

Chapter 4

The Great Parenthesis

I'm pretty sure God didn't provide Adam with a big ol' coffee table King James Bible on his way out of the Garden of Eden, saying, "Here, kid. Read this. I've put the good parts in red. There will be a quiz." The unfolding of His plan was a bit more leisurely: forty writers or so, over a period of fifteen hundred years, wrote as they were directed by Yahweh's Spirit, using as source material their own eyewitness experiences (including their dreams and visions), first-hand historical accounts, older written documents, and in Moses' case, maybe even oral traditions.

It follows that none of the Biblical writers knew *all* of what the Author wanted to say to us. Even John, the last of them, probably didn't have access to, or knowledge of, everything comprising our present Bible. And much of what we consider central doctrines of our faith were not tied up with a ribbon and delivered to us on a silver platter, but were rather "arrived at" over the years by godly men who found that a careful reading of God's Word allowed no other conclusion. The nature of Messiah, for example, was not clearly understood at the time of His first advent, though in retrospect the clues are abundant indeed. The manifestation of Yahweh as a human being, and then as a Spirit who dwelled *within* His believers, proved to be an equally hard concept for us to get a handle on. And eschatology was a closed book to post-Apostolic-age Christians until the subject started attracting renewed attention in the mid-nineteenth century. Luther himself was so puzzled by the book of Revelation, he is said to have expressed reservations about its very canonicity, remarking, "Even if it were a blessed thing to believe what is contained in it, no man knows what that is."

We need to realize that God doesn't have a problem with any of this. He is quite aware that none of us grasps more than a fraction of what He has for us. Like a father giving good things to his children, God knows that timing is everything. He won't give a T-bone steak to an infant or a high-powered sports car to a twelve year old. But He "makes all things beautiful in His time." Detailed knowledge of His plan for the end of the age may not have done Clement of Rome or Martin Luther much practical good. As the day approaches, however, the Holy Spirit opens our eyes—and our hearts—to the truths that have been there all along. God makes sure we'll see it when we need it—if we're looking for it.

This gradual unfolding of scriptural awareness is the essence of a doctrine that itself was recognized relatively recently. "Dispensationalism" is a six-dollar word describing an obvious state of affairs we find in scripture: God deals differently with people in different ages, or *dispensations*, according to the revelation He has

given them. Understanding these seven dispensations (there's that number again) is essential to comprehending God's plan for the future. It should be noted that this doctrine is widely accepted today in evangelical circles. Those who reject it tend to be the same people who reject a literal interpretation of prophecy, preferring a "spiritualized" or allegorical meaning that denies hundreds of clear and unambiguous promises to Israel. The Church, they insist, has become "spiritual Israel," inheriting those promises. Of course, if they've inherited the promises, they must also have assumed the responsibilities, such as performing the letter and spirit of the Law of Moses, keeping the Sabbath and the *miqrym*, although they conveniently manage to forget that part.

I respectfully disagree with this harebrained theory. God, in my experience, knows exactly what He's doing, comprehends the difference between Israel and the Church, and has made separate promises (and given separate missions) to each. And, as I noted earlier, He delights in doing the impossible. (It drives the intellectuals nuts.) Each dispensation grows out of, and builds upon, the one that precedes it. In a nutshell, the seven are as follows:

Innocence. In the Garden of Eden, man was given perfect freedom, being held responsible to demonstrate his trust of God by a single act of obedience.

Conscience. Having failed the test, man was held morally responsible to do what he knew to be right, according to the light God had planted within him.

Government. Man failed to heed his conscience, so God wiped the slate clean with the flood of Noah and started over. He then defined, in the simplest of terms, the relationships and responsibilities that were to exist between men from that time forward.

Promise. God next focused upon one man, Abraham, through whom He determined to bless all the nations of the earth. Abraham believed God's unilateral promise and that belief—not what he *did*, but what he *believed*—was seen by God as righteousness.

Law. Man was now shown the futility of a system of doing good works as a basis for his salvation. Sacrifices and rituals were instituted, but not for their own sake. They were there to point the way to the coming Savior.

Grace. After the resurrection of Yahshua, man could look back to a risen Christ for salvation, and forward to a reigning Messiah for hope. We are presently almost two thousand years into this dispensation—the Church age.

Kingdom. Man will live under the direct rule of the Messiah for a thousand years in a perfect environment. Unlike previous dispensations, sin will be met with direct and immediate judgment, for Yahshua will rule personally "with a rod [or scepter] of iron."

The close of the Kingdom dispensation will mark the end of the beginning, ushering in a new heaven and new earth, an eternal state that, frankly, we haven't been told much about in scripture. What little we do know will be discussed in due course. For now, we need to determine where (or *when*) we are in God's plan, so we can heed the admonitions and instructions He has provided for us who are living at this specific point in time.

We are now approaching the end of the sixth dispensation—the age of Grace—the dispensation of the Church (or more properly, the *Ekklesia*, the called-out assembly of believers). I'll tell you why I think so in a moment. The Church as such was not blatantly predicted in the Old Testament; Paul called it a “mystery,” i.e., something not previously revealed. The offer of the Kingdom was made to Israel at Christ's first advent, and had they accepted Him, there presumably would have been no need for a separate body of believers to occupy the time between his ascension and his return. But God, being omniscient, knew that His Son would be rejected, and told us so through His prophets. They presented the suffering Savior and the reigning Messiah side by side. It must have been terribly confusing to students of scripture before Yahshua's time.

There were hints about the Church, however. Isaiah saw that when God opened the door, we gentiles would stumble through it: **“I was sought by those who did not ask for Me; I was found by those who did not seek Me. I said, ‘Here I am, here I am,’ to a nation that was not called by My name.** (Isaiah 65:1) Likewise, Moses was given a glimpse of a people who would make the idolatrous Israelites green with envy. With no miraculous national identity like the Jews had, and even without the superior intelligence it would take to figure out this “God thing” on their own, these people—these upstarts—would claim the love and attention of *their* God! Horrors! **“They [Israel] have provoked Me to jealousy by what is not God; they have moved Me to anger by their foolish idols. But I will provoke them to jealousy by those who are not a nation; I will move them to anger by a foolish nation.”** (Deuteronomy 32:21) That's us Christians, I'm afraid.

