

The Apocalypse

A Series of Special Lectures on the Revelation of Jesus Christ

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Lecture Sixth

THE SEVEN EPISTLES--A DISTINCT AND INVITING DEPARTMENT OF SACRED LITERATURE--STRANGELY NEGLECTED BY THE CHURCH--EACH EMBRACES SEVEN PARTS--THEIR TEACHINGS IN RELATION TO THE PARTICULAR CHURCHES ADDRESSED--CHRIST REMEMBERS HIS PEOPLE--SPEAKS TO THEM THROUGH THEIR MINISTERS--THE MORAL STATE OF THE PRIMITIVE CHURCHES--THE IMPORTANCE ASSIGNED TO THE PRACTICAL IN RELIGION--CHRIST'S USE OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE SECOND ADVENT--THE FUTURE OF THE REDEEMED

Rev. Chapters 2-3 (Revised Text):

To the angel of the Church in Ephesus write: These things says He who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven candlesticks of gold: I know your works, and your labor, and your endurance, and that you cannot bear those who are evil, and have tried those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them false, and have endurance, and did bear for my name, and have not fainted. Nevertheless, I have against you that you have left your first love. Remember, therefore, whence you have fallen, and repent, and do the first works; otherwise I am coming unto you, and will remove your candlestick out of its place, if you do not repent. But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitanes, which I also hate. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says unto the Churches. To him who overcomes will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of my God.

And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These things says the first and the last, who became dead and revived: I know your tribulation, and your poverty (nevertheless you are rich), and [I know] your reproach from those who say they are Jews and are not, but [are] Satan's synagogue. Fear not the things which you are about to suffer; behold, indeed, the devil is about to cast [some] of you into prison, that you may be tried, and you shall have tribulation ten days: be faithful unto [the endurance of] death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says unto the Churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt of the second death.

And to the angel of the Church in Pergamos write: These things says He who has the sharp sword with two edges: I know where you dwell, [even] where Satan's throne [is], and you hold fast my name, and did not deny the faith of me, even in the days of Antipas my witness, my faithful one, who was slain among you, where Satan dwells. Nevertheless, I have against you a few things, [that] you have there those who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling-block (an occasion of sin) before the sons of Israel, to eat things offered to idols, and to commit fornication. So you yourself also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitanes in like manner. Repent, therefore, otherwise I am coming to you quickly, and will make war with them with the sword of my mouth. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says unto the Church. To him who overcomes will I give of the hidden manna, and I will give to him a white stone [a bright gem], and on the stone a new name written [engraved], which no one knows save he who receives it.

And to the angel of the Church in Thyatira write: These things says the Son of God, who has his

eyes as a flame of fire, and his feet like unto fine brass: I know your works, and charity, and faith, and service, and your endurance, and your last works [to be] more than the first.

Notwithstanding, I have against you that you suffer your wife Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and teaches and leads astray my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed unto idols. And I gave her time that she should repent, and she is not minded to repent of her fornication. Behold, I cast her into a bed [of sickness, torment or perdition], and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, if they do not repent of her works. And her children will I slay with death; and all the Churches shall know that I am He who searches the reins and hearts; and I will give to every one of you according to your works. But unto you who are the remnant in Thyatira, as many as have not this teaching, who have not known the depths, as they speak, ([depths] of Satan), I put not upon you any other burden; only that which you have, hold fast till I come. And he who overcomes, and he who keeps my works unto the end, to him will I give authority over the nations; and he shall rule them with a rod [sceptre] of iron; as the vessels of earthenware shall they be broken to shivers; as I also received from my Father; and I will give to him the morning star. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says unto the Churches.

And to the angel of the Church in Sardis write: These things says He who has the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars: I know your works, that you have a name that you live, and are dead. Be watchful, and strengthen the things that remain, that were about to die; for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. Remember, therefore, how you have received and heard, and observe and repent. If, therefore, you do not watch, I will arrive over you as a thief, and you shall not by any means know at what hour I will arrive over you. Nevertheless, you have a few names in Sardis who have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with me in white, for they are worthy. He who overcomes thus, shall be clothed in white raiment, and I will not by any means wipe out his name out of the book of life, and will confess his name in the presence of my Father and in the presence of His angels. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says unto the Churches.

