



Born to Win

Letters from God

by Ronald L. Dart

...very inspiring. And thank all of you for coming today. I'm delighted at the chance to meet some old friends, meet some new friends. It's a wonderful opportunity, and kind of a surprise; it's the first time I've spoken in a gym in a *long time*. Feels good, actually, feels good to need the room. But, again, thanks for coming; it's *good* to see all of you.

Some time ago (a long time ago now), a friend of mine came up with what he thought was a very bright idea. He concluded that competition must be ungodly—that, actually, Christian people really ought to be *cooperating*, not *competing* with one another. We ought to get in harness and pull together. We ought to be going the same direction. And, by and large, he felt that competitive sports even were not a good thing for Christian people to get involved in. He'd rationalized it all and had a...you know, you could probably put together some scriptures yourself that might sound reasonable, running down that. He thought maybe golf could be played by godly people, because in golf every person did his best and didn't do *anything at all* to interfere with the play of the other golfer (other than maybe clearing his throat at the wrong time, you know, or making snide remarks about the person's play, which golfers sometimes do); but, ordinarily, golf could be played by godly people. Basketball, though, he thought was another matter; because in basketball he wasn't sure that that kind of highly competitive game was really right in the eyes of God, because there you try to *block* shots, and you *fight* for rebounds, and you get the best position, and maybe even shoulder the other guy or block him out, or things of this nature. And he just wasn't sure that that was a good idea.

Well, in the circle of guys that heard this argument there were a lot of basketball fans, and so as you can imagine that provoked a rather lively debate. And in the end he decided that basketball was okay. I wouldn't like to think he was influenced by the fact that he had season tickets to watch the Los Angeles Lakers, but you had to crank that into (as most of us did) into our thinking about why this argument went the direction it did. But there were, in spite of that, some *really* interesting lessons, I thought, that came out of the discussion.

I've had the privilege in my lifetime of watching some of the greatest basketball players who ever played play in person on the court, no further away than from here to the back wall. I had good seats in the Los Angeles Arena. I watched Jerry West, who's really an *incredible* forward. I watched him play against Bob Cousy of the Boston Celtics. I watched Wilt Chamberlain play against Bill Russell—*incredible* basketball players. I actually got to see Elgin Baylor for a few games before he retired. And even in his latter years, even when he was over the hill, this man was magic to watch. He was *incredible*. He had a knack for making moves on the basket, but in leaving the ground defying all the laws of gravity and hanging like no man I'd ever seen before, while making every sort of move in the air that I couldn't...It's impossible for me to even comprehend how a man could *do* what Elgin Baylor was able to do as a basketball player.

However, when you think about this...and, of course, I've watched all these new guys on television, somewhat. Can you imagine, though, these guys playing without any opposition? They have occasionally these slam dunk competitions. You've seen them on television—halftime of basketball games. Frankly, it's about as exciting to me as watching haircuts. These guys go sailing down the court,

no opposition, no nothing. They do all kinds of fancy moves which they don't have to make. I mean, the goal is right there. It's not going to move. All they have to do is just go up there and slam dunk it. But no, they've got to make all these moves going down through there. But the thing is, all these moves got developed *in the face of opposition*. The moves they make with the ball are *only necessary*—the things that made Elgin Baylor what he was, the things that made Jerry West, Bob Cousy, Bill Russell, Wilt Chamberlain what they were—was the *opposition* that they faced. They developed into the great players they were because they had *strong* opposition. In fact, I don't think any of these players could have developed the greatness they later showed in their careers without opposing players who were *nearly* as good as they were. And in those realms of sports, "nearly" is a pretty big gap it seems sometimes. But really, even the second level of players in the NBA are *absolutely* incredible in the way they play.

I used to play chess quite a bit. And in the years of playing chess, I noticed something: I noticed that when I only played against players I could beat, my game went downhill, got softer. When I was playing consistently against *better* players, my game improved. And I would be willing to bet that this is true not only throughout competitive sports, it's probably true in business, and it's probably true in just about every other walk of life that you will find—that *strong* opposition, *strong* competition makes you better than you would ever be without it. We make the most progress against the strongest opposition. It is *the way we are made*.

Now, most of us know this intuitively. A few of us, like my friend, have to figure it out. Hardly anybody, though, stops to consider that this tells us something very important about our Maker. We are *made*. We are *made competitive*. We are made to go *grow stronger* against opposition, and we do not grow stronger against weak opposition or no opposition at all. We learn (some of us do) to go to the gym and take iron for our opposition, to build our bodies. There are all kinds of ways that we seek opposition. We seek opposition on the tennis court. We seek it on the handball court, the racquetball court. We seek it on the basketball court (sometimes until our knees won't handle it anymore). We seek it in various ways. But we look for competition because we know competition drives us further than we would otherwise go, makes more of us than we would otherwise be—physically and every other way. And I think the same thing is true mentally.

