

Walking With the Father Through Revelation 1-4

Over the years, I've found my life changing and my faith deepening as I meet with our heavenly Father in His word. This has been especially true as I've been writing these devotionals and having to live what I write.

I long for you to be able to say the same as you read through this letter.

As I've gotten to know Paul, James, Peter, Jude, and John through their letters, I'm overwhelmed by how they were changed by knowing and walking with their Lord. How much they must have longed for us to know Him as they did.

As John wrote in 1 John 2:3-6, he wants us to walk as Jesus did and believed that it was absolutely possible to do so. So how did Jesus walk? That's one secret our Father shares with us.

Blessings on your time as we take another walk with the Father,

Margie Martin

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Letters to the Seven Churches

These first chapters about the seven churches provide a backdrop for how believers were living at the time—the highs and the lows. Their examples can be a wake-up call for us or can encourage us to persevere. Two churches were doing well, but five churches received pointed warnings from Jesus.

Jesus gave John this insight (Revelation 1:1-2) while John was imprisoned at a Roman hard-labor penal colony on the island of Patmos. The believers may have viewed John's banishment as a horrible event, but from it we have this wonderful letter. John would have received this revelation in A.D. 95 or 96.

What would the New Testament be without Revelation? If the last letters we had were 2 Peter, John's letters, and Jude, we'd wonder if Christianity would endure.

Revelation acts as a transition from *now* to *what will be* just as Acts transitions us from the Gospels to life in the Spirit. In the Gospels we see the babe in the manger, the good shepherd, the teacher of the disciples, the model of humility, and the Son of God who died on the cross. The apostles' letters lay out the deep significance of the resurrected Christ and what He accomplished.

Revelation shows Jesus Christ from a totally new perspective: He is the mighty ruler of all. He fights the final fight and wins. His enemies are defeated, and His followers are vindicated. When John sees him in this exalted state, he falls at Jesus' feet as though dead. (Revelation 1:17) But John didn't stay on his face. Jesus raised him up and showed him what is to come, and John came back to tell us.

(The insights in this introduction come from the New International Version Student Bible, author's notes on pages 1348 and 1350.)

The churches John wrote to were in a large circle, probably on a postal road, which is in modern day Turkey.



As you spend time in this letter, please take the time to talk with our Father about what He's showing you so you're not just gathering information. As you pray, you can use the space on each page to journal your thoughts or write Him a note.

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Revelation 1:1-20

“Blessed are those who hear [the words of this prophesy] and take to heart what is written, because the time is near.”

Originally I hadn't planned on including Revelation, but as I was reviewing my third devotional on the men who knew Jesus, something was missing. Commentators mention that John's warnings to the seven churches provide background for Peter, John, and Jude's warnings—the conditions we can all *slide* into if Christianity becomes a habit. So let's take a look at these churches and learn from them.

How the apostles' hearts must have grieved as they watched the second generation of believers complicate a walk of faith. False teachers were leading believers down unhealthy paths. The apostles couldn't be everywhere, and they were getting older. What hope did the church have?

So Jesus sent John to the island of Patmos to show him what was going to happen and Who was going to make it happen. A messenger from each of the churches came to see how John was doing. They returned with Jesus' evaluation of how they were living and the truth that Jesus *will* return, triumph over evil, and make new all that has been, even though humanity is in a state of decay.

Here are the details John gives us in this first chapter:

- God gave the revelation to Jesus Christ so He could show His servants (us) what must soon take place.
- Jesus made the revelation known through His messenger, an angel.
- John testified to everything he saw (and heard): the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ.
- Blessed (happy) are those who read the words of this prophesy, hear it, and take to heart what is written, because the time is near.
- God had a message for the seven churches in Asia.
- John got the revelation on the Lord's Day (Sundays honor Jesus' resurrection); did John have the day off from hard labor? Probably not!
- John saw a whole new view of Jesus: the blazing supernatural being whose very presence knocked John to the ground, the Creator of this world who will someday return to re-create—to make new—all that humanity has spoiled.
- This resurrected Jesus told John not to be afraid and that He is alive forever and holds the keys of death and Hades.

