

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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God's Message to Seven Churches: Introduction

John to the seven churches which are in Asia: Grace be unto you, and peace, from him which is, and which was, and which is to come; and from the seven Spirits which are before his throne; And from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, and the first begotten of the dead, and the prince of the kings of the earth. Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood, And hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father; to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen. Behold, he cometh with clouds; and every eye shall see him, and they also which pierced him: and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of him. Even so, Amen. I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, saith the Lord, which is, and which was, and which is to come, the Almighty. (Revelation 1:4-8, KJV 1900)

The Holy Spirit directed John to write the last letter in our New Testament to seven churches, all located in the southern region of what we know as Turkey. They were real, individual, local churches. Despite "Church age" representation ideas¹, there is nothing in these letters to indicate that John had anything in mind other than the individual needs and problems of each local church, as revealed to him by the Holy Spirit. There is also no exegetical basis for dividing the Book of Revelation between the first three chapters and the remainder of the book. Advocates of the highly symbolic "Church age" idea allege that a hiatus shall occur near the end of time when the institution of the New Testament church era shall end, followed by a hypothetical prophetic parenthesis in time. This view interprets all of Revelation from the fourth chapter to the end as referring to this hypothetical age. Surely, if the Holy Spirit had such a vastly different intent with these chapters, He would have indicated as much in the introduction to the letter, but we find no hint at such a division in the message of Revelation.

Further, ideas that impose highly symbolized and fictional representation onto every horn, paw, and image in Revelation always loses focus on the central figure in the letter, the victorious, reigning, and glorious Lord Jesus Christ. And these explanations also contradict the letter's essential intent, stated in its title and in the introductory verses. The Holy Spirit intended this letter to be read as a simple, comforting, encouraging "Revelation," not a hopeless obfuscation of God's message to His people. The suffering saints who first received this letter were being persecuted to the death. They didn't have time to delve endlessly into one bizarre allegorical interpretation after

¹ The "Church age" idea holds that each of the seven churches "Represents" a unique era in New Testament church history rather than being an individual church in the first century. It usually accompanies the various dispensational theories.

another. They needed a powerful, focused message that would comfort and encourage them immediately, and the Lord sent them just such a message in this letter.

If we accept the simple inspired comments in the introduction, the whole letter was directed to these seven churches, and should be so interpreted. The populist dispensational views of our time often impose onto Revelation many ideas that cannot be supported by the letter or by Scripture in general. Let me give you a reasonable outline of the book of Revelation that depicts the whole book as a complete letter, written to these seven churches and intended for their encouragement and need.²

² This outline of Revelation is based on material presented in ***Worthy is the Lamb*** by Ray Summers. Summers and Leon Morris' "NICNT" commentary on Revelation are two of the most consistent and, I believe, accurate explanations of Revelation in print today. Morris' commentary is available in most Christian book stores, and Summers' book is available to Kindle readers. Both books refute, more by the power of the actual message than by engaged point-by-point examination, the whole dispensational paradigm that destroys the amazing message of Revelation to the contemporary suffering believer. Both men follow John where he leads instead of wresting his message to fit into an extra-Biblical worldview that Scripture will not sustain. One simple question, if answered by Scripture, refutes the dispensational view. In Revelation 20:4, John clearly identifies the participants in the thousand year blessing that he there describes. Unless you can accurately describe yourself as a "soul", having been "...beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God..." a martyr for your faith, you cannot claim personal participation or entitlement to that thousand year blessing. Forget "Left Behind" fictional fantasy and study Scripture's factual assurance, "...so shall we ***ever be with the Lord.***" (1 Thessalonians 4:17)

