

*THE REVELATION OF JESUS
CHRIST*

*VOLUME 1
Letters to the Churches*

*Edited transcripts of a series of sermons on
the Book of Revelation
Chapters 1-3*

First given at
Mount Zion Baptist Church, Ashford
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2017

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1. THE PERSON AND PURPOSE OF THE REVELATION

Revelation 1

‘The Revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave Him to show His servants – things which must shortly take place. And He sent and signified it by His angel to His servant John who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, to all things that he saw. Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy and keep those things which are written in it; for the time is near’ Revelation 1.1-3.

We begin a series on the *Book of the Revelation of Jesus Christ*, trusting in the Lord for His help and in the enabling of the Holy Spirit to speak what is right and true. The first thing I would point out to you is that there is a categorical promise to those who attempt to read and study the *Revelation of Jesus Christ*, the Son of God. As we do so, dependent upon the Holy Spirit of God, we read:

‘Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy and keep those things which are written in it; for the time is near’ Revelation 1.3.

First of all we are encouraged to read the *Book of Revelation* to hear spiritually the words of this prophecy through the preaching; and then we are encouraged to take these things to heart, to keep those things which are written in it, *‘for the time is near’*; to be wise and to understand the times and to see what the Lord is teaching us in this Book.

As in the whole of the Bible, everything depends upon the way in which we read and approach the Truth. There is not a different principle in preaching from the *Book of Revelation* than preaching from the *Psalms*, the *Book of Genesis*, or one of the epistles or the Gospels. The

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approach does not change. The same principle of exposition which applies to the whole of the Bible must remain for *Revelation*. If we do not apply those same principles we can go into all sorts of fanciful interpretations. The biblical principle of preaching the Word of God is that we interpret Scripture with Scripture. It interprets itself – we do not have to go to man's ideas or opinions. The Word of God is self-explanatory, and so we do not need to take a different approach for the *Book of Revelation*. We should interpret Scripture with Scripture, then we can see how this Book is related to other Scriptures, and how it applies and speaks to us today. So as we come to this Book let us depend upon the Holy Spirit, and approach this *Revelation of Jesus Christ*, assured that the rest of Scripture is able to shed light upon it and that it has an essential purpose for us.

We read in *Revelation 1.1* that it is '*the Revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave Him to show His servant.*' This emanates from the very throne of God; it is from God the Father through His Son, and the message is shed abroad in our hearts under the power of the Holy Spirit. It is to show His servants '*things which must shortly take place, and He sent and signified it by His angel to His servant John, who bore witness to the Word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ in all things that he saw*' *Revelation 1.1-2*.

Notice that there is repetition of these thoughts in verse 9:

'I John, both your brother and companion in the tribulation, and kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was on the island that is called Patmos for the word of God and for the testimony of Jesus Christ.'

You see those two phrases are repeated – '*the word of God*' and '*the testimony of Jesus Christ*'. So there are two main essential principles that are required, under the enabling of the Holy Spirit, for understanding this Book. First of all we come to it as the Word of God, and as we come to it as the Word of God we do so with the understanding that

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this is a revelation of Jesus Christ – it comes from the very Person of Jesus Christ; so we have the Word of God and the witness of Jesus Christ as the Giver of the Revelation.

We need to keep those two principles in mind as we go through this Book – it is the Word of God and the witness of Jesus Christ; it is the Word made flesh and dwelling among us. That is what Jesus Christ was while here on earth – He was the witness of the Word of God. He was the Word of God made flesh and dwelling among us. He was the revelation of Truth, He was living Truth, and He was expressing Truth constantly in His life. So we have the Word and the Witness – the truth of the Lord Jesus Christ.

I want to lay down two foundation stones by asking two questions: ‘Who is the main Person of the Revelation?’ and, ‘What is the main purpose of the Revelation?’

Who is the main Person of the Revelation?

It is clear that the main Person of the Revelation is the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. In the opening verses of the *Revelation* we have Jesus Christ as the Revealer of the mind of God. This is a fundamental characteristic of the ministry of Jesus Christ.

*‘I came forth from the Father and have come into the world’
John 16.28.*

‘...but as My Father taught Me, I speak these things’ John 8.28.

It brings a solemnity to how we view, receive and consider the words of Jesus Christ. He is the Revealer of the mind of God, as the Son of God. So it is a Revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave to Him to show His servants.

The word ‘revelation’ means the unveiling of things which would be otherwise covered, so the *Book of Revelation* is God in His wisdom uncovering, unveiling or revealing certain fundamental truths that we should be aware of. God unveils to the mind of man what otherwise

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would remain veiled to him. This is not the revelation of John, it is the Revelation of Jesus Christ, conveying the very mind and wisdom, will and purpose of God. This is a message from the throne of God, and the Revelation was sent by His angel directly to John. Here we have God, in Jesus Christ, speaking in a unique and very direct manner to John. It is undoubtedly under the power and witness of the Holy Spirit of God. The whole Triune God is involved in the work of this Revelation. We are to understand that this is God speaking from His very throne, through His Son, by His Spirit, to John.

Secondly, Jesus Christ is not only the Revealer of the mind of God, but He is the risen Saviour and Lord, as we are reminded in verses 4 and 5.

John, to the seven churches which 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 from the dead, and the ruler over the kings of the earth. To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood...'

John is very soon reminded here, under the influence of the Holy Spirit of God, to bring glory to Jesus Christ as the risen Saviour and Lord.

We have the wonderful grace of God coming from the Father and the Spirit and Jesus Christ – Jesus Christ the living Witness of God's truth, mercy and power; the wonderful Saviour of love, the risen Lord, the Lord of all the kings of the earth.

'To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood, and has made us kings and priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever, Amen'
Revelation 1.5-6.

So John is led to speak these amazing words of doxology. He is

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overwhelmed with the greatness and majesty of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and the wonder of redemption. How many times we have joined in singing this wonderful doxology – ‘*To Him who has loved us and washed us from sin in His own blood?*’ May we never tire of singing this wonderful doxology to Jesus Christ, risen Saviour and Lord.

So the main Person of the Revelation, Jesus Christ, is the Revealer of the mind of God – Jesus Christ as the risen Saviour and Lord (verse 5). But then in verse 7 we see Jesus Christ as the coming Judge:

‘Behold, He is coming with clouds, and every eye will see Him, and they also who pierced Him. And all the tribes of the earth will mourn because of Him. Even so, Amen.’

Here we have a very solemn warning: Take notice! He is coming! As each day dawns it is one day closer, in the mind of God the Father, to sending His Son again to this world – the great day when Christ will suddenly appear; when God the Father will suddenly send His Son to this earth. And Jesus will be ready to come to once more fulfil His Father’s will. How different will be the characteristics of the Second Coming of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. At His incarnation here on earth just a few people were gathered together to witness His birth – the shepherds, and the wise men who came to worship Him a little later; and of course Mary and Joseph. Really, a comparatively small number of people were aware of the birth of the Messiah. How different it will be at the Second Coming: *‘Every eye will see Him.’* How can this be? We do not know. How is it possible that every eye upon earth from Australia, all the way through Europe and America and Africa, will all see Christ at the same time? It is because it is *God* Who is coming, the Son of God. It is something beyond our comprehension, but the Word of God is true. We believe by faith that every eye will see Him, and even they who pierced Him, those who were physically responsible for putting Christ upon the cross, will be there.

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They will see, and we ourselves who were responsible for the need for Calvary, will see. What a day that will be if we do not know Jesus as our Saviour! *'And all the tribes of the earth [throughout all the earth] will mourn because of Him.'* They will realise that this Person Whom they have rejected all their lives – this Jesus – actually is the Saviour; He is the Lord, and He has come in glory. The *Book of Revelation* assures us of that great day.

In many ways we shall see that the *Book of Revelation* is a book of assurance. The Lord says He is coming: Jesus is coming again, and every eye will see Him. The simple question is: 'Are we ready for that great day when Jesus will come again?' *2 Thessalonians 1.7-10* is in the context of those who are being persecuted for righteousness' sake:

'...and to give you who are troubled rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from Heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, when He comes in that Day, to be glorified in His saints and to be admired among all those who believe, because our testimony among you was believed.'

Will He be admired by you when He comes? When Jesus comes again will you be numbered amongst those people who will be rejoicing in the Lord and in the power of His might? Will He be glorified in your heart, as He is glorified in His saints? Will this be a day of rejoicing, a day of victory?

We see here something very interesting: *'to be admired among all those who believe, because our testimony among you was believed'*. It is those that believe the Gospel, who trust in the Lord Jesus and Him alone, who will join that company on that great day, when Jesus will be glorified in His saints and His people will be glorified in Him; and

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it will be a day of great victory, a day of rejoicing, a day of triumph, for those who believe in the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Do we ever contemplate the solemnity of rejecting the Gospel? This same Jesus is not only Saviour, He is the awesome Judge, and He is coming. He is coming as a Judge in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye. Do not let Satan cause you to prevaricate in your life; do not let Satan fill you up with so much of this world's cares, concerns and worries that you do not have time to consider your most precious possession – your soul – and where you are heading. Are you right with God? That is the greatest question, the greatest issue, in your life; it is not your job, your home, your family, your house, nor even your health. The greatest issue is whether we are ready for the coming of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Do we believe in Him, do we trust in Him? Do we believe the testimony of God's servants in their letters, and in the Gospels, and throughout the Word of God? Do you believe the testimony of God's Word through His servants?

Then we are reminded of another aspect of the Person of this Revelation in verse 8 – Jesus is speaking.

'I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, says the Lord, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.'

The expression '*the Alpha and the Omega*' means 'One Who fills eternity, One Who has always been'. There is a great heresy, where people teach that Jesus was not the eternal Son of God, but that He was just made a perfect Man here upon earth; He lived a perfect life, but He was really just a man. However, the Word of God teaches us that Jesus is God-Man. He is the eternal Son of God, He has always been with the Father and with the Spirit. As the Son of God He is uncreated in the sense that He is eternal – there has never been a situation without God. God has always been, He is the eternal God. We cannot comprehend this; we wonder, 'How can this be?' 'Where did

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God come from?’ God has always been, and it is beyond our comprehension by nature. But we believe it by faith because the Word of God says, *‘I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End’*, the One that fills eternity, I AM the eternal One – God the Father and God the Spirit. The theologians tell us that the Son and the Spirit eternally proceed from the Father; in other words there has always been Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We believe this by faith. Jesus Christ is the Eternal God. There is nothing that God is not aware of; there is absolutely nothing that has preceded Him. There has never been in existence anything before God. He is uncreated and eternally forever – this unspeakable, glorious, unexplainable-by-the-human-mind doctrine, is to be believed simply by faith; *‘who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.’*

Now we move on in this remarkable magnification of the Lord Jesus Christ, and we come to Jesus Christ the glorified One.

‘... and in the midst of the seven lampstands One like the Son of Man, clothed with a garment down to the feet and girded about the chest with a golden band. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and His eyes like a flame of fire; His feet were like fine brass, as if refined in a furnace, and His voice as the sound of many waters; He had in His right hand seven stars, out of His mouth went a sharp two-edged sword, and His countenance was like the sun shining in its strength’ Revelation 1.13-16.

Here we see Jesus Christ the glorified One. Here the God-Man is clothed in a glorious robe, and it depicts His righteousness and His priesthood. His hair is white, like wool, and this represents His purity as the Ancient of Days. His eyes are like fire, which symbolises His heart-searching gaze. His feet are like brass, which depicts His resistless providence as He works out His purposes. His voice is as the sound of many waters, depicting the power of His voice – it is like the sound of a huge waterfall, like a deep, constant thunder. The seven

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stars are a picture of His servants, who proclaim the way of salvation – those that proclaim the Gospel of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

‘Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament and those who turn many to righteousness [that is, those that preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ] like the stars forever and ever’ Daniel 12.3.

The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches and the seven lampstands are the seven churches. In *Revelation 1.16* we read that *‘out of His mouth went a sharp two-edged sword, and His countenance was like the sun shining in its strength.’* So we have the seven stars depicting His servants who proclaim the way of salvation; and then the sword, which depicts the authority and power of the Lord Jesus Christ both to teach and to judge. His countenance, which was like the sun shining in its strength, shone so brightly, so intensely, that the human eye could not continually gaze at it: it describes the wonder of the glory of the Person of the Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

So the answer to the first question, ‘Who is the Person of the revelation?’ It is Jesus Christ, the Person upon Whom the whole revelation is centred. This is the first and abiding principle to remember throughout the whole Book. Jesus Christ is Lord; He is Lord of all the events of the past; He is Lord of the events of the present; He is Lord of the events of the future and all is under His divine control as He performs His Father’s will. It is, then, a Christ-centred revelation; and this needs to be borne in mind constantly throughout the Book. Jesus Christ, the Lord of Glory, is the focus of the revelation, and in Chapter 1 we are given several descriptions of the glory and the majesty of Jesus Christ our Saviour and our Lord.

What is the main purpose of this revelation?

‘And when I saw Him I fell at His feet as dead. But He laid His right hand on me, saying to me “Do not be afraid; I am the First and the Last”’ Revelation 1.17.

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To answer the question we must go to visit John on the Isle of Patmos and consider his position and condition there. This will help us to understand a little more of the purpose of this revelation. Why was John in Patmos? Because John was a faithful preacher of the Gospel; he was there because of his faithful testimony to the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. He refused to deny the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ; he refused to bow to the emperors of that time. So the Roman emperor had banished him to Patmos because of his faithful and abiding testimony to his belief in the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. We read in verse 9

‘I, John, both your brother and companion in the tribulation and kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was on the island that is called Patmos for the word of God and for the testimony of Jesus Christ.’

‘I was there because I stood by the Word of God; I was there because I believe in the testimony of Jesus Christ.’ John was persecuted for Christ’s sake, and the position of John here reminds us that the early Christian Church was soon under severe persecution.

So it is that God in His wonderful love and kindness sends His revelation through the Lord Jesus Christ to form an abiding encouragement for the Church. This is God’s assurance to the persecuted Church throughout all ages of His sovereign power. The *Book of Revelation* actually is the book God has given us to assure us of His power to encourage the Church in His sovereign, victorious purposes over evil in the latter days. So the main purpose of the Revelation is encouragement; it is assurance. It is to remind the Lord’s people that they are actually on the victory side, that Christ is in control.

But it is also a warning – Jesus encourages, but with warnings, as we will see in the letters to the churches. Jesus has searching matters to convey from the mind of God to His early Church, which are messages to the Church of today also. It is a Book which is timeless, which

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has great significance to the churches of today. So the main purpose of the Revelation is encouragement and instruction with warning.

We read that John was *'in the Spirit on the Lord's Day'* (verse 10). What an amazing expression! John was in the Spirit and thus in spiritual union with Jesus the Saviour. John, in his being as a child of God, was open to communion with God, and that is very solemnly yet profoundly true of anyone who is a real Christian. If you are a real Christian you have the Holy Spirit of God dwelling within you. That means that you are someone who can commune with God! And as we come to worship on the Lord's Day surely it should be our desire to be *'in the Spirit on the Lord's Day'*, to be in communion with God with a desire to hear from God on His Day, the Lord's Day. How important this is, because only as we are enabled of the Holy Spirit can we understand the Word of God. We need this same Holy Spirit that John had in our lives today.

As he was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day God communed with him – John found the mind of God, through Jesus Christ revealed to him personally. John was given a glorious vision of Christ, of the beauty of the Gospel of Christ. You see how John was prepared on the Lord's Day, what really moved his soul.

See how he addresses his letter, how he writes to the churches – *'Grace to you, and peace'* (verse 4). Grace and peace are things which really warm his heart.

'...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 from the dead, and the ruler over the kings of the earth. To Him Who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood and has made us kings and priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever' Revelation 1.4-6.

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So Christ is his main theme – he is overwhelmed with the amazing beauty, wonder and glory of Christ. God speaks to him, as he is in the Spirit on the Lord's Day, and John has this glorious vision of Christ. The effect of this vision was one of godly fear and humility.

'When I saw Him I fell at His feet as dead' Revelation 1.17.

Here is the real evidence of being in the Spirit. It is one of humility, it is one of going down on our knees before God; and we see this throughout Scripture. The effect of seeing Christ, of having a vision of Christ, of being in the Spirit on the Lord's Day, will not be to exalt ourselves. We are humbled by it; we are amazed that God could ever consider looking upon us and in His love show grace to us. Here John, as he sees Christ before him, fell at His feet as dead.

The position of John here helps us to understand the purpose of this Revelation, as we consider the statements in this Book. 'Who am I?', 'Who are we, little us?'; how can we cope with these things? Well, how can we cope with the glory of God in Jesus Christ? John is down on his knees, he has fallen at His feet as dead. But look at this

'[Jesus] laid His right hand on me, saying to me, "Do not be afraid; I am the First and the Last. I am He who lives and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and of death"' Revelation 1.17-18.

'I am the Saviour. Think of Calvary, and think of the resurrection, John.' John, a sinful human being, is prostrate before the pure and holy Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ, the radiance of God's glory, the very essence of God's glory, is standing before John, who is laid low by the fear of God. But the glorious Lord comes and says to John, 'Fear not'. He lays His hand upon John and says, 'Fear not'. When we have a vision of the Lord Jesus Christ like this, like the shepherds at the birth of Jesus, we have every reason to be afraid, every reason to be troubled. The glory of the Lord shone round about

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them and they were sinful men. But the angel said, 'Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy' (Luke 2.10). Because of Jesus the fear is taken away, bringing reconciliation and communion with God. He is the One that comes and lays His hand upon us and says, 'Fear not. Yes, you are a sinful person; yes, in God's sight you are unholy; but your holiness is in Me, your salvation is in Me, your acceptance with God is in Me. Do not be afraid; I am the eternal Son of God, the Saviour of the world; I am the First and the Last; do not be afraid.'

John is the one person in Scripture who we are told had this experience twice. You will remember Peter, James and John were on the Mount of Transfiguration with Jesus when He was transfigured before them. And God the Father spoke from Heaven: 'This is My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him! (Matthew 17.5). They trembled; they went down on their faces and they were terrified before the glory and majesty of God. Then we read that Jesus came, and He touched them. When they looked up they saw no man but Jesus only. And Jesus said, 'Do not be afraid, I am here.' So this is the second time that John had this experience – the second time he fell at His feet as dead, the second time he was down on his knees because of the majesty and glory of Jesus Christ, and the second time that Jesus came to him and said, 'Do not be afraid. It is Jesus; I am the First and the Last.' And this is what God is saying to us in *Revelation*.

We do not know what is going to happen in the coming year, and we may be fearful. When you get into conversation with people as you go to the shops or get your petrol, you find that everyone is uneasy. The common thread in what people are saying is that they do not know what is going to happen. They do not know what the future holds. Is the whole financial world going to go up in a bubble? Is it all going to be seen for what it really is – nothing more, really, than a figment of imagination, that it's not real wealth at all? Perhaps it will happen like

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that and we will find ourselves in difficult times. We may be fearful, but this is what Jesus is saying to us today: 'Believer, do not be afraid, because I am the First and the Last.' In your own strength you have every reason to be afraid, but if you are in Christ, if you are trusting in Christ, do not be afraid. 'I am alive forevermore; I am in control and I have the keys of Hades and death. I have power over death and I have power over Hades; I have power over hell.' What a comfort this is! He has the keys, He is the One Who is in control.

So here is the purpose of the Revelation – Jesus Christ is All and in All; Jesus Christ is in total control, and through Jesus Christ we are assured of the final victory, whatever our circumstances are here below. The purpose of the Revelation of Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God made man, is to assure us that He is in control. He lived, He died, and He is alive forevermore; He is the conqueror of death and hell.

As we go through this *Book of Revelation* we will see more references to Jesus Christ that will encourage our faith and encourage us to be those who are really confident in Christ, the One who is the Lord and the glorious Saviour. We will read that He is the Conqueror over death and hell; that He is the One Who is alive forever and ever; that He is the Head of the Church; that He is the Overcomer of all His enemies. And we will read that He is the One Who invites all His people to a glorious marriage supper at the end of time in Glory; we will read that He is the coming One. Here is good news – the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Person of the Revelation is Jesus Christ, the Lord of Glory, and the purpose of the Revelation is to encourage and assure the Church of its victory in Christ Jesus.

2. THE MESSAGES FROM JESUS TO THE LOCAL CHURCHES

Revelation 1.9-11

I, John, both your brother and companion in the tribulation and kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was on the island that is called Patmos for the word of God and for the testimony of Jesus Christ. I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day, and I heard behind me a loud voice, as of a trumpet, saying "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last" and "What you see, write in a book and send it to the seven churches which are in Asia: to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamos, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea"'.

The subject before us is God's message in Jesus Christ to the Church. We have previously noticed the blessing for those who study this *Book of Revelation*, not out of fascination, but for the soul. In *Revelation 1.3* we read:

'Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written in it; for the time is near.'

Therefore there must be a message here that will be a blessing for our souls and will affect our Christian lives in a positive manner.

We have also noticed that there are two essential principles that are required for understanding this Book – it is the Word of God and the witness of Jesus Christ, the Giver of the Revelation. We are reminded of this truth in verse 2:

'...who bore witness (that is, John) to the word of God, and to the testimony of Jesus Christ to all things that he saw',

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and then again in verse 9:

*'...was on the island that is called Patmos for the word of God
and for the testimony of Jesus Christ.'*

So twice we are reminded that there are two essential principles required. There is the inspired Word of God, and the Word of God made flesh and dwelling among us, the witness of Jesus Christ as the Giver of the Revelation.

Then, laying down some foundation stones by way of exposition, we must ask two questions of this Book: 'Who is the main Person of the Revelation?', and, 'What is the main purpose of the Revelation?' The Person of the Revelation is undoubtedly Jesus Christ, the Lord of Glory – He is the main Person. All these truths and these statements are really centred in Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church, the Lord of Glory: and the purpose of the Revelation is to encourage and assure the Church of its victory in Christ. This relates to the early New Testament Church, to whom it was first written, and it relates to us. The purpose of the *Book of the Revelation of Jesus Christ* is primarily to encourage and assure the Church, the Lord's people, that when all is said and done, if your trust is in the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ you are on the side of victory. Your victory is in Jesus Christ, you are more than conquerors through Him that loved you.

We also noted that, for interpretation, *Revelation* is to be seen as the same as the other books of the Bible; that is, it is Spirit-inspired Scripture. It is inspired by the Holy Spirit of God, and it can be interpreted by Scripture. The Holy Bible interprets itself - it does not need men to come and put forward all their ideas and say this is what we should be reading into it. Actually, the Holy Bible interprets itself. It is a unique Book; it is not like any other book; it is self-authenticating; it does not have to go out of itself to find its purpose, its teaching, its authentication. No, the Scripture is self-authenticating. So we just follow the same principles.