How are you living today—in the despair of today and how the world is going *OR* in the confident hope that Jesus will make all things right in His time and in His way, regardless of what happens until then? Time to *take to heart* what we've read?

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Revelation 2:1-7

Ephesus—the Loveless Church

“Repent and do the things you did at first”

It's so easy to start strong with Jesus in our faith walk since we know what we've been saved *from*, but then we get caught up in all the to-do's we think we need to do and so forget about our first love. This dilemma is what happened to the church at Ephesus. They started out strong when Paul came to them, but as the second generation of believers came into spiritual adulthood, they kept the form of Christianity but not its heart. Here is what they were known for:

- Good deeds
- Couldn't tolerate wicked men
- Perseverance
- Hard work
- Tested those claiming to be apostles
- Endured hardships for Jesus' name
- Found the false ones
- Hadn't grown weary

But Jesus has been walking in their midst (2:1) and knew that they were doing all of their good works without Him. They'd forsaken Him, their first love, and left this love relationship.

Jesus appreciated what they'd done but wanted them to do what was more important and what would last. He wanted them to understand how they were currently living and then repent, turn 180°, and return to Him. He wanted them to do the things they did at first—love Him and love others. He wanted them to soften their hearts and return to Him.

What will happen if they don't repent? He'll remove their church from being a light to those around them.

But if they did repent, if they did hear what the Spirit was saying, if they stopped living life on their own strength and concentrating on externals (no matter how good the externals were), Jesus would give them the right to eat from the tree of life. This tree was in Eden, the land God created for Adam and Eve, and was the tree God kept them from eating at the end of Genesis 3 so they wouldn't have to live forever in a fallen state. If they turned back to Him, Jesus said they could be with Him forever.

Oh my, so how we live up to the end of our lives does make a difference. The only way we can live with Jesus forever is to keep Him as our first love and live as we did when we first came to know Him. Adding complexity and hierarchy to a life of faith will hurt rather than help us.

Has Jesus been walking around your life today? What would He say to you?

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Revelation 2:8-11

Smyrna—the Persecuted Church

“These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again.”

When you're in a hard situation that you can't change, what do you wish for? Personally, I want to know that someone knows the whole situation and is powerful enough to be able to do something about it in a way that brings life for me and those involved.

I think Jesus is telling us today that He's this kind of person: He's not limited by time and space because He knows the beginning and the end and everything in between. He's powerful enough to break the hold that death has over all of us and is alive and active now.

This truth is what Jesus wants the church in Smyrna to remember before He reveals what's going to happen. Perhaps Jesus knows that you need to hear this truth today; He sure knows I do! So here's their situation and what's ahead for them:

- Afflictions
- Poverty
- Prison
- Persecution
- Slander

That's their bad news; how would you describe your bad news today? But Jesus doesn't leave them (or us) there. He gives them His perspective of their current situation and brings them hope for the future. He tells them that while they may see themselves as poor in this world, they are actually rich. He tells them that if they remain faithful, even to the point of death, He will give them the crown of life and won't be hurt at all by the second death (first death is physical; second death is being separated from God forever).

What pathway is God asking you to walk with Him these days? It's all too easy to think that if life gets hard God must not be working. But maybe the hard times are when He's *really* working because that's when we really need Him to be able to endure. Maybe He wants us to walk in the valley of the shadow of death so we'll learn not to fear evil. Maybe He wants us to walk through hard times so others can see how to walk with Him. Maybe His enemies need to see someone walking in paths of righteousness for His name's sake and turn to Him themselves. Maybe we need to see Him rather than look at all the evil and sin around us.

I needed today; how are you seeing life now?

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Revelation 2:12-17

Pergamum—the Worldly Church

“These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword.”

Do you remember the other reference to a double-edged sword that we’ve had? In Hebrews 4:12-13, we read that such a sword penetrates to the very depth of us, judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart, and lays everything bare before the eyes of Him to whom we must give an account. This small sword was well known because all Roman soldiers carried them.

