

Revelation - Commentaries by E.B. T.

Behold, I Stand at the Door and Knock, Behold, I Stand at the Door and Knock: 1 (3:20)

Before we enter on the consideration of these words, we would remark, that whilst the first of these seven addresses to the churches in Asia was sent to the scene of the apostle Paul's protracted labors, it was not so with the Epistle from which the above words are quoted.

Yet there is this in common, that both Ephesus and Laodicea were alike favored with the same wonderful communication from the apostle, as that which we know under the title of "The Epistle to the Ephesians." For we have no doubt that this same apostolic writing is the one referred to in Colossians 4:16, where we read, "And when this epistle [to the Colossians] is read among you, cause that it be read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and that ye likewise read the [epistle] from Laodicea."

This "epistle from Laodicea," being an inspired epistle, is not a "lost" one, as some unhappily, as we think, have concluded, but a copy, or duplicate, of the one addressed to the Ephesians, and which copy had been brought forward as far as to Laodicea, and left there, to be subsequently sent on to Colosse, which lay about eighteen miles to the east of Laodicea. The saints at Colosse are here apprized by the apostle of an epistle which was coming on to them "from Laodicea," to be read by them, in the same way as the one they at Colosse had now received, was to be sent to Laodicea to be read by the saints there.

Our reasons for this view are as follows. It is well known that the words "in Ephesus" (Ephesians 1:1) are omitted by the Sinaitic and Vatican MSS. (of the fourth century); are remarked by Basil as not found in the ancient copies (ἐν τοῖς παλαιοῖς τῶν ἀντιγράφων); and as not known at all by Origen (third century); though later MSS., and the Vv. contain the words.

Marcion and Tertulian (of the second century) knew this epistle as connected with the Laodiceans, so that it is difficult to account for this knowledge without some basis for it.

Then again, there is the remarkable absence of personal salutations in the epistle, although the apostle had lived amongst them for three years, and knew the Ephesians well. Only, as we think, by recognizing the fact that the letter was meant for others besides the Ephesian saints.

And if we take into consideration the character of the Epistle as a whole, it is difficult to account for this knowledge on their part without sound basis for it. (To be continued)

Behold, I Stand at the Door and Knock, Behold, I Stand at the Door and Knock: 2 (3:20)

Again, there is the singular absence of the apostle's personal salutations, though he is writing to those who had known his presence and labors amongst them for three years—quite inexplicable if the letter was one indeed, sent only to the saints at Ephesus, and containing neither greetings from, nor greetings to, any one there by name. On the other hand, when writing to the Colossians, whom he had not even visited (Colossians 2:1), we do meet with salutations—from Epaphras who, now at Rome with the apostle, is named as "one of you"; from others also, and finally from the writer himself. Further, there are two amongst these "saints and faithful brethren" at Colosse, who are singled out, viz., Nymphas and Archippus, so that we are in no way left in doubt as to the destination of this Epistle.

Then further, in considering the general character of the teaching in these two writings, we see that—whilst in Colossians we are in face of specific dangers (chap. 2) against which these saints are warned, and the essential and relative glories of the Lord Jesus are anticipatively presented (chap. 2) as the safeguard, and the true corrective to "not holding the Head," etc.—in the Epistle to the Ephesians we have brought before us the eternal purposes and counsels of God, revealed for the common blessing of all that now believe "the word of truth, the gospel of... salvation." Is not this meant for all saints? And there is, as it appears to us, this remarkable propriety in eliminating everything from this epistle that would in the slightest degree tend to restrict the wonderful blessings here unfolded to a special or favored class. What is true for the Ephesians is also for "all the saints" to "comprehend" likewise (3:18).

This may then suffice in confirmation of the view we have taken as to the Epistle to the Ephesians being sent, at least as specifically, to Laodicea as to Ephesus.

