

A Tale of Seven Churches: Introduction Revelation 1:17-20

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Many of us are familiar with the Revelation of John, the last book in the New Testament, or at least we think we are.

Most people breeze through it pausing only on the sensational bits: dragons, beasts with seven heads and ten horns, locust the size of Volkswagens.

But for most of us, what we know about Revelation is what we've read in the *Left Behind* series or the *Late Great Planet Earth*.

However, the Book of Revelation was originally addressed to a group of believers who didn't have Tim LaHaye or Hal Lindsay to guide them or confuse them, whatever the case may be.

So, let's start with a little background. The book itself tells us that the author was someone by the name of John.

The Bible doesn't spell out for us that it was John the Apostle. Yet there's strong, early and consistent testimony which confirms that the apostle John wrote the Book of Revelation.

Regardless of the authorship, the writer wrote in a style that's called Apocalyptic, originating from the Greek word which means "*the unveiling*."

This style of writing was very popular in the period between the Old and New Testaments as the Jewish people had been living under the rule of occupying armies for over five hundred years and looked forward to the day when the Messiah would deliver His people.

Now, there are two views as to when this book was written. Some believe it was written during Nero's reign, about 68AD while others believe it was written during Domitian's reign about 96AD.

Those who say it was written during Nero's reign are trying to put a round peg in a square hole.

They want to relegate the book's prophetic fulfillment before the destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD. Believing Jerusalem's destruction was the first phase of Christ's second coming.

The view that's held by the church and most commentators is that Revelation was written somewhere around 90–95AD, about 60 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus.

At this time, the Emperor in Rome was Domitian. He was the first ruler to institute emperor worship. Meaning he believed that he was God and insisted that he be worshipped as such by all his subjects.

Each year his subjects were required to appear at the temple and offer a pinch of incense and utter the words "*Caesar is Lord.*"

Which, for Christians, posed a bit of a problem because they believed that only Jesus was Lord, and so they refused to obey the edict.

Domitian considered this an act of treason and had those who refused to recognize him as God executed, imprisoned, or exiled.

It appears that John was probably exiled to a penal colony on the island of Patmos during this time, only being released after Domitian was assassinated.

John even says that he was there because “*of the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus*,” which traditionally has been accepted to mean that he had been exiled to the Island because of his faith.

Sir William Ramsay writes, “*John’s banishment would be preceded by scourging, marked by perpetual fetters, scanty clothing, insufficient food, sleeping on bare ground, and probably worked under the lash of a military overseer.*”

And so, that rocky, barren island became the backdrop for the vision that John records.

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Revelation 1:10-11, “*On the Lord’s Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, which said: “Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea.”*

A couple of points here. First, no one has established what John means when he says, “*I was in the Spirit.*” Some contend he was in a mystical trance like state, while others say he was simply enjoying private worship.

Next, the phrase “*On the Lord’s Day.*” Most believe that it means that it was the first day of the week, therefore John was worshipping.

It’s little things like this that throw people off track when they try to read things into what he’s writing.

I don’t know what it was specifically for John, but it doesn’t matter. What I do know is that he was in a position to be spiritually open and receptive to what Jesus would have him hear.

And it was while he was in this position that Jesus told him to record what he saw and heard.

After which, he was to send the vision to seven specific churches located in the Roman province of Asia Minor, present day Turkey: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.

If I could display a map of the area where these churches are located, you'd discover that they were located almost in a circle, most certainly a circular route.

But why seven? Why not 3 or 10 or 4? We don't know why! There were certainly more churches in the area than these.

Some theorize that the letter was addressed to these individual churches because John had a special relationship with them.

Maybe he had preached there or knew the pastors or some of the members. If so, they would be more receptive to his letter.

Others have suggested that seven is the number of completeness and therefore the seven churches represent all churches.

Or, they were the largest churches in the area and so the letters were to be sent there and then distributed to smaller churches.

Regardless, when you study the Book of Revelation, you come to understand that not only do these letters apply to seven specific churches, but these churches may represent periods in church history.

For example...

- Ephesus would describe the Early Church,
- Smyrna the Persecuted Church,
- Pergamum the Popularized Church,
- Thyatira the Dark Ages,
- Sardis the Reformation Period,
- Philadelphia the Revived Church, and
- Laodicea the Lukewarm Church

Now if that's not confusing enough, there's one other way that we can view these churches and that's indicative of various churches today.

In other words, we can find churches here and now that mirror each of these seven situations: churches just like Ephesus or Sardis or Laodicea.

Over the next few weeks, we're going to look at each of these churches historically and see how this letter applies to that particular situation.

How it might be an analogy of a particular period in church history and what warnings and advice we can find for Grace Fellowship in 2020.

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Revelation 1:20, "*The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.*"

In this verse, we need to understand that Jesus is clarifying what John saw in Revelation 1:12-13 and 16 where Jesus is standing amidst seven golden lampstands holding seven stars in His hand.

In verse 20, Jesus first explains that the stars represent the angels of the seven churches. Which may have clarified it for John but doesn't do much for us.