I'm reasonably sure that people don't think about this very much in the spiritual realm, and the reason I think this is because of the questions they ask me all the time. Two of the most common questions are "Why did God allow...?" (and you can fill in what comes after it), and "Why does God not do...?" (and you can fill in after that one). Why does God allow terrible atrocities like the Holocaust to happen? Why does God not intervene and *stop* some of the things that happen in this world? Why doesn't he work this out?

Well, I'd like today to introduce you to a set of letters from God that are very revealing on this particular issue. The letters in question are found in the very early chapters of the Book of Revelation. And one of the reasons why we have never thought of these letters, perhaps, in a way that I'm going to take them to you today, is because they're in a book of prophecy. And when we study prophecy, we are apt to study prophecy with a view of saying, "Okay, what's going to happen?" And all of our thoughts and approach to these things goes into trying to approach it as foretelling the future like fortune-tellers might do. I want to know *what's* going happen, *when* it's going to happen, and so forth; whereas prophecy really serves a very different purpose from that, as I think you may see as we take a look at these letters in the early part of the Book of Revelation.

John was in exile on the isle of Patmos, and he fell into a vision and was carried forward in time. The whole ambiance of the Book of Revelation is eschatological—that is to say, it has to do with the end time. However (and this is an important distinction, you really need to understand this), that while John is carried forward in time, and his book is eschatological—it is about the end time—it is painted in the colors and the style of the first century. And I think there's a reason for that: John did not have the tools to describe 20th-century issues and events, and his readers wouldn't have had the ability to grasp those things *even if he had* had the tools at hand to do so. And so the way in which God went about this was

to present the end time in terms of the time in which the prophecy was given. That's a very logical and a very sensible thing to do. You give people something they can understand and something they can relate to, and the idea is that you take this—and a later generation takes this—in an attempt to understand the latter end of it. It was Isaiah who gave me the first clue *I* had to this; and it's in Isaiah 41, verse 21 (a very short passage):

Isaiah 41

KJ2000

²¹ Produce your case, says the LORD; bring forth your strong reasons, says the King of Jacob.

²² Let them bring them forth, and show us what shall happen: let them show the former things, what they were, that we may consider them, and know the latter end of them; or declare to us things to come.

Now, I had heard, in my lifetime, people talk about how prophecy is dual: you know, you have a historical fulfillment and you have a latter-time fulfillment. It's called, technically, "type" and "anti-type". And I remember driving along in a car one day with some students in college that said, "Well, how do you *prove* that? How do you demonstrate that?" Well, they discussed it back and forth for a while and finally came to the conclusion, "Well, you have to kind of take it on faith." That didn't sound right to me. And on a more careful study, I found that you don't have to take it on faith *at all*—that it's very much a part of the warp and woof of the Bible; it's woven in everywhere you go. And of course, one of these is right here in Isaiah, where he says, "Show us the former things, what they are, so that we can consider them and understand the latter end thereof."

So John, in a vision, hears a voice behind him like the sound of a trumpet. And the voice says in Revelation 1, verse 11,

Revelation 1

AKJV

¹¹ [...] I am Alpha and 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[...]

And these churches then are named. We'll come to that in a moment. He said,

Revelation 1

AKJV

¹² And I turned to see the voice that spoke with me. And being turned, I saw seven golden candlesticks;

¹³ And in the middle of the seven candlesticks one like to the Son of man, clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girt about the breasts with a golden girdle.

¹⁴ His head and his hairs were white like wool, as white as snow; and his eyes were as a flame of fire;

¹⁵ And his feet like to fine brass, as if they burned in a furnace; and his voice as the sound of many waters.

Must have had quite a roar.

Revelation 1

AKJV

¹⁶ And he had in his right hand seven stars: and out of his mouth went a sharp two edged sword:

and his countenance was as the sun shines in his strength.

¹⁷ And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as dead. [...]

And I would think so. Having seen something like this would cause most of us to have a similar reaction.

