



Copyright - Zac Poonen (1992)
This book has been copyrighted to prevent misuse.
It should not be reprinted or translated without
written permission from the author.

Permission is however given for any part of this book
to be downloaded and printed
provided it is for FREE distribution,
provided NO ALTERATIONS are made,
provided the AUTHOR'S NAME AND ADDRESS are mentioned,
and provided this copyright notice is included
in each printout.

For further details, please contact:
Christian Fellowship Centre
40 DaCosta Square,
Bangalore - 560084. India.

C O N T E N T S

1. The Revelation of Jesus Christ

2. Encouragement in Tribulation

3. The Risen Lord

4. The Loveless Church

5. The Suffering Church

6. The Worldly Church

7. The Adulterous Church

8. The Hypocritical Church

9. The Faithful Church

10. The Proud Church

11. Arresting the Downward Trend



CHAPTER ONE

THE REVELATION OF JESUS CHRIST

In this book, we will be looking at the first three chapters of the book of Revelation to see what the Lord has to say to us through them.

Satan hates the book of Revelation because it describes his final defeat and his ultimate destiny. If Satan hates a book, we can be sure it has something valuable in it for us.

The book of Revelation is written especially for those who want to be overcomers in the last days. In the first chapter of that book we see a vision of the risen Lord. In the next two chapters, we see His evaluation of seven churches in Asia Minor. In those evaluations, we can evaluate ourselves and our churches too - if we want to.

The Lord's evaluation of our life can be quite different from our own and other people's evaluations of our life. Most of us have a far higher opinion of our spirituality than is true. If we are willing to be evaluated by the Lord here and now, and face up honestly to what He shows us about ourselves and our churches, we can be saved from a lot of sorrow and unhappiness when we stand before His judgment-seat one day.

Seven Introductory Remarks

"The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bondservants, the things which must shortly take place; and He sent and communicated (signified) it by His angel to His bondservant John, who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near." (Rev.1:1-3).

In these first three verses we find seven expressions that are an introduction to the whole book of Revelation.

First of all, this book is called a revelation. The word "revelation" is the translation of a Greek word which means "an unveiling". God alone can unveil His truths to us. This is the first thing that we must bear in mind. We need the Spirit of wisdom and revelation if we are to understand what God is trying to say to us in His Word. Human cleverness can never grasp it.

Secondly, we read that this revelation was given to be "shown to His (Christ's) bondservants". It is not meant for everyone. It is only for the willing bondservants of the Lord.

There is a difference between a paid servant and a bondservant. A servant works for wages. But a bondservant is a slave who belongs to his master and has no rights of his own, whatsoever.

Who then are the bondservants of the Lord? Those who have joyfully given up all their own plans and ambitions, and all their rights, and who now desire to do the will of God alone in every area of their lives. Only such believers are true bondservants.

The Lord has many servants, but very few willing bondservants. God's Word can be understood accurately only by His bondservants. Others may be able to study it intellectually, as one studies a text-book. But they will never be able to grasp the spiritual realities that are hidden in it. Jesus made it clear in John 7:17 that it was only through obedience to God's will that one could know the truth.

Thirdly, we are told that this book was "signified" to John (v.1 - KJV). This means that the message was communicated through symbols. We read in the first three chapters alone about lampstands and stars, bronze feet and a two-edged sword, hidden manna and a white stone etc., These are not literal. They are symbols of spiritual realities. We need to compare Scripture with Scripture to understand what these symbols mean.

Fourthly, John calls this unveiling "the Word of God" (v.2). In Revelation 22:18,19, a severe judgment is pronounced on anyone who attempts to add to, or to subtract from, the "words of this book". There is no book in the entire Bible that contains such a solemn warning.

Every part of God's Word has been given to us "for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness" so that we may become "perfect, and thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim.3:16,17 - KJV).

The three chapters of the book of Revelation that we will be looking at, have also been given to make us perfect. Only those who are interested in perfection in their life will get the maximum benefit from the study of any part of God's Word.

Fifthly, this revelation is the "testimony of Jesus Christ" (v.2). In Revelation 19:10, we are told that "the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy". True prophecy will always point to the Lord and not just to events. A true understanding of prophecy will humble us before the Lord and not make us proud of our imagined knowledge of coming events. Even if we are mistaken about the correct sequence of various events in the coming days, if we are not mistaken in our knowledge of the Lord, we would have done well.

Although this revelation unveils "the things which must shortly take place" (v.1), yet that is not its primary purpose. It is called "the testimony of Jesus Christ". It has been given, not to give us a detailed knowledge of future events, but to show us that the Lord Jesus is in control of those future events. It is the triumph of the Lord that we see primarily throughout the book of Revelation.

Let us "fix our eyes on Jesus" then as we go through this study.

Sixthly, a blessing is promised on those who "keep the things which are written in it" (v.3 - KJV). This last book of Scripture has been given to us to OBEY. It is blessed to obey any part of Scripture. But the book of Revelation is the only book in which a specific blessing has been promised to those who obey what is written therein.

Even if we don't understand much of the symbolism in it, it will suffice if we obey what we read. There is no blessing promised to those who understand what the symbols mean or to those who can interpret the sequence of coming events accurately. Obedience means far more to God than mere intellectual understanding of His Word. Unfortunately, most believers value knowledge of the Word more than obedience to it.

The food we eat is converted into flesh and blood and bone, even if we don't understand how that happens. It is enough if our digestive system is working properly. So too in the spiritual realm. Knowledge without obedience to God, is like undigested food. It brings death instead of life. Knowledge plus obedience brings life.

Seventhly, a blessing is also promised on those who "read the words of this prophecy" (v.3) - referring to those who read it aloud publicly and teach it to other believers.

Remember that individual copies of the book of Revelation were not available to believers in the first century. The only way one could hear the message of the book was when it was read out in the meetings of the church. This was why Paul encouraged Timothy to "give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching." (1 Tim.4:13).

The application for us today is that we should share with others what we receive from God through His Word. A blessing is promised here to all who do this.

Grace And Peace From God

"John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace, from Him Who is and Who was and Who is to come; and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne; and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To Him Who loves us, and released us from our sins by His blood, and He has made us to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father; to Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen. Behold, He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him; and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over Him. Even so. Amen. 'I am the Alpha and the Omega,' says the Lord God, 'Who is and Who was and Who is to come, the Almighty.'" (Rev.1:4-8).

John begins with a prayer that grace and peace might come to them from God.

"Grace" means "God's help offered to us according to our present need". If we need forgiveness, grace can forgive us. If we need power to overcome sin, grace can endue us with power. If we need help to be faithful in a time of testing, grace can give us the needed help. God's grace is always sufficient for our every need.

"Peace" is another great gift of God - peace within our hearts, with no nagging sense of guilt or condemnation; and peace with others around us, bringing fellowship in the church.

The greeting is sent in the Name of the Triune God.

The One Who ever exists in the present, past and future is a reference to the Father.

"The seven Spirits" refer to the Holy Spirit. Seven symbolises perfection in the Scriptures. And the "seven Spirits" refers to the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of perfection. In Isaiah 11:2,3 the Holy Spirit is referred to as:

- (i) the Spirit of the Lord;
- (ii) the Spirit of wisdom;
- (iii) the Spirit of understanding;
- (iv) the Spirit of counsel;
- (v) the Spirit of strength;
- (vi) the Spirit of knowledge; and
- (vii) the Spirit of the fear of the Lord.

Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity is referred to by a number of titles, which we can look at one by one (v.5).

The Titles Of Christ

"Faithful Witness" refers to the absolute trustworthiness of our Lord in relation to the promises that He has made.

"The firstborn of the dead" refers to Him as the first man to have overcome death and come out of the grave permanently. Others who were raised from the dead before Him, died again. Now that Jesus has permanently conquered death, we need never fear sickness or death anymore.

Jesus is also referred to as "the Ruler of the kings of the earth". Our Lord has been given all authority in heaven and on earth. He controls the hearts of earthly rulers as well. "The

king's heart is like channels of water in the hand of the Lord; He turns it wherever He wishes." (Prov.21:1).

Our Lord is further referred to as the One "Who ever loves us and has once for all loosed and freed us from our sins by His own blood" (v.5 - Amplified). His love for us is everlasting. And He shed His blood not only to forgive us our sins but also to free us from our sins once and for all. The first promise in the New Testament is that Jesus "will save His people from their sins" (Mt.1:21). To be freed from sin's power is the great theme of the entire New Testament. No sin can now have the mastery over us, if we live under grace (Rom.6:14).

A Kingdom And Priests To God Our Father

We are told further that the Lord Jesus has formed us into "a kingdom, priests to His God and Father" (v.6).

The "kingdom of God" is the sphere in which God exercises absolute authority. The church is a representation of "the kingdom of God" on earth - that is, a group of people who have become "one kingdom", because they have submitted to the authority of God in every area of their lives. The Lord has converted an unruly mob into an orderly kingdom - a people who are now being governed by God.

We have also been made priests. Every single believer - man or woman - has been made a priest unto the Lord. In God's eyes, there is no such thing as a special class of people called "priests" in the church. That is an Old Testament concept. Where such a thing exists in any church today, it is leading people back into B.C. conditions !! We are ALL priests.

As priests, we are called to offer sacrifices to God. Whereas in the Old Testament they offered the bodies of animals, today we offer our own bodies to God as a living sacrifice (Rom.12:1).

The expression "His God and Father" is similar to the expression that Jesus used after His resurrection, "My Father and your Father, My God and your God" (Jn.20:17). His Father has now become our Father too. We can now find our security in God as our Father, just as Jesus found His security therein. "Amen", says John (v.6). And we too say, "It shall be so".

To Him alone "be glory and dominion forever and ever" (v.6).

Then in verse 7, Christ's return to earth is prophesied. The last that this world saw of our Lord was when He hung in shame on the cross of Calvary. But one of these days the world will see Him coming with the clouds in glory. Every eye will see Him. Those who pierced Him (the nation of Israel) will also see Him. The tribes of the earth will weep

when He comes. But we will rejoice. Again John says "Amen". And we also say, "It shall be so!"

In verse 8, God refers to Himself as the Alpha and the Omega, the Almighty and ever-existing God. He was there right at the beginning, when nothing existed. He will be there right at the end of time. There is nothing that can ever take place anywhere at any time that is going to take God by surprise. Our Father not only knows the end from the beginning. Being the Almighty God, He controls everything as well. Therefore we need have no fear whatever concerning the future.

At the end of the book of Revelation, God is again referred to as the Almighty and the Alpha and the Omega (ch.19:6; 22:13). We could say that the whole book of Revelation is sandwiched between these two statements referring to the all-knowing, almighty power of our God and Father. This is what gives us perfect security, as we read in that book about the trials and tribulations that will befall God's people, and the calamities that will befall the world around us, in the last days.

Seven Glorious Truths

Some of the greatest truths that we need to be established in, during these days, are those concerning our Lord and our relationship with Him, that we have just considered :

- (1) The absolute trustworthiness of our Lord's promises;
- (2) His triumph over man's greatest enemy (death);
- (3) His total authority over everything in heaven and earth;
- (4) His everlasting and unchanging love for us;
- (5) His freeing us from sin's power;
- (6) His Father now being our Father too; and
- (7) His coming back to establish His kingdom on earth.

We need to be rooted and grounded in these truths if we are to remain steadfast and immovable in the times that are going to come.

CHAPTER TWO

ENCOURAGEMENT IN TRIBULATION

"I, John, your brother and fellow-partaker in the tribulation and kingdom and perseverance which are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos, because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like the sound of a trumpet." (Rev.1:9,10).

John Your Brother

Here we read John calling himself "your brother". John was at that time the only living apostle of the twelve whom Jesus had chosen. He was about 95 years old when the Lord gave him this revelation on the island of Patmos. He had walked with God for about 65 years by then. But he was still a brother.

He wasn't Pope John or Reverend John. He was not even Pastor John! He was just an ordinary brother. Jesus had taught His disciples to avoid all titles and to refer to themselves always as only brothers (Mt.23:8-11). And the apostles obeyed Him literally, unlike many today.

We have only one Head and one Leader - even Christ. All the rest of us are brothers, whatever our ministry or our experience in the church may be.

The Tribulation Which Is In Jesus

John also refers to himself as a "fellow-partaker in the tribulation which is in Jesus". Every wholehearted disciple of Jesus should be prepared to partake in the "tribulation which is in Jesus", as long as he is in this world.

John did not get this unveiling while living in comfort. He received it, while experiencing tribulation at Patmos, because he had been faithful to "the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (v.9). He had to experience tribulation himself in order to be able to write about the saints experiencing the great tribulation from the Antichrist in the last days. God takes us through trials and tribulations first before giving us a ministry to others who are facing tribulation.

Paul said, "God encourages us in all our affliction so that we may be able to encourage those who are in any affliction with the (same) encouragement with which we ourselves are encouraged by God" (2 Cor.1:4 - Amplified).

It is not surprising therefore that the doctrine that Jesus would come secretly and take (rapture) His church out of the world, before the great tribulation, arose for the first time in a country (England) where Christians were living in comfort, and at a time (mid-19th century) when they were not facing any persecution for their faith at all. Today this doctrine continues to be proclaimed and believed by Christians who live in ease and comfort, in countries where there is no persecution against Christians at all.

Since the prayers of most Christians are basically of this order : "Lord make my life more comfortable on earth", it is not surprising that they have gladly accepted this teaching of a pre-tribulation rapture of the church. Thus Satan has succeeded in lulling multitudes of Christians with a false comfort, so that they will be unprepared for the great tribulation when it does come upon them.

The words of Jesus are clear: "In the world YOU HAVE TRIBULATION. But take courage; I have overcome the world" (Jn.16:33). He never promised that we would escape tribulation - whether small tribulations or the great one. But He did say that we could overcome even as He overcame. He is far more interested in making us overcomers than in saving us out of tribulation, because He is far more interested in our character than in our comfort.

Neither did Jesus ever say that escaping the great tribulation was a reward for faithfulness, as some teach. On the contrary, He said that those who forsook everything to follow Him would have even more tribulations than others who didn't follow Him (Mk.10:30).