For the church we’re looking at today, the believers were personally doing well by staying faithful through the persecution. But on the other side of the sword, they were allowing two types of teaching to remain in their midst. One group encouraged them to marry from outside the faith, and the other group introduced false freedom that abused grace and led to licentiousness. Maybe the believers thought they didn’t have a right or the responsibility to say anything to anyone else about how he or she lives the Christian life?

I’ve heard it said recently that we all tend to be concerned only with our personal walk with the Lord without realizing that we’re also part of the body of Christ and belong to each other. If we as His body don’t work well together by following the input of the head (Jesus), how can those around us see the value of knowing God? Are you more of a lone ranger Christian who doesn’t ask for or seem to need help from others? In *Experiencing God*, I keep reading that doing a God-sized work requires God and others, never just an individual.

So the conclusion for today? Know what’s going on around you and speak out if others are adding anything to Jesus Christ crucified and resurrected. Listen to others if they try to tell you that you’re adding anything to the gospel. If we hear and live this challenge by overcoming what comes at us, we’ll:

- Be given some of the hidden manna—real life-giving food
- Get a white stone with a new name on it, a new name given by God that means something very special to the one receiving the name.

Do you need some God-provided food to sustain you as you stand up for truth when you’d rather stay in the background? Do you need to know that God really knows you and what you’re going through for Him? Perhaps a love name from Him is just what you need; how about asking Him?

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Revelation 2:18-29

Thyatira—the Paganized Church

“Hold on to what you have until I come.”

How easy it is to be swayed from what we know. No matter where we are spiritually, forces want to take us down the wrong path. The believers in Thyatira had held on for so long that they were known for their deeds, love and faith, services and perseverance, and doing more than they did at first.

But in this commercial city full of pagan religions, a “spiritual” woman has come into their midst. She says that she’s a prophetess, speaking words from God. She’s telling the believers that if they follow her teachings, they’ll learn deep secrets and become more spiritual than the “average” believers around them. The problem, though, is that she’s leading the believers into a way of worship that’s been wrong from the very beginning of Christianity and, before that, Judaism.

She tells Jesus’ servants that sexual immorality isn’t wrong and that sleeping with someone other than a spouse is acceptable, even preferable. She also tells them that eating food that has been sacrificed to idols is acceptable. But Paul had told the Corinthian church that the sacrifices of pagans have been offered to demons, not God, and he didn’t want them to be participants with demons. He told them that they could not have a part in both the Lord’s Table and the table of demons. (1 Corinthians 10:20-22)

Amazing how a “spiritual” voice telling us to do what feels good and to take advantage of good can have a strong influence on us, especially if the promise is that we can know Satan’s so-called deep secrets. How tempting.

But Jesus comes with blazing eyes and golden feet. He says that He knows what she’s been saying; He’s given her time to change her mind about her own immorality, but she’s refused. Jesus is ready to deal with her and those who have followed her instead of standing firm. Then all the churches will know that they can’t hide anything from Him who sees and knows all that we hold as important and valuable.

And those who haven’t been swayed by her teaching will have authority over others and will know Jesus.

Are someone’s words tempting you to walk down a road that seems a little too easy or pleasant? Are you tempted to try and know *deep secrets* that others don’t know? Has scripture already spoken to this new direction but you’re dismissing it? Are the results worth it? Hold onto what you know, my friend.

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Revelation 3:1-6

Sardis—the Lifeless Church

“I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead.”

Have you been noticing all of the I’s in these letters to the seven churches? I count 47 times that Jesus uses the word I; 10 times He says “I know.”

From what John records of Jesus’ revelation to five of the seven churches is that they have forgotten about Him. They started well but got involved in the actions of being a Christian—oh so easy to do!

Sardis was known for its wealth from its textile and jewelry industries. It had a respectable reputation historically and politically just as the church had a good reputation. However, in this letter to the church at Sardis, Jesus tells them to stop relying on their past and instead remember what they have received and heard, obey it, and then repent (change the direction in which they were going).

Can you remember when you first met Jesus and began walking with Him? What was this time like for you? I remember that He gave me a hope that peace that would come from knowing His love for me instead of trying to find love in all the wrong places and wrong ways.

