief.**”

It is very evident, therefore, that the coming of the Lord should be the daily expectation of His own beloved people. It is only to the great mass of mere professors that His return will be as the coming of a thief, that is, as the unexpected and unlooked-for One, whose coming will spread dismay instead of gladness.

Blessed it is to know the declaration and promise of the Lord in verse 4. Even in Sardis He beholds a few names which have not defiled their garments, and such He declares shall walk with Him in white, for they are worthy. His blood alone has made them so.

There are thousands in Christendom who, though linked up with much that is unscriptural, and often almost undistinguishable from the mass, are yet plainly discernible to His eye, for it is written, **“The Lord knoweth them that are his.”** To these overcomers the promise is made that they shall be clothed in white raiment, nor will their names be blotted out of the Book of Life, when the thousands of names, representing a Christless profession, will be expunged from the records of those who profess to have life, in the day of manifestation.

It is not a question of people, who have been truly born of God, losing that eternal life given them in Christ, for that, as many other Scriptures show, is an impossibility. In fact, were it otherwise, it would not be eternal life at all. But the Lord is referring to those who have a name to live, but are dead. Their names are registered among those who profess to have life in Christ. In reality they are, as Jude puts it, **“twice dead”** - dead in trespasses and sins, and dead to their profession of life. So, in the day of manifestation, their names will be eliminated, and only those left who have proven by continuance in well-doing that they truly have life in Christ. Such will be confessed before the Father and the angels at the Lord’s second coming.

The next in order is the letter to the church in Philadelphia, which means *“brotherly love.”*

“And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write; These things saith he that is holy, he that is true, he that hath the key of David, he that openeth, and no man shutteth; and shutteth, and no man openeth; I know thy works: behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it; for thou hast a little strength, and hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name . . . Because thou hast kept the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth.”

This, I believe, brings us to what we may call the revival period. Following the Reformation there came a time when a cold, lifeless formalism seemed to settle down over all Protestant Christendom - an era in which men were content simply to confess a creed, and as we have already mentioned, were supposed to be united to the church by baptism. But in the 18th and 19th centuries there came over all those lands where the Reformation had gone a great wave of blessing. God began to work afresh in mighty power.

There were marvelous awakenings all over northern Europe and the British Isles. A half century later the same mighty power began to manifest itself in America. Spirit-filled servants of Christ went through these various countries like firebrands of the Lord, calling on sinners to repent, and saints to awaken to their privileges.

A little later, in the early part of the last century, God, in a very special way, began to arouse many of His people to a deeper sense of the value of His Word, and its all-sufficiency for the guidance of His people in this scene. This led to the recognition of the fact that Christ Himself is the gathering center for His people; and for His name's sake thousands left all human systems, and began to meet in simplicity, seeking to be guided alone by the Word of God.

Now I do not mean to imply that we are to understand any special movement or association of believers to be in itself Philadelphia, but, just as Sardis sets forth State churches of the Reformation, so I believe Philadelphia sets forth those in Protestantism who emphasize the authority of the Word of God, and the preciousness of the name of Christ.

For any particular company to claim to be Philadelphia is but detestable ecclesiastical pretension, and God has very evidently blown upon all such conceit.

Notice what, in a special way, would mark those who seek to walk as Philadelphians.

In the first place there is the very name of this church - "*brotherly love*." This implies that those contemplated here, love as brethren. They are born of God, and His love is shed abroad in their hearts by the Holy Spirit given unto them, and they are characterized by love to all who are Christ's. Alas, how little is this characteristic seen among many who make very loud pretensions to being the testimony of the Lord at the present time. There may be much high truth, and a great pretension to divine ground and maintaining of scriptural principles, but if this first mark of brotherly love be missing, depend upon it you have not yet found Philadelphia.

In the second place, observe the character in which the Lord presents Himself to this church. "**These things saith He that is holy, He that is true.**" This is, in itself, a challenge to separation from evil in life, and error in doctrine. If we would walk in fellowship with the Holy One, we must remember the word, "**Be ye holy, for I am holy.**" And if we would enjoy communion with Him who is true, we must refuse Satan's lies, and love and live the truth ourselves. Hence it follows, as it has been put by others, that "separation from evil is God's principle of unity." Not, indeed, separation in a cold, pharisaic sense, but separation to Christ from that which is evil.

