

FOREWORD BY R. ALBERT MOHLER JR.

# GOD'S FINAL CALL

HOW THE BOOK OF REVELATION PULLS BACK THE VEIL  
ON CURRENT EVENTS AND OUR ULTIMATE FUTURE

MICHAEL YOUSSEF

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*God's Final Call: How the Book of Revelation Pulls Back the Veil on Current Events and Our Ultimate Future*

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# Foreword

*Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.*

REVELATION 1:3, ESV

Christianity is often classified among the major religions of the world. That is what we would expect from an increasingly secular world that sees “religion” as just another category of human experience. But a quick look at the Bible will dispel such an understanding. Jesus Christ, God in human flesh, did not come to organize a religion; he came to establish his church. Our Lord makes that clear in Matthew 16:18, where he declares, “On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (ESV).

This crucial text is exceptionally clarifying. First, Jesus Christ established his church, those he would purchase with his own blood, and he described his redeemed people in the most personal terms—*my church*. Second, Jesus declared that his church is safeguarded against even the gates of hell. While this certainly means that Christ secures eternal life for his redeemed people, it also means that no power on earth can extinguish Christ’s church.

At the same time, the Bible is acutely honest about the persecutions and trials that will come to God's people. This was true in the Old Testament with the experience of Israel, and it is true in the New Testament in the experience of the church. By the time we come to the opening chapters of the book of Revelation, overt persecution and cultural seduction are openly challenging Christ's church, as seen in the experiences of several congregations in Asia Minor.

In that light, the opening chapters of Revelation, in the form of letters to the congregations of seven churches, carry significant weight. Jesus addresses these particular churches through a vision given to the apostle John. These letters tell us much about the challenges faced by these first-century churches. What Jesus says to these congregations is often bracing, sometimes even shocking. He calls out sin among the people, even as he assures them of his love. He indicts these churches for their failures and calls them to repentance. The living Lord speaks to his living church, even as many in these congregations faced the very real prospect of persecution—or even death.

As Christians today, we desperately need to turn to these letters so we can understand our own times and the challenges our churches face. Though two thousand years have passed since these letters were first given to Christ's church, each is as relevant and timely as today's headlines, and they reflect the experiences of today's Christians. Given the cultural seductions of the current age, we desperately need to hear and heed Christ's words to these churches long ago.

## FOREWORD

They are addressed to us as much as they were addressed to those early congregations in Asia Minor.

I am very thankful that my dear friend Dr. Michael Youssef takes us directly into Christ's letters to the seven churches. Faithfully, he guides us through each letter and accomplishes two very important purposes as he walks us through the text. First, he describes what each letter meant in its original historical context. Second, he speaks directly to the message each letter brings to Christians in our own day and age. His insights are clear, helpful, and incredibly timely. We desperately need to take heed as Christ speaks to his church.

To know Michael Youssef is to know his love for Christ, his love for the church, his love for the gospel, and his love for the Holy Scriptures. All those loves come together in this powerful book. Prepare to be challenged, prepare to be instructed, and prepare to be faithful to Christ in this present age. As Dr. Youssef rightly warns in this timely book, neutrality is not an option. That's a good thing to keep in mind—all the time.

*R. Albert Mohler Jr.*

President, The Southern Baptist  
Theological Seminary



## INTRODUCTION

# AN URGENT MESSAGE FOR OUR TIME

Persecution is coming your way. You may not have experienced it yet, but if you seek to live for Jesus, you *will* be persecuted, sooner or later.

That's the promise and warning Paul made to Timothy: "Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Timothy 3:12). Are you ready to face the hostility and opposition of the coming days?

For many Christians, the day of persecution is already here. The global watchdog organization Open Doors reported in 2024 that active, oppressive hostility against Christians is rising worldwide. Today more than 365 million Christians around the globe suffer intense persecution. That's one out of every seven Christians around the globe. One-fifth of all Christians in Africa and two-fifths of all Christians in Asia already suffer persecution.<sup>1</sup>

Christians in America don't face torture and death for their Christian witness—at least, not yet. But the forces of

anti-Christian hatred are growing in strength and boldness, both in the United States and around the world.

Here are a few examples of officially sponsored religious persecution already taking place in America.

We all remember how federal and state governments invoked emergency powers and inflicted penalties (including costly fines) to shut down churches during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. At the same time, these government officials allowed protests, riots, and looting to go unchecked in cities across America. They also permitted liquor stores and marijuana dispensaries to remain open, but churches were deemed “nonessential.”<sup>2</sup> Now that government officials have gotten a taste of these lockdown powers, we can expect similar actions in the future.

