

INTRODUCTION

We continue this study through the letters Jesus is sending to seven different churches in the book of Revelation. Chapter 1:9 is the outline for the book of Revelation and this is the key that unlocks the understanding of Revelation.

Revelation as a book is divided into three simple sections. In 1:19, Jesus said to John, "Write, therefore, what you have seen," that's part 1, past tense, when John saw a vision of the glorified Jesus. The first part of the book is only in chapter 1. Then verse 19, the second section of the book, says "Write what is now." Those are the letters to the seven churches chapters 2 and 3. That's present tense. It was present tense when John wrote this under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and in 1993 it is still present tense. It is happening right now what we read about in these seven churches. These seven churches I believe represent all churches of all the ages. Some have said each church represents a different church age and that is one interpretation of this but I believe you can find elements of all seven of these churches in churches and in the lives of Christians today.

Then, the third section of the book, "Write what will take place later." From chapter 4 of Revelation to the end of the chapter I believe talks about the future. As I told you when we began this study, that's the part of Revelation everybody is interested in. "I want to know, pastor what's going to happen during the Tribulation what's going to happen at the Battle of Armageddon what is the interpretation of the beast that comes up out of the sea that is so grotesque looking. We have to remember you must take the entire book as a whole to study. If your desire when you study the book of Revelation is to understand the future, you'll be disappointed; but if your desire is to understand Jesus Christ you'll be rewarded. Because the title of the book is not Revelations, plural, neither is it the Revelation of the future it is the Revelation of Jesus Christ. It is Jesus who is revealed to us as we study this book.

We're in 2:8, and we've come to the second of the seven churches to which Jesus sends a letter. These were seven literal churches in Asia Minor. Most Bibles have a maps in them showing the location of these seven churches, beginning at Ephesus then Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and on around. These seven churches make a geographic circle. You begin at Ephesus and go around the circle coming back around to Laodicea. As I told you last time, these letters are addressed to the angels, messengers we believe the human messenger the pastor of the church.

Revelation 2:8: "To the angel of the church in Smyrna write: 'These are the words of him who is the First and the Last' that is the Alpha and the Omega 'who died and came to life again.'" Jesus says, "I know your afflictions and your poverty yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of 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 will not be hurt at all by the second death."

I hope as we study these seven letters to the seven churches you will begin to pick out the standard sequence Jesus uses as he writes to each of these seven churches, because there is a pattern. First of all Jesus identifies himself. In this letter he says in verse 8, “I am the First and the Last, the one who died and came to life again.” If you really want a beautiful picture of Jesus look in all seven of these letters and see how Jesus identifies himself. Then the pattern continues Jesus always points out the good things in the church. If there is something good, he points it out. Then if there is something bad in the church, he points that out as well. Then he tells them what to do about it. He ends the letter by making a promise. “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” and then he makes the promise. That’s the pattern repeated seven times.

I. THE AUTHOR OF THE LETTER

We’re going to learn a lesson tonight on “How to Persevere Under Pressure.” First, notice the author of the letter. This is not the apostle John writing. This is Jesus Christ himself writing to the members of this church to these Christians.

1. Jesus is omnipotent: He was dead and is alive

I want you to see how Jesus identifies himself in this letter. He says, “These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again.” The first thing we can say about the author of the letter Jesus is that he is omnipotent. The word *omnipotent* comes from two words *omni*, meaning “all” and *potent* meaning “powerful. When we say Jesus or God is omnipotent we mean he is all powerful! Jesus Christ says, “I am the First and the Last” the Alpha and the Omega “and I’m everything in between.” Then he says in verse 8 “I’m the one who died and I came to life again.” He said, “I was alive then I died and I came to life again.” I want you to think about every other religious leader who has ever lived. No other religious leader can make that claim. Buddha, who was a man, died and he did not come back to life again. He can’t say that. Mohammed died but he cannot say, “I died and came back to life again.” David Koresh, one living in these days is going to die and is not going to come back to life again. No other religious teacher has been able to say what Jesus Christ says here. He says, “I have power over death.” There are a lot of people who have lived and a lot of people who have died but there has only been one who can say, “I lived, and I died, and now I live again.” So Jesus is omnipotent.