And to the angel of the Church in Philadelphia write: These things says the Holy [One], the True, He who has the key of David [of Hades? comp. 1:18], Who opens and no one shall shut, Who shuts and no one shall open: I know your works; behold, I have given before you a door opened, which no one is able to shut; because you have a little strength, did keep my word, and did not deny my name. Behold, I give [those] of the synagogue of Satan, who say they are Jews and are not, but do lie, behold, I will make them that they shall come and shall do homage before your feet, and that they may know that I loved you. Because you did keep my word of patient endurance, I also will keep you out of the hour of temptation [the appointed season of sore trial] which is about to come upon the whole world, to try those who dwell upon the earth. I am coming quickly; hold fast that which you have, that no one take your crown. He who overcomes, him will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out of it; and I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem which comes down out of the heaven from my God, and my own new name. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says unto the Churches.

And to the angel of the Church of Laodiceans write: These things says the Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Beginning [Head Prince] of the creation of God: I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot; would you were cold or hot. So then because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spew you out of my mouth. Because you say, I am rich and increased with goods, and have need in nothing, and know not that you are the wretched and the pitiable

[one], and poor, and blind, and naked; I counsel you to buy from me gold refined out of the fire, that you may be rich; and white raiment, that you may be clothed, and [that] the shame of your nakedness be not made manifest; and eyesalve to anoint your eyes, that you may see. As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten; be zealous, therefore, and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will enter in to him, and will sup with him, and he shall sup with me. To him who overcomes will I give to sit with me on my throne, as I also overcame and sat down with my Father on His throne.

In the second and third chapters of the Apocalypse, upon which we now enter, we find a distinct and unique section of sacred literature which the learned and devout Dr. Bengel used to commend, above everything, to the study especially of young ministers. We call the contents of these chapters *Epistles*; but they are not so much messages from an absent Lord as they are sentences of a present Judge engaged in the solemn act of inspection and decision.

There is much pertaining to these sentences to recommend them to the particular attention of Christians. They are a prominent and vital part of the Apocalypse, which pronounces special benedictions upon its attentive readers and hearers. Like the parables, they consist exclusively of Christ's own words and are the very last which we have directly from Him. They are, perhaps, the only unabridged records of His addresses in our possession. They are most impressively introduced and so directly addressed as to beget the idea that they are something of unusual solemnity and importance. They are also accompanied with a seven times repeated entreaty and command to hear what is said in them. And yet there is not another portion of Scripture, of equal extent and conspicuity [prominence], to which so little attention has been paid.

Strange to say, the Church has nowhere included these Epistles in the lessons prescribed to be read in the public services, except in a secondary and very remote manner. In the Church of England, Archbishop Trench remarks that it is impossible, if the canons of the Church be followed, for these Epistles ever to be read in the public services.¹ Though so specifically and urgently addressed to the Churches, it would seem as if there had been some general concert to prevent them from being seen or heard.

Exposition is also remarkably barren with respect to these Epistles. Though in every way marked as of equal account with the parables, they have not received a tithe of the attention. We have hundreds of disquisitions on other special discourses of the Savior, where it would be difficult to find *tens* devoted to these--His last and most solemn, dictated from heaven, superscribed with His own marvelous attestations, and urged upon all by the seven-fold admonition to hear and ponder what they contain. Even writers on the Apocalypse itself, in very many instances, have passed these Epistles with hardly a word of remark. Erroneously assigning to them nothing but what concerned the particular Churches named, and mistakenly commencing the Apocalypse proper only with the fourth or sixth chapter, writers on prophecy have thought they had no occasion to deal with these divine letters and have generally passed them by to the utter discomfiture of their attempts, without them, to understand or expound this book.

