

LIFE-CHANGING MESSAGES FROM THE RISEN LORD

Could a letter change your life? Many people approach their mailboxes each day hoping to find a letter that will turn everything around--a job offer, a college scholarship, or a financial windfall. Or perhaps, best of all, a love letter.

The book of Revelation contains seven letters from Jesus to His people in Asia. Although they were written to specific churches long ago, they speak powerfully to our hopes, fears, and deepest needs today. Each letter ends with a plea for the reader to hear the message from God's Spirit and take the truth to heart. If we do, we will discover these letters to be our own life-changing messages from the risen Lord.

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WHO'S IT FROM?

It's a familiar ritual in most North American households--the mail arrives and you glance through it. It takes only a few seconds to separate the important from the worthless. You toss many items directly into the wastebasket without bothering to open them. "Junk mail," you mutter, as you search for something more meaningful than another credit-card offer.

According to Direct Marketing magazine, some 2.25 billion pieces of junk mail were delivered in the US in 1992. The same thing is happening in nations around the world.

But what if you find a handwritten envelope bearing a first-class stamp and a familiar return address? Or what about a neatly typed letter you hope brings news of a job interview or a university application? How we treat our mail depends on who the sender is. Our eyes can assess an important item in a flash.

The letters to the seven churches of Revelation come from the risen Christ. They may contain some puzzling phrases, but there is nothing mysterious or obscure about the identity of the sender. The apostle John made it very clear that in his vision on the island of Patmos he saw Jesus Christ and heard His unmistakable voice telling him what to write:

Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades. Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now, and what will take place later (Rev. 1:17-19).

How would you read a letter from someone like that? Someone who was dead but is now alive?

Harry Houdini became world-famous by escaping from impossible situations. He wriggled out of a straitjacket while dangling upside-down from a cable far above the ground, and freed himself from a federal prison cell after being handcuffed, shackled, and chained. But there was one place from which he could not break free.

Houdini promised his wife and friends that if at all possible he would return from the dead. But that promise was never kept. After an unsuccessful attempt to make contact with Harry on October 31, 1936--the 10th anniversary of his death--the magician's wife Bess admitted defeat. "I do not believe that Houdini can come back to me--or to anyone else," she said. "The Houdini Shrine has burned for 10 years. I now, reverently, turn out the light. It is finished."

The author of Revelation alone has the power over death. Others have written books about near-death experiences. Some have been resuscitated after being pronounced "clinically dead" for a few minutes. But only Christ fulfilled His promise to return from the grave.

These letters are the personal communication from One who conquered death so that we might have life. These are life-changing letters from the risen Lord. John is not the author but merely the messenger bearing Christ's words to first-century Christians in Asia Minor and to us, His people, on the threshold of the 21st century.

Seven Letters From The Risen Lord

TO THE DISTRACTED CHURCH IN EPHESUS

Busy, hard-working, doctrinally-correct people who needed to recapture their love for Christ.

When Jesus spoke of the signs of the end of the age, He told His disciples, "Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold" (Mt. 24:12). As the risen Lord spoke to His people at the end of the first century, the cool shadows of the last days were already evident. Jesus praised the Christians at Ephesus for their hard work, perseverance, and endurance. They refused to tolerate ungodly men, and they exposed the false teachers who tried to corrupt their thinking. "Yet," He said, "I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love" (Rev. 2:4). These were busy, enduring, distracted, empty people.

Our work for God can quickly become hollow when passion is replaced by obligation. Love is recommended, but not required, for faithful membership on a church committee. Humorist Garrison Keillor has made the tongue-in-cheek observation that "a strong sense of personal guilt is what makes people willing to serve on committees."

In human relationships, we have all observed or experienced the tragic results of a love grown cold. Interest and intimacy give way to shallow conversation about people and events. Romance is replaced by routine. Life becomes less like a garden and more like a factory. We get used to going through the motions, slowly accepting the monotony as the best we can hope for. Surrounding it all is an atmosphere of profound sadness.

Has that happened in your relationship with Jesus Christ? What has taken His place as your first love? It is frightening to contemplate a once-vibrant union with God that has become distant, emotionless, icy, and impersonal.

In *The Root of the Righteous*, A. W. Tozer writes, "A good way to avoid the snare of empty religious activity is to appear before God every once in a while with our Bibles open to the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians. This passage, though rated one of the most beautiful in the Bible, is also one of the severest to be found in Sacred Writ. The apostle takes the highest religious service and consigns it to futility unless it is motivated by love. Lacking love, prophets, teachers, orators, philanthropists, and martyrs are sent away without reward."