2. Jesus is omniscient: He knows our works

But let’s use another word to identify the author of this book. Not only is he omnipotent but there is another word we could use called *omniscient*. That’s the same basic word *omni* meaning “all” and *scient* meaning “knowing.” Omniscient means he is all-knowing. He is all-knowing! We’re just going to use these two words about Jesus here, but you can use another word reserved for God only. God is omnipotent—all powerful; God is omniscient—all-knowing; and we can also say that God is omnipresent but Jesus doesn’t say that specific thing here. You can’t say that about the devil you can’t say that about angels you can’t say that about people. Those qualities are reserved for God and God alone.

What do we mean when we say he's omniscient? How do we know Jesus is omniscient? He says, "I know your afflictions. I know your tribulations. I know what you are going through." Have you ever been going through a tough time with some kind of problem and you get so lonely and so withdrawn, sometimes you are tempted to think "I wonder if anybody really understands. If anybody really knows what I am going through!" I'm here to tell you yes there is someone who knows! Jesus says, "I know what you are going through."

II. THE AFFLICTION OF THE BELIEVERS

This church was going through a terrible time. Let me tell you a little bit about what Jesus knew about this church being omniscient. He knew Smyrna was the center of emperor worship for the Roman Empire. The Roman Empire desired to bring unity to the entire empire and this cult of the emperor worship began right here in Smyrna. This is how they unified the Roman Empire: Every year every person who lived in the Roman Empire was required by Roman law to make a gift, pay an amount of money to burn incense and they were required to say, "Caesar is Lord." This emperor worship cult began in Smyrna and the little struggling church I wish I could tell you that the church at Smyrna was just a small, insignificant church in a city that was best known for the worship of Caesar. But when Christians didn't do it, they were called atheists. If Romans had believed in Jesus, they would have put him up on a shelf in the Pantheon with all of their other gods: Jupiter, Zeus, Mercury, Mars, etc. But when Christians refused to name any other God than the one God of heaven they were called atheists and many of them were put to death. That's the kind of setting in which they lived and that's why Jesus said, "I know what you are going through." That's the identification of the author of this letter.

1. They faced pressure

Jesus says, "I know your afflictions I know your trouble. I know what you are going through." They were experiencing pressure from the outside. The King James Version says, "I know your tribulation." This is not talking about the Tribulation that is going to come on the earth. This is referring to troubles, difficulties, and afflictions. It's the word Jesus used when he said, "In this world you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer I have overcome the world." These Christians were facing all these pressures from the outside because people were persecuting them because they would not say, "Caesar is Lord." People sometimes say, "I guess this migraine headache that I have is just the cross I have to bear." or "This ingrown toenail I have is just the cross I have to bear." They think that's what it means to bear a cross. When Jesus said, "Take up your cross and follow me." He wasn't talking about an ingrown toenail or a migraine headache. He was talking about dying because anytime you saw somebody bearing a cross they were getting ready to die. There are two ways that can be understood. In our context it means dying to self. But in those days it meant literally because many of these people were losing their lives for the sake of Christ. Jesus writes a letter to this little, struggling church and he says, "Hey, I know what you are going through. I know the pressure you are getting from the outside." Have you noticed that pressure sometimes builds stronger Christians?