When He prayed to His Father for His disciples, He said, "I do not ask Thee to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil." (Jn.17:15). He did NOT want His disciples to be raptured out of the world at that time, just because they were going to face tribulation.

In the 3rd-century when Christians were being thrown to the lions in the Roman amphitheatres and being burnt at the stake in different parts of the Roman empire, the Lord did not rescue them from such tribulations. The God Who shut the lions' mouths and took away the power of the fiery furnace in Daniel's day, did NOT do such miracles for these disciples of Jesus - for these were new-covenant Christians who were going to glorify God through death. Like Jesus their Master, they neither asked for, nor expected twelve legions of angels to come and protect them from their enemies.

From heaven, God watched the Bride of His Son being torn to pieces by lions and being burnt to ashes; and He was glorified in their testimony - for they had "followed the Lamb, wherever He went", even unto a violent physical death (Rev.14:4). The only word that the Lord spoke to them was, "Be faithful until death and I will give you a crown of life." (Rev.2:10).

Even today, when the disciples of Jesus are being tortured and persecuted for His Name in many lands, the Lord does not take them away from the earth. And He will not rapture

us to heaven before the great tribulation either. He will do something far better. He will make us overcomers in the midst of the great tribulation.

Jesus is far more interested in saving us from evil than in saving us from tribulation. He permits us to go through tribulation because He knows that that is the only way that we can become spiritually strong.

Such a message is strange teaching indeed to a comfort-loving Christendom that has been coddled in their pews every Sunday for years by ear-tickling preachers. But this is the message that the apostles preached to the early churches. "They (the apostles Paul and Barnabas) strengthened the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, saying, 'Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.'" (Acts 14:22).

The little trials that we face at home and at work now, are but a preparation for the greater ones that will come in the days to come. That is why it is essential that we are faithful now. For God says, "If you have run with footmen and they have tired you out, then how can you compete with horses?" (Jer.12:5).

John speaks here about being a "fellow-partaker in the tribulation and kingdom and perseverance which are in Jesus" (v.9). We have to enter into fellowship with Jesus in tribulation first, before we can share His throne with Him in His kingdom.

Perseverance is a great virtue that is emphasised throughout the New Testament. Jesus Himself said "They will deliver you to tribulation.....but the one who endures to the end shall be saved" (Mt.24:13).

Being "In The Spirit"

John received this revelation on the Lord's day (v.10). The first day of the week was called "the Lord's day" because that was the day that Jesus rose from the dead, having conquered sin, Satan, death and the grave.

The early disciples met together on the first day of every week, to build one another up and to break bread (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor.16:2). They had no special days in the year. They had no "Good Friday" or "Easter" or "Christmas". They had been freed from keeping days and seasons etc., for they had come under the new covenant (Col.2:16,17).

John was "in the Spirit" and that's why he heard the voice of the Lord. We can hear that voice too - if we are in the Spirit. It all depends on where our mind is set. If our mind is set on the things of earth, then the voices that we hear will be concerning earthly things.

We know, for example, that there are many voices in the radio-waves in the air around us. The voice that we pick up will depend on the frequency that our radio-set is tuned to. You can hear God's Word over radio or you can hear Satan's rock-music over it. The choice is yours.

It is just the same with our mind. If we are in the Spirit - that is if we are filled with the Spirit and our mind is set on the things that are above (Col.3:2) - we will be able to hear the Lord's voice.

But there are other voices in the air that are clamouring for our attention too. There are voices that would like to tell you how to make more money, how to get your share of the family property, how to settle scores with that person who cheated you and how to defend yourself against those who are spreading false stories about you etc., etc., Satan's radio stations are broadcasting lies, bitterness and anxieties etc., 24 hours of every day. All you have to do is tune in, and you can pick up what you like!!

When believers complain that God doesn't speak to them, it is not because God does not speak. He is speaking all the time. But their minds are tuned in to this world and its interests. I am convinced that there is much that the Spirit has spoken in the past that was meant for us, but which we never "picked up", because we were not in the Spirit.

You can sit in a meeting of the church and hear absolutely nothing that the Spirit is saying, even though you may understand everything that the preacher said. Someone sitting next to you who is "in the Spirit" may however hear the Lord's voice just like John did. John heard the Lord's voice so clearly that he says it was as loud as a trumpet! That's how loudly God speaks! But those who are deaf won't hear even the blast of a trumpet.

Let me exhort and challenge every one of you to keep yourself in the Spirit every day - especially in these the last days of this age. Keep yourself sensitive to sin and walk in humility before the face of God, so that your ears can be open to hear what the Lord has to say to you.

CHAPTER THREE

THE RISEN LORD

"Write in a book what you see, and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea. And I turned to see the voice that was speaking with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands; and in the middle of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed in a robe reaching to the feet, and girded across His breast with a golden girdle. And His head and His hair were white like white wool, like snow; and His eyes were like a flame of fire; and His feet were like burnished bronze, when it has been caused to glow in a furnace, and His voice was like the sound of many waters. And in His right hand He held seven stars; and out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword; and His face was like the sun shining in its strength. And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as a dead man. And He laid His right hand upon me, saying, 'Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living One; and I was dead, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and Hades.' Write therefore the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall take place after these things. As for the mystery of the seven stars which you saw in My right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches." (Rev.1:11-20).

Seven Local Churches

God gives us messages not only for ourselves but also for others. When God speaks to us, it is a good habit to write down what we hear, as John was commanded to do here (v.11). He might otherwise have forgotten what God had spoken to him.

The message in this case was for the seven churches in Asia. What was known as Asia then is today a small part of Turkey. All these 7 churches were located within a radius of 75 miles of each other. But notice that even though they were so close to each other, they were still NOT collectively called "The CHURCH in Asia". They were called "The CHURCHES in Asia".

This is a small point but a very important one, nevertheless. "The church in Asia" would have meant that these churches had become a denomination with a central headquarters. But "The churches in Asia" indicate that each church was a local church directly under the headship of the Lord.

The church is a work of God, built by Christ. But denominations are the work of men. All the teachings and the writings of the apostles make it clear that the will of God is for each church to be directly under the headship of Christ, and not part of a denomination.

There was no bishop or superintendent in charge of these seven churches, to whom John could send these letters for distribution to the churches. Each letter had to be sent individually to the messenger of that church - for each church was an independent unit. The Lord had given apostles to the church. John himself was one of them. But the Lord had not appointed any bishops or superintendents.

There is no such thing, for example, as "The church in India". There are churches in India, and these are built by the Lord in different localities, each one directly under His headship.

Satan's final aim is to build his counterfeit world "church", Babylon. And his first step towards that goal was to group churches into denominations, many centuries ago. He knew that the task of building Babylon would have been impossible otherwise. We should not be ignorant of Satan's schemes.

The seven golden lampstands symbolise the seven churches (see v.20). Under the old covenant, the temple had ONE seven-branched lampstand. This was because all the tribes of Israel were branches of one "denomination" with its central headquarters and leaders at Jerusalem.

But it is different under the new covenant. There are seven different lampstands, each completely separate from the other. The reason, as we saw above, was because each church was independently under the headship of Christ, although in fellowship with the other churches, through the Head.

The church being called a lampstand indicates that, in God's eyes, its primary function is to give light. The lampstands being golden indicate the Divine origin of a true church. It is built by the Lord and not by men.

A lampstand is not meant to be a mere decoration. Neither is a church! The light that every church should hold forth is God's Word, which alone is a light for our path in this dark world (Psa.119:105). Instead of holding forth that light, when so-called "churches" begin to major on running schools and hospitals and on doing social work, we can be sure that they have strayed from God's primary purpose.

The Risen Lord

When John turned around to see who was speaking, he saw Jesus (v.12,13). But he saw Him in the midst of the churches. It is through the local church that the Lord seeks to reveal Himself and to speak to others.

The first dwelling-place of God mentioned in the Bible is the burning bush that Moses saw in the wilderness (Deut.33:16). Like John at Patmos, Moses also turned aside at that time to see that marvelous sight. And that's when God spoke to him (Exod.3:3).

Today the church is God's dwelling place. God desires every church to be aflame with His Spirit like that burning bush was. When people look at a local church, they should be able to see the life of Christ revealed through the members of that church. Then God can speak to people through the church.

John then goes on to describe the Lord Jesus as he saw Him. Even though the Lord is risen, He is still called the "Son of man", emphasising the fact of His identification with humanity permanently.

His long robe (undoubtedly white in colour) reaching to His feet, points to His High-Priestly ministry of intercession for us - for this was how the Jewish High-Priest was dressed when He went into the Most Holy Place of the tabernacle, on the day of atonement every year (v.13).

The Lord was wearing a golden girdle (belt) across His breast (v.13). Gold symbolises what is Divine. The girdle symbolises righteousness and faithfulness (according to Isaiah 11:5). This emphasises the perfect righteousness of God that was seen in Jesus' earthly life and the perfect faithfulness with which He keeps His promises to us.

His head and His hair were white like wool (v.14). Daniel 7:9 uses this very same symbolism to refer to God's eternity (His endless age). The white hair also speaks of wisdom. So this emphasises the fact that Jesus, although the Son of Man, is nevertheless also the Eternal God, perfect in wisdom.

His eyes were like a flame of fire (v.14). That means that "all things are open and laid bare" to Him (Heb.4:13). His eyes penetrate through all religious veneer, and can see through the flowery and pious language and the "form of godliness" of the religious hypocrite. It also sees beyond the broken, stuttering words of the God-fearing soul into the sincerity of his heart. As a result, His evaluations are totally different from man's.

His feet were like burnished bronze (v.15). Bronze was the material with which the altar of sacrifice was made (in the outer court of the tabernacle), where the sin-offering was slain. Bronze therefore symbolises God's judgment of man's sin at Calvary. While crushing the serpent's head, Jesus' feet had to be pierced on the cross (Gen.3:15).

His voice was like the sound of many waters (v.15). The rivers of living water symbolise the Holy Spirit (Jn.7:37-39). The speech of Jesus was always full of the gentleness and the wisdom of the Holy Spirit.

He held seven stars in His right hand (v.16). The seven stars are the seven messengers of the churches (v.20). God has ordained that the New Testament church be led by a plurality of elders (Acts 14:23; Tit.1:5; Acts 20:17). But God usually equips one among

the elders with the gift of proclaiming the Word in the church, as His messenger. This one is referred to here as "the messenger of the church". (The word translated as "angel" is a Greek word which actually means "one who brings news" or "a messenger").

These messengers are held by Christ in His hand. That is why we are commanded to give double honour to the elders "who work hard at preaching and teaching" (1 Tim.5:17).

It is necessary however, to mention that many elders of churches and many who preach God's Word today are NOT held by Christ in His hand, for they are self-appointed and not appointed by Him.

A messenger appointed by the Lord will be a man of God, who inspires your confidence, and through whose life and ministry you will be fed, led and blessed. Such a man should be respected - for he is held by the Lord in His hand. There are few men like that in the world today - but praise God there are a few.

God's servants are special targets of Satan. Therefore they are specially kept by the Lord in His hand. As long as they remain there in humility, Satan cannot touch them. But when they are puffed up, or if they sin and do not repent, then God allows Satan to inflict them in various ways so that they can come to repentance. It is a tremendous privilege to be held by the Lord as His messenger in His hand. But it has awesome responsibilities as well.

Out of Jesus' mouth came a sharp two-edged sword (v.16). This refers to the Word of God that He speaks (Heb.4:12). We noticed in verse 15 that His voice was like the sound of many waters. These two verses put together indicate that Jesus always speaks God's Word in the power of the Holy Spirit. He speaks with great gentleness, but He also rebukes firmly, where necessary.

His face was like the sun shining in its strength (v.16). This is how Peter, James and John saw Him on the mount of transfiguration as well (Mt.17:2). This symbolises the "unapproachable light" in which God dwells (1 Tim.6:16). The holiness of God is compared here to the noonday sun, which we cannot look at directly. The sun is a ball of fire in which no germs or bacteria can dwell. No sin can dwell in the presence of God either (Isa.33:14).

At The Feet Of The Lord

The same John who leaned on Jesus' breast at the last supper now falls at His feet as a dead man (v.17). John had walked with God for 65 years. He was undoubtedly the saintliest man on earth at that time. Yet He could not stand erect in the Lord's presence. Those who know the Lord the most, reverence Him the most. Those who know Him the least, pretend to have a cheap familiarity with Him.

The seraphs of heaven cover their faces before the Lord (Isa.6:2,3). Job and Isaiah saw their sinfulness and mourned when they saw the glory of God (Job 42:5,6; Isa.6:5). But "fools rush in where angels fear to tread" !! Such is the folly of the carnal believer.

The more we know the Lord, the more we will fall at His feet in adoring wonder, with our mouth in the dust. Only as we see the glory of the Lord constantly, will we see our own un-Christlikeness. Only then will we stop judging others and start judging ourselves. And only then will we experience His touch of power like John experienced at Patmos.

Jesus laid His right hand upon John (v.17). This symbolised endowment with power and authority. He told John not to be afraid.

"Do not be afraid" and "Follow Me" are the two most oft-repeated statements of Jesus in the gospels. He speaks the very same words to us today.

Jesus went on to tell John that He was the First and the Last - the very same title used by the Father earlier (verse 8). He knows the end from the beginning and He Himself is before the beginning and after the end. This is why we need never fear.

Jesus then tells John how He has conquered death and the grave and now holds the keys of death and Hades (the place of departed spirits) (v.18). Keys symbolise the power to open and close doors. Once it was Satan who had the power of death (Heb.2:14,15). But when Jesus died and rose again, He took those keys from Satan.

Today Jesus has the keys of death and Hades. That means that if you are a wholehearted disciple of Jesus, seeking to do the will of God alone in your life, you cannot die until God's appointed time comes. No accident or sickness can claim your life, until Jesus decides that it is time to open the door of death for you to go through into His presence. This is a tremendous encouragement for all who are truly disciples of Jesus.

John may be persecuted by men at Patmos. But they could not kill him until God's time for him had come. And the Lord still had a ministry for John to fulfil.

