

## THINKING THROUGH REVELATION CHAPTERS 1-3

**Introduction.** 'Revelation is no mere appendix to the collection of letters which makes up the bulk of the New Testament. It is in fact the last and grandest of those letters' (Michael Wilcock). The letters to the seven churches in chapters 2-3 form a self-contained corpus within the book, with chapter 1 acting as an introduction both to those letters and to the work as a whole. The city-churches targeted by Christ's message form a clockwise circuit starting at Ephesus on the coast of Anatolian Turkey and ending at Laodicea in the interior. Questions of date and authorship lie outside the scope of this study; I have taken the line of least resistance which is that the book is the work of the Lord's apostle John, writing towards the end of his life in the 90s AD (CE) in pastoral concern for churches in his 'bishopric', from his island exile in Patmos about 35 miles off what was then the west coast of Roman Asia Minor.

Ordinary prose is inadequate to convey the heightened atmosphere of language of vision and symbol. This is a hopeless attempt to unpack the multiple layers of meaning and allusion stacked in John's pages. Where it is possible to detect OT texts underlying the narrative I have tried to bring them to the surface, without dwelling too long on the context (which is often not relevant anyway). In each letter's opening lines a few extra-textual details have been inserted about the character of the place and its salient features. I am indebted to E M Blaiklock *Cities of the New Testament* (Pickering and Inglis 1965) and Edwin M Yamauchi *New Testament Cities in Western Asia Minor* (Wipf and Stock 1980) for interesting literary and archaeological evidence. I have occasionally consulted a few of the regular commentaries (Morris, Wilcock, Hendriksen, Barnett and the indispensable Beale and Carson) to check that I have not gone too wildly off track. Otherwise this is an entirely personal exploration. Steven Travis *You've got Mail* (Spring Harvest 2002) offers good application to the modern church scene. I have not yet visited the Seven Churches as a pilgrim or tourist, but it's on the shortlist.

The text of the NIV (2011) is given at the head of each section. The occasional brief headings are my own.

**1:1-3** <sup>1</sup> *The revelation from Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John,* <sup>2</sup> *who testifies to everything he saw—that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ.* <sup>3</sup> *Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.*

### **Dramatis personae**

[1:1] Hallo churches of the first and twenty-first centuries! Prepare to have your minds blown open as I show you Jesus, Jewish Messiah, Christian Lord and Master, humanity's Servant and King. He is not only the leading character in this drama, but he is also its author, producer and director. Every word of this script is about him, and is penned by him. Curtains – open!

Now let me introduce you to some of the other *dramatis personae*. First of all, there's God. He's not exactly 'a' character, in fact he's responsible for the whole thing as I'm sure you realise, and he's handed it over to Jesus to make sure it's fully understandable by ordinary human beings (even if we're going to be taken out of our depth most of the time).

So then there's us. We're Jesus' devoted followers and slaves, though he prefers to call us his friends. We're here to carry out his instructions and tell everyone what's going to happen and what they've got to do. It's not about some impossibly future event – it's unfolding as we speak – so it demands urgent action! It's all foretold in scripture, as I will tell you *ad nauseam*, so don't complain about not having been warned.

Next, there's my angel. Well, not mine exactly, because he (or she, or both, or neither) is God's commissioned agent and message-bearer, tasked with interpreting what's going on. This majestic being has been assigned specifically to me, not because I'm special, but because somebody needs to put this message into words and I, poor idiot, happen to be the one who has to do this, which is why I need supernatural assistance.

[1:2] So who is this person writing? His name is John. (He has put himself in the third person to maintain ambiguity and keep scholars in business.) As already said, he is Jesus' gofer, getting his message directly from the Master, personally communicating everything he has seen and heard. He is not some self-indulgent visionary or drug-illusioned cultist. Enough about him.

### **The audience**

[1:3] Now we come to you, by which I mean the recipients of this book, the ones listening to the words as they 're spoken aloud or come hurtling off the page. You are the witnesses of this drama, and what's more, you're fully involved. It is not just an hour or two's entertainment, a brilliant firework display after which we can all go home and get on with our lives. Because it's a prophecy, a making manifest of what lies wrapped in obscurity, whether it's still in the future or happening all around us. It is two worlds interacting and you are at the intersection. So it matters urgently what you do about it, how you understand it, how you let it do its work, memorise it, pass it on. And if you say, 'Well, I'll think about it,' there may not be much time left for sitting on the fence. I mean it.

**1:4-5a** <sup>4</sup> *John, To the seven churches in the province of Asia: Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, <sup>5</sup> and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.*

### **Greetings: who this letter is from**

[1:4] So – hallo again. I'm John, and you are Church. Seven representative churches located in a hilly area of inland Asia Minor, Roman province, earthquake-prone, materially well-off, spiritually fragile – I'll name you specifically a little later, but right from the start you are any church anywhere, anytime. So, dear seven (or seventy-seven) churches: as my letter starts, I bring you the reassurance that you are loved unconditionally and welcomed unreservedly by the One who is Three.

His life and superabundant presence are independent of time. He is not here today and gone tomorrow. There was no beginning to his existence and he stands over and beyond history. He holds the future in the hollow of his hand and he hasn't finished with us yet. Language collapses when you try to define him. Eternal Deity greets you now.

He has no bodily existence because he is Spirit through and through. Around his throne (I have to use human ways of describing the indescribable) dance innumerable blazing lights of Divine love and purity through which he communicates himself and translates his will into action. The seven-Spirited God greets you now.

[1:5a] He became incarnate in the man we call Jesus Christ, who brings us first-hand knowledge of eternal realities, who is the true and rock-solid Word from the beginning. He went through death and beyond death, to be the advance guard of the new creation. He is the unique supremo of all earthly kingdoms and their rulers. Jesus, Messiah-King, greets you now.

**1:5b-6** <sup>5b</sup> *To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, <sup>6</sup> and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father – to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.*

### **Singing his praises**

[1:5b] Let's take a moment to acknowledge the greatness of this Messiah-King. Let's gather in full assembly and sing his praises. Glory to you, Lord Jesus, for the love you have for us and have always had since before the start of time. It's so wonderful to know I'm really loved.

Glory to you, Lord Jesus, that you demonstrated that love in one single and unforgettable act of sacrifice, when you hung bleeding to death on a cross. We had been deeply treacherous and disobedient, yet you wiped every trace of that sin off our record and released us from the burden we were carrying. I can scarcely believe I'm forgiven, chains cut away, free to live!

[1:6] Glory to you, Lord Jesus, that you've not only made us full citizens of your worldwide kingdom, but you've actually seated us with yourself on your throne. I'm not a slave any more, I'm a member of the royal family. Such a privilege, such a responsibility to live up to!

Glory to you, Lord Jesus, for calling us into your service as accredited representatives of your holy will. We all share the task of interceding for our fellow-beings and of helping folk everywhere to understand your goodness and greatness. In serving the Son we serve the Father. I'm available to him, a minister reporting to God for solemn duty.

Lord, you are just so brilliant. No praise is too high for you. You do exactly as you want in all heaven and earth, and none can stop you. You hold the ultimate power in the universe, and you're never going to retire. As it always has been, so it will ever be. Fantastic! Bring it on!

*1:7<sup>7</sup> "Look, he is coming with the clouds," and "every eye will see him, even those who pierced him"; and all peoples on earth "will mourn because of him." So shall it be! Amen.*

### **The old prophecies come true**

[1:7] Do you see what I see? Daniel's old prophecy is coming true at last. Out of thick, swirling clouds a Divine figure is emerging, the long-awaited Son of Man, returning to earth at the end of history to reign as universal King. This will not be a hidden and out-of-the-way arrival like his first visit; it will be for everyone on earth to witness. Do you remember the final chapters of the book of the prophet Zechariah, where a Shepherd-King suffers at the hands of the people of Jerusalem and is 'pierced' to death? Then how all the land 'mourns' for him as for a first-born and only child? And how the Lord applied this to the coming of the Son of Man in his final glory? This is going to be fulfilled on a world-wide scale. There will be utter dismay among the nations of the earth as the One they thought they had got rid of once and for all returns to unveil his kingdom of love and justice. Yes! This is really about to happen! Let it roll!