The Messages from Jesus to the Local Churches

How are we to find the truths we are being taught here? We have to compare Scripture with Scripture. So, for example, and as a matter of interest, some people think that the symbols in the *Book of Revelation* are not found anywhere else in Scripture. But you will find, if you study the Scripture, that a number of the symbols in the *Book of Revelation* are actually elsewhere in Scripture – they are not unique to the *Book of Revelation*.

We must not read the *Book of Revelation* like the matching pairs game we play with children. Sometimes we do. We read a part of *Revelation* and ask, ‘What part of history did that relate to?’ Then we try to match it up to a certain period of history. But that is a wrong way of approaching it. We approach *Revelation* for our souls, to find more of Jesus Christ. It is not just a fascinating book; it is actually a symbolic picture which shows us the effect of the Fall throughout time, and it tells us about the judgment which is to come. The sins that were relevant at the time it was first written are the same today – it has a voice for us today. It is a symbolic picture, giving the effects of the Fall and the judgment to come. That is the solemn, warning side of the Book.

But then it tells us of the victory which is in Christ; the victory for the Church; the message of God in Christ Jesus to the Churches. There is much to be learned!

We will now consider the manner in which Jesus Christ addressed John with His messages to the Churches.

It is helpful for our assurance to see the way in which Jesus unites Himself to the churches. John hears a voice like a trumpet saying,

“I am the Alpha the Omega, the First and the Last”, and “What you see write in a book” Revelation 1.11.

Here is John in the Spirit on the Lord’s Day, and here is the Lord Jesus Christ aligning Himself with His servant John and to the churches. ‘Send it to the seven churches!’

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We note also the way He speaks about the glory of the Church in picture language. So if we look at verses 19 and 20 this is Christ in His glory speaking, and He says:

‘Write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after this. The mystery of the seven stars which you saw in My right hand, and the seven golden lampstands.’

These are symbols, but what do they represent? The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches. They are picture symbols, to represent something.

Let us look at the stars and the lampstands. The stars actually speak symbolically of the ministers of Jesus Christ. *‘The stars which you saw in My right hand’*, that is, those who have given themselves to preaching and pastoring and leading the local church. We are told in the *Book of Daniel* those who are engaged in the ministry, leading people in the right way, are described as stars.

‘Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament, and those who turn many to righteousness like the stars forever and ever’ Daniel 12.3.

Again, we see a symbol that is used in the Old Testament – *‘like the stars’* – leading people to Christ. We can note, then, that this symbol is used in *Daniel* – those who are wise and preach the Gospel are likened to stars.

The lampstands represent the seven churches, as stated in *Revelation 1.11*. The lampstands were golden, depicting the preciousness to Christ of His Church. The churches are precious in God’s sight – absolutely precious. The seven lampstands are golden, and this depicts the preciousness of Christ; and the preciousness to Christ of His Church.

We can also note here that golden lampstands are also spoken of in the Old Testament – they were in the Temple. So this is not the first

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time that golden lampstands are referred to. This is not unique to the *Book of Revelation*. A lampstand is a powerful symbol of what the Church is meant to be – a light to the world, shining and witnessing for Christ, Who is the Light of the World. That is the purpose of the lampstand: to be a shining light. The lampstands, or churches, here represent the message of Jesus Christ. They are shining and witnessing for Jesus Christ, Who is the Light of the World. This is one of the great ministries of the Church – to shine as lights in this world. In *Philippians 2.15*, Paul speaks to the church there, stating what is their calling:

‘...that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life, so that I may rejoice in the day of Christ that I have not run in vain or laboured in vain.’

So the stars represent the pastors or the ministers – they are in the right hand of Christ, they are under His authority and in His service – and the seven golden lampstands represent the Church. We see then the relationship of Christ to the stars, and the relationship of Christ to the lampstands. We read that the stars are in the right hand of Christ – *‘the mystery of the seven stars which you saw in My right hand.’* As we look at these stars in the right hand of Christ it reminds us that a pastor is someone who is called and equipped by Christ to shepherd a local church.

Now a pastor is a minister who has been sent by Christ, or he has not been sent at all. There is no middle road. If we are pastoring a church and preaching from a pulpit on the Lord’s Day, it should mean that we have been called by God to preach. It is a very solemn calling. We have either been sent by Christ or not sent at all. Christ sends out men to preach, and He equips them for service in a particular local church. That is why it is so important, ideally, for the local church to

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call a pastor. It is a biblical, New Testament principle. But the pastor is actually in the hand of Christ; he is Christ's under-shepherd and he has to understand that he is the servant of the church, but, even more importantly, he is actually the servant of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. If we believe God has guided the church, then Christ has been involved, Christ has a knowledge of this particular man in this particular position for this particular purpose – to be part of God's sovereign plan. It is one of the great responsibilities of the local church to discern among its membership whether a man is being called by Christ for the work of the ministry. This is one of the solemn responsibilities of the Church.

A pastor is a man who has been sent by Christ to preach the Word, and he has been called to a local church; but ultimately he is under the control of Christ. He is responsible to Christ, and he will have to give an account of his stewardship to Christ. So a pastor is an under-shepherd in the right hand of Christ. He is a man under authority; he is a man who is called to represent the interests of his Master. A pastor is to exalt his Master, Christ, in such a way that the people lose sight of the pastor and are taken up with the Master. That is their objective – it is so important that a pastor is Christ-centred. That is his calling – he is symbolically and spiritually in the hand of Christ. Therefore, if he is in the hand of Christ, and is appointed and called by Christ, and is put in a position in a local church which Christ has redeemed by His precious blood, then he must be Christ-centred. If we do not have time to preach about Christ, and we do not mention Christ in our ministry, then what is going on?

We are servants of Christ; our job is to exalt Christ, it is to magnify His precious Name. If we are doing this faithfully, with God's gracious help, then it is important to respect a pastor. It is very important, it is biblical. Paul is telling the church at Thessalonica

'And we urge you, brethren, to recognise those who labour

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among you, and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake. Be at peace among yourselves' 1 Thessalonians 5.12-13.

So a pastor is someone who is in the hand of Christ, and he is someone who must exalt Christ in such a way that the people lose sight of the pastor and are taken up with the Lord Jesus Christ.

The second thing we are told here, in terms of Christ's relationship with the Church, is that not only is His relationship with the Church through the pastor, but Christ is walking amongst the Church. That is a really solemn thing to think of.

'Then I turned to see the voice that spoke with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the seven golden lampstands [that is, in the midst of the Church] One like the Son of Man, clothed with a garment down to the feet and girded about the chest with a golden band' Revelation 1.12-13.

We go on to see a wonderful description of the glorious Person of Jesus Christ that John saw in his vision.

But notice at the beginning of the message to Ephesus in *Revelation 2.1* it says:

'To the angel of the church of Ephesus write, "These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands."

He has control over the pastors. Do we ever think about this – that the Lord Jesus Christ is present among His people, the Church?

I was preaching recently at the local Pilgrim Home. It is often a very encouraging place to preach. Although the people are quite old they listen to the Word, and it is often very refreshing. One old lady shook me by the hand after the service and said, 'The Lord is with us, the Lord has been here.' It really struck me – she sensed the Lord's presence. Isn't that something very precious? The Lord Jesus Christ is

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present among His people, and we have a picture here of the Son of Man in the midst of the lampstands, walking amongst the churches, having to do with the churches. He actually walks in the midst of the Church. That makes the Church very precious, but it is very awesome, isn't it? This Church is precious in Christ's sight.

Some people think of churches as just friend centres, just centres for people to have friends and have social time together. But it is fellowship we need – we are not a social club, and primarily we are in union for fellowship in Christ Jesus. Christ is among us, Christ is listening to our conversations, Christ is listening to this sermon, Christ is here, through the power of the Spirit of God. He can be present within His people by the Holy Spirit. He can be present at a service; He actually walks in the midst of us. It is the Church of Jesus Christ – He cares for it, He examines it. This is why we should be so careful about worship. Do we realise that we are responsible to God, and that how we worship is very important? He cares for the Church, He examines it, He walks among it, and He is preparing His Church for glory.

Christ has absolute authority over His Church, and therefore He commends what is right in these messages to the churches; He rebukes what is wrong, and He calls this church at Ephesus to repentance. Only Christ has the authority to do that; He is the Head of the Church, and He warns us of the removal of His presence from a local church if it does not heed His warning. It is a very solemn thing if Christ removes His lampstand from a church – a very solemn thing; and the people of God know when it has happened. Those who are really the Lord's people and are still in that local church know, because the worship services do not appear to have life in them. Christ is in the midst of the lampstands; He reminds us of His constant observation of us. Let us remember this when we meet together for worship, for prayer, for Bible study, and for church meetings. Christ is walking amongst the candlesticks, amongst the lampstands.

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Now you might say, this is something just relating to the New Testament and the *Revelation*. Well, turn with me to the *Book of Daniel chapter 3*. (I am trying to impress upon you that there are similarities to *Revelation* throughout all of Scripture.) Here are Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego, who have been thrown into the burning fiery furnace.

And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, fell down bound into the midst of the burning fiery furnace. Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished; and he rose in haste and spoke, saying to his counsellors, "Did we not cast three men bound into the midst of the fire?" They answered and said to the king, "True, O king." "Look!" he answered, "I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire; and they are not hurt, and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God" Daniel 3.23-25.

Christ was there with His servants – they were not alone. Christ was walking around that furnace with them. It is a wonderful blessing to know this, but it is also an awesome thought.

Well, let us look now at the letters that were sent to the seven churches. I want us to see, first of all, the unity of the seven letters. The churches are representative of the Church of Jesus Christ at all times. This was not written just for these local churches at that present time. Yes, it was for them, but it was meant until the end of time. So there is something in the messages to these seven churches which has a relationship and reference to the whole Church of Jesus Christ until the end of time.

You will notice, as we look at these seven letters over these coming weeks, that each of these churches had certain characteristics, some good but some bad. These provide for us a picture of the challenges which churches face throughout the ages of time. It is said sometimes that there is nothing new under the sun. We might think we are more

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sophisticated nowadays, but the essence of the issue, or problem, is the same right the way through time.

The number seven is known as the complete number, and the seven letters written to the seven churches remind us of completeness and fullness. These letters are actually meant for the whole Church of Jesus Christ unto the end of time. For example, in *Revelation 2.7* it reads: *'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches'*, not just the church there at Ephesus, but to all local churches making up the Church of the Living God (in terms of its completeness); the whole Church of Jesus Christ until the end of time.

Now while each of the seven messages had particular reference to a local church situation, each church must listen to what the Spirit was saying to the churches as a whole. This is what is meant here as well. *'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'* So we have a situation where, by communication, the different churches would know what was being said to each other. There would be warnings for them; and there would be encouragements for them.

The church at Philadelphia, for example, which had a very blessed commendation in many ways, was not to rest back on its laurels and look at Ephesus and say, 'Well, we would never do that.' The church was not to be like Peter who said he would never fall, he would never deny the Lord. The members had to take note, realising they were what they were by the grace of God. Each church is capable of falling; and each church can, if walking with and heeding the Master, be pleasing to Him. So there is a warning, and there is an encouragement. The messages to the seven churches are not just meant for that time, but for the churches here and now.

You will notice that there is a clear structure to these letters. First of all there is an address to the pastor of each church – a salutation. It says, *'to the angel of the church'*. That does not mean to say that a pastor is an angel in the sense that he is something high and mighty

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above – it is just a reference to the pastoral office of that particular church, the pastor who is in the hand of his Master, Jesus Christ.

Secondly then, you will notice that, in the structure of all the seven letters, there is a reference to some attribute of Christ that was first conveyed to John in his vision in chapter 1. For example, *‘These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands.’* We have read about that in *Revelation 1.13*. In *Revelation 2.8*, we read, *‘And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write, “These things says the First and the Last, who was dead and came to life”*’, another reference to Christ. Turn back to *Revelation 1.17* – *‘Do not be afraid, I am the First and the Last. I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore.’* So you see there is a pattern developing here. First of all there is a salutation to the pastor, and secondly the reference to some attribute of Christ. There is a link, then, between the undershepherd and Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church.

And then there are the words of praise from Christ (except for Laodicea). It is very interesting to read the letters of Paul and Peter. You will see that they were always so encouraging as they began, even when Paul was writing to the church at Corinth which had difficulties (like other churches have difficulties). They were still as positive as they could be at the beginning; and we have this pattern set by the Lord Jesus Christ – a word of praise from Christ.

Look for the positive when you write to somebody and you have something that you are concerned about. Do not just go straight into the problem. Think what you can say positively about that person; what has been encouraging for us in that person? This is a biblical principle. Do not just keep criticising people or running people down – that is a horrible thing to do. Think of the positive parts of a person. So there is a word of praise from Christ (except for Laodicea).

Then there is a word of criticism; yes, there is a word of admonition

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or criticism (except for Smyrna and Philadelphia). There is a word of warning that He will come and deal with the situation. Following that there is a word of exhortation from Christ to hear His Word, and there is a word of promise from Christ. So there is this pattern: an address to the pastor, a salutation, a reference to some attribute of Christ, a word of praise, a word of criticism, a word of warning, a word of exhortation and a word of promise from Christ. You will see this pattern running throughout; there is a beautiful structure to these letters, a purpose to them.

So far, then, we have noticed the blessing for the soul for those who study this Book. There is something blessed for the soul. There are two essential principles required for understanding this Book. The main Person of the Revelation is Jesus Christ; the main purpose is to encourage the Lord's people and assure them of their ultimate victory in Christ Jesus. We see also that Spirit-inspired Scripture is interpreted by Scripture. The Bible interprets itself – it does not need to go to another source. Many of the symbols used in *Revelation* are found elsewhere in Scripture – they are not unique.

As we consider the manner of the communication of Jesus Christ to the churches, we see there is a pattern with Christ. He follows a pattern throughout these messages to the churches. Christ is so consistent; He is so impartial; He is a wonderful Leader of the Church; He is a wonderful Shepherd of the Church; He is the Cornerstone of the Church.

Finally, the fundamental point is to see the way that Christ is approaching this situation, how He is giving these messages to the churches. He is coming in glory; He is coming in majesty; He has something very serious to say; He reminds John of Who He really is, the eternal Son of God made Man. *'I am the First and the Last. I am He who lives and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and of Death.'* 'I am the Lord of Glory and

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I am the Lord of judgment, and it is Christ, the Head of the Church, Who is speaking to us. There must therefore be something very important for us to take into account, to listen to. There is a purpose in this *Book of Revelation*, and there is this blessed pattern with which He is writing to the churches. He is going to be consistent; He is going to be impartial; He is writing with the Church upon His heart; He has redeemed them by His precious, precious blood.

So we will think next in particular of His message to the church at Ephesus. For now we have a reminder that Christ is speaking in His glory; He is speaking as the eternal I AM; He is speaking as the Head of the Church; He has authority over the Church. The pastor is someone who is a servant of Jesus Christ, and he is in His hands. And Christ is walking amongst the churches – He is walking amongst our worship services; Christ is walking in our prayer meetings; He is walking in our Bible Studies. Christ is walking among the churches – He is present.

This is something we really need to think about; Christ is walking among the lampstands and the purpose of the Church is to shine for Jesus's sake. It is to shine as a light in this dark world; and the first thing that Christ is looking for is whether there is a light shining from this church. The lampstands are golden – the Church is precious in His sight. Yes, we encourage ourselves; we are as lampstands of gold; we are precious in Christ's sight, we are very precious to Him, redeemed by His precious blood. But the lampstands are not something just to look at – they have a purpose, to give light. So we have to ask ourselves, as the Lord of Glory, the King of kings, Jesus Christ the Head of the Church, speaks to us through His Word: 'Are we shining? Are we shining as lights in this dark world? Are we shining for Christ?' Because if we are not shining for Christ, He will not allow that situation to carry on indefinitely. If the purpose of the Church is no longer being carried out at the local church, He will just remove

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His candlestick from it; that is, He will remove the Spirit and the Light when we fail to shine for Jesus Christ.

The question before us is whether we are shining as lights in this dark world; and when we think about this truth and ask ourselves this question, then it will help us to come to the message for Ephesus. We will understand in a deeper way when Christ says, '*You have left your first love.*'

3. EPHESUS – THE LOVELESS CHURCH

Revelation 2.1-7

‘To the angel of the church of Ephesus write, “These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands: ‘I know your works and your labour, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil, and you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars; and you have persevered and have patience, and have laboured for My name’s sake and have not become weary. Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Remember therefore from where you have fallen, repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place – unless you repent. But this you 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 give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God.’”’

Just before we come to this message to Ephesus, one further word about the reference to the angel of the church in *Revelation 2.1*. We notice that the stars mentioned in the hand of Jesus Christ in *Revelation 1* speak to us of the authority given by Jesus Christ to the Lord’s servants and that they are accountable to Him. They are under His authority; they are servants of Jesus Christ. ‘The angel’ refers to the ministry of the pastor in bringing forth the message from the Word of God – this is his primary calling. He is called by God to minister to the Church, and the local church, and according to the biblical pattern we minister in the morning and evening sacrifice. We

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also meet together in the midweek. The pastor is called primarily to teach and to preach the Gospel in those services – that is his primary responsibility – and he is also to care for the people.

Here the pastor is referred to as ‘*the angel of the church*’. Angels are known in Scripture as ministering on earth in bringing a message from God. So many times in Scripture we see angels coming with a message from Heaven – a message from God. So, rightly fulfilling his office, a pastor is someone whose authority is in the Word of God. A pastor who does not preach the Word of God, or who says to you that you have to obey him because he is the pastor, is not fulfilling his office biblically. You do not have to obey a pastor just because he is a pastor if he is not following the Word of God. A pastor’s authority is only in the Word of God. It is only as he is leading and teaching and preaching according to the Word of God. The authority of the office of a pastor is in the Word of God as he preaches it. Referred to as an angel, his primary purpose is to minister the Word of God; to bring a message from God.

There was a man in Scotland by the name of Robert Murray M’Cheyne, a very godly man, a man of prayer. When he came out of his vestry and walked up the steps into the pulpit, people would begin to weep before he had even said anything. It was said that the reason for this was that they knew this man was bringing a message from God, and they knew that this was a solemn time.

But a pastor is called an angel here because a pastor’s greatest joy is to see sinners saved and believers built up in their faith. We read that in Heaven there is rejoicing in the Godhead and among the angels over one sinner that repents (*Luke 15.10*). So a pastor’s chief joy must be in seeing sinners saved and believers growing in their faith.

So – the message to the church at Ephesus. Ephesus was the largest city in the Roman province at that time – it was the number one city in Asia. It was important politically and commercially. Ephesus was a

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bit like the New York of Asia at that time. It had a huge harbour which was able to accommodate the very largest ships; it was a trading city, a very wealthy and very materially successful city.

It was a place, though, of religious idolatry. There was a great temple to Diana of Ephesus. It was a centre of idolatry. The temple of Diana was considered to be one of the great wonders of the world. Paganism abounded, with all sorts of magical arts. It was the great epicentre of Satan's work. But there God established a church – because God is God. We might be intimidated when we hear people talking about their greatness and how successful they are going to be, and so on, but God is God. He is in control, and I don't suppose anyone thought there would be a church at Ephesus any more than at Corinth. They were such ungodly cities. But God is God, and God planted a church.

We read that the apostle Paul first preached the Gospel in this city. In *Acts 18.19* we read of the apostle Paul's ministry there in Ephesus.

'And he came to Ephesus, and left them there; but he himself entered the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews.'

So that is when the ministry started. When asked to stay a longer time with them Paul did not consent but took leave of them saying,

'I must by all means keep this coming feast in Jerusalem; but I will return again to you, God willing' Acts 18.21.

We need to pray, 'Thy will be done in earth as in heaven.' Do not forget the 'God willing' in your plans. Even Paul, though he desired to go back to Ephesus (and he did go back) said, 'I will come back, God willing.'

In *Acts 19* we find him back in Ephesus again, ministering the Word of God, and it is beginning to have an effect.

'And many who had believed came confessing and telling their deeds. Also, many of those who had practised magic brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all. And they

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counted up the value of them, and it totalled fifty thousand pieces of silver...And about that time there arose a great commotion about the Way' Acts 19.18-19, 23.

The Way

Notice that – that is the Way of Salvation, the Christian Gospel of Jesus Christ. There was a great commotion about the Way of Salvation in Jesus Christ.

'For a certain man named Demetrius, a silversmith, who made silver shrines of Diana, brought no small profit to the craftsmen. He called them together with the workers of similar occupation, and said: "Men, you know that we have our prosperity by this trade. Moreover you see and hear that not only at Ephesus, but throughout almost all Asia, this Paul has persuaded and turned away many people, saying that they are not gods which are made with hands. So not only is this trade of ours in danger of falling into disrepute, but also the temple of the great goddess Diana may be despised and her magnificence destroyed, whom all Asia and the world worship." Now when they heard this, they were full of wrath and cried out, saying, "Great is Diana of the Ephesians!" So the whole city was filled with confusion, and rushed into the theatre with one accord, having seized Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians, Paul's travel companions' Acts 19.24-29.

Well, we see the stir made by the Gospel, and the opposition and wrath of the world against Paul. But then turn to chapter 20, verse 22, where Paul testifies to the elders of the church at Ephesus. The church has been formed and is growing and being built up, and he is taking leave of the elders.

'And see, now I go bound in the spirit to Jerusalem, not knowing the things that will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies in every city, saying that chains and tribulations await

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me. But none of these things move me; nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. And indeed, now I know that you all, among whom I have gone preaching the kingdom of God, will see my face no more. Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God. Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears. So now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified' Acts 20.22-32.

So here we have a picture of this church at Ephesus. Paul went there; he preached the Gospel; people were converted; a church was formed; there was much opposition from the idolaters; there was great commotion, but the work carried on. Then we have this picture of Paul leaving the elders of the church at Ephesus: they had a great love for him, they wept at his departure. But he had laid a foundation – the doctrines of grace. It was an established church. And we know from Scripture that Apollos ministered at Ephesus as well – a great orator, a great preacher. So both Paul and Apollos were there, and Timothy was there too – Paul's beloved brother and son in the Gospel. Also, the Apostle John was there. So we see that this church had so many blessings from God. It had Paul, Apollos, Timothy and the Apostle

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John to preach to them. The church at Ephesus had (as it were) the cream of God's servants.

So we come then, first of all, to the commendation of Jesus Christ to this church. The church knew its doctrine – it had been established initially by Paul, and confirmed by Apollos, Timothy and John. This church would not compromise with error. Jesus said,

'I know your works, your labour, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars; and you have persevered and have patience, and have laboured for My name's sake and have not become weary' Revelation 2.2-3.