John is now empowered and commissioned by the Lord for a new task - to write this wonderful book of Revelation (v.19). We need to be empowered again and again by the Lord if we are to complete our ministry triumphantly.

The Threefold Division of "Revelation"

In verse 19, the Lord gives John the three-fold division of the book:

- (i) What John has already seen (chapter 1) - the vision of a triumphant Lord Jesus saying, "Do not be afraid". Fear has absolutely no place in the heart of a disciple who has seen the glory of the Lord.

- (ii) The situation in John's time (chapters 2 and 3) - referring to the condition of the seven churches in Asia Minor. The Lord's messages to these seven churches are a warning and a challenge to all churches of all time and to their "messengers".
- (iii) Events future to John's time (chapters 4 to 22) - the phrase "after these things" that is used here, is used again in chapter 4:1, indicating that the third part of the book begins there.

The Lord then explains to John the secret meaning of the lampstands and the stars (v.20). We studied these when we looked at verses 12 and 16.

The Lord alone can give us revelation on the secrets of His Word. To receive such revelation, we need two indispensable qualities - the fear of God and humility. "The secret of the Lord is for those who fear Him....and He teaches the humble His way." (Psa.25:14,9).

Let us study these letters to the churches then in that spirit.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE LOVELESS CHURCH

"To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, The One who walks among the seven golden lampstands, says this: 'I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot endure evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false; and you have perseverance and have endured for My name's sake, and have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Remember therefore from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you, and will remove your lampstand out of its place - unless you repent. Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the Paradise of God.'" (Rev.2:1-7).

The Lord's Evaluation

Although these seven letters are addressed primarily to the messengers of the churches, yet at the end of each message, we find an invitation to anyone who has an ear to hear, to pay attention to what the Holy Spirit is saying to ALL the churches. They have a message therefore for every disciple in every church in every generation.

We saw in Chapter One that our Lord is described as the Faithful Witness. We see Him fulfilling this ministry in these letters of His. To use a modern expression, Jesus "tells it like it is". Christ is the Judge in the midst of His church, judging both the messenger and the church itself. He tells the messengers and the churches exactly what He thinks of them.

In His evaluations, the Lord doesn't "touch-up" the portraits like modern photographers do. He loves His people far too much to do that!! He knows that it is better that we deal with sin, worldliness, lukewarmness and self-centredness right now, than to have to face up with these things at His judgment-seat later. To be judged for these over there would not be profitable for us; and He has our eternal good in view. So it is good for us to pay careful attention to everything that the Lord says in these letters.

Where there is room for appreciation, the Lord expresses sincere appreciation. And where there is need for rebuke, He does not hesitate to rebuke scathingly. Cancer cannot be washed away with soap and water. It cannot be removed gently either. It has to be excised by radical surgery. Even so with sin.

Appreciation Before Rebuke

In the letter to the messenger at Ephesus, the Lord describes Himself as the One Who holds the seven stars in His right hand and walks among the seven churches (v.1).

The Lord is always walking in the midst of the churches, examining everything that is said and done by everyone therein, and especially by the messengers Whom He holds in His hand. And He measures everything, not by the low standards that carnal Christians have, or even by the standard of the ten commandments, but by the plumline of Divine righteousness.

He expresses His approval and appreciation first before He points out the failures (v.2). The Divine nature is like that. The Lord always looks for that which is good first, and expresses appreciation for that, before pointing out what needs to be set right.

Man's nature however is quite different. He does not look for that which is good in others first, but for that which is bad. Man is naturally slow to appreciate and extremely quick to criticise. This is but one mark of the poison of the "Accuser of the brethren" that is in our system (Rev.12:11). The more we partake of the Divine nature however, the more we will be like our Lord - quick to appreciate and slow to criticise.

It is good to follow this principle all through life : "I will never point out a fault to someone, in whom I have found nothing so far to appreciate".

Following that simple rule can lead us to greater heights of godliness than we have ever imagined. It will make us a far greater blessing in the church and far less of a nuisance to others than we have been thus far.

It is only when we appreciate others that we have laid the foundation to constructively criticize them. Otherwise we will only be hurling bricks at them. You cannot write with a chalk on thin air. You need a blackboard if people are to see what you are writing. Even so, expressed appreciation forms the blackboard on which we can write and "speak the truth in love" to others. Then, what we say is also more likely to be accepted by them.

Appreciation and rebuke are both signs of love. But we must begin with appreciation first. Notice how Paul follows this principle even when writing to the carnal Corinthian Christians (1 Cor.1:4-10).

The Lord commends the messenger at Ephesus for his toil and perseverance and for his efforts to keep the church pure from evil men. No doubt he had fought a battle against worldliness to keep it from entering the church. Not only that, he had also striven to keep the church pure in doctrine. He had tested those who claimed to be apostles and had proved their claims to be false.

The Lord's reference to "apostles" in verse 2 clearly indicates that there were other apostles in the church in the first century, besides the eleven whom the Lord had

appointed when He was on earth. Christ has given apostles to the church even after He "ascended on high" (Eph.4:11), and there are apostles even today. But there are also many who claim to be apostles who are not. And so we must not be deceived by false apostles (v.2).

The messenger in the church at Ephesus had also "endured" for the sake of the Lord's Name without giving up (v.3). What a wonderful man this messenger was, according to the standards of most believers. And what a wonderful church the Ephesian church appeared to be - one that toiled, persevered, kept away evil men, kept out false doctrine and exposed deceivers - thus emphasising both purity of life and purity of doctrine.

You Have Left Your First Love

One would have thought that such a church had everything that the Lord wanted to find in a church. But alas it was not so. It lacked the main thing that the Lord looked for. It had left its first love - love for the Lord and love for one another (verse 4).

What the Lord said to them was essentially this : "In the midst of all your zeal and your activity, you have lost sight of ME. You have lost that fervent devotion that you once had for Me. You have kept yourself from evil and you have steered clear of doctrinal error. But remember how you loved Me fervently when you were first converted and how you did everything out of love for Me then. Now everything has degenerated into a dry routine. You're still going to the meetings, reading your Bible and praying. But it has all become a ritual."

The church here had become like a wife who once served her husband joyfully out of love for him, but who now considers the same tasks a drudgery - because the fire of love has gone out of her marriage. In the olden days, she used to wait eagerly for her husband to come back from the office every evening. But not now. She is still faithful to Him, but she has lost her first love.

What does a true husband desire from his wife first of all? Is it her love or her labours? Certainly, it is her love. It is the same with the Lord. He desires the love of our hearts first and foremost. When that is gone, everything that we do becomes dead works.

Good works become dead works when love for God is not the motivating force behind them.

The believers here had also lost their fervent love for each other. They were no longer able to bear with each other's weaknesses or to overlook each other's sins. They had lost their first love for one another too.

The messenger had lost his first love - and gradually the church too had become like its messenger.

This was not a small error. It was a great fall - for the Lord says, "Remember therefore from where you have fallen." We usually think of a believer as having fallen only when he falls into adultery or theft or smoking etc., When we become sensitive to the voice of the Spirit however, we will recognise that even a slight loss of devotion to the Lord and a slight cooling off in love for others is also evidence of backsliding.

From where had the church in Ephesus fallen?

Ephesus was the place where some 40 years earlier the apostle Paul had come and established a church. There was such a revival there at that time that the whole city had known about it (Acts 19). Here was a church where Paul had laboured for three years, preaching DAILY with tears (Acts 20:31). When finally he left Ephesus, he called the elders of the church and warned them of some of the dangers that the church would face after his departure (Acts 20:17-35).

Four years later, Paul wrote a letter to them - a letter containing some of the deepest truths of the new covenant found in the entire Bible. He could write to them about such matters because he considered the church at Ephesus to be the most mature and most spiritually-minded of all the churches that he had established. We also notice from the letter that Paul had found nothing to rebuke or correct in them. Such was the high position that they had occupied at one time.

Paul's letter could be called the first letter to the Ephesians. Here in Revelation 2, we see the second letter to the Ephesians. The story is entirely different now. A new generation had arisen in the church and they did not have the devotion or the spirituality of their fathers.

This is the sad history of almost every church and movement in Christianity, throughout these twenty centuries. The second generation has the same doctrine, but not the same life as their fathers.

And so the Lord tells the church at Ephesus, "Remember therefore from where you have fallen".

The Need For Repentance

There was only one solution for this problem. "Repent and do the deeds you did at first", says the Lord (v.5).

The word that we normally think of preaching to unbelievers - "REPENT" - is the word that the Lord preaches to the church. "Before you tell others to turn from their sins, turn from your own sin of leaving your first love", He tells them. They must mourn for having left their first love.

"Do the deeds you did at first", says the Lord (v.5). If their works did not spring out of love, then all their activities had no value before Him. Their works were wood, hay and straw now, fit only for being burnt.

The motive behind each action is what gives value to the action. The motive behind your perseverance and your toil and your purity is what makes them acceptable or unacceptable to the Lord. In the day that we stand before the Lord, we shall find that the question "WHY?" will be far more important than the question "WHAT?". Why we did what we did will be the test by which the Lord evaluates all our actions. We must never forget this.

Whatever does not spring out of love for the Lord is a dead work.

Remember, that we are commanded to repent of dead works. Hebrews 6:1 tells us that this is part of the foundation for pressing on to perfection in our lives.

If the messenger and the church do not repent, then the Lord says that He will remove their lampstand from out of its place. That means that He will no longer consider them thereafter as one of His churches on earth. They may still have their meetings and their conferences, and their numbers may keep increasing. But, as far as the Lord is concerned, they would be dead and non-existent, without the anointing of His Spirit and without His grace.

That is how serious the loss of first love can be.

The Nicolaitan Hierarchy

The Lord then commands the messenger for hating the deeds of the Nicolaitans which He also hated (v.6).

There is no reference anywhere in Scripture that tells us who the Nicolaitans were or what they did. So we cannot be certain about what deeds the Lord was referring to. However, the word "Nicolaitans" means (in Greek) "conquerors of the people".

If that was what the Lord meant, then it would be a reference to those who sought to "lord it over the flock" (1Pet.5:3) - elders who behaved like kings and not like servants. Such elders set themselves up as a separate priestly class (as the Levites were in the Old Testament) and rule over other believers. The Lord said that He hated the deeds of the Nicolaitans.

Today we have Christian preachers using titles such as "Reverend" (a title that is used in Scripture for God alone - Psa.111:9 - KJV) and "Pastor" (which is a gift and not a title or an office - Eph.4:11) etc., to exalt themselves over others in the church.

However, it is not just with titles that preachers seek to rule over others. There are many who call themselves just "brothers" who dominate their fellow-believers by their soul-power (dominant personality), their financial-power and their spiritual gifts.

All this is Nicolaitanism and it is nauseating to God.

In India we see the sad spectacle of multitudes of Christian churches and organisations ruled by their Western masters through money-power. Because of financial indebtedness and the obligations that have come through being invited to Western countries, many Indian believers have ended up as slaves of "the white man". Such slavish subservience of one believer to another is "Nicolaitanism" and is an abomination in God's eyes.

Consider another form of Nicolaitanism. The Roman Catholic church teaches that Mary is a mediator between Christ and man. Their priests then act as further mediators between the Roman Catholics and Mary!! But this unScriptural mediatorial attitude can be practised just as much by a Protestant pastor as by a Roman Catholic priest!

When a pastor "finds God's will" for one of his flock in matters concerning employment or marriage or whatever, he is acting as a Nicolaitan mediator. By such methods, priests and pastors gain power over their flock in a way that God detests.

To give spiritual counsel and advice is a godly thing. But to "find God's will" for another member of the body of Christ is to rob him of his connection with Christ as his Head.

Under the old covenant, there were prophets who found God's will for the people, because the Holy Spirit had not been given to individuals then. But now, under the new covenant, things are different. All can know God personally (Heb.8:8-12). In fact the Lord eagerly desires that every member of His church (His body) should have a direct connection with Him as Head (Col.2:18,19). Nicolaitans however hinder this.

The church in Ephesus had successfully resisted Nicolaitanism. They hated it, and the Lord commended them for it because He hated it too. He hated it in the first century and He hates it still.

What about you? Do you hate this evil just as much as the Lord hates it? If not, you are unlike Christ, and you cannot be a true messenger of His. A Nicolaitan can never build the body of Christ.

The Call To The Overcomers

Finally, the Holy Spirit exhorts everyone who has an ear to hear, to hear what He is saying, for the message is for ALL the churches (v.7). Not every believer is willing to obey what the Lord has to say - for most of them are either wanting to have their own way or wanting to please their fellowmen. Recognising this fact, the Holy Spirit proceeds to challenge individuals in the church to an overcoming life.

The Holy Spirit gives recognition here to a group of wholehearted and faithful believers whom He calls "overcomers", in the midst of a church. These are the ones who overcome sin and worldliness and who stand faithfully for the Lord in the midst of the spiritual decline around them.

In every locality, God is looking for those who will stand true to His standards and who will fight for those standards at any cost. In the letters to the seven churches, we see that the Lord is primarily interested in the overcomers. Even today, He looks for overcomers in every place. He may not find them in every church, but He looks for them in every locality.

The Lord promises a reward to those who overcome. In this case, it was the privilege of eating from the tree of life (v.7) - the privilege that Adam missed. The tree of life is a symbol of the Divine life, the Divine nature. The greatest reward that God can ever give a human being is to partake of His nature. Here on earth, even most believers don't think too highly of this. But in the clearer light of eternity, we shall discover that this is indeed the greatest of all rewards that God can ever give a human being.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE SUFFERING CHURCH

"And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life, says this: 'I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death.'" (Rev.2:8-11).

Tribulation

The Lord describes Himself here as the First and the Last, the One Who has overcome death. A church that is facing opposition and persecution needs to see the Lord as the One Who is in control of all events from the beginning to the end and as One Who has conquered man's greatest enemy - death.

The Lord has no charges at all against this church.

It was a church facing tribulation, poverty and slander.

