

The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia.

INTRODUCTION

It is not possible in the compass of a single 'Musings' document to provide a detailed study of the letters to the seven churches of Revelation 2 and 3. This document sets out rather to sketch, in brief, the main features of the letters.

Chapters 2 and 3 of the Book of Revelation provide us with a unique (and altogether invaluable) insight into our Lord's interests and concerns today. The section pulls back the curtain, as it were, on the other world and informs us about those matters which are of direct concern to the Lord in His relationship to His churches. What an immense blessing and privilege it is to learn from the Lord Himself of those issues which He considers important. May He give us ears to hear and intelligence to understand!

THE CONTEXT

The apostle John has been exiled on the island of Patmos on account of his loyalty to God's word and his witness to Jesus. There, 'in the Spirit', he sees the Lord Jesus as the glorified Judge '*in the midst*' of 'the seven golden lampstands'.¹ In *the past*, John has seen the Lord 'in the midst' of two malefactors,² *in the future*, he would see Him 'in the midst' of the central throne of the universe,³ but *in the present*, he sees Him 'in the midst' of the churches.

The Lord is active. He is not seen as 'standing' (as in Rev. 5. 6) but 'walking'.⁴ John tells us (i) that, when 'in the world', Jesus had 'walked' before men,⁵ (ii) that one day He will 'walk' with His saints in glory,⁶ and (iii) that now He 'walks' in the midst of His churches. Yes, He is walking there today!

THE OVERVIEW

THE IDENTITY OF 'THE ANGELS OF THE SEVEN CHURCHES'

In that the 'angels' are themselves symbolised by 'stars',⁷ I do not see that they themselves can possibly be symbols of something (or someone) else—any more than the 'churches' (which are symbolised by 'lampstands') are themselves symbols of anything else. It is clear that the 'churches' are literal churches and it follows, therefore, that the 'angels' are literal angels.

Nor is there any ground for translating the Greek word rendered 'angel' as 'messenger'. Out of well over 180 occurrences in the New Testament, it is translated 'messenger' on only five occasions⁸—and never in the writings of John. In Revelation, all the other occurrences of the word (all 68 of them) unquestionably describe literal angels, including one in the letter to the church at Sardis.⁹

John was 'in the Spirit' when he saw the events he records¹⁰ and would therefore have had no more difficulty in writing to an angel¹¹ than he would have had in conversing with one.¹²

I do not understand the relation between the angels and the churches. I note, for example, that the singular 'thy' and 'thee' (referring to the 'angel') merges into the plural 'you' and 'ye' (referring to the members of the church) in the letter to Thyatira.¹³ But then neither do I understand the relation between angels and the nations¹⁴ or between angels and individual believers.¹⁵

THE IDENTITY OF THE OVERCOMER

John refers to 'overcoming' twenty-three times in his writings. This is in marked contrast to the rest of the New Testament, where we find only three references in all.

To John, the Lord Jesus is pre-eminently the 'overcomer'.¹⁶

John explains, 'Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God?'.¹⁷ That is, the 'overcomer' is the true, genuine Christian. Having spoken of the eternal glory, John said, 'He that overcomes shall inherit these things'¹⁸ in stark contrast to those who have their part in the lake of fire.¹⁹

That is, the word 'overcomer' does not describe a member of an elite band of super-spiritual Christians; it is a definition of a real Christian. The promises to the 'overcomer' in Revelation 2 and 3 are made to all true Christians.

THE SEVEN CHURCHES

The seven churches are symbolised as '**seven golden lampstands**'.²⁰

1. Lampstands.

What is the symbol of a 'lampstand' intended to convey?

The Bible consistently distinguishes a 'lampstand' from a 'lamp'.²¹ We must not confuse the two items; the function of a 'lampstand' is simply to hold up the 'lamp' that its light may be clearly seen. The churches are portrayed as 'lampstands' and not as 'lamps'; indeed, in the Book of the Revelation, the only 'lamp' mentioned is that of the Lord Jesus Himself.²²

The purpose and God-given function of the local church is to lift up and elevate Christ in its community and let His light radiate out. The 'light' of the gospel of His glory streams out to people around when we preach, not ourselves, but Him 'as Lord'.²³

2. Golden.

What do we learn from the fact that the 'lampstands' are 'golden'?

