

The Seven Letters (1): Introduction

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Date: 17 May 2026

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[0 : 00] We're going to read now in the book of Revelation at the end of the Bible. This is page number 1028. If you're using one of the white Bibles in the shelf in front of you.

Revelation chapter 1. Revelation chapter 1.

Let's read the whole chapter together. The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants the things that must soon take place.

He made it known by sending his angel to his servant, John, who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw.

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

[1 : 04] John, to the seven churches that are in Asia, grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come.

And from the seven spirits who are before his throne. And from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, the ruler of the kings on earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and father.

To him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. Behold, he is coming with the clouds and every eye shall see him, even those who pierced him.

And all the tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so, amen. I am the Alpha and the Omega, says the Lord God.

I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient in judgment that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

[2 : 23] I was in the spirit on the Lord's day and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet saying, Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna, and to Pergamum and to Thyatira, and to Sardis and to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea.

Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands. And in the midst of the lampstands, one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash round his chest.

The hairs of his head were white like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire. His feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace.

And his voice was like the roar of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword.

And his face was like the sun, shining in full strength on all its brilliance. When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead.

[3 : 35] But he laid his right hand on me, saying, Fear not. I am the first and the last and the living one. I died, and behold, I am alive forevermore.

And I have the keys of death and Hades. Write, therefore, the things that you have seen, those that are, and those that are to take place after this.

As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

Heavenly Father, we bow in your presence. May your word be our rule, your spirit our teacher, and your greater glory, our supreme concern, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen. Letters change history. One such was a letter written by the American civil rights activist Martin Luther King called Letter from a Birmingham Jail, where he suggested that people have a moral responsibility to rise up against unjust laws and take direct action rather than waiting for

justice to catch up.

[5 : 09] King's letter from a Birmingham jail accelerated the equality of the races in the American South. Over the course of this summer, I want us to catch up with the letters of an altogether greater kind of king.

At the end of the first century AD, the early Christian church was well established over the entire ancient Near East. The church was growing rapidly, especially in the Roman province of Asia Minor, which is today's Turkey.

To all appearances, the church seemed to be flourishing. But in every age and in every place, the church has its problems.

It was facing opposition from outside and division on the inside. Well, through the Apostle John, the exalted Lord Jesus Christ, the King of the church, wrote letters to seven of these churches to assure them of His presence with them, but also to challenge them to stand firm in the faith.

These are the most important letters in the history of the church, detailing for us Christ's heart for us in every place and in every age.

[6 : 33] No two churches look the same, nor should they, but every church is to listen carefully and obey the teaching of our Lord in these seven letters of Revelation.

But this week, by way of introduction, I want us to consider two things together. First of all, the King of the letters, where we'll think through who the Jesus is who wrote these letters.

And then secondly, the letters of the King, where we'll review the common threads between these letters and set down patterns for how we are both to understand them and apply them in 21st century Scotland.

These aren't letters sent to ancient churches as much as they are letters sent to churches in every age. They're for us.

And we'll be both confronted and challenged by them to be the best we can be for the glory of King Jesus and for the good of His church.

[7 : 41] First of all then, the King of the letters, the King of the letters. Revelation 1 is one of the most majestic chapters in the whole Bible. The Bible is, this book is called Revelation because that's what it is.

It is God revealing hidden things to His church, things that the church wouldn't know or understand about itself unless God revealed it to them.

Much of the book of Revelation is couched in mysterious imagery, but all of it tells the story of God's complete victory over darkness and over the evil of this world.

It's a book for every age, every chapter, telling the story, not so much of what will happen in the future, but what is happening today.

As the gospel is being preached, as the world's peoples are responding in faith, God is pushing back the darkness and reinforcing the victory of Christ.

[8 : 48] But what I find so fascinating and majestic about Revelation 1 is its presentation of the glory and the majesty of Jesus, the Lord of the church, the author of these seven letters.

We cannot but kneel before this presentation of the exalted Christ, perhaps a little bit like the apostle John of whom we read in verse 17, when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as though dead.

There are two things which gives the Jesus revealed in Revelation 1 the right to assume authority over these churches and to write them these letters.

First of all, He is the church's Lord, and then He is the church's Savior. He is, first of all, the church's Lord. One cannot but read through Revelation to be filled with awe at the majesty and glory of the exalted Jesus.