*1:8<sup>8</sup> "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty."*

### **God in control**

[1:8] Don't doubt for a single moment that God is in full control of everything, past, present and future. Ask Moses in the wilderness of exile, when he met the living I AM and realised he was dealing with a Being who stood outside time and yet was present at every moment in time. Ask Isaiah, the prophet and interpreter of Israel's exile, who repeatedly brings us back to the primacy and eternal supremacy of this Lord who never goes away, whose name is Alpha and Omega, who encompasses the whole alphabet of creation from A to Z. He is there in the present, with us all day and every day; he was there at every moment in the past, and before the past even began; he will be there in the future, striding ahead of us, God on the move, the Shepherd leading his flock, the King coming in glory, the Lord who never changes.

Yes, he is in charge, and what a relief! Look at the name the prophets love to give him, the name even poor battered Job gives him: 'The Almighty'. He has all power in heaven and earth. This is our God, this is our Lord.

*1:9-11<sup>9</sup> I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.<sup>10</sup> On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet,<sup>11</sup> which said: "Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea."*

### **Introducing myself**

[1:9] So, yes, let's come back to my letter and move on from my greeting to tell you a bit about myself. I'm John, just an ordinary Christian and therefore having the same Father as you and experiencing the same ups and downs as you do. Belonging to Jesus means going through painful and difficult times, and that's what I'm doing just now. It means gritting one's teeth and hanging on like grim death while they

try to dislodge you from your position of faith. But in the midst of all that it also means holding your head high, because you're royalty, you've become a partner in God's kingdom, that's your new status and your base of operations. All because I belong to Jesus and Jesus belongs to me.

It's of no relevance where I'm writing this from or where I am now; but where it all happened was on a little island that's big enough to have a name – Patmos. On a clear day you can see the mainland coast; but I wasn't there just for the views across the Aegean Sea, I had been banished there by the proconsular authorities because I was preaching the word of God and showing how it all pointed to Jesus. Some crime!

### **Pastoral concern**

[1:10] It was the first day of the week (in Hebrew reckoning), which ever since the Lord's resurrection we Christians have called 'the Lord's Day', and the Holy Spirit was stirring in me not only a deep sense of Christ's presence, but also an acute pastoral concern for all the churches I had left behind on the mainland. My spirit, imagination, intellect, emotions were all highly on the alert. I certainly wasn't asleep or in a trance – if I had been, the trumpet-blast of a voice I heard from behind me would have jerked me awake in an instant. [1:11] It, or he, was issuing clear instructions: 'I'm going to give you a vision of how things actually are, and I want you to write it all down on a scroll (make sure it's a big one!) and send copies round the key mainland churches in the following order: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyateira, Sardis, Philadelphia, Laodicea.'

**1:12-16** <sup>12</sup> I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, <sup>13</sup> and among the lampstands was someone like a son of man, dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. <sup>14</sup> The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. <sup>15</sup> His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. <sup>16</sup> In his right hand he held seven stars, and coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.

### **The figure among the lampholders**

[1:12] Rather than dismiss this as a product of my fevered imagination (Patmos is not exactly the best place for getting hold of writing materials!), I thought I might at least see where this very precise commission was coming from. It wasn't a Bath Qol, a voice from heaven above – it was right behind me, like a friend giving me an urgent message. So I swung round and to my utter amazement I was staring straight at a set of lampholders made entirely of gold, the type Moses was told to make for the tabernacle, or the one Zechariah saw in his vision – except that there wasn't just one lampholder, there were seven (I was told the reason for this a little later) – [1:13] and there was a human figure standing in their midst. I say human, but this Being was humanity and Divinity combined. Like the Son of Man in Daniel's vision, he was uniquely fitted to bear rule over the entire universe. If I have to use figurative language to describe him, it still wouldn't do justice to the awesomeness and the majesty of this Person. Was this the Jesus I had known, now become Christ in glory? Each detail made me more certain it was my beloved Lord and Master himself. The last time I'd seen him was on the hillside when he physically left this earth. Had he now come back specially for me? But he was so different!

### **Priest and King**

To start with, he was robed like a king or a priest, with a linen garment flowing right down to his feet. The sash he wore suggested a high-priestly status, except that it wasn't around his waist but higher up, on his chest; and it wasn't of woven material but entirely of gold, as befits a king. I was surely in the presence of the original priest-king Melchisedek, who brought blessing to Abraham in Genesis and the days of whose life were without number. The Lord Jesus had hinted at his identification with Melchisedek, and it is standard teaching in our churches today. His name means 'king of righteousness' and he is the true and permanent sovereign of the city of Jerusalem, the centre of world peace. Even more significant is that he introduces a covenant of promise apart from the law. I didn't realise all this at

the time because I was too terrified, but now it brings me massive reassurance: Jesus has come not to judge the world, but to save it.

### **White hair**

[1:14] I was now able to lift my eyes a little higher, and I saw that this Person had a flowing mane of hair that was entirely white, as white as pure lambswool, luminous as virgin snow. This took me back again to Daniel's vision, but with one significant difference: it wasn't the Son of Man who had white hair, it was the Ancient of Days himself. The two figures in Daniel's judgment scene had coalesced into one. Jesus is both Judge and Saviour – he is representative Man, yet he bears the full authority of God. The radiant whiteness around his head bears witness to his deep suffering while on earth, and also to the utter purity and integrity of his character. It also reassures us that he is not a God who is here today and gone tomorrow – he is the eternal Father whose wisdom and love have been, and will be, from everlasting to everlasting.

### **Eyes like flames**

Don't ask me how long I gazed into his eyes – it could have been for only a fleeting second, it could have been for several hours. You know how when you stare into a fire blazing on the hearth, the flames dance and twist, form and reform in an endless variety of colour, light and movement. You are drawn to their warmth and friendliness; but then you also deeply respect their power to consume and destroy. I felt I was in the presence of truth itself, truth that would simultaneously liberate and heal me, while unmasking any darkness within me. He knows all my ways, I thought, and his gaze cannot abide whatever is proud or untrue; yet he welcomes me as one greatly loved and valued.

### **His feet**

[1:15] As I eventually lowered my gaze, it rested on this Person's feet. They glowed like bronze tempered in a well-stoked furnace. This was the likeness of the 'son of the gods' who went about in the superheated furnace with the three faithful friends of Daniel. Jesus has been through every trial known to mankind and to God, and has come through unscathed – surely he can walk with us through our trials and bring us out the other side.

### **When the Master speaks**

I compared his voice to a trumpet-blast, but there was no harshness in it. I was now reminded of a mountainside flowing with innumerable streams (on Patmos there are only low scrubby hills, but inland Asia rises to several thousand feet). Each stream has its own distinctive timbre and melody, and the sound heard by a traveller at a distance is irresistibly inviting and reassuring. When the Master speaks, it's not like the roar of a powerful waterfall, drowning out any other sound, it's the music of creation, fresh and living and eternal.

### **Seven stars**

[1:16] I hope you're aware by now that even if I describe this vision as vividly as I can, I have to rely on symbol and imagery to convey even a hint of its full meaning. This kingly Person who was also a priest held something incredibly precious in his right hand, the hand of greeting, guidance and action. That something was a set of seven stars. I'm not talking astronomy now, still less astrology (the hand that holds the universe is love, not fate) – you may already have guessed what these stars represent and I'll soon be telling you – these stars were sparkling like a jewelled bracelet, beyond value to the owner and whose possession is worth any sacrifice.

### **Gleaming sword**

But in case you think you are safe with this Lord whatever you get up to, can I point you to something quite unmistakable about him, which was a gleaming sword in the place where his tongue would have been, both its sides honed to razor-edge sharpness and clearly able to cut anything to ribbons in a second. The fact that it was not in his hand but emerging from his mouth indicates only one thing: that unbelief and disobedience where God's word is concerned incur his total displeasure and destruction.

## Full gaze

Finally, I had one more glimpse of him before my strength gave out completely. His countenance, his face gazing fully on me, was now as radiant as the sun itself, glowing with tenderness and vitality, shrivelling up anything unworthy yet nourishing and strengthening what needed to grow. It was blessing, encouraging, reassuring me and giving me an indescribable sense of peace. I felt warmed through and through, drained of all personal power yet energised and refreshed from a source which came from outside me and penetrated my inmost being.

**1:17-18** <sup>17</sup> *When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said: "Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. <sup>18</sup> I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.*

## No need to be afraid

[1:17] That's the vision I had of the Lord Jesus Christ in his glory, and it knocked me out completely. I collapsed right at his feet thinking my last hour had come. Then I felt a touch on my shoulder. His right hand, the hand that held the set of stars, was now resting on me and pouring strength back into me. He was speaking to me in the Master's familiar tones: 'Silly old John, there's no need for you to feel in the slightest bit afraid.' How often he'd said that to us, in the boat, on the holy mountain, on the day of resurrection! Here I was, paralysed with terror, and he was telling me it was quite unnecessary. 'I've been there since before it all started, and I'm going to go on being there long after it's over.'