The fact that they are made of the most valuable metal known at the time²⁴ teaches us the immense and lasting worth which Christ attaches to His churches. They are of tremendous value in His sight. And no wonder for, after all, they were purchased at the price of His own blood.²⁵ Woe therefore to anybody who corrupts so as to destroy such a precious entity.²⁶

It is important to note that, although (i) the 'lampstand' which symbolised Israel was made simply of gold,²⁷ and although (ii) the 'lampstands' which symbolize Christian churches are made simply of gold,²⁸ (iii) the 'lampstand' of the tabernacle, which served as a type of Christ, was constructed of 'pure gold'.²⁹ Indeed, that lampstand was described very graphically as the 'pure lampstand'.³⁰ How zealously God guards the truth of the purity and sinlessness of His Son! 'He is pure' and 'in Him is no sin'.³¹

3. Seven.

What is indicated by the fact that there are 'seven' lampstands?

First, we note that John did not refer to a single lampstand with several arms or branches. This distinguishes what he saw from both (i) the article of furniture in the tabernacle³² and (ii) the subject of Zechariah's vision.³³ That is, there is only one Christ and there is only one nation of Israel but there are many separate local churches.

The so-called 'Arch of Titus' in Rome depicts soldiers carrying in a triumphal procession the sacred Menorah—the seven-branched lampstand taken from Herod's temple consequent on the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. When John wrote the Book of the Revelation, that lampstand (which was a fitting symbol of Israel's role as the upholder of the lamp of divine witness in the world) lay extinguished in the Temple of Peace in Rome. That glorious role now belonged to local Christian churches.

Individually accountable.

Although each of the churches had a common role and function, each was entirely separate and independent. Although each was committed to hear and to obey the same teaching,³⁴ each was directly accountable to the Lord alone.

Several of the churches of Revelation 2 and 3 were located quite closely to each other and communication by road was good between them all. Some of the churches were spiritually weak whereas others were relatively strong. Yet on no occasion was any church instructed by the Risen Lord to interfere in the affairs of another. The churches were each responsible and answerable to Him, and to Him only.

Second, we note the frequency of the numeral 'seven' in the Book of Revelation; it occurs over 50 times. And there are other (less obvious) 'sevens' woven into the fabric of the book; for example, there are seven beatitudes—spanning from Rev. 1. 3 to Rev. 22. 14.³⁵ No doubt 'seven' conveys in itself the idea of completeness.

There were certainly many more than seven churches in proconsular Asia; the churches at Colossae, Hierapolis and Troas are three well-known examples.³⁶ We can be sure that the choice of the seven

which are mentioned by John was not random or haphazard. But what considerations governed the choice?

It is a fact that the seven were located on a loop road which circled the interior of the province. This road was the common post route; an inscription of 50 BC at Miletus lists the names of eight Asian cities, including Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos and Sardis in that order. John knew that a book addressed to the seven churches listed could be circulated easily and that these seven churches could disseminate its truth to other churches situated off the main post route. It was, for instance, only six miles from Laodicea to Hierapolis and eleven miles to Colossae.

Surely, however, the main reason that these seven were selected must lie at a deeper level.

Representative.

Far more important than the physical situation of the churches was their spiritual situation. They represent a very wide spectrum of spiritual experience—of differing strengths and weaknesses, of differing problems and pressures.

Undoubtedly, the Lord chose these particular seven for inclusion because He knew what John could not have known; namely, that His messages to them would be of continuing relevance to all local churches down through the centuries. That is, the seven churches we meet in Revelation 2 and 3 are singled out because the lessons to be learnt from the letters to these churches are of timeless and universal value.

Note the Lord's word to *each* of them separately, 'He that has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to *the churches*'. What He says to one, He says to all!

THE SEVEN LETTERS

Structure and format.

