

Imagine yourself living in the port city of Ephesus near the end of the first century after Christ. Still somewhat to your surprise, you became a follower of Jesus in your late 20s. You have access to one of the people who actually lived with Jesus, John, your spiritual leader. It still seems strange to believe in someone you have never seen, to remember Him by the breaking of bread and a cup of wine, and to pray to Him and to God His Father and your Father through Him.

Your circumstances have taken a nasty turn. Your neighbors, some of the people who work with you, and even people in your family have become hostile to your faith in Jesus. Even more distressing, the authorities have changed their attitude toward the new religion you embraced. There is talk of economic sanctions against Christians by the government. In the city of Pergamum, a member of the church there lost his life. Circumstances surrounding his death are murky. The Christians believe he was put to death because he was a Christian. Other people give different reports. In either case dread has fallen on believers in Pergamum and even in Ephesus.

Rumors don't help. Some say the hostility toward Christians comes as a direct policy from Rome itself. Others say it is only a local disturbance, fueled by politicians who have it in for Christians. Whatever the truth, Christians are on edge. Everyone hopes that somebody is going to do something or say something to help to stop the madness.

You are at a further disadvantage. Your spiritual leader, John, has been exiled to the Mediterranean island of Patmos, about 40 miles southeast of the Port of Ephesus. His exile is further evidence of official hostility to Christians. No one knows if he can communicate with the churches in his care or not. The situation grows worse week by week, and still no word from John.

If you can imagine yourself in those circumstances, then you are in the right frame of mind to hear the last book of the Bible. It was written to seven churches that found themselves in the circumstances I have described. It had become difficult and sometimes dangerous to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

Everyone agrees that the book of Revelation is difficult for modern readers. It is important to remember that it went originally to ordinary Christians, who were living in extraordinarily difficult circumstances, and they found it helpful. If we can put ourselves in their shoes, its message will come through to us more clearly.

John's Letter

So imagine: One day, the congregation you meet with receives word that a letter from John has arrived. Relief and expectations rise. The letter comes. You and your fellow believers gather on the Lord's Day, but you can't read what John wrote. There is only one copy. You can only listen as someone reads the book of Revelation to the congregation. That's why John blesses **the one who reads the words of this prophecy.**

(Revelation 1:3)

His letter is a prophecy. It will speak to their uncertain and dangerous future. John also blesses **those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.** (Revelation 1:3) There will be action for the churches to take, because a crisis of some kind is at hand.

John's letter will go to seven churches in seven cities that are linked on a major trade route that makes an upside down letter U in the Middle Eastern countryside, beginning with Ephesus and ending with Laodicea. In his greeting to the churches he

calls Jesus Christ **the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.** (Revelation 1:5), names heavy with meaning in what follows in Revelation. Yet this mighty Jesus is as personal as a kiss. He **loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood.** (Ibid) John insists on the unique identity of the seven churches. They are not just Romans, Greeks, or Asians. Jesus **has made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father.** (Revelation 1:6)

This Jesus is coming again to our world. They have never seen Him, but **he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him.** (Revelation 1:7) John never thinks small. He has the whole wide world in mind. The inspiration for his global outlook comes from the majesty of God. **“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.”** (Revelation 1:8)

The Vision of Christ

You might notice that John does not say one word about the suffering of his fellow believers in the seven churches. Instead, he immerses them in the realities of the faith for which they suffer. And if you can only hear John’s letter being read, you don’t have time to stop and think. I wonder if people could interrupt to ask questions. Maybe, but you have to wonder if the reader was often in the dark as much as they were.

Finally, John alludes for the first time to the suffering of the churches. He says he is their **brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus.** (Revelation 1:9) He doesn’t dwell on it. He gets to the point. **“On the Lord’s Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet.”** (Revelation 1:10) The voice told him to write the prophecy you are listening to. We should keep in mind how often in Revelation a voice behind John speaks and causes him to turn around, and we should notice how often what he saw helped him to understand what he heard.

He heard a loud voice like a trumpet. He saw seven golden lampstands, and among the lampstands was someone **“like a son of man.”** (Revelation 1:10-11) The description of the one **like a son of man** could send determined Bible students on a quest to understand what every figure of speech means. It is right here that John does something we will find throughout this remarkable prophecy. Along with language we may never understand, he says plainly what he means.

