

# The Lord of the Church

Reading: Revelation 1  
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## **Introduction**

### ***Illustration:***

In many parts of the world today men and women are paying the ultimate price for being Christians. In many African countries persecution in the form of torture and death awaits the believer who publicly declares his or her allegiance to Jesus Christ. Today the Wycliffe Bible Translators are conducting Trauma Workshops for Church leaders designed to show them how to help those who have been severely traumatized by war. A recent conference attracted church leaders from Barundi, Uganda, Democratic Republic of Congo, Chad, Ghana, Liberia, Ivory Coast and Sierra Leone. They were broken, grieving, bewildered and sometimes bitter people trying to find God's healing for themselves and others.

Here is one example of the sort of true stories shared at the conference. A believer from Chad reported:

*We were captured and marched through the bush for 45 days. The children were naked, the fathers were in chains. Christians who renounced their faith were set free and the rest were tortured. One man was buried alive.*

What is happening in some African countries today is not so very different from what was happening in the first century. At the end of the first century Christians were being persecuted, imprisoned and killed in the Roman province of Asia which was located on the western seaboard of what we know today as Turkey.

In the latter years of the 1st century the Emperor of Rome, Domitian, embarked on a policy of hostility towards Christians. Feeling insecure as Emperor, Domitian introduced Emperor worship right across the Roman Empire. Every year everybody, Christians included, had to burn some incense and say "Caesar is Lord". For Christians such a confession was blasphemous because they and we believe that there is only one Lord, Jesus Christ. Failure to comply with this Imperial instruction meant imprisonment or death. What would the Christians do? More important, what would God do to help his struggling people? How would they cope with the demand to deny the uniqueness of their Lord, Jesus Christ.

Around 96 AD God spoke to the apostle John who was in exile on the Island of Patmos and revealed truths about Jesus Christ and the ultimate destiny of this world. This revelation of Jesus Christ is contained within the book of Revelation. In chapters 2 and 3 of Revelation there are seven letters that Jesus wrote (through the apostle John) to seven churches.

The seven towns were Ephesus, Smyrna and Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea. The messenger bringing the letters would sail from Patmos to Ephesus. He would then take the great circular road (the M25 of the Ancient world) that linked these seven cities.

The Seven Churches. The book of Revelation gives a picture of the Church under Fire. The Church was under fire from three sources - the Devil, Pagan Society and God Himself. Not only was persecution becoming a big problem there was also error to be refuted and immorality to be challenged. John recognized that behind the situation characterized by persecution, heresy and immorality was the force of evil. What was being fought out in these seven churches was but part of a cosmic battle between good and evil, God and the forces of the Devil. That battle has been decisively won by the once crucified now risen and glorified Christ. And Jesus wanted these churches to know that victory in their struggles had been won for them.

In the book of Revelation the number seven sometimes stands for perfection. It may well be that in these seven letters we have a message not simply for the first century Church but for the Church of Jesus Christ of every age. The types of problems experienced in the first century Church are the same in principle for all time. The Devils tactics never change. In some areas of the world today Christians face open hostility and persecution. In other areas the church is battling against false teaching. Elsewhere the struggle is in the moral field and the challenge for the Church is to present a counter culture in its teaching and practice.

The book of Revelation is more than God speaking to seven churches in the first century; it is God speaking to the Church today, to our church.

### 1.Christ is speaking to his Church

#### **Illustration:**

At 11.00 on Friday night the phone rang and a voice said Hi Dad, are you in bed? It was Jonathan ringing from Denver in Colorado at 4.00pm Colorado time. "It's great to hear your voice" I replied. So a conversation began. During the conversation I had the strong feeling that he wasn't listening to me. (Have you ever had that feeling?) So I said to him, "Jonathan what are you doing?" "I'm sending you a picture of the house I have just bought." Sure enough we received by email picture of his newly bought house. He was talking and sending a picture at the same time.

The words of Jesus Christ have travelled a good deal further in time and space. The words and pictures Jesus sent to John on the island of Patmos have come down the ages to us this evening. They too are words with pictures, many astonishing pictures, word pictures. This evening as we begin to study Revelation chapter I we can say to Jesus: "It's good to hear your voice and to receive your picture, a picture of the risen and ascended Christ."

#### **Encouraging words**

How thrilled John must have been on that Sunday morning to hear those words Do not be afraid (v 17) words that sounded like rushing waters. John had heard those words ringing loud and clear across the storm tossed sea of Galilee when Jesus walked on the water to calm the storm and to calm the frightened hearts of his disciples. Here on Patmos came those same words, Do not be afraid, from the same person, Jesus Christ, but from a different place - heaven itself. He was speaking to John in exile, to the beleaguered Christians in the seven churches and to all believers down to this present day. Words of comfort and assurance - Do not be afraid.