Tribulation is a recurring theme in the book of Revelation - and notice that it is faced by the most faithful among God's children, and not by compromisers. In the first chapter of Revelation, we saw John undergoing tribulation. Here we see a faithful church undergoing the same. It is a church against which the Lord does not have a single charge, that is being persecuted. The worldly, compromising churches have an easy time.

All this is meant to remind us that tribulation is a part of God's perfect will for His wholehearted children. So when we ourselves are faced with the great tribulation one day, we need not think that some strange thing has befallen us. We will be treading the same pathway that God's faithful children have trodden through the centuries.

God allows the very best among His children to face tribulation. It was so in the first century. It has been so throughout these 20 centuries of church-history. And it will be so even at the end of time.

The best of God's children, the most faithful among them, the elite commando-troops of the Lord's army will be the ones who will be here on earth to stand as witnesses for Him in the days of the Antichrist. Every General sends his best troops to where the battle is

raging the thickest. The Lord does the same too. It will be a great privilege and honour to be among those troops of the Lord.

God will certainly not take the overcomers away to heaven at a time when He needs their testimony on earth the most. He has never done that in the past and He will not do that in the future either.

The Lord's elite troops who stand up to the Antichrist in the days of the great tribulation are referred to in the book of Revelation as those "who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus" (Rev.12:17). They will refuse to bow down to the Antichrist or to receive his mark on their bodies. Many of them will therefore have to lay down their lives for their faith (Rev.13:7,8,15-17). Thus they will join that select company of martyrs of all time who "did not love their lives even to death" (Rev.12:11).

None of us naturally have the courage to face death for the Lord. But if God has called us to seal our witness with our blood, then we can rest assured that He will give us special grace for that when such a time comes. It was through such a special supply of grace that every Christian martyr faced death fearlessly in the past. And what God did for them He will do for us too - even for the weakest and the most cowardly among us. All we have to do is tell Him that we want to be faithful to Him at any cost. If we have the willingness, God will give us the boldness.

Poverty

The saints in the church at Smyrna were poor. Poverty is another thing that God's faithful children have faced throughout church-history.

Many Old Testament saints were rich. God had promised earthly wealth as a reward for obedience in Old Testament times, because Israel was called to possess an earthly kingdom.

But Jesus inaugurated a new covenant and brought the kingdom of heaven to earth. Now the wealth we are promised is heavenly, not earthly. That was why Jesus Himself and the apostles were all poor.

Today, there are many who are teaching that becoming wealthy is a sign of God's blessing on His children. This doctrine was first invented by preachers in the West, who used it to justify their becoming wealthy from the tithes of God's people! Christian businessmen then latched on to it as a convenient doctrine to justify their own amassing of wealth. Covetous preachers everywhere have found it to be a convenient doctrine for them as well!!

The poverty of Jesus and of the apostles should suffice to show that all such preachers have been thoroughly deceived by their own covetousness.

The believers at Smyrna were faithful to the Lord in the midst of great trials, and they were poor. The believers at Laodicea, on the other hand, were thoroughly dead, and they were materially rich. What does this prove? The answer is plain for anyone to see.

"God has chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith..... God has chosen the foolish things of the world..... God has chosen the weak things of the world..... God has chosen the things that are not..... that no man should boast before God." (Jas.2:5; 1 Cor.1:27-29).

God has made no mistake in choosing His children.

God has promised to provide all our material needs, if we seek His kingdom and His righteousness first (Mt.6:33; Phil.4:19).

We have seen evidence of this again and again in the churches in India, where believers who were living in abject poverty and who were heavily in debt, have been blessed financially by their heavenly Father, when they honoured Him in their lives. This is a miracle in a country like India, where there is no government-funded social security system and where unemployment is high and bureaucratic corruption rampant. But we have also seen that such believers have not become wealthy. God has met their needs. But He hasn't made them rich.

We have also seen that where believers have pursued after wealth, they have destroyed themselves spiritually (1 Tim.6:9,10).

What should a believer do if he is already wealthy - as a result of inherited family wealth or some other reason? He should obey God's Word: (i) Recognise first of all, that ALL that he has belongs to the Lord (Study the following Scriptures : 1 Cor.10:26; 1 Cor.4:7; Lk.14:33; Jn.17:10); (ii) Obey the Lord's command to use his wealth for the spread of the gospel, thus seeking first the kingdom of God with his money ("Use your money to make friends for eternity" - Lk.16:9 - paraphrase); (iii) Obey God's command to share his wealth with other needy believers (1 Tim.6:17-19).

If he follows these three steps, he won't be able to stay wealthy for long. But he will become a spiritual man, for God rewards us spiritually exactly according to our faithfulness with material things (Lk.16:11). Many are spiritually poor, because they have been unfaithful with "the mammon of unrighteousness" that God entrusted them with, and tested them with.

God has not promised us material wealth in the New Testament. But He told the church in Smyrna, "...but you are rich" (v.9). They were rich in God's eyes, because they had been faithful in their trials and thus partaken of the Divine nature. This is the true eternal wealth that God gives us in the new covenant.

Slander

The church in Smyrna faced the "blasphemy of those who say they are Jews" (v.9).

Slander is another thing that all of God's faithful children have to face. Notice here that the slander and opposition that this church was facing was from those who called themselves God's people - "those who say they are Jews, but are not, but are a synagogue of Satan" (v.9).

Those Jews were religious people, who studied their Bibles (Genesis to Malachi). Yet the Lord called them "a synagogue of Satan", because they were hypocrites. That was why they persecuted the true disciples of Jesus.

Many a synagogue that was started by God-fearing Jews degenerated into a synagogue of Satan over a period of time. In the same way, many churches that were started by God-fearing believers, have also degenerated into "churches of Satan", in God's eyes, today.

Opposition for the true disciples of Jesus today, comes not just from heathen religions (which is understandable), but also from "those who say they are Christians, but who are not, but are a church of Satan".

Today if we said that a so-called Christian "church" was "a church of Satan", many would accuse us of being un-Christlike. But they forget that it was Jesus Himself Who rebuked Peter, saying "Get behind Me, Satan" (Mt.16:23); and that it was Jesus Who called this group of religious people "a synagogue of Satan". He would use exactly the same strong language today to rebuke "churches" that have drifted from their calling.

Jesus warned His disciples, "They will make you outcasts from the synagogue; but an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God. And these things they will do, because they have not known the Father, or Me." (Jn.16:2,3).

What He said then that the people in a synagogue would do to His disciples, was in later centuries done by "churches" too. In the middle ages, God-fearing disciples of Jesus were killed by Roman Catholic inquisitionists.

This hatred of the disciples of Jesus will reach its peak during the time of the Antichrist and the Babylonian "world church". We must be prepared to face it when it comes. That is why we must not be afraid of the little slander and opposition that we face from so-called Christians these days.

We must never be afraid of being slandered - for Jesus Himself was maligned. He was called a gluttonous man, a false teacher, a blasphemer, an insane man, a demon-possessed man, and one who had Satanic power (Lk.7:34; Jn.7:12; Mt.26:65; Mk.3:21,22; Jn.8:48).

He told His disciples, "A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a slave above his master. It is enough for the disciple that he become as his teacher, and the slave as his master. If they have called the head of the house Beelzebul (a Jewish title for Satan, the prince of demons), how much more the members of his household!" (Mt.10:24,25).

Peter exhorts us saying, "Keep your behaviour excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may on account of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation." (1 Pet.2:12).

God's promise to us is, "No weapon that is formed against you shall prosper; and every tongue that accuses you in judgment you will condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord. And their vindication is from Me." (Isa.54:17). So we need not fear slander. The Lord Himself will vindicate us at the right time. Until then we can afford to keep quiet and ignore what ungodly people say about us.

Freedom From Fear

The Lord then tells the church at Smyrna not to fear (v.10). "Don't be afraid" was a word that fell from Jesus' lips frequently when He was on earth. And it is the same word that He speaks now to a church that is facing suffering for His Name's sake. Perhaps it is the one word from the Lord's mouth that all of us need to hear the most in these days.

There is a spirit of fear all over the world today and it is gripping people more and more powerfully. Jesus warned us that it would be so in the last days (Lk.21:26). But He also told His disciples that they should not be affected by this spirit of fear. The sad thing is that most believers are not free from this spirit. Many believers are enslaved by the fear of what will happen in the future, fear of men, fear of sickness, fear of death and various other types of fears.

Fear is one of Satan's master-weapons, with which he enslaves many believers. It is this spirit of fear that prevents many believers from boldly testifying for the Lord in the meetings of the church and from being bold witnesses for the Lord in their places of work. Many believers confuse timidity with humility and thus Satan deceives them.

It was fear that prevented Peter from boldly testifying about the Lord to the servant-girl who questioned him in the high-priest's palace. But when Peter was baptised in the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, that fear was driven away. He could then testify about the Lord boldly to anyone.

Later, when he and the other apostles were tempted to be afraid again, they prayed and they were filled with Holy Spirit again, and the spirit of fear was driven away from them once more (Acts 4:31).

This then is the answer : We must be filled with the Holy Spirit again and again.

God doesn't want you to be enslaved to the spirit of fear that prevents you from opening your mouth and being a witness for Christ among your friends and relatives and in your place of work. He wants to fill you with His Holy Spirit and to make you bold. All you have to do is to acknowledge that you are a coward and ask God to fill you with His Spirit so that you can be His bold witness. Those who hunger and thirst will be filled.

We will be tempted to fear far more in the days to come. So let's use every opportunity that we have now to overcome fear of every kind.

Suffering According to God's Plan

God does not protect His faithful children from suffering. He knows that suffering is necessary for our spiritual growth. And so the church in Smyrna was not spared suffering. But the Lord encouraged them saying, "Do not fear what you are about to suffer."(v.10).

The Lord warned them that Satan was going to cast some of them into prison. God has given Satan the power to cast believers into prison unjustly. But we must remember that Satan can't do anything to us without first getting God's permission. And even if we are cast into prison, it will only be in order to test us (v.10). God uses even imprisonment to fulfil His purposes.

Paul said, "My circumstances (in prison) have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel" (Phil.1:12-14). God used Paul's imprisonment to fulfil a number of purposes: (i) to sanctify Paul; (ii) to convert a number of Paul's jailers; (iii) to give Paul an opportunity to write his epistles; and (iv) to encourage many other believers to preach fearlessly.

Truly our God is able to turn the tables on Satan in such a way that everything (including imprisonment) works only for the fulfillment of the Divine purposes (Rom.8:28; Psa.76:10).

How long we spend in prison is also determined by the Lord. "You will have tribulation ten days", the Lord tells them (v.10). It is our Heavenly Father Who decides the length of time that His children have to undergo tribulation.

Even in the days of the great tribulation, Jesus said that "for the sake of the elect those days shall be cut short." (Mt.24:22). "God remembered Noah" when the flood was on the earth (Gen.8:1). And He wont forget His elect when they are encompassed by the great tribulation on earth. "I will not forget you...I have inscribed you on the palms of My hands", is His Word to us (Isa.49:15,16).

It is a great comfort for us to know this. And we must remember it in the days to come, when we have to suffer for the Lord's sake. He will never allow us to be tested beyond our ability. He has His Hand on the control knob and He will turn down the pressure (that we are facing) when the right time comes.

"Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life", is the Lord's exhortation (v.10). We should be willing even to die if necessary, in order to stand true to the Lord. Don't follow the example of believers who compromise their witness just for the sake of a little earthly gain - some honour or promotion or money etc., How will such believers stand true to the Lord in the day when we wont be allowed to buy even our necessary food without the mark of the Antichrist (Rev.13:16, 17)? Surely such "believers" will accept "the mark of the beast" in order to survive.

Remember that the crown of life is a far greater reward than any earthly honour and even than physical life itself.

Again the Lord recognises that not all have ears to hear such a message. And so He calls those who have ears to hear, to hear.

The overcomers will not be hurt by the second death (v.11).

The second death is eternal death - being cast away from the presence of God for all eternity, into a lake of fire. It is significant that the promise of escaping the second death is made only to the overcomers. That's why it is so important to overcome sin - for death is the end-result of sin (as James 1:15 makes clear).

The fundamental message of the Spirit throughout the New Testament is that we should overcome sin in every form.

CHAPTER SIX

THE WORLDLY CHURCH

"And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: 'The One who has the sharp two-edged sword says this: 'I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is; and you hold fast My name, and did not deny My faith, even in the days of Antipas, My witness, My faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells. But I have a few things against you, because you have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit acts of immorality. Thus you also have some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Repent therefore; or else I am coming to you quickly, and I will make war against them with the sword of My mouth. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, to him I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it.'" (Rev.2:12-17).

Light In Pitch Darkness

The Lord describes Himself here as the One Who has the sharp two-edged sword of the Spirit - God's living and powerful Word (v.12; Eph.6:17). This was the sword with which He overcame Satan in the wilderness, when He was on earth. This sword still comes out of His mouth today. And this is the weapon that we need for our battles against Satan as well.

Pergamum was a city which was so evil that the Lord says that Satan had his earthly headquarters there. This is mentioned twice in verse 13. And right in the midst of that city the Lord had placed His church.

The Lord tells them, "I know where you dwell". He knows exactly where we are living, and in what circumstances we are living. And He can keep us pure and triumphant, even if Satan has his earthly throne right where we live. With the sword of the Spirit we too can overcome.

No lampstand ever complains that the surroundings are too dark for it to shine in. The brightness of a lampstand has nothing to do with its surroundings. Its light depends solely on the amount of oil it contains.

It is exactly the same with any local church. The surroundings may be evil. Satan may have his throne in that city. But if the church is filled with the oil of the Holy Spirit, the

light will shine brightly. In fact, the darker the surroundings, the more brightly any light will be seen in such surroundings! The stars are seen at night - not during the day.

The Lord commands this church for holding fast His Name and not denying the faith even in times of persecution. He specially mentions Antipas, who was a faithful witness who laid down his life for his faith.

Antipas was one who stood for God's truth, even if it meant having to stand alone. He was a man of conviction and not one who sought to please men. Those who know God do not have to look around to see how many others believe what they believe. They are willing to stand alone for the Lord, if necessary against everyone else in the whole world. Antipas was a man like that. And as a result he was killed.