“I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.” Whatever we make of John’s fierce and beautiful description of the one **“like a son of man,”** he leaves no doubt that he is talking about Jesus Christ, the Lord of the Church. And Jesus leaves no doubt what the golden lampstands represent. **“The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and the of the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.”** (Revelation 1:20) The seven churches do not suffer alone. The risen Lord walks with them.

There is something here for us too. The number seven recurs throughout Revelation. It is the number of completeness. John wrote to seven specific churches, but the number seven indicates that he wrote to the whole Church then and now. That causes tension in us as we hear Revelation. We want to know how those first Christians heard it and how we should hear it. What did it mean to them? What does it mean to us?

Letters within the Letter

We feel this tension in what comes next: seven brief letters from Christ to the seven churches. Listen to the first one that went to the church in Ephesus. Every letter begins like this: **“To the angel of the church in Ephesus write.”** (Revelation 2:1-7) No one knows for sure who the angel of each church was. The Greek word translated **angel** is *angelos*, and it could mean messenger. My guess is that it meant the person in each church, who was charged with reading John’s prophecy to that church. It’s one of those meanings we may never know for certain, and it doesn’t matter. The message to follow is usually clear, and it’s the message that matters.

Each letter begins with words of praise. **These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands.** And here is Christ’s message to the Ephesian congregation. **I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.”** (Revelation 2:1-3) That is high praise for any church. The Ephesian believers have to be feeling pretty good when they hear that.

They have to be feeling pretty bad, when they hear what comes next, especially when they know that other six churches are going to hear it too. Each letter, except the second one, includes a strong admonition like this: **Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.** (You will go out of existence.) **But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.”** (Revelation 2:1-3)

Each letter closes with a call to action, and the action is the same for every church. This call to action dominates the book of Revelation. It applies to the specific circumstances of each church, and it applies to the precarious position in which all churches find themselves in a hostile world. **“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. And what does the Spirit say? “To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.”** (Revelation 2:7)

Listen to other examples of this call to action. **“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. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it.”** (Revelation 2:17) and: **“To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I 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.”** (Revelation 3:21-22)

Seven times over the Lord of the Church calls on the churches to overcome, but not once does He offer a word of sympathy for their suffering because of Him. There is no pity party for the suffering churches; just a call to overcome and rewards for those who do.

The Take-away

The Lord of the Church has words of praise for Brandywine Valley Baptist

Church and others like it. He sees our affirmation of life for the unborn, the elderly, and the disabled in the face of the culture of death. He sees our fidelity to the faith that has been held always, everywhere, and by all quarters of the Church. He sees our growing heart to fulfill the Great Commission and to serve the poor, the enslaved, and the outcast. He sees and He blesses us.

The Lord of the Church also has words of admonition for Brandywine Valley Baptist Church and others like it. He sees life's worries, and the enticement of money, and the sheer lust for things, most of which we don't need. He sees them choke the word of God in us. He sees us treat the Church, as if she were the kitchen help instead of the Bride of Christ, whom He loved and bought with His blood. He sees our fantasy that the kingdom of God will arrive on Air Force One. He sees our capitulation to all forms of sexual immorality. He sees and He calls us to turn our backs on our worldliness and our trust in false gods.

The Lord of the Church says to this church and others like it: **“To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I 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.”** (Revelation 3:21-22)

We hear people say the following: “What is truth?” They say “That may be true for you, but it isn't true for me.” We hear people say: “If it feels good, do it,” and “You can do anything you can get away with,” and “Science and technology do away with the need to be good. You just need a good doctor, lawyer, or therapist to rid yourself of any unpleasant side effects.” It is intellectual and moral despair, and it is demoralizing our nation. The Lord of the Church says to the churches, **“To him who overcomes intellectual and moral despair, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne.”**

Powerful media voices declare that same-sex issues have been debated, and when did those media ever present an equal number of intelligent voices to speak on behalf of traditional values? It is propaganda. Hundreds of TV channels air months and years of programming, and they never present a sympathetic treatment of Christianity. It is propaganda. The Lord of the Church says to the churches, **“To him who overcomes the power of propaganda, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I 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.”
(Revelation 3:21-22)