There are several explanations clarifying who these angles were. But first you need to understand that the word for angel in the Greek simply means messenger.

Therefore, some suggest that these seven angels were human messengers who were gathered to take John's message to their respective churches.

Now linguistically that makes sense, "*to the seven messengers of the seven churches*," but when we get into the letters themselves it would appear that whoever these angels were, they were more than simple messengers.

In all other instances in Revelation the word "angel" means a heavenly being, and with that in mind there have been some who have suggested that perhaps these were guardian angels.

Heavenly beings who protected the individual churches and who would be held accountable if a church went wrong. If that's true, then each church had its own angel to guide and protect it.

Even though it's the angel who's mentioned in the opening of each letter, it's obviously the members of the church who're being addressed.

Another idea that's been presented is that since both Greeks and Jews believed that every earthly thing had a heavenly counterpart, the angel being addressed is the Ideal of the church, the way it's supposed to be.

It's also been suggested that the angels of these churches were actually their human overseers or pastors, and that the letters were addressed to these spiritual shepherds.

This particular view is backed up by Malachi 2:7, "*For the lips of a priest ought to preserve knowledge, because he is the messenger of the LORD Almighty and people seek instruction from his mouth.*"

In the Greek Old Testament, the word used for messengers is the same word that's used here for angels.

Traditionally, most scholars believe that these seven angels were the bishops or pastors of these seven churches. Which of course has some serious implications for us pastors.

Each of us is responsible for our individual behavior and obedience as a believer.

However, as the overseer of Grace Fellowship, I'm not only responsible for my obedience and behavior but I'm also responsible for your collective obedience and behavior.

Since the seven stars are held in the right hand of Jesus that indicates that the pastor's primary responsibility is not to his congregation as a whole or to any one member of the congregation in particular... but to God.

In 2020, the role of pastor doesn't have the respect in the community or even the church that it had 25 years ago, but that doesn't mean it's any less important.

My role in this church is to serve and speak for God. Psalm 105:15, "*Do not touch my anointed ones; do my prophets no harm.*"

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Let's go back for a minute to Revelation 1:12-13, "*I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, and among the lampstands was someone like a son of man, dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest.*"

There are three things we need understand in these verses. **First:** the lampstands were gold. Not iron or brass or silver, they were gold.

And while that may not mean much to us today, outside of an economic statement, it had a different connotation 2000 years ago.

The context of gold, when this letter was written, was not only of worth but of purity.

Today, society has declared that the church is irrelevant and some believers feel that they don't need the church. That they can worship alone.

But God, in His infinite wisdom, choose to use the church, that we sometimes see as imperfect, as His instrument of change for the world.

Listen to Paul as he describes how the church was to look. Ephesians 5:27, "*And to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.*"

That's not a description of the church today. As long as the church is made up of people it will have stains and blemishes, but the ultimate plan is for it to be perfect.

The **second** thing we need to see in these verses is not only was the lampstand gold, it was a gold lampstand.

Do you hear what I'm saying? Do you know what a lampstand is? It's a stand for a lamp. The church is not a lamp, it's a lamp stand.

The light doesn't come from the stand it comes from the lamp. Now there are two ways that we can view the meaning of this light that comes from the lamp.

First, Jesus is the light. This is verified from passages like John 9:5, "*While I am in the world, I am the light of the world*" and John 8:12, "*When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."*"

When a church no longer preaches Jesus as the son of God who was born of a virgin, died on a cross and was resurrected on the third day offering forgiveness, then they're no longer a church; they have no light in themselves.

The second meaning is that believers are the light. Matthew 5:14, "*You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden.*"

Which can be correctly interpreted to mean that Jesus left believers to be light for the world. That the light that shines from the church comes from individual believers and it's our responsibility to shine.

Either way, when the light, whether coming from Christ or Christians, is removed, then the lampstand is no longer of any use.

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Conclusion

The last thing I want to explain about lampstands is... about lampstands.

Within the framework of the scriptures, when the word lampstand is used, Jews immediately thought of one thing--the Menorah.

Exodus 25:31-32, “*Make a lampstand of pure gold. Hammer out its base and shaft, and make its flowerlike cups, buds and blossoms of one piece with them. Six branches are to extend from the sides of the lampstand—three on one side and three on the other.*”

Revelation 1:12 isn’t talking about seven lamps that make up the lampstand. It’s talking about seven individual lampstands. Each lampstand has a unity, yet it’s connected to itself.

Within the individual church there needs to be unity. We, as a body of believers, need to be united with Christ in the center. He’s the unifying force.

But there also needs to be unity within the church as a whole, that’s the Presbyterian Church, the Methodist Church, Bible Churches, Pentecostal Churches, Baptist churches, etc.

There must be unity in the lampstand and unity with the lampstands.

And as we study about the seven church and learn what God wants us to understand, we have a responsibility to share this knowledge.

Revelation 22:10 commands us: “*Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this scroll, because the time is near.*”