The answer: "Remember the love you once had for Me," said Jesus. "Repent--turn around, come back to Me, change your mind and heart. Do the things you used to do to show your love for Me."

How tragic to have the Lord say of us, "These people come near to Me with their mouth and honor Me with their lips, but their hearts are far from Me" (Isa. 29:13).

Seven Letters From The Risen Lord

TO THE SUFFERING CHURCH IN SMYRNA

Suffering people who needed to conquer fear and remain faithful.

There is no call for repentance given to the Christians in Smyrna. They were under attack and needed encouragement to resist the deadly paralysis of imagining the future and wondering how they could possibly cope with what tomorrow might hold.

"Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer," Jesus told them. "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 the crown of life" (2:10).

After the shock of being told he had leukemia and then undergoing a week of treatments, 15-year-old Douglas Maurer sank into a deep depression. When one of his aunts ordered flowers for him, she asked the young florist to make the display especially nice. "It's for my teenage nephew who has leukemia," she told the clerk over the phone.

When the flowers arrived in Douglas' hospital room, he found a handwritten card in the basket:

Douglas--I took your order. I work at Brix Florist. I had leukemia when I was 7 years old. I'm 22 years old now. Good luck. My heart goes out to you. Sincerely, Laura Bradley.

Writing about this incident, columnist Bob Greene said, "Douglas Maurer was in a hospital filled with millions of dollars of the most sophisticated equipment. He was being treated by expert doctors and nurses with medical training totaling in the hundreds of years. But it was a salesclerk in a flower shop, a woman making \$170 a week, who--by taking the time to care--gave Douglas hope and the will to carry on."

Why? Because she had faced the same situation he was facing and had overcome.

When Jesus Christ says to us, "Don't be afraid of what you are about to suffer" and links our persecution directly to our allegiance to Him, He speaks as One who has been there. In the pages of Scripture, we can observe but never fully comprehend Jesus' agony as He faced the cross. In Gethsemane, while His exhausted friends slept, Jesus fell on His face before His Father, praying and pleading for another way. With full knowledge of what was ahead, Jesus willingly embraced His Father's will.

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider Him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart (Heb. 12:2-3).

On a recent radio program, a woman described the caustic comments directed at her by her boss because she kept a Bible on her desk at work and often voiced her Christian beliefs in lunch-hour discussions. Many of her Christian friends had urged her to file a religious harassment suit against her employer.

What an unusual period of history in which we live! For most of the history of the Christian church, believers have not enjoyed the legal protection given to citizens of many nations today. Just the opposite was true. A professor of New Testament studies once said that if we live in a time of peace and protection with free exercise of our Christian beliefs, we should do three things: (1) Thank God for it. (2) Accept it as being abnormal for followers of Christ. (3) Make the most of our present opportunities, using each day to memorize Scripture and spiritually prepare for the time when we may face persecution for our Christian faith.

In certain instances, Paul's Roman citizenship afforded him a measure of protection as he preached the gospel throughout the empire. But that protection didn't keep him out of prison or guarantee that he wouldn't be executed. Yet Paul continued to proclaim the message of Christ boldly. Writing from confinement in Rome, he asked the Christians in Ephesus to pray "that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains" (Eph. 6:19-20).

To the suffering church in Smyrna, Jesus said, "Do not be afraid . . . Be faithful" (Rev. 2:10).

Seven Letters From The Risen Lord

TO THE COMPROMISING CHURCH PERGAMUM

Bold, faithful people who could not be silenced by intimidation, but who were in danger of being silenced by their own compromise and corruption.

What's the most threatening place to live that you can imagine?

An inner-city housing project with daylight drug deals, shootings, and domestic violence as a way of life?
A town in Bosnia-Herzegovina battered by daily artillery fire and ripped apart by ethnic hatred?
A village in Rwanda where the skeletons of unburied corpses litter the ground after each tribal massacre?
What would it be like to begin each day wondering if it would be your last? The Christians of Pergamum had remained strong in the face of powerful external threats. Jesus commended them for remaining true to Him and not renouncing their faith even when a faithful witness named Antipas was executed in their city, "where Satan has his throne" (Rev. 2:13).

Their greatest threat was not external, however. It was a subtle system of thought within their own fellowship which Jesus identified as "the teaching of Balaam." Most people remember Balaam as the frustrated Old Testament character who was reprimanded by his donkey (Num. 22:21-35).