In verse 5, He's called the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, the kings of the rulers on earth. In verse 8, the Alpha and the Omega, who is and who was and who is to come.

[10 : 14] In verse 17 onwards, He is the first and the last, the living one, the one who was dead but is alive forevermore, the one who holds the keys of death and of Hades.

And then we have the vision of Jesus John received from verse 9 onwards. It's a vision of the exalted Jesus enthroned. How unlike the Jesus John had seen decades before, crucified, dead, and buried.

The Jesus whose face dripped with blood and whose naked body was battered and bruised on the cross. He's described as being like a son of man.

He is clothed with a long robe and there's a golden sash around his chest. Back in the Old Testament prophecy of Daniel, which we're going to look at in the evenings over the summer, there is a mysterious figure called the Ancient of Days, in whom is vested all authority, power, and sovereignty.

And in Revelation 1, the exalted Christ is portrayed as the fulfillment of the image of the Ancient of Days.

[11 : 29] The Lord, the Ancient of Days, to whom has been given universal authority, power, and dominion. And he's wearing this long robe and there's a golden sash around his chest, symbols of the exalted Christ as the priest king of his people.

It's a sash made of liquid gold. It's pure and it's glowing with the radiance of his glory. And the hairs of his head are white like wool, as white as the snow, and his eyes are like a flame of fire.

Again, these are images taken from Daniel's vision of the Ancient of Days, images of infinite purity and authority. His eyes are deepest fire, and they are piercing through the disguises and the masks human beings wear to cover their sin.

Eyes which see beneath the surface and burn away the dross. His feet are like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, again another image of purity.

The church's Lord is altogether free from any impurity, any partiality, any bias. And his voice is like the roar, I prefer, rushing of many waters.

[12 : 49] You've stood beside a massive waterfall, and the roar of the rushing waters is deafening. You can't shut it out. The voice of Christ overwhelms the loudest of human voices.

We might shout, but his whisper is even louder. His divine proclamations triumph over the words of men and shush us into silence.

In a world of clamor and noise and soundbites, clickbait, the church is compelled to listen to her Lord. And in his right hand there are seven stars.

These stars which represent the angels and messengers to his church. He holds them in his right hand of power, authorizing them, empowering them to declare his voice to his church.

And out of his mouth comes a sharp two-edged sword, the sword of his word, the sword of the gospel by which he conquers the nations and brings all humanity under his authority and lordship.

[14 : 04] And then what I've always found to be the greatest of all descriptors, we read, his face was like the sun shining in its full strength. These words should set off bells in our heads.

After all, in the accounts of Jesus' transfiguration, we read that his face was so transformed that it shone like the sun in all its brilliance.

Here is the face we cannot see, the glory of the face which pierces our pretensions and fills us with fearful awe and worshipful reverence.

Have you ever looked directly into the sun? No, nor should you. It would burn your eyes. In the same way, we cannot look directly into the face of the gloriously exalted Lord Christ.

And John fell at his feet as though dead. In verse 20, we read that he walks among the seven golden lampstands, these lampstands representing the seven churches, but at a deeper level, they fulfill the imagery of the Garden of Eden where at the very beginning, God walked with Adam and Eve in the cool of the day.

[15 : 27] These lampstands, they represent the trees of Eden and Jesus, the Lord, is walking with his people, holding as he does the messengers to the seven churches in his right hand of power.

So, these are the pictures of the glory and majesty of Jesus as revealed to the Apostle John. And this is our Lord, the Jesus who alone has authority to write these letters to his churches.

The church is Lord greater than all our enemies. We should not fear for the future of our church when King Jesus walks among us. Rather, we should plead to his protecting and empowering grace so that we should please him in every way and at every time.

He's the church's Lord. But he's also the church's Savior. The church's Savior. Jesus reigns over us as King but also as Savior.

The dedication of this letter, if we may call it that, is stated in the second half of verse 5. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood.

[16 : 44] To him who loves us. Jesus loves his church. For all our sins and for all our weaknesses, he loves us with that self-sacrificial love of which only he is capable and of which he has demonstrated on the cross.

He has freed us from our sins by unlocking the prison doors of our guilt and punishment. He freed us by standing in our place and taking upon himself the punishment our sins deserved, the penalty of eternal death.