The FBI has investigated parents—including Christian parents—for speaking out on a variety of issues at school board meetings. These parents should be praised and applauded for being involved in their children’s education. They want the schools to stop exposing their children to pornography in the school library and to stop indoctrinating their children in perverse sexual practices and “queer theory.” But because these parents have spoken up, the federal government—on orders from the US attorney general—is criminally investigating them for “domestic terrorism.”<sup>3</sup>

A Catholic charity, the Little Sisters of the Poor, spent nearly a decade battling the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania in court. Finally, on July 8, 2020, the United States Supreme Court ruled 7–2 that these Catholic nuns did *not* have to pay

for abortion-inducing drugs. Despite the Supreme Court ruling, Pennsylvania is still pursuing the Little Sisters in federal courts at the time of this writing.<sup>4</sup>

Girls and young women are increasingly required to accept boys and men (so-called *trans women*) into their restrooms and changing rooms. Not only is the male invasion of women's single-sex spaces an attack on Christian morality, but it violates women's rights and human rights. These rules are being imposed on us by the secular-left education establishment, the media, and state and federal governments.<sup>5</sup>

In recent years, Christian business owners (including a baker in Colorado and a florist in Washington State) have been targeted by LGBTQ+ activists and their own state governments, attempting to put them out of business if they don't knuckle under to a godless agenda. Even after winning their cases in the Supreme Court, these Christian business owners continue to be besieged and harassed by activists bent on shutting them down.<sup>6</sup>

## **Fired for Christian Beliefs**

And then there's the case of my friend Kelvin Cochran, who served as a fire chief in Shreveport, Louisiana, and Atlanta, Georgia. In 2009, President Obama appointed him US fire administrator, a post he held briefly before returning to his job in Atlanta. Five years later, despite his being a highly decorated and qualified firefighting expert, he was abruptly sacked as fire chief of Atlanta *solely because of his Christian beliefs*.

While leading a men's Bible study in his church, Kelvin wrote a book to help men live purposefully and obediently for God. The book dealt with all aspects of a man's life, and it included a brief section—just a few pages—on the biblical teaching that sex is for marriage between a man and a woman.

After clearing the book with the city's ethics office and being assured he wasn't violating any rules, he self-published the book in 2013 and gave copies to the mayor of Atlanta and a few Christian members of the city council. He also handed out free copies to anyone who asked.

But in November 2014, the city suspended Kelvin without pay for thirty days—then fired him in January 2015. Why? Because a city council member who identified as gay was offended by the book's Scripture-based teaching on morality and demanded that Kelvin be fired.

With the aid of the Alliance Defending Freedom, Kelvin defended his First Amendment rights in court. In October 2018, after three and a half years of litigation, the city finally agreed to compensate him for violating his civil rights.<sup>7</sup>

Though Kelvin Cochran ultimately won his case, it has become clear that systemic hostility toward Christians and biblical values is widespread—and it's increasing. Government officials are becoming bolder and more aggressive in trampling the religious freedom of Christians.

As hatred toward followers of Jesus increases, we will be forced to either take a stand for Christ or retreat into cowardice. We will be forced to either proclaim our love for Jesus

or deny our Lord. We will be forced to renounce our love for this corrupt and dying world or seek its approval.

Neutrality is not an option. We will have to choose.

When that day comes, I believe that many people in the church will make a tragic decision. Many who now attend church, sing hymns, and take part in Christian fellowships will fall away when the fiery persecution of the church heats up. Many will choose the world instead of the Lord. As Jesus himself said, “When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?” (Luke 18:8).

We need to consider the coming days soberly and search our hearts honestly, remembering that Jesus said, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 7:21).

That’s why we need to understand the book of Revelation. That’s why we especially need to understand the seven letters to seven churches found in Revelation 2–3. These letters offer words of both warning and encouragement to the persecuted first-century church—and to us today. They instruct us in how to live victoriously in times of peril and hostile opposition.

## **More than a Book of Predictions**

One of the most common misconceptions about the book of Revelation is that it is primarily a book of predictions about the future. Well, it certainly is that. But foretelling the future is *not* the primary purpose of Revelation.

This amazing book was written to strengthen the faith of Christians in the first century—and in every century after. The essential theme of Revelation is *how to live faithfully for Jesus in the here and now*.