This church was firm on its doctrine; it would not compromise with error, it remained steadfast for truth. In fact, according to Ignatius, the bishop of Antioch, the report had reached him that this church was so well taught that no unorthodox sect would gain even so much as a hearing from them. And the message from Christ respects their stand for the truth. Remember this – we know that this church had a problem with love, but Jesus was not in any way criticising their stand for the truth. In fact, He was commending them for their stand for the truth. So do not ever think a loving church does not have to be doctrinal church. What we need is doctrine and love. Love and truth go together – they are in harmony with each other. These people at Ephesus knew their doctrine; they stood for the truth. They could weed out any error or movement away from the doctrines of grace. The elders knew the truth. They were also a dedicated church, they were a hard-working church; they were persevering, they were labouring in the name of the Lord. They were commended for this.

We need to be a working church. We need to be a persevering church, a labouring people. We need to understand the calling of a Christian is to serve God. The days are short. When we get to the end

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of our lives will we be able to say, ‘Lord, I have sought to be faithful, taking opportunity to serve You; I have laboured in the church’?

The church at Ephesus was a church bustling with activity; the people were labouring together with God, sound in doctrine and in faithful discipline. They also hated the deeds of the Nicolaitans, as did the Lord Jesus Christ (verse 6): *‘But this you have that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.’* So there was so much to commend this church. They were strong in the doctrine, they were labouring, they were working, and they hated what Christ hated.

The Nicolaitans were those who joined in the idolatrous feasts, and then tried to justify their actions. Suppose a young believer comes to you and asks you what you did last night, and you say you were in a night club, but you were witnessing (it was okay because you went there with a friend and you were witnessing to them), or you watched an inappropriate film (but it was okay because you were with your friend and you were witnessing). That is what the Nicolaitans were like – they went to the idolatrous feasts and had a good time partying with the world, then used the excuse that actually they did this as going out into the world and witnessing. Actually, these professing Christians, the Nicolaitans, were a great danger to the flock, especially to the younger and new believers. They were saying, ‘We don’t want to worry about holiness and godliness; we are saved by grace alone, and so we want to hang loose a bit, relax a bit – we don’t want to have all this seeking after godliness.’

But the church at Ephesus was clear in hating compromise – it was commended for doing so by Jesus. This is something to remember – it was not being criticised as it was a faithful church. But (there is a great ‘but’) truth, discipline, commitment to the works of the church, walking in the way of uprightness, a hatred of compromise, is not enough. The church at Ephesus, according to Jesus Christ, its Shepherd and Leader, had a fundamental and major problem. The

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people had left their first love! So they had the truth without love – they had the works without love. They had the doctrine without love, and that, according to Jesus, (and how true it is) was a fundamental problem in this church. They had left their first love.

So we move on to the constructive criticism from Jesus. I want us to remember that when Jesus criticises us, convicts us, and warns us, He does it out of love. Criticism from the Lord Jesus is always constructive. There is always a reason. He wants to bless us; He wants us to grow; He wants to pour out the Holy Spirit within us in a greater way. He wants us to grow closer to Him. He wants us to experience the spiritual blessings that come from Him. So it is not just a question of dotting the i's and crossing the t's. Jesus is saying here that the church had left its first love, it had lost the heart from what it was doing.

So the church (as in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*) was valiant for truth, certainly, but it had lost the other characteristics; it had lost Mr. Greatheart. It no longer had a great heart. It was valiant for the truth but had lost its great heart of love for Jesus. So Jesus said He had something against the people there; a serious problem that had to be rectified, otherwise He would close down the local church. He would remove the lampstand from them – '*unless you repent*'. 'Unless you take this seriously', Jesus said, 'and if you will not heed the warnings, there will come a time (I will give you time) when the lampstand will be removed.'

Well, something was happening in the church that the Lord Jesus Christ was very displeased about. So, through John, He wrote first to the pastor, who had the oversight, to give the message to the church. The church had grown cold in its love for Christ. Its members had grown cold in their love for one another. We need to remember the words of the Lord Jesus here. If we do not have love, whatever else we do or stand for has no effect. It is worthless and there is no power in our witness – our whole witness is ineffective. Jesus is teaching us

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here that truth and love go hand-in-hand together; there should be no division. Paul told the church at Ephesus they should be –

‘speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ’ (Ephesians 4.15).

In a marriage there is something very special about the first love. It is fresh, it is a blessing for both. But that first love for one another either matures and is maintained and still has a certain freshness about it as the marriage continues, or it stagnates and loses its power. It is taken over by just a sense of duty towards one another. As in a happy marriage we need both love and steadfast commitment to one another, so it is in a church. It is not enough to say we have the truth and a full programme of commitment; we need love. First, our love to God, and then love to one another. When relationships are strained we need to take some time to examine our hearts.

So the church at Ephesus, amidst all its busyness, had a visit from Jesus with an unexpected message. The members thought that they were *the* church in Asia; they had had Paul, Apollos, Timothy and John. Then they received this letter through John from Jesus Christ. What a shock it was when the pastor read this letter out to them! The first part – ‘Oh yes, this is us!’ – *‘I know your works, your labour, your patience, that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them to be liars; and you have persevered and have patience, and have laboured for My name’s sake and have not become weary.’* Perhaps they were lifted up in their spirits, saying, ‘This is us – this is Ephesus.’ Then they came to the second part of the letter. The pastor read out to them *‘Nevertheless I have this against you’* – just imagine the sudden shock, the stillness in that church at Ephesus. *‘You have left your first love.’* Love to God, and love to one another, is the oil that enables the church to function as a body.

So, some practical application now. We need to examine ourselves;

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we need to examine our hearts. I want to read to you something that I read recently by the Puritan preacher and writer, Octavius Winslow. The Puritans were incredibly up-to-date, and their writings are still up-to-date now. In fact, if you read the Puritans on depression and melancholy you will find they were very practical and helpful – so helpful that we can still use some of the principles that they set out.

You must examine your heart; you must come to the garage for an MOT. You must come before the Lord and say, ‘Lord, is this true of me?’ Here is what the Puritan preacher says – these are some of the questions to ask yourself.

‘Has God become less of an object of fervent desire for you? Is He no longer your holy delight and frequent contemplation? How often do you think about the character of God? Have you lost that sweet confidence and simple trust of a child before God? Have you lost that early faith that you had in God – “O Lord, I’m just a little child; how am I going to walk in the Christian life? I’m a child before You. O Lord, help me; Lord undertake for me.”’¹

Do not lose that simple trust. As we mature in our understanding we must never lose that simple, childlike trust, depending upon God. Maybe, the Puritan says here, you have had hard thoughts about God, and about some of His dealings with you, and it has created a coldness; you see it as a duty rather than a privilege coming to worship the Lord. You come feeling, ‘O well, I have got to come to church today, I’ve got to get out to the Prayer Meeting’, and it is a duty rather than a privilege in your spiritual exercises. There is a less tender walk before God, less trembling at the thought of offending Him, and so you have lighter views of sin, and Christ has become less obvious and glorious to the eye – less precious to the heart. Your love to Christ’s people is

¹ Based on Winslow, *Personal Declension and Revival of Religion in the Soul*, chapter 2

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growing cold; your interest in the advancement and the prosperity of Christ's cause is beginning to wane. You are not so concerned about the growth of the church and its ministries. You have begun, as it were, to just tread water, just coming and going and not concerned that the church will grow.

I remember, at one of the Prayer Meetings, when I had not been here long, one of the Lord's people stood up and prayed, 'Lord, bless this church so much that we have to pull the building down and build a bigger one!' Well, I was quite surprised – this is a nice building – but he was right. He prayed that we might have to pull the building down and build a bigger one. That was faith! There was a real anticipation, and we thank the Lord for what He is doing, beginning to build the work. It is the Lord's work.

But then, we should not only examine ourselves, but consider what action to take. Yes, we have examined our hearts, and have said, 'Yes, I am afraid that is true of me – I know there is a problem.' So what about the exercise now?

I was reading quite a remarkable thing this week by Spurgeon (the works of the Puritans and Spurgeon are so rich!) and he was speaking about the text, *'I sought him but I found him not'* (*Song of Solomon 3.1 AV*). This is longing for Christ, knowing that we are out of fellowship. This is what Spurgeon says, and it is very helpful advice.

'Tell me where you lost the company of Christ and I will tell you the most likely place to find Him. Have you lost Christ in the devotion of your prayer? Then that is where you must seek and find Him. Did you lose Christ by sin? You will find Christ in no other way but by giving up the sin and seeking, by the Holy Spirit, to mortify the member in which the lust dwells. Did you lose Christ by neglecting the Scriptures? You must find Christ in the Scriptures. The saying is true – look for a thing where you dropped it, it is there where you dropped it.'²

² Based on Spurgeon, *Morning and Evening*, 19 January morning

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So look for Christ where you lost Him. You must examine your life, and say, 'Yes, I have gone cold. Where has it all gone wrong?' And you trace back and say, 'Actually I know now – when I started playing with that situation, when I started in this area of life – and I realise I have become hard in my heart. I realise I must go back. I have to repent and go back and do the first works – my love for Christ.' This is back-to-basics theology.

It is hard work to go back to Christ. Bunyan tells us in the *Pilgrim's Progress* that Pilgrim found the road back to the arbour of ease where he lost his roll the hardest he had ever travelled. This was the covenant roll that he had – his promise – and he lost it. But he had to go back and find it, and it was hard work. Spurgeon says that twenty miles onward, walking forward, is much easier than to go one mile back for the lost evidence.³

'Take care, when you find your Master, cling close to Him. How is it you have lost Him? One would have thought you would never have parted with such a precious Friend, whose presence is sweet, whose words are comforting. How is it that you did not watch Him every moment for fear of losing sight of Him? Yet, since you have let Him go, what a mercy that you are seeking Him.'⁴

So he comes in positively now – one of the evidences of life is that you are not comfortable with the situation, you do not like to be in this cold state of heart. That is a sign of life. It is a mercy from God that you are seeking Him. Seek Him; it is dangerous to be without your Lord! You know what it is like when you have a maths problem – when you are doing a calculation and it has all gone wrong somewhere along the line, and you are told to go right back until you find the place where your calculation was wrong. That is what it is like for

³ Based on Spurgeon, *Morning and Evening*, 19 January morning

⁴ Spurgeon, *Morning and Evening*, 19 January morning

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us when we have lost our love for Jesus. We have to go back and find out, trace back; and then in repentance say, ‘Lord, I remember now, this is where I went wrong. Lord, receive me again graciously.’

I conclude with this from John Owen, a Puritan again. Dear old John Owen says,

‘Think of your Lord Jesus under the full weight of the wrath of God, under the curse of the Law; think of Him taking on the worst that God had ever threatened to sin or sinners; think of Him in His agony and sweat in the Garden of Gethsemane; of His loud cries and prayers when He was sorrowful to the point of death; as He began to be amazed at the things that were coming to Him. Think of Him in battle against the powers of darkness and the rage and madness of men. Think of Him suffering in body and soul; think of Him, loving His name, His reputation, His goods, His life. Some of these sufferings come immediately from God above, others from devils and wicked men acting according to God’s wise, over-ruling plan. Think of Him praying, weeping, crying out, bleeding, dying and all of this making His soul an offering for sin.’⁵

So what John Owen is saying to us is, ‘Go back to Calvary; if you have lost your love to Christ go back to Calvary; think of Him, think of what a wonderful Saviour you have.’

Well, it may seem that Jesus speaks harshly to the church at Ephesus, but remember one thing – let it sink deep – Jesus is a faithful Friend, and He wounds before He heals. The only reason He wounds our conscience is that He might heal us that we might walk more closely with Him. So Jesus tells us that if this is our condition we must remember, repent and return to the Him; and if lack of love is our great problem we must confess it before the Lord that we might be

⁵ Based on John Owen, *The Glory of Christ*, chapter VI

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forgiven, that we might know the influences of the Holy Spirit melting us, moving us. There is no reviving without repentance in our soul.

Jesus concludes with a warning. He says He will take the lampstand away *'unless you repent'*. The church at Ephesus eventually closed down. A church cannot continue indefinitely on a loveless course. But if a church will remember its condition and repent and return, it will overcome, because *'He who endures to the end will be saved'* (Matthew 10.22). This is what the Lord Jesus says in His Word.

He says, *'He who has an ear'*. Do you have an ear to hear? *'Let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life which is in the midst of the paradise of God'* Revelation 2.7.

To eat of the tree of life in Paradise is to have eternal life in Paradise. If we listen and heed, and follow the warnings and instructions in the Word of God, looking to the Lord Jesus Christ, there will come a time when we will enjoy the riches of Paradise, the riches of eternal life.

'Blessed are those who do His commandments, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter through the gates into the city' Revelation 22.14.

These are serious words, are they not? They have eternal implications for our lives. Remember that the Lord Jesus is the Good Shepherd, He is the loving Shepherd, and He warns us because He wants to bless us. So let us heed His warning and let us return to the Lord, and may we truly, as a church, be known as a church of love and truth.

4. SMYRNA – THE PERSECUTED CHURCH

Revelation 2.8-11

‘And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write, “These things says the First and the Last, who was dead and came to life: I know your works, tribulation and poverty (but you are rich); and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear any of those things that you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation 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.”’

This is the message to the persecuted church at Smyrna. In this particular message the Lord Jesus Christ, the Head of Church, brings His greetings, introducing Himself as the First and the Last, the One Who was dead and is alive again. His meaning here is that He is the One Who is above and before history. So, concerning any events that are happening in this world, we need to look at the Lord Jesus Christ and worship Him as the eternal I AM, the One Who is above history, the One Who is over all – the Lord of all. ‘I am the eternal One, I am the eternal I AM, the Creator, Saviour, Judge. I encapsulate all of time, from beginning to end, and I inhabit eternity with the Father and the Spirit.’

So the Lord Jesus Christ is bringing our attention to His eternal being, and to the fact that He is most assuredly at the beginning and the end of time. He is the One Who was dead, Who lived and died – He most assuredly was dead upon that cross at Calvary – but came to life; and rose again victorious over sin and death and hell.

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So He is saying to the church at Smyrna, ‘Be assured in Who I am, and be assured in what I have accomplished. I am the First and the Last; there is nothing that is going to happen in time, either the past, the present or the future, that is beyond My knowledge, beyond the sovereign overruling of the Father; and there is nothing that We are not aware of. I am the First and the Last – I was the One Who was dead and came to life. Be assured in what I have accomplished for the Church.’

Then He comes with His message to the church at Smyrna. I want us to look at a brief overview of the church at Smyrna, because it will resonate with our own experience here upon earth now.

Smyrna was a very wealthy and prosperous city. It had gained its wealth chiefly from the export of myrrh, the ointment that was used for burials. The city enjoyed a glorious position, overlooking the Aegean Sea, and the fashionable, the well-to-do, the important people of Asia, wanted to be there. It was a bit like the Marbella of Asia. Smyrna was a city in which there was a large population of Jews. It was famous for its School of Medicine; it was famous for its monetary system; it was famous for its science; it had a huge open-air theatre, which seated twenty thousand people. It was called ‘the ornament of Asia’, the lovely crown of Iona. This city still remains today, and it is called Izmir, the second largest city in Turkey.

But behind this beauty and prosperity there was great wickedness prevailing against the Lord’s people, because the city was actually the spearhead of opposition to the Church – opposition to Christ – in Asia. This was the epicentre from which persecution was coming in that particular part of the world. Sadly, a lot of the persecution of the early Church came from the Jews, who still considered themselves as God’s people, and yet did not behave as God’s people should.

It is thought that the church at Smyrna was first formed when Paul preached in that area. In *Acts 19.10* we read of the ministry of Paul

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there. *‘And this continued for two years, so that all who dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks.’* So the ministry of the Apostle Paul was spreading throughout Asia. This church was largely made up of the materially poorer elements of the city. Yet the Lord says to these materially poor, *‘Actually you are spiritually rich; you have an eternal inheritance to look forward to.’*

The believers in Smyrna were making a faithful stand for the Lord, and they were under increasing threats of persecution. One of the particular areas of persecution was material. These people, these converted Christians, had originally been trades people with good livelihoods. They had been in the trade guilds and were respected as professional tradesmen, and they had good businesses. But all of these trade guilds were linked to pagan associations – they had their idols. So if you belonged to one of these trade guilds you also had to acknowledge that you worshipped the idol of that particular trade guild. So when these people were converted and became Christians they had to leave their trade guilds as a matter of conscience. It is a bit like our modern situation with the equality oath. It may be written in such a way as to make it impossible for Christians to sign it without compromise. This is a matter of conscience, and it is not for us to make judgments upon people; but nevertheless the oath may be written in such a way that it will become increasingly impossible for the Lord’s people to be able to sign it because it is against the Word of God.

So these people suffered poverty and deprivation. Some of them even suffered starvation. They were stripped of their material possessions, even stripped of their homes. If they had mortgages, or had borrowed money to buy their homes, they could no longer pay their mortgage and were out of work. They no longer had an income and so they lost their homes; and many of their possessions had to be sold just to feed themselves. They shared in the poverty of their Saviour, Who for their sakes became poor that they through His poverty might become spiritually rich.

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Together with this material suffering came verbal abuse and accusations. This was particularly from the traditional Jews who rejected Christian teaching. Because of their compromised position, having rejected Christ at Calvary, they were sensitive to the witness of believers in Jesus Christ. Their religious leaders had crucified Christ, and these Jews were more interested in their race than in their spirituality. They made blasphemous statements against the Christians, especially as regards the Lord's Supper. They falsely accused them of cannibalism, saying that they were eating the body and drinking the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. They actually accused the Christians before the Roman authorities, thus subjecting them to persecution.

So it was that the professing believers in God, the Jews, were actually those that brought about some of the difficult persecution for the Lord's people. And it could well come to a point today where the actual true Church of the Living God is being persecuted by the professing church – the liberal church, the church which is compromised and seeking to have alliance with other religions, saying we are all one big happy family.

Jesus Christ speaks of these Jews who claim to believe in God and yet reject His Son. He says something very solemn about them – He says that actually they are '*a synagogue of Satan*'; they have the devil working within them, working to make them attack the Christians. They are a synagogue of Satan – they are not spiritual Jews. They are being used as servants of Satan to persecute believers.

Jesus is reminding the Church here that the true Jew is one who believes in Him as the Messiah, Jesus Christ; one who has the faith of his father, Abraham, who looked to the Lord Jesus Christ. In God's sight, then, the true Israel is a spiritual nation, made up of Jew and Gentile – the *spiritual* seed of Abraham.

In *Romans 2.28-29* you will see a brief explanation of what is meant here.

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‘For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God’.

In Romans 9.6-7 Paul deals with the matter again:

‘But it is not that the word of God has taken no effect. For they are not all Israel who are of Israel, nor are they all children because they are the seed of Abraham; but, “In Isaac your seed shall be called.”’

In God’s sight the spiritual Israel, the Church of the Living God, is made up of those that truly trust in Jesus Christ.

Against the increasing cloud of persecution, the believers at Smyrna were encouraged by Jesus Christ Himself. ‘I know your works’, He says, ‘I know your tribulation, I know your poverty, I know the blasphemy of the Jews who profess to be believers in God and are not.’ Then come the words ‘*Do not fear*’. Why does Christ say here, ‘*Do not fear*’? Because there is worse persecution to come, the clouds of persecution are gathering. ‘Some of you will be thrown into prison; this is to be a great test of your faith.’ Then come the words, ‘*Be faithful until death and I will give you the crown of life*’, meaning here not only to be faithful until the end of your life, but to be faithful even if it means martyrdom. ‘But do not fear these things because I am going to give you a crown of life. You will have a crown of glory.’

So, in the context of this persecution, of the seven cities mentioned in the letters to the churches, none was stained with the blood of the martyrs as much as that of Smyrna. This city was renowned for its fierce loyalty to the Roman Empire. Annually, every Roman citizen had to burn a pinch of incense publicly on an altar, and in addition acknowledge publicly that Caesar was supreme lord. This is where the phrase ‘the supreme pontiff’ comes from. The title was subsequently taken over by the church of Rome and remains the title of the pope.

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But it actually originates from Caesar, from Christians being taken and thrown to the lions because they refused to bow down and acknowledge Caesar as lord. No believer loyal to Christ could take this action of loyalty to Caesar.

You know of the famous Bishop Polycarp. He perished because he refused to swear allegiance to Caesar, and it is thought that he was a member of this church at Smyrna. He was brought to the Proconsul and urged to get his liberty by swearing allegiance to Caesar and denying Christ. Polycarp replied, 'Eighty-six years I have served Him and He has never done me any injury. How can I blaspheme my King and my Saviour?'⁶ When later he was threatened with burning at the stake he responded by saying, 'You threaten me with one hour of fire at the stake. After a while it is extinguished. But you are ignorant of the coming judgment and the everlasting fire reserved for the ungodly.'⁷

So this is the context of the letter to the church at Smyrna; and you will notice that there are many similarities with the way things are moving even now in Europe. We know there is intense persecution in other parts of the world, but now these storm clouds of persecution, these storm clouds of opposition, are gathering on the horizon, and they are moving towards even our own nation. Ungodly legislation is being passed nowadays that we would not have thought possible twenty years ago.

Now I want us to look, by way of encouragement and teaching, to the message to the church at Smyrna and see what is God's way in this time of persecution. From the Word of God we know that, before the end of the world, persecution will increase. Persecution is not something that we run after to prove ourselves before God, but it is the inevitable outworking of a godly life. We read in *2 Timothy 3.12* that '*all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.*'

⁶ and ⁷ Based on *Ante Nicene Fathers*, Volume 1, page 37ff

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From 2005 to 2015 an average of ninety thousand Christians were killed throughout the world – ninety thousand!⁸ Christianity is now the most persecuted religion in all the world.

I want us to see, then, from this message of Jesus Christ to the persecuted church at Smyrna, five particular ways, or characteristics, of how God, in Jesus Christ, will help us.

We are potentially facing a very similar situation to the believers at Smyrna, especially in terms of compromise and of the workplace. We need to look to see how the Lord Jesus Christ comes along and encourages and helps us, when facing such a time of persecution. I want to encourage you.

First of all, we see the knowledge of the Lord Jesus. Verse 9 reads, *‘I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich); and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.’* So the first thing the Lord Jesus Christ is going to say to us is ‘I know. I know what’s going to happen; I know already at this time in history what is going to happen next year; I know the elements of the warfare, the persecution, that will come.’

The Christians in Smyrna were despised. Actually they were despised as the scum of the city – they were the city’s ‘nobodies’; they were the traitors; they were considered worthless. When a Roman procession was held in honour of a leader after a battle, or some other Roman celebration, all the important people would parade themselves at the beginning. They would go through the streets and garlands would be thrown at them, and they would receive the adulation of the crowds. But right at the end of these processions would come the Christians, some of them captured from other lands, almost naked, beaten, abused, stoned by the crowd. They became the entertainment – ‘Throw your rubbish at the Christians!’ The poverty-stricken, wretched Christian

⁸ Based on figures from The Center for the Study of Global Christianity

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nobodies were the butt of common jokes. In the sight of the world they were nothing! They were now threatened with prison; some later would lose their lives being thrown to the beasts and lions, as Jesus warned but encouraged. They were poor and despised in the sight of the ungodly; yet in the sight of Jesus Christ they were rich, eternally rich!