I think Yahshua was describing Israel's jealous reaction to the Church in the parable of the prodigal son, which ends with these words: **“And [the servant] said to [the older brother, symbolic of Israel], ‘Your brother [metaphorically, the Church] has come, and because he has received him safe and sound, your father has killed the fatted calf.’ But he was angry and would not go in. Therefore his father came out and pleaded with him. So he answered and said to his father, ‘Lo, these many years I have been serving you; I never transgressed your commandment at any time; and yet you never gave me a young**

goat, that I might make merry with my friends. But as soon as this son of yours came, who has devoured your livelihood with harlots, you killed the fatted calf for him.' And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours. It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found.'" (Luke 15:27-32) The Jews were well aware of their privileged ancestral and historical status. They were descendents of Abraham and custodians of the Law of Moses, recipients of the covenant promises of Yahweh, and they were proud of it. How could these people, these *sinner*s—repentant or not—presume to have a relationship with *their* God? No, the Church was a big surprise to Israel.

It didn't have to be. It wasn't as if the Jews hadn't been invited to the party. They had the promises; they had the prophecies. Yahshua predicted what they'd do in this parable: **"A certain man gave a great supper and invited many, and sent his servant at supper time to say to those who were invited, 'Come, for all things are now ready.' But they all with one accord began to make excuses... So that servant came and reported these things to his master. Then the master of the house, being angry, said to his servant, 'Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in here the poor and the maimed and the lame and the blind [i.e., the repentant Jewish believers].' And the servant said, 'Master, it is done as you commanded, and still there is room.' Then the master said to the servant, 'Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them [i.e., the gentiles] to come in, that my house may be filled. For I say to you that none of those men who were invited shall taste my supper.'" (Luke 14:16-24)**

Those who had been invited—the Jewish nation—had rejected God's gracious invitation. But ten days after Yahshua ascended back to heaven, the Day of Pentecost brought with it a whole new paradigm: the Spirit of God permanently indwelling and empowering individual believers, making us "the body of Christ." Sure, there had been isolated and temporary instances of the Spirit's anointing in years past, but never had it happened to an entire class of people, and seldom for very long. David's anguished plea in Psalm 51, **"Take not your Holy Spirit from me,"** was a real concern; he had seen that very thing happen to King Saul, and it wasn't pretty. But now, on the Day of Pentecost, the Spirit—the Comforter—had fallen upon all the disciples, just as Yahshua had predicted.

John recorded how Yahshua promised to send His Spirit to dwell within them as a guarantee of His second coming, just as His resurrection was a guarantee of our eternal life: **"A little while longer and the world will see Me no more, but you will see Me. Because I live, you will live also. At that day you will know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you. He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him.' Judas (not Iscariot) said to Him, 'Lord, how is it that You will manifest Yourself to us, and not to the world?' Jesus answered and said to him, 'If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our**

home with him.” (John 14:19-23) Note that Yahshua is describing the Holy Spirit not as a third “person” of the trinity, as we often mistakenly picture Him today, but as the manifestation of both the Father and the Son who will live within us. There are not three Gods—there is only One.

Pentecost, the first instance of God “making His home” with man, was a hint, a foretaste, of what the Prophet Joel had seen coming: **“And it shall come to pass afterward that I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions. And also on My menservants and on My maidservants I will pour out My Spirit in those days.”** (Joel 2:28-29; cf. Acts 2:17-21)

Yahshua had already given His disciples their marching orders: **“All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”** (Matthew 28:18-20) Now that His Holy Spirit had come upon them, there was nothing holding them back. Yahshua was no longer living among them; now He was living *within* them. From that moment on, He would *always* be within them.

From its very beginning, the Church knew it was temporary—that whatever it did was done in the expectation of Yahshua’s imminent return. As Paul said, **“He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.... And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment, that you may approve the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ.... Do all things without complaining and disputing, that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life, so that I may rejoice in the day of Christ that I have not run in vain or labored in vain.”** (Philippians 1:6, 9-10, 2:14-16) The “day of Christ” was always in view—the carrot at the end of our stick. It was what drove Paul to preach the good news with such enthusiasm: **“For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Is it not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming? For you are our glory and joy.”** (1 Thessalonians 2:19-20)

And what would this dispensation be like? Yahshua had told them that as well. It wasn’t what you’d expect from the Prince of Peace, but that title would apply to another age, another advent. As for now, He said, **“I came to send fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! But I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how distressed I am till it is accomplished! Do you suppose that I came to give peace on earth? I tell you, not at all, but rather division. For from now on five in one house will be divided: three against two, and two against three. Father will be divided against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law**

against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.” (Luke 12:49-53) Why is it like that? Because now, in the present dispensation, the defining mark of God’s people is not so much what you do, but why you do it; it’s not who you are, but *whose* you are.

The Church age has been going on so long, some have come to believe that this is *it*; there is no more—that God’s promises to Israel have been transferred to us. This view sees the Church marching triumphantly ever forward, gaining converts and civilizing nations until the whole world is under Christ’s (i.e., *our*) control. Granted, it was easier to hold this position in the nineteenth century, before we fought two world wars and scores of lesser skirmishes, before a hundred million souls were swallowed up in genocidal rage, before 45 million unborn children were murdered in the name of “choice” in a nation that fancies itself to be holding the world’s high moral ground. It was easier to take this position before man invented the means to destroy all life on this fragile planet, or before Israel rose from the ashes of two millennia of persecution and exile to be reborn as a sovereign nation. No, the triumphant Church is not so easy to believe in any more.

Besides, to take this position, nowadays called “replacement theology,” you have to ignore, deny, or explain away huge chunks of divine writ. It becomes necessary to build an elaborate system of substitute realities to deal with the obvious discrepancies. But the minute you do this, the minute you start trimming your jigsaw puzzle pieces to fit your own preconceptions, *nothing* fits anymore. And remember, this is a ten-thousand-piece puzzle. Call me lazy, but I find it far easier to try to place God’s pieces into the picture the way I found them, even if they don’t make much sense to me at first glance.

The Church is simply the Church, not Israel’s ambitious understudy. One of the primary passages leading me to this conclusion is in Revelation’s early chapters, where the risen Christ directs John to write open letters addressed to seven churches in the Roman province of Asia, in today’s western Turkey. These messages can and should be applied in three different ways, one of which is of particular interest in our current study.

First, there is the obvious historical context. Seven actual churches, located within a relatively short distance of each other, displayed seven different spiritual profiles. Most of them received commendation as well as condemnation, a pat on the head followed by a swift kick in the derrière. But two were not rebuked at all,

and one—the last—received no praise of any kind—only an impassioned plea to repent.

Second, there are important lessons here for every local assembly, and indeed every individual Christian throughout the church age, for these conditions can and do coexist side by side. We all need to examine our lives in the light of these letters, to assess whether *we* are being commended or chastised. Within these pages are mercy, encouragement, guidance, calls for repentance, and warnings of dire consequences if we ignore what God has to say. Each of these messages contains the admonition, **“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”** That’s all of us. We dare not be dishonest with ourselves. There is too much at stake.