We may think our own age is too far removed from those distant days of the first century AD. Our fears and worries are nothing like those of Christians in the Roman Empire. After all, we live in a time of global nuclear terror, bioweapons, cyber warfare, and the rise of artificial intelligence. What do we have in common with a culture that didn't even have printing presses, much less the internet?

But in taking a closer look at these seven letters, we find they were written during a time of intense political and social upheaval—and thus they speak clearly to our own time of political and social upheaval. The seven churches of Revelation 2–3 were surrounded by a culture of hostility, false religion, and in-your-face immorality—very similar conditions to those that surround us today.

The four Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—contain the recorded words of Jesus that he spoke during his earthly ministry. Acts 1 records the words Jesus spoke just before he ascended into Heaven. But he wasn't finished speaking—he still had seven important messages to impart to his church. The seven letters to seven churches in Revelation are the Lord's last recorded call to his people until he returns to earth in power and glory to establish his Kingdom.

As we approach the brink of eternity, the words of Jesus in these seven letters fill us with strength to face the present

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moment, and the courage to step out into an uncertain future. These letters show us that the risen and glorified Jesus will have the ultimate victory over sin and Satan. They teach us that we have nothing to fear as long as we remain faithful to the Lord.

In Revelation 2–3, we hear one sentence repeated seven times, once in each of the seven letters: “Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). As you read this book, my prayer is that you will truly have ears to hear what the Spirit is saying to *you*.



# WARNINGS AND ENCOURAGEMENT FROM JESUS

Many years ago, I visited a friend who was the pastor of the historic St. Philip's Church in Charleston, South Carolina. The congregation was established in 1680, and the current building was constructed in 1836, making it one of the oldest continuously worshipping churches in America. Three signers of the Declaration of Independence are buried in the churchyard. The eighteenth-century English evangelists George Whitefield and John Wesley both preached from its pulpit.

As we toured the historic church, my friend pointed to an ornately carved antique chair and said, "Please, sit in this chair."

I sat and gripped the well-worn armrests.

He said, "You're sitting where John Wesley sat when he was tried by the bishops and found guilty of enthusiasm."

Imagine, John Wesley was found guilty of *enthusiasm*! It seems hard to believe, but *enthusiasm* was considered a bad thing in Wesley's day. The Church of England looked down on enthusiastic evangelicals like Wesley.

The accusation of enthusiasm meant fanaticism, preaching the gospel, praying for revival, saving souls, and expanding the Kingdom of God. The fact that Wesley was not only *accused* but also *found guilty* of enthusiasm should make us ask ourselves, "If we were accused of enthusiasm for Jesus, would there be enough evidence to convict us?"

## Patrick Henry for the Defense

Many people don't realize that evangelical Christianity was once persecuted in America. The oppression came at the hands of the Church of England, the state church of the British king and Parliament.

Church of England ministers were paid in tobacco, corn, and livestock collected from the colonists by taxation. One historian observed that most of these ministers "were any thing else than ministers of the gospel of Christ. Many of them were lamentably immoral."<sup>1</sup>

In contrast to the wealthy taxpayer-supported church officials were a growing number of "unlicensed" or "dissenting" preachers, poor men who faithfully preached the Good

News of Jesus Christ. As these congregations grew, the corrupt church officials began to feel threatened. Many joined with their local sheriffs to have the unlicensed preachers arrested for “disturbing the peace.”

On one occasion, a sheriff arrested three preachers—Lewis Craig, Joseph Craig, and Aaron Bledsoe—in Fredericksburg, Virginia. When word of the arrests reached a Virginia lawyer named Patrick Henry—the very same Patrick Henry who had ignited the American Revolution with the words, “Give me liberty, or give me death!”—he rode fifty miles on horseback to the Spotsylvania Courthouse.

At the trial, Henry listened to the indictment of the three men, which accused them of “preaching the gospel of the Son of God.” Barely able to contain his outrage, he stood and addressed the court.

“May it please the court, what did I hear read?” Henry said. “That these men . . . are charged with what! . . . For preaching the gospel of the Son of God!”

Patrick Henry reminded the court that the first colonists had left England and settled “in these American wilds—for liberty—for civil and righteous liberty—for liberty of conscience . . . to worship God according to the Bible.”

Again and again, Henry recited the outrageous charges: “For preaching the gospel of the Son of God.”

As he spoke, the audience applauded—and the prosecuting attorney turned pale.

Finally, the judge had heard enough. “*Sheriff,*” he said, “*discharge those men.*”<sup>2</sup>

Some historians say that religious liberty in America began with Patrick Henry's defense of these three pastors for the "crime" of "preaching the gospel of the Son of God."