Now, all this sounds very strange to us, doesn't it? There is a word that has come back into vocabulary, modern vocabulary, very common, called "icons". And now we have become very familiar with them because we have them all over our computer screen. I think once I had some set of software up there, and I thought, "I wonder how many icons there are actually on this screen?" I think I counted 40. Now, we all know an icon; it's a little image. Like, for example, there's a little printer up in the corner up there—a little thing shaped like a computer printer. You click on it, and it starts the whole printing process with the computer. It's called an "icon". And this takes up less space, and of course is easier to spot than the word "printer", which you'd have to pull down from other menus and go looking for, right? So they can put lots and lots of icons on a page that can let you do things.

But the word "icon" goes *way* back in history. It's a Greek word [εἰκών, Strong's G1504], and it has to do with images that stand for things. And what has never been... I have never really encountered a really *good* study of Christian (and Old Testament in particular) iconography, where someone goes back and really takes the time to describe that when you see... in other words, what does the icon of a sword coming out of the mouth actually stand for? What do stars actually stand for? What does the right hand symbolize? Because all these things are, to the *reader*, icons. They're not *visible* icons like we have on our computer screen. They are icons, nevertheless, because they are familiar symbols out of the time in which people live. And they were really designed to communicate, not to obscure. But for us, living many thousands of years later, a lot of these things become very obscure, indeed.

So here he is, and the explanation has to come to him of what he had seen. The one spoke and said,

Revelation 1

AKJV

¹⁸ I am he that lives, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for ever more, Amen; and have the keys of hell and of death.

¹⁹ Write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter;

²⁰ The mystery of the seven stars which you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden candlesticks. The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches: and the seven candlesticks which you saw are the seven churches.

Ah! So if we didn't know what the iconography was before, now we know what these icons mean, in this context and in this place. And icons tend to be used pretty much the same as you find them throughout Scripture. Wherever you find one, chances are it's used the same way in other places.

Now, how are we to take these seven churches that we read about in the Book of Revelation? First, I take them to be seven literal churches on the ground in Asia Minor before the end of the first century. When John says, "You have there in their church one called Jezebel", I assume that there was a woman in attendance at that particular church, at that particular time who, if her name wasn't "Jezebel", her conduct matched the conduct of the Jezebel well known to everyone who understood the Hebrew Bible. They were seven literal churches on the ground in Asia Minor at that time. And because the book is *about* the end time, I see these seven churches as a *type* of the *entire* church at the end time.

Now, I do not look for—knowing what I know about Biblical iconography—I do not look for, at the end time, seven churches or seven church organizations. The number seven I take, really, symbolically rather than literally. Seven in the Bible means "all" or "whole" or "the total"—everything. And what he

is saying is this is *the whole church* at the end time. And the reason why it is seven instead of one is frankly because the entirety of the church would not necessarily *be* one as we come down to the end time. I see the church at the time of the end to be much as one might be expecting it to be: divided, facing various challenges, experiencing success, experiencing failure, sometimes in serious error, sometimes *totally* confused, sometimes clear of vision. I see a church composed of human beings with all that that implies.

What about then, having seen all that, these seven letters to the churches of God? I call them “letters from God”. If our church, somehow we were able to know, someone came in and read a letter to us that was from God...How would we respond to that? How would we feel? Now, I have to assume, based upon what I read in the Book of Revelation, that there *were* seven churches in Asia. And I have to assume that, sometime after John did this, some fellow came wandering in the door of each one of these churches (probably in succession, probably went to all of them), stood in front of them, and read a letter from God to *that church*. And it’s something to consider: how they might have responded and what they might have felt.

Now, as we read these, I think it’s important for us to understand one thing that will be repeated over and over again. John will say, “He that has an ear to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” [Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22], so that *individually* we cannot escape reading these letters, listening to the admonition; for it is written for *anyone* who has got *even one ear* on either side of his head. Are we clear? You’ve got ears to hear, hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Having said that, they are particularly directed to groups of individuals. The Greek word is *ecclesia* [ἐκκλησία, Strong’s G1577]. It means “assembly”. In modern language, we use the word “church”, but it is a particular assembly of people who get together on a regular basis—who see one another, can shake hands with one another, know one another, call one another by name, relate to one another, work together on projects that the church may be doing. This is an *assembly* of God’s people who actually work together as a part of...as a *body*, as it were. And that’s what we’re talking about when we talk about a “church”. And the letters were written, each of them, to a church, holding the church responsible in certain key areas.

Now, here’s what the angel...what the Spirit says, first, to the church at Ephesus—Revelation, chapter 2, verse 1:

Revelation 2

AKJV

¹ These things said he that holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks in the middle of the seven golden candlesticks;

² I know your works, and your labor, and your patience, and how you can not bear them which are evil: and you have tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and have found them liars:

³ And have borne, and have patience, and for my name’s sake have labored, and have not fainted.