If he had been a man-pleaser, he could have escaped death. He was killed because he stood uncompromisingly for God's revealed truth. People probably called him narrow-minded, stubborn, hard-to-get-along-with and insane. But it made no difference to him. He just stood true to his Lord, standing against all sin, worldliness, compromise, disobedience to God's Word and against the devil. Here was a man who was a threat to Satan's kingdom.

Perhaps it was because Antipas was in Pergamum that Satan decided to place his throne there. What a man Antipas must have been if even Satan dreaded him!

God needs people like Antipas in every part of the world today. The time is soon coming when we will have to pay a price for our faith. All of Babylonian Christendom around us will compromise and bow to the Antichrist. Will we stand firm in that day, like Antipas did? Or will we bow the knee to Satan to preserve our life? Are we convinced that it is worth losing our life for the sake of God's truth?

Today, God is testing us through little trials. It is only if we are faithful in these little testings that we can be faithful in the bigger trials that will come in the future. Satan should consider you such a threat to his kingdom that he moves his throne to the town where you live.

Decline After Antipas' Death

The sad thing was that the church at Pergamum lost out spiritually, after Antipas died. Antipas was probably the messenger of the church when he was alive. When he died, someone else took over and the church went downhill. This is the sad history of many churches.

When Paul was leaving Ephesus, he told the elders there that he knew that after his departure, the church there would compromise and backslide (Acts 20:28-31). As long as Paul was there he fought against worldliness and sin and kept the spirit of the antichrist at bay. But there wasn't anyone strong enough in Ephesus to do that after Paul left. And so

the wolves got in among the flock and devoured the sheep freely, while the elders stood by and watched!

Satan changed his tactics at Pergamum, after Antipas died. The fact that Satan's throne is in a place does not necessarily mean that he will always attack the church with persecution.

He is described in the Scriptures, not only as a roaring lion (1 Pet.5:8), but also as a wily serpent who transforms himself into an angel of light (Rev.12:9; 2 Cor.11:14). He has found through the centuries that he accomplishes his purposes far better by corrupting the church with worldliness from within than by persecuting it from without.

This is what he finally did at Pergamum through "Balaamism" - and thus he succeeded, where he did not succeed with persecution!

The Teaching Of Balaam

The Lord tells the church here, "You have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam" (v.14). Balaam was one who was hired by King Balak to curse the Israelites. He was the first of the "hired preachers" that we read of in the Bible.

Christendom is flooded with these hirelings today, for whom preaching is a means of earning a living. God is against such hirelings, who pretend to be shepherds of God's flock, but who are interested only in fleecing the sheep.

Balaam did not go when Balak called him at first, because God specifically told him not to go. But when Balak offered a higher pay and greater honour, then Balaam "sought God's will again" - just like many do today, in similar circumstances !! God allowed Balaam to go after money, and to destroy himself thereby. And God allows many Christian preachers today also to follow in Balaam's footsteps and finally to come to Balaam's end.

When Balaam saw that he could not curse Israel, he suggested to Balak that the Israelites be corrupted by tempting them to immorality and idolatry (Numb. 24 and 25). Thus Balaam succeeded in getting God Himself to punish them.

That was how Satan succeeded at Pergamum too. He knew he could not overcome the church, until the church became worldly in some way. So he corrupted the church from within. Thus the church became ineffective in its witness for the Lord and also in its battle against Satan.

"If you can't beat them, join them", has been Satan's motto in relation to the church. And thus he has succeeded in destroying the witness of many churches throughout these twenty centuries.

Idolatry and immorality were the two sins that God condemned the most throughout the Old Testament. And these are the two that he condemns even today. According to new-covenant standards, to be greedy, or to worship money or one's profession or a person or anything earthly is idolatry. And to lust after a woman with one's eyes is immorality. To compare your wife unfavourably with someone else's wife in any area is to "covet your neighbour's wife". This too is immorality.

Where these new-covenant standards are not consistently preached in a church, hidden idolatry and immorality will prevail among its members and the church will soon become like the one at Pergamum.

When worldliness overtook the church at Pergamum, the sad thing is that the messenger of the church just watched it happen and did nothing about it. Many elders are just as powerless today against worldliness that has come in like a flood into their churches.

The messenger in Pergamum had not himself succumbed to the doctrine of Balaam. There were only "some" in Pergamum who had fallen a prey to it. But the messenger was guilty in that he had not rebuked the worldliness that had come into the church. This is where he had failed.

The reason for his failure must have been that he had not judged such worldliness severely in his own thoughts. We can have authority in the church only over those things that we have crucified in our own flesh. It is when we treat sin and worldliness lightly in our own lives that we become tolerant of it in the lives of others in the church as well. What looks like a "merciful" attitude on the part of an elder towards a worldly person in his church is usually dictated by the fact that there is unjudged worldliness in the heart of the elder himself.

The messenger at Pergamum was so lax about worldly teachings that he even permitted the teaching of the Nicolaitans to flourish in his church (v.15). Priestcraft was being taught as a doctrine by some in the church at Pergamum! And the messenger had done nothing about it. That was another thing that the Lord held against him.

The Lord warns him and the church to repent. If they don't, He says that He will judge them with the sword of His mouth (v.16). It is by His Word that God judges us. Jesus said that we would all be judged in the final day by the word that He has spoken to us (Jn.12:48). Our lives will be compared with the words of God that we have heard, and we will be judged thereby.

The Call To The Overcomer

The overcomer is then promised the reward of the hidden manna and a white stone with a new name written on it (v.17).

In the Old Testament, Moses was told to hide some of the manna that fell from heaven inside the ark, in the most holy place of the tabernacle (Ex.16:33,34). While manna that was kept by the Israelites in their tents began to stink within 24 hours (Ex.16:19,20), the "hidden manna" in the ark remained fresh throughout the 40 years that the Israelites wandered in the wilderness. Such is the power of God's presence in the most holy place to keep us fresh, if we live there before His face at all times.

The most holy place can be entered only through the rent veil of the flesh (Heb.10:20). This is the way that Jesus inaugurated through His flesh for us. If we walk on this new and living way, we can receive the hidden manna that God gives - revelation from His Word and fellowship with Him. And our lives will always carry the fragrance of the freshness of the Lord.

The hidden precious stone with the overcomer's name written on it (v.17) speaks of an intimate relationship with the Lord such as a bride has with her bridegroom. This is the spiritual equivalent of the engagement ring (with an expensive precious stone and a name engraved on it) that worldly men give their fiancees.

The bridegroom calls the bride by an intimate name that no-one else knows (v.17). Bridal intimacy with the Lord is a reward that is promised to all who overcome.

The average believer has a dry and boring relationship with Christ, because he is not radical in his hatred of sin and worldliness. But the true overcomer enters into a spiritually ecstatic relationship with his Lord such as a bride has with her bridegroom with whom she is deeply in love. This is the type of relationship described in the "Song of Solomon" - and only an overcomer can understand it fully and experience the reality of it.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE ADULTEROUS CHURCH

"And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write : The Son of God who has eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet are like burnished bronze, says this : 'I know your deeds and your love and faith and service and perseverance, and that your deeds of late are greater than at first. But I have this against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and she teaches and leads My bondservants astray, so that they commit acts of immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols. And I gave her time to repent; and she does not want to repent of her immorality. Behold I will cast her upon a bed of sickness, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of her deeds. And I will kill her children with pestilence; and all the churches will know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts; and I will give to each one of you according to your deeds. But I say to you, the rest who are in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not known the deep things of Satan, as they call them - I place no other burden on you. Nevertheless what you have, hold fast until I come. And he who overcomes, and he who keeps My deeds until the end to him I will give authority over the nations; and he shall rule them with a rod of iron, as the vessels of the potter are broken to pieces, as I also received authority from My Father; and I will give him the morning star. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'" (Rev.2:18-29).

A False Prophetess

The Lord says here that He has eyes like a flame of fire (v.18). He searches the hidden thoughts and motives of the heart - and so He does not judge as men do, who only look at the outward appearance. His feet are like burnished bronze - which means that He believes in severe judgment on sin. If there is one clear message that comes down to us from Calvary's cross, it is this : God hates sin and will judge it severely wherever it is found.

The Lord knew the deeds, love, faith and perseverance of the messenger and the church at Thyatira. And He notices that while the quantity of those deeds had increased considerably (v.19), their quality had come down. Compromise and worldliness had come into the church.

This compromise had come about mainly because the messenger had permitted a woman (symbolically called "Jezebel") to influence the church in an evil, worldly way (v.20).

She had pretended to be a prophetess, and the messenger of the church had been deceived.

Although Christ has given prophets to the church, He has not given any prophetesses (See Eph.4:11,12). Women can be anointed by the Spirit to prophesy in the meetings of the church (Acts 2:17; 1 Cor.11:5). The daughters of Philip are examples of those who did that (Acts 21:9 - KJV).

Men and women can prophesy - that is, share God's Word to the encouragement and edification of the church (1 Cor.14:3). All believers are encouraged to seek for this gift (1 Cor.14:1; Acts 2:18). But there is a difference between one who prophesies and a prophet. The Lord never appointed a woman to be a prophetess under the new covenant - the reason being that God never intended a woman to have authority over men.

There were prophetesses under the old covenant. We read of five of them in the Bible, with Anna being the last (Lk.2:36). They all spoke the word of the Lord with authority. Deborah is one example of such a prophetess (Judg.4). But under the new covenant, authority in the church is always invested by the Lord in men.

Paul gives us two reasons why God does not allow a woman to exercise any authority over men in the church: (i) She was created after man - to be his helper; (ii) She was deceived by Satan first (1 Tim.2:12-14).

A woman is more prone to deception by Satan than a man is. This is one reason why Christ has not set any women-teachers in the church either.

Jezebel, however, called herself a prophetess. And the messenger of the church at Thyatira was so weak and spineless that he could not silence her.

In a home, if the man who should be the head of the house, is weak and effeminate, his wife will take over the leadership of the home. This will be true in a church too. When powerful women see that the elders in a church are weak, they will begin to assert themselves in the church.

God's Word exhorts us to "act like MEN" (1 Cor.16:13). There is a great need for that exhortation, for many elders today have just about as much backbone as a jellyfish, when it comes to silencing powerful women! They are like King Ahab who was so scared of his wife Jezebel, that he allowed her to do whatever she liked in his kingdom - even to the extent of murdering innocent, God-fearing people (1 Ki.21). Ahab was the head of Israel only in name. Jezebel actually ran the kingdom. Many church-elders function exactly like Ahab too!

Elijah, however, was a fearless man of God who stood against all of Jezebel's false prophets and slaughtered every last one of them (1 Ki.18:40). That's why Jezebel hated Elijah. And she feared him too. There were 7000 people in Israel at that time who did not bow down to Jezebel's idols. God Himself had said so (1 Kings 19:18). But Jezebel never

feared any of them. She feared only Elijah. She knew that those 7000 were scared of her, even if they didn't bow down to her idols.

A Jezebel today does not fear 99.9% of believers, because she knows that those believers cannot stop her, even if they don't agree with her. Jezebels fear only Elijahs. And Elijahs are rare in Christendom today.

Today's Jezebels hate Elijah-like elders and love Ahab-like elders. Every elder of every church follows either Elijah or Ahab in this matter.

The Wife Of The Elder

The Greek word translated as "woman" here can also be translated as "wife". This would mean that Jezebel was the wife of the messenger of the church. This would certainly have made the situation more difficult for the messenger.

If the messenger had been a true disciple of the Lord and had learnt to "hate" his wife (as Jesus had told His disciples to do - Luke 14:26), there would have been no problem at all. But he obviously loved his wife more than he loved the Lord and the church. And so he did not want to offend her. And so he let her have her way in the church. That was how the church at Thyatira was corrupted. And that is how many churches are corrupted today.

Many a church has been ruined by a Jezebel, who is often the wife of one of the weak, effeminate elders. A woman like that can seek to make herself prominent in the meetings of the church through frequent speaking in tongues, or through interpreting her own "tongues", or through long prayers or in other crude, unBiblical ways. She may also seek to change the decisions of the elders by influencing her husband at home.

There are foolish elders who, after having discussed church matters at the elders' meeting, then go home and discuss these matters with their wives. Then being brainwashed at home by their wives, these effeminate men express their changed views at the next meeting of the elders!! And the decisions that were taken in the previous meeting are then changed!! Such is the power of a hidden Jezebel to influence a church!

In other cases, the Jezebel could be a woman who has acquired influence over one of the elders in some soulish way. There are some elders' wives who have such powerful personalities and such soul-power that the other men in the church (including the elders) are afraid to displease her in any way. In some cases, even her own husband is frightened of her.

It will be impossible to build the body of Christ in any place, if the elders in the church there, allow a woman to have power over them in any way.

The wife of an elder must be an example as one with "a meek and a quiet spirit", taking extra care to hide herself at all times. She must not be an Assistant Pastor or Songleader

or Assistant Administrator (as many women are), but a hidden helper to her husband and not one who seeks to run the church from behind the scenes. Praise God that there are such wives too, who are real helpers to their elder-husbands, because they recognise their boundaries as women. Blessed is the elder who has such a wife.

All elders must keep a special eye on any woman who seeks to be prominent in the church in any way. She will almost certainly have the spirit of a Jezebel. If she is allowed free rein, she will certainly become Satan's agent to destroy the church slowly but surely.

The "adultery" spoken of here (v.20) is obviously spiritual - because a righteous God cannot possibly punish innocent children born of adultery. Spiritual adultery is more dangerous than physical adultery, because it is less recognized. Religious harlotry results from the teaching of false grace that leads believers to take sin lightly. Disobedience to God in small things and little unfaithfulnesses are glossed over. It is such teaching that builds Babylon, the harlot church. And this is what the Lord denounces here.

Time To Repent

The Lord gave Jezebel time to repent (v.21). Even Jezebels are given time to repent. Such is God's mercy.

