

Unlocking Revelation

The Seven Churches, Part One

under the law but under grace, he clearly does not mean that we are at liberty to sin, which is transgression of God's law (see 1 John 3:4). He plainly teaches that "we should not serve sin" as Christians who are saved by grace.

So what does Paul mean when he says we are not under the law but under grace?

Moving back in the book of Romans to the context that builds up to chapter 6, we notice the same exact term—"under the law"—that we find in chapter 6. Notice the wording in chapter 3, verse 19:

"Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God."

Here Paul explains what he means by the term "under the law." To be under the law means to be under its condemnation because we are guilty of breaking it. So, as sinners saved by grace, we are no longer under the condemnation of the law, but under the forgiving influence of divine grace. Because God freely forgives our transgression of His law, we are no longer regarded by Him as guilty for our sins.

Further down in chapter 3, we see the proper function of the law and the means by which we are saved:

"Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in His sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference: for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Romans 3:20-24).

Paul is clear. We are not saved by obedience to God's law. The law has one function—to give us a knowledge of our sin. We cannot make up for our wrongdoings by future obedience. There is nothing we can do from this point forward to change the fact of our guilty past. There is only one solution to our problem—we must receive the full and free forgiveness of God, which cannot be earned by obedience.

Do we conclude then that we should live disobedient lives because God has been so gracious as to freely forgive

us? Paul poses the same question and gives us the answer in verse 31 of the same chapter: "Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid: yea, we establish the law." Actually, God's grace ought to be the most powerful motivating factor to prompt us in the direction of obedience to His law, not in order to earn salvation, but out of a heart overflowing with love for the One who has regarded us with such tender compassion.

The Promise to the Overcomer

Each of the messages to the seven churches closes with a special promise to the ones who overcome. To overcome simply means to be victorious, to be triumphant, to win. For the church of Ephesus there is need to overcome the loss of their first love, as is the case with many today. Each church is faced with temptations and circumstances that are liable to thwart their faith unless they overcome. Ultimately we are all individually called upon by the Lord to overcome in our personal battles with Satan, with the world, and with our own sinful selves. The following two Scriptures point out the means by which we are to be overcomers:

1 John 5:4, 5: "For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith. Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God?"

Revelation 12:11: "And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony..."

We do not overcome in our own strength. If left to ourselves, we are hopeless victims of the devil and his temptations. Our only hope of victory is to put our confidence in Jesus Christ as our Savior, to exercise faith in His blood, and to bear testimony of Him as our Savior.

All of this implies that victory is obtained by focusing our heart's attention upon the Lord Jesus Christ. It tells us that we are not to focus on our own personal strength or weakness. As we keep our eyes on Jesus, we will find ourselves strong to do battle with the temptations and trials we encounter.

The reward for overcoming is so very wonderful. Jesus promises that we will eat the fruit of the tree of life. We will have eternal life. While we are saved wholly by grace, the Lord is so gracious as to reward us as though we actually did something great. He is so kind.

When the disciples said their final good-bye to Jesus, angels who attended the Master's ascension promised that the One they loved more than any earthly friend would return some day never to leave them again (see Acts 1:9-11). Each one must have gazed up into the Savior's fading eyes hoping He would come back in their lifetime. But the years passed, and one by one they all died as martyrs for their Lord . . . all except one.

The apostle John was exiled to the island of Patmos for his faith. The last living of the twelve, he must have spent many a contemplative hour wondering what the future would hold for the people of Jesus in this world. Little did John know that Heaven had already chosen him as a medium through which the remaining history of the church and the world would be revealed.

Jesus Our High Priest

It all happened one Sabbath day as John was engaged in meditation and worship. Suddenly the aged apostle realized that he was not alone. He heard a voice like a trumpet behind him. The identity of the supernatural Person was unmistakable. "I am Alpha and Omega," the Presence announced. It was the Lord Jesus Christ. (You can read the amazing account in Revelation 1:10-20.)

To use modern vernacular, John was "blown away." So much so that he fell before the glorified Christ as a dead man. Obviously he was peeking with at least one eye open, for he gives us a very detailed description of the One he saw.

Jesus appeared to John clothed in the familiar garments of a High Priest (compare Revelation 1:13 with Exodus 28:3-6). Not only was Jesus dressed like the High Priest of the Old Testament sanctuary service, He revealed Himself with imagery that depicted the sanctuary itself.

The sanctuary was divided into three basic parts: (1) the courtyard, (2) the Holy Place, and (3) the Most Holy Place. In the courtyard was the altar of fine brass on which the fires of sacrifice were kindled. In the Holy Place there was the seven-branched candlestick, as well as the table of

shewbread and the altar of incense. And in the Most Holy Place was the chest-like ark containing the ten commandment law, over which resided the visible presence of God in the form of a brilliant light called the Shekinah Glory.