Now we are not anywhere near that particular situation in our country, but there are many in the world that do experience such persecution, that are considered to be nothing. In India, and other parts of the world, if you convert from your birth religion to Christianity you can be thrown out of your home; you can no longer go to the universities and get a good education; you can only do menial jobs like cleaning the roads etc, and there are many material ways in which Christians are persecuted. But the first thing Jesus says here is, 'I know. I know about your stand; I know your labours; I know about every curse that is shouted at you; I know every stone that is thrown and even who throws the stone, and how much it hurts, and what is the outcome. I know every lash of the whip, I know who gave it; I know about every pang of hunger; I know about every tear, every cry, every rejection; I know about every horrible word that is spoken against you.' And the message of encouragement comes to the church at Smyrna, and to the Lord's people throughout all time. As they enter into a field of persecution Jesus Christ knows! He knows when you are the only one making a stand for Him in your family; He knows when you say 'No!' to compromise; He knows when people laugh at you; He knows when people make fun of you; He knows when they reject you, when they hate you, when they say all manner of evil against you falsely for His sake. Jesus said in the *Gospel of Matthew 5.11*: '*Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake.*' 'Blessed are you! You are persecuted for My sake, because you are following Jesus Christ the Lord.' The first

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thing to remember in times of persecution is that Jesus knows! We do not know what lies ahead of us, but the first thing we must realise, as we look to the future, is that Jesus knows!

The second thing is to remember the encouragement of the Lord Jesus.

Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life’ Revelation 2.10.

As the church at Smyrna watched the gathering storms of persecution, like we sometimes watch a storm approaching in the sky, they heard these words of encouragement – ‘Do not fear; although some of you are going to be thrown into prison, and although things are going to get worse,’ said Jesus, ‘do not fear the things which you are going to suffer.’

In the *Book of Isaiah* God gives encouragement:

‘Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, Yes, I will help you. I will uphold you with My righteous right hand’ Isaiah 41.10

‘For thus saith the High and Lofty One Who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: “I dwell in the high and holy place, with him who has a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones”’ Isaiah 57.15.

The High and Holy One Who inhabits eternity is with those that trust in the Lord, and He says, ‘Do not be dismayed; I am with you, I will uphold you, I will strengthen you.’ So we face this reality: whenever we make a stand for Christ’s sake we are going to get hit by the devil, and the stronger we stand against the devil the greater will

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be the persecution. But through the harsh reality of what you may face Jesus is saying to you, 'Do not fear.'

But you may well say, 'On what basis are we not to fear? What in this message gives us the reason why we should not fear?' Well, this brings us to the third point – how God deals with His people in persecution. Jesus says, 'I am in control. I am going to allow this persecution even to test your faith.' *Revelation 2.10* says,

'Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days.'

So we see the control of the Lord Jesus Christ. The devil is on a lead; he is only allowed to go as far as God, in His permissive will, lets him.

You remember that when Job had his times of deep trial God, in His permissive will, allowed Satan to attack him. But He said, '*But spare his life*' (*Job 2.6*). Satan tried his utmost to take Job's life, whether by suicide or by sickness; he tried everything. But Job did not curse his God, and neither was Satan able to take his life. And what is most remarkable here, in what Jesus is saying, is that Satan looks upon it as an assault, but God looks upon it as an opportunity. Satan means it as an assault, or an attack. But God can take that same assault and use it for our spiritual good. Satan means it for evil, but God can use that same thing for our good. This is a great mystery; how can this be possible?

Well, think of Joseph, who was a believer, when he was thrown into the pit. How could God be in control? He could not get out of the pit. He was going to die in that pit unless he was delivered. How could God be in control? How could God have been in control when he resisted Potipher's wife and did what was right and ended up in prison for it? How could God be in control? When Jacob, Joseph's father, died his brothers came to him thinking he would get his own back on them, he said something very remarkable –

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‘Do not be afraid, for am I in the place of God? But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive’ Genesis 50.19-20.

God knew the future; God had a plan. Satan meant it for evil but God meant it for good. In *1 Peter 1.3-5* we have these wonderful words of encouragement:

‘Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.’

This is the doctrine of God, the doctrine of salvation, the doctrine of faith on this foundation:

‘In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honour and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ’ 1 Peter 1.6-7.

That faith is much more precious than the most valuable diamond in the world. It is much more precious than gold that perishes. Even though it is tested by fire it will be found to praise and honour and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

And then we are taught in Scripture that persecution is your badge of honour – it proves you are a Christian, and it can be used by God as a means of assurance.

In his book *Tortured For Christ*, Richard Wurmbrandt, the Romanian Christian imprisoned for his faith, actually says that

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when he was in prison he had such deep fellowship with God, such deep fellowship with the Lord Jesus Christ that it was a spiritually enriching and most holy place in his soul. But then he was released and went back to the church and started to preach again. There was a church meeting, and the people started to argue amongst themselves over something quite trivial. He stood there and said, 'Lord, take me back to prison, because I want to have that fellowship again.' That is an amazing thing to say!

Persecution can be used by God as a means of assurance. You have a faith which results in persecution for Christ's sake and you have a faith in a God Who can bring you through and prove to you that nothing will separate you from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus the Lord (*Romans 8.38-39*).

It is recorded of the apostles that, after they had been beaten, they departed from the presence of the Council '*rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name*' (*Acts 5.41*). Worthy! The badge of honour! Actually worthy to suffer for Christ's sake!

For encouragement then – God is in control; He can even use this persecution in your life as a means of blessing; it is your badge of honour as a soldier of Jesus Christ. Remember that this persecution will be for a set time. Jesus says here, '*You will have tribulation ten days*' (*Revelation 2.10*), thus signifying a period of time – not ten years but ten days – and this encourages the Church that, in the light of eternity, this is actually a short time permitted by God for Satan to attack you. But there will come a time when God will say, '*This far you may come, but no farther, and here your proud waves must stop!*' (*Job 38.11*). So it was with Job – God appeared for him, and there was a set time; and God delivered Job, restored him and blessed him.

So we learn that God not only turns the persecution for our spiritual good but He limits the power of Satan. Satan is on a leash; God is in control, His timing is perfect; His timing has a purpose.

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But then God works and helps the Church in persecution. Jesus Christ says, *'Be faithful until death'*. He instructs them. He not only reminds them that He is in control, but He instructs them. 'This is your instruction – *"be faithful until death"*'. Your responsibility, dear friends, is not to be successful. Any fruit or success is under the sovereignty of God; but we are called to be faithful, and when we are faithful the consequences are with the Lord. The faithful believers at Smyrna, some of whom lost their lives for Christ's sake, had been strengthened with might in the inner man by the Holy Spirit, especially for that particular time. So the message here to the church at Smyrna is, 'Do not be fearful, but faithful. Do not look at the suffering so much as beyond the suffering at the all-controlling hand of God.'

The message of the Lord Jesus Christ in persecution is simply, 'Be faithful. By God's grace hold on.' Faithfulness speaks to us of relationship. It speaks to us of character; of stability; of security; of being loyal. Jesus says, *'He who endures to the end shall be saved (Matthew 24.13)*. So we need grace to be faithful. In persecution the Lord Jesus Christ gives us instruction.

Finally, Jesus promises, *'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.'*

It has been said that where there is no cross there will be no crown, and as we take up our cross and follow Jesus we can look forward to a glorious crown in Heaven – the crown of eternal life. Notice here again how the Lord Jesus speaks to the church at Smyrna – 'I was dead, and came to life'. Here is death; here is resurrection; He knows exactly how to encourage these persecuted believers. And these believers face an increasing persecution but He reminds them that He was victorious – 'I was dead, but I am alive, and even if you have to go through the very extremity to martyrdom, remember that I am alive.' They looked forward to resurrection life. Although they would

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experience natural death they would not experience the second death at judgment. Any pain they may experience during the first death of their body is incomparable to the eternal suffering of unbelievers in the second death, at the great Day of Judgment. Jesus said they would most certainly be preserved from that most awful second death. They would have to go through that porchway of natural death, but they would be preserved from the awful second death. Hell is absolute separation from God as the Fountain of life and joy and everything that is lovely and beautiful. Hell is darkness, darkness forever; and the Lord's people are preserved from that.

So the message to the church at Smyrna, the message to a persecuted people is, firstly, Jesus knows! Secondly, Jesus is in control! Jesus says '*Do not fear*'; Jesus says, '*Be faithful!*'; and Jesus has a reward and a promise: '*Be faithful until death and I will give you the crown of life.*' Listen to what He says; listen to what the Spirit says to the churches: '*He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death.*' This is God's way of encouragement as we look to the future.

5. PERGAMOS – THE COMPROMISING CHURCH

Revelation 2.12-17

‘And to the angel of the church in Pergamos write, “These things says He who has the sharp two-edged sword: ‘I know your works and where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is. And you hold fast to My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days in which Antipas was My faithful martyr, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells. But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality. Thus you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate. Repent, or else I will come to you quickly and will fight 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 I will give some of the hidden manna to eat. And I will give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name written which no one knows except him who receives it.’”’

We now come to the message to the compromising church at Pergamos. Pergamos was the centre of administration for the whole province of Asia at this time. This city was the seat of Roman imperialism in Asia. It was also known for its intellectual learning. It had a library housing two hundred thousand parchments and it was in this city that parchment paper was first made.

The city of Pergamos was renowned in three particular ways. Firstly, it was known as the City of the Sword. The symbol of rule from this city was the sword. The Proconsul, who acted as the chief magistrate, had the right to pass the death penalty in this city. He could do so

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without recourse to a higher authority – such was his delegated position. This was called the Right of the Sword. It showed that the rule of authority from the capital city of Asia was delegated directly from Rome.

So Jesus reminds the church at Pergamos that, although this city proudly said that it had this special authority direct from Rome as the City of the Sword, it was actually the Lord Jesus Who had greater authority. *‘These things says He who has the sharp two-edged sword.’* He had the Word of authority going from His mouth, He had the sword of His authoritative judgment. The City of the Sword must know, the Church must know, that in this city of Pergamos it was Jesus Who was in authority. While magistrates have a delegated authority to maintain justice, absolute authority does not remain with Roman imperialism – absolute authority remains with Christ.

And that is a comfort to us today when we hear of men and women speaking very proudly about what they are going to do, and see people beginning to worry and get concerned. Remember Christ has the ultimate authority – He is the Lord of the earth.

Secondly, the city was known as the City of the Serpent. The most magnificent temple in Pergamos was that of Asclepius, the so-called god of medicine and of healing. The priests of Asclepius performed an exercise of healing openly in the name of their god. This was what they claimed, and through demonic power they provided certain signs and wonders. This is something we have to realise. Satan can provide signs and wonders; he has that power. They are not true, they are deceitful, but he does have that power. We read of this in the Word of God. When Moses went to Pharaoh to say, *‘Let My people go’* (*Exodus 5.1*), Pharaoh’s men also did some remarkable things (see for example, *Exodus 7.22* and *8.7*).

The symbol of this god Asclepius was a serpent, so the city was also known as the City of the Serpent. It is not surprising, therefore, that

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the Lord Jesus Christ describes this city as the very seat, the throne of Satan. There is a connection between the City of the Serpent and Satan being there working at its very centre.

Thirdly, the city was known as the City of the Altar. In this city false religions tolerated each other, and openly, without restraint, showed their true colours. There was a multitude of statues and a multitude of altars. There was a large number of sacred groves dedicated to the pagan gods.

Now while imperial Rome was prepared to tolerate any religion, however debased it might be, it was now demanding a uniting religious principle that acknowledged the ultimate authority of Rome. So Pergamos was actually the first city in Asia to erect a temple in honour of the Roman Emperor, Augustus Caesar. Here at the altar to Caesar every citizen of that city was expected to burn incense in his honour. The worship of Caesar as a god crossing all religions was intended to be the uniting bond of the Roman Empire. So long as Caesar was acknowledged as the chief god then any other god could be worshipped as well. The principle was that Rome wanted Caesar Augustus to be the chief god – you were to worship him, burn incense to him, but then you could go your own way and worship whatever gods you liked. In this way the people of Pergamos could all be in one family together.

So it was that this city declared that they catered for the mind, with their administrative system from Rome and their huge library; they catered for the body with the healing work of the so-called priests, representing the healing god, Asclepius; and then, thirdly, they catered for the spirit in the worship of Caesar and any god that suited one's particular taste. It was known in those days as the alternative-society city. Rome was imposing a developing alternative society; it was to be a symbol and example to other cities in Asia.

And it was to the church in this city in this society that Christ, the

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Head of the Church, spoke. As the worship of Caesar in this city was so intense the Christians at Pergamos were in constant danger, and Jesus Christ brings a message to them, exactly suited to their need.

We might think that God is out-of-date and out of touch. We may think that the society we now live in is very sophisticated, and technology is king; we live in such a sophisticated age of communication, where the knowledge of men and women is so vast. Can God cope with 2017? Yes, God knows all about 2017 – in fact He knew all about 2017 before He created the world. He knew exactly where this world would be at such a time as this. And He has a perfect understanding of every technological achievement. So let us worship God – do not let us ‘dumb God down’, as it were, or be patronising to God and think we are so advanced that, even though we have to worship on a Sunday, on Monday when we go back to work, and we are on our computers, God is not interested. God knows more about anything than we will ever know.

So the Lord Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church, enters into this situation and gives a relevant message to the church at Pergamos. He says, ‘The Great Judge is speaking to you.’ *‘To the angel of the church in Pergamos write, “These things says He who has the sharp two-edged sword.”*’ ‘I am the Judge.’ He reveals Himself as the One Who has the sharp two-edged sword, with ultimate authority. He reveals Himself as the One with the authority of the Judge, Who will ultimately destroy all evil with the sword.

Firstly, here the Great Judge is actually commending the church. He says, ‘I know exactly your situation. *“I know your works, and where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is”*, how difficult it is for you, and yet *“you hold fast to My name; and did not deny My faith even in the days in which Antipas was My faithful martyr, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.”* I know exactly the situation of this city at Pergamos.’

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Jesus here reminds the church of His knowledge. ‘I know where you dwell; I know your situation in practical and spiritual matters.’ Dear friends, be encouraged – Jesus knows all about you; He knows what you are going through; He knows what you are suffering; He knows the assaults of the enemy; He knows absolutely everything about you. The Lord Jesus is telling the church at Pergamos, ‘I know; I know where you dwell, I know your situation, I know exactly the situation that you find yourself in, and I know that you hold fast to My name.’ What a blessed testimony that is – *‘you hold fast to My name.’*

This is what we are called to do in this day and age. The Word of God has so much to say about holding fast. *‘Hold fast what is good’* (1 Thessalonians 5.21); *‘holding fast the faithful word’* (Titus 1.9); *‘hold fast the confession of our hope’* (Hebrews 10.23); *‘hold fast the confidence’* in Christ (Hebrews 3.6); *‘stand fast in the faith’* (1 Corinthians 16.13); *‘stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free’* (Galatians 5.1); *‘stand fast in one spirit’* (Philippians 1.27); *‘stand fast in the Lord’* (Philippians 4.1); *‘stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught’* according to the Truth (2 Thessalonians 2.15).

Hold fast your confidence, then, in Jesus Christ. Hold fast! That is what we are called to do. Hold fast! Hold fast to the old paths; hold fast to God’s Word – this is our calling.

The believers in Pergamos were holding a faithful testimony, despite the pressures of persecution. These Christians retained personal loyalty to Christ; they held fast to His name, they retained personal trust, they did not deny His name. Even when Antipas was the Lord’s faithful martyr the believers held firm even to the point of death. Antipas, a man willing to stand alone for Christ, died for Christ’s sake. So here we have a church which remained steadfast under persecution, and the persecution actually strengthened their faith and trust in the very name of the Saviour, Jesus Christ.

The Great Judge says here that He not only knows where the

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believers are dwelling, He also knows where Satan dwells. This again is a great assurance for us. Satan is on a leash; yes, he accomplishes terrible things, and he perhaps tempts you and tries you very hard sometimes. But I want you to bear in mind that Satan is like a dog on a lead. He can only go as far as God will permit him. Satan is on a lead.

Here Jesus says that Satan is actually dwelling in this city. It is a very interesting statement. Satan cannot be everywhere at the same time. He actually takes residence in one place. His evil angels and evil spirits work in other places at his command. Satan is a being; he was thrown out of Heaven as an evil being, with the fallen angels. So therefore, as a being, Satan must dwell somewhere. He is not just a mystical figure. He is not just a figment of our imagination – Satan is a really evil person, and as a being he must be dwelling somewhere here on this earth, and he is commanding the evil spirits throughout the world. We do not often come to this particular truth, but here it is. The Lord Jesus Christ mentions this very clearly here. *‘I know your works, and where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is.’*

So at this time Satan was using this city as his operating base for all Asia, and here Satan had succeeded in uniting the state and false religion. Here from his dark spiritual throne in this city, for the first time in Asia, Satan had succeeded in introducing the cult of emperor-worship. So Satan was controlling a religious ecumenical movement, together with the Roman imperialistic rule. He brought all these false religions together and united them with Roman rule under Caesar. It was all done through the satanic agent of emperor-worship, stating that all man-made religions could unite together under one man-made organisation. Here Satan himself could take care of the body and the mind. This was Satan’s throne in Asia, and Jesus knew exactly what Satan was doing.

The church was standing steadfastly in persecution, but this same

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church which was standing fast was becoming tolerant and relaxed about what was going on in their midst. *‘But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality. Thus you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate.’*

Here we come to the warning, and it is so relevant to our day and age. They had become tolerant and lax about what was going on in their midst. What Satan could not achieve through persecution he was now achieving through another evil – so called ‘loving tolerance’ where things are ignored under the guise of love.

This is so relevant to our day and age. In February 2017 the Synod of the Church of England voted against the bishops’ recommendation that the Word of God should be the rule in terms of men and women in marriage. There was a lady who was interviewed on the News and she used the words ‘in the name of love.’ This was what they were supporting – this is what love is about. So the commentator then said that now the Word of God is no longer the final authority. In the name of love we are going to allow this. So what society considers to be true love has become the guiding principle.

The same had happened here in Pergamos. Under the guise of loving tolerance people were allowed to stay within the church. Within their church membership were those holding to the doctrine of Balaam and the doctrine of the Nicolaitans. In the name of tolerance these people had not been disciplined. In the name of Christian tolerance these people had not been withdrawn from. I know someone who recently started going to a particular church and the pastor there told him that he was really struggling. He had recently been appointed as pastor, and when he had his first meeting with the deacons he proposed a certain course of action. The deacons disagreed, and when

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the pastor said, 'Let us see what the Bible says,' they said, 'We don't need the Bible!' The pastor was very discouraged, realising that he actually had those in the church who were not really converted. But they were tolerated and respected!

Well, in the name of Christian tolerance these people in the church at Pergamos had not been withdrawn from; and rather than cause an upset these people were allowed to wear two hats – they could remain in church membership but they were still allowed to hold on to their false views and doctrines. So they would come to worship on the Lord's Day but then in the week they were compromising with all the idolatry because they did not want to lose membership of their trade guild and therefore not be able to do business in the city. So they thought they could compromise with the world on the one hand and have church on the Lord's Day on the other. And the lack of church discipline was becoming a serious problem. The tolerant attitude towards evil in their midst was grieving the Head of the Church, the Lord Jesus Christ.

We listen to news items and we hear people saying what is in their minds concerning the true meaning of love. How grieving must that be to the Lord Jesus Christ, Who gave Himself as a pure sacrifice upon the cross at Calvary, Who suffered the eternal punishment due for the sins of all those who put their trust in Him! Sometimes the Word of God is accused of not being loving enough! There are those who say they are the dispensers of love, they know what love really means, and therefore in their understanding of love they go against the teaching of the Word of God, because according to them God is not really loving enough! But the Word of God tells us, '*God is love*' (1 John 4.8), and that '*God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life*' (John 3.16). Friends, how much more could God love this world than by giving His beloved Son? And people question whether God is love!

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Well, we know better, and we must have no part in this – the Word of God is so relevant. We must stand resolute against such thinking. We must stand with our Saviour; we must stand fast in the Lord; we must stand fast with Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church, because what Jesus Christ says is what is right! What the Word of God says is what is right! Any toleration that despises the Lord Jesus Christ is misplaced, and those who are holding on to these things that are wrong; they are actually dishonouring Jesus Christ. If we try not to offend these people in the name of love, like the church at Pergamos, then actually we are offending Jesus Christ. This is a very challenging question. Who would we rather offend – Jesus Christ or the person we might be friendly with? They may come and say they believe in tolerance, but you have to lovingly stand for the truth. You have to keep in mind that you do not want to offend your Father in Heaven; you do not want to grieve the Holy Spirit; you do not want to offend Jesus Christ; you do not want to grieve your Master.

Then Jesus speaks about the doctrine of Balaam. Balaam was a false prophet; he was a devourer of the people. When he could not curse the children of Israel on behalf of the King of Moab he counselled the women of Moab to lure the men of Israel and ruin their testimony by lust and adultery. He could not curse the children of Israel because God would not let him, so he went through the back door and said he would try another way. He would bring the women of Moab in all their physical beauty and lure the men of Israel. So what Satan could not do one way he succeeded with in another. Balaam's doctrine was to mix the truth with the falsehood. The counsel of Balaam caused a great stumblingblock to the children of Israel.

Now the same thing was happening in this church at Pergamos. Certain members were turning the truth of spiritual liberty into licence. They said they were standing fast in the liberty of Jesus Christ, and that meant they could do just as they liked; they could do

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whatever they liked in the name of spiritual liberty; have anything they desired or lusted after in the flesh, even if it meant fraternising with idolaters – they were free!

The same danger faces the Church today. Satan seeks to devour the people of the Church spiritually. One of the chief pastoral issues I have had in the wider Church (when people call me) is to do with the Internet. People are struggling – the Internet is a great danger to some people. And Satan tries to devour people through temptation. He says there is no need to change your life so much – you do not need to be different, you can hang on to this idol; you can hang onto this, you can hang onto that and you can meet these other people; nobody need know. There is no need to be different; there is no need for separation. Satan encourages the Church in the name of Christian loving tolerance to promote a ‘sink-your-differences’ religion. But actually what he intends to do is devour you, to devour the Church.