But God also placed a time limit for her to repent. If she did not repent within that time, she would be judged. Not only Jezebel, but all those who committed adultery with her, and her children (v.22,23) would also be killed. God's patience with sinners and hypocrites is not endless.

Jezebel's partners in spiritual adultery were those who propagated this false teaching along with her. Her "children" were those half-converted hybrids who were the products of this teaching of false grace, who imagined that they were converted without having repented from sin first, or who imagined that now that they were "converted" they could take fleshly indulgence lightly.

People who live in sin in the world are not judged so quickly by God. But those who come into the church and treat sin lightly are dealt with more severely and more quickly.

God's judgment of Ananias and Sapphira and of those who sinned in Corinth (1 Cor.11:29,30) are examples of the severity of God towards those who take the name of Christ lightly.

The Lord goes on to say that He will give to each one according to his deeds (v.23). This is to counter the teaching of false grace in Thyatira that taught that "our deeds won't matter if we just believe". Our deeds do matter.

God's Word says, "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done,

whether good or bad" (2 Cor.5:10). "If you are living according to the flesh, you MUST die" (Rom.8:13).

The Lord said that He would cast the sinners in Thyatira into "great tribulation" (v.23).

There are two types of tribulation spoken of in the New Testament, and we read of both of these types in the book of Revelation : (i) that which comes from men in the form of persecution against the disciples of Jesus - (most of the references in the New Testament are to this type of tribulation); (ii) that which comes from God in the form of judgment "on every soul of man who does evil" - (Romans 2:9 and Revelation 2:22 are the only two references to this type of tribulation).

God threatened to cast the unrepentant sinners of Thyatira into great tribulation. But this could not possibly be referring to THE great tribulation to come in the days of the Antichrist - for that is still in the future, whereas the sinners of Thyatira have already died. So the Lord must have meant the judgment that God brings on sinners and hypocrites.

The Deep Things Of Satan

There were some however in Thyatira, who did not agree with Jezebel or follow her teachings. To these, the Lord says that He will place no other burden on them (v.24). They had steered clear of "the deep things of Satan", because the anointing within them had told them that something was wrong with this false grace that Jezebel preached; and they had listened to the anointing (1 Jn.2:27).

Notice that the Lord calls the teaching of false grace as "the deep things of Satan". False grace is one of Satan's masterpieces, with which he has deceived most of Christendom. So it is appropriate to call it one of "Satan's deeper truths"!!

Doctrine is like a seed. The proof of whether a seed is good or bad is seen in the fruit it produces. Many Christians analyse various types of seeds (doctrines) under their theological microscopes and pronounce some as bad and some as good. But that's not the way to find out the quality of a seed. It is better to sow the seed and to see what type of fruit it produces.

Any doctrine of "grace" that takes away the fear of sinning is certainly a false teaching. If a doctrine enables you to sin lightly and to ask for forgiveness cheaply, without the deep sorrow and vehement hatred for sin that true repentance brings, then you can be sure that that doctrine is one of the "deeper truths of Satan"!

There are many believers nowadays who mouth impressive phrases such as "End-time truths" and "Kingdom truths" etc., The test by which we can evaluate every so-called "truth" is the test that Jesus Himself gave : "The truth shall make you free.....from

sin"(Jn.8:32-36). A "truth" that does not liberate you from sin in your daily life is not the truth of God, however Scriptural it may appear to be to you. It is a false doctrine.

One indication that you have understood God's truth correctly will be that you experience more and more liberty from every type of bondage in your life. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth and "where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty" (2 Cor.3:17).

The Lord then exhorts the remnant in Thyatira to hold fast to what they have - that is, to "the true grace of God" (1 Pet.5:12). We need to hold fast to this, because Satan would like to snatch it away from us. We are commanded to hold fast to it until Jesus comes (v.25).

The Call To The Overcomer

The overcomer is described by the Lord here as one who keeps His deeds until the end (v.26). Jesus' deeds are His victories over temptation, in the days of His flesh. The overcomer is one who overcomes temptation, even as Jesus overcame, and who endures in this path until the end.

The Lord promises the overcomer the reward of authority over the nations in the future (v.26). This is not a domineering over others, as we understand authority in the world today. The expression "He shall rule them" (v.27) actually means "He shall shepherd them" (the word "rule" here comes from a Greek word meaning "to shepherd").

This is the type of authority that the overcomer exercises in his home and in the church now, and that he will exercise one day over the nations of the world. Those who domineer over others today, whether in a family or in a church, are actually exercising a Satanic form of authority and will be unfit to shepherd the nations. All of us who have authority - fathers, mothers and elders - are being tested by the Lord now.

The Lord then uses the expression, "As I also have received authority from My Father" (v.27). The Father gave Jesus authority primarily to give eternal life to all whom He had chosen (John.17:2). This is the purpose with which the Lord gives His messengers authority in the church too - to lead others to take hold of eternal life (1 Tim.6:12). Any elder who exercises authority in any other way is actually misusing his authority.

Those who reject this authority of the Lord over their lives will be dealt with one day, with a rod of iron that Jesus will wield (Psa. 2:7-9; Rev.12:5; 19:15). The Lord will share that rod of iron with the overcomer, who would have learnt during his time on earth, how to use the rod of authority with gentleness and firmness (Rev.2:26,27).

"He who rules his spirit is better than he who captures a city" (Prov.16:32). It is only those who have overcome the lusts in their flesh, the attractions of this world and the wiles of Satan, who are truly qualified in God's eyes to rule the nations one day in His kingdom.

The overcomer is also promised "the morning star" (v.28). The morning star is Jesus Himself (See Rev.22:16). Jesus is also called the Sun of righteousness Who will burn the evildoers and bring healing to the nations (Mal.4:1,2). The world can see Him only as the Sun of righteousness, but the overcomers will see Him as the morning star.

The morning star is seen just before the rising of the sun. In the last moments of this age, at the end of the great tribulation, while the world is lying in darkness, the last trumpet will sound, and the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout. The overcomers of all generations will then be taken up to meet Him in the air to welcome Him back to earth. Then they will see Him as the morning star.

The Lord will then descend to the earth as the Sun of righteousness to judge and heal this sin-sick world. And every eye will see Him. The overcomers will also come down with Him at that time to reign with Him on earth.

He who has an ear let him hear what the Spirit is saying (v.29).

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE HYPOCRITICAL CHURCH

"And to the angel of the church in Sardis write : He who has the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars says this : 'I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, and you are dead. Wake up, and strengthen the things that remain, which were about to die; for I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of My God. Remember therefore what you have received and heard; and keep it and repent. If therefore you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come upon you. But you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their garments; and they will walk with Me in white; for they are worthy. He who overcomes shall thus be clothed in white garments; and I will not erase his name from the book of life, and I will confess his name before My Father, and before His angels. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'" (Rev.3:1-6).

The Lord's Opinion And Man's

The Lord refers to Himself here as the One who has the seven Spirits of God, or the sevenfold Holy Spirit. We saw the meaning of this in Chapter One. He also has the seven stars. He expects each star (messenger) in His hand to be a Spirit-filled representative of His in the church.

The messenger in Sardis was one who had built up a tremendous reputation before others as a spiritual man. But the Lord's opinion of him was the exact opposite of that of his fellow-believers in Sardis. This shows how carnal and gullible most believers in Sardis were.

More than 90% of believers are unable to recognise the difference between a carnal messenger and a spiritual one. And more than 99% of believers are unable to distinguish between soul-power and spiritual power.

Most believers are impressed by the display and exercise of spiritual gifts and that is how they evaluate a preacher or an elder. And that is how they are deceived. God however looks at the heart. The messenger at Sardis may have had the gifts of the Spirit. But he was spiritually dead.

This is a warning for all of us to take heed to : That the opinion that 99% of our fellow-believers have about us can be 100% wrong! God's opinion about us could be the exact opposite of their opinion.

The same applies to a church. Others may consider a church to be "spiritually alive". But God may know it to be spiritually dead. And vice-versa. Churches that God considers spiritually alive could be considered dead by undiscerning men.

Most believers evaluate a church by the warmth of the welcome they receive when they come to the meetings, the size of the congregation, the amount of noise and emotion in the meetings, the musical quality of the singing, the intellectual content of the sermon and the amount of the offering!! But God isn't impressed by any of these things.

God evaluates a church by the Christ-like humility, purity and love and the freedom from self-centredness that He finds in the hearts of its members. God's evaluation and man's evaluation of a church can therefore be at total variance with each other. In fact, they usually are.

There were no Jezebels in Sardis and no teachings of Balaam or of the Nicolaitans either. But they had something worse - hypocrisy.

The messenger at Sardis must have felt a secret satisfaction in the reputation that he had built up for himself. Otherwise he would not have ended up as a hypocrite. There is nothing wrong in being known by others as one who is spiritually alive, provided we don't get any satisfaction out of their opinion of us.

But if we are seeking a name for ourselves in what we do for the Lord, then we will certainly end up living before the face of men and not before the face of God. Then we would have to admit that we haven't realised that man's opinion is worthless.

Christendom is full of preachers who are constantly doing things and writing reports in order to get a name for themselves. All of these will end up like the messenger in Sardis. And they will be judged by the Lord in the final day, because their works were not perfect before God. It is impossible for our works to be perfect before God if our motive is to impress men.

The messenger at Sardis was also fast asleep spiritually.

Jesus warned His disciples of the great need of being alert and praying, in order to be ready for His coming - for worldly cares and the love of mammon have a way of putting the best of believers to sleep (See Luke 21:34-36).

When a man is asleep, he is unaware of things happening in the real world around him. He is more conscious of the unreal world of his dreams. This is how it is with those who are spiritually asleep too. They are unaware of the real world of the kingdom of God, of lost souls around them and of eternal realities. They are alive however to the unreal, temporary world of material riches, pleasure, comfort, earthly honour and fame.

That was how it was with the messenger of the church in Sardis.

The Lord exhorts him to wake up - in other words to give up the unreal world of his dreams (the world of materialism) - and to strengthen the few things in his life that were sinking towards spiritual death, but which had not yet died (v.2). The embers had not died out completely. But he had to "fan them to a flame" soon, or they would die out completely (2 Tim.1:6 - Amplified).

Perfect Works In God's Sight

The Lord tells him that his works were not perfect in God's sight (v.2 - KJV). Many believers are afraid of the word "perfection". But here we see that the Lord expected this messenger's works to be perfect before God.

Spiritual perfection is a vast subject. But what it means here is that this elder's works were not done with singleness of heart to secure God's approval alone.

His works were good works - that's how he got a name that he was spiritually alive. But they were not done for the glory of God. They were done to impress men. And so they were all dead works. There was "iniquity in his holy activities" (Ex.28:38). He had to cleanse himself from this filthiness of spirit, before God could approve of him (2 Cor.7:1).

Good works done to obtain the honour of men are dead works.

The first step to perfection is to do everything before the face of God. If we don't begin here, we won't get anywhere. Whether it is praying or fasting or helping others or whatever, the important question that we need to ask ourselves is :"Am I thinking now of some man seeing me do this and appreciating me, or am I doing this before God's face for His glory alone?" A wrong motive is what corrupts many good deeds and makes them imperfect in God's eyes.

The Lord reminds the messenger to remember what he has received and heard through the years and to obey those exhortations (v.3). The Lord expects more from those to whom more is given. This messenger had heard much about perfection and about the necessity of doing everything for the glory of God. But he had not taken those exhortations seriously. To know the truth and not to obey it is to build one's house on sand. One day it will collapse. And that was what happened to the messenger and the church at Sardis.

The Call To Repentance

The messenger is now exhorted to repent (v.3). This is the message of the Lord to all churches in these last days : REPENT.

There was still hope for this messenger, for he was still a star in the Lord's hand (v.1). The Lord had not given up on him. But he had to wake up first and repent.

John the Baptist was the forerunner of Christ who prepared the nation of Israel for the Lord's first coming by preaching repentance. Now the prophets in the church have to prepare God's people for the second coming of Christ by preaching repentance to them. The message of repentance is the greatest need in the church today.

If the messenger does not wake up and repent, the Lord says that He will come upon him in judgment, as unexpectedly as a thief comes at night. The Lord comes as a thief in the night primarily for unbelievers - but also for believers who walk in darkness. The sons of the day who are walking in the light will not be surprised by the coming of the Lord, but the sons of the night will (1 Thess. 5:4,5).

The overcomers will always be ready for the coming of the Lord because they are always walking in the light. Those who are walking in darkness, however, with unconfessed sin in their lives will not be ready, even if they call themselves "believers".

Revelation 3:3 indicates clearly that those believers (even if they are messengers in a church) who are spiritually asleep and who do not repent will be surprised by the Lord when He comes. They will be in the same category as the sons of darkness. These are the foolish virgins who will be left outside the closed door, when the Lord comes (Mt.25:10-13).

The Lord says, "Behold I am coming like a thief. Blessed is the one who stays awake and keeps his garments, lest he walk about naked and men see his shame." (Rev.16:15).

The Faithful Remnant

There were however a few people in Sardis who had not soiled their garments (v.4). This was the only redeeming feature of this church.

God has a list of names of those who have kept their hearts pure. This purity refers not only to freedom from the sins of the flesh, but also to freedom from the sin of seeking the honour of men and other sins of the spirit.

This was the remnant of the overcomers who lived before God's face in Sardis. As the Lord Himself pointed out, these overcomers were FEW. This remnant has always been small in every generation, for there are few who find the narrow gate and the narrow way that lead to life (Matt.7:14).

The Lord says that these few are worthy and that therefore they will walk with Him in white (v.4). These are the ones who had obeyed the Lord's exhortation in Luke 21:36 : "Keep awake then and be attentive at all times, praying that you may have the full strength and be accounted worthy to escape all these things and to stand in the presence of the Son of man." (Amplified). They were accounted worthy. And so they will walk in the white garments of the bride on the wedding-day of the Lamb.

All overcomers are then promised the reward of being clothed in white garments (v.5). This indicates clearly that only overcomers will form the bride of Christ.