When John saw Jesus, He had "feet like unto fine brass, as if they burned in a furnace" (Revelation 1:15). In your imagination, place the feet of Jesus in the courtyard of the sanctuary at the altar of brass. Then John says, "He had in His right hand seven stars" (Ibid.). Place the right hand of Jesus in the Holy Place at the seven-branched candlestick. Then he says, "His countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength" (Revelation 1:16). Picture the radiant face of Jesus in the Most Holy Place. By transposing the physical appearance of Jesus, as John saw Him, over a layout of the sanctuary, we quickly see that the images correspond perfectly.

Obviously Jesus wants us to become familiar with Him in the light of the Old Testament sanctuary. The reason why is clear. The sanctuary was God's symbolic lesson book of the plan of salvation. From beginning to end, the temple and its service was a representation of the coming Messiah and His ministry for our salvation. As the altar of sacrifice was situated in the outer court of the temple, so Jesus came from heaven to this earth to lay down His life as a sacrifice for our sins. The lamb sacrificed on the Old Testament altar was a symbol of the cross of Calvary. Throughout the book of Revelation, Jesus is referred to as the Lamb of God.

But the courtyard was not all there was to the Old Testament sanctuary. And the cross, as significant as it is, does not complete the ministry of Jesus as our Savior. In the old symbolic sanctuary service, once the sacrifice had been made, the High Priest took the blood and ministered in the temple itself. On a daily basis, his ministry extended as far as the Holy Place. Then, once each year, on the day of atonement, he entered into the Most Holy Place to perform the final phase of the service.

The implication is obvious. After Jesus died on the cross and was resurrected on the third day, He ascended



into heaven to occupy His role as our High Priest. This is why John saw Him dressed in the garments of the High Priest. As our High Priest in the heavenly sanctuary, we can expect Jesus to accomplish all that was symbolized in the Old Testament sanctuary service. In fact, this is precisely what the whole book of Revelation is about. It explains how Jesus will make reality out of what that system only foreshadowed.

Jesus Among the Seven Golden Candlesticks

In John's first vision he saw Jesus in the Holy Place of the heavenly sanctuary, "in the midst of the seven candlesticks." Later on, Jesus told John that "the seven candlesticks" represent "the seven churches" (Revelation 1:20).

In the Old Testament sanctuary service the candlesticks were to be kept burning continually. It was one of the responsibilities of the priest to keep the seven lamps on the candlestick trimmed and burning brightly (see Leviticus 24:4, NIV). Following this theme, Jesus gave seven messages of encouragement, reproof and counsel for the churches. Since Jesus said the candlesticks represent the seven churches, the message is clear. Jesus intends that His church be radiant with the light of God's glory. "Ye are the light of the world," He once said, "A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven" (Matthew 5:14-16).

The picture of Jesus walking among the seven candlesticks represents His ministry on behalf of the church to keep the light of its witness burning brightly in this dark world. The messages to the churches are designed to accomplish that purpose.

The Seven Churches as Prophecy

In John's day there were seven local churches situated in the seven cities listed in Revelation 1:11. While the messages were first delivered to those individual congregations, in a prophetic sense they map out the history of the church from the time of Christ until the end of the world. The dates given are approximate:

- Ephesus—the apostolic church, from Christ to about A.D. 100.
- Smyrna—the persecuted church, 100 to 313.
- Pergamos—the exalted church, 313 to 538.
- Thyatira—the church in the wilderness, 538 to the 1560s.
- Sardis—the church of the Reformation, from the 1560s to the 1790s.
- Philadelphia—the judgment-hour church, from the 1790s to the 1840s.
- Laodicea—the lukewarm, end time church, from the 1840s to the second coming of Christ.

The Personal Application

The messages to the seven churches also compose the most comprehensive counsel given in Scripture to protect and guide the individual Christian and the local congregation. Such a wide range of heart-searching evaluation and wise admonition is here given that virtually every trap of the devil is exposed and every spiritual remedy is prescribed. All Christians and every church may find in these seven messages correction and counsel applicable to their various cases.

Let's explore the message to the first church. We will look at the remaining six in the next two studies of this series.

Ephesus

"Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus write; These things saith He that holdeth the seven stars in His right hand, who walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks; I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil: and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars: and hast borne, and hast patience, and for My name's sake hast laboured, and hast not fainted. Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love. Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent. But this thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; to him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God" (Revelation 2:1-7).

The word *Ephesus* means "desirable" or "attractive." What a fitting way to describe the early apostolic church, and also the new Christian. The Christianity of the apostles was, indeed, attractive. The beautiful gospel of Jesus Christ made it so.