What I received and heard from Him was totally different from what I had known. It meant that I had to make uncomfortable and strange-to-me choices, choices of dying to me being in control and setting the standards of what was acceptable for everyone else. It meant I couldn’t let emotions and negative thinking rule my life.

As I’ve lived with Jesus for almost 40 years (I can’t believe that number!), the challenge of living this way is as fresh as it was on Day 1. At the end of times I want to walk with Jesus dressed in white with my name written in the book of life. I want Jesus to acknowledge me before His Father and the angels. Since I don’t know when Jesus will return, the time to stay close to Him and live how He’s called me to live is *now*. Deeds that fool others will never fool Him because He truly knows.

How are you doing with remembering what you received and heard and then obeying? Time to repent (change your direction) in any area of your life?

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Revelation 3:7-13

Philadelphia—the Missionary Church

“Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth.”

As I came to today’s section, I really believed we’d be talking about verse 7: “What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no man can open.” Over the years I’ve depended on this truth that God’s intent and power in a person’s life can’t be changed by anyone or any force. But after comparing this church to the others, what amazes me is that Jesus has nothing negative to say about it. Instead, because of the believers’ faithfulness in the middle of hard situations, He gives them today’s promise.

Are you in the middle of a hard situation, or many situations, that keeps getting harder and harder? Are you finding it hard to endure instead of complain? Then maybe today’s words are for you. Let’s look at their situation and at the truth Jesus gives them.

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| Jesus | He is holy and true. He holds the key to David’s city (New Jerusalem). What He opens stays open, and what He closes can never be opened. He knows their deeds. He has opened a door for them so they won’t stay where they are forever. |
| Church | They have little [spiritual] strength, yet they have kept His word and haven’t denied Him. |
| Jesus | Those who are Jews in name only [nationally but not spiritually] will eventually acknowledge that Jesus has loved these believers [the Jews must have been telling them that Jesus had forgotten them]. He will keep them for the hour of trial that will come upon the whole world. |
| Church | He’s coming soon so they’re to hold onto what they have so no one can take their crown. |
| Jesus | Those who endure without giving in will become pillars [of strength] among God’s people [the temple]. God will identify Himself with these believers in the New Jerusalem. They will know Jesus as He reveals Himself. |

Commentaries suggest that these words describe the rapture that will take believers out of the whole world before the trial that tests those who live on the earth. I don’t think any of us want to live through such a time, so we have the choice now of where we will be then: with Jesus or having to live through it. It’s all too easy to say, “I trust God, but . . .” I think what He wants us to say is, “This is my situation, but I trust God.” Period. What do you hear yourself saying these days?

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Revelation 3:14-22

Laodicea—the Lukewarm Church

“Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent. Here I am!”

My, Jesus seems to be trying to get their attention. They’re blasé about their walk with Him. *Ho hum* seems to be how they live. Life is fine, so why be bothered? Therefore, Jesus’ warning that He is about to spit them out of His mouth gets our attention, and I hope theirs.

Commentators tell us that Laodicea was a proud and wealthy city. So wealthy, in fact, that when the city was almost completely destroyed by an earthquake in A.D. 60, the citizens rebuilt at their own expense, without Rome’s help. The city was known for its fine black wool for clothing and for a powder used to treat eye diseases. Also, local hot springs made it a medical center.

Those who called themselves followers of Jesus believed that they didn’t need Him because of this wealth and their natural resources, and so they had shut Him out of their hearts.

Jesus longs for them to see themselves as they really are: wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked. His offer of life that is refined by the fire of discipline, righteous clothing that will never wear out, and holy salve that will heal their spiritual blindness will probably be ignored. But a remnant always remains: they probably heard His cry and let Him back into their hearts. To those who hear and repent, He offers a place of honor with Him.

Have these words challenged your heart today? Are you depending on yourself, your abilities, and your resources? All too easily and quickly what we have can disappear as in an earthquake. Comfort in this world may bring discomfort in the next. Our hope is in Jesus Himself.