He liberated us more surely than Martin Luther King's campaigns freed the African Americans from being second-class citizens. Jesus freed us from the penalty of our sin at the cost of his own lifeblood.

The blood of the exalted Lord of the church whose face shines like the sun in all its brilliance, the lifeblood of the eternal priest-king, Jesus Christ, soaked the ground under the cross at Calvary so that we, his people, could be freed from the penalty and power of sin.

The majesty of Christ over his church is based upon the misery of Christ on behalf of his church.

The cross stands as the backdrop of the lampstand in which the eternal Christ walks.

[18:16] His blood is the life of the church as applied by the Holy Spirit. And as the church gazes at this heavenly vision of Christ, she cannot but recall that it was this Christ who endured the humiliation of Calvary for her to free her from her sins by his blood.

And as we gaze at him, we fall to our knees recognizing that his love for us surely is infinite, eternal, and unchangeable and it cost him everything.

So the living Christ has authority to write these letters to his church by virtue of him being the church's Lord and the church's Savior. When someone tells me what to do, I ask myself, what right has that person got to tell me what to do?

When this Christ commands the church in Ephesus to repent, he has every right to do so. And when this Christ tells the church in Thyatira to hold fast until he comes, he has every right to do so. And when he promises the church in Sardis that they shall be clothed in white garments, he has the power to fulfill his promise. So does he, the church in Smyrna, to which he promises the crown of life.

[19:45] So this is the church's Lord and her Savior. This is the King of the letters. Well, secondly, and more briefly, the letters of the King.

The letters of the King. Jesus orders that John record seven letters each to a particular church in the Roman province of Asia Minor, modern-day western Turkey.

These are the churches of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. We probably know most about the church in Ephesus since it is described to us in the book of Acts.

We have a New Testament letter named after it, the letter of Ephesians, and 1 and 2 Timothy were written to deal with problems in that city church.

But all these churches were situated in prominent towns and cities. We should not think that there were only seven churches in western Turkey in those days.

[20:55] There were many, many more, but these seven act as representatives. The number seven is significant because it represents the perfect number, the number of completion and fullness.

They represent all churches everywhere at all times. Just because the church in Thyatira no longer exists, it does not mean that the letter is now irrelevant.

All churches in all places at all times are represented by these seven churches. At this time in the world, there will be churches which face the same problems the Ephesian church faced.

Others which face the problem the Laodicean church faced. In fact, I'd go as far as to say that every church in its growth and development passes through one or other of these stages, perhaps even them all.

And it reminds us, does it not, there are no perfect churches in our world today. No perfect churches. In our pride, we may think that we belong to the best church or that our church is better than the rest.

[22:12] But the reality is that every church is imperfect in its own ways. We've recently begun talking in the free church about healthy churches and I think that's quite a healthy term.

However, we must be extremely careful about labeling one church healthy and another church unhealthy. Every church is healthy in some ways and unhealthy in other ways.

And what I'm saying is that there's something here for us in Crow Road Free Church in every one of these seven letters. But saying that, all these churches are unique.

They all have their unique strengths and weaknesses. They're found in unique situations. Philadelphia is not Sardis. It's not Thyatira. There may be some teaching in one letter which is immediately more applicable to our situation in Glasgow's West End than if we were in Germany. More applicable in our city than if we lived on the island of Skye. Each letter is different in its own unique way but there are certain similarities between them.

[23 : 28] And if you're taking notes, I've identified nine but I didn't put them up on the board. First of all, they're all written not to the church but to the angel of the church. To the angel of the church in Sardis, to the angel of the church in Pergamum, to the angel of the church in Ephesus.

This is perhaps a reference to the minister or pastor of the church. The man God has called to preach the gospel and to be the messenger of grace to them. It is the pastor, the minister's responsibility to pass on the teaching of these letters to the people God has called him to serve. He is ultimately responsible and accountable for them and their spiritual health. In every age, the minister is to be the messenger of Christ to the church and that's some responsibility.

Secondly, Jesus, as the author of these letters, describes himself using some of the images taken from the vision in chapter 1. For example, to the church in Ephesus, he describes himself as him who holds the seven stars in his right hand who walks among the seven lampstands.

And each description is tailored to the church to which that letter is written and is designed to point to a unique aspect of the exalted Christ which will apply to that church in particular as we'll see as we go through the letters in the coming weeks.