Then there was the doctrine of the Nicolaitans. The doctrine of Balaam was the devouring of the people, and the doctrine of the Nicolaitans was to be a conqueror of the people. The name Nicolaitans related to the Hebrew word ‘Balaam.’ They were Balaam’s New Testament equivalent. They sought to work out compromise with paganism, to enable Christians to take part without embarrassment in some of the social and religious activities. The problem was the same here as at Smyrna. If you did not join in with the pagans you would be ostracised and thrown out. So the Nicolaitans, the New Testament Balaam, worked out a compromise solution in their minds. They said, ‘Go along, but always bear in mind that the idol you worship is nothing.’ Satan was saying, ‘Compromise, but on social lines, and this will enable you to reach a far greater audience.’ They were the forerunners of today’s teaching in the Church that you can worship Jesus as Saviour but you do not need to have Him as Lord. In other words, you come to the Lord Jesus to forgive your sins but to have Jesus as the

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Lord of your life, the Lord of how you live, is not acceptable. No, no! They want Jesus as Saviour but not Jesus as Lord. Jesus says He hates this doctrine, and yet there are churches teaching it this very day, saying, ‘Yes, you can have Jesus as Saviour but all this business of walking in His ways is old-fashioned and Puritanical.’ Jesus says (and I want you to remember this) ‘I hate this doctrine!’ He hates it!

It is interesting to note in Church history that the Nicolaitans, the New Testament Balaams, were among the very first in the early New Testament Church to promote a type of hierarchy. In their lack of spirituality and godliness they became power-hungry and they promoted themselves by developing a hierarchical system of church government. These were some of the first seeds being sown which brought about the system of bishops, archbishops and popes. It all started right back here in this early New Testament church.

The Great Judge is commanding you through this message, *‘Repent, or else I will come to you quickly and will fight 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 I will give some of the hidden manna to eat. And I will give him a white stone and on the stone a new name written which no one knows except him who receives it.’*

Oh friends, the Great Judge is warning, but He is also encouraging. This is how Jesus does it. He does not just warn and leave you in a void and full of terror. He says, ‘Repent, and you, who have an ear to hear, have a wonderful promise.’ Jesus says, ‘If you do not repent I will personally come and sort out the situation. You must change your mind on this policy of misguided toleration; you must excommunicate those who continue to hold on to these doctrines.’ And the message to each one of us is that tolerance on fundamental issues can never be condoned because it grieves Jesus Christ. It grieves the Holy Spirit of God. It damages the life of the Church and it forms a stumblingblock to blessing.

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In *Exodus 34.12* we read of the Lord speaking to Moses on the mount. He says:

'Take heed to yourself, lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land where you are going, lest it be a snare in your midst.'

Then in *Acts 11.23* we read:

'When he came and had seen the grace of God, he was glad, and encouraged them all that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord.'

That is our exhortation today – purpose of heart, continuing with the Lord. Yes, stand firm, and do so with this precious promise: the Great Judge is going to bless the overcomers, the stand-fasters! He is going to bless them.

Jesus ends this message on a positive note about the hidden manna. *'To him who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna to eat.'* Here Jesus promises spiritual food to the faithful. He speaks of Himself as the Manna, the Bread from Heaven. It is called the 'hidden manna' because it means that this blessing is unique to those who believe and trust in Jesus Christ. It is a mystery to unbelievers; they cannot understand it. Why do we put all our trust in Jesus? Why do we read the Word of God? It is a mystery to them. But to those of you who believe and trust in Jesus Christ this hidden manna is a secret in their heart. You know when you go out into the workplace tomorrow, and you have to do business with your family and your friends, that you have the Word of God hidden in your heart. You have something unique, something precious – the Holy Spirit of God is within your heart and within your soul. The world is a stranger to the enjoyment of Christ's unchanging love, the enjoyment of meditating upon His glory, the blessing of enjoying Him in the worship, meeting with Him in the secret place of personal devotion.

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Some of you have worked in factory situations, and they can be very tough. For the first part of my working life (about ten years) I worked in an intense factory environment where there were a lot of men gathered together. When I was on shift work I would get into work at 6 o'clock on a Monday morning, and I was still thinking about the services of the past Lord's Day. But the men would be chatting, telling how they had got drunk and had been to this nightclub and had done this and that. Then they would ask me what I had been doing, and I said I was at church yesterday. They asked, 'But didn't you do anything interesting?' Well, I went to church! It was a mystery to them. How much we have to witness, friends. Never underestimate the wonder of being a Christian. Never underestimate the wonder of being a believer. Never underestimate the wonder of being in the family of God – you have a hidden treasure in your heart.

Finally – and there is something very precious here – Jesus Christ gives you a personal invitation to partake of the heavenly food from His table; from His Gospel table. We think of this Gospel table – it has such heavenly food. There is forgiveness there; there is peace, reconciliation, life, and hope. There is a heavenly inheritance promised at the Gospel table, and Jesus says, 'Come, partake of the heavenly food. Come.'

And then He speaks about a white stone. *'I will give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name written which no one knows except him who receives it.'* This whiteness indicates holiness and purity and beauty and glory. The stone itself symbolises durability – it is an imperishable stone. And so the white stone denotes that you are free from guilt; you are cleansed from all sin in the very Person and name of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. It indicates your eternal justification in Christ, as you have been given this white stone and have received it by faith. This is picture language. It is your promise stone, and the new name indicates the unique character and citizenship of

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belonging to God's family. You are a child of God, and of course the righteousness, purity and holiness symbolised by this white stone is saying to you that you are in Christ Jesus. He is your purity; He is your righteousness; He is your glory; He is your acceptance with the Father – you are accepted in the Beloved, Jesus Christ.

It was the custom in those days to give a special friend a small white stone and on that stone was inscribed the address of your house. It was an invitation – your friend could come to your house at any time because he had the stone. He was always welcome in your house because he had been given this white invitation stone.

So this white stone given by Jesus symbolises His open invitation to fellowship with Him. You have the white stone, you are a child of God by faith in Jesus Christ and you are accepted in the Beloved. No-one can take this stone away from you because Jesus has given it to you; and on this stone is the relationship between you and Jesus. It is your personal stone. You see, friends, we often think of salvation *en masse*, but do you not know that God saves you personally? Your white stone is a picture, it is a white stone from Jesus. He has given it to you – you are His, redeemed by His precious blood. You are righteous in Christ Jesus.

There is so much in these messages to the churches, and they are so relevant to this day and age. Be encouraged – God is in control; Christ is on the throne; He is the Head of the Church. Whatever is happening in this world in all its volatility, where proud men stand up and say how big they are and what they are going to do, God remains on the throne.

6. THYATIRA – THE TOLERANT CHURCH

Revelation 2.18-28

‘And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write, “These things says the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet like fine brass: ‘I know your works, love, service, faith, and your patience; and as for your works, the last are more than the first. Nevertheless I have a few things against you, because you allow that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, to teach and seduce My servants to commit sexual immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols. And I gave her time to repent of her sexual immorality, and she did not repent. Indeed I will cast her into a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of their deeds. I will kill her children with death, and all the churches shall know that I am He who searches the minds and the hearts. And I will give to each one of you according to your works. Now to you I say, and to the rest in Thyatira, as many as do not have this doctrine, who have not known the depths of Satan, as they say, I will put on you no other burden. But hold fast what you have till I come. And he who overcomes, and keeps My works until the end, to him I will give power over the nations— “He shall rule them with a rod of iron; They shall be dashed to pieces like the potter’s vessels” — as I also have received 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.’”’

As we continue in our series in the *Book of Revelation* we come to the message of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, to the tolerant church at Thyatira.

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Thyatira was a city of great wealth. It was famous for its wool trade, its linen trade, for the dying of cloth, of pottery and leatherwork. This was the city of Lydia, the seller of purple, whose heart the Lord had opened to receive the Gospel (*Acts 16.14*).

In this city, as in Smyrna, the trade guilds were extremely powerful – the city was known for its trading. I mention this subject again because it was in this city that the problem was most acute for the Lord's people. To trade effectively in Thyatira, from a human perspective, meant membership of these trade guilds. Each one of these guilds had its idol to whom its members were expected to bow and worship. The guilds were wealthy because membership fees were high, and consequently they were able to lend money and to keep tight control of their members. So if any of their members were borrowing money from them, the guilds would have a certain control over them. They kept contracts closely between their allied memberships, and they had control over all the trade in the city.

Occasionally these guilds held a feast in honour of their god, who they thought was responsible for their wealth. These feasts always ended in gross immorality. Such feasts and such immoral behaviour were deliberately encouraged, and attendance at these feasts was obligatory for all the members. There was a list of members of each guild, and they were each ticked off as they came into the feast. If you were not there, or if there was not a good enough reason (if you were sick for instance), there were big problems for you. So confrontation between the faithful followers of Jesus Christ and the powerful trade guilds was inevitable.

It was in this city that a Christian church was ministering, but it was this same Christian church that, sadly, Satan was infiltrating with a terrible error. First of all, we see in verse 18 that the Son of God proclaims Himself, *'to the angel of the church in Thyatira write, "These things says the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and His*

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feet like fine brass.” So here we have the glorious Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ, the Saviour, proclaiming Himself as One Whose eyes are like a flame of fire, having feet of fine brass. This refers back to the description that John gave of the Son of Man in his vision in the very first chapter of *Revelation*.

*‘His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and His eyes like a flame of fire; His feet were like fine brass, as if refined in a furnace, and His voice as the sound of many waters’
Revelation 1.14-15.*

Here was a picture of the authoritative Son of God, who reigns over the Church and is Lord of the whole earth.

The Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, proclaims Himself and reveals Himself here in three ways. These are theological words that we use, and I will explain them: He is omnipresent, He is omniscient and He is omnipotent, three characteristics of the Son of God. He is omnipresent – ‘I am in all places at the same time, I am the Son of God, whose eyes are like a flame of fire’; He is omniscient – ‘I have infinite knowledge of all’; and He is omnipotent – ‘I have unlimited power, I have feet like fine brass.’

Now what is the relevance of Christ’s introduction here for us? Well, the gilt coin with which they traded in this city showed the sun god with a battleaxe, and this symbolised the smashing of all enemies. They were going to be victorious through wealth. Anybody trying to overcome their trade would be smashed. When men show military might and produce such a coin as this the world is impressed. This city would have been recognised as a powerful city, it was one of the great wealthy cities in the world. This was where finance and trade were carried on. So this gilt coin was greatly admired.

There is something very contrary about human nature, because when we as believers read that Jesus, the Son of God, has eyes like a flame of fire and feet like fine brass, we remind ourselves that we

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worship a holy and awesome God, the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But when unbelievers read this they say, 'Where is the God of love? We do not want this God who is so terrible and just and holy. Where is the God of love?' As human beings we are very inconsistent. We admire human military might or financial wealth and power, but when God simply reveals Himself as Who He really is we say we do not want to know that God – we only want to know a God of love.

Here, then, the Son of God proclaims Himself – He comes to this proud city of Thyatira and He has a message for the church there. They should be encouraged and be warned, even though there were people all around proudly strutting about and who were saying that they were in control, and that they had a coin to speak of their power and their might. He encouraged the church to look to Him, the Son of God, Who is the One in control.

Secondly, the Son of God proclaims the good side of this church.

I know your works, love, service, faith, and your patience; and as for your works, the last are more than the first' verse 19.

There was so much to commend this church. Now you might picture in your mind an apple which looks beautiful on one side, but is disappointing on the other because it is damaged or rotten and bruised. It is not all fit to be eaten, although it looks so good on one side. This is what had happened here – the church looked beautiful on one side but on the other side it was badly bruised, rotten even. So the Son of God first looks on the good side of the church, and then turns it around to reveal the bad side.

First of all, then, there is so much to commend the church at Thyatira. Notice the consistent pattern of Christ – He always brings the good before the bad, and that is a big lesson for us, friends. We are so prone to rush to criticise or to find fault in someone else (we are all like it!); but remember the Christian pattern is to look for what is

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positive about that person, what we can commend in them, rather than rushing to the negative. The Lord Jesus Christ shows us and leads and guides us in this matter – constructive encouragement should come before constructive criticism.

So there is a pattern, then. The Apostle Paul also writes in his own letters following the pattern of Jesus Christ, as His servant. He writes to the church at Corinth and starts off quite positively, yet there was much to deal with in that church.

Here, according to this pattern, Christ gives a picture of this church at Thyatira as something very beautiful and to be commended. In this church was love, and it was being actively displayed. In this church was faith – they believed in Jesus Christ and they professed their belief in Jesus Christ. In this church was patience – actually this church showed a great deal of forbearance with one another. And in this church was service – these members gave themselves in an increasing way to Christian service; in fact they were actually increasing in their outreach and their labours. So it seems at first sight that this church was a growing, vibrant church; there were so many right and commendable aspects in the eyes of the Head, Christ Jesus. These members were showing love, expressing their faith, actively working – something most beautiful and precious. This was not a dormant church – they were growing in their love, faith, service and patience. This was the good side of the church.

But there was a difficult side, a bad side. In verse 20-21 we read:

‘Nevertheless I have a few things against you, because you allow that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, to teach and seduce My servants to commit sexual immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols; And I gave her time to repent of her sexual immorality, and she did not repent.’

This person, described here as Jezebel, who called herself a prophetess, was infiltrating the church; she was affecting the servants of the

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Lord and trying to move them away. When we eat the part of an apple that has gone bad the taste is so bitter the first thing we do is spit it out of our mouth. And this is the picture that Christ is putting before us here. This issue is one that is revolting and horrible and needs to be dealt with quickly.

The problem with the church at Thyatira centred around this woman described as Jezebel, who proclaimed herself a prophetess. She was teaching the acceptance of an ungodly, immoral lifestyle while still professing Christianity amongst the servants of the Lord. She was teaching the acceptability of conforming to worldly living while professing to be a Christian; and it appears from verse 24 that she had exposed herself to the very depths of Satan, because Jesus then speaks to the remnant who have not known the depths of Satan. Basically, what Jezebel was teaching was that it does not matter what we do bodily because we can separate the physical from the spiritual, the spiritual from the material, the body from the soul. So you could live how you wanted to emotionally and bodily, but you could still enjoy your spiritual experiences. It seems that she was also teaching the fallacy that to know the enemy you need to live like him, or you need to investigate how the enemy, Satan, operates. Well, there is a sense in which we do need to know our enemy, but we do not need to know our enemy by practising what the enemy does.

Here is how it came about. There was this remarkable church in Thyatira and Satan had failed to penetrate the church from without. So he began to attack it from within, to infiltrate the servants of the Lord. He started, first of all, with those who are committed to the way of God. He worked through Jezebel, who attempted to seduce the Lord's servants to commit sexual immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols.

So today it might come about this way. It might be that a pastor begins to watch inappropriate things on the Internet. He may be a very

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good minister and preacher but, as Satan gets in, step by step back-sliding overcomes this poor man. He has to repent of this and come back to the Lord, but it of course affects his ministry.

We have to examine ourselves. We may say we are strong Christians and can watch a 15- or even an 18-rated film dispassionately without being affected. We cannot! I can absolutely, categorically assure you that if you spend your time watching such films, which expose you to immorality and violence, you will be affected. It is absolutely naïve for you to think that you can enter into the depths of Satan without it affecting you. I knew some people who took a very old lady for a birthday party to a cinema. She was 90 years old and they thought it would be a nice thing to take this elderly member on a Saturday evening to watch a film, which was well above 15-rated. I was horrified for this poor old lady, because they did not get back till 1 o'clock on the Sunday morning. What sort of preparation for the Lord's Day was that?

Friends, I am talking straight because this is an issue we need to be aware of. Satan can come in; we can have a very good part in the church, and we can be loving and faithful and serving the Lord, but in our homes there might be a side which is not so good.

The Lord Jesus is so kind to the Church. He knows the issues we struggle with, and God our heavenly Father says to us, 'Look; if you will separate from these things you will not be on your own; I will be a Father to you and you will be my sons and daughters.' It is not as if God is saying to us, 'Separate from this and your life will just be an empty void.' No, what God is actually saying is, 'Separate from the Jezebel in your life and I will be your Father and you will be my sons and daughters.'

Dear friends, the Bible is so positive; it warns but it also shows us the way forward. We all struggle sometimes; we have no stones to throw at one another – the Lord knows our hearts; the Lord knows what goes on in the secret places of our home. We are not to judge one

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another – that is not our business. What we do have, though, is a need to warn and show the positive alternative – looking unto Jesus; looking that we might come to our Father in Heaven, Who will receive us as sons and daughters. We need grace to separate – it is not easy to separate. We need God’s help – we cannot do it in our own strength.

So we may have a person who is infiltrating the church and saying, ‘It is OK for you to watch this or to do that because we are saved by God’s grace. We are above all this – *“There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus”*’. But they forget the next part of the text – *‘who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit’ (Romans 8.1)* – and say, ‘There is no condemnation; you are saved by grace, you can do as you like.’ The Apostle Paul had to deal with this issue. He says, *‘Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? (Romans 6.1)*. There was teaching around at that time that said the more we sin the more we need to be forgiven and so we magnify the grace of God. Paul said, ‘God forbid that we should go down that route!’ *‘Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?’* Let it not be so.

So this Jezebel comes in and says we do not really need to be a Christ-centred church; we do not really need to place so much attention on the Word of God; we do not need to worry about hymns or songs that have theology in them; we can try and make our worship look as much like a worldly concert as we like, and everybody will come in and have a good time. We can then put all these difficult, challenging things to one side – these challenging aspects of the Christian walk.

What went wrong with this church at Thyatira? What was the fundamental problem? What do we have to be so careful of as a church, friends? Actually, Satan used the very strengths of the church to hide the weakness of the church, because the church here in their faith and love and work had dropped the belt of truth – that is what had happened.

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I want us to notice the difference between the church here and the church at Ephesus. The church at Ephesus, as we considered, lacked love but they were strong in truth and doctrine. Thyatira had love, but they had taken off the belt of truth.

Recently I experienced a service which had a lot to do with love and sentiment and emotion, but if you wanted to hear about Calvary, and about Christ, and about salvation, and about sovereign grace and the wonders of it, you would have been very disappointed. There was a lot of sentiment but there was very little truth. This is what happens. They say, ‘We are a loving church, we are a working church (look at the work we are doing in the community!). We profess faith but we do not have much to do with the doctrinal side. We just love Jesus, we do not need to worry about doctrine.’

So Satan lulled the church at Thyatira into thinking that so long as they had love and faith this was sufficient. As long as you trust in the subjective and emotional experience, as long as you feel good about yourself and you feel good about worship, that’s OK. So what Satan does is encourage you to watch something that is inappropriate, and you will at first feel very uncomfortable. Satan knows that will happen. But the next week Satan will suggest that you watch that soap again – you will be all right, nothing has happened to you, you have not had an accident, God has not judged you; so you watch it again and again. Then after six months it is not an issue with you because Satan has succeeded in hardening your heart about that particular thing, which you knew at the beginning you should separate from. That is how Satan works; he is an evil foe, and this is what happened in Thyatira. They were a fine church in many ways but Satan succeeded in separating love from the Word of God; and at Ephesus he succeeded in separating God’s Word from love.

The point I am trying to make to you is that there is no division between love and truth. They are the best of friends. Without love we

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cannot really say we are holding the truth. And we cannot say we are holding love if we don't have the truth. They are in harmony together. In Thyatira Satan had just made them take their eye off the ball. You know how it is in cricket: when the fielder takes a catch from high in the sky he keeps his eye on the ball. He is not looking around but at the ball all the while, and actually running towards it at the same time, so he can catch it.

What had happened at Thyatira was that they had taken their eye off the ball and they had really gone away from the doctrinal element of the Word. So Satan used their love to tolerate an evil person, because this Jezebel no doubt impressed them. She was claiming special dreams, she was claiming special leadings, special insight, even a special word from the Lord. So in a spirit of love they had to let her speak – she was impressive, she called herself a prophetess. It is like this with people who call themselves apostles. We see it all over the world; I see it many times in my travels – apostle this and apostle that. How do they claim such a title? Well, it's presumption isn't it?

Here is this lady, Jezebel – she says she is a prophetess, but surely in a spirit of love (we must not be judgmental) we should listen to this person who claims special spiritual insight and this way of living? Actually, her doctrine is somewhat attractive, because if she is right it means we can retain our dual membership. We can join in the feasts, we can mess about with our bodies as we are not entering into it with our soul, and we can separate the physical from the spiritual. That is what she was teaching. But there is great danger in playing with the devil. If you enter into the depths of Satan you are going to get hurt. Jezebel taught the false doctrine that we should do evil that grace may abound!

Let us look at *Romans 6.1* again:

'What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace

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may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?’

Then turn to Romans 12.1-2:

‘I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service, And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.’

Then, finally, in looking at Scripture on this subject, turn to *1 Peter 2.15-16*:

‘For this is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men – as free, yet not using liberty as a cloak for vice, but as bond servants of God.’

So, at the expense of truth and the honour of God, and in the name of love, the church at Thyatira tolerated Jezebel. Now, this is a tolerant attitude towards sin. See how crafty Satan is – here is this loving church, a church who clearly professed faith in Christ, an active church. So Satan says he will affect this church by an impressive person, one who claims insight but teaches immorality as an acceptable lifestyle, because she has seemingly impressive spiritual gifts. He knew that the inexperienced members, especially the younger members, would be impressed and carried away. Remember, in the Old Testament, Queen Jezebel was just like this – she had married King Ahab, and as a result the children of Israel were controlled by her, through Ahab. Satan uses people in a powerful way to lead others astray.

So, the lesson is for us to be on our guard against those who, on the one hand claim great spiritual enlightenment, while on the other hand live a life which contradicts the teaching of the Word of God. We do not have to listen to them. If anyone teaches you something

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which is contradicting the Word of God do not think that love and faith mean that you have to tolerate false ideas.

This church was in great danger. There was this beautiful side of love and faith and spirituality, but they were in danger of being destroyed because of the bad side of compromising with evil. They were separating their spiritual life from the discipline of the Word of God and of truth. The sweet and lovable church had gradually forgotten to apply the objective standard of God's Word. They had allowed a personal experience to be the chief criterion of truth. If they had made an attempt to apply the test of God's Word to the speech and life of Jezebel they would have detected her heresy and cast her out if she did not repent. Anything that is contrary to Scripture, then, or in collision with any part of it, must be rejected.

But then the Son of God proclaims His judgment. It is an awful judgment in verses 21 to 23. I want us to notice something very special, really, about our God. Verse 21: *'And I gave her time to repent.'* See again the amazing lovingkindness of Jesus, the Son of God. There were those who had not fallen into this error, but there were those that had, and this woman Jezebel was actually given time, under the longsuffering of God, to repent. *'I gave her time'*! And this is the amazing thing about our God – He gave this evil person time to repent. God gives even such people as Jezebel time to repent. There is a day of grace. But finally Jezebel crosses over the line from God's mercy to God's judgment. The situation has gone beyond being able to leave it to the discipline of the church. They had proved weak on this point, so the Head of the Church Himself is going to personally sort out the situation. She will be destroyed, along with her children. That means her followers – those who do not repent will enter ultimately into judgment, great tribulation for their unrighteous deeds, and God will even judge them with death, both spiritual and physical.