It may be interesting to some to know that Beza appears to have been the first to suggest this probability of the share of other assemblies in the receipt of this same Epistle. For in his first and second editions (1559, 1565) of his folio Greek Testament no comment is made, but in his third (1582) he is inclined to think that this epistle was sent (as he says) to Ephesus, rather than to the Ephesians, in order that it might be passed on to the other churches of Asia. Deans Howson and Alford are scarcely correct therefore in attributing the first start of this "hypothesis" to Archbishop Usher, as his "Annals" did not appear till seventy years later. (To be continued)

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Behold, I Stand at the Door and Knock, Behold, I Stand at the Door and Knock: 3 (3:20)

How then, it may be asked, does all this bear upon the Apocalyptic addresses to the seven churches in Asia? In this way, that although Laodicea may represent the last phase of the church, viewed in its progressive history on earth, and thus, as far removed from apostolic times, it nevertheless is no less responsible than Ephesus to continue in the truth as revealed— “the faith once for all delivered to the saints.” Both, receiving the same apostolic epistle, were alike privileged and responsible to “walk as children of light,” who, “at one time darkness,” were “now light in the Lord.”

In the address “to the angel of the church in Ephesus,” we have before us those who had been favored with the personal ministry and oversight of an apostle, and he had “not shunned to declare to them all the counsel of God.” In Laodicea, on the other hand, we have those who had not been so privileged, yet had they, as we have seen, this same apostle's written words, if not his presence—words affecting every saint on earth, both as to his present blessings in Christ in the heavenlies, and his responsibilities, individual and corporate, down here.

We see how the Lord values the love of His own, in that He is not content with activity of service where first love is lacking. “But I have against thee that thou hast left thy first love. Remember, therefore, from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works” (Revelation 2:4, 5). What is our love worth indeed, we might say? Yet does He value it, look for it, is not satisfied without it, and calls to repentance where this love is wanting. Oh, what a rebuke of our inconstant hearts! His love is unchanging, and never fails. Why should we not be on to know and appreciate it better that so His love may indeed call forth ours in deeper intensity?

Looking, then, at these several addresses as not only sent to seven actually existing churches of the apostle John's days, presenting the respective features here disclosed to us, but as also prophetic of the successive phases of “the church” condition (and in the case of the last four, going on concurrently after they have severally arisen), during its existence on the earth, we shall be prepared to appreciate the singular appropriateness of the Lord's touching appeal to our own very selves in this our day.

By “the church” is meant not the aggregate of believers from Abel down to the end, but those converted and formed into one body by the Holy Ghost sent down at Pentecost as the consequence of Christ's work and exaltation on high. As our Lord predicted (Matthew 16) that upon Himself, the Rock, He would build His church, so we find that saints now are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets (of the New Testament), Jesus Christ Himself being the chief corner-stone (Ephesians 2:20). Before Christ died, He was alone (John 12:24). There could be no “union in incarnation,” for death was before Him, and the judgment of our sins, and into that judgment the blessed Lord would not take His own. The believer comes not into judgment (John 5:24). It was “by Himself He made purification for sins” (Hebrews 1:3). Alone in life and on the cross, He, the Risen One, is no longer alone. Now living, to die no more, He can say, “Go to my brethren.” For His God is our God, His Father is our Father.

So also we see that His death was not for “the nation” only, but to “gather together into one the children of God that were scattered abroad,” and it is because He has been “lifted up from the earth” that He draws all to Him.

Clearly, then, it is not before but after Christ's death that this is brought about. “Being by the right hand of God exalted, and having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Ghost, he hath shed forth this which ye now see and hear.” This is the explanation of Pentecost, and later, we learn by another apostle, that “by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Gentiles” (Acts 2:33 Corinthians 12:13)..(To be continued)

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Behold, I Stand at the Door and Knock, Behold, I Stand at the Door and Knock: 4 (3:20)

(Continued from page 48)

OF Jews and Gentiles there has now been created “one new man,” where national distinctions no longer obtain (Ephesians 2:15, 16; Colossians 3:11), so that whilst before the cross all mankind were comprised under two heads (whether believer or unbeliever), namely, as either Jew or Gentile, it is not so since the cross. There is now the introduction of a third class, hitherto non-existent, as in 1 Corinthians 10:32, “Give none offense, neither to the Jews, nor to the Gentiles, nor to the church of God.”