The Lord's letters to the seven churches do not all conform rigidly to the same structure; for example, (i) not all include words of *commendation and praise* (witness the letters to Sardis and Laodicea) and (ii) not all include words of *censure and blame* (witness the letters to Smyrna and Philadelphia).

Nevertheless, the letters generally follow a common format, to which there are seven components.

These are:³⁷

- (i) the **c**hurch addressed;
- (ii) the **c**harity of Christ (mostly drawn from the vision of chapter 1);
- (iii) the **c**ircumstances of the church (introduced invariably by the expression 'I know' and usually taking the form of a commendation);
- (iv) the **c**riticism levelled;
- (v) the **c**ounsel given;
- (vi) the **c**all for attention ('let him hear'); and
- (vii) the **c**ompensation promised ('to him that overcometh').

Seven suggested lines of study.

There are many ways of approaching a study of the seven letters of Revelation 2 and 3. I suggest seven such ways.

1. We can consider the order in which the messages to the churches are found.

It is interesting that we can trace in sequence the allusions made to the Old Testament history. For example:

Ephesus. This is the church which (i) had been beguiled from its single-hearted devotion and love to the Lord, doubtless by the devil,³⁸ (ii) had 'fallen'³⁹ and (iii) had the promise to the overcomer that he would be given 'to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God'.⁴⁰ It seems clear that we are back in Genesis 3.

Smyrna. This is the church which experienced 'affliction'.⁴¹ This is the very word used to describe the experience of Israel during their bondage in Egypt.⁴² The name 'Smyrna' means 'myrrh or bitterness' and may remind us of how the Egyptians made the lives of the children of Israel 'bitter with hard bondage'.⁴³ We have moved on to the time of the Exodus.

Pergamos. This is the church which had been affected by those which held 'the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to cast a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit fornication'.⁴⁴ It is to the overcomer at Pergamos that the promise is given that he 'will eat of the hidden manna'.⁴⁵ We are transported back to the time of Israel's passage through the wilderness.⁴⁶

Thyatira. This is the church which tolerated 'that woman Jezebel',⁴⁷ a clear reference to the infamous wife of Ahab who stirred him up to work wickedness.⁴⁸ We are now about half way through the period of Israel's monarchy.

Sardis. This is the church which was alive in name only: its greatness was a thing of the past. Those things which did remain looked about to die completely yet there were 'some' who had not defiled themselves.⁴⁹ All of this suggests the situation of God's people during the time of the exile.

Philadelphia. This is the church which had but little strength and yet which attached such importance to keeping the Lord's 'word'.⁵⁰ The promise to the overcomer concerned the temple of God.⁵¹ These circumstances point to the return of the remnant in the days of Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah.⁵²

Laodicea. This is the church which was self-deceived, oblivious to its true spiritual condition.⁵³ And yet they were assured of the Lord's unfailing love.⁵⁴ How reminiscent of the six-fold 'Wherein ...?' of Malachi's prophecy⁵⁵ and of the Lord's affirmation, 'I have loved you'.⁵⁶ We have reached the sad times of spiritual declension at the very end of Old Testament history.

2. We can group the letters together in various ways.

It may be significant, for example, that the first three churches are distinguished from the later four in that (unlike in the later four) the promise to the overcomer follows the exhortation to 'hear what the Spirit says'. For the purpose of this article, however, we will consider a structure which links together the first and the last letters and proceeds inward.

(i) Only the churches at **Ephesus and Laodicea** (viz. the first and seventh churches) are threatened with complete extinction. **Ephesus** is threatened with the moving of its lampstand out of its place⁵⁷ and **Laodicea** with being vomited out of the Lord's mouth.⁵⁸ It is sad that these were the only two churches of the seven to which (as far as we know) the apostle Paul had written letters⁵⁹ and for which he had earnestly prayed.⁶⁰

(ii) Only the churches at **Smyrna and Philadelphia** (viz. the second and sixth churches) receive unqualified praise. Not a word of censure or blame is heard in either letter. These are the only letters in which the word 'repent' is not found.