But the story of Balaam goes on to chronicle an insidious deception that threatened to destroy God's people even as they were poised to enter the Promised Land.

When God wouldn't let the prophet curse the nation of Israel, Balaam tried another strategy. He sensed that a people who couldn't be cursed could be corrupted. The prophet skirted the letter of God's command by advising the King of Moab to have his women invite the Israelite men to their pagan feasts. What could be wrong with sampling the local culture? The tie was strengthened through immoral sexual relationships, and soon the men of Israel were proposing marriage to the women of Moab. The whole sad affair is recorded in Numbers 25.

Among the strong Christians at Pergamum were some who had embraced a doctrine that legitimized sexual behavior that had previously been prohibited. Under the guise of freedom, they were being enslaved. The doctrine of grace was given a twist that turned liberty into license.

A people who had been strong in the face of persecution were unthinkingly caving in to the temptations of their culture. Resilient to external threats, they became careless with their own character.

Seven Letters From The Risen Lord

TO THE CORRUPT CHURCH IN THYATIRA

People of growing love, faith, service, and perseverance who were not taking a stand against false teaching and immorality.

I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess. By her teaching she misleads My servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols (Rev. 2:20).

Tolerate--what an interesting word. Jesus is saying, in effect, "You put up with, allow, shut your eyes to, wink at, permit a teacher to lead Christians into immorality."

Jezebel was probably not the woman's real name, but it must have fit her character. The risen Christ must have seen something in this woman's behavior that linked her to Queen Jezebel, wife of Ahab, the seventh king of Israel.

Jezebel is synonymous with evil. Like Judas of the New Testament, she ruined her given name forever. As the queen of Israel, she used deceit, slander, and even murder to get what she wanted--and to help her weak-willed

husband get what he wanted (1 Ki. 21). Ahab, like the church at Thyatira, was confronted by God because he tolerated and even profited from the evil brashness of Jezebel.

Jezebel was strong enough to send shivers down the spine of a prophet. Anyone who crossed her knew he was in for trouble. Even the mighty prophet Elijah feared her threats of retaliation (1 Ki. 18-19). After praying fire down from heaven and slaughtering 450 prophets of Baal, Elijah showed his fear of Jezebel. When she threatened to take his life in the same way he had killed her prophets, Elijah ran all the way from Mount Carmel in central Israel to a cave in Egypt.

It's not a simple matter to confront evil people, even though we sense that others are being drawn into their web of deceit. Such persons are not bound by principles of decency. When attacked, they will, like Jezebel, turn with a vengeance on those who expose them. They have no fear of God to restrain them. They feed off the lust of their followers and on the blood and fears of their challengers.

It was just such a Jezebel who had been leading Thyatiran Christians into sexual immorality and the worship of a false God.

While we cannot be certain about what was happening in Thyatira, it's interesting that archeologists digging in the ruins of that city have discovered evidence of a well-organized system of trade guilds. These were societies of tradesmen organized to protect their common interests. Through group pressure, they exercised influence in the community. So significant were these associations in Thyatira that it would have been hard for a tradesman to carry on business in this city if he hadn't cooperated.

Christians in such a setting would have found themselves faced with the cost of doing business in a pagan society. Historians tell us that membership in these unions meant attendance at guild banquets, which involved eating meat offered to idols and exposure to pagan sexual practices.

It's possible that the Jezebel of Thyatira convinced some Christian professionals that it was better to compromise with the system than to go broke. Since she claimed to be "a prophetess," she undoubtedly claimed that the doctrine of Christian grace would allow for men of the church to adopt sexual and spiritual compromise as a means of protecting their business interests.

The church of Thyatira was not willing to expose this woman. Some may have feared arousing the anger of this Jezebel. Others may have lacked the moral conscience and strength necessary to confront the presence of evil. Still others may have bought into the argument that it is not so bad to enter into pleasures that were once thought wrong.

Times have changed, but not the moral and spiritual shadows that silently and slowly creep up on us. In a U.S. News & World Report editorial, Mortimer B. Zuckerman said, "Three out of every four Americans think we are in moral and spiritual decline. Social dysfunction haunts the land: crime and drug abuse, the breakup of the family, the slump in academic performance, the disfigurement of public places by druggies, thugs, and exhibitionists. Are we now . . . 'defining deviancy down,' accepting as part of life what we once found repugnant?" (8/8/94).

Are we in danger of becoming like the frog placed in a pan of cool water over a small flame? The same frog who would leap out of scalding water is quite content to be gradually boiled to death, never realizing that it needs to jump.