And third, there is a definite prophetic element to this passage. Each of these Asian churches represents a period of Church history. They are just general trends, of course. The eras overlap and coexist in places, but as time goes on the pattern becomes more and more obvious. And as we examine the history of Christianity in light of these letters, we begin to realize that we are very near the end of the age.

Geographically, the churches formed a rough oval a little over a hundred miles in length. Patmos, the island where John was exiled when he received the vision, was just off the coast near the first city on the list, Ephesus. John was told: **“To the angel of the church of Ephesus write, ‘These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands: I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars; and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name’s sake and have not become weary. Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent. But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God.’”** (Revelation 2:1-7)

The church at Ephesus represents the Apostolic age, that in which John himself lived. They are commended for their tireless works and for their discernment—their unwillingness to compromise with or tolerate evil. This is emphasized by the mention of their hatred for the deeds of the Nicolaitans—followers of Nicolas of Antioch, who sought to work out a compromise between Christian morality and the licentious pagan lifestyle of the world they lived in. His philosophy was the antithesis of “Be holy, for I am holy.” Interestingly, the movement is also associated with the promotion of a clerical hierarchy, something that later proved to be the bane of Christendom.

The only problem in Ephesus was that they had “left their first love.” Not “lost” it, but “left” it. These folks had the right doctrine and the right work ethic, but they had forgotten why it mattered. Without the love of Christ, a program of good works is not only unsustainable, it’s pointless. What did Isaiah say? “All *our* righteousnesses are like filthy rags.”

About thirty-five miles up the coast was Smyrna, known today as Izmir. **“And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write, ‘These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life: I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich); and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death.’”** (Revelation 2:8-11)

Smyrna represents the Church under persecution. Funny how a little persecution helps you keep your priorities straight: Yahshua has nothing but commendation and encouragement for these people. But there was nothing “little” about the deprivations these folks suffered. They had been reduced to utter beggary by a policy of systematic harassment, exclusion from the economic life of their community. No trade guild would endorse them; their businesses were boycotted, or worse, were looted and burned by mobs stirred to irrational hatred by the large local Jewish population. How ironic it is that today the only comparison example we can think of to adequately describe the sufferings these Christians endured is the European Jews under Hitler’s domination.

Yahshua was talking to the Church at Smyrna when he offered the following bit of encouragement to his disciples on the Mount of Olives. **“But before all these things [i.e., the signs of the end of the age], they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons. You will be brought before kings and rulers for My name’s sake. But it will turn out for you as an occasion for testimony. Therefore settle it in your hearts not to meditate beforehand on what you will answer; for I will give you a mouth and wisdom which all your adversaries will not be able to contradict or resist. You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. And you will be hated by all for My name’s sake. But not a hair of your head shall be lost. By your patience possess your souls.”** (Luke 21:12-19) You’d have to be either nuts or God Himself to say, “They’ll kill you, but you’re going to be just fine.” Only One who had power over death itself

could deliver on such an outlandish claim. Five days later, Yahshua proved He did.

It's interesting that Yahshua says, "You are rich." He apparently counts money the same way he reckons time, i.e., *not like we do*. In His economy, our wealth or lack of it is inconsequential, no matter how much, or how little, we have. Our Father owns the entire universe. Do Donald Trump's children worry about the rising cost of bus fare? Smyrna's real wealth had nothing to do with money, but was the abundance of God's Spirit—something they had in spades. It was wealth they could never lose.

He gave Smyrna no reprimand, but He did warn them of "ten days" of tribulation. In the end the early Church suffered precisely that—*ten* intense periods of persecution under Rome, beginning in the reign of Nero (A.D. 54-68) and lasting through that of Diocletian, 230 years later. Somehow, knowing it's coming, knowing there's an end to it, can help us cope with adversity. I think it's the same reason God has given us so much information about the coming events. It's called hope.

The church at Smyrna is still going strong. Between Islam and Communism, between secular humanism and the false religions of man, there's plenty of overt persecution to go around. But in this world, subtle hatred of God and his people is ubiquitous. As Paul said, **"All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution. But evil men and impostors will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived."** (II Timothy 3:12-13)

Forty-five miles due north of Smyrna is Pergamos, today the village of Bergama. Christ instructed John, **"And to the angel of the church in Pergamos write, 'These things says He who has the sharp two-edged sword: I know your works, and where you dwell, where Satan's throne is. And you hold fast to My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days in which Antipas was My faithful martyr, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells. But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality. Thus you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate. Repent, or else I will come to you quickly and will fight against them with the sword of My mouth. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna to eat. And I will give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name written which no one knows except him who receives it.'" (Revelation 2:12-17)**

The last great persecution, that of Diocletian, took place in 284, and it was almost as if Satan grumbled to himself, “This ain’t workin’.” Under pressure, the Church had *not* died out; it had only grown stronger. So, he figured, if the gates of hell couldn’t prevail against it, maybe the gates of *success* would. Less than thirty years later Constantine “converted” to Christianity, and, as Roman emperors were wont to do, he issued an edict that made all of the Roman world a “Christian” domain.

The Christians came out of hiding, but the celebration in the catacombs was short lived. There were a few strings attached, it transpired, and those strings were promptly used to bind and gag the true Church. Constantine, you see, had no intention of actually letting Yahshua rule *him*—he was the emperor of Rome, for cryin’ out loud. Besides, you couldn’t run a tidy empire if you kept upsetting all the apple carts. So paganism would have to be accommodated. *What would it hurt if we dressed up the old holidays in new, Christianized costumes? That old pagan winter solstice festival? Let’s rename it Christmas! We’ll keep the tree, the yule log, and the mistletoe, of course; we’ll just throw in the bit about—what was the kid’s name again? And our Babylonian-derived fertility bash in the spring, Ishtar, coincides with Passover and the resurrection anyway; we’ll just blend it with the new state religion; we won’t even bother changing the name. All that Jewish stuff though—that’ll have to go. We’ll make it illegal to worship God on the Sabbath. Sun-Day will be much more comfortable for all us former followers of Mithras.*

There was something to be said, of course, for not being the target of a mini-holocaust every couple of decades. But Satan had found Christianity’s Achilles heel. Pergamos had embraced the very thing Yahshua had commended the church at Ephesus for resisting: the Nicolaitan heresy, a.k.a. the doctrine of Balaam—compromise. After Constantine, the Church swallowed it whole. By accommodating pagan rites into the liturgy of the Church, a *religion* was born—it was no longer simply a personal relationship with a loving God. The good works remained a priority, out of habit or momentum or plain old self-willed determination. But the rationale was on its way out. Love was being replaced with duty. Relationship was being replaced by religion.