The apostles had experienced firsthand the love of Christ. It had penetrated and broken their hearts. They had witnessed in Jesus a picture of the character of God that etched an indelible impression upon their minds. They had watched Him draw close to the outcast and feed the hungry. They witnessed His tender love for those who had fallen in sin. They were there when He took the children up in His arms and blessed them. As He healed the sick and raised the dead and forgave sinners, they realized more and more deeply the goodness of God. Finally they were faced with His death on the cross. Through the pain they realized that Calvary was the ultimate expression of His love for them and every member of the human family. Like an unquenchable fire, the gospel burned in their hearts. In a short time they had "turned the world upside down" with their preaching (Acts 17:6).

The success of the early church was in their focus on

the cross of Jesus Christ. Theirs was a faith that worked or operated by love (see Galatians 5:6). Under the influence of their teaching, people "gladly received the word" and "were baptized." On one occasion three thousand were baptized in a day (see Acts 2:41).

You Have Lost Your First Love

Gradually, with the dying of the apostles, the glory of that early apostolic faith began to fade. Love had been their power, but now Jesus warned them in the Ephesus message, "thou hast left thy first love" (Revelation 1:4). Strangely enough, while they had lost their first love, the message indicates that they were very active in works and labor. It seems that they had lost sight of the love of Christ while at the same time diligently laboring for His cause.

There are many Christians today who need to learn the vital message of Christ to the church of Ephesus. Yes, Jesus wants us to labor in witness for Him, but first and foremost He wants us to maintain the early fervor of our first love for Him. Even church work and religious endeavors should not be allowed to crowd out the intimate moments that we all need with Jesus to maintain our relationship with Him.

The apostle Paul warns that good works without love profit nothing (see 1 Corinthians 13:3). The apostle John enlightens us as to the real essence of Christianity when he says, "God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him" (1 John 4:16). Apart from God's love in our hearts and manifested in our lives, our religion is worthless. It is mere formalism without power (see 2 Timothy 3:5). Like diligent Martha, we are in danger of working so hard for Jesus that we neglect to sit at His feet like Mary and cultivate our love for Him (see Luke 10:38-42).

Jesus had very specific counsel for the church of Ephesus. His counsel is helpful for anyone who has once known Christ and lost their first-love experience. He gave a threefold remedy:

1. Remember the place from which you have fallen. Recollect what your early Christian experience was like. Remember how you loved Me.
2. Repent. Turn from your present experience back to the first love experience you once had. Do whatever it takes to regain your love for Me.
3. Do the first works. The works you are presently doing lack the quality of your works at the beginning of your faith in Me. Originally you served Me out of the deep sense of love; now it's a matter of mere habitual duty. Cultivate love-motivated works again.

The Deeds of the Nicolaitans

Jesus commends the church of Ephesus for their seri-

ous disapproval of the deeds of the Nicolaitans. Historic accounts tell us that the Nicolaitans believed that immoral practices were not incompatible with Christianity. After all, they reasoned, the gospel saves us by grace and frees us from the law. Jesus says He hates religion that seeks to cover the willful commission of sin under a cloak of grace.

While it is true that we are saved by grace through faith alone, it is equally true that faith without works is dead (see Ephesians 2:8-10 and James 2:19-26).

There are many today, like the Nicolaitans, who profess to be Christians and yet follow the immoral practices of the world. One major contributing factor to this unfortunate situation is the teaching that Jesus abolished the ten commandment law by His death. A surprisingly large number of professed Christians today actually believe that Jesus came to this world and died as our Savior in order to cast aside the ten commandment law of God. You will hear them say that the law has been nailed to the cross, abolished. Or you might hear them say, "*We're not under the law, but under grace,*" the implication being that we are not *under* any obligation to live in obedience to God's law because of His grace. This is very much the same kind of thinking that the Nicolaitans promoted. Jesus says that He hates such theology.

So what does the Bible actually teach concerning the relationship between salvation by grace and obedience to God's law?

In order to support the idea that God's grace does away with His law, certain Scriptures are lifted from their context and given a meaning that the Bible itself does not intend to convey. Probably the most commonly misused Scripture on this point is Romans 6:14. One phrase from the verse is quoted: "Ye are not under the law, but under grace." At first glance this Scripture may appear to make law and grace opposed to one another. But when the context is read, Paul's meaning becomes clear. Notice some of the immediate context of chapter 6:

"Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein? . . . walk in newness of life . . . we should not serve sin . . . Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof. Neither yield ye your members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin: but yield yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God. For sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace. What then? shall we sin, because we are not under the law, but under grace? God forbid. Know ye not, that to whom ye yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants ye are to whom ye obey; whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness?" (Romans 6:1, 2, 4, 6, 11-16).

Whatever Paul means by his statement that we are not