There are some telling statements about our flirtation with immorality in C. S. Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters*. Since the letters are written by an emissary of the devil, God is identified as the Enemy:

Never forget that when we are dealing with any pleasure in its healthy and normal and satisfying form, we are, in a sense, on the Enemy's ground. I know we have won many a soul through pleasure. All the same, it is His invention, not ours. . . . All we can do is encourage the humans to take the pleasures which our Enemy has produced, at times, or in ways, or in degrees which He has forbidden. . . . An ever-increasing craving for an ever-diminishing pleasure is the formula. . . . Everything has to be twisted before it's any use to us (pp.41-42,102).

What line of reasoning am I tolerating in my life that is just as sinister as the teaching of Balaam or the Jezebel of this passage? Am I allowing sexual immorality an open door by viewing sexually explicit materials or devaluing the reality of my present marriage in favor of an imagined future with another spouse?

False teaching leads to destructive behavior, but the line of wrong thinking rarely begins as a clearly identifiable external threat.

Seven Letters From The Risen Lord

TO THE LIFELESS CHURCH IN SARDIS

Image-conscious people whose actions didn't match their reputation.

While all the other letters begin with a commendation for faith, service, or perseverance, the Lord told these people bluntly, "You have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead" (Rev. 3:1). They had started well enough to earn the respect of other churches. They still looked good on the surface, but internally, life had ceased. It reminds us of Jesus' indictment of the Pharisees:

You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness (Mt. 23:27-28).

How easy it is to settle for the approval of others, to be so preoccupied with what people think of us that we cease to be useful to God. Oswald Chambers said, "We are only what we are in the dark; all the rest is reputation. What God looks at is what we are in the dark--the imaginations of our minds; the thoughts of our heart; the habits of our bodies; these are the things that mark us in God's sight."

What does God see when He looks at me today? He looks past my outward appearance, which I spend so much time preparing for the eyes of people. What does God see in my heart? Does He see a heart beating with honest love for God and an active interest in the well-being of others?

According to an article in the International Herald Tribune, "At least fourteen living persons are among the 58,175 dead and missing whose names are inscribed on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C." Apparently the errors occurred when clerks typed the wrong numbers into a computer. Eugene J. Toni, one of the fourteen, said that seeing his name etched in the Memorial's black granite was "kind of scary . . . like seeing your name on a gravestone."

If the government tells me I'm deceased when I'm not, that's a minor inconvenience. If the risen Christ pronounces me spiritually dead, that's a serious problem.

Yet for the believers in Sardis there was a ray of hope. "Wake up!" Jesus told them. "Strengthen what remains and is about to die . . . Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent" (Rev. 3:2-3).

The praise for the church at Sardis was withheld from the majority of people and given to "a few . . . who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with Me, dressed in white, for they are worthy" (Rev. 3:4). Revelation 19:8 says, "Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints."

Christlike character and action is not the dress of choice in the human scheme of life. Popular culture assembles lists of the Ten Best-Dressed, Worst-Dressed, and Sexiest people, but it is difficult to imagine widespread interest in people who spend time and money "clothing" themselves in actions that are pleasing to the eyes of God.

God values actions more than words and appearances. He is looking for people who are doing things and going places in behalf of the kingdom of His Son. He is looking for those who have dressed themselves in the fresh, clean clothes of mercy, compassion, and patience. In the midst of the Christians in Sardis, there were a few who, by their Christlike walk and actions, had earned the praise of God.

Seven Letters From The Risen Lord

TO THE FAITHFUL CHURCH IN PHILADELPHIA

Obedient, faithful people who needed to stand strong.

I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept My Word and have not denied My name (Rev. 3:8). At a recent Christian college baccalaureate service, one of the three student speakers received a stirring ovation as she approached the platform--on crutches. Her muscular disability was well-known to students and faculty who had watched her struggle to climb stairs, use the library, and eat in the dining hall--things that were effortless for most of her peers. By refusing to yield to her physical weakness, she had inspired hope in those who took their healthy bodies for granted.

How much strength does it take to courageously follow Christ? Paul's lingering physical problems caused him to say:

I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong (2 Cor. 12:9-10).

How often we turn for encouragement to the beautiful words of Isaiah:

He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint (Isa. 40:29-31).

"I know that you have little strength," Jesus told His people in Philadelphia, "yet you have kept My Word and have not denied My name" (Rev. 3:8).