And ecclesiastical organization? If you read Paul’s letters to Timothy and Titus, you’ll see simplicity of church order. Pastors and elders were to be men of integrity and piety, good husbands and fathers, sober minded, and service oriented. Power, wealth, and prestige were not part of the formula. But the institution that grew out of Constantine’s edict brought with it a top-heavy hierarchy of priests, bishops, cardinals and popes—a corrupt bureaucracy that was never God’s intention for the Church. It all brings to mind one of the parables that Yahshua used to illustrate this dispensation: **“The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field, which indeed is the least of all the seeds;**

but when it is grown it is greater than the herbs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches.” (Matthew 13:31-32) Mustard plants aren’t supposed to grow into trees. As long as the Church remained a humble shrub, the birds (a scriptural metaphor for evil) had no interest in building nests there.

Still, growing a tree is a time-consuming process; these changes didn’t take place all at once. The church (the laity at least) during this era could still be said to be holding fast to the name of Yahshua, not denying His faith. But how long could this last?

A few miles southeast of Pergamos is Thyatira, the next church on John’s mailing list. He was told, **“To the angel of the church in Thyatira write, ‘These things says the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet like fine brass: I know your works, love, service, faith, and your patience; and as for your works, the last are more than the first.’** In the Greek, this is as much commiseration as it is commendation. As the prophetic fulfillment unfolded, the “works” were compelled, the “love” was enforced, and the “service” was in actuality servitude. Yahshua knows our condition—and our motives. **“Nevertheless I have a few things against you, because you allow that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, to teach and seduce My servants to commit sexual immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols. And I gave her time to repent of her sexual immorality, and she did not repent. Indeed I will cast her into a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of their deeds. I will kill her children with death, and all the churches shall know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts. And I will give to each one of you according to your works. Now to you I say, and to the rest in Thyatira, as many as do not have this doctrine, who have not known the depths of Satan, as they say, I will put on you no other burden. But hold fast what you have till I come. And he who overcomes, and keeps My works until the end, to him I will give power over the nations—“He shall rule them with a rod of iron; They shall be dashed to pieces like the potter’s vessels”— as I also have received from My Father; and I will give him the morning star. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”** (Revelation 2:18-29)

Once the leaven of compromise had been introduced, it was only a matter of time before the whole loaf of Christian religiosity grew too big for its baking pan. As Yahshua put it in His parable, **“The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened.”** (Matthew 13:33) It’s my guess (SF5) that the “three measures” ultimately represent the Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant branches of Christendom. We are all tarred with the same brush: compromise with the world.

Thyatira represents the Church at the height of its political power. The picture is not a pretty one, and yet it's not all negative. The Church at this stage of history was, at least among the laity (the part God is particularly interested in) relatively unified. Being one Church in the catholic (that is, universal) sense was a good thing, though the glue that held the Church together should have been unfeigned love, not political pressure. But God's agenda is clear: **"Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! It is like the precious oil upon the head, running down on the beard, the beard of Aaron, running down on the edge of his garments. It is like the dew of Hermon, descending upon the mountains of Zion. For there Yahweh commanded the blessing—Life forevermore."** (Psalm 133) The piety and devotion of the common worshippers had not yet been totally quenched by their leaders' greed and arrogance, and the open squabbles of the Reformation had not yet split the Church into warring camps. (The Roman and Orthodox branches were divided, in the midst of this period, more upon geographical lines, liturgical nitpicking, and petty personality conflicts than on doctrinal issues. When the ambitious patriarch of Constantinople, Michael Caerularius, tried to force Greek rites on the Latin churches in the East, he ran afoul of the powerful Pope Leo IX. Leo's legates excommunicated the patriarch on July 16, 1054, whereupon he revolted, permanently splitting the Church in two.)

Remarkably, even the Papacy's purposeful repression of the scriptures and regurgitated paganism had not been able to completely snuff out the love of Christ among the laity. A little light was enough to keep them from falling. Here Yahshua recognizes and commends their "works, love, service, faith, and patience." Though illustrious names from the Venerable Bede to John Milton and John Wycliffe dot the landscape of this period, most of the saints in this time are unknown and unsung. Yahshua, however, sees their good works and notes that they were actually growing, in spite of their problems.

Their problems, though, were formidable. Christ focused on this woman, "Jezebel," whose influence promoted compromise with the world. In the local sense, the description seems to indicate she was a proponent of tolerance for Thyatira's pagan community—sexual immorality was part and parcel of pagan worship, as was eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols. In the long view, sexual immorality was a symbol of unfaithfulness to God, i.e., idolatry. The whole ministry of the prophet Hosea speaks of this very thing, in his case in reference to Judah's spiritual adultery. Different object, same metaphor. Thyatira, then, pictured a church that was clearly ill, though not yet dead. Would it recover?

Sardis was in even worse shape. We aren't given too many details in this passage as to the specific nature of their problem, but as a church, they were about as far gone as you could get and still be called part of the body of Christ.

“And to the angel of the church in Sardis write, ‘These things says He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars: I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead. Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God. Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent. Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you. You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy. He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’” (Revelation 3:1-6)

It must have *killed* John to pen this indictment. He himself had planted the church at Sardis some years before, and they still had a reputation for good works and sound doctrine, but now they were pronounced “*dead*.” What had happened? They didn't suffer from great persecution, like the church at Smyrna, nor were they plagued (that we know of, anyway) with internal heresy like their neighbors, Thyatira, Pergamos, and Ephesus.

Sardis was the capital of the province of Lydia. It was a wealthy city; it had been the home of King Croesus, whose name was synonymous with big bucks. (There are a score of Islamic hadiths that express Muhammad's covetous heart toward the wealth of the legendary Croesus, though he may have been referring to a rich Persian king with a similar name.) With wealth often comes pride—a haughty spirit—which, as Solomon reminds us, comes before destruction. And what is pride? In the end, it's nothing more or less than a lack of love.

Placing Sardis in the context of history points this out in some shocking and unexpected ways. Though some would disagree, I believe Sardis represents the state of the Church at the time of the Reformation. The Catholic monolith had succumbed to the weight of its own pride and idolatry by this time, but the same small, faithful remnant in its ranks that had always been there was still accounted “worthy” to bear the name “Christian.” Also worthy were the handful of courageous reformers who did us all an invaluable service by digging Biblical truth out of the rubble of a thousand years of suppression and neglect. But Yahshua isn't talking about Catholics and Protestants here. He's not taking sides between them. He's pleading with *His Church*—His called-out assembly of believers—to be watchful, to wake up.