He was using language associated with God himself and no other. [1:18] 'That means I am Life itself. All life flows from me and through me you exist and everything exists. To be sure, I had to die, but that was once and once only, and now my life goes on uninterruptedly and eternally. Oh John, you've been fed with the idea that death is like an all-powerful jailer who locks everyone up in a grim fortress down in the underworld. Don't you realise that it is I who hold those very same keys, and they turn both ways: to open the cell doors and let death's prisoners go free, and to shut the powers of death and sin away where they will never be able to do harm again?'

**1:19-21** <sup>19</sup> *"Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later. <sup>20</sup> The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.*

## Stars and lampstands interpreted

[1:19] Jesus continued: Now listen. I've got something for you to do. You aren't wasting your time here. You're going to write a book, and it's going to contain the vision you've just been seeing, as well as more revelations which will help people to understand the real state of affairs both now and as they unfold in the future. It's all under control – it's all meant to be the way it is. But people need to go about with their eyes open, and your book is going to show them things they couldn't find out otherwise.

[1:20] Now, you and your readers will need help if you're to understand the coded language in your visions. For instance, you may be wondering what is meant by those seven stars you saw me grasping so firmly in my right hand, and by the seven golden lampstands with me standing in the centre. Here's the explanation. You're going to be writing to the seven churches I've named, which are located physically in a particular area and consist of a number of human beings. But each of these churches has a non-physical character, represented by what we're going to call an 'angel'. I don't mean an angelic being like the ones we're going to meet in this book, nor do I mean some kind of human go-between, so what am I talking about? It's the essential 'spirit' of any church, the *zeitgeist*, what really matters to that church – the governing assumptions of any given congregation or fellowship. We're not talking about structures or programmes or leadership here, we're talking about how the folk in the church hear God's word and what they do about it. This constantly needs addressing, because no single church has got it all right, and some have got it seriously wrong. Ultimately (says Jesus) I am in full control of all churches and every church, because it is I who grasp them in my right hand, they're my sheep and I don't want to lose

them because I love them. But each church is fully responsible for its own character and spiritual viewpoint, which is why I'm asking you to write specifically to the 'angel' of each one (I'll tell you what they are as we go along).

The other coded image, the golden lampstands, is a bit easier, but it's incredibly important. A lampstand isn't the light itself, it's what holds the light and enables it to shine bright and clear. The light is myself, Jesus Christ, the light of life and the light of the world. The lampstand is each individual church, and even though I'm actively present in the midst of the lampstands – I'm vitally involved with the life and witness of each church – there may be reasons why that lampstand is not holding the light up for everyone to see, or maybe the lamp itself is burning dimly and needs its wick trimming, or a fresh supply of oil, or even a one-way journey to the tip.

So here we go! What's my church about? What's your church about?

**2:1-3** <sup>1</sup>To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands. <sup>2</sup>I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. <sup>3</sup>You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.

### **Ephesus: spirit of orthodoxy**

[2:1] Hallo, you there in Ephesus! What's your church all about? What really matters to you? There you are, in the biggest city in the province, a sea-port with impressive temples, theatre, streets, libraries, schools of philosophy – such a centre of learning, open to the world's ideas, sophisticated and alert. You're my church, founded by Paul, where this person called John has been living and ministering – what's your essential spirit?

This is your Lord Jesus speaking, yes I who 'hold the seven stars in my right hand', who maintain the life and truth and brightness of the worldwide church, and who am 'walking around in the midst of the seven golden lampstands', actively near at hand in each and every fellowship – I'm here for you, I'm concerned for you and I'm talking to you.

[2:2] Oh Ephesus church and churches, don't think that I don't know how you're doing! I'm fully aware of your comprehensive programme of good works, how you're working your socks off in all kinds of projects, and also how hard you find it to make headway against the prevailing scepticism and apathy of your day and age. Not only do you set a tremendous moral standard in your city, but you maintain zero tolerance of those of your own membership who let down the high tone of the church. I particularly admire the way you've confronted some visiting evangelists, who claim that their message is the original apostolic gospel when it definitely isn't, and you've put them through the mill, rigorously questioned them and exposed them for the frauds they are. Well done indeed!

[2:3] Not only so, but you've borne up under persecution and haven't been cowed by your opponents. I must repeat that you haven't found it easy, but you've kept going splendidly, you've presented the claims of Jesus Christ as Lord above all earthly emperors and rulers, and you haven't given in to threats or been discouraged by the sheer immensity of the task. You're outstanding for your doctrinal orthodoxy and your social concern. So far so good.

**2:4-6** <sup>4</sup>Yet I hold this against you: you have forsaken the love you had at first. <sup>5</sup>Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. <sup>6</sup>But you have this in your favour: you hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

### **Jesus-shaped blank**

[2:4] The trouble is, you've lost me in the process. There's a Jesus-shaped blank in your church. You're having a ball, but you haven't invited me. Back in the early days (which some of you can still remember quite clearly) you couldn't have enough of me. Teachers like Priscilla and Aquila, Apollos, and of course

Paul himself, made you so hungry and thirsty for the living God that you would do literally anything to find me. You rubbished your old pagan practices, you opened your lives to the Holy Spirit, you burnt your precious books of magic, and you loved me to bits. Now you're so sorted that you don't need me any more. [2:5] Am I getting through? Do you begin to realise how far you've drifted from your first passion for Christ? You're way out at sea and there I am waving from the quayside saying 'Take me with you!'

### **Change of course**

There's only one thing for it: you will have to change course, put about and return to harbour. 'But we're doing so well! What could have gone wrong?' Come back to the foot of the cross. Meet the risen Jesus face to face. Crown me Lord of all and Head of the church. Let me fill you to overflowing. Live by grace and not by the works of the law. Otherwise – and it's the stark alternative – I will walk over to you and simply uproot your lampstand from its secure footing, so that where the light of Ephesus shone once so brightly, there will be a darkness and a void.

[2:6] There's one glimmer of hope that you might respond to my message. You had a problem with the ever-so-plausible teaching of that gentleman Nicolas and his band of liberty-loving henchmen. You couldn't drum them out of town, but you could at least show your utter contempt for them, and you are doing precisely that. I couldn't applaud you more heartily, because I loathe everything they stand for. OK then, if you're capable of that kind of decisive action, why not similarly make up your minds that you're returning to me heart and soul? I can't wait!

*2:7 <sup>7</sup>Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.*

### **There's a war on**

[2:7] And you out there, maybe in a church far distant in space and time, are you listening? This isn't just a postcard from Patmos, it's the Holy Spirit speaking directly to all God's people. Does what I'm saying to Ephesus resonate with you? Have you settled for a correct faith with no living Christ at the centre? What are you going to do about it? Let me tell you what you could miss out on, and I mean eternally. There's a war on, and you may not think so, but I'm winning it. With me you can be a winner. Without me you're a loser. When the final victory comes, I will personally escort every disciple who has lasted the course to the famous Tree of Life – not the old tree which proved the downfall of the first human couple in Eden, but another Tree in the city of new Jerusalem, the second Garden Paradise which my cross opened up for anybody and everybody who wants to come in. Still thinking about it? Don't miss the party!

*2:8-9 <sup>8</sup>'To the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. <sup>9</sup>I know your afflictions and your poverty – yet you are rich! I know about the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.*

### **Smyrna: spirit of loyalty**

[2:8] Hallo, you there in Smyrna! What's your church all about? What really matters to you? Such a fine city, with its hill above the sea crowned with temples, and a history of resurrection after destruction, and its proud record of loyalty to Rome – where all the correct sacrifices, games, festivals happen so regularly. You're my church there – so what's your essential spirit?

This is your Lord Jesus speaking, yes I who am 'the first and the last', who begin and end the alphabet of human history, who alone am enthroned as God, who loved you to the point of death and who came out the other side to take you on with me – I'm here for you, I'm concerned for you and I'm talking to you.

[2:9] O Smyrna church and churches, don't think that I don't know how you're getting on! You've been finding things very hard recently. It's as though God has allowed your persecutors to do what they like with you and trample all over you. In the eyes of the world you are contemptibly poor, and they kick

you around like beggars at the roadside; but don't worry, your wealth in the vaults of heaven is already legendary.