But then, in verses 24 to 27, we come to the final part of the message – the Son of God proclaims His promise.

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Now to you I say, and to the rest in Thyatira, as many as do not have this doctrine, who have not known the depths of Satan, as they say, I will put on you no other burden, but [here is the key!] hold fast what you have till I come.'

Hold fast to the truth, friends; hold fast to reverent worship!

'And he who overcomes, and keeps My works until the end, to him I will give power over the nations.'

Well, here we see the amazing lovingkindness of Jesus, the Son of God. There were those who had not fallen into this error – they needed to be encouraged; they needed to be assured; they needed to be given a token of His love; and the Head of the Church knows when to apply the rod and when to apply the oil. Those who remain faithful and overcome through Him will actually share in His rule, and in His glory. They will even enter into verse 26 at the end of the world. They will be there with Christ in that great day of the final judgment of His enemies. Every Christian believer will ultimately unite with Christ in His glory on the throne; in the final judgment of the enemies of God, those who remain faithful will be like the morning star. We read, *'I will give him the morning star.'* This means to be united with Christ in glory; this is the amazing expectation of the Lord's people as they are united with Christ, who is the ultimate Morning Star – the Star of Glory. We ourselves, with Christ, will reflect that glory as the morning star. We will have the righteousness of Christ and we will reflect the glory of Christ.

So, with a prospect like this, how despicable does a Jezebel become in our lives! And that is the purpose of this message – to warn the Church, and to say to us that, if we do have a Jezebel in our life, then it is something to be hated, not to be tolerated.

You see, when we look at the ultimate end of the Lord's people, as we follow Him, and have this glorious expectation, how despicable does an idol become in our eyes. How it fades in a moment; how

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despicable does the evil of spiritual adultery with the world become when we look at the end of the Christian – the unity with Christ Jesus, the power and glory they will have with Christ Jesus: *‘As I also have received from My Father.’* ‘You will join with Me as Lord of Glory as the Church of the Living God.’

‘I will give him the morning star. He who has an ear let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’

Do you have an ear to hear? Because this message, I am afraid, is very challenging for each one of us, but it is the Word of God. You may have already shut your ears and said this is not what you want to hear. But God says, *‘He who has an ear let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’*

I was thinking this week about how misguided we can be as to the true work of the Holy Spirit. This is the Holy Spirit, through Jesus Christ, under the sovereign will of the Father, speaking to the churches; and He warns! So many people think that the Spirit working in a church is just an emotional feeling; but the Holy Spirit of God inspired the Word of God. He inspired the comforting parts and the challenging parts. It was the same Author – God.

If we say we want to understand the work of the Spirit truly and aright we have to bow in submission to the truth of the Word of God. Because if we do not accept God’s Word, which is actually written by the Holy Spirit, how can we then claim to be worshipping in the Holy Spirit? Any rejection of the Word of God and its teaching is to deny the work of the Holy Spirit. We cannot claim one part of the Holy Spirit and reject another part – we have to bow to the Word of God and ask for God’s grace to walk in His way, and to find all our hope, our righteousness, our expectation and our reconciliation with God in none other than the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. And our manual for life is the Word of God. May the Holy Spirit work in our lives that we might truly grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

7. SARDIS – THE IMAGE-CONSCIOUS CHURCH

Revelation 3.1-6

‘And to the angel of the church in Sardis write, “These things says He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars: I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead. Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God. Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent. Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you. You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy. He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but 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.’”

This is the message of the Lord Jesus Christ, given under the power of the Holy Spirit, to Sardis, the image-conscious church.

The reference at the beginning of this message to ‘the seven Spirits’ refers to the Holy Spirit’s various powers, graces and operations. Although the Holy Spirit of God is personally one – one Person in the triune Godhead, together with the Father and the Son – He is various in His gifts, in His gifting and in His ministrations. So the plural ‘seven Spirits’ refers to the Holy Spirit’s various powers.

The number seven refers here to the number of churches in *Revelation* that were being messaged. This statement reminds us that there is a most remarkable dispensation of God’s blessings by the Holy

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Spirit, which is made available to the church of the living God; a stock of spiritual information for the ministry. Jesus reminds us here that the churches have this spiritual stock, this spiritual fund, in Him, to Whom they should apply.

There is nothing worse than a dead church. The Lord Jesus Christ encourages us to come to the Gospel table and to partake of His spiritual stock under the power of the Holy Spirit, so He is sending this message to the languishing church at Sardis which was ready to die. They were not availing themselves of the spiritual blessings in the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. They were not concerned enough. They were not really concerned about life; they were not really concerned about reality in their faith. They were only concerned about the form, and Jesus is writing very severely, we might say, to the image-conscious church at Sardis.

He exhorts them to repent, to apply themselves urgently to the storehouse of grace for revival. There was only one way for this church to survive; there is only one way for a New Testament church to continue and prosper and develop, and that is by constant recourse to the storehouse of God's grace in Jesus Christ, given to us under the power of the Holy Spirit. There is no other way of revival than through God.

So this gracious help from God is available, and it is found in the Word of God and in the Holy Spirit by Christ Jesus. God in His sovereignty is pleased to bless a seeking church, He is pleased to bless a dependent church. But He frowns upon an image-conscious church that is really not bothered about spiritual life or about the good of their never-dying souls – they are happy with just the image and not the substance.

The city of Sardis was a very imposing architectural sight. It was situated at the top of a commanding escarpment about fifteen hundred feet high. It actually looked totally impregnable. On three sides there were almost vertical cliff faces. The remaining side was a gentle

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sloping neck of land which could easily be fortified and defended. However, on three occasions in the recent history of this city it had been captured, not by people coming up the slope, but by mountaineering soldiers who bravely climbed up the cliffs and overcame the city, taking it unawares, like a thief in the night.

Despite these experiences and these warnings the city, according to historians of the time, was complacent. In historical archives writings have been found, describing the state of the city at the time Jesus wrote to the church there. They said that the people of Sardis liked nothing more than sitting around, playing their musical instruments and doing deals with money. Entertainment and leisure had taken over and they just wanted a good time and to have their fill of the world.

This culture had evidently infiltrated church life and had brought with it an arrogant, self-sufficient security. So once again the message of the Lord Jesus is relevant to the present situation and the historical situation. Even though the mountaineering soldiers had caught this city unawares in its false security, the city still remained complacent and did not learn by its mistakes. Likewise the church at Sardis was complacent – it was arrogant, despite its danger. So Jesus warned the church that, unless it repented, He would come, like those mountaineering soldiers, as a thief in the night.

Now the city of Sardis was an ancient city; its citizens often held ceremonies to mark events in the past and in honour of their god, Dionysus. In these ceremonies the priests and priestesses would dress up in white to worship their god. They would then proceed to enter into terrible depravity – the city was famous for its decadence. So Jesus speaks later to this church of the few in Sardis who have not defiled their garments, who walk with Him in white. See how relevant the Lord Jesus is; it is very important to see the pattern of the ministry of the Lord Jesus. He takes a city; He knows about its culture, He knows

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what is going on in it, He knows what is going on in the church, and He brings a message to them that they can relate to. We know about this; this is happening in our city and it is affecting our church.

The city also had a famous civic register in which the citizens of the city had their names. Everybody had their names registered. But their names could be blotted out of the register if at any time they showed disrespect to the city's god.

So Jesus speaks of not blotting out the names of the faithful ones from the Book of Life. The people in the church at Sardis would know immediately what Jesus was referring to here. They would know that, although their names were blotted out of the city's register because they would not bow down to the false god, Jesus promised they would never, ever, be blotted out of the Book of Eternal Life, God's book.

So, as we come to the message of the Lord Jesus Christ to the church at Sardis, we realise that actually it is a very devastating message. With the situation being so dire in the church, Jesus gives a message that has to start with the negative. We have noticed how the Lord Jesus Christ so often starts with something positive and then goes on to the negative; but here the situation is so perilous that He goes straight in with His warning. But then, in His gracious love, He ends the message with something positive for the faithful ones. He starts with something really serious but ends with something of comfort for the faithful ones.

He presents Himself to the church at Sardis as the One Who has control of the church. He holds the stars; He dispenses the blessings to the churches by the Holy Spirit to those who truly seek blessing. He oversees the church and He knows all about the church's great need of the work of the Spirit of God. Yet, sadly, as He looks at this church, He sees their need but He observes that they do not have a desire for blessing. They do not have a desire for spiritual life; they do not have a desire for real things; they do not have a desire for the Word of

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God; they are careless and they seem to be unaware of their spiritual emptiness.

“These things says He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars. “I know your works that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.”

So here we have profession without possession! We live in a day when presentation seems much more important than substance. We are constantly bombarded today by an image-conscious world, and when we start to dig we realise actually there is not much substance behind it all – it is all a big front.

The church at Sardis had a very good image. Sardis was evidently a city in that part of the world where people were converted initially through the preaching of John – the John of the *Book of Revelation*, who wrote it under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The church was planted by the Apostle John. It had a remarkable heritage. It was the Christian cathedral of the area. They thought that, as they could look back to the Apostle John, they were the centre of Christianity in the area. Yet it was this church that was evidently the first to revolt against true Christianity and one of the first that was later ruined. There is a great danger, friends, of profession without possession – an eternal danger. Yet before this judgment came upon the church at Sardis its image was so good that it actually had the reputation of being a living church. As people looked on they thought its reputation meant that it must be a living church. It had a good name, a good heritage, but it was a church that was living off the past.

The inhabitants of the city itself, which had an impressive history, remembered the past to cover the present. And so likewise the church at Sardis was living off the good name of its forefathers. They were concerned with image rather than substance. They were content with formality and tradition – things looked respectable on the outside but on the inside the spiritual life of the pastor and the church was almost

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non-existent. Most of the ministries were being worked out in a spiritually dead manner by spiritually weak members. Only a few things remained, and even they were *'ready to die'*. The spiritual life of the church was like a weak fire running out of fuel, that would peter out if no attention was paid to it.

So it was that this church at Sardis paid little or no attention to the absolute necessity of spiritual experience. They had no real concern for the reality and blessing of God's Holy Spirit working with the Word of God within their hearts and in their worship; they considered themselves to be a good church. They had a good name; there was plenty of activity but sadly no life. There was worship but it was not spiritually-alive worship. It may well have been emotionally-worked-up worship, but it was not spiritually-led worship because it lacked the chief aspect of true worship, which is the Holy Spirit teaching us to worship God in reverence and with godly fear, and with rejoicing in our hearts. The sermons were lifeless; there was conversation but it was not spiritual conversation. And the Sabbath, the Lord's Day, instead of being a delight was actually a burden to them. They just wanted to get Sunday over so that they could get on with the business of the week.

The problem with the church at Sardis was one of complacency – it was one of spiritual laziness. The church appeared good on the outside, even impressive, but at heart there was a major problem. So Jesus gives a very serious reproof: *'I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.'* Hypocrisy and lamentable decay are the sins charged upon this church by the Head of the Church.

I just want to read to you how the commentator, Matthew Henry described the situation at Sardis. He puts it very succinctly and accurately:

‘This church had gained a great reputation – it had a name, and a very honourable name. It was a flourishing church, a name

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for vital lively religion, for purity of doctrine, unity among themselves, uniformity in worship, decency and order. We do not read of any unhappy divisions among themselves. Everything appeared well as to what falls under the observation of men. But the church was not really what it was reputed to be. They had a name to live and they were dead. There was a form of godliness but not the power. There was a name to live but not a principle of life. There was a great deadness in their souls and in their services, a great deadness in the spirit of their ministers and a great deadness in their ministrations, in their praying, in their preaching, in their converse, and a great deadness in the people in hearing, in prayer and in conversation. What little life was left among them was in a manner expiring, ready to die.’

And so the Lord Jesus comes, and He says to them: *‘Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die’* (verse 2). He gives this church the greatest advice possible. Jesus says to this church at Sardis: *‘Wake up! Be watchful! Consider your state! Examine your hearts before the Lord! Pay attention to the things that remain, for even they are ready to die!’*

The picture here is of a sentry, waking up out of sleep and realising the danger; and he rushes to the weak point in the defences. If we turn to the *Book of Nehemiah* we read there a picture of what is meant here under the teaching of the Lord Jesus.

‘Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us’ Nehemiah 4.20.

So here is this trumpet of warning, given to the church at Sardis, and the watchmen have to wake up and run as fast as they can to the danger area. *‘Rally to us there at this danger area, and as we trust in the Lord, our God will fight for us, our God will be with us.’*

So the believers had got to wake up and lift up again the standard of God’s Word and apply it to their lives. He advises them to be on

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their watch. The cause of their sinful deadness and declension was that they had let down their watch; they were no longer watching and praying. Whenever we are off our watch we lose ground; we must return to our watchfulness – against sin, against Satan. Whatever is destructive to the life and power of God in us we must resist. As we look over our lives we must look at what is making us so spiritually lethargic. We have to watch, to be alert, to examine our hearts! And we have to seek God, go to God and ask Him to strengthen the things that remain. We have to hold fast to the great doctrines of grace; we have to hold fast to the Gospel of God, of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. We have to pray, return to our dependence upon the Word of God and the Holy Spirit of God, especially under the preaching of God's Word.

Turn again to *Nehemiah*, and there you will read of a revival time. It was a time when the people needed to return to the Word of God.

'Now all the people gathered together as one man in the open square that was in front of the Water Gate; and they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded Israel' Nehemiah 8.1.

Here is the great sign of a turning church – a great sign of revival. What is real revival? Real revival is when there is a return to the Word of God and a dependence upon the Holy Spirit of God. Any church claiming revival without the Word of God does not have revival. Revival is centred on the Word of God. Here in the *Book of Nehemiah* the people were longing for spiritual life, they were longing for reality, and so they brought the Word of God to Ezra the scribe, and they even made him a pulpit to preach on. And he stood on this pulpit, this platform of wood which they had made for the purpose. His fellow ministers stood with him, and he opened the book in the sight of all the people. As he opened it all the people stood up. They had respect for the Word of God.

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‘And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God. Then all the people answered, “Amen, Amen!” while lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground’ Nehemiah 8.6.

They came before the Lord in humility, and as Ezra and his servants preached they helped the people to understand the Law, to understand the Word of God. They read distinctly from the Book of the Law of God; they gave the sense, and they helped them to understand the reading. There is the heart of a church returning unto God, returning to the Word of God, seeking revival.

This was so needful at Sardis; and it is so needful in this day and age as well. We must return to the Word of God. *‘Strengthen the things which remain.’* Return to your dependence upon the Word of God and the Holy Spirit of God. Look unto Jesus as your Saviour and your Lord. Remember how the Apostle Philip was told by the Spirit to join the Ethiopian eunuch on his way back home. He got up into the chariot and he noted that the man was reading from *Isaiah 53* but did not know Who it was that this passage was speaking about. Philip sat by him and preached Jesus (*Acts 8.35*). That is the heart of it – we have to get back to preaching Jesus.

‘Be watchful and strengthen the things that remain.’ Here the Lord identifies the heart of the problem. He says, *‘I have not found your works perfect before God.’* By this He means there is no heart in the works you are doing; there is an emptiness in the ministry. It is a very difficult thing to keep pressing on when we see deadness and declension prevailing round about us. Here the Lord warns the church, *‘I have not found your works perfect before God.’* ‘There is something missing; there is a shell but the heart is not in the work. The inward thing is wanting. Your works are hollow and empty. Prayers are not really filled with desire; your giving is not really filled with love. The Lord’s Day is not filled up with real true devotion of the soul to God

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and there are not those inward affections and moving of the Spirit within to match your outward actions and expressions.’

So the Lord Jesus says, ‘Remember and repent.’ Verse 3: *‘Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent.’* Instead of living off the past you must compare the past with the present. That is the healthy way to look at the past. We might look back at the history of the church of the Living God; we might look back at times of revival and we compare it with the days in which we live and we seek the Lord – ‘O Lord, return again, O Lord revive us again.’ There is a right way to remember and there is a right way to learn from the past. Moses said to the children of Israel, *‘And you shall remember that the Lord your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not’* (Deuteronomy 8.2). So there is a right way to remember, and as we remember the past in the right way it will humble us. There is a right way to learn from the past.

Here the Lord Jesus is saying, ‘Remember, there was a time when you received the Word with joy, in the time of your first espousals when you were first converted. You could not wait to get to church. You loved to open the Word of God and Jesus really was your All and your one and only Saviour. But over the years the world has come in, and has attacked, and there has been a sense of lifelessness entering into your soul. Remember how you were blessed by the Word of God and you respected the importance of the Word of God. Remember those days; remember how your forefathers received the Word of God, how they heard and obeyed the Word of God.’

They were not only to remember what they had received and heard through the Word preached but what tokens of His mercy there were towards them; and God’s favour towards His church over the years. He had sent the Apostle John to work in this city and many others of God’s servants over the years. They needed to remember how blest

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they were as a church; what tokens of mercy and favour there were towards them; what impressions the mercy of God had made on their souls at the outset; how welcome was the Gospel of God and how welcome was the grace of God to them when they first received it.

*Where is the blessedness I knew
When first I saw the Lord?*

William Cowper, 1731-1800

What was the secret of those former days? Christ was All and in All. ‘*Hold fast*’, that you might not lose all. Repent sincerely that you have lost so much of the life of your Christianity.

So Jesus calls the church at Sardis to wake up, to consider its real state and remember the reality of past blessings. This is really the heart of the message to Sardis – remember, you need reality. Remember, friends, if you do not feel to have that reality in your life it is not the end. It might very much be the beginning for you – that you realise now as never before

*Jesus, engrave it on my heart,
That Thou the one thing needful art;
I would from all things parted be,
But never, never, Lord, from Thee.*

Samuel Medley, 1738-99

Engrave it on my heart, Lord; work in my heart, Lord; teach me from your Word, Lord; O Lord work, we pray!

Well, Jesus calls the church here to wake up, to remember, to repent, to hold fast. The Lord Jesus taught us that if we feel we lack the Holy Spirit’s work in our lives, and there seems to be a lifelessness in our Christian faith, we should go to the Father and knock. Ask, knock and seek (see *Matthew 7.7*). ‘*If you...know how to give good gifts to your children,*’ (which you do), ‘*how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!*’ (*Matthew 7.11*).

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If you recognise yourself in measure, like the people at Sardis, and if you say, 'I need the Spirit of God to work in my life; I need this reality; I need this life,' then the Lord Jesus says, 'Go to the Father, as a little child; go to Him, tell Him all about it. Go with earnestness and conviction; go and seek life in your soul, and your heavenly Father will give the Holy Spirit to those that seek Him.' You want to do the best for your children and your grandchildren; you long to do the best for them, not only for their practical needs but their spiritual needs. If you, as a fallen sinner saved by grace, know how to give good gifts to your children how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him!

So it is not the end, it does not have to be the end. But it is the end if we are warned and we do not repent, if we do not really take the warning but just carry on to the end of our lives, careless about our souls. Then, sadly, it will mean that we were never truly born again in the first place.

This is a message, a wake-up call, from the Lord Jesus. He says, 'Be warned! and' (this is really very solemn) 'if you will not watch, if you will not hold fast and repent, I will come upon you as a thief and you will not know what hour I will come upon you.' In case it should be despised Christ enforces His counsel with a dreadful threat. He warns this sleepy church that if it does not heed His warning to wake up and watch and repent, then He will come upon it unexpectedly and without warning, while it sleeps, and deal with the situation. If Christ takes away His gracious presence from a church He will then come in judgment, surprisingly and unexpectedly, and it will be dreadful for those who have sinned away His gracious presence. Their deadness, which has kept them in false security, will be their downfall. The problem they have in their life, which is spiritual deadness, is the very thing which is blinding them to the reality of the situation. And Christ will come as a thief, suddenly, and He will strip them of their image.

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He will not come like a thief to steal, but He will come as suddenly as a thief. He will come in justice and righteousness. We have seen this happen in the history of the Church. We have sadly seen this happen in our own generation, when the Lord comes and brings judgment upon a church because they have an image which over the years has become more important than the substance. Others thought, ‘What an amazing church, how incredible,’ and yet they had lost their first love; they had lost the heart, and were content with the image.

Finally, the Lord Jesus says in verses 4-6: *‘You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy. He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but 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.’*

There were a few in Sardis who had not defiled their garments. They had not joined in the ungodly feasts and ceremonies and become careless in worship. They had not linked up with the world; they had not wanted worldliness in worship; they longed for spiritual life and mourned the lack of it. They were not interested in earthly honour or in being part of the crowd who accepted honour from the civic leaders. They were not interested in joining in the civic ceremonies and dressing up in white to honour the gods. These few in Sardis had separated themselves from idolatry; they had remained faithful, and Jesus promised them far greater honour than earthly honour, than the ‘Well done!’ of man. Jesus says something very precious – *‘You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me.’* ‘I will own them, I will confess their names before the holy, heavenly Father, My Father in Heaven. They will walk with Me and they will be clothed in My robe of righteousness; their worthiness is in Me, because they are looking to Me and trusting in Me alone. And they will be presented pure before the Father in Christ Jesus.’ Their security was in Christ, unlike the civic register in which

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one's name could be put in, but it could also be removed or blotted out. Jesus says their names will never, never be blotted out from the Book of Life. This was an encouragement. Christ has His Book of Life, you know; He has a register; He has a roll of all those ordained unto eternal life. It is a book of eternal election; it is a book of remembrance of all those who live to God, called by God's grace, who by their fruits of faith and spiritual life show that they are truly born again spiritually.

God has His Book. Jesus knows every name written on that register – all those who truly put their trust in Him; all those who will truly turn to the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ in the future and put their trust in Him and walk with Him; whose worthiness, whose acceptance with God and whose righteousness is fully, completely and absolutely dependent upon the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Christ will not blot out the names of His children; He has died for them on the Cross at Calvary.

Now people may be enrolled in the registers of the church; they may even be baptised and make a profession, but they have a name to live and yet are dead; and they can be blotted out of the roll because actually it appears there was but a name to live, but without spiritual life. Everybody thought they were on the roll, everybody thought they were one of the Lord's people but actually when the Great Judge, the Searcher of all hearts came, there was no life found. It is very solemn.

But the names of those who have overcome through Christ Jesus shall never be blotted out; so the message, friends, is – Look to the Lord Jesus Christ; trust in Jesus alone; understand that your hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness. Look to Him, trust in Him, believe in Him; follow Him. He is your Saviour; He is your Lord, and when you come to the end of your life Christ will produce this Book of Life and He will confess your name before His Father. When the books will be opened He will do so as your Captain,

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as your Saviour and as your Head. He will lead you triumphantly, ultimately, into the new heavens and new earth, together with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. He will say to the Father, *‘Here am I and the children whom God has given Me’* (Hebrews 2.13).