In the next place the Lord speaks of Himself as "**He that hath the key of David, He that openeth and no man shutteth, and shutteth and no man openeth.**" In Isaiah 22:22, he who had the key of David was the treasurer of David's house. And the word used here is clearly a reference to that passage. There it is said of Eliakim, "**The key of the house of David will I lay upon his shoulder; so he shall open and none shall shut; and he shall shut and none shall open.**"

The remainder of the passage shows that Eliakim was but a type of the Lord Jesus Christ, the one upon whom should be hung all the glory of His Father's house. He, by His Spirit, opens the great treasure-house of divine truth, and none can shut it. On the other hand where there is perversity of spirit, and an unwillingness to walk in the truth, He shuts and none can open. So He has said elsewhere, "**If the light that is in thee become darkness, how great is that darkness.**"

And it is blessed to realize that, while Christ is said to have the key of David, there is another sense in which we see that Himself is the key, for it is by the presentation of Himself to the souls of His people that He opens up the treasures of His Word. Thus Christ is the key to the Holy Scriptures, and no other is needed. To understand the Bible you need only to know Christ.

Perhaps there is another sense in which we might apply the words in regard to opening and shutting; that is, they may have an application to service.

The Lord Himself opens the doors for those whom He sends forth, and He it is who closes them when He so wills. And this is one thing that Philadelphian believers, generally, have found. Acting on the truth that Christ is Son over His own house, and that He has commanded His servants to go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature, thousands have gone forth, in dependence on Him alone, not only in the home-land, but to lands beyond the seas, even among heathen people, without any organization or Board behind them and have found the Lord Himself all-sufficient to meet every need, and to open and close just as He will. "Faith can firmly trust Him, come what may." I think the 8th verse emphasizes this second application, for there He says, "**I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it, for thou hast a little strength, and hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name.**"

Observe these important characteristics of Philadelphia.

- His Word is kept,
- His Name confessed.

The keeping of His Word involves a great deal more than just believing the Bible, or reading and studying it. It implies obedience to the revealed will of the Lord. It is a blessed thing to realize that "**All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.**"

What immense scope is there here for faith to act upon! This blessed book of God marks out all my path, and, so long as I seek to walk in obedience, I will never be, found in circumstances where this Book cannot guide me. And this, I believe, is what is involved in keeping His Word.

The denial of His Name is the increasing apostasy around us on every hand. Those who have not denied His Name refuse all fellowship with this God-dishonoring condition of things. Christ is to them more precious than all else; even for the sake of service, they refuse to link themselves with that which dishonors or blasphemes that worthy name whereby they are called.

It is significant that, wherever Philadelphian truth has been proclaimed, the devil has raised up a counterfeit to draw people's hearts away from the truth, and so, in verse 9, the Lord speaks of those who will be manifested as the synagogue of Satan, "**who say they are Jews, and are not, but do lie.**"

The day will come when they will have to worship before the feet of those who are faithful to the Lord, and shall know that He has loved them.

It is, undoubtedly, that false Judaizing system which is contemplated, whose advocates everywhere oppose the truth of grace, and seek in every way to hinder the carrying out of those principles which we have been noticing as pleasing to the Lord. In their ignorance, these teachers give up the true Christian position, claiming to be the spiritual Israel, appropriating to themselves Jewish promises and Jewish hopes, and would put the consciences of Christians under the bondage of Jewish legalism, thus really doing Satan's work.

The promise of verse 10, like all the promises to these different churches, is for every true child of God. **“Because thou hast kept the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth.”**

This is the Lord's own pledge to those who love His Name, and seek to keep His word - they shall not be left down here to pass through the appalling tribulation which is just ahead of those who **“dwell upon the earth.”** This expression is found frequently in the book of Revelation. It does not simply mean those who live in the world, but a careful reading of the various passages in which this peculiar term is found, will make it manifest that *“the earth-dwellers” are in contrast to those whose citizenship is in heaven.*

They are persons who, while professing to be Christians, refuse the heavenly calling, and prove by their earthly-mindedness and worldly ways, that they really belong to this world. All their hopes are here, and their treasures likewise, and the Lord has said, **“Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”** The coming Great Tribulation will be, for them, a time of fearful trial.

Of this hour of turmoil the bulk of the book of Revelation treats, as we shall demonstrate in later lectures. But when that hour comes the church of the present dispensation will have been caught up to meet the Lord in accordance with the promise in I Thessalonians 4:13-18. And to this agrees the verse that follows in our chapter, **“Behold, I come quickly; hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown.”**

The Lord's return is the hope of every Christian heart. They long to see Him who loved them and gave Himself for them. At His return, they will be manifested before His judgment-seat, and be rewarded according to service here. Then He will give out the crowns for service in this day of His rejection. Observe that the warning is, **“Let no man take thy crown.”** It is not, “Let no man take thy life,” or “thy salvation.” That is eternally secure in Christ. Being born of God, I cannot lose my salvation; but, if I am not a faithful servant, I may lose my crown.