In particular, I'm keenly aware of the official statements the Jews in Smyrna are putting out about you, how they're saying that you are committing the ultimate blasphemy in worshipping me as the Son of God and praying to me for forgiveness. I had to face this myself, as you well know. In fact the blasphemy is entirely on their part. They claim that they alone are the true children of Abraham, and that the Gentiles among you need to be circumcised; in the eyes of God, however, it is they who are uncircumcised, because neither do they show the faith of Abraham, nor are they the children of God. Sadly, as I said myself, they are the children of the evil one, and in their desire to do away with you they declare the true nature of their worshipping community, which is under the domination of Satan and is in direct opposition to God.

**2:10-11** <sup>10</sup> *Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor's crown.* <sup>11</sup> *Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who is victorious will not be hurt at all by the second death.*

### **Staying faithful**

[2:10] Serious clashes are inevitable if both sides hold to their convictions. Don't let this prospect terrify you, and don't be the first to blink. If I know the devil (and how I know the devil!) he will arrange for some of your number to be unjustly accused and sent up for trial; they will be kept under lock and key far longer than necessary, which will put a huge strain on the entire community. There will be pressure to renounce your faith, threats, beatings, torture, food and sleep deprivation, that kind of thing.

How are you going to react? Are you going to cave in to all this bullying? How long are you prepared to stay faithful to me? What if it means that some of you will physically lose your lives as the result of standing firm? I promise you, when you wake up the other side of death, you will find me pulling you to your feet and welcoming you to my victory parade. I will personally place a crown of immortal glory on your heads. Remember how when Stephen was stoned to death for blasphemy, the last thing he saw in this life was not the furious faces of his assailants, but the gates of heaven wide open and the Son of Man rising to his feet to welcome him with lasting honour and fame. Do you think that was a one-off occasion? Hang in there and see if I've changed in the slightest.

[2:11] And you out there, maybe in a church far distant in space and time, are you listening? This isn't just a get well soon card, it's the Holy Spirit speaking directly to all God's people. Does what I'm saying to Smyrna resonate with you? Are you facing assaults on your faith that are driving you to despair? How are you reacting? Yes, there's a war on, but if you don't run away you're going to be a winner, because you're on my side and I'm in full control of the outcome. When victory comes at last, you won't see Death any more. You'll have done your dying (in fact you've done it already), and there will be no prospect whatsoever of further judgment or punishment. Have you the slightest inkling of what the final resurrection is going to mean? Wait and see!

**2:12-13** <sup>12</sup> *To the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword.* <sup>13</sup> *I know where you live – where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, not even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city – where Satan lives.*

### **Pergamum: spirit of no compromise**

[2:12] Hallo, you there in Pergamum! What's your church all about? What really matters to you? Pergamum the famous capital of Asia, with its conical hill crowned with the temple of Zeus and its great altar, and the shrine of Asclepius where people come for healing, and that enormous library second only to Alexandria – the headquarters of the imperial cult where the reigning emperor is worshipped as god

and saviour – where the proconsul holds the right of life and death. You're my church there – so what's your essential spirit?

This is your Lord Jesus speaking, yes I who have a sword coming out of my mouth, both its edges sharp as razors, able to penetrate to the heart of the matter and to speak words that expose the truth and heal the soul – I'm here for you, I'm concerned for you and I'm speaking to you.

[2:13] O Pergamum church and churches, don't think that I don't know all about your situation! You've discovered that your homes and families are actually located right next to the headquarters of evil, the command centre of Satan's empire. Phew! I bet you're popular! And not a little scared? Yet, wonderfully, you're still wearing your Jesus badges and are bravely confessing you're my followers and friends. So they arrest Antipas, whose name is in lights up here, and when he won't stop witnessing to me they torture him to death while you have to look on. That was a terrible time for everyone; things may have eased a little since then, but the devil hasn't gone away, he's in full-time business, and you're still living in the shadow of those grim fortress walls.

**2:14-16** <sup>14</sup> *Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: there are some among you who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin so that they ate food sacrificed to idols and committed sexual immorality.* <sup>15</sup> *Likewise, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.* <sup>16</sup> *Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.*

### **Rotten apples**

[2:14] Inevitably, though, these events have had their effect on some who belong to your fellowship. Listen carefully, because a few rotten apples in the basket can turn the whole lot bad. Let me remind you of the story of Balak and Balaam, that deeply troubling episode where the prophet seems to be (and thinks he is) doing the will of God, and says all the right things as God's mouthpiece, yet he's really only concerned with feathering his own nest, and the advice he gives Balak ends up with God's people going off the track big time, partying on delicious steaks straight from the temple of Baal, and holding sex orgies with nice Moabite girls. Sorry, but does this ring a bell with you? 'Everyone here does it, so why should we be any different?' [2:15] How has this got into the church's bloodstream? In my letter to Ephesus I commended them for their forthright condemnation of that popular teacher called Nicolas, but he's obviously been round your way too, because your little have-it-both-ways group is propagating exactly the same ideas. [2:16] They're beginning to infect the whole church, yet you're doing nothing about it.

### **Spring-clean**

It's time you came to your senses! You need a thorough spring-clean, which can only happen if you wake up, come humbly to me and ask me back among you. Had you noticed I'd gone? The alternative is that I come back anyway and do the job myself, which will be sooner than you think and won't be pleasant for anyone. That sword you saw flashing from my mouth isn't just a ceremonial decoration, it's operational, it's God's word doing its wounding and healing work, and these world-loving compromisers are going to feel its full force. You have been warned.

**2:17** <sup>17</sup> *Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give that person a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it.*

### **Encouragement**

[2:17] And you out there, maybe in a church far distant in space and time, are you listening? This isn't just a wave from a friend, it's the Holy Spirit speaking directly to all God's people. Does what I'm saying to Pergamum resonate with you? Have you got professing Christians who are sitting down to meals with the enemy? Are you letting God's word speak with full force when you assemble together? Or is it all soft music and pious phrases?

Because there's a war on, and if you're not on my side, you're working for the opposition. So let me give you a couple of words of encouragement. In the devil's fortress they may keep you on starvation rations, but if you stay close to me you'll have a secret source of sustaining food. Remember what God did for the children of Israel when they were starving? He sent them heavenly manna which was better than all the fleshpots of Egypt. I Jesus am your bread from heaven and I promise you this: if you feed your souls on me you will live for evermore.

The other thing I'm promising you is a ticket with your name on it. A white pebble washed smooth by the mountain streams, bearing a name which belongs specially to you. It won't be the old name everyone knows and which gets put up on lists of undesirables. It will be mint-fresh, yet you'll recognise it instantly. It will speak of your history with me, how you loved me, what you went through for me, how I was there for you. Your Christ-name, fit for the new creation.

**2:18-19** <sup>18</sup> *To the angel of the church in Thyatira write: These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze.* <sup>19</sup> *I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first.*

### **Thyatira: nearly a model church**

[2:18] Hallo, you there in Thyatira! What's your church all about? What really matters to you? Once a strong frontier town, now a prosperous trading centre, with a reputation for its purple cloth, where the numerous trade guilds require your membership if you are to thrive economically, but which also demand the performance of pagan rituals at their company feasts: you're my church there – so what's your essential spirit?

This is your Lord Jesus speaking, yes I'm the one who appeared in John's vision, with flaming eyes that were warm and friendly yet also searched out all wrong to destroy it– I'm here for you. I'm also the one with my feet made of the purest bronze, who will stand uncompromisingly against evil and will trample it under foot – yes, I'm here for you, I'm concerned for you and I'm speaking to you.

[2:19] O Thyatira church and churches, don't think that I don't know how you're doing! Here's a little list I've been jotting down opposite your name:

- Love ... You're such a friendly and welcoming church, you have a deep affection for each other and indeed for anyone who turns up among you, but that's really just an overflow of your love for me, your deep gratitude and reverence for the Father who sent me to die for you
- Faith ... Like the other churches here in Asia Minor you haven't seen me in the flesh, but you've trusted and obeyed my word; and what's more, unlike Ephesus you haven't let your beliefs congeal into a stiff orthodoxy, but you've applied my truth to your lives and experienced the ever-fresh freedom of following me day by day
- Service ... It takes a lot of sacrificial effort to keep a church on its feet, but you really do put yourselves out for each other, you respect everybody's contribution and as a result things get done, the poor are looked after, the sick visited and so on
- Stickability... Yes, I know you get mocked and occasionally maltreated, but that's par for the course, and you've never thought of chucking the whole thing in or easing up in your commitment to me
- Growth ... In fact, when I compare your early days with what you've become now, I am hugely impressed with the sheer volume of activities and programmes you are undertaking, in your attempts to spread the faith and bring the goodness of God into the society around you.