The “church” of God, then, comprises all believers since Pentecost, “baptized into one body,” and who are “the body of Christ, and members in particular.” But in the first three chapters of the Revelation we have the churches before us under the symbol of—not “one,” but— “seven golden lampstands,” in the midst of which is seen one like to the Son of man with eyes as a flame of fire, and from whose mouth went a sharp two-edged sword. Here we see that the “seven churches” are viewed as under Christ's judicial eye and word in regard to their individual and collective responsibility as light-bearers. “Holiness becometh thine house, O Lord, forever.” And “the time [is come] that judgment must begin at the house of God, and if it first begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God?”

Let us hear, then, what the Spirit says to the churches. The Lord, in His faithful love to His own, has His eye upon us in this scene of danger and difficulty, and lets us know what He looks for from those who profess His name. He is not indifferent to our walk and testimony, but would have us to be in the intelligence of His mind and will, and in fidelity of heart to judge whatever is abhorrent to Him.

Hence the call in five of these seven addresses to “repent.” Where is repentance if the state of things under His condemnation is continued? To repent is, in holy judgment of the evil, to depart from it. We are to “cease to do evil,” and to “learn to do well.”

In chapter 2:4, the charge against Ephesus is, “Thou hast left thy first love,” with the call to “remember, therefore, from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works.” What are works worth without love? The true answer of our hearts to this appeal of His affection

will be the walking after His commandments (2 John 6). If we love Him that begat, we love Him also that is begotten of Him, and hereby “we know that we love the children of God when we love God, and do his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous” (1 John 5:1-3).

If then we are thus walking, Christ will be the one object before our eyes; and our ambition will be, not to be pleasers of men, but to be well pleasing to Him. And in this, too, what a blessed example we have in the Lord Jesus Christ, who set the Lord always before His face. “For even Christ pleased not himself; but, as it is written, the reproaches of them that reproached thee fell on me.” If we are reproached for the name of Christ, how happy! And if the going forth to Him without the camp entails this reproach, let us not shrink on that account, but, in dependence upon Him, obey. May our “ministry of song,” the confession of our lips, our activity of service, and the bounty of our hands be in divine harmony, for “with such sacrifices God is well pleased” (Hebrews 13:13-16).

“We have known and believed the love that God hath to us. God is love, and he that abideth in love abides in God, and God in him.” “We love, because He first loved us.” And this commandment have we from Him, “That he who loveth God love his brother also” (1 John 4:16, 19, 21).

To the Thessalonian saints the apostle Paul could say, “As touching brotherly love ye need not that I write unto you, for ye yourselves are taught of God to love one another. And, indeed, ye do it toward all the brethren which are in Macedonia: but we beseech you, brethren, that ye increase more and more.” This increase of love will not tend to laxity, or indifference, for love is of God, and God is light as well as love. And so we read, also in this same epistle, “And the Lord make you to increase and abound in love one toward another, and toward all, even as we toward you, to the end he may stablish your hearts unblameable in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints” (1 Thessalonians 3:12, 13; 4:9, 10). And without practical holiness no one shall see the Lord (Hebrews 10:14).

It is when, losing the sense of Christ's deep love to us— “He loved me, and gave himself for me,” we fall from our first love to Him, that other objects crowd before the eye and enter the heart. It is no longer Christ—He has been displaced. Moses and Elias were honored saints of God. But He is above all. And where it is not “Jesus only” that commands the mind and heart, how He feels this lapse from “first love”! “Little children, keep yourselves from idols.” May we heed indeed this necessary warning!

Behold, I Stand at the Door and Knock, Behold, I Stand at the Door and Knock: 5 (3:20)

We will now briefly glance at the addresses that follow.