If John had seen it all clearly, he would have surely cringed at what he saw unfolding. After all, it was he who had written: **“He who loves his brother abides in**

the light, and there is no cause for stumbling in him. But he who hates his brother is in darkness and walks in darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes.... Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love.... If someone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also." (I John 2:10-11, 4:7-8, 20-21) Love his *brother*? The Reformation brought with it centuries of fratricide. It did not precipitate unity and repentance, but pride, hatred and war.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not suggesting that we would have been better off without the Reformation. But the Church—the whole body of Christ—handled it badly from the very beginning. After Peter Waldo tried in 1170 to return to the simplicity of the Apostolic church and set aside the top-heavy liturgy of the Roman system, Pope Innocent III instituted (in 1209) a purge of the Waldensians, slaughtering millions of these and other “heretics.” When John Wycliffe translated the Bible into common English in 1383—the linguistic foundation of virtually every English translation to this very day—he so incensed the Roman hierarchy—whose lust for power had driven them to suppress it—that, though they couldn't touch him during his lifetime, they dug up his bones and publicly desecrated them after his death. Girolamo Savonarola spoke out against the papal practice of selling indulgences, so they hanged him and burned his body. Killing him once was presumably not enough.

But when the Protestant Reformers gained a foothold in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, they did no better (well, maybe a little bit). Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, and their followers were not above going to war—literally—to increase the scope of their influence. Some of the reformers (Luther, as a notable example) were rabidly anti-Semitic. Politics and Protestantism were strange but frequent bedfellows. The Church of England, for example, was founded not on doctrinal issues, but on the insatiable desire of King Henry VIII for a male heir—no matter how many wives he had to divorce or decapitate to get one. This was all a long, long way from “...Love one another; as I [Yahshua] have loved you... also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:34-35)

The fallout from the Reformation—*outside* the areas where the Catholic church still held sway—was not a huge, united group of believers, alive, Christ centered and Spirit filled. It was, rather, a splintered hodgepodge of fiercely independent religious organizations, each suspicious and resentful of the others, quick to call anyone a heretic who did not agree with them in every nuance of doctrine and practice. They rarely supported, sheltered, encouraged, or prayed for

each other. They certainly did not love one another as Christ had loved them. Along with the Catholicism they had rightly abandoned, they were the church at Sardis: as good as dead.

The Reformation opened a door, however. The advent of the printing press and the will to use it to put the Word of God into the hands of the masses precipitated a revolution in spiritual awareness that's still going on to this day. Out of Sardis, a dying fire with only a few live coals left smoldering among the ashes, would come the last two churches on John's mailing list. One used the fresh air breathed upon it by the Reformation to rekindle the flame of Christianity; the other took the cold, dead coals of their religion and encrusted them with gold and jewels—impressive to look at perhaps, but of no practical use to anyone. These two churches both characterize the present era; today they live side by side, along with scattered remnants of previously addressed assemblies. This arrangement will continue until the end of the church age.

What does God see when he looks at us? Yahshua put it this way: **"The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field; but while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat and went his way. But when the grain had sprouted and produced a crop, then the tares [weeds that look like wheat] also appeared. So the servants of the owner came and said to him, 'Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?' He said to them, 'An enemy has done this.' The servants said to him, 'Do you want us then to go and gather them up?' But he said, 'No, lest while you gather up the tares you also uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest.'" (Matthew 13:24-30)** There's an eschatological element to this, and I'll address it in due time. But for now, suffice it to say that the Church has both "wheat" and "weeds," i.e., real Christians and look-alike forgeries, growing together within it.

The sixth church, Philadelphia, is apparently the "wheat." It is one of only two in John's list that received no condemnation at all from Yahshua: **"To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write, 'These things says He who is holy, He who is true, He who has the key of David, He who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens: "I know your works. See, I have set before you an open door, and no one can shut it; for you have a little strength, have kept My word, and have not denied My name. Indeed I will make those of the synagogue of Satan, who say they are Jews and are not [because they do not worship Yahweh], but lie—indeed I will make them come and worship before your feet, and to know that I have loved you. Because you have kept My command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those**

who dwell on the earth. Behold, I am coming quickly! Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown. He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more. And I will write on him the name of My God and the name of the city of My God, the New Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God. And I will write on him My new name. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”” (Revelation 3:7-13)

I don't know about you, but the hair on the back of my neck stands up when I read those words. If any Christian could wish to be somewhere—spiritually, doctrinally, or prophetically—this is it. Yahshua has no words of rebuke for these folks, none at all. The only other church in the list with that distinction was Smyrna, and *they* were getting killed in the streets for their faith—like I said, there's nothing like persecution to help you sort out what you really believe. But Philadelphia had not been *driven* to this place of blessing; they had sought it out; they had come here through simple faith and obedience.

Yahshua says, “I know your works.” That usually brings to mind things like feeding the poor, healing the sick, preaching the gospel to those in darkness, and basically living like civilized human beings. And yes, the church at Philadelphia was doing—and is still doing—all those things. But I don't think that's what He meant, not all of it, anyway. Yahshua was once asked to define “the work of God.” The answer was surprising, especially for those who were looking for some kind of laundry list of do's and don'ts like the Ten Commandments. He said, **“This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent.”** (John 6:29) That is precisely what the Philadelphians were doing: trusting Yahshua. They had “kept His Word” (and shown their love for it by translating it into virtually every language on the face of the earth—and then printing billions of copies). They had “not denied his name.” And they had “kept His commandment to persevere”—to patiently endure the testing of their faith in the face of both hostility and apathy.

There are two other remarkable things about this message to the church at Philadelphia, and I believe they're related. The first is the odd statement about the “synagogue of Satan,” i.e., the Jews in unbelief (also referred to in the letter to Smyrna). At the risk of getting ahead of myself, it is clear from many scriptures that Israel will at some future point turn—as a people—in repentance to God, recognizing Yahshua the Christ as their Messiah. Today, about half of the world's Jews live in Israel, a percentage that I have reason to believe will increase as the end approaches. Having been there recently, I can assure you of two things. As a people, they are hungry for the truth; they're curious, cautious, and confused, all at the same time. And they seem to intuitively recognize that Bible-believing Christians are their only real ally in the world. Remarkably, American Evangelicals are far more pro-Israel politically than American Jews are! Today, the world's Jews as a group comprise the “synagogue of Satan,” regarding the

Ekklesia to be a mere heretical spin off of Judaism. (Those few Jews who recognize Yahshua as their Messiah, of course, are actually part of the Church, just as they were in the Apostolic age.)