In 1975, a Japanese housewife from the suburbs of Tokyo became the first woman to reach the summit of Mt. Everest. Junko Tabei was 35 years old, stood 4'11" tall, and had helped raise money for her expedition by giving piano lessons in her home after school.

Other Everest climbers have described the kind of strength it takes to tackle the world's highest mountain. "Above 26,000 feet, it's 90-percent mental and 10-percent physical" says Barry Bishop, who was one of the first Americans to climb Everest. "Who gets to the summit and who doesn't is a question of whose mind-set is ready for it." According to Glenn Porzak, another American who has climbed Everest, "Tenacity is the most important skill."

"I am coming soon," Jesus promised the little-strength Christians in Philadelphia. "Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown" (3:11). If you're feeling that you cannot go on in your walk with Christ, take heart from this life-changing letter from your risen Lord.

Seven Letters From The Risen Lord

TO THE LUKEWARM CHURCH IN LAODICEA

Materially-wealthy people plagued by spiritual poverty and indecision.

Jesus Christ had a markedly different opinion of the Laodicean Christians than they had of themselves. They thought everything was fine. Jesus said that nothing was right. They believed they were on top of the world. Jesus knew they were in desperate trouble. They could not see themselves as they really were. Jesus saw past their make-believe and read them like a spiritual CT scan.

You say, "I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing." But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked. I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see (Rev. 3:17-18).

Their life may have been filled with exciting material things, but they were spiritually insipid--lifeless and dull. The word lukewarm appears only once in Scripture (v.16). It describes the state of the Laodicean church, "which afforded no refreshment to the Lord, such as is ministered naturally by either cold or hot water" (W. E. Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words).

These people had forgotten that they had a mission. They did not exist for themselves, but for the honor of God and the good of others. They weren't just to be good, but to be good for something.

They were a golden lampstand, designed by God to be a light in the dark (Rev. 1:20). They were to be light and salt in the world around them. And the only way they could do that was to follow the lead of their Lord, who set aside His own interests in order to go to their rescue (Phil. 2:1-13).

Without realizing it, these Christians in Laodicea had fallen into the root sin of Sodom. By soaking in God's goodness for themselves and failing to be good for others, they stood in the shadow of a community of people notorious for their self-absorbed way of life. Of them the prophet Ezekiel said:

Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed, and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy. They were haughty and did detestable things before Me. Therefore I did away with them as you have seen (Ezek. 16:49-50).

The people of Sodom were arrogant, overfed, and unconcerned about the poor and needy. Jesus loved the Laodiceans, even though they were acting like the people of Sodom. And because He did, He affirmed the hard truth with which we often struggle today, "Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline" (Rev. 3:19).

A man once described his relationship with his stepfather by saying, "He was a kind man, but I never thought of him as my real father because he never disciplined me."

In an age where the courts have been called on to draw the line between spanking and child abuse, people find it difficult to accept the idea that punishment can be motivated by love. In addition, we may have lost our ability to accept the Bible's illustration of parental discipline as a picture of how God treats His children.

Hebrews 12:5-6 introduces a landmark presentation of God's discipline with these words:

You have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when He rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those He loves, and He punishes everyone He accepts as a son."

It's not hard to understand why we've forgotten that "word of encouragement." The number of children living without fathers in the US has quadrupled since 1950. In 1994, 24 percent of American children lived in mother-only families.

David Blankenhorn, president of the Institute for American Family Values and author of the book *Fatherless in America: Confronting Our Most Urgent Social Problem*, says, "Fatherlessness is the most harmful demographic trend of our generation."

Literally millions of people in the world today have no experience of a human father who administered loving discipline for their good. We are called on to accept, by faith alone, the Bible's affirmation that God's discipline of His children is loving, perfect, and in our best interest.

God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in His holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it (Heb. 12:10-11).

Why would a loving heavenly Father allow pain in the lives of His children whom He loves? "Because the Lord disciplines those He loves, and He punishes everyone He accepts as a son" (Heb. 12:6).

That's hard truth for a soft age--hard truth for the soft Laodiceans, who had lost sight of themselves and the Lord who loved them.

A LIFE-CHANGING PATTERN FOR PROGRESS

A quick glance at any newspaper or magazine reveals that a large segment of our economy is devoted to helping ordinary people achieve lasting, meaningful, positive change.

"Lose those unwanted pounds and keep them off!"

"Stop smoking today and never start again!"

"Find the job you really want and keep it!"