Overcomers are also promised that their names will not be erased from the Lamb's book of life (v.5). This makes it clear that a person's name can be in the book of life and then be erased from it. The promise given to the overcomer here would be meaningless, if such a danger does not even exist. The plain teaching of Scripture is that believers who live after the flesh **WILL DIE SPIRITUALLY** (Rom.8:13). They will lose the salvation that they once had.

The Lord said to Moses, "Whoever has sinned against Me, I will blot him out of my book" (Ex.32:33).

In Psalm 69:25 we read of a prophecy concerning Judas Iscariot that is quoted by Peter in Acts 1:20. On reading further in Psalm 69, we see a prophetic reference there to Judas Iscariot's name being blotted out of the book of life (v.28). His name was once in that book and then it was erased.

One has to be an overcomer to retain one's name there.

The Lord also promises to confess the overcomer's name before the Father and before His angels. This is a reward promised to those who unashamedly confess His Name before men (Mt.10:32; Lk.12:8). The Lord places great value on our publicly confessing His name before our relatives, friends, neighbours and colleagues at work. Many believers are unfaithful here. And thereby they prove that they are not overcomers.

What an honour it will be for our name to be publicly confessed by the Lord in that final day. Even if we have to bear shame and persecution for the Lord's sake, every day for a hundred years on earth, it will still be worth it all, if the final reward is that the Lord proudly acknowledges us before the Father and His holy angels one day. One word of approval from His precious lips will erase from our minds the memories of a lifetime of suffering and ridicule.

Those who have ears to hear will take heed to what the Spirit is saying (v.6).

CHAPTER NINE

THE FAITHFUL CHURCH

"And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write : He who is holy, who is true, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, and who shuts and no one opens, says this : `I know your deeds. Behold I have put before you an open door which no one can shut, because you have a little power, and have kept My word, and have not denied My name. Behold I will cause those of the synagogue of Satan, who say that they are Jews, and are not, but lie - behold, I will make them to come and bow down at your feet, and to know that I have loved you. Because you have kept the word of My perseverance, I also will keep you from the hour of testing, that hour which is about to come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell upon the earth. I am coming quickly; hold fast what you have, in order that no one take your crown. He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he will not go out from it any more; and I will write upon him the name of My God, and the name of the city of My God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God, and My new name. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." (Rev.3:7-13).

The Key Of David

The Lord calls Himself here the One who is holy and true. "He committed no sin, nor was any deceit (hypocrisy) found in His mouth" (1 Pet.2:22). He looks for holiness and for reality in His messengers too.

He also says that He has the key of David. The gospel of the new covenant concerns the Son of God who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh (Rom.1:1-3).

One of the last exhortations that Paul gave Timothy was to remember that Jesus Christ of the seed of David had risen from the dead (2 Tim.2:8). The implication there is that even though He came with David's flesh, yet He never sinned. Therefore He was considered worthy by God to be raised from the dead. Christ manifest in the flesh and declared righteous by the Spirit is the secret of godliness (1 Tim.3:16).

The key speaks of ability to open a door. It is because Jesus came in David's flesh (which is the same as our flesh) and overcame sin and Satan, that He has been able to open a way for us to walk in. Jesus is the Forerunner and Example for all who want to overcome.

The Key To Every Door

The Lord also describes Himself as the One who can now open or shut any door. If we are overcomers, we need never stand before a closed door at any time, when it is the will of God that we should go through.

But the Lord also shuts certain doors before us, so that we don't go into paths that He has not ordained for us - paths that He knows will not be profitable for us. It is really an exciting life to be an overcomer. The Lord Himself decides which doors we should go through, and which doors we should stop knocking at.

In the book of Jonah, we see how the Lord shut one door (of a ship, by getting Jonah thrown overboard) and opened another (of a fish's mouth, by getting it to swallow Jonah). When the fish came to the coast of Israel, the Lord opened the fish's mouth once again to place His servant ashore. Thus God brought Jonah back to "Square One". Then He told him once again to go to Nineveh, where He wanted him to preach. Then Jonah went.

If God wants us in any place for any purpose, He has ways and means of closing the wrong doors before us (getting us thrown out of somewhere perhaps!) and of opening the right doors in front of us. He even has means of transporting us back to "Square One" in our lives, so that we don't miss His best! What He did for Jonah, He will do for us too. He will do even more.

The key to every door is in His hand. If you are a wholehearted disciple of the Lord with no ambition in life but to glorify God, you can be certain of one thing - that nothing can stand in your way. Like automatic doors that open as soon as a person comes near them, every closed door that hinders you from moving forward in the fulfillment of God's will, will open up before you - as soon as you come near it. He opens each door at the right time - not too soon and not too late. He will also close those doors that would make you miss His perfect will for your life.

An Exemplary Messenger And Church

Here in Philadelphia, we see the second of the two messengers and churches that receive no rebuke at all from the Lord. The first we saw was the one at Smyrna.

These two examples show us that it is possible to be such a messenger of the Lord and to be such a church as to receive no rebuke at all from the Lord when He examines us. This should be a challenge to all of us.

The messenger and the saints here were a weak people (v.8). They had very little human influence and power. But they had obeyed God's Word and confessed the Name of the Lord.

These are two primary requirements for the days in which we live - and that is why we find them being repeated again and again in the book of Revelation: OBEDIENCE TO GOD'S WORD AND HOLDING FORTH THE TESTIMONY OF JESUS.

Because of their faithfulness, the Lord says that He has set before them an open door to witness for Him. No one will be able to shut that door (v.8). Their witness will naturally be opposed by Satan. But the gates of Hell will not be able to prevail against this church - for this is a triumphant church that Satan himself is afraid of.

Opposition From Religious People

The church here was being opposed by a synagogue of Satan - similar to the one that was in Smyrna (v.9). Notice that the synagogue of Satan opposed only two of the seven churches in Asia - the very two that the Lord commands unreservedly. Those churches that are most wholehearted for God are the ones that Satan opposes the most. And Satan's opposition comes mainly through religious people.

Jesus was opposed in the days of His flesh, not by the Romans or the Greeks, but by religious Jews who studied their Bibles daily! It will be the same for the body of Christ. Our main opposition will come from those who claim to be Christians, but who don't preach freedom from sin's power.

The Lord says that He will make the synagogue of Satan recognise in an obvious way that He is with the church at Philadelphia. The agents of Satan will be compelled to bow down before the church (v.9). God has destined that Satan should be crushed under the feet of the church (Rom.16:20). We must never forget this that God is always on our side against Satan. So we need never fear Satan or his agents at any time.

Jesus prayed that the world would know that His disciples were loved by the Father (Jn.17:23). This prayer was to be answered in Philadelphia. The synagogue of the Jews would be made aware of the fact that the Lord loves the church and that He would stand by them (v.9). God has wonderful ways of confounding our enemies and of making them aware that we are the objects of His love and care!

The church in Philadelphia had kept the word of Jesus' perseverance (v.10). They had obeyed the word of the Lord and endured to the end in obedience. It is only by enduring faithfully in times of temptation, that we become perfect, lacking in nothing (Jas.1:4).

The Lord's Promises

The Lord's promise to this church was, "I will keep you from the hour of testing that is about to come upon the whole world" (v.10). Here the Lord warns them in advance of a time of trial that was going to come upon the whole world at that time (at the end of the first century or in the early second century). The church in Philadelphia was promised Divine protection during that time of testing.

How did the Lord "keep them from that hour of testing"? It was certainly not by rapturing them out of the world. No. They were KEPT SAFE IN THE MIDST OF THE TRIAL. They experienced the Lord's protecting hand in the midst of their tribulations.

This is a word of encouragement for us too - for the Lord will similarly keep us also safe from evil in the midst of the great tribulation during the time of the Antichrist. He will keep us exactly as He kept the church in Philadelphia in the second century - on earth, safe from evil, even though we may have to suffer for His Name's sake.

Jesus has said, "You will be hated by all on account of my Name.....but do not fear those who kill the body.....for the very hairs of your head are all numbered.....Not a hair of your head will perish" (Mt.10:28,30; Lk.21:18).

Even during the tribulation, not a hair on our head can be touched by anyone without the Lord's permission. So we can be at rest.

The Lord then tells the church at Philadelphia that those who are going to be tested during "the hour of testing", are "the earth-dwellers" - those who have made this earth their home, whose minds are set on earthly things, and who pursue after wealth and seek the honour of men (v.10).

No overcomer is such an earth-dweller, for His mind is set on the things that are above.

The Lord goes on to tell the church here to hold fast to what they have until He comes back to earth, so that they may not lose their crown (v.10). It is possible therefore for someone else to get the crown that God meant for you.

God has planned a task and a crown for you. But if you are unfaithful in fulfilling that task, you won't get that crown. God will raise up someone else to fulfil that task and he will get the crown that was meant for you. This is a real possibility. So we must be watchful.

God had planned a specific task for Judas Iscariot, just as He had planned tasks for the other apostles of Christ. But Judas was unfaithful. So he lost his crown. Someone else (perhaps Paul) fulfilled the task that Judas was to have fulfilled. That person will now get Judas' crown in addition to his own.

We have to hold fast what God has given us. We cannot afford to take things easy at any time.

The overcomer will be made a permanent pillar in the church (v.12). What that means is that he will be a support to others in the church, bearing their burdens. He will be a spiritual "father" to others. In every church there is a great need for such pillars.

The overcomer will have the name of God, the name of the New Jerusalem and the Lord's new name written on his forehead. In other words, he will be publicly identified as a wholehearted disciple of Jesus, wherever He goes. This will lead to his being despised on earth now, but honoured by the Lord when He returns.

The New Jerusalem is a symbolic name for the bride of Christ. (Rev.21:9,10). The name of that city will be written on the forehead of the overcomers. And so we see once again that only overcomers will constitute the bride of Christ.

Those who have ears to hear must take these words of encouragement very seriously (v.13).

CHAPTER TEN

THE PROUD CHURCH

"And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write : The Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God, says this : "I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I would that you were cold or hot. So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth. Because you say, "I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing," and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked. I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire, that you may become rich, and white garments, that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and eyesalve to anoint your eyes, that you may see. Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; be zealous therefore and repent. 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 will dine with him, and he with Me. He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'" (Rev.3:14-22).

Respectable And Dead

The Lord calls Himself here the Amen - the One whose word will certainly be fulfilled. He is also the faithful and true Witness who tells the truth exactly as it is. He is also the Beginning (or the Author) of the creation of God. He is the One who created the first creation and He is the One Who began the new creation, through His death and resurrection. "He is BEFORE all things" (Col.1:17) - the Author of everything visible and invisible, the Beginning and the End.

Here is another church that did not have any Jezebels or false teachings in it. They were neither immoral nor evil. But they were not on fire for God either. They were just plain "lukewarm" (v.16). They were dead right in their doctrines - but they were both dead and right! They were morally respectable - and spiritually dead!

The Lord wants our hearts to be on fire at all times - aflame with a fervent love for Him and for other believers.

"Fire shall be kept burning continually on the altar; it is not to go out", was the old-covenant Law (Lev.6:13).

Symbolically we see here what God expects the normal state of the true disciple of Jesus to be. Anything less than this is sub-standard. When the burning bush was aflame with

the fire of the Lord, no insects or germs could survive within it. And when our hearts are aflame with the fire of the Spirit, no unloving attitudes can survive therein either.

This is one way by which we can test whether we are hot, cold or lukewarm : To be "hot" is to love others fervently. To be "cold" is to be bitter and unforgiving towards others. To be "lukewarm" is to have neither bitterness nor love towards others.

When a believer says, "I have nothing in my heart against anyone", he is lukewarm. Did Jesus say, "All men will know that you are my disciples when you have nothing in your hearts against each other"? No. The absence of evil attitudes towards each other is NOT the identifying mark of the disciples of Jesus (cf. Jn.13:35).

We must have something in our hearts. We must have fervent love for all our fellow-believers. Love is a positive virtue and not just the absence of evil.

To cast out the spirit of bitterness from our heart and then to leave it cleansed and empty is the surest way to be lukewarm and to finally end up in a worse state than at the beginning (Lk.11:24-26).

The world says, "Something is better than nothing". If so, then one would think that it is better to be lukewarm than cold. But that is not what the Lord says. He says, "I would that you were cold" (v.15). He would rather see us totally worldly than half-hearted.

The lukewarm, compromising Christian does a lot more damage to the cause of Christ on earth than the worldly unbeliever. The unbeliever does not take the name of Christ, and so his worldliness cannot be a hindrance to the gospel. But a compromising, half-hearted Christian takes the name of Christ and disgraces that Name among the heathen by his worldliness.

The cold, worldly unbeliever is also far more likely to come to an awareness of his spiritual need than the lukewarm, self-righteous Pharisee (See Mt.21:31).

It is for these reasons that the Lord says that He would rather see us cold than lukewarm.

In practical terms this means that if you have no longing to be free from the love of money or from anger and impure thoughts (to take just three areas of sin), it would be better if you remained an unbeliever than one claiming to be a disciple of Jesus. There is more hope for you if you are cold than if you are lukewarm. This is amazing, but true.

Not Knowing One's Condition

The church at Laodicea was proud of what it possessed. The "believers" there considered themselves rich and needing nothing - perhaps because they were rich in knowledge of the truth and had a good reputation before men and had a lot of money as well. Respectable leaders in Laodicean society may also have been members of their church.

Like the Pharisee who prayed in the temple, these Christians may have imagined themselves to be spiritual, because of the wealth of their religious activities (Lk.18:9-14).

Whatever the reason, there was certainly no poverty of spirit either in the messenger or among those in the church.

Both the messenger and the church were completely unaware of their backslidden state - just like many today. The Lord's opinion of them was the exact opposite of their own evaluation of themselves. He calls them, "wretched, miserable, poor, blind and naked" (v.17). What strong adjectives the Lord used to show them that their condition was pathetic indeed!

In Sardis, the messenger and the church had a reputation before others that they were "spiritual". In Laodicea, they didn't even have that reputation. They were "spiritual" only in their own eyes.

The vast majority of believers have a far higher opinion of their own spirituality than the Lord has of them. This is true of believers in every Christian group. Very, very few believers have a true and realistic estimate of themselves - because very, very few are ruthlessly honest with themselves.