In other words, “You people have put your nose to the grindstone. You’ve put your shoulder to the wheel. You’ve gotten on down the road. You’ve gotten work done.” And by this time, most of us would be feeling fairly good about this letter. Then he says this:

Revelation 2

AKJV

⁴ Nevertheless I have somewhat against you, because you have left your first love.

“The *fire*, the *zeal*, the *desire* that you had, has faded over time. And although you have a lot of good works, it’s my impression that you’re just going about them automatically. You’re just doing it because you’ve always done it. You’re just doing it because it’s the thing to do. And the fire, if it’s not gone out, is getting pretty low.” Now then comes the call:

Revelation 2

AKJV

⁵ Remember therefore from where you are fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come to you quickly, and will remove your candlestick out of his place, except you repent.

Now, I guess we can wonder what he means by this “remove your candlestick out of its place”. Your place inside of the whole Church of God is just removed. I can visualize the Master walking in, seven candlesticks, picking one of them up and taking it *away*. I’m just not sure what “away” means in this context. I just don’t like the sound of it very much, and I don’t think you would either.

Now, here’s a question I want to ask: Why did God allow them to lose their first love? Why did God not *imbue them once again* with their first love? Remember those two questions I asked earlier, the two ones I hear over and over again from people? “Why does God allow...?” “Why does God not do...?” These are the questions: Why did God allow them to lose their first love? Why didn’t God restore that first love? And the answer is simple enough, and it’s right here. Verse 7:

Revelation 2

KJ2000

⁷ He that has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says unto the churches; To him that overcomes will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God.

The reward that’s held out here is eternal life. That part we understand fairly well. But notice, “to him that overcomes”. Overcomes what? Well, in the context of this particular church, there’s not much argument about that. It is the problem of having lost your first love. *That* is what this church is called upon to overcome; and it was *their* job to overcome apathy, not God’s. Think about that. Remember what I said before about how you grow stronger against opposition—how that it’s necessary to *fight*, how it’s necessary to *oppose*, how it’s necessary to struggle oftentimes to become stronger, better, to become great? To understand this, you need to realize that when problems like this come along, it is not to sit patiently waiting on God to somehow solve our problem of apathy. It is for us *to do* something about it, to *overcome* the problem that has been placed before us.

You know, this is one of the great ambiguities of the Bible. There is a time for us to wait on God. Nothing that we can do, we just have to wait on God. There is a time when God waits on us—when God does not move, when he will not act. And the *reason* he does not act is because he is waiting for us to act. And the challenge for us is to know what time it is: whether this is something where it’s time for us to act, or whether this is a time when we must be still and see the salvation of God.

The service on the Day of Atonement in the temple was an interesting one. It’s a fascinating day, because all the Israelites had to do on the Day of Atonement was come before God and stand there. They were hungry, of course, because they were fasting on this day; and they all stood out there in whatever kind of weather it was when the priest went through the ceremony of killing the first [goat], and taking its blood in the temple, and then sending the other [goat] away. I asked the question last year, I remember, on the Day of Atonement: I said to people, “What was Israel required to *do* on the Day of Atonement?” And the answer is nothing. There is *absolutely* nothing you and I can do to achieve our atonement. That *has to be done for us*. And so we come, and we watch, and we wait; and the high priest, as a type of Christ, makes our atonement for us and reconciles us to God.

However, that being done, now we come face to face with the other side of this question: Is God waiting on *us*? And if he's waiting on us, what's he waiting on us for? Well, for *this* poor church group, he was waiting on them to get over their apathy. He was waiting on them to *take hold of it*, to *do* something about it. And this is really one of the tough questions that we have to face. If we're supposed to *do* something about our apathy...how? What? How do we tackle this problem? Well, he went on to talk to the church in Smyrna. He said,

Revelation 2

AKJV

⁸ [...] These things said the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive;

⁹ I know your works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but [*boy*] you are rich) and I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan.

¹⁰ Fear none of those things which you shall suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that you may be tried; and you shall have tribulation ten days: be you faithful to death, and I will give you a crown of life.

Now, why did God allow these people to suffer and even to die? Because it's one thing to suffer a while and be delivered. It's another thing to suffer all the way to, and including, *dying*. And yet this seems to be something...Why does God allow people—*his* people, *faithful* people—to suffer and to die? Why doesn't God deliver them from prison? Why doesn't he deliver them from tribulation? And why doesn't he deliver them from death? Here's the answer, if you have an ear:

Revelation 2

AKJV

¹¹ He that has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit said to the churches; He that overcomes shall not be hurt of the second death.