**Relevant words**

To each of the seven churches that received a personal letter from Jesus he wrote that which was relevant to their particular situation. As you will see in the next few weeks Jesus writes to each church in such a way that they cannot mistake his meaning. Jesus reveals a deep knowledge of both the situation in which the Church was placed in the world and all the strengths and weaknesses inherent in each church. He knew their town and he knew his people. Jesus still knows each local church, and knows what to say to them.

**Apply:** He knows all about your lives as individuals and your life as a church. He knows about our finances, our sorrows and our hidden fears. He knows each family linked to the Church. He knows each individual here tonight. When Jesus speaks he knows whom he is speaking to.

*Quote: He is not content with our narrow horizons. He is not deceived by our compromises. He is not defeated by our weakness. He delights in our faithfulness.*

**Conclusion:** Because the Lord knows his people His words will always be relevant. May it please the Lord to speak to you as you study the seven letters to the churches. Some of the things he said to them he will say to you. Our prayer should be: Lord, give us ears to hear what you have to say to us and hearts that are willing to be changed so that we love you more dearly and follow you more closely.

## 2. Christ is staying with his Church

**(verses 12-13a)** John in a vision sees someone like a son of man standing among the lamp stands. What are these lamp stands that John sees? In v 20 John tells us that the lampstands represent the seven churches. So the someone like a son of man, i.e. someone who looks like a human being is standing in heaven in the presence of God and he is picture as being in the churches. The churches are in fact the dwelling place of the Son of Man. That title Son of Man was a favourite title that Jesus used of himself. Richard Bewes says of this title “*it has overtones of divinity and undertones of humanity*”.

**Apply:** Jesus is staying with his Church. He does not abandon his church when it fails. He does not get cynical when the Church is lagging behind his purposes. He loves His Church and has pledged to build his Church; so He stays with his people. To his Church Jesus promised that he would be with us until the end of the age. To the Church Jesus has pledged his living presence. A presence is always superior to a memory. A memory inevitably fades; not so a presence. Christ is staying with his Church - in person. How those frightened Christians in the first century needed to grasp this picture. They needed assurance that whatever happened to them Jesus would stay in there with them.

### 3. Christ is strengthening His Church

Look at three titles given to Jesus in **Revelation chapter 1 verse 5**.

- ***The faithful witness***

Throughout his earthly life and ministry Jesus had been faithful to his Father, doing his Father's will, obeying his Father's commands, sharing his Father's message. In spite of facing severe temptation, vicious cruelty, and extreme suffering Jesus was faithful.

**Apply:** This title, faithful witness is a reminder to the persecuted Christians in the first century that they are truly following Jesus. As they suffer, they are taking up their crosses and following their Lord. That is true discipleship. And with them every step of the way will be the faithful witness himself. Is the Church called to bear witness in the world? Let her follow the example of her Lord. Be faithful even unto death is the Lord's command to the Church in Smyrna (**Rev 2:10**)

- ***The firstborn from the dead***

Others like Lazarus had been brought back to this life, only to die again. But Jesus was the first person to go through death and is alive for evermore. He is the living one. Death has no hold on Him. The victory over death won by Jesus has been won for all his followers. Death has no hold on them. A persecuted Church facing martyrdom needed to know this truth! Death need hold no fear for them because Jesus had conquered death.

- ***The ruler of the kings of the earth***

Earthly kings and Emperors and Dictators might well seek to crush the Church and destroy the Church. But Jesus Christ is the King of kings. Human lords might seek to dominate the Church, but Jesus Christ is the Lord of lords. Ultimately he directs the destinies of peoples and nations. His empire is bigger than the Roman Empire that has already disappeared from sight along with other mighty dictatorships that attempted to rule the world. Only the kingdom and rule of God continues and will do so into eternity. His rule is universal and eternal.

### **Conclusion**

Christ is speaking to His Church: Christ is staying with His Church: Christ is strengthening His Church.

What is abundantly apparent in the seven letters to the churches is that Christ loves His Church.

What the churches needed to rediscover was that the Christ who offers unlimited love also makes great demands of the Church. He makes his demand, not as a ruthless taskmaster, but because his goal is to make us a people who reflect God's character and who share effectively in God's mission to the world. But Jesus never makes demands without promising supernatural resources to meet them.