You're such a model of what a church ought to be! I wish I could bottle you and sell you at all the supermarkets in the empire.

**2:20-23** <sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, I have this against you: you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. <sup>21</sup> I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling. <sup>22</sup> So I will cast her on a bed of suffering, and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely, unless they repent of her ways. <sup>23</sup> I will strike her children dead. Then all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds.

### **Weeping sore**

[2:20] So why, why on earth, don't you deal with the one weeping sore there is in your fellowship? You know who I mean – I'll call her Jezebel. I'm not mincing matters here. The original Jezebel introduced the people of Israel to a heady mix of idol worship, pagan feasts and sexual laxity. This led them to abandon their devotion to Jehovah in favour of Baal, and my faithful prophet Elijah correctly saw that you couldn't follow both deities, because there's only one God. Now this Jezebel of yours claims that she too gets her messages direct from God, and he is telling her that Christians are not under the law but under grace – fine, we are – which means you are free to take part in pagan sacrifices and feasts and other practices. Not so fine, because it is precisely this polytheistic and often promiscuous lifestyle that many of you were rescued from when you turned to me.

### **Hospital bed**

[2:21] So why haven't I put her to the sword, as Elijah did to the prophets of Baal? I've given her every chance to acknowledge the error of her ways, but she's having none of it; she knows she's being unfaithful to me, but she's determined to go on whatever. [2:22] Just watch this space! She wants to go to bed with the enemy – right then, so she shall, but it will be a hospital bed, and her fellow-adulterers will be sharing it with her, all of them racked with agonising pain – they're being given one last chance to change their attitudes and their behaviour, then that's it. [2:23] The offspring she's spawned won't escape either, because if you work for sin, the wages you get are death, both here and eternally. I'm not going to do this in a corner: all round Asia the churches are going to sit up and take notice. The whole church will realise that my blazing eyes John saw in his vision aren't just a figment of the imagination – it's God himself you're dealing with here, the God who sees through all the outward show and knows what's going on in each person at the very deepest level, the God who isn't fooled by professions of spirituality but asks quite simply and directly: what has someone's life been like, what have they actually done, what do they think they've got away with?

**2:24-25** <sup>24</sup> Now I say to the rest of you in Thyatira, to you who do not hold to her teaching and have not learned Satan's so-called deep secrets, 'I will not impose any other burden on you, <sup>25</sup> except to hold on to what you have until I come.'

### **Get on with the gospel**

[2:24] So much for Jezebel and her little coterie. 'What are we supposed to do about this plague-spot in our church?' the rest of you may be asking. I know full well that only a small minority of you Thyatirans go along with this heresy. Most of you are rightly suspicious of their mystical claims to have reached a level of deep understanding where good and evil are aspects of the same thing, and where what ordinary Christians call 'Satanic temptations' are really opportunities to know Christ more intimately. All right – I'm not asking you to take drastic action, apart from making perfectly clear, as you seem reluctant to do, that however gifted and persuasive this prophetess is, she is not going to be allowed a platform for her 'enlightened' ideas. [2:25] Just get on with preaching the apostolic gospel you know so well; don't ever get so familiar with it that it ceases to thrill and refresh you. I'll deal with the Jezebel crew when I turn up among you – and if that isn't till the Second Coming, I still expect to find you holding true to the message of Christ crucified and risen.

**2:26-29** <sup>26</sup> To the one who is victorious and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations – <sup>27</sup> that one "will rule them with an iron sceptre and will dash them to pieces like pottery" – just as I have received

authority from my Father. <sup>28</sup> I will also give that one the morning star. <sup>29</sup> Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

### **I need under-shepherds**

[2:26] If you want to be a winner and not a loser, it isn't just a question of signing a doctrinal statement or wearing a church membership badge, it's finding out my will and being available to me right up to the last breath you draw on this earth. Did you ever think this was going to be easy? I need people to whom I can safely give responsibility in the new world that's coming, my kingdom world revealed in its full glory. [2:27-28] Let's dig deep into the Royal Psalm and see the Messiah-plan unfolding. Here on earth the nations of the world generally don't accept my God-given rule, and those who resist me will meet their comeuppance at the judgment, when they find the irresistible law of my Lordship beating them to their knees and smashing their futile rebellion into tiny bits like a clay jar rejected by the master Potter. But they were always going to be my inheritance, my birthday present from the Father, and that's still the plan – in which you're going to play a full part.

Remember all those promises about the Gentiles coming home to Jerusalem? I'm not talking old creation language here, it's the new creation in its radiant fullness, where the sheep I was never going to lose come together from all over the world into one fold. These sheep are still going to need shepherding in righteousness and love, and I'm the one to do it, but I'm looking for under-shepherds who have proved their worth in unremitting faithfulness. Are you on for this?

### **Morning Star**

Do you remember the Star promised to Israel by the false prophet Balaam? I'm going to give you that Star, because it represents myself. I am the Ruler forecast in that ancient message. I am the Morning Star, the true light-bringer to the nations. Satan and Venus are wannabe usurpers of that title. Wait for me to give you myself, and I will. I promise.

And you out there, maybe in a church far distant in space and time, are you listening? This isn't a rant from a disappointed lover, it's the Holy Spirit speaking directly to all God's people. Does what I'm saying to Thyatira resonate with you? Are you being seduced by apparently radiant fellow-Christians who say it's all right to flirt with the world and go along with its incentives of money, sex and power? Do you have the staying-power I'm looking for in my future world rulers?

**3:1-3** <sup>1</sup>To the angel of the church in Sardis write: These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. <sup>2</sup>Wake up!

Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God.

<sup>3</sup>Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; hold it fast, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.

### **Sardis: any signs of life?**

[3:1] Hallo, you there in Sardis! What's your church all about? What really matters to you? Once the capital of Lydia, famous for its river flowing with gold, an apparently impregnable fortress on the heights but twice captured through lack of vigilance, home to gods like Cybele and Artemis, dutiful in its homage to the emperor: you're my church there – so what's your essential spirit?

This is your Lord Jesus speaking, yes I'm the one who appeared in John's vision, having in my hands the sevenfold Spirit of the Living God, and responsible for the seven churches and their life and essential character – I'm here for you, I'm particularly concerned for you and I'm speaking urgently to you now.

O Sardis church and churches, don't think that I don't know how you're doing! Glowing reports come in all the time about you, how you're a living and growing fellowship, vibrantly active in your community and so on, and I could be impressed – but I'm not, because I know the truth. You're dead, dead, dead. Sorry, but I'm telling it as it is. I see no signs of life anywhere. Finis.

## Stir a leg!

[3:2] Well, if you're hearing me, it may be a sign that there could be some chance of reviving you. Perhaps you're not dead, only fast asleep. Come on, stir a leg! All your initiatives are dying out one by one, and no-one's coming forward to carry them on. You're not posting guards at the weak points. Projects get abandoned before they've reached halfway. The throne of grace is poised to send help down, but there are no applications. [3:3] Fine sermons are preached, but they're never about the gospel of Christ. Does anyone recall why Jesus died and rose from the dead? Search the scriptures and rediscover a living faith; come on, why not start all over again and start believing what you say you do!

Here's my warning: there's a gang of robbers prowling round this slumbering house, and if urgent action isn't taken, and doors and windows aren't firmly bolted, they'll be inside in a flash. Didn't I warn you about this? I'm coming back, as I said I would, but not a single mortal knows when that's going to be; when it happens, it will be a complete surprise. Please believe that I want bring blessing, not judgment!

**3:4-6** <sup>4</sup> Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. <sup>5</sup> The one who is victorious will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life, but will acknowledge that name before my Father and his angels.

<sup>6</sup> Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

## A few exceptions

[3:4] Though, I have to say, there are exceptions – just a few, because most of you Christians in Sardis have become compromised morally. But a few I could name haven't gone the way of the world; they have managed to keep their clothes from being spattered with the mud from the streets, and this is symbolic of their relationship with me. Like Enoch, who walked with God all his long life and continued his stroll into eternity, these folk have consistently rung true in their daily lives, and I'm only too happy to have them accompany me on the pavements of the new Jerusalem, dressed fit for the wedding of earth and heaven.