I was talking with our pastors from the former Soviet Union and they were talking to me about what they went through during Communism because they were a church. The KGB would break the apartment doors down and go around taking everybody's names because they were meeting

together and studying the Bible. They had to pay a fine to the police department there because they were meeting together illegally according to their law. You met Pabel and Benjamin, the two brothers. Their father has been a pastor for many years even when it was illegal for young people to go to church. It was against the law for anybody under the age of 18 to go to a worship service because the Communists believed if they could keep their young people from being "indoctrinated" with Christianity, they were free from the effects of it. They were pretty smart, because if a person doesn't come to Christ by the time they are 18 years old, statistics say very few of them do after that. In the former Soviet Union, every man was required by law to serve military service. Because Benjamin and Pabel were children of a pastor, they were sent to serve in the very worst place in the Soviet Union—Siberia. Why? At that time they weren't even Christian but their father was a Christian. The one thing all that pressure did was to build strong Christians, because you had to make sure you were really a believer. We do not understand and we cannot comprehend the freedom we have in America to worship God. If you have not thanked God today for the freedom you have—you should, because we are relatively free from that kind of governmental pressure Jesus is talking about here. The first affliction was pressure.

2. They faced poverty—but Jesus called them "rich"

The second affliction was poverty. This was a very poor church. He says in verse 9, "I know your affliction and I know your poverty." He says, "I know that you don't have much in the way of material goods." He says, "I know what you are going through." This is a very interesting church. By the way you're going to see that of the seven churches, Smyrna and Philadelphia are the two that stand out as good churches. Jesus really doesn't have anything negative to say to the church at Smyrna. If you are looking at that church about the only thing bad you could say about that church was that they were just dirt poor. Jesus said, "That's not bad." They just did not have much in the way of finances, because many of the people who lived in Asia Minor during this time, if they were workers, had to belong to a labor guild almost like today's labor unions. In order to belong to a labor guild, you had to burn incense and bow before the god of that labor guild every year. Every profession had some kind of a pagan deity. Many of these Christians said, "No! We're not going to bow our knee before anybody but Jesus." So that meant no jobs for them. Many were poverty stricken because they refused to bow their knee to some pagan god. So they were a very, very poor congregation.

Tertullian of Carthage was the pastor of a church in northern Africa about 200 years later around the year 200 A.D., 200 years after Jesus was born and some of the members of his congregation argued, saying, "Tertullian, we must burn incense to this pagan god even though we are Christians. We just have to do it. We won't mean it, but we will do it." Tertullian said, "Why?" They said, "Because we have to work!" Tertullian said, "Why do you have to work?" They said, "Because we have to eat." He said, "Why do you have to eat?" They said, "Because we have to live." Tertullian the pastor looked at them and said, "No you don't have to work you don't have to eat and you don't have to live. The only thing you have to do is be faithful to God." I say we cannot understand the persecution and the tribulation these early Christians faced.

Have you ever heard that it pays to serve Jesus? It doesn't pay financially. Ask Simon Peter what it pays to serve Jesus. Simon Peter left what we would call a very successful fishing business. We're talking Zebeddeean Sons, Inc. It was not some little cheap two-bit outfit and he followed

Jesus. What did it end up doing in his life? The time came when they crucified Simon Peter upside down because he didn't feel worthy to be crucified like Jesus. What did it do for Stephen? It ended up with Stephen kneeling before the Sanhedrin there having the life stoned out of him. What did it pay to James, the brother of John? They took him to the pinnacle of the Temple, tossed him off the pinnacle of the Temple and when he fell to the valley below it didn't kill him. Somebody came along with a club and they were ordered to beat him to death! That what it paid James. I love the little needlepoint that I was given. I keep it in my study. It says, "Working for the Lord doesn't pay much, but the retirement benefits are out of this world!"