You may die the first death, but it's the *overcomer* who will not die the second death. Now, this is a great puzzle: How can you conclude that you have overcome, that you have won, when at the end of *great suffering* you die—which is the lot of God's people, and has been for generations, for thousands of years now? People who come to the end of their life—sometimes early, sometimes late, sometimes in pain, sometimes not—but we come through the end of our lives, sometimes in great pain, sometimes in agony, suffering the tortures of the damned through hospitals and whatever else we go through, to try to stay alive, only to die at the end of it...Have we won or have we lost? It's a great puzzle.

But you see, it's the *resurrection* that's the victory. It's the *resurrection* through which we cannot be hurt by the second death. And in the end we *really have* won. But it's God's will that some of us suffer and die, and that the struggle with pain, imprisonment, and with death is what makes us into *the kind of being he wants us to be*. I think it's fair to say that God is not satisfied with what you are right now—that you are not the ultimate objective of what he's driving for. You're fine, as far as you've come. He loves you as a son. And as any parent is always, in one sense, satisfied with their children—they love their children—their children rarely are what they *hope* their children are going to become, right? They're looking for more and they hope for more.

Well, for us, prison, tribulation, pain, and death, are what are given to some of us for us *to overcome*. And it's a struggle we have to fight, all the way sometimes to the bitter end. I've watched this argument going on about assisted suicide and the willingness of some people to end their lives early, because they want to avoid the suffering and death that they know is waiting for them with the disease that they have. They are afraid of it, and they hope not to go that way. And there is, at a human level, a part of me that says, "Rationally, it really makes a lot of sense. It's going to cost my family a lot of money. It's going to cost me a lot of pain. And it would be a whole lot easier if I would just end my life right now." It *would* be. It would be.

It would also be a whole lot easier, if you were a professional basketball player, not to get down to the gym early in the morning and do your weight training. It would be a lot *easier* not to do your time shooting baskets. It would be a whole lot *easier* not to do the work that you have to do, knowing that you're going to have to go up against world class competition three or four days out of every week through the basketball season. It would just be a whole lot easier. You could take the easy route, and you will never overcome. You'll never be a winner. You'll always be a loser. And, in fact, it does seem that God is driving at something in human beings *far greater* than anything we either imagine or possibly even *can* imagine. Continuing with his letter to the church at Pergamos:

Revelation 2

AKJV

¹² [...] These things said he which has the sharp sword with two edges;

¹³ I know your works, and where you dwell, even where Satan's seat is: and you hold fast my name, and have not denied my faith, even in those days wherein Antipas was my faithful martyr, who was slain among you, where Satan dwells.

I would kind of think probably there was a man named Antipas who died right there in Pergamos at that spot. He says,

Revelation 2

KJ2000

¹⁴ But I have a few things against you, because you have there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to cast a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication.

¹⁵ So have you also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate.

Now, what is this all about? Well, what it's about is the two big problems that have seemed to beset organizations from time immemorial: money and sex. This was where the problem was in this particular church. Nothing much, it seems, ever changes.

But the striking thing about this is, the question I would want to ask is: Why did God allow this person to teach the doctrine of Balaam in the church? Why did he allow him to teach people to commit fornication—that it was okay to commit fornication? Why? The answer seems to be that it was the responsibility of *the church* to deal with that, not God's. And that's a sobering thing. We want to think, "Well, why'd God allow this? Why did God let this happen?" And God looks down and says, "'Why did *you* let it happen? Where were *you*? Why weren't *you* paying attention? Why didn't *you* stand up? Why didn't *you* say something?" This is an interesting little problem we've got here, isn't it? We sit around waiting for God to move, God sits around waiting for us to move, and guess who gets hurt? In the long run, *we* are the ones that are going to wind up being hurt by this. And he says,

Revelation 2

AKJV

¹⁶ Repent; or else I will come to you quickly, and will fight against them [*myself*] with the sword of my mouth.

Now here's a case where God *threatens* to act, but he calls on *us* to act, so he won't have to. That's what's going on here. He writes to the church and says, "*Act*. If you don't, *I will*. And you're going to wish, probably, that I hadn't."

Revelation 2

AKJV

¹⁷ He that has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit said to the churches; To him that overcomes will I give to eat of the hidden manna, and will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knows saving he that receives it.