Unfortunately, we are now entering a *new* era of peril for religious freedom, as the following cases clearly show.

### 1. Protect a Life, Go to Jail

After the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* in the Dobbs decision, the US Department of Justice stepped up its prosecution of Christian pro-life sidewalk counselors who pray outside of abortion clinics. The government began adding a charge of "conspiracy to violate civil rights," which carries a maximum ten-year federal prison sentence. The purpose of this federal strategy was clearly to frighten and silence Christians.

In January 2023, a jury acquitted pro-life advocate Mark Houck of federal charges that could have sent him to federal prison for eleven years. In 2021, Houck and his twelve-year-old son were volunteering for a Forty Days for Life prayer vigil at an abortion clinic. According to trial testimony, Houck moved to prevent a clinic worker from verbally abusing his son, and the clinic worker claimed Houck shoved him.

When local prosecutors refused to charge Houck, the federal government sent more than a dozen cars with about two dozen officers with guns drawn. The early morning raid and arrest terrified Houck and his family.

During the trial in Pennsylvania, the judge asked federal

prosecutors if the law hadn't been "stretched a little thin here" in trying to send a man to prison for eleven years over a minor sidewalk incident. Though Houck was acquitted, the federal government has continued to use the "conspiracy to violate civil rights" charge to intimidate pro-life Christians.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. When Christian Love Is Equated with Hatred

The FBI and other federal agencies have partnered with an organization called the Southern Poverty Law Center.<sup>4</sup> The SPLC built its early reputation as a scrappy group of public interest lawyers who won cases against the Ku Klux Klan and Aryan Nations. Today, the SPLC is a well-funded activist organization that vilifies some evangelical Christian organizations by labeling them as "hate groups." Housed in lavish headquarters dubbed the "Poverty Palace," the SPLC has an endowment of more than half a billion dollars.<sup>5</sup>

The SPLC publishes a so-called Hate Map featuring groups it claims spread hatred against minorities (including LGBTQ+ "sexual minorities"). On its Hate Map (along with the KKK and a variety of neo-Nazi groups), the SPLC lists mainstream Christian organizations such as the Alliance Defending Freedom, the Family Research Council, the American College of Pediatricians, the Liberty Counsel, the Pacific Justice Institute, the American Family Association, D. James Kennedy Ministries, and the Ruth Institute.<sup>6</sup> These organizations promote Christian love and compassion for innocent children, gay people, and people with gender dysphoria, while upholding biblical morality, and with a passion

for proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ. But to the SPLC, Christian love equals hate.

On August 15, 2012, a heavily armed man walked into the Family Research Council headquarters planning to kill everyone in the building. He shot a security guard, but during the struggle, the heroic guard disarmed him. The gunman later confessed that he had targeted the Family Research Council after finding them on the SPLC's Hate Map. Though the SPLC recklessly inspired this attack, its leaders remain unrepentant, and the federal government continues its partnership with the SPLC.<sup>7</sup>

### 3. They're Coming for Your Children

Another attack against Christians comes from the so-called transgender agenda, also called radical gender theory or radical queer theory. There has been no national vote or debate over imposing this radical secular-left agenda on Western society. It simply burst onto the scene, taking mainstream culture by surprise. Leftist academics, media pundits, and politicians have adopted this agenda and are imposing it on our children by the force of law.

As I write these words, far-left Illinois politicians are pushing House Bill 4876. If passed, it would allow the state to take children away from parents who refuse to permit experimental sex-change drugs and surgical procedures to be used on their kids. The state would perform breast removal, surgical removal of genitalia, chemical puberty blocks, and other life-altering procedures on *minor children*, based purely

on a child's temporary gender confusion. The bill would also take minor girls from parents so they can have abortions without parental consent.

Loving Christian parents who refuse to let the state mutilate their children would be prosecuted for “child abuse.” Parents could face up to fifteen years in prison plus fines of up to \$25,000 for the “crime” of protecting their children from these experimental procedures. The bill would give queer activists power over children while giving legal immunity to doctors who perform these procedures on children.<sup>8</sup>

Similar legislation is quietly being passed in other states. For example, a California law signed by Governor Gavin Newsom in late 2023 gives the state the power to take children twelve and older out of the home without a court order—and without the parents' knowledge or consent. California parents could face the nightmare of having a child taken from the home to receive “gender reassignment” treatments—and they'd have no legal recourse.<sup>9</sup>

LGBTQ activists often chant, “We're here, we're queer, we're coming for your children.” When a reporter asked an activist if that chant means what it says, the activist replied, “It's all just words.”<sup>10</sup> But it's not just words. They are telling you what they are *already doing* through legislation. They really *are* coming for your children.