I want you to know something about the church at Smyrna. They were poor financially, but look what Jesus said about them. "You're poor, but I want to tell you you guys are rich. You are rich! You are wealthy!" Look in 3:17. The Laodicean church was just the opposite. Jesus says, "You folks say, 'I'm rich; I have acquired wealth and I don't need a thing.'" They thought they were rich, but what did Jesus say about them? "You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked." Compare for just a moment these two churches. Here was struggling, little, dirt poor Smyrna church didn't have anything financially and they knew they didn't have anything. Jesus looked at that church and said, "You folks are rich!" Laodicea was a very wealthy, comparatively influential church. They said, "We're rich! We don't need anything!" Jesus looked at them and said, "You are poor and wretched, blind and miserable and you don't even know it." It's a whole lot better to be like the church at Smyrna than the church at Laodicea. Some of the greatest churches I believe in God's Hall of Fame of Churches are those small, little, struggling intercity churches or those rural churches. They may not have the kind of funds we have to send missionaries around the world and to do the kind of work we do but they are faithful where they are. God looks at those churches and he says, "You may be poor, but you are rich in my eyes." God has blessed us as a church and I tell you to whom much is given, much is required. The danger of being a church like Green Acres Baptist Church is that we say sometimes like the church at Laodicea, "We're rich! We have buildings. We have buses. We have PA systems. We have so much!" We have to be careful that we don't become so presumptuous that we get to the point where we say we don't need God.

3. They faced persecution

There's another thing they were facing in terms of affliction. They faced pressure they faced poverty and they faced persecution. Jesus said, "Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer." The life of a Christian is not a life free of suffering. If you are a Christian, you will suffer. This heretical health, wealth and prosperity gospel still being preached on television is from the pits of Hell. It is not true to the word of God. Jesus said, "You folks are going to suffer but don't be afraid. Hang in there." He said, "I'm going to tell you what the devil is going to do. The devil is going to put some of you in prison to test you and you will suffer persecution for 10 days." What does that mean? 10 days then persecution is over? No. Do you remember I told you at the beginning that the book of Revelation employs the Jewish practice called Geamatria which is the use of numbers the symbolic use of numbers? This word 10 days means it is a set period of time. It's more than 10 days, but what Jesus is saying to you here is "Listen you're going to suffer persecution but it is going to be for a set period of time so hang in there! Don't give up! You'll be able to see relief sometime down the road." And they did suffer persecution.

If any of you are ever interested in studying about the early church that existed about 100 years after the New Testament closes, there are a lot of writings they are not the Bible, but they are what we call "Extra-biblical writings" of what is sometimes called the early church fathers like Tertullian. The pastor of the church at Smyrna, this church we are talking about, was a man named Polycarp. I want to read to you what happened to Polycarp. This old, respected, loved pastor was arrested under one of the periods of Roman persecution and was commanded to declare in a public place that "Caesar is Lord." This is what he said, "Eighty and six years have I served him." He had been a Christian for 86 years and how old he was at this time we don't know. He might have been 100. "Eighty and six years have I served him and he that is Jesus never did me harm. How then can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?" The Roman Proconsul said, "If you will not confess Caesar as Lord, I will burn you in the fire." Polycarp replied, "You threaten me with fire which burns for an hour and after a little is extinguished, but you are ignorant of the fire of the coming judgement and of eternal punishment reserved for the ungodly. Why are you waiting? Bring forth what you will." They tied him to a stake and Jews in Smyrna (that might have been why Jesus talks about those Jews who are of the synagogue of Satan) gathered the wood on a Sabbath day which was against their Jewish law but they gathered the wood and lit the fire around this old pastor. As he was dying, Polycarp prayed these words, "I thank thee that thou hast graciously thought me worthy of this day and of this hour that I may receive a portion in the number of thy martyrs in the cup of thy Christ." and he died. This is just one account of the thousands and thousands of Christians who suffered persecution.

The Roman Emperor, Nero, filled his jails in Rome with Christians. Then he had them brought out and tied to the trees in his garden, then covered in tar and pitch and set on fire as human torches to illuminate his garden as he rode his horses through his gardens at night. We laugh about the Christians vs. the lions, but it was no laughing matter to those Christians! There are many, many accounts of Christians kneeling in an arena as a wild bull or a wild animal tore them apart as they called upon Jesus asking Jesus to forgive their persecutors. There are actual accounts of Roman soldiers who witnessed how these Christians died. They threw down their swords and they threw down their spears and these Roman soldiers became Christians on the spot because of how these Christians died. Then they were immediately were put to death because they named the name of Jesus. Jesus said, "Blessed are you when men persecute you and say all manner of evil against you for my name's sake." He said, "Because that's the way they persecuted the prophets." Let's face it. This good little church was persecuted. Are we being such strong Christians in our age today that we are facing persecution? I tell you if we continue to be salt and light and we stand up for what is right as this world is getting worse by the hour, we are going to be suffering from persecution. It is coming. You be ready.