It is more than likely that YOU yourself have a far higher opinion of your spirituality than the Lord has of you. Humble yourself and cry out to the Lord to give you His evaluation of your life. Why not put this book down for a few moments and make that prayer right now.....

The believers at Laodicea may at one time have been on fire like those in Philadelphia. But they had backslidden and become careless about their spiritual life. They still held the doctrines of the Spirit-filled life. But they had lost the reality of that life.

Peter says about such people, "It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment delivered to them." (2 Pet.2:21).

Vomited Out By The Lord

What does the Lord do with such people? He says that He will spit (vomit) the messenger and the church out of His mouth (v.16).

What do we vomit out of our mouths? We vomit out food that we ate, but which did not get digested, and therefore which did not become a part of our physical body.

When we give ourselves to the Lord, the intention is that we become "digested by Him" ("It is no longer I but Christ") and thus become a part of His Body. If however, we still continue seeking our own, then we will end up like that undigested food; and our ultimate end will be to be vomited out by the Lord.

You may even have been the Lord's messenger for a time, and yet be vomited out so that you are no longer His messenger. We can be "in Christ" at one time and be vomited out later so that we are out of Him.

However, the Lord still had hope for this messenger and for this church. This is amazing indeed. He is always seeking to redeem even that which is wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked. What men would have discarded long ago, the Lord still seeks to salvage. That's why even the worst among us can have hope. We can all be salvaged - if we repent.

A Price To Be Paid

The Lord advises the messenger and the church to BUY gold, white garments and eyesalve from Him (v.18).

There are some things in the Christian life that are free. Forgiveness of sins and the baptism in the Spirit are free gifts of God.

But the parables of the hidden treasure in the field and of the man seeking fine pearls, teach unmistakably that the kingdom of God can be obtained only by those who are willing to give up everything. (Mt.13:44-46).

To the Christians at Laodicea too, the Lord says the same thing - that they have to pay a price to obtain spiritual wealth. They have to buy it.

Gold refined by fire symbolises the divine nature that is pure, without any alloy in it. This is what we need to partake of - within us.

The white garment speaks of outward righteousness - purity in our external life, speech, behaviour etc.,

Eyesalve refers to the revelation of the Holy Spirit that enables us to see everything from God's point of view. Thus we can understand God's Word and His purposes, and also see ourselves as God sees us. It enables us to see the worthlessness of earthly wealth and honour too.

To obtain all of these, we have to pay a price. We have to forsake everything and be "sold-out" for God. If we do that, we can have these riches that the Lord offers - real riches that have eternal value.

The Lord then says that He rebukes and disciplines only those whom He loves (v.19). It is a great comfort to know this. When we are corrected and chastened by the Lord, we can bear in mind that these are but indications of His great love. They prove that He still has hope for us.

If on the contrary, when you sin, you don't feel rebuked in your conscience, and you are not chastened by the Lord, then you are truly on dangerous ground. Perhaps the Lord has given up trying to change you. And maybe the reason is that you have persistently refused to hear His gentle voice of correction in the past.

Repent then, and turn to Him again, before it is too late altogether.

"If you are without discipline, of which ALL (true sons) have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons." (Heb.12:8).

The Call To Repentance

The Lord exhorts the messenger and the church at Laodicea to "burn with zeal and repent" (v.19). Even our repentance can be sluggish. We must be zealous and wholehearted about our repentance too.

The Lord is now standing outside the church, knocking, trying to get in (v.20). In the meetings of the church however, it is "Business As Usual" with praise and prayer and preaching going on with monotonous regularity. But the congregation is blissfully ignorant of the fact that the Lord Himself is on the outside!

Don't ever belong to a church where the Lord Himself is outside the door. For if He is on the outside, you have no business to be inside yourself!! You should be outside too. If the bridegroom is standing outside, the bride should be with her bridegroom.

The Lord now calls individuals in the church to open their hearts to Him. How can they do that? The context makes it clear that it is by burning with zeal and repenting that they can open the door. The door is not the door of our intellect or the door of our emotions. It is the door of our will. When the will is yielded, then the Lord enters in and fellowships (dines) with us in our spirit.

Again there is the call to overcome. This time He specifies that we can overcome EVEN AS HE ALSO OVERCAME in the days when He was on earth (v.21).

Jesus was the first Overcomer. He is our Forerunner, Who has already overcome the world, the flesh and the Devil. Thus He was exalted to sit down with the Father on His throne. Now we can overcome all of these just as He did. If we do, we too can sit with Him on His throne one day, as His Bride.

"If we endure, we shall also reign with Him." (2 Tim.2:12).

Finally, we hear the same word again at the end : "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (v.22).

CHAPTER ELEVEN

ARRESTING THE DOWNWARD TREND

The seven messengers and churches that we have looked at are pictures of seven types of messengers and churches that have been in existence in all these 20 centuries. These seven types of messengers and churches are existing in the world even today. Each of us can evaluate ourselves and see where we stand.

The Backslidden Messengers And Churches

When we look at the five messengers and churches that are rebuked by the Lord we see in them a definite downward trend:

- (1) In Ephesus, we see the loss of first love for the Lord. When we lose our devotion for Christ, we have taken the first step downwards. In a little while, this leads on to our losing our love for our fellow-believers too.
- (2) In Pergamum, we see that worldliness has crept in slyly through the teaching of Balaam. The Nicolaitans (who were kept out of the church at Ephesus) have now got power here. When devotion to Christ is lost, worldliness creeps in and the religious hierarchy takes over the church. Once a religious hierarchy has taken over the leadership of a church, Babylon is built easily.
- (3) In Thyatira, the church has become thoroughly worldly, and as a result religious harlotry is rampant. A woman now has power to influence the church, and is proclaiming false grace and counterfeiting the gifts of the Spirit too (prophecy in particular).
- (4) In Sardis, we see hypocrisy. Sin is covered up and man's opinion is valued more than God's. The messenger of the church is spiritually asleep (unaware of spiritual realities). The form of godliness however hides from the eyes of men the spiritual death that the Lord sees in him.
- (5) In Laodicea, things have degenerated to such an extent that the body has not only died, but also begun to decay and stink. Lukewarmness and spiritual pride are the cause of the death. In the above four churches, there was something good that the Lord could still see in each of them. But here in Laodicea He could see nothing.

None of the messengers of the above churches were aware of the true spiritual condition of their own lives or of their churches. All of them were complacent because of the high opinion they had of themselves. They could not hear what the Lord had to say to them

personally, because they were all busy preparing sermons to preach to others. They were more interested in preaching than in seeing their own need.

It is very easy, once a person has become the messenger of a church, to imagine that he himself is beyond the need for correction. The Bible speaks of "an old and foolish king who no longer knows how to receive instruction" (Eccl.4:13).

The messengers of these five churches were all like that foolish king. Their word had been law for so long that they could not even imagine the possibility of their now being wrong in any matter!! Such was their deluded state. They imagined that they could never lose the anointing of God from their lives. Their proud attitude was what made them spiritually deaf.

King Saul was another foolish king who had started out well but who fell by the wayside very soon. He was "little in his own eyes" when he was first anointed by the Lord as king (1 Sam.15:17). But he did not keep himself in low thoughts about himself. And so he lost the anointing of God. The anointing then moved on to young David. Saul realised this, but he refused to face up to it. He stubbornly continued to sit on his throne and sought to kill David. Finally, God took away Saul's life and put David on the throne.

We see similar situations in many churches today. The anointing of the Spirit has departed from many who were once the Lord's messengers, and is now resting powerfully on some younger brothers in their churches. But the "old and foolish kings" cannot bear to see this. So what do they do? Their jealousy and their selfish desire to preserve their kingdoms prompts them to suppress those young brothers in one way or the other.

Perhaps something similar may have been happening in the five backslidden churches of Asia Minor as well. So the Lord gave those messengers one last warning.

There is no partiality with God and He has no special favourites. Even the apostle Paul realised that he could fall away and be disqualified if he was not careful to live a disciplined life (1 Cor.9:27).

Paul told Timothy, "Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things; for as you do this you will insure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you." (1 Tim.4:16).

Timothy had to watch over his own life first of all. He would then be able to experience salvation from un-Christlikeness in his own life and thus be enabled to lead others to such a salvation as well. This is the way the Lord has appointed for all His messengers in every church.

Paul told the elders of the church in Ephesus also to watch their own lives first of all and then the lives of their flock (Acts 20:28).

This is the responsibility of every messenger of the Lord - to preserve his own life first of all in purity and under the constant anointing of the Spirit. "Let your clothes be white all the time, and let not oil be lacking on your head." (Eccl.9:8).

The Lord had wanted to speak to these messengers directly. But they did not have listening ears. Finally He had to speak to them through an apostle. Thank God that there was at least a John who could hear the Lord's voice clearly.

In spite of their failures however, the Lord had hope for all five messengers - for He still held them all in His right hand (Rev.2:1). If they repented, they could become glorious brothers once again. And their churches could radiate the glory of the Lord once more. If however they failed to heed this last warning, then the Lord would cast them off.

The Faithful Messengers And Churches

In the midst of all this degeneration, there were two wonderful messengers and churches (at Smyrna and at Philadelphia) against whom the Lord had no charge at all.

In them we see the virtues of: (i) faithfulness in the midst of poverty and opposition; (ii) perseverance in obedience to God's Word; and (iii) proclaiming the testimony of Christ unashamedly.

The Lord had to rebuke and correct the five backslidden messengers and their churches because they had not judged themselves.

The two faithful messengers and their churches did not need any rebuke, because they were constantly judging themselves and cleansing themselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit (2 Cor.7:1).

God's Word says, "If we judged ourselves rightly, we should not be judged." (1 Cor.11:31).

"It is time for judgment to begin with the household of God.....it begins with US FIRST." (1 Pet.4:17). This is the identifying mark of the true house of God that we judge ourselves FIRST and CONSTANTLY.

The Lord gives us the privilege of judging ourselves now, so that when we stand at His judgment-seat one day, there will be nothing left to be judged in our lives. That is why it is important for us to read and meditate on God's Word with an attitude of self-judgment. Thus we too can be among those in whom the Lord finds nothing to rebuke or correct.

The Overcomers

In the messages to every one of these churches is a call to individual believers to overcome. Overcomers are those who arrest the downward trend (that we have seen above) in their own life, and thus radiate the glory of the Lord. They recognise that they have the same flesh with the same evil tendencies to backslide that are found in others around them. But they stand against those tendencies and crucify them in the power of the Spirit.

What should overcomers do today? Should they stay in the dead churches that they find themselves in, or should they come out?

In the letters to the seven churches in "Revelation", we find no command to the overcomers to leave their local churches. But that was because there was ONLY ONE CHURCH in each locality. And the Lord had not yet removed the lampstand from any of them.

The situation is very different today. There are many "churches" in our towns and cities these days. But we cannot call all of these the lampstands of the Lord, for in most cases the Lord never founded them. Their messengers were never stars in the Lord's hand at any time, because He never called them or appointed them to eldership.

In many other cases the Lord has given up both messenger and church long ago, because of their refusal to repent. So we need discernment to see whether the "anointing" of the Lord is on a messenger and a church before deciding to become a part of that church.

Overcomers must certainly not become a part of any local "church" that does not proclaim "the whole purpose of God" (Acts 20:27).

The messenger at Ephesus was warned that if he did not repent, the Lord would remove the lampstand out of its place (Rev.2:5). What would have happened if the messenger had NOT repented? The Lord would have set him aside as His messenger and appointed someone else.

What would have happened if the church at Ephesus also had NOT repented? The church would have been set aside and thus become one that was unrecognised by the Lord. They would no doubt still have continued as a congregation - but only as a Babylonian "church" thereafter, in the Lord's eyes.

What would the overcomers in Ephesus have done then?

They would have pulled out of the old "church" as soon as the Lord pulled out of it. And they would have started gathering separately. Those who had eyes to see the moving of the Lord away from the old system to the new church would then have gathered together with these overcomers. That new gathering would then have become the church at Ephesus - for the Lord would have placed His lampstand in their midst.

If at any time this new church now refused to walk in the ways of God or to judge itself, then the Lord would have had to remove the lampstand from their midst and start all over again. There is no partiality with God.

The history of the Christian church shows how this process has been repeated over and over again in every part of the world, during these past twenty centuries. This is why we now find so many Babylonian "churches" in every place. It can become so bad at one stage that there is no lampstand left in a city at all. Every so-called church can be a Babylonian one.

We must in any case, never stay in a "church" after the Lord Himself has pulled out of it. Our loyalty must always be to the Lord and to His church - not to "the church we grew up in". Human attachments can hinder us from moving on with the Lord.

From our study of these seven churches, we have seen clearly what it is that the Lord looks for in a church. And so, overcomers must seek to fellowship with a church in their locality :

- (i) that burns with devotion to Christ and love for one another;
- (ii) that preaches a living faith in God;
- (iii) that emphasises total obedience to all of God's commandments;
- (iv) that proclaims the testimony of Jesus unashamedly;
- (v) that stands against spiritual pride, hypocrisy and worldliness;
- (vi) that exposes false apostles, false teachers and false gifts;
- (vii) that constantly preaches the crucifixion of the flesh;
- (viii) that encourages all believers to judge themselves constantly; and
- (ix) that challenges believers to be overcomers, like Jesus Himself was.

The Lord desires such a testimony to His Name in every place.

To build such churches, the Lord needs messengers who are gripped by the truths that we have considered in this book.

May the Lord find many such men and many such churches in every part of the world in these last days. Amen.

Copyright - [Zac Poonen](#) (1992)
This book has been copyrighted to prevent misuse.
It should not be reprinted or translated without
written permission from the author.

Permission is however given for any part of this book
to be downloaded and printed
provided it is for FREE distribution,
provided NO ALTERATIONS are made,
provided the AUTHOR'S NAME AND ADDRESS are mentioned,
and provided this copyright notice is included
in each printout.

For further details, please contact:
[Christian Fellowship Centre](#)
40 DaCosta Square,
Bangalore - 560084. India.