(iii) The churches at **Pergamos, Thyatira and Sardis** each represents a combination of strengths and weaknesses. It seems that in each case the spiritual condition of the church was worse than that of the one mentioned before.

It appears that in the church at **Pergamos** most were sound in the faith but that there were some there who held the teaching of Balaam and of the Nicolaitans.⁶¹

It appears that at **Thyatira** a considerable proportion was affected by the teaching of Jezebel; note 'as many as have not this doctrine'.⁶²

At **Sardis** there were only 'a few' who 'have not defiled their garments'.⁶³ Sardis is distinguished by being the only one of the three for which the Lord has no word of commendation at all.

3. We can concentrate on the dominant characteristic of each of the seven churches.

The general character of each of the churches can be summarised as follows:

Ephesus – the unloving church, without heart-devotion for Christ.⁶⁴

Smyrna – the persecuted church, both in the present and future.⁶⁵

Pergamos – the over-tolerant church, harbouring those who held godless teaching.⁶⁶

Thyatira – the compromising church, allowing immoral doctrine to be publicly taught and the saints thereby deceived.⁶⁷

Sardis – the sleeping church, in one sense 'dead'⁶⁸ and in another sense 'dying';⁶⁹ needing to wake to watchfulness.⁷⁰

Philadelphia – the loyal church, praised for 'keeping' the Lord's word.⁷¹

Laodicea – the lukewarm church, smug and spiritually complacent.⁷²

4. We can look for comparisons and contrasts between the churches.

We can, for example, compare and contrast **Ephesus and Thyatira**. Both are commended for their 'endurance'.⁷³ Both letters refer to the church's first works.⁷⁴ To both churches, the Lord says, 'But I have against you'.⁷⁵

Yet there is one striking contrast between them. **Ephesus** is praised repeatedly for its zeal for truth⁷⁶ but is condemned for its lack of love.⁷⁷ Over against this, **Thyatira** is praised for its love (and is the only church that is)⁷⁸ but is woefully deficient by way of concern for sound doctrine.⁷⁹ **Ephesus** 'let go' its first love and **Thyatira** 'let go' Jezebel.⁸⁰

Again, we can link together **Smyrna and Philadelphia**. These churches have in common that they alone receive unqualified praise and to them alone does the Lord speak of 'crowns'.⁸¹ Clearly, these were exceptionally spiritual churches and yet there is a very real contrast between them in that the one was shortly to face the closed door of imprisonment⁸² and the other a continuing open door of service.⁸³

5. We can consider how relevant and fitting to the particular situation of each of the churches is the description of Christ and the promise to the overcomer.

Take, by way of example, **Smyrna**. To a church facing affliction for a short, defined period ('ten days'⁸⁴), the Lord presents Himself as 'the first and the last.'⁸⁵ He is the One before and beyond all time! To a church facing cases of martyrdom⁸⁶ He presents Himself as the One who 'became dead and lived again';⁸⁷ for them death was not uncharted territory—He had entered it first and had conquered it! The promise to the overcomer is that, though he may indeed be hurt by the first death, he most certainly shall not be hurt by the second; 'by no means' is the force of the double negative.⁸⁸ Some of the saints may be 'cast' by the devil into prison⁸⁹ but they shall never be 'cast' where he is going to be!⁹⁰

Again, consider **Pergamos**. To a church disturbed by the doctrine of Balaam,⁹¹ the Lord Jesus presents Himself as the One with the sharp sword⁹² and threatens to war against the offenders with the sword of His mouth.⁹³ It can hardly be a coincidence (i) that Balaam was once withstood by 'the angel of the Lord' (possibly, a manifestation of the Lord Himself) with a drawn sword in his hand⁹⁴ or (ii) that Balaam perished finally 'with the sword'.⁹⁵

6. We can relate the contents of the letters to the historical and geographical background of the cities where the churches were located.⁹⁶