Hold that thought for a moment and consider verse 10: **“Because you have kept My command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth.”** The “hour of trial” is described elsewhere as “the Tribulation” or the “time of Jacob’s trouble.” We’ll study it in detail when our chronological survey gets to it. But notice for now that the church of Philadelphia will be “kept from” (Greek *ek*, meaning “out of”) this world-wide testing period. They won’t have to endure this trial because they have *already* kept Christ’s command to persevere.

Now, back to Israel. What will they do and think when their only earthly ally is suddenly removed from the scene (we’ll get to how *that* works in Chapter 8), leaving them alone in the world, friendless? What have they always done in the past? Repent? Turn back to God? If Old Testament history is any indication, that’s exactly what they’ll do—but not until the situation has become hopeless, when they’ve exhausted every other recourse, when they’ve been driven to their knees.

But how will they know God? How will they recognize their true Messiah? Their own religious leaders—the rabbis of the “synagogue of Satan”—have been misleading them for the last two thousand years. It will be through the latent testimony of the Church of Philadelphia—who themselves will have been removed from the scene by that time, kept out of the hour of trial. The Jews will remember what we said, what we wrote, and what we did, and they will return to their own scriptures with opened eyes. Then, and only then, will they realize that our Messiah is their Messiah. They will finally know how much Yahshua loved us—*loves* us—and they will sit at our feet and worship Him.

If only the list had ended there. It did not. There is one church left, that of Laodicea, located about sixty miles due east of Ephesus, the last in the chain of churches running southeast from Pergamos. Yahshua didn’t have a single good thing to say to these folks. They are the parable’s tares, the weeds, living among the wheat at the close of the church age, looking good to the uninformed world, but producing no grain at all.

In a way, it’s sad to think that anything that Yahshua called part of the Church could be left on earth after Philadelphia is gone. If the “true” Church has been

“kept from the hour of trial,” what will become of the “false” Church that’s left behind? There is only one possible answer: they will go through it—they will be tested like gold in a crucible. As individuals, some will be purified through the process of persecution, and some will be revealed for the worthless dross they are.

I need to make something clear here, at the outset, even though we’re getting way ahead of our timeline. I’m not suggesting that some “worthy” Christians will escape the hour of trial, while other, “unworthy” Christians—carnal, backslidden, or misinformed—will be tested and purified in the fires of judgment. This idea, known as the “partial rapture theory” has no scriptural basis, and worse, places works on the same pedestal as grace as a means of salvation. That’s wrong. As we shall see, the “church” at Laodicea has no real believers within it when Philadelphia is “kept out of” the Tribulation (in an event known as the “rapture”). Because of God’s longsuffering grace, Laodicea *will* experience the salvation of Yahshua—but too late to keep them out of the hour of trial.

When I was a kid, my family attended a Bible-believing local assembly of a major American denomination. I distinctly remember being taught that not only if you died without Christ but also if the Church was “called home,” leaving you behind in unbelief, there was no hope for you. The bottom line: you’d better come forward and “get saved” before we got through singing all seven verses of “Just As I Am,” or you were toast. They were on the right track, I suppose; but they couldn’t remotely see how long the track was. Since then I’ve come to be more closely acquainted with the depth of God’s mercy. I have personally come to know the God of second chances. And third, and fourth.... After studying what Yahshua said to the church at Laodicea, I am amazed at how longsuffering He really is.

The message to Laodicea teaches us just how deep the river of God’s grace runs: **“And to the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write, ‘These things says the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God: I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth. Because you say, “I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing”—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked—I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see. As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me. To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”** (Revelation 3:14-22)

As he had said to the church at Philadelphia, Yahshua repeats, “I know your works.” But this time it’s an indictment, for the works they are doing are done with a “lukewarm” spirit that Christ finds disgusting. There is none of the love, fire, passion, faith, or sense of urgency that animated their brothers to the northwest. It is tempting to conclude that Laodicean wealth was the problem; it was (and is) certainly a factor. But wealth isn’t sin, though it can foster an attitude of arrogant self-sufficiency (and *that is*). Yahshua isn’t asking them to feign enthusiasm here; He’s pleading with them to recognize Him as the source of true riches.

At this point it might be helpful to compare historical Laodicea and Philadelphia a bit more closely. Philadelphia was a blue-collar kind of place; it was not a wealthy community, though it wasn’t dirt poor like the believers at Smyrna either. But Laodicea was like Beverly Hills or Manhattan. The city was renowned for three things. It was the principal banking center for the region of Phrygia and was thus known for its wealth. It was a center of medical knowledge, famous for its “Phrygian powder,” an eye salve valued throughout the Roman world. And it produced a fine wool, coveted far and wide. The letter uses each of these examples to personally relate to their condition.

Both cities were located in a volcanically and seismically active area still known to trouble western Turkey. Philadelphia had no material resources to speak of. They had no choice but to rely on God’s protection, and they did just that. Since their “strength was made perfect in weakness,” their city was spared the ravages of geology far longer than any of the others. Laodicea, on the other hand, was self sufficient and proud of it. *Hey, God helps those who help themselves, right?* When a major earthquake in A.D. 62 leveled the city, they said “Thanks, but no thanks” to offers of help from the emperor, and proceeded to rebuild it themselves, bigger and better than ever. Their money had “In us do we trust” printed on it (just kidding).

So who is Laodicea today? Labels are clumsy tools, but generally speaking, the Christian world now stands roughly divided between “fundamental” and “liberal,” camps, i.e., those who are willing to believe what God’s word plainly says, and those who aren’t. There are Catholics and Protestants (or more correctly, non-Catholics) on both sides of this equation. Just as there are facets of Catholic doctrine that don’t square with scripture, there are major Protestant denominations that have gone out of their way to deny baseline truths that Catholics wholeheartedly embrace, doctrines such as the virgin birth, the resurrection of Christ, and anything resembling a miracle: *The idea of the atoning blood of Jesus is just too gory and uncivilized for our modern sensibilities, and the concept of personal sin is upsetting and old fashioned, not to mention*

inconvenient. We're pretty sure Christ was a great moral teacher, but we can't quite get behind his outrageously narrow-minded claims to deity.