You know, I'd like to know what some of that means; but at the same time, I think what's more important for me to get out of this particular verse is: Whatever it means, I've got to *overcome* to get there. I probably have to overcome to find out what it's all about—that life is a struggle; God *allows* the struggle; *permits* the struggle; allows things to happen to us, people in his church, willy-nilly, just like to anybody else who's *not* in the church, who's *not* a Christian, who could be anything else. We're all in this world, and we all suffer in this world. Question is: Are we suffering with any *meaning* or not? God does not expect us to sit on our hands. He expects us to get in the game and, if necessary, to compete with the Devil himself. Strong opposition? You think Michael Jordan's tough? The problem that *we* have is that we may be called upon to go up against the old Devil himself. Verse 18:

Revelation 2

KJ2000

¹⁸ And unto the angel of the church in Thyatira write; These things says the Son of God, who has his eyes like unto a flame of fire, and his feet are like fine bronze;

¹⁹ I know your works, and love, and service, and faith, and your patience, and your works; and the last to be more than the first.

That you've actually done different from some people: instead of letting down, you've come on strong.

Revelation 2

KJ2000

²⁰ Nevertheless I have a few things against you, because you allow that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, to teach and to seduce my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed unto idols.

Now, remember I ask you this question before. We talked about this before—how that each of us individually are responsible for turning our life around and turning to God, and that every one of us individually must hear the things that are said here. But these things are spoken and written to *the church*, and the church is expected to *do something* about this—not just sit there like a bump on a log and listen to it, not just to sit there and allow it to take place and say, “I wonder why God's allowing this to happen to us.” God says, “*You* have permitted this woman to do this.”

Revelation 2

AKJV

²¹ And I gave her space to repent of her fornication; and she repented not.

²² Behold, I will cast her into a bed, and them that commit adultery with her into great tribulation, except they repent of their deeds.

²³ And I will kill her children with death; and all the churches shall know that I am he which searches the reins and hearts: and I will give to every one of you according to your works.

²⁴ But to you I say, and to the rest in Thyatira, as many as have not this doctrine, and which have not known the depths of Satan, as they speak; I will put on you none other burden.

Except this one: Get a grip.

Revelation 2

AKJV

²⁵ But that which you have already hold fast till I come.

²⁶ And he that overcomes, and keeps my works to the end, to him will I give power over the nations:

²⁷ And he shall rule them with a rod of iron; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers: even as I received of my Father.

²⁸ And I will give him the morning star.

²⁹ He that has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit said to the churches.

Now, by now this picture ought to be clearing up a little bit. You can't grow strong while you're facing no opposition. And therefore you should understand why it is that God allows opposition to come our way—if we can't grow strong unless we face opposition, we can't grow strong unless we overcome obstacles, we can't grow strong unless we face problems and solve them and resolve them and go forward from them. And we tend to look back and say, "Why did God let that happen? Why did God let this happen? Why did God let our church split into two big halves over here? Why did this thing have to happen to us? Why did God allow it?" God allowed it for the simple reason that *you have got to grow stronger*, and you can only grow stronger when you face opposition and *overcome* it, when you face problems and *overcome* them, when you face pain and *overcome* it, when you face loss and *overcome* it. It's only in the facing of these things and dealing with them that you can ever become strong.

It is not that God is *helpless* to prevent pain and suffering. It's not as though God is *helpless* to keep us from making mistakes and *hurting* ourselves and hurting people that we know. But, you see, we can only know how strong we are when we actually face the problem. We can only know what we're made of when we actually overcome the obstacle. And the stronger the opposition, the stronger we *can become*. As a chess player, I don't think that I could have ever gotten any better than the best player I played with the most. I doubt it. (I did play one game once with Bobby Fischer, which was a strange experience. I'd have to tell somebody about it.) But nevertheless, you can never get better than the better players that you play with you. It's almost impossible for a man to rise above his teachers, as the old saying goes. We can never learn the best of who we are until the contest is over. They give the best team a Super Bowl ring. What do *we* get? Well to him that overcometh, he says (verse 28),

Revelation 2

AKJV

²⁸ And I will give him the morning star.

²⁹ He that has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit said to the churches.

God will slip a ring on our finger with the morning star as a setting. But only, *only*, if we overcome.
Chapter 3:

Revelation 3

AKJV

¹ And to the angel of the church in Sardis write; These things said he that has the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars; I know your works, that you have a name that you live, and are dead.

² Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found your works perfect before God.

³ Remember therefore how you have received and heard, and hold fast, and repent. If therefore you shall not watch, I will come on you as a thief, and you shall not know what hour I will come on you.

⁴ You have a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with me in white: for they are worthy.

⁵ He that overcomes, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels.

