

# INTRODUCTION TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES IN REVELATION

BY WATCHMAN NEE

The apostle John's writings, whether his Epistles or his Gospel, were always the last in each category. Revelation was the last of all the books written in the Bible. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke were written regarding the behavior of the Lord Jesus on this earth, whereas the Gospel of John speaks of "He who descended out of heaven, the Son of Man, who is in heaven" (3:13). John wrote at the time when the Gnostics were confusing the Word of God; his writings bring men to heaven to see God's eternal fact in heaven. John brings us out of the realm of man to wholly receive the Son of God. What John wrote has the special feature of bringing us back to the beginning. The Gospel of John tells us that Christ was in the beginning; the Epistles of John speak of the Word of life, which was from the beginning; and Revelation brings us to eternity in the future. The Gospel of John shows the Son of God who was in the flesh—He was in the midst of us, but men mistook Him, thinking that He was only Jesus of Nazareth. Therefore, John shows that this Jesus, who was in the flesh, was in the beginning. This is the fact behind the scene. The Epistles of John do likewise. Jesus' person is the Son of God, and His office is Christ. But men did not know the Son of God; neither did they know the Christ. So the Epistles of John especially speak of these two points, bringing us back to the fact behind the scene in the beginning. At the time John wrote Revelation, the world was in great confusion, and Caesar of Rome was at his worst. So John brought us into the condition behind the scenes of the future to let us know how God regards the situation of this world. However, in Revelation we see not only the condition of the world but also the condition of the church. Revelation also shows us what pleases the Lord, what the Lord condemns, and what the Lord's way is for the church when the outward appearance of the church is extremely confusing. The church in her appearance has many manifestations in history, but what way, what condition, is the Lord's desire? This desire behind the scenes is shown by John.

In the Bible there are two groups of seven epistles. God used Paul to write the first group—Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and 1 and 2 Thessalonians—and God used John to write the second group. The first seven Epistles speak of the church in a time of normality; the latter speak of the churches in a time of abnormality. The three Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke are normal, helping men to know God, but the Gospel of John is God's reaction to man's unclearness; that is why it frequently speaks of truth and grace. John's Epistles are also God's reaction to abnormality; that is why they speak of light and love more often. Revelation 2 and 3 are God's dealings with the abnormal conditions of the churches. The first seven Epistles of Paul deal with the normal behavior of the church. Later, the church was not normal; therefore, John wrote the last seven epistles in Revelation. The first seven Epistles contain the truth that the church must know; the last seven epistles show the way that the church must take. Today, if a man really wants to walk in the

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Lord's way, he must read Revelation 2 and 3. Today the church has problems; therefore, Revelation tells us what to do. If you do not seek the way in Revelation, I do not know how you can be a Christian.

Furthermore, the first seven Epistles were written before the last hour, whereas the last seven epistles were written either during or after the last hour. First John 2:18 indicates another time, the last hour: "Young children, it is the last hour; and even as you heard that antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come; whereby we know that it is the last hour." If Christians see only the light in the first Epistles, they do not know the will of God regarding the last hour.

**I**n the Bible there are three persons with outstanding ministries: Peter, John, and Paul. Second Peter is the last book written by Peter. In this Epistle Peter brings up the matter of apostasy. Second Timothy is the last book written by Paul. Verse 2 of chapter 2 says, "The things which you have heard from me through many witnesses, these commit to faithful men, who will be competent to teach others also." First Timothy 3:15 tells us that the church is the house of God, the pillar and base of the truth, but in 2 Timothy 2:20 Paul says, "In a great house there are not only gold and silver vessels but also wooden and earthen." The problem is whether a man will cleanse himself from the vessels of dishonor to pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart (vv. 21-22). The Epistles of John were written by John as his last books. He says that the antichrists have already come and that we must keep the Word (1 John 2:18, 24; 4:3). Generally speaking, the time from the beginning of the church until now is one age—the age of the church. But the problem is not that simple. The normal and the abnormal must be separated. Today the outward appearance of the church is desolate—if we have not seen this fact, there is no need for us to read Revelation. The first seven Epistles (i.e., those written by Paul) deal with the normal situation. But now the situation is abnormal. What then should we do?