These three examples just scratch the surface of the coordinated attack on our right to practice our faith in Christ. And it is getting worse.

## Entering the Era of the Book of Revelation

By now you may be saying, “I thought this was a book about Revelation—but all you’ve talked about so far are American history and current events. When are you going to get to Revelation?”

I’ll make the connection right now.

Revelation was written during a time of intense persecution, and I wanted you to see that intense persecution is happening today as well—as it has in the Western world in times past. If you think you’re safe from persecution because you live in the United States of America, the United Kingdom, or Europe, think again. Persecution is already happening in the West.

I believe we are entering the era of the book of Revelation, and persecution will only get worse from now on.

Revelation opens with these words: “The revelation from Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place” (Revelation 1:1). A revelation is an unveiling, an uncovering, a full disclosure. The Greek word for revelation is *apokalypsis*, from which we get such English words as *apocalypse* (meaning an event of final and catastrophic destruction) or *apocalyptic* (meaning ominous or cataclysmic). But in Greek, *apokalypsis* simply means “unveiling.”

Revelation pulls back the veil on our uncertain future and reveals coming events. Most important of all, Revelation unveils the true glory and splendor of Jesus, the God-Man

who temporarily set aside his glory—though never his divinity—during his sojourn on Earth. He is God the Son, who coexisted with God the Father before time began.

The apostle John received this revelation from the Lord Jesus in the first century, but it has never been more relevant than it is now, in the twenty-first century. Because Revelation was written during a time of great persecution in the Roman world, it still speaks volumes to us in our post-Christian age.

People think of Revelation as a book about the future, but it is even more urgently a book about the present. To understand how Revelation affects our lives here and now, we must look to the past.

## **An Apostle in Exile**

Three days before Passover in AD 70, the Roman army under Titus, the elder son of Emperor Vespasian, laid siege to the city of Jerusalem. His goal was to suppress the Jewish rebellion by any means necessary. After a five-month siege, which led to starvation and unspeakable horrors within Jerusalem's walls, the Romans destroyed the city and the Temple and slaughtered all the inhabitants. The destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple happened exactly as Jesus had predicted some forty years earlier (see Matthew 24:2 and Mark 13:2).

After Vespasian's death in AD 79, Titus became emperor of Rome. But just two years into his reign, in AD 81, Titus died of a mysterious illness, and his brother Domitian became emperor. Today, you can pass through the Arch of Titus on

the Via Sacra in Rome, built by Domitian in honor of his brother's triumph over the Jews. Carved images on the arch depict the despoiling of Jerusalem.

Domitian revived the imperial cult, in which the emperor was worshiped as a god. He gave himself the title *Dominus et Deus* (Lord and God) and demanded that people burn incense before his statue in every Roman province. As the smoke of the incense ascended, the people would chant, "Our Lord and God!"

By the time of Domitian's reign, most of the apostles had likely been martyred. Herod had executed James in Jerusalem. Peter had been crucified in Rome, while Paul had probably been beheaded. According to tradition, Andrew was crucified in Greece, Thomas was killed in India by a spear, Nathanael was executed in Syria, and Philip was crucified in Hierapolis in Asia Minor. The others seem to have suffered similar fates. John may have been the only apostle still alive.

By this time, he was likely in his early nineties and continuing to serve as a leader of the church in Ephesus. If you visit the ruins of Ephesus today, your guide will probably take you to the place where (according to tradition) John lived, and where Mary the mother of Jesus stayed with him in accordance with Jesus' instructions from the cross (see John 19:26-27).

John had taken a stand against the cult of emperor worship. He warned believers in Jesus not to worship idols. Their only Lord and God was Jesus Christ. The Ephesian

Christians refused to worship the emperor, and they suffered the wrath of the oppressive Roman government.

The apostle John was a thorn in the side of Emperor Domitian. To silence him, the emperor sent him into exile on the island of Patmos.

Many people mistakenly picture Patmos as a barren unpopulated island. In reality, it was a thriving Roman colony with an army outpost, shops, homes, and pagan temples. John was free to go anywhere on the island, but he was not allowed to leave it. He remained in exile as long as Domitian was on the throne.