Take, for example, the Lord's requirement of **Smyrna** that the saints there be 'faithful'.⁹⁷ The men of Smyrna were renowned for their loyalty to Rome, particularly in the period before Rome became all-powerful. Cicero (Roman orator and statesman, lived 106-43 BC) called Smyrna 'one of our most faithful and our most ancient allies'. Tacitus (Roman historian, lived AD 58-120) reports how the men of Smyrna stripped themselves of their garments and sent them to warm Roman soldiers during a winter campaign against Pontus. He further tells how, when eleven Asian cities were in competition in AD 26 for the privilege of building a temple in honour of Emperor Tiberius, Smyrna was selected because of its history of loyalty to Rome. The believers at Smyrna would have readily appreciated what the Lord meant when He commanded a higher loyalty!

Again, consider **Sardis**. On two occasions the city had fallen to its enemies because its occupants failed to watch and properly guard its battlements. Built on a hill about 1,000 feet above a valley, with steep cliffs on three sides, its Acropolis seemed inaccessible and unassailable. In 549 BC, it was besieged by the Persians. Croesus, the wealthy king of Lydia, believed Sardis was impregnable and left its cliffs unguarded. A Mardian soldier (on the side of the Persians) spotted a Lydian soldier climb down, and back up, one of the cliffs to retrieve a fallen helmet. The following night the Mardian led a company of Persian troops up the cliff and Sardis fell.

incredibly, history repeated itself about 300 years later when the city was taken by Antiochus following the ascent of the apparently unscalable cliffs by a band of his men – again there was no guard! The saints at Sardis could hardly miss the aptness of the Lord's words, 'Be watching ... If therefore you do not watch ...'.⁹⁸ This call for vigilance is unique to the letter to Sardis.

7. We can follow threads and key words through the individual letters.

For example, the idea of 'holding' in the letter to **Pergamos**.⁹⁹ Also that of 'works' in the letter to **Thyatira**; note 'thy works' twice,¹⁰⁰ 'her works',¹⁰¹ 'your works',¹⁰² 'my works'.¹⁰³ Again, in the letter to **Philadelphia**, the four occurrences of 'name'¹⁰⁴ and the repeated references to 'keeping'.¹⁰⁵

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Notes

¹ Rev. 1. 9-16.

² John 19. 18.

³ Rev. 7. 17.

⁴ Rev. 2. 1.

⁵ John 1. 10, 36.

⁶ Rev. 3. 4.

⁷ Rev. 1. 20.

⁸ Matt. 11. 10; Mark 1. 2; Luke 7. 27; 2 Cor. 12. 7; Phil. 2. 25.

⁹ 'I will confess his name before my Father, and before His angels', Rev. 3. 5.

¹⁰ Rev. 1. 10.

¹¹ Rev. 2. 1, 8, 12 etc.

¹² Rev. 17. 1; 19. 10; 22. 9-10.

¹³ Rev. 2. 18-29.

¹⁴ Dan. 10. 13-21.

¹⁵ Matt. 18. 10; Heb. 1. 13-14.

¹⁶ 'Be of good cheer; I have overcome the world', John 16. 33; cf. Rev. 3. 21.

¹⁷ 1 John 5. 5.

¹⁸ Rev. 21. 7 lit.

¹⁹ Rev. 21. 8.

²⁰ Rev. 1. 12, 20; 2. 1 (lit.).

²¹ See, for example, Exod. 25. 3 1, 37; Zech. 4. 2; Luke 8. 16; 11. 33. In each of these cases, the Greek Bible uses the same word for 'lampstand' as John does.

²² 'The lamp thereof is the Lamb', Rev. 21. 23 lit. The word in chapter 4 verse 5 is different and signifies 'torches', as it does in John 18. 3.

²³ 2 Cor. 4. 4-5.

²⁴ Compare Rev. 21. 18, 21.

²⁵ Acts 20. 28.

²⁶ 1 Cor. 3. 17.

²⁷ Zech. 4. 2.

²⁸ Rev, 1. 12, 20; 2. 1.

²⁹ Exod. 25. 31; 37. 17, 24.

³⁰ Exod. 31. 8; Lev. 24. 4.

