

“TO THE CHURCHES, WRITE . . .”

“I AM THE LIVING ONE”

THE LETTERS OF CHRIST TO THE CHURCHES

A LORD’S DAY ENCOUNTER

I, John, am your brother and your partner in suffering and in God’s Kingdom and in the patient endurance to which Jesus calls us. I was exiled to the island of Patmos for preaching the word of God and for my testimony about Jesus. It was the Lord’s Day, and I was worshiping in the Spirit. Suddenly, I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet blast. It said, “Write in a book everything you see, and send it to the seven churches in the cities of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.”

REVELATION 1.9-11

- ▶ For the Apostle John, now in his nineties, it has been six decades since he last saw Jesus. That occasion was forty days after Jesus’ resurrection, when he ascended back to the Father after completing his mission. This encounter is nothing like that last sight of Jesus.

AN EXTRAORDINARY MANIFESTATION

When I turned to see who was speaking to me, I saw seven gold lampstands. And standing in the middle of the lampstands was someone like the Son of Man. He was wearing a long robe with a gold sash across his chest. His head and his hair were white like wool, as white as snow. And his eyes were like flames of fire. His feet were like polished bronze refined in a furnace, and his voice thundered like mighty ocean waves. He held seven stars in his right hand, and a sharp two-edged sword came from his mouth. And his face was like the sun in all its brilliance.

REVELATION 1.12-16

- ▶ This One, whose appearance is so overwhelming to John, was revealed seven hundred years earlier to Daniel when he received his prophecy about the world empires, and saw the Ancient of Days approached by “one like a son of man” who was given an eternal kingdom (Daniel 7).

THE “I AM”

- ▶ To understand the significance of the term by which Christ identified himself to John, we must go back to the experience that Moses had when the LORD God called him to confront Pharaoh. Moses asked how to identify this One speaking to him from the burning bush:

God said to Moses, “I AM who I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’ ” God also said to Moses, “Say to the Israelites, ‘YHWH, the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob—has sent me to you.’ This is My name forever, the name you shall call Me from generation to generation.”

- ▶ To the Jews, “I AM” was the most recognizable description of divinity. Repeatedly, the LORD God had identified himself in this way:
 - ▶ I am the LORD; apart from me there is no savior. (Isaiah 43.10)
 - ▶ I am he who blots out your transgressions. (Isaiah 43.25)
 - ▶ I am the LORD and there is no other; apart from me there is no God. (Isaiah 43.5)
 - ▶ I am the first and I am the last. (Isaiah 48.12)
 - ▶ I am the LORD your God . . . You shall acknowledge no God but me, no Savior except me. (Hosea 13.4)

“EGO EIMI”

“Very truly I tell you,” Jesus answered, “before Abraham was born, I AM!” At this, they picked up stones to stone him.

JOHN 10.58-59

- ▶ In the Hebrew to Greek translation of the Old Testament made before the birth of Jesus, God’s divine and exclusive name in Exodus 3.14-15, “I AM” is translated as *“Ego eimi.”*
- ▶ Throughout his ministry, Jesus appropriated this term “I AM” (*ego eimi*) to describe himself, to attest to his divine nature as the Son of God and his fulfillment of Old Testament anticipation of the Messiah.

- ▶ In Revelation, the number “seven” is prominent – signifying completeness and comprehension; in *The Gospel of John*, Jesus identifies himself with seven “I AM” descriptions. This identification and appropriation by Jesus was not lost on the Jews; they understood what he was saying about himself – that he is fully and eternally God – and to them, that assertion was unacceptable blasphemy.
- ▶ For 2,000 years the most hotly contested and most rejected religious belief is this assertion that Jesus Christ is truly God.

Who is the liar? It is whoever denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a person is the antichrist—denying the Father and the Son. No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also. (1 JOHN 2.22-23)

“I AM THE BREAD OF LIFE”

“I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, yet they died. But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which anyone may eat and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.”

JOHN 6.48-51

- ▶ In his first “I AM” description, Jesus presented himself in “God-like” and “God-sized” proportions: he declared that he is the living bread—the bread that came from heaven, the bread capable of imparting eternal life, and the bread whose life is sufficient for the entire world.

“I AM THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD”

When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, “I AM the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

JOHN 8.12

- ▶ In the Old Testament, light is a symbol of God’s divine presence (Exodus 13.21), salvation (Psalm 27.1), God’s Word (Psalm 119.105), and God’s ultimate promise and Light-Giver, the Messiah (Isaiah 9.2). Light was at the heart of the history and identity of God’s people; for the Jews, YHWH and light were synonymous. Now Jesus claims to be a greater light than any in their history: *“I AM the Light of the World.”*

“I AM THE TRUE GATE”

“I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved.”