The overcomer will be made a pillar in the temple of God, the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, and shall dwell in the Father's house to go no more out forever. Upon him will be written the name of God, the name of the Holy City, and Christ's new name. All that is involved in this is beyond our poor, finite comprehension, but it speaks of stability, of security, of fellowship, of intimacy with the Lord Himself, which will make heaven to the believer - his blessed and eternal home.

Laodicea completes this septenary series, and brings us down, practically, to the last stage of the professing church's history on earth - the close of the present dispensation.

“And unto the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write; These things saith the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God; I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.”

Laodicea is a compound word, and means “*the rights of the people*.” Could any other term more aptly set forth the condition of present-day church affairs? It is the era of democratization, both in the world and in the church. The masses of the people are realizing their power as never before. The terrific slogan, *vox populi, vox Dei* (*The voice of the people is the voice of God*), is ringing through the world with clarion-like distinctness. Imperialism and every form of aristocratic government is disappearing - at least for the time being. The age of anarchy is almost upon us.

Bolshevism is not confined to unhappy Russia, it is making tremendous progress in all Christendom. Statesmen and capitalists never were more anxious and nervous than at the present time. In the great war we were told our soldiers were fighting to make the world safe for democracy. In a little while statesmen will be attempting to raise armies to make the world safe from democracy. The spirit of this ultra-democratic age has invaded a large portion of the professed church. The authority of God and His Word is rapidly being denied. The spirit of the age is the spirit of a large part of the church; hence the striking correspondence between this letter to the Laodiceans and the latitudinarianism so prevalent about us.

In a day when faithful witnesses to God's truth are becoming fewer and fewer, the Lord addresses Himself to the church as the **Amen** (that is, the establisher of all God's promises), **the faithful and true Witness**, who will maintain to the last what is of God, though the great majority of those who profess to follow Him be swept away by the apostasy.

He reproves the church for its lukewarmness and indifference to Himself and the truth. He says, **“Because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spue thee out of my mouth.”**

There is neither burning zeal for His word, nor yet absolute repudiation of Christ and the Bible. Instead there is a nauseating, lukewarm condition, that is abhorrent to the Spirit of God. Lukewarm water is, in itself, an emetic; and this is the figure the Lord here uses. He cannot tolerate such conditions much longer, but will spue out the whole disgusting mass in judgment.

Meantime the church goes on in its pride and self-satisfaction, saying, **“I am rich and increased with goods, and have need of nothing”**; knowing not that, in His eyes, it is **“poor, and miserable, and blind, and naked.”**

Never were church dignitaries and carnally-minded religious leaders more satisfied with themselves and their great work than at the present time. Anything and everything is advocated that will seem to make for, the church's popularity.

The rights of the people alone must be considered; the rights of the Lord Jesus Christ are not even thought of.

We have come to a time when, in many places, it is easier to get on without Christ than with Him; easier to carry on religious programs without the Holy Spirit than if He were working among us in mighty power. No wonder He says, “**I counsel thee to buy of Me gold tried in the fire** (that is, divine righteousness), **that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment** (that is, practical righteousness) **that thou mayest be clothed, and anoint thine eyes with eyesalve** (that is, the anointing of the Holy Spirit) **that thou mayest see.**”

Yes, there is lots of work, much fleshly energy and human effort being put forth to reclaim the world, and make it a comfortable place for men to live in, apart from Christ; but the great things of God’s truth are largely neglected, and myriads of so-called church-workers are utter strangers to the new birth, without which no one can see the Kingdom of God.

And so we see the Lord standing at last outside the door of the professing church, and saying so tenderly, “**Behold, I stand at the door and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with Me.**”

Ah, beloved friends, it is getting late in the dispensation: the night-shades are fast falling; and the Lord who, in the beginning, was in the midst of His church, stands outside that lukewarm system which calls itself by His name, and He knocks in vain for entrance! Yet, individuals here and there open to Him, and find His presence is more to them than all else that the earth or the professing church can afford.

And so we have come down to the closing days of the present dispensation of grace.

The Ephesus period passed away long ago, and the same is true of the Smyrna and Pergamos periods. Thyatira, which, as we have seen, speaks of Romanism, and began properly when the Pope was recognized as universal Bishop, is with us still, and will go on to the end. Sardis, which began centuries later, remains to the present time, and will remain till the Lord shall come. Philadelphia, thank God, is also here, and, though it has but a little strength, will also abide to the end. But Laodicea is more and more in evidence, and seems to be almost swamping everything that is of God.

The next great event is the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, and our gathering together unto Him. For this we wait, and our longing hearts cry, “**Even so, come, Lord Jesus.**”

~ end of chapter 4 ~

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