III. THE ASSURANCE FROM THE LORD

1. Jesus promised them peace in suffering

But there is finally assurance from the Lord. He says, "Do not be afraid for what you are about to suffer. I'll give you peace in suffering. You are going to suffer, but don't be afraid. I'm going to be there with you." Do you remember when Jesus appeared on the road to Damascus with Saul of Tarsus? He said, "Saul, Saul why are you persecuting me?" He said, "It's difficult for you to keep kicking against the pricks or kicking against the goads." That's a picture of a cow forced to

move ahead with a sharp stick and instead of moving on ahead as the master is trying to make the cow do the cow keeps kicking against that sharp stick and every time she does, she sticks herself and causes a wound. Jesus said, "Paul, that's what you are doing. Why do you keep kicking against what I am trying to do in your life?" Of course, when Paul saw Jesus standing there he realized "Hey, I've made a big mistake. I've been killing people who believe in this guy and here he is." Then he said, "Lord, what do you want me to do?" Jesus said "Paul, I want to show you what great things you are going to suffer for me." (Acts 9) If I was giving an invitation tonight to you and you were not a Christian and I said, "All right. I want you to become a Christian tonight because if you become a Christian you're going to suffer a lot." Would you accept Christ? Probably not, because we want to have it easy. We want to take things nice and smooth. Jesus said, "I'm going to show you what you are going to suffer, Paul." and he suffered a lot! He was stoned until he was left as dead, shipwrecked three times, fought wild animals, beaten with stripes many, many times. He suffered—but the main thing is Jesus said, "I'm going to be there with you during the suffering."

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the Old Testament were told to "bow down to the image of the king." They said, "No we're not going to bow down." The king said, "We're going to throw you in the fiery furnace." I love what they said to the king. They said, "King, our God is able to deliver us but even if he doesn't, we're still going to praise him." Do you have that kind of "but if not" faith? I mean it is our tendency to say, "If he delivers me, I will praise him." That's not what they said. They said, "Our God is able to deliver us, but if he doesn't, we're still going to praise him." You can't beat somebody like that! They were thrown into the fire and the Bible says, "The fire was so hot that even the men who threw them in died but the fire only burned their ropes off and set them free." The king looked in that fiery furnace and he said, "Wait a minute! Didn't you throw three guys in the fire?" "That's right, O king!" He said, "But I see four! And the fourth is like the Son of God!"

Let me ask you a question. Would you rather be outside the fire where it is nice and cool and comfortable without Jesus or would you rather be in the fire with Jesus? I don't know about you, but I'd like to be in the fire with Jesus wouldn't you? That's why he says to these people "Listen don't be afraid! Because while you are suffering and going through this persecution, I'm going to be walking through the fire with you." If Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego hadn't been thrown in the fire, they would never have gotten to see Jesus. He says, "Peace in suffering!"

2. Jesus promised them power over Satan

Number two He says, "I'll give you power over Satan. You will not be hurt by the second death." That's the last thing he says in verse 11. The first death is physical death. That's inevitable if the Lord tarries if he doesn't come back to rapture the church soon you may die physically. That's the first death. That's inevitable. What is the second death? The second death in Revelation 20:11 is talking about the great white throne judgement that's going to be taking place sometime in the future. 11 He says, "I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them." This is Jesus on the throne at the great white throne judgement. "I saw the dead, great and small" that means, spiritually dead those who are lost great and small "standing before the throne and the books were opened (books plural) "another book was opened which is the book of Life. The dead,

meaning lost people, the spiritually dead, were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades" (or the grave or Hell) "gave up the dead that were in them and each person was judged according to what he had done" and here it is "then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death." Everyone needs to listen to verse 15 "If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire."