To Smyrna there is no word of reproof, but of encouragement; and if the saints are in “tribulation and poverty” as far as earthly circumstances are concerned (“but thou art rich,” is what He says), the tribulation is not without its limit, and they are called to be “faithful unto death.” Should we be less faithful in the more subtle, but less avowed, antagonism of to-day?

How different is the state of Pergamos, where, not content to “dwell alone” (Numbers 23:9), the church is seen as dwelling where is Satan's throne! Is it, then, to be wondered at for “evil communications (` consortium et sermones ') do corrupt good manners” —that we find here the toleration in their midst of some “holding” the doctrine of Baltham, as well as of others that “of the Nicolaitanes in like manner”? Is this a small evil? “Repent, therefore, or else I am coming unto thee quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth” (2:14-16). These are the words of Him who presents Himself to this church as having “the sharp two-edged sword” (ver. -12), and He threatens His instant coming and war against these holders of evil doctrines.

An advance of evil comes before us in Thyatira. If in Ephesus there was the righteous abhorrence of the “deeds” of the Nicolaitanes, so hateful to the Lord (ver. 6), in Pergamos we have the sufferance in the midst of the holders of the doctrine of the Nicolaitanes,” &c. (ver. 15); whilst here in Thyatira there is the “letting alone” of the woman Jezebel who “teacheth and deceiveth my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed to idols” (ver. 20). How grievous where there is (by “letting alone,”) this sinful acquiescence in guilty commerce with the world (what is here signified by “fornication”), instead of holy separation from it, and there is acknowledgment of other claims on the heart than those of the Christ of God (the eating of “things sacrificed to idols”)! His eyes are as a flame of fire, and His feet like to burnished brass, and He will have all the churches to know that He searcheth reins and hearts, as well as ways and deeds. The indictment here is—not the personal guilt of the teacher only, but the suffering or allowing what another does. “But I have against thee that thou sufferest the woman Jezebel.” To be personally clear of, and to condemn, the evil doctrine taught-important as this assuredly is for every child of God-is not enough. We see from these addresses that the Lord calls for more, viz., that where there are those that teach or even hold what is offensive to Christ, He demands that we “repent” of their presence in our midst, for all are affected by the tolerance of the evil within, whether actively taught or only passively held. Are we sufficiently alive to the defiling power of sin? Do we really believe that “a little leaven” —whether of doctrine (Galatians 5:9), or of walk (1 Corinthians 5:6), “leavens the whole lump”? It is not our measure of what is wickedness, but what God reveals in His word so to be. Our thoughts—even of “the wise of this world” —are vanity. “The wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable,” &c.

Sardis-“ Thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead. Be watchful... for I have not found thy works complete before my God. Remember, therefore, how thou hast received and heard; and keep, and repent” (3:1-3).

Insubjection to the word of God leads to forgetfulness of how and what we may have received and heard. But we need to be brought back, and are exhorted to keep or hold fast what we have received from the Giver of every good. The truth does not “accommodate” itself to the fitful changes of time, but is ever according to godliness. It sanctifies divinely, and commands our obedience. Our loins are to be girt about with truth, and our souls are purified by obedience to it. Do we desire that our works should be “complete before God?” This is what the Lord desires, and should we not be “ambitious (φιλοτιμούμεθα) that, whether present or absent, we may be well pleasing to him” (2 Corinthians 5:9)? There were a few in Sardis that called forth the Lord's approval, and who are they? Those who had “not defiled their garments” in their walk here below, of whom it is said, “They shall walk with me in white, for they are worthy.” How blessed thus to have

“honorable mention” from Him! And if so for the few in Sardis, may we in these days not despise such an encomium.

What of Philadelphia? “Thou hast little strength!” How despicable in the eyes of onlookers! Man wants something great and commanding. Even the prophet Jeremiah warned Baruch, “Seekest thou great things for thyself? Seek them not.” But how great is the snare even to-day! What is mostly “great” in this book of the Revelation is what comes under judgment. Apostate Christendom will become great. “Great Babylon” will come in remembrance before God (16:19). “The great city” Babylon shall be thrown down with violence. “The great men of the earth” shall be her merchants (18:23). And later there will be “the great supper of God” to which all the fowls that fly in mid-heaven shall be called to eat the flesh of kings... and of all men... both small and great” (19:17, 18).