You could find a dozen more ads in the morning paper. They are there because people find it difficult to change. Some people have become discouraged by trying and slipping back so often that they have dismissed the possibility of change--for themselves and perhaps for someone they love. "Forget it," they mutter. "This is just the way I am."

Part of our alternating hope/despair relationship with change stems from our search for an event rather than a process. We want a big, noticeable, certified turning point in our lives where we can say, "Look! I've done it. I'm a new person." In reality, it rarely happens that way. Even the miracle moment of Christian conversion in which "the old has gone, the new has come" (2 Cor. 5:17) is a point on a continuum of moving toward Christ and going on with Him.

Daniel J. Boorstin, a writer and critical thinker, has said, "The true watersheds in human affairs are seldom spotted quickly amid the tumult of headlines broadcast on the hour. History rarely shows its hand swiftly" (U.S. News & World Report, 4/22/91).

The destruction of the Berlin Wall in 1989 symbolized the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe. Five years after that dramatic event, Bulgarian President Zhelyu Zhelev said, "We thought that the changes would come about more quickly, much more easily. . . . Alas, reality turned out to be cruel and much more severe, and now we are paying the price for our own illusions" (Wall Street Journal, 12/22/94).

We need beginnings, but they must be followed by a process that produces lasting change. The Scripture offers great encouragement by giving us many pictures of small beginnings that brought about momentous change.

Jesus likened the kingdom of heaven to a mustard seed--"the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree" (Mt. 13:32).

Jesus told His disciples, "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you" (Mt. 17:20).

Elijah's seven sessions of fervent prayer for drought-ending rain produced only "a cloud as small as a man's hand" (1 Ki. 18:41-45). Yet it was followed by torrential rain.

Small beginnings--far-reaching change.

Shift your thoughts for a moment from the content of Christ's letters to the seven churches to the construction of the letters. Have you noticed a pattern followed by our Lord in addressing each church? In their very structure, the letters provide a prescription and a process for change.

1. THE CHARACTER OF CHRIST--WHO HE IS.

Each letter begins with a reminder of who is writing and a statement about His authority and power. For example, these are the words of:

"Him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again" (Rev. 2:8).

"Him who has the sharp, double-edged sword" (Rev. 2:12).

"Him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David" (Rev. 3:7).

Jesus Christ Himself is always our standard. If we are to change and make progress in this life, we must focus on Him, not on ourselves or each other.

2. COMMENDATION OF THE PEOPLE--WHO THEY ARE.

Throughout these letters to His churches, the Lord Jesus Christ reiterates these themes: "I know who you are. I know what you have done. I know where you live. I know what you've been through, what you face today, and what lies ahead on your road through life."

When our families, friends, and co-workers don't understand who we are and what we are trying to do as followers of Christ, the Lord's words bring encouragement and challenge:

"I know your deeds, your hard work, and your perseverance" (Rev. 2:2).

"I know your afflictions and your poverty" (Rev. 2:9).

"I know where you live--where Satan has his throne" (Rev. 2:13).

"I know your deeds, your love and faith" (Rev. 2:19).

"I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead" (Rev. 3:1).

"I know your deeds. . . . that you have little strength, yet you have kept My Word and have not denied My name" (Rev. 3:8).

"I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot" (Rev. 3:15).

What a relief to meet Someone who knows us as we are. There's no need to pretend. There's nothing to hide. Everything is out on the table. Psychiatrists often spend months establishing a bond of trust with a patient before the troubled person will share his deepest secrets. Jesus knows our hearts and our secrets even before we open our mouths to tell Him.

How significant that the Samaritan woman with a sordid past who met Jesus at the well in Sychar (Jn. 4:1-30) went rushing back to her village, saying, "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did" (v.29).

3. CORRECTION OF THE PEOPLE--THEIR SHORTCOMINGS.

"Yet, I hold this against you . . ." When someone asked country preacher Vance Havner what he was trying to accomplish with his sermons, he replied, "Two things: Comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable!"

Few of us are ignorant of our failings. When Christ speaks His word of correction to us, it rings true with what we already know of ourselves. The Great Physician begins with a precise diagnosis of our condition.

For the most part, we don't want to be told of our shortcomings. We often respond to the comments of friends and family by saying, "I don't want to hear it." And that's our privilege, even with the Savior. But unless we are willing to listen to the voice of Jesus, we will never move toward significant change as His people.