I have already indicated the manner in which the seven Churches are to be viewed. They were literal historical Churches existing at the time John wrote, but at the same time representative

¹ "It is very much to be regretted that while every chapter of every other book of the New Testament is set forth to be read in the Church, and wherever there is daily service is read in the Church three times in the year, and some--or portions of some--oftener, while even of the Apocalypse itself two chapters and portions of others have been admitted into the service, *under no circumstances whatever can the second and third chapters ever be heard in the congregation.*" --*Epist. to the Seven Churches*, p. 10.

and comprehensive of all other Churches of all nations, places, and ages--a complete sample of the whole body in the entirety of its character and career. And it is the same with reference to these seven Epistles. They are neither exactly nor only prophetic. They were really messages to these particular Churches, in view of their several conditions, to stir them up to hold fast what was right and to amend what was wrong, as also all other Churches in like conditions. But as the seven Churches were representative and inclusive of the entire Church, these Epistles also give Christ's judgment of the entire Church and are necessarily anticipatory of its entire history. In other words, they give us from the beginning the exact picture of the whole history of the Church, as that history when finished shall present itself to the mind of Christ as he contemplates it from the judgment seat, which is really the point from which everything presented in the Apocalypse is viewed. We may therefore read in them what was in the beginning, and what the career of the Church has been since, and what it will be to the end.

The number of these Epistles is *seven*, corresponding with the number of the Churches. Each one also embraces seven distinct parts: **first**, an address; **second**, a citation of some one or more of the sublime attributes of the Speaker; **third**, an assertion of His complete knowledge of the sphere, duties and doings of the persons addressed; **fourth**, a description of the state of each with such interspersions of praise and promise, or censure and admonition, as the case required; **fifth**, an allusion to His promised coming and the character it will assume to the persons described; **sixth**, a universal command to hear; and **seventh**, a special promise to the ultimate victor. In the last four the order of succession is varied from the first three, and the call to attention is there put *after* the promise "to him who overcomes." But in each these seven parts may be distinguished, showing that there is a completeness and fullness about the whole which will not admit of their being confined in their signification to the few particular congregations to which they were originally addressed.

But without descending into all the particulars, I propose to note briefly some of the teachings of these Epistles, considered--

I. IN RELATION TO THE PARTICULAR CHURCHES ADDRESSED.

II. IN RELATION TO THE ENTIRE CHURCH REPRESENTED.

1. The first Churches were very obscure assemblies, without badges save their common adherence to Christ and obedience to his Gospel, and their congregation in quiet, if not in secrecy, around the altars of a simple worship. They were unnoticed by the great world, in the midst of which they were planted, or were observed only to be despised. But neglected or persecuted on earth, we see from these Epistles that they were considered in heaven and had the very first place in the blessed Savior's regard.

Wonderful doings among the potencies of this world were about to take place. Seals were to be opened, at which the heavens should shake, the sun be darkened, the stars fall, and mountains and islands move from their places. Trumpets were to be blown, which should turn the very rains to hail, fire and blood, open the pit, and fill the earth with woe. Battles were to be fought in heaven and on earth, and vials of wrath emptied, and scenes enacted over which heaven should shout hallelujah. But in advance of all and above all, the mind of the great Judge was on His companies of believers, and to them He gave His first attention. "Write," said He, "and send to the seven Churches."

2. But when we come to inspect what is written, we find all addressed to the ministers in charge

of these Churches. Each Epistle is written to "*the angel of the Church.*" What is written we know to be meant not for him alone, for the command is to everyone to hear "what the Spirit says to the Churches." But we thus encounter an item of ecclesiastical order binding up these congregations very closely with their pastors, and their pastors with them. This is important. It shows that there is a ministry--an official order--in the Christian Church which assigns one angel to one congregation and makes him its representative and head. The method by which these officers succeeded to their places, or the precise extent of their functions and authority, is not defined. Neither is it denied that what pertained preeminently to them also belonged subordinately to the whole company of believers. But a special ministerial appointment is recognized as part of the sacred economy, the proper life, and the wholesome ongoing of the Church, and which no power on earth may disturb without insurrection against God and invasion of the dignity of our Lord.

This is a doctrine from which, indeed, many deplorable abuses have sprung (of which we will have occasion to take notice), and on account of which some have rejected it as not of God. But it is a true doctrine of our holy religion, and, in its legitimate relations, enters essentially into the system which Christ has himself ordained for the bringing of souls to eternal life.