JOHN 10.9

- ▶ Unapologetically and without qualification, Jesus presented himself as the exclusive access to God and to salvation – that one’s response to his claims ultimately determines their eternal destiny and well-being, and this applies to every person, everywhere.

Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him! For if, while we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! (ROMANS 5.9-10)

“I AM THE GOOD SHEPHERD”

“I AM the Good Shepherd. I lay down my life for the sheep.”

JOHN 10.11

- ▶ The image of God as shepherd, was to the Jews, one of the most profound Old Testament images of God in covenant relationship with His people (*cf. Psalm 23; Isaiah 40.11; Ezekiel 34.16, 23; Micah 5.4*).
- ▶ Jesus was unequivocal in declaring that there are no alternatives to his care and actions on behalf of the sheep. In stating thus, he declared himself to be the willing and vicarious sacrifice who came as the singular means and with sufficient authority to determine the composition of the “one flock.”

“I AM THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE”

Jesus said to her, “I AM the Resurrection and the Life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

JOHN 11.25-26

- ▶ Standing in front of the tomb of a dead man, Jesus dared Martha to believe that he was “*Ego-Eimi-Incarnate*”— that she was looking at the “*God-Word who became flesh,*” the “*Life-Eternal and Life-Breathing Author of Creation*” who, at that moment, could reverse physical death and impart eternal life to any who would believe his claims. (He proceeded to back up his claims by calling the dead man to walk out of his grave.)

“I AM THE WAY, THE TRUTH, AND THE LIFE”

Jesus answered, “I AM the Way and the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

JOHN 14.6

- ▶ Audacious in its claim, but consistent and summarizing of all that he has asserted throughout his ministry, Jesus declared to his disciples on the eve of his impending Scripture-fulfilling death and resurrection that he is the ⁽¹⁾ singular way to God, ⁽²⁾ the exclusive truth about God, and ⁽³⁾ the sole arbiter of life and access to God. He rejects, apart from himself, any other means of access to God the Father.

“I AM THE TRUE VINE”

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit He prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.

JOHN 15.1-2

- ▶ *“Ego eimi alethinos ampelos”* – In contrast to Israel, the choice vine which produced only bad fruit (Isaiah 5.1-2), Jesus declared that His Father, the True Husbandman who had planted the choice vine, has replaced it with the True Vine into which he has grafted branches (Gentiles) that were not originally part of the choice vine. Again, Jesus presents himself as the exclusive source of life and as the only means by which anyone can be acceptable or viable in the sight of God.

“I AM THE LIVING ONE”

“I am the First and the Last. I AM the Living One. I died, but look—I am alive forever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and the grave.”

REVELATION 1.17-18

- ▶ The apostle John had never seen Jesus in his post-incarnate state: re-possessed of the glory he shared with the Father (John 17.5). But what is familiar are the words he heard Jesus speaking: “Ego eimi.”
- ▶ “*I AM the First and the Last*” expressed the equality of essence and existence that Christ shares with the Lord God Almighty (1.8). Christ was declaring his oneness identity and nature with the Father—now fully restored to its eternal dimensions in function and manifestation.

- ▶ To his seven “I AM” statements given during his earth-life, Christ added an eighth (*eight is the number of new beginnings*), this one spoken in the realm of infinity: “I AM the Living One.” Christ further elaborated: *“I died, but look—I am alive forever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and the grave.”*
- ▶ Unlike Lazarus who was resurrected only to die again, the One who is the Resurrection and the Life is alive forever and ever. As the Light, Gate, Shepherd, *and* the Living One, he has the keys to every person’s life, future, and eternal destiny. He can reverse any circumstance and give one a new beginning; he can also lock one in eternal death with no possibility of reversal (cf. 3.7; Matthew 7.23; 25.41).

IS HE YOUR LIVING ONE?

- ▶ The Apostle John knew Jesus as his resurrected Lord; now he encountered him as his eternally and infinitely glorified Savior—the One who has the keys to forgiveness of sin, justification, eternal life; the One who writes our names in his Book of Life. To all who truly know him and abide in real relationship with him, he says: “Do not be afraid.”
- ▶ But as the One with the keys to everyone’s destiny, as the One who can erase a name from the Book of Life (3.5), there is reason to fear. He is *God-the-One-and-Only* with the final authority to judge who receives eternal life (John 5.21-22), the ultimate standard determining one’s destiny (John 8.24). He is not to be underestimated.