How great will this honour be! What can compare with that prospect, friends? To be with Jesus and to be in that company where Jesus is at the Head, and He walks us to God the Father in glory; and He says to God the Father, ‘These are the ones I have died for. These are my purchased possession. These are the ones You gave me; these are the ones who were ordained to eternal life and their worthiness is in Me. They have walked worthy in Me; they have washed their sins away in the precious blood of Christ; they have followed Me; they have suffered for Me; they have been persecuted for Me; but they have owned My Name in earth and I bring them to You, Heavenly Father.’

These few in Sardis had their true hope in Christ, their fellowship in Christ, their victory in Christ; their Advocate was Christ; they confessed Christ here on earth and Christ confessed them in Heaven. There was a blessed unity between Christ and the believer.

In the final analysis, it is not our acceptance with the world; it is not our acceptance with worldliness and society that is important. What is important for us, dear friends, is our acceptance with God, that we might be accepted in the Beloved, Jesus Christ. Christ says of those few in Sardis, *‘for they are worthy’*, and Jesus moves them from condemnation to commendation. *‘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.’*

The testimony of those few in Sardis was that they were living their lives to please God. The question is, as Joshua and Moses challenged the children of Israel: *‘Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve’* (Joshua 24.15). *‘Whoever is on the Lord’s side—come to me!’* (Exodus 32.26).

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That is the message to Sardis. It is a very challenging message, friends, it has searched me through and through. I went again to my notes and I almost trembled as I looked at them again, trying to do the best for the Lord and bring out more and more from the Scripture. It seemed as if the Word was speaking to me. Do we have life? Is it all a shell? Oh friends, it does not have to be the end, if God is convicting us. It could be a blessed spiritual birthday if we will repent, if we will watch, if we will come to the Lord Jesus Christ and trust only in Him; if we recognise our utter need of the Holy Spirit to work in our lives and in our church. If our prayer is to depend upon the Word and the Spirit, the Lord will hear.

8. PHILADELPHIA – THE FAITHFUL CHURCH

Revelation 3.7-13

‘And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write, “These things says He who is holy, He who is true, ‘He who has the key of David, He who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens.’ ‘I know your works. See, I have set before you an open door, and no one can shut it, for you have a little strength, have kept My word and have not denied My name. Indeed I will make those of the synagogue of Satan, who say they are Jews and are not, but lie – indeed I will make them come and worship before your feet, and to know that I have loved you. Because you have kept my command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth. Behold I am coming quickly! Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown. He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more. I will write on 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 I will write on him My new name. He who has an ear let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’”’

So as we continue in our consideration of the messages to the seven churches we arrive at the message to Philadelphia, the faithful church. The church at Philadelphia was not thought to be large numerically at the time this message was sent. Nevertheless, it was known by Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church, as a spiritually-minded church, and this was particularly evidenced by its perseverance. We read in verse 10: *‘Because you have kept My command to persevere’, you have*

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pressed on, looking unto Jesus. While it had little strength numerically it did have real spiritual life; and it is understood its spiritual life was from God. It was a church which understood its first responsibility was to be faithful, to honour God. It was not actually to be successful, but to be faithful.

The continuing spiritual life of the church at Philadelphia is seen in that it resisted persecution. Historically, it was the church that resisted for the longest period of time against the fearful onslaught of Islam in Turkey, and it was not until AD1390 that the witness of the church of Philadelphia was ultimately destroyed by Islamic persecution. This fact demonstrates to us the importance of having real spiritual life within us, and within the church, as we face an increasing time of persecution. The great need for us, dear friends, is to have a real work going on within our lives – spiritual life, the work of the Holy Spirit going on within us. Only then can we really know the blessing of being faithful.

The city of Philadelphia itself was nestled in a valley on a very important Roman road, and because of its accessibility it was known as the centre of the spread of Greek language and customs. This gives us the providential reason why Jesus promises the church an open door that nobody can shut, and we know that the Greek language, the language of the New Testament, would be greatly used for the spread of the Gospel. So here is the communications centre for the development and spread of the Greek language.

God speaks to the church at Philadelphia, and He says, *‘I have set before you an open door.’* ‘My Word will go throughout all Europe, and ultimately the world. And I have opened the door, and no one will shut it.’

In the introduction of this message we are called upon to remember Who Jesus really is. Some people have pathetic views of Jesus. They reduce Him to just a good man in a very patronising way – ‘Oh, Jesus

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was a good example, He was a good man, yes, we give you that.' But read these words – Jesus is the Son of God, this is Jesus speaking. *'And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write, "These things says He who is holy, He who is true, 'He who has the key of David, He who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens.'"*'"

This is Jesus, the Son of God, and the sooner we have the highest view and the highest respect for Jesus the sooner we will grow spiritually.

Here, Jesus comes and encourages the church by reminding them of three of His glorious attributes. He is **holy**. This word 'holy' means that Jesus is absolutely and utterly free from sin. Christ is the One in Whom purity is personally displayed. He is pure, not only in His actions and His integrity, but in His very Person. There is no sin in Jesus – He is absolutely pure.

Turn with me to *Luke 1.35*. Here we have the record of the conception of the Lord Jesus Christ in the womb of Mary:

'And the angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God.'"

So, first of all, always remember that Jesus is holy.

Secondly, we are taught here to remember that Jesus is **true** – *'These things says He who is holy, He who is true.'* The expression of His character here means that Christ is absolutely true and is perfect Truth; so the more you know Jesus, the more you relate to Jesus; and the more you walk with Jesus, the more truth will be revealed to you. He is the epicentre of Truth. Jesus said, *'I am the way, the truth, and the life'* (*John 14.6*).

A Christian's ambition to come to the Father and to know Him in a deeper way can only be through his or her relationship with the Lord

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Jesus Christ, because He is the way to the Father. So to grow in our estimation of, and fellowship and union with God, we must understand the significance and importance of our relationship with Jesus, Who is the Truth. The more we know about Jesus, in Whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (*Colossians 2.3*), the more we will understand truth, and the closer will be our relationship with God our heavenly Father.

Jesus describes Himself as the true Vine – *‘I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser’ (John 15.1)*. The Father is the One Who, in His providential dealings with you, is pruning you. He is arranging things in your life and in your experience to deal with you spiritually, to work in your life to mould you and sanctify your life through different experiences. He is the vinedresser. He has the secateurs, He has the shears, He is the One that is doing the cutting. Therefore we know that if our lives are in the hands of the heavenly Gardener, God the Father, we are most undoubtedly safe. But the centre of blessing for us as Christians comes, in God’s providence, and in God’s wisdom and spiritual plan, through the Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, Who is the true Vine. So as we feed from Jesus spiritually by the Holy Spirit we come closer and closer to the Truth, and to understanding the Truth, and in our union with God the Father. *‘I am the true vine,’* Jesus said.

But then, thirdly, He is **Lord**: *‘He who has the key of David, He who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens.’* Now, this is a quotation from the *Book of Isaiah*:

‘The key of the house of David, I will lay on his shoulder; so he shall open, and no one shall shut; and he shall shut, and no one shall open’ Isaiah 22.22.

Here Shebna, because of his arrogance and unfaithfulness, has the key symbol of authority removed from him. And this same authority is passed on to Eliakim – *‘The key of the house of David, I will lay on his shoulder.’* The key was the symbol of trust and authority, and so Jesus

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Christ the Lord is speaking here about His kingly authority. All that went on then, back in the *Book of Isaiah*, was a symbol of the Great King, the greatest King of all, the King of kings and Lord of lords, Jesus Christ, Who has the ultimate key of authority. And, whereas in *Isaiah* it was to open up the treasure house of David (speaking of the king's authority in a natural way), spiritually speaking the Lord Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church, has the authority to open up the treasure house of David spiritually, and bestow His blessing.

The picture here is of Jesus Christ being the Chief Steward Who unlocks and locks according to his Lordship. You remember that Joseph in the Old Testament, who is a type of Christ, had the storehouses of Egypt – all the grain – under his authority. The people came to Pharaoh, and they said, 'Please give us grain'; and Pharaoh said, 'Go to Joseph.' Every time they came to Pharaoh, he said, again, 'Go to Joseph. He has the authority over the grain.' (See *Genesis 41.55.*)

And so it is for us. Go to Jesus, He has the authority, He has the key. Do not go to an earthly ruler, go to the heavenly Joseph. Do not go to anyone in authority on earth who has power, not even the Queen, and say, 'Do this for me,' or 'Can I have this?' No, the Christian goes to Jesus because He has the wealth, the spiritual wealth, under His control. He has the authority to withhold or bestow blessing. Jesus has the key!

So, He is holy, He is true, and He is the Lord, and we must worship and bow before Him as Lord.

Then I want us to see the size of this faithful church: verse 8 – '*I know your works.*' Well, this church at Philadelphia was **a working church**. Here is a great encouragement for the biblical policy of the working church. Sometimes, friends, I expect you feel very weary, and wish that Mount Zion was not such a working church. Well, those things come to our mind naturally at times; but I want you to remember that it is a great blessing to be a working church. The Head of the Church knows all about your service. You may have been doing something

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in the church this week that nobody knows about. You do not need to tell anybody, but Jesus knows. It is good for us to understand the blessing of being a working church.

Now you may be in a situation in your secular employment in which your employers do not really appreciate you. They really do not know about your efforts; they do not really know or bother to assess the situation and understand the stress you are under or what you are going through. Well, you can come and be encouraged in the Lord, because it is not the same in a church. You may find that your brothers and sisters in the Lord, and even the Pastor, might not recognise or understand all that you are doing, but the Lord knows. Jesus knows. And that is the great encouragement, friends. Christ knows about the positive aspects of a working church; He knows about the negative side of a church – we saw that with the church at Sardis. But here we are at Philadelphia, and Christ not only knows about the negative, but He also knows about the positive aspects of a working church.

Here is a church which can be trusted with the Gospel; because they are faithful, and they will preach the Gospel faithfully, an open door has been set before them for the furtherance of the Gospel and the Kingdom of God. It is a working church; it is a faithful church; they have a concern for the lost; they have a concern for souls. They have a realisation that there are millions and millions of people who are heading towards a lost eternity in hell and that there is a precious Gospel to preach, and that it may be in God's sovereign will to use their labours to turn some from darkness into light, from death unto life.

This is the real heart of a working church – we do not just work to feel better about ourselves; we do not work to be self-righteous and say, 'Look at all this work we have done!' No, we work for the glory of God and we work because we have a concern for the lost. We want to reach out into this community; we want to minister in a way whereby

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souls will be saved and believers will be built up in their most holy faith. We work because we are called to work. The days are short – we need to redeem the time because the days are evil (*Ephesians 5.16*).

When we think of time compared with eternity you and I only have a very small slot in the history of this world to work for Jesus; and we need to work for Jesus – we need to work, friends.

This was also a **living church** – *‘I know your works. See, I have set before you an open door, and no one can shut it; for you have a little strength, have kept My word, and have not denied My name.’*

Philadelphia was a faithful church, but up the road was Sardis; and Sardis had such a good name, such a good reputation; Sardis was big and prospering numerically. But here at Philadelphia they were known as the little church. Those in Sardis would look upon Philadelphia a bit condescendingly, as if they were saying, *‘Can anything good come out of Nazareth?’* (*John 1.46*). Perhaps they would despise them, thinking that they themselves were a big church.

But here Jesus, making this statement, encourages the church. They did have spiritual life! And that is the most important thing – spiritual life! They had a little strength – they did not have a big number but they did have a little strength, only a little strength, and they had life! Jesus makes this statement to encourage the church. You see, it is better to have a little strength than to be described by the Head of the Church as being a dead church, as Sardis was, with all its numerical prosperity, and all its seeming strength. The eye of the all-important Judge knows the situation – the church at Philadelphia was very, very precious in His sight.

But then, they were a **church that had kept His Word**; *‘You have a little strength, have kept My word, and have not denied My name.’* While under attack this church had maintained its adherence to the teaching of God’s Word. They had decisively and deliberately decided to obey the Word of God by faith in Jesus’ name. The church had been

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tested and proved in this matter before the blessing of the open door, in terms of their service, came to them. They were tested first; and then the Lord opened the door for them.

So it is with the Church. God has to test us at times; can He trust us with the Gospel? Can He trust us with having an outreach ministry in Ashford? Can He trust us to bring people in from the town? Will we care for them? Will we spread the Gospel? Will we have a concern for their never-dying souls?

Philadelphia was proved to be faithful – they had the truth within them; they were a living church, and Jesus said, ‘I am the One Who opens and no one shuts. See, I have set before you an open door – an open door for service. You have kept my Word, you have not denied My name.’

The city of Philadelphia had suffered a huge earthquake, and had had to be rebuilt. It was then given another name, but the citizens of the city fought to retain the old name of Philadelphia. Finally they got their way and the rebuilt city was renamed Philadelphia. So, like the citizens who did not want to deny the original name of the city, Jesus says to the church here at Philadelphia, ‘You have not denied My name; you have not preached another Jesus; in all the testing time, amidst the earthquake, amidst the history of this city, you understand the significance of the name of Jesus. You have not denied My name.’

When they were pressed to renounce His name amongst the idolaters, they stood firm. When they were pressed to compromise on the deity of Christ they stood firm. When they were tempted to compromise and say you could have a mixture of the Christian religion and the Jewish religion and respect each one equally they said, ‘No, it is Jesus only for us. We will not deny the name of Jesus. He and He alone is the way of salvation.’ So they stood firm on the deity of Christ, they stood firm on the perfection of Christ – He is holy; He is true; He is Lord. They stood firm on the all-sufficiency of Christ.

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If we turn to *Matthew 10.33* we see the significance of not denying the name of Jesus:

‘But whoever denies Me before men, him I will also deny before My Father who is in heaven.’

You see the importance here, friends, of loyalty to Jesus; of not denying His Name. We must realise the importance of loyalty to Christ.

‘If we endure, we shall also reign with Him. If we deny Him, He also will deny us’ 2 Timothy 2.12.

‘[You] have not denied My name.’ Friends, as we look to the future, there will be increasing pressure to deny the name of the Lord Jesus through legislation; and there will be increasing efforts to compromise by saying that you can accept certain things – you can deny the authority of the Lord Jesus just a little, but that you are not really doing so. But the Lord Jesus says to the church at Philadelphia, *‘[You] have kept My word, and have not denied My name’*. Friends, we need grace; we cannot do this in our own strength. So much depends upon our relationship with God; so much depends upon our relationship with the Lord Jesus.

The church at Philadelphia, then, had kept the command of Christ to persevere. *‘Because you have kept My command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth’* (verse 10). ‘You will be kept in the time of trial; you have the truth within you; you are on the right foundation; you have attended to the first love – you have attended to the first essentials of doctrine; you understand, by God’s grace, and you have kept My command to persevere.’ They patiently persevered in the Gospel of Jesus Christ – signs of a faithful church, a working church, a living church, a church that keeps the Word of God, a church that confesses the name of Christ and does not deny His name. It was a church that persevered in the right way.

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In response to these precious signs of a faithful church three promises came to these people at Philadelphia. First of all, there was **an open door**. They were going to be effective and ultimately eternally blessed. *I have set before you an open door, and no one can shut it.*

Now we need to remember that there was a time when the members of this church at Philadelphia were in prison – that is, they were shut up, slaves of Satan. They were locked up in their lives, in their old nature; and yet the open door of the Gospel came to them. The Lord opens the door through which all those ordained to eternal life must enter to be truly saved.

To appreciate the miracle of this open door to salvation I want to look at it first in terms of salvation and the Gospel; then secondly in terms of the open door for service, witness and effectiveness for the church.

Firstly, this church, this people, had known the open door of salvation to them. Jesus Christ is the door and they had gone through that door. They had come to the Lord Jesus Christ and put their trust in Him, and they had been freed. The Psalmist says, *'Bring my soul out of prison' (Psalm 142.7)*. Those of you here who are unbelievers, who do not yet know what it is to walk with the Lord Jesus Christ – do you not know that you are in prison? Do you not know that you are actually locked up in the prison of self and your old nature? You are locked up! You are not free! You are only free inasmuch as you can walk around the prison of Satan – you have freedom to walk around but you cannot get out. You are locked in this prison; you are locked in the prison of condemnation under the Law, in the prison of fear and unbelief, temptation and pride, materialism and idolatry, and lust. It is a prison, and when you consider this in the context of what sin is really like it has a grip upon you. You cannot get out by yourself; you are helpless and hopeless in this condition until God intervenes in your life and you cry out to Him.

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The members of this church at Philadelphia, before their conversion, were locked up in the prison room of sin; but the Lord Jesus Christ had done something wonderful for them – He had set them free, He had liberated them as they looked to Him.

Jesus said, *‘I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture’ (John 10.9)*. There is a sense of freedom here. Jesus is the door by which we can be freed from the prison house of Satan; and He had opened the door of salvation to them as unworthy sinners. They had had the Gospel preached to them, and the Gospel was applied with power. They saw by faith in Christ that He was the only hope of redemption and deliverance from sin. They heard through the Gospel that Christ had come to save sinners imprisoned in Satan’s cell; they heard of the wonderful love of God to them, that He had sent His only Son to die for them on the Cross. And they heard the amazing truth that Christ had suffered in their place and stead for their sins; that He had endured the eternal punishment due for their sins, on their behalf, to set them free. He had delivered them from the wrath of God, from an eternity in hell. He had set before them an open door, that they might go free, and by faith they had walked through that door.

The Gospel states that Jesus Christ has set an open door before us – *‘I am the door.’* When Christ died upon the Cross the veil of the temple was rent in two, and this depicts for us an open way to God, a way of forgiveness, peace and reconciliation. We can be justified by faith in Christ Jesus.

Today the door of salvation remains open – it is an open door that is set before you. But it will not always be the case. This same Jesus is Lord, and He opens and no man shuts, and He shuts and no man can open. The question is, will you understand the absolute necessity of seeing Jesus as the door to freedom, the door out of this prison house of unbelief and temptation and sin? There is a way, and He has

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the key. He unlocks the door for you, poor sinner, in the Gospel, as you look to Jesus Christ and Him alone. You can be free from this prison house – you go through the door; the door is Christ and He has opened the door. And when He opens the door for you and you look to Him by faith no one can shut that door. Trust only in the Lord Jesus Christ!

But then, in the context of this passage, this open door specifically refers to the future witness of this church – ‘*I have set before you an open door.*’ Christ is going to unstop the ears of the deaf, He is going to open the eyes of the blind spiritually; He is going to open a door of mission for this church through the Gospel. The Word is going to have great impact because Christ has opened the door. He has opened His storehouse of blessing, and there will be showers of blessing coming from Heaven. This church will be abundantly blessed spiritually, abundantly blessed in its evangelism. Even its greatest enemies will be forced to acknowledge the effectiveness of the door God has opened for them, including those who are of the synagogue of Satan, those of the liberal church, those who deny Creation, those who deny that the Word of God is inspired, those who deny that the *Book of Genesis* is absolute truth. This may sound strong, friends, but we have to understand very seriously that anyone who denies the Word of God is of the synagogue of Satan and is not speaking on behalf of the Lord. So if you are not speaking on behalf of the Lord, and there is no middle road, you are speaking on behalf of Satan. Are you the Lord’s, or Satan’s?

As we speak on behalf of the Lord, the Word of God, we must believe by faith the Word from *Genesis* to *Revelation*. Your greatest enemies are those who despise you and say you must be out of your mind to believe in Creation, in Jesus Christ as the only way of salvation, and to believe that *Genesis* through to *Revelation* is the inspired, infallible Word of God. They say, ‘People do not think like that nowadays. We are more intelligent, we think more freely, we have looked into all this

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and we have worked out a way whereby we can take the good and leave out the difficult bits.’

So Christ says to those who are enemies, *‘Indeed I will make those of the synagogue of Satan, who say they are Jews and are not, but lie – indeed I will make them come and worship before your feet, and to know that I have loved you.’* Friends, we may be despised, we may be rejected, but there will come a time when people will see that, actually, we speak the truth, and were right to remain loyal to the Word of God. And if it does not happen in our lifetime it will certainly happen on the Day of Judgment.

So, friends, the message is to stand firm on the Truth; stay loyal to the Lord Jesus Christ; do not deny the name of Jesus, however the stream of popular church opinion is going; however much you hear around you of this New Calvinism, this new way, this more sophisticated way whereby you can accept theistic evolution and things like that. Friends, do not go down that path! Do not deny the name of Jesus! Do not deny His Word! It will cost you; you will be unpopular; you will have people say all manner of things against you. But you are not here to please men – you are here to please your heavenly Father, and it is a privilege to be persecuted for Christ’s sake; it is an honour – your badge of honour – to realise that you are walking in the narrow way, looking unto Jesus.

And so He set before them an open door. Christ has the key to blessing; He has the key to revival; He has the key to growth. Why do we say here at Mount Zion, Ashford, that we are a Christ-centred church? One of the reasons is because this is the key to revival; this is the key to growth. The more we look to Christ the more the Holy Spirit will bless us, friends. Look through the history of the Church, at the Puritans and at the way they preached. They were Christ-centred. Look at Spurgeon – he was Christ-centred. All his sermons were full of Christ, and the Lord gave him five thousand members in his

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church because he would not deny the name of Jesus. It meant that he had to come out of the Baptist Union because of its liberal view of Christ; and he was persecuted. In the end it broke his heart, and he died at the age of fifty-five. He went to Glory, a glorious entrance because he had not denied the name of Jesus.

So this open door of salvation was set before the church at Philadelphia as unworthy sinners, and now He sets before them **an open door of opportunity for serving**. You see the ongoing fruit of salvation. We have the open door of salvation through Jesus Christ and then, as we come to serve Him and believe in Him, we have the open door for service. The Lord has opened the door through which we can serve, according to His pleasure. The lives of the members of the church at Philadelphia had been turned upside down by the Gospel. They had been transformed to walk with the Lord. When we follow the Lord He will give us opportunities to grow and serve Him in many ways; the opportunity for witness; to grow in grace and develop in our spiritual understanding through His Word; an open door to truth; an open door to wisdom that is from God; an open door to every spiritual blessing.

Do we not know that in Christ Jesus is every spiritual blessing? As we look to Him by faith there is an open door to that treasure house of spiritual blessing; the opportunity to live according to the example of Christ; the opportunity to give of our substance willingly to the need of the working church; the opportunity to receive by faith the precious promises in Christ; the opportunity to work for the Lord, knowing that He will open doors of service for us, according to His Word. This is an authoritative statement from the Lord, the King of kings, the Lord of lords, the Head of the Church. He opens and no one shuts, He shuts and no one can open.

Finally, **the open door to Heaven** –

'Behold, I am coming quickly! Hold fast what you have, that no

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one may take your crown. He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more. I will write on 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 I will write on him My new name' v11-12.

The church at Philadelphia was experiencing a time of persecution and opposition. It came from so many angles, yet in the midst of this persecution the Lord says, 'I have set before you an open door to Heaven' – not only an open door of salvation, not only an open door to service, but an open door to Heaven.