4. COMMAND FOR THE PEOPLE--ACTION THEY NEED TO TAKE.

In medicine, diagnosis is an important beginning, but it is not enough. The relief at being told the nature of a troubling ailment will quickly disappear if we must face the dreaded words inoperable, untreatable, no known cure. But Jesus is never stymied by a spiritual condition that has no cure.

In these letters, Christ's correction is followed by a command:

"Repent and do the things you did at first" (Rev. 2:5; cp. 2:16; 3:19).

"Be faithful, even to the point of death" (Rev. 2:10).

"Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die" (Rev. 3:2).

"Hold on to what you have" (Rev. 2:25; 3:11).

Will we obey His commands? Will we continue to follow them after the initial crisis is over? Studies show that a surprisingly high percentage of patients do not follow their doctor's instructions to take all of their prescribed medicine over a period of time. When an antibiotic brings relief from an ear infection or fever in a day or so, the capsules go in the medicine cabinet. The doctor prescribed a process and the patient was satisfied with an event. How quickly we forget after the emergency has passed.

5. CONSEQUENCES OF THEIR ACTIONS--RESULTS OF DISOBEDIENCE.

The difference between a 2-year-old and a terrorist is that you can sometimes negotiate with a terrorist. If you've ever faced a little person with folded arms and furrowed brow who said, "What if I don't?" you know the importance of spelling out and carrying out the consequences of defiance.

We can conclude from Christ's letters to the churches that if we don't repent of our sin we are in jeopardy. Popular culture may advocate a casual acquaintance with "the Man upstairs," but the Bible says, "The Lord will judge His people. It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb. 10:30-31). How often do we grapple with this truth individually? Have we ever assembled to pray about it collectively in our local church congregations?

6. CALL TO OVERCOME--PROMISE FOR OBEDIENCE.

Every letter contains a promise for the person who overcomes. Each promise points to a future reward in heaven with Christ. Being people of the moment, chained to the here and now, we fail to comprehend the magnitude of these promises. Will it take persecution and earthly loss to tune our spiritual senses to hear what Christ is saying here?

"To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God" (Rev. 2:7, Ephesus).

"He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death" (Rev. 2:11, Smyrna).

"To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it" (Rev. 2:17, Pergamum).

"To him who overcomes and does My will to the end, I will give authority over the nations . . . I will also give him the morning star" (Rev. 2:26-28, Thyatira).

"He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before My Father and His angels" (Rev. 3:5, Sardis).

"Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of My God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on him 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 him My new name" (Rev. 3:12, Philadelphia).

"To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with Me on My throne, just as I overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne" (Rev. 3:21, Laodicea).

Some people have been troubled by these words, feeling that if they fail to overcome, their salvation will be taken from them. I believe the Bible teaches that our eternal security is in God's hands, not our own. Paul said, "I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him for that day" (2 Tim. 1:12).

At the same time, I sense the enormous responsibility Christ has given me for faithful service. Perhaps the answer lies in considering the past, present, and future aspects of overcoming.

Overcoming In The Past. When Christ died on the cross, He shouted, "It is finished!" (Jn. 19:30). With those words, He proclaimed a victory over Satan, sin, and death. In a strange and miraculous way, every person who turns to Christ in repentance and faith shares in that victory.

This is love for God: to obey His commands. And His commands are not burdensome, for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God (1 Jn. 5:3-5).

Overcoming In The Present. There seems to be no earthly parallel to illustrate the truth that although the spiritual war has been won by Jesus, the battle still rages today. And because it does, the Bible is filled with military imagery urging us to put on the full armor of God (Eph. 6:10-18) and to serve as good soldiers of Jesus Christ (2 Tim. 2:3-4). Romans 12 ends with the challenge, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (v.21). In our present circumstances, we are called to be obedient, to be faithful, and not to give up. "Be strong in the Lord and in His mighty power" (Eph. 6:10).

Overcoming In The Future. The book of Revelation speaks of a final cataclysmic battle in which we will be led to victory by Christ. While scholars may not agree on just how and when that battle will occur, the conclusion is clear--believers in Christ will overcome (Rev. 19:11-20:10).

Revelation 12:11 speaks of those who overcame Satan "by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony." And Revelation 17:14 says that "the Lamb will overcome [those who make war against Him] because He is Lord of lords and King of kings--and with Him will be His called, chosen, and faithful followers."

Overcoming, then, has past, present, and future aspects. We can overcome only through the blood of Christ and His work on the cross. In that sense, it is not a victory we win for ourselves. Christ has done it all.

Yet there is an aspect of overcoming that grows out of our response to Christ. "This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith" (1 Jn. 5:4). As we obey His commands and remain faithful to Him, no matter what happens, we overcome.