3. From this peculiarity in these Epistles we may also trace something of the nature and responsibility of the ministerial office. It is not a lordship, but a service; not a service to be commanded of man, but of God. It is the business of the angel to hear for the Church, receive for the Church, and to answer for the Church which has been committed to his care. He is its chief, its guardian, its watchman, the under-shepherd of the flock. He is to receive the word at the mouth of the Lord and at the hands of His inspired servants, and to present it faithfully to his people, and to see that it is accepted, observed and obeyed according to the true intent of its divine Author. Christ sends His Revelation to these angels above all, and looks to them for the right ordering of His Churches. To them He addresses His judgments, His rebukes, and His directions, as if the whole estate of the Churches were wrapped up in them and they alone responsible for that estate. And so far as they keep themselves to their true sphere and work, whoever hears them hears Him, and he who despises them despises Him.

4. But these Epistles show us more particularly what was the moral condition of the primitive Churches. Nor is the exhibition what we would perhaps have expected. Churches founded and instructed by apostles, ministered unto by those who were the pupils of the apostles and appointed under apostolic supervision, we would think to find models of every excellence and pure and free from the evils, heresies and defections of later periods. But these Epistles show that the Churches then were much like the Churches now and of all ages; that is, interminglings of good and bad, and as full of the workings of depravity as of the fruits of a true faith. There was much to commend, but quite as much to censure. There were worthy sons and daughters of the Most High, whose conversation was in heaven, but many more whose love had cooled, whose hearts were in the world, who had a name to live but were dead, and who esteemed themselves rich and increased with goods and needing nothing, not knowing that they were wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked. With five out of the seven, Christ finds serious fault; and in one of these five He finds nothing whatever to commend. Two alone pass the solemn inspection, and they in contact with elements which He quite condemns.

The first and most distinguished was that of Ephesus. This Church was characterized by strong impulse toward God, earnestness, and zeal, and yet with a waning in these qualities from what they were at first. This is signified in the word εψεσις, which thus exactly fits to the description.

He who holds the seven stars and walks in the midst of the candlesticks found in Ephesus works, labor, endurance, steadfast opposition to evil, faithfulness and firmness in discipline, cheerfulness in bearing any burden for Christ's sake, and a just hatred of deeds and practices which Christ also hates. But He found there also this defect, which called for repentance and return to first works if they would not be unchurched entirely: namely, that they had left their first love. There is such a thing as having and exercising a sharp penetration into the true and the false, a correctness of judgment in sacred things, a zealous and self-sacrificing devotion to the right and true, and an earnest-minded severance from false apostles and all evildoers. And yet it can be without that warmth and purity of love, which is the first impulse in the breast of young disciples, and without which, if not well cherished and kept in vigorous life, there is unfitness to meet the judgment or to stand in it.

And this was the sorry fault of the Church of Ephesus. Of course, it was not the estate of every particular member who is thus described. There were Smyrnaotes and Philadelphians in Ephesus also; but their number was few, and the prevailing characteristic of the whole together was great zeal for truth and right, with a love in fatal decline.

Smyrna is a word three times translated in the New Testament (Matt. 2:11; Mark 15:23; John 19:39). It signifies *myrrh*, an aromatic exudation from a thorny tree, which furnished one of the ingredients of the holy ointment and was used by the ancients in embalming the dead. It had associated with it the idea of something grateful [pleasing] to God, and connected also with death and resurrection. It well describes a Church persecuted unto death and lying embalmed in the precious spices of its sufferings, such as the Church of Smyrna was. It was the Church of Myrrh, or bitterness, and yet agreeable and precious to the Lord, holy in the midst of its tribulations, and full of blessed hopes for the world to which the resurrection is to bring the saints.

Nothing of complaint is said of this Church, but neither are any special works or achievements enumerated to its praise, while the presence of an evil synagogue is affirmed. A poor Church in the midst of persecution and suffering cannot be expected to do much. To endure steadfastly is, then, all that can be looked for, and is worthy of highest commendation. From two sources did these troubles spring: from blaspheming Jews and from intolerant Pagans, both actuated by the devil. When Polycarp was tried and martyred (whom some regard as the angel of the Church here addressed), we are told that the Jews joined with the heathen in clamoring for the good bishop's destruction, and were the most forward in bringing the fuel for the fire which consumed him. These Jews were blasphemers in the enmity and contempt which they felt and enacted against Christ and His people; and they were false Jews and a mere Satanic synagogue because of that blasphemy. "For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, but he is a Jew who is one inwardly." It was thus a two-horned Antichrist by which this little Church was gored, bereft, oppressed, and trampled; a Church destitute, powerless, crushed, but rich in divine grace, pleasing to God, and comforted with joyous hopes for the world to come, though having nothing but suffering to expect in this.

Pergamos carries in its etymology the idea of a tower, and also of marriage.² It well describes a Church in close proximity to the center of the kingdom of evil, and yielding itself to sensual alliances. And such was the Church at Pergamos. There was Satan's throne, the darkest center of Pagan abominations. It had faith, and courage, and endurance, and faithful witnesses to Christ. But it also had some of the worst of elements. It had those who held to a system of ideas answering to the treacherous teachings of Balaam, by which Israel was seduced to

2 Donegan gives *πύργος*, a tower; *γάμος*, marriage; *τα πύργα* signifies things lofty or high.

fornication and idolatry. It had also those who held to another system of ideas involving tyrannical lordship over the Church: Nicolaitanes, or people-conquerors. It was a Church with a tower of unrighteous assumption in it, and indulgently compliant with the adulterous solicitations and embraces of worldliness. With all its saintship and fidelity, it had need to repent if it would have the approbation of the Lord. It was a Church of much praiseworthy fidelity, but with wicked pretenses to loftiness and power on the part of some, and base alliances with what was earthly and Satanic on the part of others.

The Church in Thyatira had some of the same excellencies, but conjoined with even worse defects. It was active in services and charities, patient in reliance upon God's promises, and increasingly vigorous in its endeavors. But it was lacking in proper zeal for the maintenance of godly discipline and doctrine, and was so indulgent toward errors and errorists that falsehood and idolatry permeated, overlaid, and modified the whole character of the Church, obscuring the faith, deceiving the saints, and setting up in its very midst the infamous school of Satan himself.

With all that is said commendatory of this Church, the idea of effeminacy connects with its whole history and character. The first Christian in Thyatira was a woman. The name Thyatira some take as equivalent to *thygatira*, a daughter. If we take it as a compound of θυγατρης and τειρω, we get the idea of feminine oppression. The false prophets who first enticed the members of this Church into apostasy were women. And the great fault which Christ finds with these Christians is their toleration of the false pretenses, the miserable domination, and the abominable doings of one whom He designates as "that woman Jezebel," who, like her namesake of old, seems to have borne down what should have been the governing will, set aside the true prophets of God with her falsities, and entirely taken possession of the Church for her own impurities. It was a Church with much activity of faith and love, but lying in the embraces of an adulteress and, for the most part, completely in her power.

The name of the fifth of these Churches has been variously derived. Some connect it with the precious stone called *sarda*, which was found about Sardis and sometimes used as an amulet to drive away fear, give boldness, inspire cheerfulness, sharpen wit, and protect against witchcraft and sorceries. Others have derived it from the Hebrew and have assigned it the signification of *remnant* or *an escaped few*. Ebrard finds for it an etymological derivation denoting something new, or renewed. And there is a further explanation which derives it from a word which denotes a builder's rule, or measuring line. These several explanations, though different, are not antagonistic as applied to the condition of a Church. They can be very well combined in one picture. Courage and boldness imply great conflict and danger. In a great contest, many would be vanquished, but a remnant would escape. Those surviving and escaping would necessarily involve new features of life and *regime*. And in this process of renewal, there would appropriately come in the use of the carpenter's rule in fashioning the new edifice.

We accordingly see in this Church comparative freedom from the sorceries of the domineering prophetess of Thyatira, and an account of things remaining as though they had with difficulty been saved from some far-reaching and crippling danger, and of some names which had clean escaped from the abounding defilements. The ideas of newness from old degeneracies, and of the true rule regiven for the new order, run through the entire description. But with all, the boasted new life was in many things but name, and not reality. These Sardians had heard and received that which was right and good, but they did not properly hold or improve what had been given them and became dead in the very forms and attirements of the new life. Having defied and escaped the sorceress, they suffered their garments to drag in other defilements.

There were some noble exceptions whom Christ pronounces worthy, and who are to walk with Him in white, and whose names He will confess before the Father and His angels because they were not ashamed to confess Him and to stand true to His pure gospel in its spirit and life. But in a large part the Church of Sardis was but a drooping plant and a dead carcass. It started fresh and new; it had heard and received that to which it is the true life of saints to hold. But it soon had more profession than vitality and more boastfulness than purity or fruit.

The Church in Philadelphia shows no interminglings of evil but is addressed as if embracing only a small exceptional company of acknowledged ones in the midst of a larger body, who are no longer recognized as strictly a part of Christ's Church. They are spoken of as having kept His word and not denied His name; as though many had failed in these particulars and so lost their place in the acknowledged Christian body. These Philadelphians were but a little flock, poor in worldly goods and of small account in the eyes of men. They had but little strength and were greatly oppressed by heretical teachers and pretenders, but they held fast to the word of Christ in patient waiting for His promise. They were an exceptional band, joined by cords of loving fraternity, as the meaning of the word is, and they had promises given them of special exemptions and special triumphs.

Very different was the Church of Laodicea. Here was nothing to commend, though having in it a few suffering ones whom Christ loves and chastens. Its name³ designates it as the Church of mob rule, *the democratic Church*, in which everything is swayed and decided by popular opinion, clamor and voting; and hence a self-righteous and self-sufficient Church. It is described as thinking itself the perfection of Churches. It said in its heart, "I am rich and increased with goods, and have need in nothing," but never was a body of people so woefully self-deluded. With all this boastfulness, the faithful and true Witness found nothing which He could abide and pronounces them wretched, and pitiable, and poor, and blind, and naked, and about to be vomited up and cast out.

We thus find all sorts and shades of intermingled or coexistent good and evil in the Church of that day. Some were priest-ridden, and on that account condemned; and some were mob-ridden, and hence unsatisfactory to Christ. Some had great zeal for pure doctrine and godly discipline, while they failed in the important element of love and charity. And others, with much faith and beneficence, yet permitted the manlier things of doctrine and the ruling out of impurity to be overlaid by the false pretenses and domination of lewd effeminacy. Some in their sufferings were faultless, but feeble. Others in their prosperity were strong, but dead and corrupt. There was true faith and false faith, and sometimes no faith. There were schisms, heresies, and sects as well as devout works, noble self-sacrifices, and instances of fidelity to death. There were children of the kingdom and children of the wicked one, wheat and tares, truths and errors, sins and sanctities--then as now, and as in all intervening ages. The leaven of evil was even then already working in the woman's meal, and the birds of impurity finding lodging in the branches of the springing tree.

5. We may also notice, in this connection, the stress that our blessed Lord lays upon the practical features of religion. It is upon these that His commendations and censures turn. What He praises in the Ephesians is their labor, their endurance, their resistance of evil, their patience, their courageous perseverance in well doing. And what He proposed as the remedy for their defects was that they should return to first *works*. Love, ministries, patience, labors,

³ Λαοδικεια, from λαος, people, and δικη, judgment, or justice.

works--these are the things to which He refers with most delight as the marks of the true election and the proper badges of approved saintship.

It is in vain to boast of a correct creed, of right theories, of sound doctrine if there be no practical godliness, no good works, no positive virtues and active charities and labors. Orthodoxy is important, but orthodoxy alone will not do. The most orthodox in this list is depicted as the deadest. Mere ecstasies, pleasant frames, joyous feelings, loud professions, or dreams that we are rich in grace and in the divine favor, will not do; for the most ecstatic and the best pleased with itself among these Churches was the worst. There must be faith, and a true faith, but also a living, working, bearing, self-denying faith--a faith that shows its life and power by love, by charities, by gracious ministries, by active services and sacrifices for God. Persecutions and sufferings may cut off opportunity for such displays (as winter overlies and locks up the germs and life-powers of nature and hides them from our view), but as springtime and summer bring those hidden germs to light and cause them to put forth and fill the face of heaven with joyous freshness, beauty and fruit, so must true piety in the soul show itself in the life, in good deeds, in devoted endeavors, in a loving spirit, and in faithful standing to the truth whatever might be the cost or storms.

There are, indeed, such things as "dead works"--works that have no life-connection with piety, works put on from without and not brought forth from within, fruits tied upon the tree and not the product of its life. These are not at all characteristics of true religion. There may be prayers, vigils, fasts, temples, altars, priests, rites, ceremonies, worship, and still be no true piety. Heathenism has all these. There may be Christian profession, connection with the Church, observance of the sacraments, where saving religion has never taken root. None of these things alone characterize a Christian. That which distinguishes him where all other tests fail is his living, active love to God and man--his CHARITY. If this be lacking, the defect is fatal. All knowledge, all faith, all mastery of tongues, all miraculous powers cannot atone for such a deficiency. For "pure religion, and undefiled before God and the Father, is this: to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep [oneself] unspotted from the world."

6. These Epistles further set before us Christ's use of the great doctrine of His return, and the very high place it occupies among the motives to penitence, hope, steadfastness and godly fear. In this respect the language of the blessed Lord harmonizes exactly with that of His inspired servants. Finding the Ephesians cooling in their love, He enjoined on them a speedy repentance and return to their first works, lest His coming should suddenly overtake them. The suffering Smyrnaotes, though taught to look for nothing but tribulation in this world, were exhorted to be faithful in view of the crowns which it is assigned to that day to bring. The Pergamites were plied with it as an object of just dread to them, in consequence of their Balaamite and Nicolaitane doctrines, and as the great incentive to immediate repentance. The believers of Thyatira were referred to it as the motive for holding fast to the faith, and as an event which was to end their struggles and temptations. The Sardians are commanded to remember how they had received and heard, and to hold fast, and repent, and watch, on pain of having their Lord and Judge come upon them as a thief, which is contemplated as the worst of calamities. To the Philadelphians it is announced, as a subject of comfort and hope, that Christ shall quickly come. And to the Laodiceans He is represented as already present, knocking at the door, prepared to bless those ready to receive Him but about to eject with loathing the lukewarm masses who fail in fervency and timely repentance.

Some tell us that *death* is, to all intents and purposes, the coming of Christ to the individual,

and that we are to comfort and exhort men with reference to their mortality. But that is not the method of Christ in these Epistles. With the exception of the one to Smyrna, there is no hint that there was any such thing as death for any of those who really believed. I have my doubts whether the Scriptures warrant any Christian in expecting to die at all. Paul, in several places, has taught us most specifically that there are Christians who shall never die. Such of Christ's waiting-and-watching people as shall be alive and remaining at the time of Christ's coming are not to sleep, not to die, but to be suddenly transfigured and caught up to the clouds to meet the Lord in the air (1 Thess. 4:17). And as Christ may come in any of these passing generations, I cannot see how true Christians of any generation can reconcile it to the Scriptures to count upon dying.

Death, to the saint, is not that certainty which it is sometimes represented; nor is it of a character to impress and comfort as the doctrine of Christ's coming in power and glory to give deliverance to His sighing and dying creation, and dominion to His saints. It is to that coming, therefore, and the translation of the watching and faithful without tasting of death, and of the glorious honors into which it is to induct the patient waiters for it, and the fearful disasters which it is to bring upon the unprepared, that the Scriptures everywhere refer us and upon which the Savior Himself relies in all His exhortations to the seven Churches.

And if this was the proper method eighteen hundred years ago, when that coming of the coming One was yet so many centuries in the future, how much more is it the proper method now that threescore generations have passed, and that we have come to the very margin of the great occurrence! People may call it idiosyncrasy in us that we persist in preaching the near and speedy coming of Christ. But, after all, we only preach as He did when it would seem to have been less in place than now, and as all His inspired apostles also preached when they were yet eighteen centuries further from the event than we are. And if some will call it a sort of amiable hallucination under which we are laboring, it is sufficient for our consolation that the blessed Savior has trod this path, "leaving us an example that we should follow His steps."

7. There are also important and most interesting hints in these Epistles respecting the future life and honors which the coming of Christ is to bring to the redeemed. Each Epistle has a promise to a particular victor. These several promises unitedly give us at least a seven-sided view of the future possessions of the saints.