Anticipate this, friends! You are free in Him. Remember, the door of Heaven will always remain open for you. Whatever you experience here on earth in opposition and hindrances, the door of Heaven remains open to you by faith in Jesus Christ, and no one can shut it because you are safe in the Father's hand. The believer has this wonderful prospect, something truly to look forward to – an open door to Heaven; salvation in Christ Jesus is secure and sure because He has set before us, as believers, an open door to Heaven, and our confidence of this reality is in the shed blood of Jesus Christ. By faith we overcome, through Him. There are many voices that might tell you the door is closed, you are unworthy, you are a failure, you are undeserving, you will be left out. Satan comes with all these terrible insinuations and he reminds you of all your failures, and of all the times when you should have been witnessing and you have not been. But Christ comes to you, and He says, 'I have set before you an open door and no one can shut it'. No one can shut it! So our call, as we follow God, is to look on, press on, looking unto Jesus.

Turn with me to *Revelation 21*:

'Also she had a great and high wall with twelve gates, and twelve angels at the gates, and names written on them, which are the names of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel: three gates

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on the east, three gates on the north, three gates on the south, and three gates on the west. Now the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb' Revelation 21.12-14

This is speaking of the amazing city, Jerusalem, but if we look on to verse 25 –

'Its gates shall not be shut at all by day (there shall be no night there).'

This is a wonderful prospect for all the Lord's people – the gates are open in Heaven, constantly open, because they are constantly receiving the Lord's people who have gone to Glory. The gates are open, friends, there is no night there, and the gates are open all day. That is Heaven.

'I have set before you an open door.' An open door for the Gospel, an open door for service, an open door for Heaven. And you are going to be kept, Jesus says. You are going to be kept! *'Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown.'* Hold fast by faith. *'He who overcomes I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more. I will write on 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 I will write on him My new name.'* 'You are going to be kept, I will write on you My new name.' All this is in the security of the Lord Jesus Christ. They were going to be kept in persecution. Twelve members of this church were martyred very soon after this, together with Bishop Polycarp; but their souls were kept in persecution.

'I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth.' 'I will keep you; I have written on you my My new name; you are going to be immovable; you are going to be a pillar in the temple of My God and you

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shall go out no more. You are overcomers in Christ Jesus; you are more than conquerors.’

The city of Philadelphia was on an earthquake fault line; the strong pillars of the building broke under the strain. But the Lord’s people are not collapsing pillars, they are abiding pillars. And Christ is using picture language here – to be a pillar in God’s temple is speaking of the closest, richest, loveliest, most beautiful relationship possible with God. God’s people have written upon them the name of God, the name of the city of God, Christ’s name; and this speaks to us of the perfect unity with God and His glorious Church in Christ Jesus.

This is the eternal prospect of the Lord’s people – a most glorious subject. Remember these promises to the working and faithful church – you are going to be effective and eternally blessed; you are going to be kept, and you are going to be immoveable in Christ Jesus.

9. LAODICEA – THE LUKEWARM CHURCH

REVELATION 3.14-22

‘And to the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write, “These things says the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God: ‘I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth. Because you say, ‘I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing’—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked—I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see. As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me. To him who overcomes I will grant to sit 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.”’

We come to the final message given to us by the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ to the seven churches in Asia. Now, despite the fact that the seven messages were given to specific churches at the time, the content of these letters, the conditions described, the teaching and the action required, are timeless. The applications are to be made to the varying states of the Christian Church until the end of the world. This is one of the grand purposes of the Word of God. And any of the

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conditions described in the message given to the church at Laodicea could be applicable to the state of a particular local church today.

So we come to this message given to the church at Laodicea. Once again we see that the Lord Jesus brings a message relevant to the condition of the city at that time. The Lord Jesus Christ has a perfect knowledge of each city, and of its culture. He understands more about the conditions in each city than any other person.

Laodicea was a great banking centre. It dealt in pure gold. So Jesus speaks of gold being refined in the fire. The clothes shops of Laodicea were renowned for their beautiful garments, which were made from the rich glossy wool of a particular breed of black sheep. So Jesus speaks about white garments. Laodicea was also famous for its eye salve ointment, which was manufactured in this city. So Jesus speaks of anointing their eyes. The Lord Jesus brings a message that the people would understand, that they could relate to, and that they would understand even culturally in the day in which they were living.

But Laodicea was a very tolerant city. It tolerated different religions – they co-existed together unchallenged under the banner of their great prosperity. People were doing very nicely in the city; they lived under the shining face of material prosperity; it was the wealthy city. And so the church at Laodicea sat very comfortably in its affluent lifestyle, in this general aura of well-being materially, financially and prosperously. Well, the Lord Jesus Christ brings this very challenging and yet solemn message to the church at Laodicea.

So we look again at the Speaker, the Lord Jesus Christ. The loving Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church, comes to rebuke and chasten this church. But I want us to notice the way in which He does it. What is the attitude of the Head of the Church? In verse 19 He says, *‘As many as I love I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent.’*

Here we have the Lord Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church, coming

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with a solemn warning, but coming with a loving attitude. And as Christ addresses Himself to the church at Laodicea He does so, giving three distinctive titles about Himself. These titles express His deity, His humanity and His eternity.

Firstly we read of the Lord Jesus in verse 14, *‘These things says the Amen.’* This is speaking about His deity. This word describes what is fixed, true and unchangeable about the Lord Jesus Christ and what He says. He is the final truth; He is ‘the Amen’ – it shall be so. These are the words of the eternal Son of God, and when He is described as ‘the Amen’ there is nothing further to say. We cannot add to this, we cannot take anything away – He is the Amen; He is the conclusion of the whole matter, and He comes to say, ‘It shall be so.’ There are no ifs or buts – it shall be so. When we use the word ‘Amen’ at the conclusion of our prayers we mean ‘may it be so.’ When we really say ‘Amen’ sincerely we are saying, ‘May this be so; may the prayers uttered by our Pastor be so.’ And the ‘Amen’ can be very encouraging – it is biblical to say ‘Amen.’

Christ, then, is God’s final word to man. There will not be any more words to man about the great way of salvation, the great way of God, the great truth of God. It is revealed and manifested in Jesus Christ, the ultimate Amen. He is God’s final word to man. There is nothing more to say than this statement made here by Christ to the Church. God the Father has absolute confidence in His Son: He has nothing more to add. The Holy Spirit has nothing more to add because the Holy Spirit is working through Christ, and God’s will is working through Christ. So when Christ speaks it is God speaking; and therefore He is the Amen; His deity is the Amen.

Secondly, His humanity – He is the Faithful and True Witness. From the manger to the cross the Lord Jesus was the Faithful and True Witness. He was the perfect testimony and witness for God, and He died for that testimony; He is the revelation of God here upon this earth.

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The Lord Jesus Christ said in the *Gospel of John*,

'No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him' John 1.18.

So the Lord Jesus Christ, Who is in the bosom of the Father, in absolute eternal, unbroken fellowship with the Father – He has declared the Father to us.

When Jesus was speaking to Pilate He said, *'For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice' (John 18.37).* 'This is my testimony; this is my revelation; I am the truth. I am the Witness to the truth and I am the Witness to the glorious character of the Father in His love and mercy, His truth and justice and majesty.'

He is *'the Beginning of the creation of God'* – that is the third characteristic given here. This means that Christ is the very source of all creation, together with the Father and the Spirit. We read in *John*:

'In the beginning was the Word [that is Jesus], and the Word was with God, and the Word was God [Jesus the Son of God]. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made' John 1.1-3

Then again in the *Letter to the Colossians*:

'He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist' Colossians 1.15-17.

So when we speak about creation we do so by faith, believing in the Word of God about creation. We honour God, and when we question

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creation we are dishonouring God, because God is our Creator, and Father, Son and Holy Spirit were all engaged in this glorious work of creation. But we are particularly encouraged to look to the Lord Jesus Christ, because God the Father was pleased to work all things through His Son. So the Lord Jesus Christ speaks about Himself as being '*the Beginning of the creation of God*'.

But, having spoken about the Speaker, and attempted to exalt His wonderful name, the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ, let us move on to the state of the church at Laodicea. And what a comparison.

'I know your works', Jesus said. Now this is the seventh time that Jesus uses the word 'know'. He knows all about the situation. He knows all about the situation among us, friends.

Now maybe the members of the church at Laodicea were waiting for their message. These messages were given consecutively to John by the Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, but they would have then been sent to the various churches, and Laodicea was the last in the queue. They had heard that there had been messages given to the sister churches, and maybe they were expecting a message of commendation. Well, if Philadelphia had a message of commendation surely they of Laodicea should also be commended. Yes, they considered themselves to be in good order, to be strong and rich. They were rich and had become wealthy and had need of nothing. They were the ultimate church, they had need of nothing. They did not need anyone to come and give them any advice. They had everything worked out; they had their activities in the church; they had God's smile upon their providence. 'Oh yes', they thought, 'we must be in the right place, we must be doing what's right; we've got big houses, we've got big vehicles we ride about in and we have rich garments – look at the way the Lord is blessing us in our lives. We must be right.'

But Jesus says, '*And do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked.*' That is actually the state of your soul. You may

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have a big house, you may have grand clothes, but do you not know that you are in a miserable state spiritually. But they did not see it like that until Jesus spoke to them. They could finance all the church projects; in their judgment they were rich – they had reached a favourable judgment upon themselves. “*For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways,*” says the Lord’ (Isaiah 55.8). In the eyes of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ (speaking reverently) they were disgusting. They actually made Him feel sick. The problem with the church at Laodicea was that they were coming to worship with their bodies but without their hearts.

If someone is rebelling against God and walking in rebellion against God, he does not come to God. This is why Jesus spoke about being neither cold nor hot. The rebellious person is not being hypocritical, in the sense that he does not even come to God. He is a rebel, without any desire to come to God – that is what and where he is. And in a sense, although he is in a dreadful condition, and a dangerous condition spiritually, at least he is honest – he is not trying to be what he is not.

By contrast a believer walking with God comes to Him by faith in Jesus Christ, acknowledging his sin, trusting only in the righteousness of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, and he is received graciously.

But these people were portraying themselves as Christians, they were portraying themselves as church members, but their hearts were nowhere near the Lord Jesus Christ and His Word, and they had no real desire after godliness. Yet they were coming to worship. And Jesus said, ‘You disgust Me. You make Me feel sick. You are lukewarm, you are neither cold nor hot.’

Now the Laodicean church would have fully understood this illustration because the water that served the city of Laodicea was always lukewarm. It came from springs, but it had to travel along a conduit or aqueduct five kilometres from the city. So on arrival in the city the

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water was neither hot nor cold; the water as it arrived in the city was unpalatable. It had to be boiled. If anyone didn't realise this and took a gulp of the water they would spit it out of their mouths straightaway. Now this illustration, being understood by the church in its particular situation at Laodicea, would have shocked them. They considered themselves rich and Christ considered them repulsive.

So here is this church in a condition of complacent indifference, half-hearted hypocrisy, with no real spiritual thirst, no fervent prayer, no burden for the lost, a church life that conformed to the world with spiritual life not a priority any longer; and every man doing what was right in his own sight. And these people drew near unto the Lord with their mouths, honouring the Lord with their lips, but their heart was far from Him (see *Matthew 15.8*).

So how did these conditions come about? Well, the church was careless about whom it received into membership; it rushed people into membership and did not spend time considering and going over the details. It did not understand the need to examine the heart. Numerical growth was more important to them than spiritual growth. The members themselves had become accustomed to mixing the carnal with the spiritual. The result was like when you mix cold and hot together – everything became lukewarm.

So the church had become careless, and the church members were satisfied with outward form alone. They knew what to say, they knew how to behave, they knew how to listen, they would come and go; they were very polite, and yet they remained spiritually unmoved. They were very proper, everything looked all right on the outside and yet they were spiritually unmoved.

The saddest and most solemn thing about the church at Laodicea was that they had become unconcerned about their condition. That was just how it was – there was no mourning over their condition, no acknowledgement of or mourning over their sin. We read in *Psalms 51*

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of David making his confession before the Lord. David said, *'Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight'* (Psalm 51.4). There was recognition by David of the sinfulness of his heart, but it did not stop there. It caused him to cry to the Lord for mercy and grace. Not so at Laodicea.

Another sad thing about Laodicea was that they thought their condition was acceptable. They thought they could just walk into church and all they had to do was present their bodies; they could just come along as if they were worshipping and it was not important whether they were worshipping in their hearts; they could just come along and present themselves before the Lord without any thought or preparation. The Old Testament describes such people as being haughty in the Holy Place; it describes them as strutting about, a bit like a proud peacock. They were just coming in, and image was everything. This condition is one of the great ploys of Satan in this world today – a person who is simply content with the outward form, and can convince even the most experienced preacher that they are a Christian. Even the most experienced pastor can be deceived about the condition of some people. This is a very solemn situation. Matthew Henry says that these people were involved in the ordinances of God's house but they forsook the God of the ordinances.

Well, a complacent, take-it-or-leave-it person can be very difficult to reach spiritually, and so this message came as a warning to true believers who had themselves become half-hearted, who had allowed themselves to be sucked into this lukewarm state. And the message came to warn those in the church who had never really repented in the first place, never really been born again, although they were members of this church at Laodicea. So Jesus calls to repentance backslidden believers, and also those who may be in church membership but in reality have never truly come to the Lord.

In verse 18 the Lord Jesus says, *'I counsel you to buy from Me gold*

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refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see. As many as I love I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent.' Here is the action of man.

Now Jesus is not saying here that you can purchase a right relationship with God in and of yourselves. When Jesus says, *'I counsel you to buy from Me gold'*, He is talking about faith. In a sense faith is a way of purchasing. It is not that we literally purchase something but we can only receive Jesus Christ by faith. Without faith we cannot receive forgiveness. Actually, without faith we cannot repent. Repentance has an element of faith in it. We must believe that God is holy, we must believe that God is gracious to receive those who repent, and that is in itself a part of faith.

So the Lord Jesus says, through the prophet Isaiah in the Old Testament, *'Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money [how can you buy if you have no money?], come [by faith], buy and eat. Yes, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price' (Isaiah 55.1)*. *'Come to Me, I am the One who can forgive you and cleanse you and fulfil you spiritually.'*

Later in *Isaiah* He says, *'To console those who mourn in Zion, to give them beauty for ashes [it is a gift of grace], the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness, that they may be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord that He may be glorified' (Isaiah 61.3)*.

The Holy Spirit convicts us of sin, and maybe as you read this passage you say, *'Oh, this passage is speaking about me.'* And as the Spirit convicts you, and you mourn in your heart, there is a promise here for you from the Word of God. *'To console those who mourn in Zion, to give them beauty for ashes.'* Beauty for ashes; joy for mourning; praise

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for the spirit of heaviness; righteousness from the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

'I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for He has clothed me with garments of salvation, He has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with ornaments, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels' Isaiah 61.10.

I will rejoice in the Lord, He has done this. As I come by faith, as it were, I buy from the Lord Jesus Christ gold refined in the fire that I may be rich in white garments, that I may be clothed, that the shame of my nakedness may not be revealed, and I anoint my eyes with eye salve that I may see. Oh, as I come by faith I receive these precious gifts from God through Jesus Christ, freely. I receive His righteousness; I receive His forgiveness; my eyes are opened and I see spiritual things again, or for the first time, and I have this precious gold from Christ.

The precious riches of Christ – forgiveness, peace, His righteousness. Oh friends, this is the wonderful blessing of repentance by faith. There is this wonderful exchange that takes place – our sin is exchanged for Christ's righteousness, all according to God's grace. You remember how, in the Old Testament in the *Book of the prophet Zechariah*, we read of Joshua, and he was clothed with filthy garments.

'Now Joshua was clothed with filthy garments, and was standing before the Angel [the Angel of the Lord]. Then He answered and spoke to those who stood before Him, saying, "Take away the filthy garments from him." And to him He said, "See, I have removed your iniquity from you, and I will clothe you with rich robes"' Zechariah 3.3-4.

This is the wonderful exchange of grace – we come to God in repentance by faith with our sin and our uncleanness and our unworthiness;

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and as we come by faith to the precious Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ He says, ‘Take away those filthy garments from him and I will cause your iniquity to pass from you and I will give you my righteousness.’

This is what we call ‘the grace exchange’, and this is what Jesus in His love is calling us to – the wonderful blessing of repentance, the wonderful blessing of faith. This exchange in salvation is an incredible and awesome transaction. And this exchange takes place according to God’s plan. In His love He determined that His only beloved Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, should take the place of needy sinners; and His Son willingly obeyed, and came from the heavenly glory above and took upon Himself a body and became like one of us, yet pure. He lived a perfect life and obeyed God’s holy law all His life; and in love – the precious eternal love of God – He went to Calvary’s cross and under the overruling sovereignty of God He suffered and died. He bore the eternal punishment for the sins of all those who put their trust in Him, all those who will prove to be those ordained unto eternal life. He made this perfect atonement on our behalf, and in this great exchange Christ not only takes the burden of our sin and guilt; He not only deals with the problem, but He actually assigns to the repenting sinner His own righteousness.

And this exchange is available, according to the Word of God, to all those who truly repent of their sin and put their trust in the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. They are then viewed by God the Father as perfect as Christ Himself. The wonder and the beauty of salvation is seen in the grace and love of God in providing such a way – a way whereby needy sinners, backsliding sinners, lukewarm sinners, can be reconciled to Him, in Christ, according to His free grace. So the Apostle Paul says, ‘*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*’ (Romans 1.7).

If you went for a job interview and you were honest with your prospective employer, saying that actually you were unworthy, and

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unreliable, that there would be a lot of baggage that you brought from your past employment, and there were a lot of issues in your life, and you could not even provide a reference; that you had nothing to commend yourself to your prospective employer but that you would like to be in his employ; and then that person said to you, 'I am going to take you, I am going to employ you, and I am going to look after you and take care of you', you would think that would be amazing grace, wouldn't you?

Far more amazing is that Jesus Christ the Lord says, according to the God of all grace,

'Come to Me all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light' Matthew 11.28-30.

So the Lord Jesus speaks to them in terms that they could be familiar with: gold refined in the fire – seek your eternal and pure riches in Christ; white garments – clothe yourself by faith with the robe of Christ's righteousness; anoint your eyes – seek the anointing, healing eye salve of the Holy Spirit of God that He might reveal the truth to you, that you might look at the Bible with new eyes.

Those of us who have been converted can testify that there came a Sunday when we went to church and opened the Bible and hymnbook and thought they were different books. For years we had had this Bible, perhaps from Sunday School, and we used to open it and follow what the minister was saying in his reading but it did not mean anything to us. And now we opened the Bible and hymnbook and thought they must have changed; but this was all because God was speaking to us and working in our lives – our eyes had been anointed and opened, uncovering our blindness.

This is what needs to happen if we are in such a state as these Laodiceans were. This lukewarm state is a state of blindness and,

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friends, we need a new vision of Jesus – that is the only answer. Look with me at *Isaiah 6*. It happened to Isaiah, a man who was a minister, a renowned man in his day and generation, but the Lord came to Isaiah:

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple. Above it stood seraphim; each one had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one cried to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory!” And the posts of the door were shaken by the voice of him who cried out, and the house was filled with smoke. So I said: “Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips’ *Isaiah 6.1-5a.*

Some people say that when the Apostle Paul says in *Romans 7.24* ‘*O wretched man that I am!*’ that he cannot have been speaking after he was converted because he would never have said that then. But you will say it, friends, if you have a vision of Jesus – you will if you have a vision of Jesus!

‘So I said: “Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips, for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.” Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a live coal which he had taken with the tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth with it, and said: “Behold, this has touched your lips; your iniquity is taken away, and your sin purged”’ *Isaiah 6.5-7.*

Oh, we have to go to God’s altar, friends. We have to go to Calvary, we have to go to that almighty altar of God whereby God the Father was pleased to strike His Son on behalf of needy sinners, that we might be forgiven, that our iniquity might be taken away. This is where we need to go, we have to go to Calvary. We need a vision of Jesus.

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'Be zealous and repent', the Lord Jesus Christ says. But He says, 'It is because I love you that I rebuke and chasten you.' This is a great comfort to us. We may be challenged by the message; God might be speaking to us under conviction, but come to verse 19, friends, by faith. Run into the refuge this morning, by faith. Quickly come.

'As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent.'

Turn to *Hebrews*.

'And you have forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you as to sons: "My son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; for whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives." If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? But if you are without chastening, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate and not sons. Furthermore, we have had human fathers who corrected us, and we paid them respect. Shall we not much more readily be in subjection to the Father of spirits and live? For they indeed for a few days chastened us as seemed best to them, but He for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness. Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. Therefore strengthen the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be dislocated, but rather be healed' Hebrews 12.5-13.

This is God's way.

Then finally, in verses 20-22 it says, '*Behold I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me. To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down*

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with My Father on His throne. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'

Jesus stands at the door and knocks. He knocks at the door of your heart. And here is God's sovereignty, His timing. Maybe in your life it is time for God to knock at the door of your heart. '*If anyone hears*' – this is God's Holy Spirit causing you to hear, causing you to take notice, causing you to respond. Here is God's sovereignty – '*Behold I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door..'*' This is the great act of faith; man's will under the influence of God's Holy Spirit. Yes, you open the door, but you can only open it by faith, and you can only do it with God's help.

*'I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door I will come in to him and **dine** with him and he with Me.'*

The outcome of this action is that you will be an overcomer. How do we overcome? We overcome by the blood of the Lamb.

'And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death' Revelation 12.11.

This is overcoming by the blood of the Lamb, by the Lord Jesus Christ. The wonderful fruit and experience from this is that you will have fellowship with Christ. Here is one of the texts which describes the grand purpose of God for your Christian life.

'I will come in to him and dine with him and he with me.' Fellowship with Christ – taught of Him; feeding from His Word; and Christ also appreciating the garden of your soul, taking in the fragrance from your garden, the fragrance of repentance, the fragrance of faith, the fragrance of love, the fragrance of working and serving the Lord and following Him and His ways; the fragrance of your testimony. You see, it says here that Jesus said, '*I will come in to him and dine with him and he with Me.'*

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There is this wonderful harmony, and the *Book of the Song of Solomon* speaks about Him coming into His garden and eating His pleasant fruits (*Song 4.16*). Is that true of your soul? Can you say to Jesus, 'Come in, Lord Jesus, come in to my heart and dine'? Is the spirit of repentance in your soul, in your heart? Do you have the spirit of faith, that desires after the Lord and after His Word? Is Jesus welcome, is He the chief Guest in your life?

Well, the church at Laodicea outwardly professed that they were united to Christ, but communion with Christ was something that they could do without. They professed, but they didn't commune. There was an outward show of unity, but there was no inward union. Fellowship with Christ is begun here on earth and perfected in its power in Heaven.

'To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne. He who has an ear [he who is listening] let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'