## **The Apostle John, Time Traveler**

In Revelation 1:9, John tells his readers that he “was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.” In other words, John had been exiled to Patmos by the Roman government because of his bold witness for Christ. He goes on to describe the vision he had there, saying, “On the Lord’s Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet” (Revelation 1:10).

What did John mean by “the Lord’s Day”? Some suggest he meant that the vision came to him on a Sunday. After all, don’t we call Sunday “the Lord’s Day”? I’ve even heard preachers say, “If you aren’t at church on the Lord’s Day, God can’t reveal a vision to you like he did for John.”

But that’s not what John meant. Sunday did not become known as “the Lord’s Day” until centuries after John

## GOD'S FINAL CALL

experienced this vision. Sunday was simply called the first day of the week.

I don't think there's any real mystery about what "the Lord's Day" means. Throughout Scripture, the Day of the Lord is the Day of Judgment. It's the day when Jesus will return to judge the living and the dead. Here are just a few passages among many from the Old and New Testaments that support this view:

See, the day of the LORD is coming—a cruel day,  
with wrath and fierce anger—to make the land  
desolate and destroy the sinners within it.

ISAIAH 13:9

Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision! For  
the day of the LORD is near in the valley of decision.

JOEL 3:14

Hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of  
the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved on the day  
of the Lord.

1 CORINTHIANS 5:5

The day of the Lord will come like a thief. The  
heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will  
be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything  
done in it will be laid bare.

2 PETER 3:10

John says that when he saw the Day of the Lord—when Jesus showed him a vision of the Day of Judgment—he was “in the Spirit.” John was privileged to see the long-prophesied Day of the Lord with his own eyes.

In the final chapter of John’s Gospel, there is a scene in which the risen Lord Jesus predicts that Peter will die a martyr’s death. Peter points to John and says, “Lord, what about him?” (John 21:21).

Jesus replies, “If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me” (John 21:22).

In Greek, the original language of John’s Gospel, the Lord’s words are even more emphatic than they sound in English. Jesus says, in effect, “Mind your own business, Peter. My will for John is not your concern.”

John adds that the Lord’s words—“If I want him to remain alive until I return”—caused a rumor to spread among the believers that John wouldn’t die. This rumor was probably still circulating when John was in his nineties. It must have seemed like he was indestructible and would be writing and preaching until the Lord’s return.

I believe that when Jesus said, “If I want him to remain alive until I return,” he was dropping a hint that John truly *would* see the Second Coming, the Day of the Lord. He would see that day when he received the vision on Patmos. In other words, the book of Revelation is the fulfillment of the Lord’s words in John 21:22.

What does John mean when he says, “I was in the Spirit”? I have given a lot of thought to those words. In fact, I could

write an entire book on what “in the Spirit” means—and perhaps someday I will. But the essence of his meaning is this: John lived in reliance on the power of the Holy Spirit.

When Emperor Domitian sent John into exile on the island of Patmos, he was trying to punish him, to silence him, to get him out of the way, to show him who was boss. The emperor thought he had defeated John; but John was not defeated.

Though separated from his Christian friends, he could not be separated from the Lord Jesus Christ. Though cut off from the fellowship of his home church, he could not be cut off from the Holy Spirit. Though deprived of his freedom to preach the gospel, nothing could deprive him of the Father's love.

The full weight of the oppressive Roman government could not crush John's spirit, because he was filled with the Holy Spirit. He was yielded to the Holy Spirit. He was strengthened by the Holy Spirit. He was comforted by the Holy Spirit.

John's enemies banished him to a far-off island, but God turned this exile into a panoramic vision of eternal reality. Because John was “in the Spirit,” he was yielded to the Holy Spirit and not to his circumstances. God transformed John's punishment into praise, his isolation into revelation.

Because John was “in the Spirit,” God swept him into the future to behold the end of human history. John became a time traveler when he was transported to the Day of the Lord.

If you want to gain the full spiritual benefit from these seven letters in Revelation 2–3, I encourage you to follow John's example. Go to the Lord in prayer and tell him you

want to be “in the Spirit.” Ask the Holy Spirit to fill you, make you wise and receptive, and help you to apply everything the Lord wants to teach you.

## **A Complete Picture of Jesus**

The entire Bible is about Jesus. The prophecies of the Old Testament give us a picture of Jesus that is hazy and indistinct, but which gradually comes into focus.

In the four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, the truth about Jesus becomes crystal clear. He walks the earth, teaching and healing and raising the dead. He dies—and he rises again!

In Acts and the Epistles, people who knew Jesus (including Paul, who met the resurrected Lord on the road to Damascus) fill in many of the details about who Jesus is and all that he has done for us.

Finally, in Revelation, our vision of Jesus is completed in every dimension. We see him, not only as the promised Messiah—not only as the preaching, healing, crucified, risen, and ascended Son of God—but also as the King of kings and Lord of lords, the glorified and reigning Son of God, coming to judge the living and the dead. Now our image of Jesus is complete.

Not only does the book of Revelation complete the picture of Jesus, but it also completes the story of humanity. Genesis and Revelation serve as the bookends for all human history.

At the beginning of the Bible, Genesis tells us about the origin of the human race—our splendid creation and our tragic fall. At the end of the Bible, Revelation tells us how those who have been saved by faith in Jesus enter into eternal fellowship with God.

Revelation reveals that all of history has a purpose. Though the world seems out of control to us, God is still in ultimate control. He reigns and rules, and nothing happens anywhere in the world when he is not looking. Revelation is a continuous unveiling of the glorified Jesus and all he will do in the future of the human race.

The book of Revelation divides into four parts:

Part 1, chapters 1–3: Warnings and Encouragement for the Church

Part 2, chapters 4–17: Judgment against Sin Poured Out upon the Earth

Part 3, chapters 18–20: The Final Destruction of Satan and Evil

Part 4, chapters 21–22: The Coming New Heaven and New Earth

In this book, we will focus on just two chapters in Part 1: Revelation 2–3. These two chapters contain urgent messages of both warning and encouragement to seven first-century churches in Asia Minor (now known as the nation of Turkey).

Revelation opens with John's greeting, and then he describes the moment when Jesus appears to him, dressed in

## WARNINGS AND ENCOURAGEMENT FROM JESUS

a robe bound by a golden sash, with hair as white as snow and eyes like blazing fire (Revelation 1:13-14). Jesus tells John to write on a scroll all that he sees and hears.

Then the glorified Jesus begins revealing what he thinks of his church. Jesus chooses seven churches in Asia Minor to represent all churches, in all places, at all times. Seven, of course, is the biblical number of completion, suggesting that these seven churches give us a complete picture of the church in every age.

On a map, the seven churches form an irregular circle. If you depart from the island of Patmos, where John experienced his vision from the Lord, the closest city is Ephesus. From Ephesus, you would travel north to Smyrna, then further north to Pergamum, then southeast to Thyatira, down to Sardis and Philadelphia, and finally down to Laodicea.



Why is it important to understand the historical background of these seven churches? Because these churches were going through a time of persecution much like the times we are entering. By understanding the cultural pressures of Roman-occupied Asia Minor in the first century, we can apply the lessons of these seven letters to our own trials today.

## **The Satanic Strategy**

In the late first century, the Christian church across the Roman Empire was suffering the worst persecution imaginable. Emperor Nero launched a wave of intense persecution from AD 54 to 68. Then, from 81 to 96, Emperor Domitian started a second wave of persecution—a far more systematic, wide-ranging, and deadly reign of terror than Nero's. Where Nero was brutal and sadistic, rounding up many Christians in Rome and burning them alive as torches in his garden, Domitian's persecution stretched across the vast Roman Empire.

Domitian demanded that all people worship him as Lord and God. Those who refused became outcasts. They were verbally attacked and insulted by their neighbors. They were shunned and threatened. Their businesses were destroyed. They were reported to the Roman authorities, and many were executed. Imagine their fear for themselves and their children. The temptation to compromise must have been overwhelming.

In addition to the external threat from their neighbors

and the Roman government, the early Christians faced the internal threat of false teachers, false prophets, and the infiltration of immorality. Satan—much as he had gone after Jesus in the early days of his life on earth—was now trying to murder the infant church in its cradle.

I've heard people say, "Well, that was then, and this is now. Things are different today." No, the things that truly matter haven't changed. Human nature hasn't changed. The dynamics of church life haven't changed. Satan's strategy hasn't changed. He still seeks to destroy the church Jesus founded.

But Satan could not destroy the first-century church, and he will not destroy the twenty-first-century church. Even though he can't win, he can wreak havoc and devastation. All Satan needs is one or two undiscerning or unfaithful people in a church, and tragedy will follow. One of his favorite tactics is to use false teachers to deceive the faithful.

In these seven letters, we see evidence of Satan's handiwork again and again. We see him orchestrating visible conflicts and invisible strategies. And one thing that becomes clear in these letters is that Satan attacks the church from multiple directions.

Sometimes he attacks through physical persecution.

Sometimes he attacks through governments, laws, and courts.