[3:5] Yes, the world may call you losers, but in my book you're winners, and I repeat my promise that I shall personally clothe each of you with my full-length robe of righteousness, won for you by my sacrifice. And speaking of books, your names may have been removed from the synagogue list, or the guild register, or even the citizen roll, but I give you my solemn assurance that on no account will they ever be scrubbed out of the archive of those who are going to live for ever. And when your name comes up before my Father's throne, and the holy angels hold their breath (because they know you weren't as perfect as they are), and all eyes turn to me for my verdict, I shall declare in ringing tones, 'This is one of mine.'

[3:6] And you out there, maybe in a church far distant in space and time, are you listening? This isn't an end-of-term report from your old teacher, it's the Holy Spirit speaking directly to all God's people. Does what I'm saying to Sardis resonate with you? Why are you expecting to make it into heaven? Is it because you're on the electoral roll of a fine old traditional church? Is what you say and sing on Sunday consistent with what you get up to in the rest of the week? Have you ever thrown yourself on my mercy for time and eternity? Do you ever actually listen to what my word says to you? If you can't hear me, then you really are terminally dead.

**3:7-9** <sup>7</sup> To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. <sup>8</sup> I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. <sup>9</sup> I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars – I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you.

### **Philadelphia: an open door**

[3:7] Hallo, you there in Philadelphia! What's your church all about? What really matters to you? City named for 'brotherly love', in your peaceful and fertile valley, set on rich red volcanic soil, living in constant fear of losing your homes in the next earthquake, gateway for Greek culture to reach eastwards, bristling with Roman temples and a powerful Jewish synagogue: you're my church there – so what's your essential spirit?

This is your Lord Jesus speaking, yes I'm the one who appeared in John's vision, shining with God's own purity and intolerance of falsehood, loving truth and utterly faithful to my promise: I hold the keys of total responsibility for entry to David's house and full authority over the Davidic kingdom, so that when I unlock any door there is no-one else who can shut it, and when I lock a door it stays shut no matter what force is applied to it – I'm here for you, I'm particularly concerned for you and I'm speaking reassuringly to you now.

[3:8] O Philadelphia church and churches, don't think that I don't know how you're doing! You may think every door in your city is locked and barred against you, but may I let you into a secret: I am the Lord of the keys, not only in a universal sense, but right here in Philadelphia. I've opened the only door that counts, which is the door into my kingdom for Jews and non-Jews alike. I opened this door in the sight of all mankind when I died on the cross and the temple curtain barring access to God's presence was ripped in half. No human or devilish agency can lock you out of the kingdom of God – you can come and go freely. Similarly when I open a door for the gospel, people's minds and wills are set free to come to a knowledge of the living God.

### **Surprise in store**

'So why are we as a church so pitifully small and ineffective?' Well, you may be limping along in the rear, but you're still keeping going! You're holding onto my promises for dear life (unlike many a so-called 'successful church') and you've kept me, your Saviour and Lord, at the centre of your teaching despite the incentives to water down your faith. Maybe I've deliberately chosen you to shame the stronger churches. At any rate, I haven't a single word of criticism for you.

[3:9] You've got a surprise in store! The people who are chiefly making your life a misery call themselves covenant Israelites and true children of Abraham, but they're a travesty of what a synagogue should be – to put it plainly, as I explained while I was on earth, they have been thoroughly fooled by their master Satan and the lies they generate come directly from him. 'True Jews' indeed! You won't believe this, but the day is coming when I'm going to do something humanly impossible. I'm going to turn the old prophecies on their heads. It won't be Gentile nations falling on their faces before Jews, it will be the other way round. My Spirit is going to cause these opponents of yours to queue up at your doors and to beg desperately to be admitted to your fellowship – because they at last realise that you have been the true objects of my love all along, you have believed that I died and rose again for you, and you stand squarely in the Abrahamic line of God-approved faith.

**3:10-13** <sup>10</sup> Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth. <sup>11</sup> I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. <sup>12</sup> The one who is victorious I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will they leave it. I will write on them the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on them my new name.

<sup>13</sup> Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

### **I'll see you through**

[3:10] Yes, patient endurance is the name of the game! I've told you this already, and it's always been part of my teaching. If you wonder how long things are going to last, think what I've had to put up with and still am, if only some of them would come to their senses! But we are moving inexorably towards crunch-point, and this will be when your refusal to give in pays handsome dividends. No matter how

many billions of human beings there have been on earth, no matter where they have lived or what age they have lived in, the climactic day is coming when the quality of each person's life will be tested against God's own standards of perfect love. 'But won't that include us?' Yes, indeed it will, but if you stay close to me I'll see you through it and out the other side, so that you'll hardly notice it. Trust me, I know what you're having to put up with, but it's nothing compared to what your opponents are going to have to go through.

[3:11] I may seem to be a long time coming back, but I promise you it's imminent. Meanwhile you need to hang on to God's grace like grim fury, because victory is in sight and you're going to play a full part in the celebrations. [3:12] Yes, little Philadelphian church, you're an essential part of the architecture of my future dwelling place. If you can stand the pressure to the end, you're going to be like earthquake-proof temple pillars in the everlasting home where God is going to live with his people. No more running out of town at the first sign of danger – you'll have total and permanent security. How come? Because God is moving house, and he's building his new place right where you are.

### **God's new name**

[3:12] You know how builders and architects stamp their names on bricks and columns and so on? It's a guarantee of the genuineness of the materials, and it reminds everyone of the greatness of the designer. Well, you are to be the living and breathing components of my new temple-city, and you're going to have the name God gives you stamped all over you, the name I will personally engrave upon you.

In fact, you're going to bear three names. Firstly, your 'Divine ownership' name, the 'I AM' of the living God. If you truly belong to my God, then you live for ever. Next, your 'citizenship' name, the name of God's city: 'JERUSALEM' – not the destruction-prone earthly capital, but an entirely new and heavenly construction specifically designed to take its place. And because you belong to me, you're all going to have your own 'Christian' name stamped on you as well, the uniquely personal name I've got just for you and that suits you perfectly.

[3:13] So you out there, maybe in a church far distant in space and time, are you listening? This isn't a threatening diatribe about what will happen to you if you abandon your faith in Jesus, it's the Holy Spirit speaking encouragingly to all God's faithful people. Does what I'm saying to Philadelphia resonate with you? You may feel small and ineffective in your local community, under constant criticism from 'the powers that be' and sorely tempted to give up any idea of being a missionary church bringing people to Christ. Who holds the keys to the heavenly Jerusalem? Who can open any door in your city? Just stay close to me. Build your house upon the Rock, and you'll be still standing when everything and everyone else has fallen down.

**3:14-17** <sup>14</sup> *To the angel of the church in Laodicea write: These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation.* <sup>15</sup> *I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other!* <sup>16</sup> *So, because you are lukewarm – neither hot nor cold – I am about to spit you out of my mouth.* <sup>17</sup> *You say, "I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing." But you do not realise that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.*

### **Laodicea: lukewarm towards Christ**

[3:14] Hallo, you there in Laodicea! What's your church all about? What really matters to you? Your city is celebrated for its prosperity and elegance, renowned for its glossy black wool, its medical school and its notoriously tepid water; when an earthquake caused total devastation a generation ago, you funded your restoration yourselves without any help from the imperial coffers; you're my church there – so what's your essential spirit?

This is your Lord Jesus speaking, I who am God's own genuine signature appended to everything he has said and has done and will do. I am the 'Amen!', the confident 'Yes!' to all God's promises. I am the rock-solid evidence, the utterly reliable servant-witness to the One True Lord who alone can and does come to the rescue and who carries his plan through to completion. When creation began I was already

there from eternity; I kick-started the whole process and when I rose from the dead it was a new creation coming into being, an entirely new version of heaven and earth that renders the old version obsolete. I am not just a chapter in the autobiography of God – I am the whole book and its single indisputable Subject and Author. Yes, I your Lord am here for you, I'm concerned for you and I'm speaking urgently to you now.