Evangelicals and fundamentalists, on the other hand, are commonly referred to by them as “unbalanced, reactionary, right-wing religious whackos”. Whatever. Paul warns us that as the end draws near, old-fashioned Biblical truth will go out of style: **“The time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables.”** (II Timothy 4:3-4)

The fascinating—and often overlooked—fact is that Yahshua still holds out hope for the Laodiceans. He points out that He's only rebuking and chastising them because He loves them. Then He pictures Himself as knocking at their door, asking them to invite Him in. Yes, He is not now among them—He's outside, looking in. And yes, while the Philadelphians have been promised to be kept safe from the coming unpleasantness, the Laodiceans haven't. The world is sinking. Yahshua has provided the lifeboat. But since the Laodiceans have refused to get in, they're going to get wet. Yahshua still pleads with them to “open the door” to Him, to repent and to overcome the world as He did. That's grace.

I'm sure you noticed (I *hope* you noticed) that I glossed over some sections of the seven letters. I wanted to handle some of this stuff topically. Each of the messages is structured the same way. It opens (as was customary at this time) by identifying and describing the Author. An observation as to the condition of the particular church comes next, followed by a warning or admonition. Each letter closes with a promise that begins with the formula, “To him who overcomes...” Since the Author is the same for all seven letters, and since the warnings, admonitions, and promises apply in some measure to all Christians, it makes sense to look at the forest instead of the individual trees.

John was not the author of these letters. He was merely the amanuensis. The descriptive phrases used were part of John's vision of the risen Messiah. This vision was the reason he wrote this letter to the seven Asian churches: **“John, to the seven churches which 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 from the dead, and the ruler over the kings of the earth. To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood, and has made us kings and priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. Behold, He is coming with clouds, and every eye will see Him, even they who pierced**

Him. And all the tribes of the earth will mourn because of Him. Even so, Amen. 'I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End,' says the Lord, 'who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.'

"I, John, both your brother and companion in the tribulation and kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was on the island that is called Patmos for the word of God and for the testimony of Jesus Christ. I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day, and I heard behind me a loud voice, as of a trumpet, saying, 'I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last,' and, 'What you see, write in a book and send it to the seven churches which are in Asia: to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamos, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea.'

"Then I turned to see the voice that spoke with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the seven lampstands One like the Son of Man, clothed with a garment down to the feet and girded about the chest with a golden band. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and His eyes like a flame of fire; His feet were like fine brass, as if refined in a furnace, and His voice as the sound of many waters; He had in His right hand seven stars, out of His mouth went a sharp two-edged sword, and His countenance was like the sun shining in its strength. And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as dead. But He laid His right hand on me, saying to me, 'Do not be afraid; I am the First and the Last. I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and of Death. Write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after this. The mystery of the seven stars which 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 which you saw are the seven churches.'" (Revelation 1:4-20)

In the individualized letters that followed, Yahshua described Himself just as John had seen Him: "He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands... the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life... He who has the sharp two-edged sword... the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet like fine brass... He who searches the minds and hearts... He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars... He who is holy, He who is true, He who has the key of David, He who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens... the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God."

John had known Yahshua for years as a mortal man. He had seen him on the Mount of Transfiguration, revealed in glory for a brief moment. And he had seen Him after His resurrection in a body that could do things no man had ever done before, dead *or* alive. John had also seen his fellow disciples martyred one by one because of their faith, and according to legend his own execution—by being boiled in oil—had not been successful; he had instead been exiled to this desolate Aegean island, an old man no doubt wondering why he alone had been spared. *Why?* If there were any man alive who was prepared to meet and describe the

glorified Messiah, it was John. I mean, if *John* “fell at His feet as dead,” the encounter probably would have *killed* anybody else.

Significantly, Christ’s first self-description speaks of his association with, and care for, His Church. It’s clearly explained in verse 20, **“The seven stars are the angels [or messengers, i.e., pastors] of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands which you saw are the seven churches.”** He walks among us. He holds us in his right hand. We are His—and not just Smyrna and Philadelphia but all seven churches, even the one that, at the moment, He feels like vomiting out of His mouth!

“The First and the Last,” the “Alpha and Omega,” the “Beginning and the End, and the Beginning (Greek: *arche*) of the Creation of God,” speak of Christ’s eternity. *Arche* doesn’t merely indicate being first in time, as if Yahshua was the “first” among Yahweh’s many created beings. It means “chief” in various applications of order, place, or rank—including time. Yahshua therefore exercises preeminence over the Creation of God. He is once again equating Himself with the Father, Yahweh—“I Am.” Those who think Yahshua was something less than God need to deal with that. The fact that He was dead and came to life by His own power demonstrates His deity as well. “He who searches the minds and hearts” and “the sharp two-edged sword” speak of Christ as the Word of God, sharp enough to penetrate to our very souls. As John also wrote, **“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory...”** (John 1:1, 14)

The glorified Son of God even *looks* like what we’d expect God to look like (which, I presume, is why Satan transforms himself into an angel of light). The glowing skin and flaming eyes remind us of Yahshua’s appearance on the Mount of Transfiguration, where it was said even His *clothes* shone like the sun. Actually, the closest parallel to this description is in Daniel 10, where an angel—not a theophany—is described as having feet of brass and eyes of flame. At the very least, this is the kind of thing you don’t see every day: a being whose very appearance is wonderful, terrifying, and awe-inspiring.

The “seven Spirits (or seven-fold Spirit) of God” refers back to a passage from the prophet Isaiah predicting the coming of Messiah: **“There shall come forth a Rod from the stem of Jesse [the father of David], And a Branch shall grow out of his roots. The Spirit of [1] Yahweh shall rest upon Him, the Spirit of [2] wisdom and [3] understanding, the Spirit of [4] counsel and [5] might, the Spirit of [6] knowledge and of the [7] fear of Yahweh.”** (Isaiah 11:1-2) Thus Messiah “has the key of David,” and with it the power to open and close, to bind and loosen, including authority over Hades and death itself.

If there were any question before, there shouldn’t be now: we are dealing with God Himself—the risen Christ manifested in the glory He had left behind when he entered history in the form of a man. This is the second of the “two” Messiahs

who were predicted by the prophets of old. The first wasn't treated very well by the Jewish religious establishment. I wonder how they would have liked this one.

When you put the admonitions to the seven churches together, a few interesting truths emerge. The first is that the coming of Christ for His Church was imminent throughout the age of grace. It could have occurred at any time. References to the sudden appearance of Christ are sprinkled throughout the letters, from Ephesus to Philadelphia. But remarkably, Laodicea received no such admonition; they were not told to “watch.” The obvious reason is that by the time the prophetic letter to the church at Laodicea is ultimately fulfilled, Yahshua will have *already* returned and taken His church home.