But what is according to God is holiness. He “showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God” (21:10)-spoken of the bride, the Lamb's wife (ver. 9). This is not a description of heaven, but of saints since Pentecost, who as forming the church, are now espoused as a chaste virgin to Christ (2 Corinthians 11:2). Then the marriage of the Lamb will have taken place (19:7), and the bride (18:21) is seen displayed as “the holy city” having the glory of God. “The glory which thou gavest me I have given them,” said our Lord to His Father. “And when Christ who is our life, shall be manifested, then shall ye also be manifested with him in glory” (Colossians 3:4). Here, then, is the glorious fulfillment.

We have in display, first Satan's wonderment, his counterfeit, in all its meretricious gorgeousness (17:14), of that for which Christ gave Himself for presentation without spot-holy and blameless. “Howbeit that was not first which is spiritual, but that which is natural, afterward that which is spiritual” —may apply here. The judgment of the corrupt vine of the earth clears the way for the subsequent manifestation in glory of that which is according to the mind of Christ.

But, if in possession of “little strength,” Philadelphia had kept Christ's word, and not denied His name. And He, “the holy” and “the true” records it, and promises exemption from the hour of temptation. May we hold fast what we have, till He come.

(Continued from page 64)

(To be continued).

Behold, I Stand at the Door and Knock, Behold, I Stand at the Door and Knock: 6 (3:20)

We are now arrived at the last of these “seven addresses,” and what a picture is here unfolded to us as represented by “the church in Laodicea!”

From an earlier writing than this Book of the Revelation (the latest written, as is clearly evidenced internally, spite of its rougher Greek, in keeping with its character as the closing book of prophecy), we learn how “Jude, a bondman of Jesus Christ, and brother of James,” had had necessity laid on him (ἀνάγκην ἔσχον) to write exhorting to earnest contention for the faith once for all delivered to the saints. But, as far as Laodicea is concerned, this exhortation might never have been. For where is the zeal for the truth of God against the many errors of to-day? “As many opinions as men,” what is truth? So asked Pilate but waited not for answer. And so here it is like indifference that we see. “Thou art neither cold nor hot; I would thou wert cold or hot. So, because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spue thee out of my mouth.” How offensive is this easy going latitudinarianism to the “Amen, the faithful and true witness”!

Then, again, the self-satisfied and boasting spirit of the age has affected the church. It not only thinks, but proclaims, itself “rich and established in wealth, and in need of nothing,” and knows not its real poverty, nakedness and blindness.

If the world is eager in its pursuit after wealth which cannot be carried above (Job 1, Psalm 49), why should not we be as eager after the true and abiding riches? There is imperishable gold and purified by fire to be obtained, and we are counseled to buy it where only it can be had—“of Me.” So we find the apostle Paul in the Holy and divine “reckoning” of Philippians 3, saying, “But what things were gain to me, these have I counted loss on account of Christ. Yea, verily, and I count all these things to be loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, on account of whom I suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having my righteousness that is of law, but that which is by faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith.” Is not this the “buying of Me gold purified by fire”?

So, too, the “white garments that thou mayest be clothed,” i.e., the saint's practical righteousness of every day, cannot be apart from Him, “for without (or, apart from) me ye can do nothing” (John 15:5). “Blessed is he that watches and keeps his garments that he may not walk naked.”

When self displaces Christ, how blind indeed is the soul! And lukewarmness towards Him is the fit soil for this self-occupation. There is no clear perception of spiritual truth. We see neither Him aright nor ourselves. “Thou knowest not that thou art the wretched one and the miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked.” “As many as I dearly love (φιλω), I rebuke and chasten. Be zealous therefore, and repent.”

And where is Christ? Where shall we find Him where all is so abhorrent? He is outside! “Behold, I stand at the door and knock!”

(Continued from page 80)

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