[3:15] O Laodicea church and churches, don't think that I don't know how you're doing! You are like the water that flows along the aqueducts into your town: it starts as thermal springs, nice and hot, but by the time it reaches you it still hasn't cooled down, so it's quite unpleasant to drink. You're lukewarm in your love for me, half-and-half Christians, soldiers in mufti. I'm longing for you either to turn up the heat and become passionate, all-out devotees of mine – or why not cool down completely and abandon your faith, then at least I could challenge your unbelief! [3:16] As it is, you are token disciples, passengers who have taken out the lowest level of insurance against eternal disaster. If the water's really hot, you can use it for cooking and general therapeutic purposes; if it's really cold, you can quench your thirst on a sweltering summer afternoon; but if it's kind of in-between, all you want is to spit it straight out of your mouth. Well, that's how I feel about you Laodiceans: I am frankly nauseated by your 'yes, but' attitude and I've reached the point where I want to give my taste-buds a swill-out and flush you down the drain. Sorry I can't put it more politely, but as I said, I'm the witness who tells it how I see it.

### **Self-sufficiency**

[3:17] What am I talking about? Well, I'm addressing this letter to the predominant spirit of the Laodicean church, and if you eavesdrop on that spirit, you get something like this: 'We are world-famous for our self-sufficiency. We have enough funds in the bank of earth and of heaven to survive any disaster, material or spiritual. O munificent Emperor, we didn't need any help from you for rebuilding our city. O God of earth and heaven, we don't need any help from you for maintaining our church life and year-round programme of good works. We've got it sorted, thanks very much. End of prayer.'

You have no conception of the true state of affairs. Whatever your credit balance in the records of humanity, your tally in the account books of heaven stands at precisely nothing. You are referred to in angelic circles as 'Laodicea the Loser.' We long to help you but there's nothing we can do. You're the neediest down-and-outs on the streets of the kingdom. You are in a permanent grace-flow crisis. You are spiritually unsighted and you don't even realise it. Your clothes are in rags and you smell to high heaven. Yuck!!

**3:18-20** <sup>18</sup> I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so that you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so that you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so that you can see. <sup>19</sup> Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent. <sup>20</sup> Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.

### **Free, gratis and for nothing**

[3:18] If you want my advice, which you probably don't, but here it is anyway: there is only one place in the universe where you can get what is of infinite value completely free of charge, and that's at my market stall under the sign of the cross. Is your bank account standing at zero? Then here's a bag of gold so pure that no furnace on earth could leach any impurities out of it, and when you've run through the first one, there's an inexhaustible stockpile of bags to follow. Grace upon grace upon grace. Is your wardrobe full of moth-eaten and tattered garments that make you ashamed to be seen in public? Here's a whole department store full of shining white designer clothes that will make it a privilege to stroll down the streets of heaven in your company. Is your vision so blurred and distorted (come on, admit it!) that people look like objects to be avoided or manipulated? Great! Now you can queue up at my eye-clinic and get your cataracts fixed with this infallible remedy I'm offering you – all free, gratis and for nothing! There's only one condition: that you admit you need treatment.

[3:19] Love is a serious business. I am totally committed in my love for you, just as I am for the whole world. That's why I'm taking a really tough line with you, telling you these unpalatable truths like a father confronting his son, cutting to the quick like a surgeon going to the heart of the infection. All I want is a similar commitment from you, a sign that you too really mean business. Drop your self-justifying attitude. Turn round and face me. Listen for just a moment to the amazing things I'm going to tell you.

### **Jesus knocking**

[3:20] Because I'm here in person, your Lord Jesus, standing right here outside the locked and barred door of your house. The knocking you hear isn't the police or the bailiffs, it's me asking to be allowed in, because I love you. I'm calling your name – can you hear me? Are you prepared to draw back the bolts and let me in? I'm not going away. What I want to do is to walk across the threshold and come into your life once again (or maybe for the first time). I promise you – and I signed that promise on the cross – I will accept your invitation and join you in undying friendship. We'll sit down and have the first of many meals. I'll be your guest, and you will be mine. Nothing spectacular, just good healthy eating and chatting together. Then, one day, we'll find we're together on the high table, sharing the banquet that knows no end. It can't be bad, can it?

**3:21-22** <sup>21</sup> *To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I was victorious and sat down with my Father on his throne.* <sup>22</sup> *Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'*

### **Enthroned me**

[3:21] With me. You can't win on your own. If I've become irrelevant or marginal in your life, put me back in the centre where I belong. I won that right when I died for you on the cross and rose again to endless glory. The Lamb upon the throne. Enthroned me, and I'll enthrone you. I want you to be where I am. So I promise you this: just as my Father invited me to take my place where I have always belonged, as the King reigning in love, so you too will take your place with me as kings and saints and one-hundred-per-cent victors. Do you believe this? Do you want this?

### **To my whole church**

[3:22] I'm speaking to my whole church throughout space and time. Do you believe this? Do you want this? Have you lost your first love, like Ephesus? Are you going through the fire, like Smyrna? Are you tempted to compromise, like Pergamum? Have your moral standards slipped, like Thyatira? Have you gone to sleep, like Sardis? Do you feel you're not achieving anything, like Philadelphia? Are you proud and complacent, like Laodicea? I am your Lord Jesus and this is my Spirit speaking to you all. You think you're in the real world as you battle down there on earth. Let me open your eyes to the true realities of the heavenly warfare that's going on all around you. One day soon it will be all over, but for now you and I are fully involved. Join me in a battlefield tour....

*The letter continues through chapters 4-22.*

## **CROSS-REFERENCES**

'No other book of the NT is as permeated by the OT as Revelation. Although its author seldom quotes the OT directly, allusions and echoes are found in almost every verse of the book' (Beale and Carson). Add to this our uncertainty about the date of the book and how much the author knew of other NT writings, and the result is a highly subjective collection of references. Underlined: direct quotation of or reference to an OT passage.

\*Asterisked: probable or possible allusion to an OT passage or earlier part of the letter.

**1:1-3** *Call us his friends* Jn 15:15.

**1:4-5a** No beginning to his existence Exod 3:14. Spirit through and through Jn 4:24. The Seven-Spirited God Isa 11:2. Knowledge of eternal realities Jn 3:11, 18:37. Word from the beginning Jn 1:1, Rev 3:14, 19:11. Advance-guard of the new creation Col 1:18, Rom 8:29. Unique supremo Eph 1:21. And their rulers Dan 2:47, Rev 17:14.

**1:5b-6** Before the start of time Eph 1:4-5. Hung bleeding to death 1 Pet 1:19. Worldwide kingdom \*Exod 19:6. Seated us with yourself Eph 2:6. Goodness and greatness 1 Pet 2:9. Serve the Father Jn 12:28. None can stop you Dan 4:32.

**1:7** Daniel's old prophecy Dan 7:13. Son of Man Mk 14:61-62. Prophet Zechariah Zech 9-14. Pierced to death Zech 12:10. Mourns for him Zech 12:10-12. In his final glory \*Matt 24:30. Nations of the earth Ps 2:1ff. The living I AM Exod 3:14.

**1:8** This Lord who never goes away \*Isa 41:4, 43:10, 44:6. Alpha and Omega Rev 22:13. All day and every day Mt 28:20. Shepherd leading his flock Jn 10:4. Never changes Heb 13:8. Prophets love to give him Hos 12:5. Battered Job Job 27:11. All power in heaven and earth Job 42:2, Mt 28:18, Rev 15:3. This is our Lord Phil 2:11.

**1:9-11** My greeting Rev 1:4. Same Father as you 2 Cor 6:18. All pointed to Jesus Rev 6:9. The Lord's Day Acts 20:7, 1 Cor 16:2.

**1:12-16** For the tabernacle Exod 25:31. Zechariah saw in his vision \*Zech 4:2. In Daniel's vision \*Dan 7:9-14. Ancient of Days himself Dan 7:9. Left this earth Acts 1:9. The sash he wore Lev 8:7. Priest-king Melchisedek Gen 18:14, Ps 110:4. Without number Heb 7:3. The Lord Jesus had hinted Mt 22:44. Standard teaching in our churches today Heb 7. Covenant of promise Heb 8:6. But to save it Jn 3:17, 12:47. From everlasting to everlasting Ps 103:17, Jer 31:3. Knows all my ways Prov 5:21. Proud or untrue Hab 1:13. One greatly loved and valued Dan 10:11. Like bronze \*Dan 10:6. Son of the gods Dan 3:25. Trumpet-blast Rev 1:10. Drowning out any other sound 1 Ki 19:11, 12. Living and eternal Jn 4:14. Beyond value to the owner Exod 19:5. Worth any sacrifice Acts 20:28. Razor-edge sharpness Heb 4:12. Displeasure and destruction Isa 11:4, 2 Th 2:8. Anything unworthy Ps 34:15, 16. Sense of peace Num 6:25, 26.