1. First chapter. Introduction and identification of the One who revealed this message to John, the Lord Jesus Christ. He is glorious, all-powerful, all-knowing, and wholly victorious.
2. Chapters 2-3. The recipients of the letter are named, and a mini-letter is written to each church to address their individual problems and needs, though the whole letter is to be circulated among the churches and read to them all. These churches are no different than a group of churches we might examine today. Some are in good spiritual health, despite their trials and the unfriendly world around them, while others struggle, partly because of trials from outside the church and partly because of problems they created for themselves. The more we examine the state of these seven churches the more we appreciate the need of the message of Revelation to all of them. Apocryphal letters in ancient cultures were designed to encourage beaten, down-trodden, and discouraged people with an upbeat, assuring message. Despite their present trials and gloomy outlook, God is on their side, and He shall intervene in His time and wholly defeat their adversaries. Ah, we need that message today, do we not?
3. Chapter 4. Once John has identified the true "Revealer" and the actual recipients of this letter, he is ready to raise the curtain and begin the actual drama of the message that the "Revealer" directed him to write and send to these churches. Chapters four and five parallel Jesus' words in John 14:1. In Chapter four, John both reminds and nudges his readers, "Ye believe in God." In Chapter five, John urges his readers, "Believe also in me." Here we see an amazing view through John's eyes into heaven. John sees God, firmly seated on His throne and ruling. None of the present persecutions—or persecutors—that so distressed these churches, and none of their own self-inflicted wounds in any way deterred or diminished Him or His rule. He is the Creator. He is the present Sovereign of the world that He created. He is not oblivious to their trials or to their needs.
4. Chapter 5. Now we look deeper into heaven's glory. We move from the sovereign Creator to the sovereign Redeemer. As the fourth chapter highlights the wisdom and power of God, the Creator, the fifth chapter emphasizes the victorious love and grace of the sovereign Redeemer. The book that God firmly held in His hand, containing the identity of the saved and of God's glorious provisions for them, is only

released to the Redeemer, not to anyone else. He alone can unseal the Book and explain its message and contents. He alone holds the power to "...save his people from their sins." (Matthew 1:21) Do not overlook the joy of heaven's onlookers as the Lamb takes the book and unveils its contents. Should we not also rejoice? (Luke 10:20)

5. Chapters 6-19. In these chapters we see one scenario after another that, once we get past the images, and the terror they stir in us if we look only at them, reveals the righteous judgment and the final victory the ruling Creator/Savior shall accomplish against all His enemies. We often read bizarre and incredible (literally so; not credible, when studied against the Scriptures themselves) interpretations that effectively forget the dominant figure in the whole book and become hopelessly lost and confused chasing one fantasy interpretation after another. A sure way to keep your bearings as you read Revelation is to never forget the central—and most important—figure in the whole letter, the One who sits on heaven's throne and the One who shares that throne with Him. (Revelation 3:21; "...as I also overcame, and am **set down with my Father** in his throne." Emphasis added) No enemy who rises against the glorious Christ succeeds in the end. The simple one line quip sums up God's intended message in Revelation, "**Jesus wins!**"
6. Chapters 20-22. The final victory and the glory of all God's chosen vessels of mercy is depicted in terms that could only empower and encourage these seven churches, not to mention you and me, in the trials of life. I can't tell you if heaven shall have literal gold-paved streets, but I can assuredly tell you, based on John's description in these chapters, that heaven shall be far more glorious than we can presently imagine.

If we, like one of the seven churches, overly focus on our limitations and failures, and on the obstacles that oppose our godly faith-walk, instead of keeping our faith's-eye on the King and His message, our joy in God dries up and dies. We can only realize present victory by looking at—and to—the Victor, whom Scripture describes as being "...the head over all things to the church..." (Ephesians 1:22-23) That, my friends, is John's intended message in Revelation. Do not become discouraged by the trials of life or the sufferings of this present time. They are nothing when considered against our final glory with our Savior. (Romans 8:18) This is Revelation's message to suffering Christians and churches, and it is the heartbeat of the gospel's

message to all believers today. This message, so preached and so believed, is the truth of which the Lord intended His church to serve as "...pillar and ground of the truth." (1 Timothy 3:15) David's dying words (2 Samuel 23:1-7) acknowledged that his house could not be compared to a cloudless day, but He rejoiced in God and in God's covenant promises. So should we. Revelation reminds us of that glorious, cloudless Day that we rejoice to see.

Little Zion Primitive Baptist Church
16434 Woodruff
Bellflower, California

Worship service each Sunday 10:30 A. M.
Joseph R. Holder Pastor