The first death is physical death. But there is a second death and it is what we might call "eternal death" because the Bible says every person who has not been born again is going to be cast into the lake of fire. It is the second death. When you trust Jesus Christ as your personal Savior when you are born again your name is written in the Lamb's Book of Life. Jesus says, "You be faithful. You trust me and you don't even have to worry about the second death!" Have you noticed people today are afraid of that first death? People do everything they can to deny the fact that death is coming. They always try to not even think about "I'm going to die one day!" They do everything they can to put it off, and put it off, and put it off and "We don't even want to talk about it!" I wish that we were just as afraid of the second death as we are the first death. Jesus said, "Do not fear him who is able to destroy the body but fear him" that is God "who is able to destroy both the body and the soul!" You had better fear God. So Jesus said, "I'm going to give you power over Satan." because Satan until Jesus takes that power away maintains that power.

3. Jesus promised them prizes for being steadfast

Number three, He says, "I will give you a prize for being steadfast." Look, if you will, at verse 10 the last part of verse 10 he says, "Be faithful even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life." The Bible has a lot to say about crowns God will give us. These are rewards. You say, "I don't really want crowns. I just want to get to heaven when I die." If you are after crowns, you won't be getting any. It is something he gives you as a reward for service. There is a crown of glory and there is the crown of life. That means he looks at you and says, "You're a good and faithful servant." This is the word that means *stephanos*, which is not a royal crown. It is a picture of someone who has competed in an athletic event and they come and they stand before the raised platform and the official (the judge) gives them this garland wreath this kind of crown and they say, "You have finished the race. You have run a good race and now here is your prize. Here is your crown." Have you ever heard somebody say, "There are going to be stars in your crown?" Maybe we ought to say, "There will be a leaf in your crown." because we are talking about that kind of garland that kind of crown. You say, "Do you mean to tell me that all throughout eternity I'm going to be wearing a crown?" Oh, no we'll get to it in chapters 4 and 5. But the Bible says when Jesus raptures the church and we get to heaven, we're going to kneel before the Lamb on the throne and the Bible says we're going to cast our crowns at his feet and we're going to say, "Crown him with many crowns because he is the only one worthy of praise and adoration." The admonition here is "You be faithful! Be faithful, good and faithful servant and I will reward you." So in the midst of pressure in the midst of poverty in the midst of persecution he says, "Don't be afraid." He says, "Satan will give you a hard time, but that's okay. He doesn't have final control over you and you be faithful and I will give you the prize!"

OUTLINE

I. THE AUTHOR OF THE LETTER

Jesus is:

1. Omnipotent: He was dead and is alive
2. Omniscient: He knows our works

II. THE AFFLICTION OF THE BELIEVERS

They faced:

1. Pressure
2. Poverty—but Jesus called them "rich"
3. Persecution

III. THE ASSURANCE FROM THE LORD

Jesus promised them:

1. Peace in suffering: "Fear not"
2. Power over Satan: "Not be hurt by the second death"
3. Prizes for being steadfast: "Crown of life"



DISCLAIMER: These messages are offered for your personal edification and enrichment. There is no legal copyright on this material. I have used many sources, and I have always attempted to cite any exact quotations. Any failure to cite a quote is simply an oversight on my part.

If you are a preacher or teacher, I encourage you to use this material to stimulate your own Spirit-driven imagination. Additional study beyond this material will benefit both you and your listeners. You have my full permission to use any of this material as long as you cite the source for any substantial amount used in your message.

If you borrow the majority of a message or outline, I encourage you to simply preface your remarks by saying something like: ***“Some (or “much” as the case may be) of the ideas I’m sharing in this message came from a message by Pastor David Dykes in Texas.”*** This simple citation may prevent any criticism that may be directed toward you.

To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes