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LETTERS TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES

THE BOOK OF REVELATION

John the Apostle was an elderly man when he was exiled to the prison island of Patmos. It was a scary time for the church, a time of persecution with the expectation of much worse to come. On a Sunday morning he slipped away to a place of solitude to pray and worship God....when *A voice like a trumpet blast* (Wow!) suddenly called him to *write down in a book a message to the seven churches* of Asia Minor, (present day Turkey) (Rev. 1:11).

Over the centuries, the church has sometimes interpreted the seven letters as pertaining not only to the seven literal churches at that time but also to seven periods of time. But the seven letters actually form a single unified message for the church in all times and places. In other words, any single body of Christians might be similar to one of these churches, and each church may contain people who are like the Christians from these churches.

God speaks to human beings in figurative language: in metaphors, dreams, visions, parables, similes, word pictures. He speaks to our intellect, our emotions, and our spirit. Our spirit is that mysterious part of our being where we can make contact with God. The Bible says: *Deep calls unto deep*. I believe God is speaking to us regularly and commonly in a multitude of ways.

The letters to the seven churches and Revelation itself is a love letter from the heart of God to his backsliding people. It is a severe letter with horrendous images and warnings of impending judgment and destruction to all those who willfully stop their ears and continue in their defiant ways. All of this sounds strange and unreal to our modern ears because much of the church has invented a sweet little God, a Santa Claus, who is tame and harmless and passive toward our lives. Revelation reminds us that, yes, God is loving and gentle and kind, he is a Lamb (the favorite image for Christ in Revelation), but he is also a consuming fire. In a prophecy about the coming judgment on the earth, consider the reaction of those who refused to repent:

Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?" (Rev. 6:15-17)

The book of Proverbs says that anyone who doesn't fear the Lord is a fool. For much of my life, even after I became a Christian, I acted like a fool. The Lord Jesus is inviting you and me to examine ourselves in light of these messages.

THE SEVEN CHURCHES – REVELATION 2 AND 3

I reiterate that the warnings to the churches sound unduly harsh and judgmental because we, the modern church, have watered down the message of the Bible to an extreme extent. God says to us clearly at the end of these messages, *Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline*. (Rev. 3:19) Without

identifying each church, I have categorized the words that God spoke to each church as words of:

COMMENDATION, COMPLAINT, CORRECTION, WARNING, and PROMISES.

1. COMMENDATION

Expressions of love and appreciation to the appropriate churches for their:

- Hard work, and Patient endurance
- Resistance against false teachers and false apostles
- Suffering, afflictions, slander against them, poverty, martyrdom
- Faithfulness in persecution, *You have not denied my name.*
- Love, faith, service

2. COMPLAINT

- You have forsaken your first love (for God and for people).
- You have compromised with the teaching of Balaam, or the Nicolaitans, or Jezebel. In each case this compromise was with:
 - WORLDLINESS
 - IDOLATRY
 - SEXUAL IMMORALITY
- You appear to be awake and alive but you are asleep and dead
- You are deceived, You think you are rich in the ways of God, but you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.
- You are neither cold nor hot but lukewarm

3. CORRECTION

What you can do to correct or remove my complaint against you.

- Repent!
- Remember your first love
- Do the things you did at first to express your love to me
- Obey the things I've said to you
- Be faithful in persecution, even to the point of death
- Wake up!
- Buy from me gold, white clothes and salve (for your eyes)..

4. WARNING

If you don't repent,

- I will come and remove your lampstand from its place. *The lampstands are the seven churches.* (Rev. 1:20) (They will cease to be a true church in God's eyes.)
- I will come and fight against you.
- You will lose your crown

Several warnings were not explicit but were implied:

- I will remove your right to eat from the tree of life.
- You will be hurt, destroyed, by the second death.
- I will blot out your name from the Book of Life

5. PROMISES

Promises of reward for repentance and faithfulness, expressed in the words, *To him who overcomes*, to each of the seven churches.

- Right to eat from the tree of life (giving you eternal life)
- Won't be hurt by the second death
- I will give you hidden manna, a white stone with a new name on it
- I will give you authority over the nations, the morning star, the crown of life.
- I will never blot out your name from the book of life, and I will acknowledge your name before the Father and his angels.
- You will hold onto your crown and be a pillar in God's temple
- If you hear me knocking at your door, I will come in and eat with you
- You can sit with me on my throne

REFLECTIONS ON THE LETTERS TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES

Salvation by faith or by works?

There are parts of these admonitions that are difficult to understand. It almost appears to teach salvation by works. This can't be true, because the John who wrote Revelation is the same John who wrote the Gospel of John where Jesus declared: *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.* (John 3:16) He is also the same John who wrote the little book of 1st John and said, *Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God...* (1 John 5:1)

But John also said, *We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands...and the man who does not do what he commands is a liar* (1 John 2:3-4)....and *No one who is born of God will continue to sin* (1 John 3:9) Paul addresses this subject by saying, *By grace you have been saved through faith....For we are...created in Christ Jesus for good works.* (Eph. 2:8-10)

What is clear in the Bible is that (1) We are saved by faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord (Romans 10:9-10) and (2) *Faith without works is dead* (James 2:26), but many in the church have bought into "easy believism," and think that giving lip service to being a Christian is all that is required. Read through the Complaint, Correction, and Warning sections above and reconsider.

What is the meaning of salvation?

Has the modern church lied to people about what it means to be saved? Of course we all understand that we are talking about being saved from Hell and to Heaven. That is surely the most important subject in our lives. But it means more than that in Scripture. On the day of Pentecost when the church was born, the crowd heard the Apostles speaking to them of the kingdom in a multitude of languages. Then when Peter preached to them their hearts were smitten, and they cried out, *What must we do to be saved? Peter replied, Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.* (Acts 2:38-39)

Peter's first word to the crowd was "Repent!" "Repent and believe in Jesus Christ." It's clear that repentance, renouncing our sin, stopping the practice of sin, turning away from our sinful habits, addictions and bondages, is central to being "saved." It is also clear from Scripture that we cannot do this in our own strength, God has to help us. He helped us by sending a Savior. In announcing Jesus' coming birth, the angel said to Joseph, the husband of Mary, *She will give birth to a Son...and you will name him Jesus* (which means Savior in Hebrew), *because he will save his people from their sins.* (Matthew 1:21) There are fifty or a hundred other Scriptures I could quote, all through the New Testament, that tell us that Jesus came to save us from our sins - - - because sin is what messes up our lives and kills us. *The wages of sin is death.* (Ro. 6:23)

Overcoming our sins (being an overcomer), is not easy or automatic. It is a process, a desperate struggle, a fight against our sinful nature, the devil, and the world. The Apostle Paul spoke of his own struggle with sin in chapter 7 of Romans, *I don't do the things I want to do, I do the very things I hate*. Surely, we can all identify with his words. God expects us to enter into the struggle, the battle against sin. We become more Christlike in the struggle. Christ enters the battle with us, he becomes our Savior, as we surrender to his Lordship. Wait! Do we all understand what that means?

Is Jesus our Savior or our Lord?

Of course the answer is that he is our Savior and our Lord. Note again what Paul said about salvation in Romans 10:9 - *That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved*. He said to confess, "Jesus is Lord." Jesus is the Lord of all creation. Jesus is my personal Lord. He is my Master, my Ruler, my Savior, my Deliverer, my God. Jesus saves us as we submit to his personal Lordship, rulership, over our lives.

The little book of 1st John provides us with a litmus test about salvation. John said, *I write these things* (in the book of 1st John, written to believers) *so that you may know that you have eternal life*. (1 Jn. 5:13) The three things John says are necessary to show us whether we have truly been saved are:

- Right belief in Jesus Christ as the Son of God
- Obedience to Christ
- Love for God and men as the hallmark of our lives.

All through the five chapters in 1st John, John states, repeats, reiterates that these three things are necessary and essential to the process of salvation. (Yes, it is a process.) John says that if we claim we are saved and belong to Jesus as one of his own, but we are disobedient to his commands (in the Word and to us individually), and if we don't live lives of love for God and for our brothers, we are deceived and we are liars.

Can we lose our salvation?

It also appears in the warnings to the churches that saved people, or those who consider themselves to be saved, can lose their salvation. That statement to one of the churches, *He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life* (Rev. 3:5 NKJV) places a condition on salvation by faith in Christ, or it seems that way to me. It definitely says that being an overcomer is a part of the package. Being an overcomer has many ramifications, but in context the major meaning is overcoming the bondage of sin and its ravages. God is not saying that our good works earn salvation, it was Christ's work, not ours, that saves us. He is saying that if we are truly saved then good works will follow, including being an overcomer.

There are many promises in the New Testament that give us an assurance of salvation if we have believed and confessed Jesus Christ as Lord. John 3:16; 10:1-18, 27-30; Romans 10; 1 Cor. 10:6-12; Hebrews 6:4-8. But, as mentioned above, the New Testament also contains stern warnings demanding obedience, faithfulness and endurance. (Note again the Complaints, Corrections, and Warnings to the Seven churches in Revelation.) In addition to the Scriptures listed above, see Jesus' warning in the sermon on the mount: *Many will say to me on that day, "Lord, Lord," and I will say to them, "I never knew you."* (Matt. 7:21-27); and see Hebrews 6:4-12; 10:26-31; 2 Peter 1:3-12)

What is God saying to us in the Letters to the Seven Churches of Revelation?

I believe that God is assuring us of his personal love for each of us, a love so real and extreme that he sent his Son to die on a cross for us.

But I believe God is reminding us that he has saved us for a purpose that is bigger than our own lives. It is a calling to a grand and glorious life in the service of our Savior and Lord, our Master and King, Jesus Christ, Lord of lords and King of kings! We are called to be a part of the Kingdom of God! - the place in the world and in our hearts where God is our King, and his will is done on earth as it is in heaven!

God may be speaking to us individually through the Corrections and Warnings and Promises to his church throughout history.

God is also reminding us that we are being closely watched and monitored, not with a critical eye but with a loving, concerned eye.

God is telling us that from start to finish he is not passive but active in our lives.

God is telling us that his love is kind and gentle, but it is not soft like a marshmallow but as hard as steel. God calls us to be soldiers of Christ and, if necessary, to lay our lives down in service to our King.

God is telling us that he wants to be our Savior and Lord, and that he demands our faithfulness, obedience and love for him. The Great Commandment, according to Jesus, is to: *Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.* We need to remember that this is the Great Commandment, not the Great Suggestion.

The New Testament clearly affirms that with God's help, faithful Christians will persevere to the end and enter into the destiny and reward that God has prepared for them.

RACISM

(Robert Morris recently had a powerful message about racism, and I share from my brief notes.)

According to Genesis 6 through 10, the nations of the world are all descended from the sons of Noah - Shem, Ham and Japheth. Part of the ancient meaning of the name Ham is black; part of the meaning of Japheth is light or fair-skinned; and Shem means name. It is assumed that Noah was brown in complexion, because black and white can genetically come from brown but white cannot come from black or vice-versa. Shem was also apparently brown in complexion.

It is also likely that Adam and Eve were brown-skinned for the same reason.

God created mankind with great diversity, and he created all men and women "In the image of God." There is never a suggestion in the Bible that God created some races, based on skin color, to be superior and some to be inferior. Ham was cursed by his father, Noah, because of his disrespect toward his father (Genesis 9:18-29), just as Reuben was cursed by his father, Jacob, for the same reason (Genesis 35:22 and 49:4).

- People of ethnic diversity were from the beginning

involved in the story of Christ and of the early church

- The man who was conscripted to carry Jesus' cross was Simon of Cyrene, a black man from northwestern Africa. (Matt. 27:32)
- In Acts 2, the church was birthed at Pentecost by Jews who came together from 17 different nations and ethnicities, and after they were converted they went back to their homes and the church was spread. They were Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Egyptians, Romans, Arabs, Libyans, etc.
- The Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:26 was from Africa.
- Acts 13 says that the leaders of the early church *at Antioch were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen, and Saul.* Three of the five were black men from different nations in Africa. This was the group to whom the Holy Spirit spoke and sent forth Barnabas and Saul on the first missionary journey.

I (Robert Morris) believe there are three aspects to racism:

(1st) hating a person because of his race or color

(2nd) believing that a certain race is superior or inferior
based solely on race or color

(3rd) prejudice toward another race before you have all the
facts

Probably most of us have had some racism as a part of our heritage and makeup.

Following is a list of seven things that the Bible and the Christian faith tell us about racism:

1. **Racism is pure evil.** It is of the devil. Romans 12:9 tells us, *Don't pretend to love others, but really love them. Hate what is evil.*
2. **Racism is self righteousness.** "I'm superior to you because I was born in Texas." (Sorry that I, Glenn, sneaked that in. I probably still need to work on that one.)

3. Racism violates the Great Commission. *Go into all the world (all ethnicities) and preach the gospel.....*
4. Racism violates the Great Commandment. *Love God....and love your neighbor as . . . yourself.*
5. Racism questions God's creation. *From one man God created all the nations throughout the earth. He decided beforehand when they should rise and fall, and he determined their boundaries. (Acts 17:26)*
6. Racism questions God's plan. *Your blood has ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. (Rev. 5:9)*
7. Racism questions God, or it actually defies God.

Once again, John 3:16 says, *For God so loved the world (all ethnicities) that he gave his only Son...*

Robert Morris said when he visited the Holocaust Museum in Israel and saw the photographs from Auschwitz, what pierced his heart were the photos of piles of children's shoes, and stacks of eye glasses, and even boxes of human hair. That is an example of the end result of the sin of racism.

Robert Morris also showed on overhead a photograph of his family, his wife and four grown children and grand children. Included in the photo was his beautiful daughter and her handsome black husband and their three beautiful brown children.

I (Glenn) add a brief word: When I was born and raised in Texas, racism was universal. The fountains in stores and public buildings were marked White and Colored, restrooms were marked White Only, and "colored people" sat in the back of the buses. There was also a lot of prejudice against Mexicans and Indians and anybody else that wasn't white. My father and mother were wonderful parents. They were as loving as they knew how to be, and they raised my sister and me in church. But they were terribly racist. God knows that I was sinful and rebellious toward God in many ways, but for some reason (the grace of God) I always felt uncomfortable with all the racism around me. From the time I was a boy, when I rode city buses I often sat with the black folks and offered my seat to black ladies. I can't claim that I don't have any racism because I recognize some in my thoughts and attitudes at times, and it bothers me. But I believe all of us need to reflect a while on Robert Morris's thoughtful message.

Blessings to you all,

Glenn

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