Maybe these words aren’t for you but for someone dear to you. How can you lovingly and gently use the truth you’ve read about today? We can’t control natural calamities just like we couldn’t control the families or times we were born into, so we need to be ready for whatever comes.

Regardless of how today’s example of these lukewarm believers affects you, it reminds us that Jesus is always available to come in, clean our dirty and cluttered houses (hearts), and provide a life of honor and acceptance forever.

How do Jesus’ words affect you today?

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Revelation 4:1-2

“After this . . .”

This section transitions us from *what is* to *what will be*, from *earth* to *heaven*. John is given the opportunity to see the future, but this vision is for our benefit. We tend to look for fairness in this life, for all to be made right in our here and now, but often we have to wait for heaven. I think our heavenly Father knew that we needed a heavenly perspective so we could endure. Do you need this heavenly perspective today?

But before we leave these seven churches, let's review how Jesus revealed Himself to John for our benefit.

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| Ephesus | <i>He holds the seven stars in His right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands.</i> Commentators suggest that the seven stars are the messengers sent by the seven churches to see how John was doing on Patmos. The seven lampstands are the churches. Stars and lampstands provide light in darkness and so are symbols of God's people who reflect the One who is the light of the world. |
| Smyrna | <i>He is the first and the last, who died and come to life again.</i> Our only hope for a life that really means anything rests in Jesus because He broke the hold that sin and death had over us. |
| Pergamum | <i>He has the sharp, two-edged sword</i> that can cut through any lie or deception to get to the truth. |
| Thyatira | <i>His eyes are like blazing fire, and His feet are like burnished bronze.</i> Fire and heat burn away what doesn't last. |
| Sardis | <i>He holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.</i> Seven in scripture means fullness or completion, so the seven spirits of God are thought to be the fullness of the spirit, not just one or two of His attributes. The seven stars are the messengers from the seven churches (see Ephesus). The Spirit and the believers in other cities see the real situation in Sardis. |
| Philadelphia | <i>He is holy and true and holds the key of David.</i> Jesus has no stain of sin on Him or in Him, and His words can be believed because they don't have any falsehood, deception, or self-serving in them. Only Jesus has the key to open the city of David (New Jerusalem) when He returns. |
| Laodicea | <i>He is the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation.</i> Jesus will have the last word; no one can contradict Him or reverse His decisions. What Jesus says is consistent and accurate. He rules over all creation, and no one can take His place. |

Which church describes you? How are you responding?

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Revelation 4:1-2

“ . . . after this.”

What a fitting way to end this look at the other writers in the New Testament. Through John we are able to have a glimpse at our Lord as He was, is, and always will be. But my question is, how do *you* see Jesus?

- Is He like He was when He walked and talked with His disciples, fully in His humanity?
- Is He walking in your midst as He did with the seven churches, observing and evaluating?
- Is He high and lifted up, seated in the heavenlies?

I think all three perspectives are accurate, as long as we see Him in all three at the same time. Because He lived here on earth as we do, we know He understands all that we go through and the pressures and struggles we face. Because His sacrifice on the cross broke the power of sin and death, and He makes His life available to us through His Spirit, He has the right to evaluate how we're living, and His evaluation is just and true. And because the Father accepted His sacrifice, Jesus returned to the heavenlies to take His rightful place on the throne as ruler of all.

This same Jesus said to John, and so to us, “Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.” He invites us to join Him as we live here on earth to have a heavenly perspective on our here and now.

Think about your life and relationships right now. What if Jesus invited you, as He invited John, to join Him at His Throne, allowing you to see Him as He is with all His power and might? Do you think you would have a different perspective on what you're facing on earth as John probably did? I do. I think I wouldn't be afraid of the future, I would be free to care more for others, and I'd live by faith rather than by sight. I think this is how John returned to his fellow believers after being set free from his banishment on Patmos. Hope, love, and confidence would be his constant companions as they can be ours.

Who are your companions today?

*(If you want to know more about what happens in this letter from John about what is to happen, check out my notes to the **Left Behind** series on the Studies section of our website WalksWithTheFather.com.)*