It makes the hair stand up on my neck to imagine for a moment when Jesus himself introduces you to the Father and the assembly of angels, and *calls out your name* in that place. That's what he says that he's going to do. *But only* if you overcome. And, in order to overcome, you have to have something to overcome. Does that follow? Logically, you've got to have something to overcome. What is it? Well, I don't know what yours is. I know what mine are. Probably some of them I haven't figured out yet, but I know what mine are. I don't know what yours are. But the truth is that in front of you lies a path strewn with obstacles. In front of you lie problems, in front of you lie pain—maybe prison, maybe sickness, maybe death. And all these things you are called upon to overcome. Verse 7:

Revelation 3

AKJV

⁷ And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write; These things said he that is holy, he that is true, he that has the key of David, he that opens, and no man shuts; and shuts, and no man opens;

⁸ I know your works: behold, I have set before you an open door, and no man can shut it: for you have a little strength, and have kept my word, and have not denied my name.

Now, there's a really interesting little byplay here. God does his part. He said, "*I* open the door." Then he says, "No man can shut it because *you* have a little strength." The implication of this is: it's our job, once the door is open, to keep the door open with what little strength we have got—to do what we can. And the fact is that it is in the battle to keep the door open that we become *stronger*, and actually in the process of fighting and succeeding—and even fighting and *failing*—we grow stronger. "I open a door. No man can shut it because *you* have got some strength."

Revelation 3

AKJV

⁹ Behold, I will make them of the synagogue of Satan, which say they are Jews, and are not, but do lie; behold, I will make them to come and worship before your feet, and to know that I have loved you.

¹⁰ Because you have kept the word of my patience, I also will keep you from the hour of temptation, which shall come on all the world, to try them that dwell on the earth.

¹¹ Behold, I come quickly: hold that fast which you have, that no man take your crown.

¹² Him that overcomes will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out: and I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, which is new Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from my God: and I will write on him my new name.

I don't know what that is. But he says, "to him that overcomes". And to this particular group it had to do with holding on, keeping the door open, hanging on to what they've got, not giving up.

The last of these seven letters of God was written to a church in a town called Laodicea, in verse 14.

Revelation 3

AKJV

¹⁴ [...] These things said the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God;

¹⁵ I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot: I would you were cold or hot.

¹⁶ So then because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth.

¹⁷ Because you say, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and know not that you are wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked:

¹⁸ I counsel you to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that you may be rich; and white raiment, that you may be clothed, and that the shame of your nakedness do not appear; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see.

¹⁹ As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent.

Repent of *what*? You know, it's interesting this church, because every indication here is that they *have not had* any opposition. They have not had any particular problem. Their perception is, "I'm rich, increased with goods." I don't know how they mean that. I don't know if it's a wealthy church. I don't know if they mean spiritually rich. It doesn't really matter very much, does it? The implication of it is, "We're doing just fine!" And the implication that I read from it: no particular opposition and no specially strong opposition. And the result of it: apathy, lukewarm, no enthusiasm.

He says to these people, "You'd better buy of me gold tried in a fire." The implication of, "We've gotten this far without having to overcome much of anything"...I've got news for you. Starting now, *you're going to have to overcome*. He says,

Revelation 3

AKJV

²⁰ Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.

²¹ To him that overcomes will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne.

²² He that has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit said to the churches.

Now, if you've gotten the picture reading through all this set of "overcomes", and the rewards of these things, you should begin to grasp the fact that what God has in store for us is *greatness* beyond anything we imagine, and I am sure beyond anything we *can* imagine—to have your name announced when you walk into the presence of God, to sit down with Jesus on his throne, to be a pillar in the house of God in the temple, to be in all this stuff...I mean, to really see this. But, you see, greatness comes *only* as a result of overcoming, of meeting the challenge, of meeting the struggle, of being up against *strong* opposition, of being up against (in our world and in your world) the Michael Jordan, it would be, of basketball. The very *best* that God can throw up against us, that we can handle, *that's* what we are going to face. We can thank God that he has this one little promise that says, "I will never tempt you above what you are able [**1 Corinthians 10:13**], but I'll always provide a way of escape that you can go." But you know what he's saying in the process? (It's unsaid, but it's there.) "I am going to take you right up to that point. I won't take you beyond it."

We're going there. We're headed there. What is your challenge? What is your opposition? Is it going to be a false teacher? Is it going to be a sin? Is it going to be the challenge of wealth? What is the challenge that's coming your way? He says,

Revelation 3

AKJV

²¹ To him that overcomes will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne.