**1:17-18** Knocked me out completely \*Dan 10:8. Touch on my shoulder \*Dan 10:10. Held the set of stars Rev 1:16. In the boat Jn 6:20. Holy mountain Mt 17:7. Day of resurrection Mt 28:10, Jn 20:19. Language associated with God \*Isa 41:4, \*44:6, \*48:12, Rev 1:4, 21:6. All life flows from me Jn 1:4. Everything exists Col 1:17. My life goes on Heb 7:24. In the underworld Ps 49:7-9, 14. Death's prisoners go free Lk 4:18, Ps 49:15. Never do harm again Rev 21:4.

**1:19-21** They're my sheep Jn 10:28, 29. Light of life Jn 1:4. Light of the world Jn 8:12.

**2:1-3** Founded by Paul Acts 19. Seven stars Rev 1:16, 20. Seven golden lampstands Rev 1:12-13, 20.

**2:4-6** Priscilla and Aquila Acts 18:19. Apollos Acts 18:24. Paul himself Acts 19:1-20:1. Thirsty for the living God Ps 42:1-2, 84:2. Pagan practices Eph 2:1ff. Holy Spirit Acts 19:6. Books of magic Acts 19:19. Loved me to bits Eph 6:24. Foot of the cross Eph 1:7. Risen Jesus Eph 1:17-20. Head of the church Eph 1:21-23. Fill you to overflowing Eph 5:18, Jn 7:37-39. Live by grace Eph 2:8, Rom 6:14. Liberty-loving henchmen Rev 2:14, 15.

**2:7** Without me Jn 15:5. The old tree Gen 2:9. New Jerusalem Rev 22:2. Opened up for anybody Lk 23:43.

**2:8-11** The first and the last Rev 1:17. Alphabet of human history Isa 41:4. Enthroned as God Isa 44:6, Rev 21:6, 22:13. Come out the other side Rev 1:18. Trample all over you Ps 66:11, 12. Vaults of heaven Jas 2:5. Had to face this myself Mk 2:7, Jn 10:33. Children of Abraham Jn 8:33. Need to be circumcised Gal 6:12. Faith of Abraham Gal 3:7. As I said myself Jn 8:44. Opposition to God Rev 3:9. Hold to their convictions 2 Tim 3:12. I know the devil Jn 14:30. A crown of immortal glory 2 Tim 4:12. Stephen was stoned to death Acts 7:55-56. Won't see Death Rev 20:14. You've done it already Mt 16:28, Col 3:3-4. Further judgment Rev 20:6.

**2:12-13** Sharp as razors Rev 1:16. Heal the soul Dt 32:39. Hasn't gone away Lk 4:13. He's in full-time business 1 Pet 5:8.

**2:14-16** Balak and Balaam Num 22ff. Nice Moabite girls \*Num 25:1-3. Ring a bell with you 1 Cor 10:21. Letter to Ephesus Rev 2:6. Came to your senses Lk 15:17. It's operational 1 Th 2:13, Heb 4:12.

**2:17** Meals with the enemy 1 Cor 5:9-13. Working for the opposition Mt 12:30. Heavenly manna \*Exod 16:31. Fleshpots of Egypt Exod 16:3. Live for evermore Jn 6:57, 58. New creation 2 Cor 5:17.

**2:18-19** Purple cloth Acts 16:14. Flaming eyes Rev 1:14. To destroy it Hab 2:13. Purest bronze Rev 1:15. Trample it under foot Isa 63:3, Rev 19:15. To die for you Rom 5:5, 1 Jn 4:10. Seen me in the flesh Jn 20:29, 1 Pet 1:8. Obeyed my word 1 Th 2:13. Sick visited and so on Mt 25:40, 1 Tim 5:10. Society around you Gal 6:9, 10.

**2:20-23** The original Jezebel \*1 Ki 16:31-33. Sexual laxity 2 Ki 9:22. Devotion to Jehovah 1 Ki 19:14. Follow both deities 1 Ki 18:21. Under grace Rom 6:14. When you turned to me 1 Cor 8:7. Prophets of Baal 1 Ki 18:40. Error of her ways 2 Tim 2:24-26. Won't escape either 2 Ki 10:1-11. Wages you get are death Prov 29:1, Rom 6:23. Take notice Acts 5:11. At the very deepest level \*Jer 17:10. Got away with Ps 62:12, 2 Cor 5:10.

**2:24-25** Aspects of the same thing Isa 5:20. Know Christ more intimately 2 Cor 11:14. Take drastic action \*Acts 15:28, 1 Cor 5:5, 1 Tim 1:20. Christ crucified and risen 1 Cor 15:1ff.

**2:26-29** Royal Psalm \*Ps 2. My God-given rule Ps 2:1-3, Acts 4:25-26. To their knees Phil 2:10. The master Potter Ps 2:9, Jer 19:11. My inheritance Gen 18:22. Present from the Father Ps 2:7-8, Jn 10:29. Still the plan Rom 15:12. Home to Jerusalem Isa 60:3ff. Radiant fullness Rev 21:1-5. Into one fold Jn 10:16. Righteousness 2 Pet 3:13. Love 1 Pet 5:2-4. The

one to do it Rev 7:17. False prophet Balaam \*Num 24:17. Morning Star Rev 22:17. Satan Isa 14:12. Future world rulers Jn 16:33, 1 Jn 5:4-5.

**3:1-3** Spirit of the Living God Rev 1:4, 5:7. Essential character Rev 1:16, Col 1:18. Warn you about this Mt 24:42-44.

**3:4-6** Way of the world Rev 14:4. Stroll into eternity Gen 5:24. Earth and heaven Rev 19:11. Robe of righteousness Isa 61:10. My sacrifice Rev 7:14. Live for ever Lk 10:20. One of mine 2 Tim 2:12, 19. Rest of the week Tit 1:16.

**3:7-9** Intolerance of falsehood Rev 6:10. Hold the keys Rev 1:18. Entry to David's house [Isa 22:22](#). Davidic kingdom \*Isa 9:6-7. Who can shut it 1 Cor 16:9. All mankind Jn 12:32. Ripped in half Mk 15:38. Are set free 2 Tim 2:25-26. For dear life 1 Jn 2:5. Shame the stronger churches 1 Cor 1:27-29. While I was on earth Jn 8:31-47. Their master Satan Rev 2:9.

Directly from him 2 Th 2:9-12. Falling on their faces \*Isa 49:23, 60:14. God-approved faith Gen 22:15-18, Rom 4:16-17.

**3:10-13** Told you this already Rev 1:9. Part of my teaching Lk 21:19. Had to put up with Heb 12:3. Come to their senses 2 Pet 3:9. Include us Rom 14:10-12, 2 Cor 5:10. Hardly notice it Jn 5:22-24. Have to go through 2 Th 1:5-9. It's imminent Rev 22:20. God's grace 1 Pet 5:10. Live with his people Rev 21:3. Right where you are Isa 66:22. My new temple-city 1 Pet 2:3-4. Stamped all over you Isa 43:7. I AM Exod 3:14. You live for ever Exod 3:6, Mk 12:26-27. JERUSALEM Heb 12:22.

To take its place Ezek 48:35, Rev 21:10. You belong to me Jn 10:3, 2 Tim 2:19. Suits you perfectly Jn 1:42.

**3:14-17** Imperial coffers Tacitus Annals 14:27. All God's promises 2 Cor 1:20. Servant-witness \*Isa 43:10-12. One True Lord \*Isa 65:16. Kick-started the whole process \*Prov 8:22-25, Jn 1:3, Col 1:18. New creation Isa 65:17. Old version obsolete Rev 21:5. Got it sorted Lk 18:10-12. Clothes are in rags Isa 64:6.

**3:18-20** Free of charge \*Isa 55:1-2. Grace upon grace Jn 1:16, Jas 4:6. In your company Rev 3:4. Avoided or manipulated Mk 8:24. You need treatment Lk 5:31-32. My love for you Jer 31:3. Whole world Jn 3:16. Sharing the banquet Lk 16:30.

**3:21-22** Upon the throne Rev 5:6. I'll enthrone you Eph 2:6. Where I am Jn 17:24. One-hundred-per-cent victors Exod 19:6, Rev 1:6. Down there on earth Exod 17:10. All around you 2 Ki 6:17.

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