To the Ephesian victor Christ awards "to eat from off the tree of life which is in the midst of the paradise of God." To him who abides faithful amid the Smyrna trials is awarded "the crown of life and exemption from the second death." To the victor of Pergamos is awarded "the hidden manna, and a white pebble engraved with a new name which no one knows except he who receives it." The victor of Thyatira is to have "authority over the nations, to rule them with a sceptre of iron," and to receive "the morning star." The victor of Sardis is to be "clothed with white raiment, and walk with Christ in white," and have his name continued upon the book of life and confessed in the presence of the Father and of the holy angels. The victor of Philadelphia is to be made a pillar in the temple of God, never again to go out, and to have the name of God written upon him, and the name of the new Jerusalem, the city of God, and the new name of Christ himself. And to the victor of Laodicea is the highest promise of all, even to sit with Christ on His throne, as Christ overcame and sits with the Father on His throne.

Have we here seven orders of rewards to seven orders of Christians succeeding in their triumph through seven orders of surroundings? Or have we here seven steps or degrees in the rewards of

the saints unto which each one attains? Or have we really both? They rise in degree from the first to the last, as do the evils and the adversities over which the victories are achieved. They also seem to have been framed in the light of the whole sweep of God's varied dispensations, from the days of Adam onward until Christ shall have reinstated His saints in the fruition of all that Adam lost.

The first refers to a readmission to a paradise and a tree of life, answering to, if not the very same from which Adam was excluded. The next proclaims a triumph over the afflictions and an exemption from the death that pertain to the state of expulsion from paradise and the tree of life. The third throws open the same or like storehouses out of which the pilgrim Hebrews were sustained in the wilderness, and imparts the engraved and shining jewel, as on Aaron's breastplate, which admits as a priest into the presence-chamber of the Lord. The fourth promises authority and judicial administrations upon nations, which find their type in Joshua's and David's and Solomon's victories and reigns, with an addition the exact nature of which I have not been able to penetrate.⁴ And having thus exhausted the range of the dispensations of the past, the next three move forward to things predicted of the future. The promise to the victor of Sardis links itself with the solemnities which are to end this world: with the resurrection, the opening of the books, and the official acknowledgment of those whose names are in the registry of the faithful. The next takes its elements from the setting up of a new kingdom, and a new city, and rights of celestial citizenship, and a temple--not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. And the last conducts to a point of settlement and dominion beyond which there is nothing higher to be imagined or desired--even session with Christ upon His everlasting throne.

But in whatever way we take these promises, they set before us a body of honor, and privilege, and power, and blessedness greater than eye has seen or ear heard or the heart of man conceived. It has been well observed that these seven promises together, in their twofold aspect, form by far the completest description to be found in all the Word of God, of what good things they are which God has prepared for them who love Him.⁵ They set before us a destiny to which the faithful shall attain, at which the lean, meager, shallow, shadowy, flimsy thing some present as heaven sinks into insipidity and contempt. They present us with something fitting and competent to brace up the courage of the Church, to carry her to the pitch of bearing the cross and crucifying herself with Christ, and actualizing her professed expatriation from this world. They open to us prospects which put upon the commonplaces of heavenly anticipation the disgrace and shame of scarcely having caught the first syllables of what is laid up for the true saints of God.

But we have not time to dwell here, or even to touch sundry other topics suggested by these Epistles in their relation to the particular Churches addressed. The consideration of these Churches, in their representative and prophetic character, we therefore necessarily must defer to another occasion. Meanwhile, let us think of the standard which the Savior has here set up for His people, and seek to animate ourselves to the zeal, self-sacrifice, and devotion that alone can secure the prize here held out for our attainment.

Must Jesus bear the cross alone
And all the world go free?
No, there's a cross for everyone,

4 I have since thought the promise to refer to the exalted position of those saints who are joined with Christ in the judgment of the world, which heralds and brings the final consummation, as the morning-star the day.

5 Rev. Wm. Lincoln, "Javelin of Phineas," p. 149.

And there's a cross for me.

How happy are the saints above
Who once were sorrowing here!
They ever taste unmingled love,
And joy without a tear.

The consecrated cross I'll bear
Till Christ shall set me free,
And then go home, my crown to wear,
FOR THERE'S A CROWN FOR ME.