Sometimes he attacks through false teachers and false preachers.

Sometimes he attacks through the sins of compromising Christians.

In every age, Satan has been a dangerous and implacable foe. And as the day approaches when he will be thrown into the Lake of Fire forever, his attacks on the church will grow increasingly more desperate.

Satan is intelligent, but he's not very creative. His strategies never change. He uses the same means and methods today that he used two thousand years ago. Even though by now we should know his strategies by heart, we never seem to learn from history. We get blindsided again and again in every generation.

Just look at what Satan is accomplishing in the church around the world today. In America and other Western countries, he has caused the love of many Christians to grow cold—both their love for Jesus and their love for one another. He has tricked many into loving the world, loving material things, and loving themselves more than they love Jesus.

In other parts of the world, Satan has used false religions and authoritarian governments to systematically hunt down, torture, and kill believers.

Elsewhere, Satan has seized control of the citadels of learning, assaulting the minds of children and young people, filling them with false ideologies and misinformation. Beginning with kindergarten and continuing all the way through the university experience, Satan has turned our education system into an indoctrination factory designed to turn young minds against the faith in which their parents have raised them.

In still other parts of our culture today, Satan has convinced people that love means the acceptance of immorality

and the toleration of sin. He persuades believers to doubt God's Word and to view biblical morality as bigoted and irrelevant.

As we will soon see, Satan used these same tactics and strategies to confuse, weaken, and corrupt the church in the first century. That is why these seven letters have never been more relevant than they are today.

## Faithful to Jesus Alone

What is the central theme of Jesus' messages to his church in these seven letters? That he wants his bride, the church, to be faithful to him alone. The theme of faithfulness to Jesus runs throughout each of the seven letters. Our Lord either affirms a congregation for their faithfulness to him or reproves a congregation for turning away from him.

This theme of faithfulness shines in three dazzling facets in the opening paragraph of Revelation, where John writes that these messages come directly "from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth" (Revelation 1:5).

Facet #1: Jesus wants his bride, the church, to look only to him, the faithful witness. We're *not* to look to psychology, or to political ideologies, or to clever marketing techniques, or to worldly philosophies. The church must look to Christ alone.

The exalted, glorified Jesus introduces himself as "the faithful witness." Everything he says is true. Rely on it. Bet your life on it. His witness is faithful and dependable.

Do you want to share your faith with others? Do you want to see lost souls come to Jesus for salvation? Then follow his example by being a faithful witness.

Jesus never faltered or evaded. He spoke the truth, boldly and faithfully. Even when the Pharisees tried to trap him, even when Pontius Pilate tried to get him to change his testimony, even when the terror and pain of the Cross loomed before him, he continued to be a faithful witness.

Facet #2: Jesus wants his bride, the church, to place its eternal hope in him, because he is the firstborn from the dead. In the Gospels, Jesus raises three people from the dead: a synagogue leader's daughter (Matthew 9:18-26); a widow's son (Luke 7:11-17); and his friend Lazarus (John 11:38-44). But the life he restored to these three people was only temporary. They all died again.

Jesus was the first one *permanently* raised from the dead. He was resurrected, and he ascended to Heaven, and he will *never* die. He is alive forevermore. He is the living one, and he is the firstborn among many who will be raised to eternal life. The hope of resurrection gave early martyrs the courage to face torture and death as Christ's faithful witnesses. This same eternal hope can strengthen us as we face temptation and persecution.

Facet #3: Jesus wants his bride, the church, to know that he is the victorious ruler of the kings of the earth. Earthly rulers and dictators may try to silence the church. Government officials may persecute the church. But King Jesus is the ultimate ruler of the kings of the earth. He is King of kings and Lord of lords. He presides over the entire universe.

The Lord Jesus decides the destiny of people and nations. His empire is greater than that of Imperial Rome or Alexander's Greece or the Ottoman Empire or the British Empire or the Soviet Union or Communist China or the United States of America. His power dwarfs all the armies that ever marched and all the navies that ever sailed. He holds the title deed to every star and planet in the universe. His name is above all names.

For now, we do not see our Lord enthroned over all the nations of the world; but soon, and very soon, we *will* see the magnified majesty of our Lord Jesus Christ. We will see him in all his splendor, dominion, authority, and power.

That is why, with John the Revelator, we can say, "Come, Lord Jesus!"

And that is why the seven letters of Jesus to the seven churches of Asia Minor are so important to us today. As the world grows darker and more evil, these seven letters are our road maps through perilous times.