[25 : 02] Thirdly, in every letter, Jesus says, I know. I know. The knowledge of Jesus is complete as a shepherd knows his sheep so Jesus knows his church.

He knows the situations we find himself in. He knows the inner workings of each church. He knows the temptation each church faces and the way in which each church has responded either faithfully or unfaithfully.

It reminds us, does it not, we can hide nothing from Jesus. He can see right through appearances. Fourthly, he knows the good things a church has done.

He knows the good things a church has done. Jesus isn't an austere critic, criticizing us for every precise failure to do what we must.

He knows that in every church there is some good. And like the gentle Savior he is, he fans the flickering embers of our graces into flame.

[26 : 10] And this should encourage us to deeper faithfulness to our Lord knowing that even when he sees one of us give a cup of cold water to someone in need, he knows.

Fifthly, there comes a point in every letter or most of the letters where Jesus says but, but. For example, to the church in Thyatira, having commended the church for its patient endurance, Jesus says but I have this against you, but I have this against you.

If Jesus knows the good things in his church, he also sees the bad things in his church. He knows and sees those areas where this church falls short.

Our Lord doesn't wear rose-tinted spectacles, he sees things which perhaps we wouldn't want him to see. He can see, for example, in the church in Laodicea that we become lukewarm in our zeal for him.

We can't hide these things from him. We mustn't for these are things from which we need to repent.

Sixthly, there is normally some kind of instruction or command, instruction or command.

[27 : 32] For example, at the church in Ephesus, Jesus commands them to remember from where you have fallen, to repent, to do the works you did at first. To the church in Philadelphia, he instructs them, hold fast to what you have so that no one may seize your crown.

It is one thing to point out a problem, it's an even thing, even greater thing to point out a solution and Jesus does both. For us, the solutions to our problems, both from outside and inside, this is important, the solutions to our problems lie in the words of Jesus, the Bible.

They don't lie anywhere else, they lie in our study of the Word of Jesus, the Bible. And that's why the reading, the studying, and the preaching of the Word of God must be central to everything we do as a church.

Seventhly, there's always some kind of warning what will happen if the church continues in its present state of unfaithfulness.

For example, Jesus warns the church in Sardis saying, if you will not wake up, I will come like a thief and you will not know at what hour I will come against you.

[28 : 55] It's not enough for a church to know in what areas it's unhealthy, it must do something about it. Jesus is our Savior and Lord, the King of grace, but we do not dare take Him for granted.

Where are we? Eightly, there's a command to listen, listen. It's a command Jesus often used in the Gospels, especially in the context of the parables, where He was emphasizing to His disciples some aspect of the kingdom of God.

He who has ears to hear, let him hear. In other words, He's saying, listen up, what I'm saying is of first importance, don't just listen with your ears, but engage with what I'm saying with your minds and your hearts and do something with it.

It's a challenge to us as Crow Road Free Church, are we listening to the voice of Jesus today? And lastly, there's a promise, there's always a promise, and the promise itself is usually tailored to the precise situation in which the church finds itself.

Jesus is using words and He's using concepts that they can understand as we'll discover as we go through these letters. For those who persevere in faithfulness, there's a promise, and the value of the promise far exceeds the value of endurance.

[30 : 20] It's like someone saying to you, I'll give you a million pounds if you take your next breath. To the one who conquers, I will grant to eat from the tree of life which is in the paradise of God, Jesus promises the Ephesians.

Very much reminds us of the words of the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 4. This slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison.

These are the King's letters, and what a King we have. The overriding theme of them all is this, the faithfulness of the Lord Jesus to His blood-bought church.

He will do what He must to keep us in the palm of His nail-pierced hands, our faithful King, our loving Savior. And over the next few weeks we're going to explore somewhat the depths of His faithfulness to His church.

The question for us is this, in Revelation Jesus has written to us seven letters. if you had to write seven letters to Jesus today, what would they say?

[31 : 50] Let us pray. Lord God, we thank You for these magnificent, majestic revelations of the glory of Your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Christ, we thank You for His Lordship over the church, the church which He holds in His seven, the church which He holds in His right hand and among whom He walks.

Lord, we're so thrilled at the prospect of exploring more of Your faithfulness to us as we delve into the riches of each of these seven letters and apply them to ourselves.

Give us ears, O Lord, that we may hear what Your Spirit says to Your church. In Jesus' name. Amen.