Indeed, the confusion on the earth does not affect the spiritual reality. God's spiritual reality still remains. But the church in her outward appearance, at least, is confused. The Roman Catholic Church claims that it is the Body of Christ. According to a survey taken in 1914 of Protestantism, there were more than one thousand five hundred well-organized denominations, excluding scattered groups, each claiming to be the Body of Christ. Before John, Paul, and Peter passed away, this had already started. Paul wrote to Timothy, saying, "All who are in Asia turned away from me" (2 Tim. 1:15). Even Ephesus was included. In this kind of circumstance, the children of God must seek one thing; that is, how should we follow and serve the Lord? What should we do? When the appearance of the church is desolate, we must ask, "What should we do?" Revelation 2 and 3 give us a way in which to walk. If we are really seeking before God, Revelation 2 and 3 will tell us what to do.

The first thing that we must know when coming to read Revelation is what kind of book it is. Many people know that it is a book of prophecies, but if we ask these ones whether the seven churches are prophetic, they dare not say. Chapters 1 through 22 show that the special feature of Revelation is that it is a book of prophecy in nature. Not only are the seven seals, the seven trumpets, and the seven bowls prophetic, but even the seven epistles are prophetic. This book is a book of prophecy. That is why no one dares add anything to it, nor is anyone allowed to take anything from it. Since it is a book of prophecy, we must treat it as prophecy and discover the fulfillment of its prophecy. Concerning the nature of the book of Revelation, we must note the following: first, it is prophetic; second, since it is prophecy, it will be fulfilled. At that time there were more than seven churches in Asia. Why then does John speak of only these seven? When he was on the island of Patmos, he saw only these seven churches because these seven represent all the others. God chose seven churches that have matching characteristics and put the prophecy on them.

On the earth there are seven churches; in heaven there are only seven lampstands. Here is a problem: Whenever there is a church on the earth, there is a lampstand in heaven. The strange thing is that John saw only seven lampstands in heaven. Are there then only seven churches on the earth? It seems that the church in Chungking has been cut off, and the church in Nanking has also been cut off. What should we do? This is why we must remember that this is prophecy. Since it is prophecy, only seven churches were selected. These seven churches are representative of all other churches; there is no number eight to be represented. There are more than seven churches on earth, but these seven are selected as representatives. There are only seven lampstands in heaven because the history of the seven churches constitutes the complete history of the church.

We must give special heed to the word in chapter 1: “Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy and keep the things written in it” (v. 3). Revelation 22:7 also says, “Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy of this scroll.” We may say that this prophecy is God’s commandment. Although outwardly this book is clothed with prophecy, inwardly it is the commandment of God. This is a book for practice, not for study. The prophecy here differs from other prophecies; this one is for man to keep. Between John and us there is a common principle; that is, this prophecy is for us to keep—to keep from beginning to end. How can those who do not want to keep it understand Revelation? How can they understand the seven churches?

**I**n reading Revelation 2 and 3, we must see not only that this is a prophecy for us to keep but also that the Lord is the Lord of judgment. The first half of Revelation 1 is the preface to the whole book of Revelation; the last half is the preface to chapters 2 and 3. These two chapters start with the revelation of the Lord Jesus. In 1:13 we see the Lord “clothed with a garment reaching to the feet.” The priests wore long garments; here the Lord is the High Priest. The lampstand is in the Holy Place, the light of which will not be extinguished. Its light burns day and night; therefore, the priest must continually trim it and add oil to it in the Holy Place. The Lord Jesus is the High Priest who walks in the midst of the churches to see which lamps are lighted and which ones are not. The trimming is the judgment, because judgment begins from the house of God. Christ walks in the midst of the churches doing the work of judgment, and today’s judgment is seen from eternity.

John was the one who was closest to the Lord, because he reclined on the Lord’s breast (John 21:20, 24). The Son is in the bosom of the Father, and John was in the bosom of the Son. Yet the day that he saw the Lord, he fell at His feet as dead, because He is the Judge. Formerly, we saw Him as the Lord of grace; now we see Him as the Lord of judgment. But the judgment here is the judgment of a priest, for it involves trimming. On that day it will be judgment entirely. Every one of God’s children must one day meet the Lord’s fearfulness and holiness; then they will no longer reason. Light disposes of all reasons—it not only illuminates; it also kills. The illumination in every part of the Bible kills the natural life of man. Men may have many reasons, but before the Lord they are all gone. All men will fall dead to the ground just as John did. The further a person is from the Lord, the greater is his self-confidence; but it is impossible for him to bear the light of God. We must be dealt with by God at least once.