The second truth that becomes immediately evident is that there are echoes of each of these churches in evidence simultaneously throughout the age, just as there were in John's day. Therefore, we need to be mindful of what Yahshua said to all the churches, not just the one in whose age we think we are living:

Remember from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works [i.e., return to your first love], or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent.... Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.... Repent, or else I will come to you quickly and will fight against [those who would compromise their faith] with the sword of My mouth.... And I will give to each one of you according to your works.... But hold fast what you have till I come.... Remember how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent. If you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you.... Behold, I am coming quickly [i.e., suddenly]! Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown.... I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see. As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent.

The recurring themes aren't hard to spot. Five of the churches were exhorted to repent—to turn around and go the other way, to change their minds. (The exceptions, of course, were Smyrna and Philadelphia, who were holding fast to their faith, and were encouraged to continue.) What were the five to repent from? Ephesus had left their first love. Pergamos and Thyatira had compromised with the world. Sardis had gone so far down this road to idolatry they were as good as dead. And Laodicea had exchanged their relationship with the living God for the trappings of a dead religion. When you boil it down to its essentials, then, Yahshua is simply telling the Church what he'd always told us: don't concern

yourself with “religion,” but rather separate yourselves from the world; love God with your whole heart, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor the same way you love yourself.

Each letter also contains a promise to “him who overcomes.” Overcomes what? The things they were told to repent from—leaving their first love, compromising their faith with the world’s system (the doctrine of Balaam and Nicolas of Antioch), building a ponderous bureaucracy in the Church, tolerating sexual and spiritual immorality in the Church (i.e., idolatry), and, in the words of Paul, “having a form of Godliness, but denying its power.”

This is what Yahshua promises: **To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God.... He shall not be hurt by the second death.... I will give [him] some of the hidden manna to eat. And I will give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name written which no one knows except him who receives it.... I will give [him who keeps my works until the end] power over the nations—“He shall rule them with a rod of iron; They shall be dashed to pieces like the potter’s vessels”—as I also have received from My Father; and I will give him the morning star.... [He] shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels.... I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more. And I will write on him the name of My God and the name of the city of My God, the New Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God. And I will write on him My new name.... I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.**

Eat your heart out, Santa Claus. This is quite a Christmas list. It starts with everybody’s favorite stocking stuffer, eternal life. Remember the Genesis account of the Garden of Eden? Among all the trees, two were mentioned in particular: the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and the tree of life. Adam and Eve were told not to eat the fruit of the first one, but when they did, they had to be expelled from the Garden so they wouldn’t eat the fruit of the second one. Why? Apparently because the tree of life would have enabled them to live forever. But their sin had already precipitated its punishment: **“And Yahweh, God, commanded the man, saying, ‘Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.’”** (Genesis 2:16-17) With that first mouthful of forbidden fruit, Adam’s body became mortal. Not only had his spirit immediately died—being disconnected from that of Yahweh, the physical aging process began as well; his biological clock began to tick. Nine hundred and thirty years later, the process that had started with a disobedient little nibble ended with a decaying corpse. Adam’s soul had departed from his body.

Although we aren’t told, my suspicion is that somewhere around year 600 Adam began to see the benefit of not living forever in a corruptible body. As we

get older, we realize that eternal life in our present bodies would be more curse than blessing. But God has something else in mind for us—bodies that are built to live forever. We'll discuss the mechanics of eternal life more fully in a later chapter, but for now I merely want to point out that the promises to those “who overcome” can't really be fulfilled if we're still clothed in our mortal flesh. The “second death” we will avoid presupposes a *first* death—the death of the physical body—that all of us will endure one way or another. It is only those whose names are blotted out of the “Book of Life,” those who are truly lost, who will suffer this second death. The overcomers will not.

We can't receive the gifts God has for us until we receive our new incorruptible bodies. We'll finally eat from the tree of life that eluded Adam. Yahshua also mentions “hidden manna,” a symbol of His sufficiency. The “white stone” with a secret name on it is a picture of acquittal. Satan has been accusing us, but Yahshua our advocate has made sure that we are found guiltless. No, it's better than that: the “white garments” speak of innocence, purity, not just a dearth of damning evidence. That's why Christ can confess our names before the Father and His angels—He's already paid the penalty for our crimes. The next item is just as remarkable: “power over the nations.” This is tantamount to making us co-rulers with Christ. Paul alluded to this amazing fact as well when he asked, **“Do you not know that the saints will judge the world?”** (I Corinthians 6:2) We will actually share the throne of King Yahshua! I don't know about you, but the very thought makes me blush.

The last thought makes me smile. Did you ever get something you really wanted, something very valuable or meaningful to you? What did you do with it? Chances are, you wrote your name and address on it, just in case. Well, so did God: **“I will write on him the name of My God and the name of the city of My God, the New Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God. And I will write on him My new name.”** (Revelation 3:12) Why would Yahshua do that? Because we're precious to Him—valuable, costly. It's *us* He was describing in his parable when he said, **“The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls, who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it.”** (Matthew 13:45-46)

So there it is. Yahweh has arranged human destiny and His plan of redemption to be revealed in sevens. Seven successive dispensations, or eras of His unfolding revelation, are indicated in scripture, five of which have passed, one of which we are living in, and the last of which is yet to come. In the present dispensation, the

Church age, seven successive phases have been foretold. Five of them have seen their primary fulfillments in history. The sixth Church now eagerly anticipates the imminent return of Yahshua the Messiah. And the seventh has no idea who He is—yet. Also, seven great annual feasts or appointments have been ordained to prophetically mark the seven most significant events in our history—both past and future. Five have been fulfilled down to the smallest detail, though one of them—out of order in its fulfillment—must still be completed through an event yet future; three of these holy convocations remain before us.

If you're new to all this, you may be asking yourself, "Yahshua the Messiah—a.k.a. Jesus Christ—may have come once, died for our sins, and risen from the dead, but who ever said He was coming again?" Good question. The answer is, *He* did: **"Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also. And where I go you know, and the way you know." Thomas said to Him, 'Lord, we do not know where You are going, and how can we know the way?' Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.'" (John 14:1-6)**

Though Yahshua could have returned for His Church in any of the last two thousand years without breaking His promise, He did not. Trust me on this; we would have noticed. Therefore, His return is yet future. Considering the established, one-hundred-percent-perfect track record of fulfilled Biblical prophecy, there can be no question of *if*, only of *when*.

Here's the rub. It *can't* be very far in the future. Everything we've been told to expect has either already come to pass or is now poised on the brink of fulfillment. If the doctrine of God's seven-thousand-year-plan (six of man, one of Yahshua) is correct, then we're at the very doors. I'm convinced that it is. Although it's not explicitly spelled out anywhere in scripture, it's alluded to and hinted at dozens of times. At the very least, we're one day closer to Yahshua's second coming than we were yesterday.