There are many challenges for us to overcome. And, strikingly, this set of letters from God begins and ends with what *may be* the toughest, biggest, challenge of all: apathy. [It starts with] having lost the first love. It ends there with being lukewarm. And the implication of all that I read here is that if you are going to sit and wait for God to cure your apathy, you may wait until it's too late. The fact of the matter is that what God expects us to do is to look deep down inside of ourselves, examine ourselves, and *overcome* the apathy. There is no secret. There isn't any button you can press. There isn't any formula that you can follow. What it does mean, to overcome laziness, is that you got to get up out of your recliner and go clean the garage. Something like that is there for the churches of God, wherever they may be, in every generation, all the way down to the end time—that the greatest threat is apathy. And the cure for apathy is *to do*. Do what? What is at hand. For me, it may be one thing; for you, it may be another; but you have to get up and do.

There are two parables of Jesus, in the closing moments, that I'd like for us to think about in this regard. I think they're very important. One of them is the Parable of the Talents in Matthew 25. I won't take the time to read all of this to you; I just want to remind you of the story because I think it's familiar to you. The Lord came and he gave to each of these people so much to work with, and went away on his journey, and he came back. The first two guys had doubled the money. They gave it to him, and they got the reward. "Congratulations, you've done real well." And the last guy comes in and stands before God after all this is said and done. And he came before him and said,

Matthew 25

KJ2000

²⁴ [...] Lord, I knew you that you are a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not spread:

²⁵ And I was afraid, and went and hid your talent in the earth: lo, there you have what is yours.

²⁶ His lord answered and said unto him, You wicked and slothful servant[...]

The *man* said he was afraid. The *Lord* said he was wicked and lazy. Now, he didn't even acknowledge the fear. He just *brushed* it aside, "You wicked and slothful servant." And the results for this poor fellow were *dire*, weren't they? The question you have to ask about this: What is he afraid of? Because if he had taken a chance and lost his Lord's money, he would have been in no worse shape than he was. It could have been no worse for him, because he was cast out, rejected completely. Nothing worse could have happened to him. But he wouldn't take the chance. He was afraid. And he let his fear dominate him and keep him from doing what needed to be done. But God's response was, "No, no. Not that you're afraid; you're just *lazy*."

There's another parable, very similar one, in **Luke 19**, verse 12. In this case, they were all given the same amount of money to work with, in the same situation, though, as he came back and judged them. The first guys had done well. They had recreated a great deal of increase of the Lord's money. But then there's this last guy again—same parable, same idea, the same thing. The guy comes to God with his excuses. His excuses aren't accepted. He's considered wicked and lazy, and he's sent into outer darkness where there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. That's what all this stuff is all about.

Now, I can't help but believe from these two parables that fear is nothing but an excuse. Because it's hard for me to really imagine that our being afraid is the reason why we are not *actively* overcoming the challenges that face our churches in this world right now. I don't think it's fear. I think it's apathy. Because in both of these cases, these guys... "Well, you know, I was afraid of you." And God says, "You wicked and you slothful person."

Now, I understand grace in the Bible as well as anyone. I *understand* that salvation is by grace. I *understand* the reconciliation of God comes while we stand there and do nothing, as Christ went to the stake in our place. I understand all of that. But we are *continually* faced with this ambiguity in the Bible: sometimes we must wait on God, and sometimes God is waiting for us. And there is no one who can answer that question of which it is for you, *except you*. God may just be waiting on you to get your act together—you personally and your church. What are you going to do?

It's apparent to me that God's goals, objectives, and aspirations for us are higher than we imagine, and probably higher than we can imagine. To achieve that goal, he's prepared to give us bigger mountains to climb. He's prepared to give us greater challenges to overcome. He's prepared to put us up against the *toughest* opposition that can be found in order to develop us to the *maximum* of our potential—to do the *best* that we possibly can do and be *everything* that we possibly can be. Remember Job? Who was his opposition? He was up against the Devil himself. Remember Abraham? What was his mountain he had to climb? It was the mountain at the top of which he was supposed to sacrifice his own boy. And never forget that the greatest temptation you will ever face in your life is the temptation to give up—to be overcome with shame, with grief, with pain, fatigue, or maybe even to be overcome with a total abject failure. But, you see, all these things are the price of greatness and they *must be overcome*.

I can sort of see us praying, “Lord, would you mind awfully much just letting me be mediocre?” And I can hear God's reply: “My son, sorry. It's too late for that.”

Transcript of a
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Letters from God
DATE: 4/28/01
ID: 01LFG