The first part of each epistle tells us who the Lord is, and the word that follows is based on this revelation of the Lord. He who does not know the Lord cannot see the church. The church is the continuation of the cross; there is no such thing as knowing the cross yet not knowing the extension of the cross.

These seven epistles start with the Lord and end with the call to the overcomers. Who are the overcomers? What are the overcomers? Are they special ones, those who are above the ordinary? In the Bible the meaning of the overcomers is that they are the normal, ordinary ones. Those who are not abnormal during the time of abnormality are the overcomers. Most people are below this level. The overcomers are not above this level,

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but at this level. God is calling the overcomers today to rise up and walk according to the normal pattern in the beginning. The will of God never changes; it is just like a straight line. Today men fall, fail, and continually go downward, but the overcomers are recovered anew into the will of God.

Here we see two more matters: first, the church is the golden lampstand, and the Lord walks in the midst of the lampstands; second, the Lord holds the seven stars in His right hand, which are the angels of the seven churches.

Each of the various kinds of metals spoken of in the Bible has meaning: iron typifies political power, bronze typifies judgment, silver typifies redemption, and gold typifies the glory of God. The glory of God is one thing that no one knows or comprehends. Although it is difficult to comprehend the holiness of God, we can still comprehend it. The righteousness of God can also be understood. But the glory of God has never been known, because it is the one characteristic that belongs most uniquely to God. The church is made of gold. The people in the church are born of God, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man. The church has absolutely nothing to do with man. Some ask what the work of wood, grass, and stubble is. Wood, grass, and stubble are the works of the flesh. The work of gold, silver, and precious stones is that which is entirely of God.

**T**hese seven epistles were written to the angels of the seven churches, differing from the first seven Epistles written by Paul. Paul wrote to the churches, although we see that he addresses all the saints, overseers, and deacons, especially in the book to the Philippians. In Revelation the epistles were written to the angels of the seven churches, not directly to the churches. However, they were the words spoken by the Holy Spirit to the churches. The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches. The word *angel* in Greek is *angelos*. This word represents one who is a messenger. Many people, after reading Revelation 2 and 3, have tried to find similarities between the last seven epistles and the first seven and have injected all manner of wrong explanations regarding the messenger. Who is this messenger? The messenger spoken of here is singular in number; the epistles were written to a singular messenger. However, this singular number is corporate in nature; that is why, at the end of each epistle, the calling to the overcomers is plural. This messenger is a corporate messenger who can represent a minority in the whole church. At this point the way of God is different. Formerly, the church stood before the Lord; now the messenger stands before the Lord. The light of the lamp is inferior to the light of the star. The Lord has chosen the inextinguishable starlight and said that this is His messenger. This star is in the Lord's hand. Today a group of people is a messenger in the eyes of the Lord; thus, the nature of the church today is entrusted to them. When the church has a problem before the Lord in her outward appearance, the Lord sees a group of people—a messenger—who can be the representative of the church. Formerly, the representatives of the church were the elders with position and office; now the responsibility of representing the church is given to the spiritual messenger. This messenger is not necessarily the elders or deacons. Today God places the responsibility upon whoever can represent the church. Those who can represent the church have the responsibility committed to them by God. Today it is not a matter of position and office, but of having real spiritual authority before God—to such ones God turns over the responsibility. Revelation is written to the “slaves” of God. Therefore, unless you are a slave, you will not be able to understand. He who is not bought with the blood and constrained by love to be a slave cannot understand Revelation.

John wrote Revelation in A.D. 95 or 96, at the time when Domitian was Caesar in Rome. Of the twelve apostles, John was the last to die; therefore, the church of the apostles ended with John. When John was writing, the seven epistles were prophetic. Today when we read the seven epistles, we also must regard them as prophecy. However, when we consider them today, they have already become history. John was looking ahead, while we are looking back. 