³¹ 1 John 3. 3, 5.

³² Exod. 25. 31-32.

³³ Zech. 4. 2.

³⁴ Rev. 2. 7, 11, 17 etc.

35 Rev. 1. 3; 14. 13; 16. 15; 19. 9; 20. 6; 22. 7, 14.

36 Col. 1. 2; 4. 13; Acts 20. 5-7.

37 An admittedly contrived instance of 'seven Cs'!



38 Rev. 2. 4; 2 Cor. 11. 3.

39 Rev. 2. 5.

40 Rev. 2. 7.

41 Rev. 2. 9, 10 lit.

42 Exod. 4. 31 (Greek Old Testament).

43 Exod. 1. 14.

44 Rev. 2. 14.

45 Rev. 2. 17.

46 Exod. 16. 33-35; Num. 25. 1-2; 31. 16.

47 Rev. 2. 20.

48 1 Kings 21. 25.

49 Rev. 3. 1, 2, 4; cf. Dan. 1. 8.

50 Rev. 3. 8, 10.

51 Rev. 2. 12.

52 See Neh. 8. 1; Zech. 4. 9-10 ('the day of small things').

53 Rev. 3. 17.

54 Rev. 3. 19.

55 Mal. 1. 2, 6, 7; 2. 17; 3. 7, 8.

56 Mal. 1. 2.

57 Rev. 2. 5.

58 Rev. 3. 16.

59 Eph. 1. 1; Col. 4. 16.

60 Eph. 1. 16; 3. 14; Col. 2. 1.

61 Rev. 2. 14-15.

62 Rev. 2. 24.

63 Rev. 3. 4.

64 Rev. 2. 4.

65 Rev. 2. 9-10.

66 Rev. 2. 14-15.

67 Rev. 2. 20-24.

68 Rev. 3. 1.

⁶⁹ Rev. 3. 2.

⁷⁰ Rev. 3. 1.

⁷¹ Rev. 3. 8, 10.

⁷² Rev. 3. 15-17.

⁷³ Rev. 2. 2, 19 lit.

⁷⁴ Rev. 2. 5, 19.

⁷⁵ Rev. 2. 4, 20 lit.

⁷⁶ Rev. 2. 2, 6.

⁷⁷ Rev. 2. 4.

⁷⁸ Rev. 2. 19 lit.

⁷⁹ Rev. 2. 20, 24.

⁸⁰ Rev. 2. 4, 20 lit.

⁸¹ Rev. 2. 10, 3. 11.

⁸² Rev. 2. 10.

⁸³ Rev. 3. 8 (cf. 1 Cor. 16. 9).

⁸⁴ Rev. 2. 10.

⁸⁵ Rev. 2. 8; cf. Rev. 1. 11, 17.

⁸⁶ Rev. 2. 10.

⁸⁷ Rev. 2. 8 lit.

⁸⁸ Rev. 2. 11.

⁸⁹ Rev. 2. 10.

⁹⁰ Rev. 20. 10, 14.

⁹¹ Rev. 2. 14.

⁹² Rev. 2. 12.

⁹³ Rev. 2. 16.

⁹⁴ Num. 22. 23, 31.

⁹⁵ Num. 31. 8.

⁹⁶ Three easily accessible sources of information about the historical background to the seven letters are: '*The Final Encounter*' by F. A. Tatford, '*The Daily Study Bible*' by W. Barclay, and the separate articles on each of the churches by W. M. Ramsay in '*Hasting's Dictionary of the Bible*'.

⁹⁷ Rev. 2. 10.

⁹⁸ Rev. 3. 2-3.

⁹⁹ Rev. 2. 13-15 (three times).

¹⁰⁰ Rev. 2. 19.

¹⁰¹ Rev. 2. 22 lit.

¹⁰² Rev. 2. 23.

¹⁰³ Rev. 2. 26.

¹⁰⁴ Rev. 3. 8, 12.

¹⁰⁵ Rev. 3. 8, 10 (cf. 'hold fast', v. 11).