Remember the context of the letters to the seven churches. They had done well in the past; they were commended for their perseverance and faithful service. Much had been gained. But much remained to be done. In Christ, they had already overcome. In Christ, they were to keep on overcoming.

7. CONCLUSION--HEAR THE MESSAGE.

Any parent or teacher knows that a child can look directly at you as you speak and never hear a word you say. As adults, we retain the same frightening capacity to listen without hearing.

The risen Christ concludes each letter with the same call: "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (Rev. 2:7,11,17,29; 3:6,13,22).

The command is not to read the letter to your church and rejoice that God has finally put His finger on the sins of all those other people. Since all seven letters were written on one scroll that was sent to all the churches (Rev. 1:11), the Christians in Asia Minor were apparently expected to read each other's mail! And in reading, they were called to listen with their hearts to the voice of the Holy Spirit.

Can a person really change? Can destructive habits and thoughts be replaced with new life-giving behavior? Are we doomed to repeat the patterns of the past? Absolutely not! In Jesus, there is hope for liberation.

Recall the construction of these letters. The Seven Cs: (1) character of Christ, (2) commendation, (3) correction, (4) command, (5) consequences, (6) call to overcome and promised reward, (7) conclusion--to hear what the Spirit says.

Doesn't God deal with us according to this same design? He begins with who He is and who we are, and carries us through a process of encouragement and correction to make us the people He wants us to be.

The Lord told the Christians at Philadelphia, "I am coming soon" (Rev. 3:11). The book of Revelation opens and closes with a sense of immediacy and urgency. "The time is near" (1:3), "Yes, I am coming soon" (22:20).

There is an axiom that most of us follow unconsciously throughout our lives: Proximity equals influence. The closer we perceive an event to be, the more attention we devote to it. Its corollary is this: Distance breeds disinterest. The farther away it is, the less inclined we are to deal with it.

Take tax returns, for example. Every American knows that a return must be filed by midnight on April 15. By law, the information that is needed for our return must be mailed to us by January 30. But distance breeds disinterest.

A few returns dribble in during the month of February. March brings in the efforts of some highly organized people. By April 1, it becomes a frequent topic of conversation. But on the night of April 15, the US Postal Service has to station people outside post offices in major cities to receive the tax returns of multiplied thousands of people who rush downtown trying to beat the midnight deadline. Proximity equals influence.

But how can we believe that the second coming of Christ is near when He spoke of coming "soon" almost 2,000 years ago? We find Peter's words so appropriate: "In the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, 'Where is this "coming" He promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation'" (2 Pet. 3:3-4).

What we must remember is that proximity is defined by the person in charge who knows the present location and the ultimate destination.

I wonder if your family vacations with young children were anything like ours. Before we passed the city limit sign, the kids had removed their shoes, which promptly disappeared into a black hole in the back seat of the car. A few hours down the road I'd say, "We're stopping for gasoline and a bathroom break in 5 minutes. Get your shoes on." The announcement was usually ignored until we actually stopped and everyone padded barefoot into the gas station because their shoes absolutely could not be located.

The next few hours were punctuated by frequent questions about how much longer we had to drive. Sometimes I answered in hours or miles or one of those nebulous parental phrases such as "a long time."

On our 15-hour journeys to visit the grandparents, I started feeling close when we were still 3 hours away. My answers changed from "a long time" to "just around the corner" or as my Dad used to say to me, "two whoops and a holler." I knew exactly how far we had come and how far we had to go. From my perspective, we were getting close.

Perhaps it was a change in my voice when I said, "Hey, everybody. Get your shoes on, we're almost there." Maybe it was the children's own sense of nearness. Shoes were suddenly found and the kids were poised to run for their grandparents' house before we pulled in the driveway.

"I am coming soon," Jesus tells us. We are to accept His measure of proximity and act accordingly because only He knows how far we have come and how far we have to go. Whether the world around us is at peace or in chaos, we are to believe our Lord when He tells us that "the time is near."

The letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor were not junk mail. They were then, and are today, life-changing messages from the risen Lord. In speaking to the churches, Jesus speaks to each believer. His words are to you and to me.

Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will go in and eat with him, and he with Me (Rev. 3:20).

Jesus knocks at the door of our hearts today, longing for us to open every part of our lives to Him, our Creator and Savior. He wants to make our lives different by the gift of His presence and His love.

"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (2:7,11,17,29; 3:6,13,22).