

Session 3 Why We Must Understand the Seven Churches in Revelation 2-3

I. REVIEW: MESSAGE OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

- A. Revelation is called the “revelation of Jesus” because it reveals His heart, power, and leadership.
¹The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him [Jesus] to show His servants... (Rev. 1:1)
- B. The theme of Revelation is Jesus returning to take leadership of the earth, in partnership with His people, to reap a harvest of souls (Rev. 7:9) and replace all governments (Rev. 11:15; 19:15-16).
⁷Behold, He is coming with clouds, and every eye will see Him. (Rev. 1:7)
- C. Jesus will come *only* in the context of a prepared Bride in unity with the Spirit and anointed in prayer to release God’s glory on earth and to release the Tribulation to confront darkness.
⁷“For the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready.” (Rev. 19:7)
¹⁷The Spirit and the bride say, “Come!” (Rev. 22:17)
⁴The prayers of the saints, ascended before God...⁵Then the angel took the censer, filled it with fire from the altar, and threw it to the earth. (Rev. 8:4-5)

II. OUTLINE OF REVELATION

- Rev. 1:* Jesus gives the clearest picture of who He is, giving us eighteen descriptions of His majesty.
Rev. 2-3: Jesus gives us the clearest picture of what He wants in the Church in His seven letters.
Rev. 4-5: Jesus gives us the clearest picture of His heavenly commission and resources.
Rev. 6-19: Jesus gives us the clearest picture of how He will prepare the nations for His glory.
Rev. 20-22: Jesus gives us the clearest picture of our eternal inheritance on earth with Him.

III. LETTERS TO 7 CHURCHES: PREPARING TO OVERCOME AND OPERATE IN POWER

- A. The book of Revelation is an eschatological book of Acts, revealing the acts of the Spirit through the end-time apostles and prophets, and the praying Church under Jesus’ authority. These seven prophetic messages instruct us on how to prepare to partner with Him in His worldwide actions related to His second coming. Jesus knows best how to prepare His own Bride.
- B. These letters show us the kind of Church that Jesus is building and what His agenda is. In them, He defines love and relevance on His terms. These define the spiritual maturity necessary for the Church, under Jesus’ leadership, to pray to release God’s judgment against the Antichrist in the way Moses released the ten plagues on Egypt, and as the apostles established the Church in Acts.
- C. These letters define the truths and focus necessary to equip the Church to walk in love for Jesus. Our love is expressed as we obey His commands, heed His warnings, and believe His promises (especially His 22 eternal rewards). There will be great challenges but even greater rewards.

IV. HOW TO APPLY THE SEVEN LETTERS: FIVE WAYS

- A. ***Individually***: These letters were written to inspire response from individuals.
- B. ***Corporately***: The most powerful application is when local churches walk in these truths together.
- C. ***Historically***: The letters were first written to seven historical churches in John's generation to address the actual conditions of seven real churches. Some see parallels in the spiritual conditions of the seven churches of Asia in the first century to the spiritual conditions of successive periods in church history. I am not sure this can be substantiated, but it is possible.
- D. ***Universally***: All churches in the first century and throughout 2,000 years of church history, just as the letter to the Romans was for the church at Rome and all churches past, present, and future.
- E. ***Eschatologically***: To prepare the end-time Church for the events seen in Revelation 6-19. This is when there will be the most believers in history living in the most difficult time in history.

V. STUDYING THE SEVEN LETTERS: THE COMMON ELEMENTS IN THE LETTERS

- A. ***Historical context***: It is important to gain information about the situation that each church was challenged with politically, economically, and spiritually. Jesus strategically selected these seven, knowing they would give prophetic insight into preparing the end-time Church.
- B. ***Affirmation for faithfulness***: Jesus gave affirmation before correction (Ephesus, Pergamos, and Thyatira). Two churches received no affirmation (Sardis and Laodicea).
- C. ***Rebuke for compromise***: What they must not do. Jesus' correction is not rejection. He had things against three churches: Ephesus (2:4), Pergamos (2:14), and Thyatira (2:20). Two churches did not receive a correction (Smyrna and Philadelphia). The compromises He gave the sternest rebukes for were passivity, immorality, and idolatry (covetousness and/or sorcery; Col. 3:5; Eph. 5:5; 1 Cor. 10:20-22). These were enabled by false teachings on grace that did not require repentance.
- D. ***Exhortation to respond***: What they must do. Jesus gave actions that He required, often with an element of warning. The warnings that Jesus gave most were against ***passivity*** (distraction with their increased blessing) and ***fear*** (persecution/rejection).
- E. ***Promise for overcomers***: As incentive for diligent faithfulness to Jesus. Most of these promises are for the millennial kingdom. Insight into rewards is essential to equip us to stand in pressure. Jesus promised us twenty-two eternal rewards in Revelation 2-3 (2:7, 10, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21).
- F. ***Revelation of Jesus***: Each message begins by Jesus calling attention to the specific aspect of His majesty seen in Revelation 1 that was most needed in each church's situation. Sixteen different aspects of Jesus' majesty are highlighted in Revelation 2-3 (see appendix on "The Thirty Descriptions of Jesus in Rev. 1-3" at mikebickle.org for more on this).

VI. SIXTEEN DESCRIPTIONS OF JESUS: APPLIED TO SPECIFIC TEMPTATIONS

¹To...Ephesus write, “These things says He who holds the seven stars...who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands...”⁸ And to...Smyrna write, “These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life...”¹² And to...Pergamos write, “These things says He who has the sharp two-edged sword...”¹⁸ And to...Thyatira write, “These things says the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet like fine brass...”^{3:1} And to...Sardis write, “These things says He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars...”⁷ And to...Philadelphia write, “These things says He who is holy, He who is true, He who has the key of David...”¹⁴ And to...the Laodiceans write, “These things says the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God.” (Rev. 2:1-3:14)

VII. HE WHO HAS AN EAR, LET HIM HEAR: FIVE IMPLICATIONS

- A. The exhortation that Jesus repeated the most in His earthly ministry was the call to have ears to hear what the Spirit is saying. This is written 16 times (8x in the gospels and 8x in Revelation: Mt. 11:15; 13:9, 43; Mk. 4:9, 23; 7:16; Lk. 8:8; 14:35; Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22; 13:9).
⁷“**He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.**” (Rev. 2:7)
- B. First, it signaled that the truth being proclaimed was *extremely important to Jesus*.
- C. Second, it calls us to *pay careful attention*. Jesus is saying that there is more than what is immediately obvious. We must not be content with understanding only what is on the surface. Jesus calls us to diligently focus on pursuing the deeper truth being set before us.
- D. Third, it takes the *supernatural help of the Holy Spirit* to grasp it. The unaided mind of even a devoted believer will not be able to automatically comprehend the truth being set forth. Jesus is making it clear that it is beyond our natural ability. Jesus wants us to ask the Spirit for help.
- E. Fourth, He most often gave this exhortation related to *eternal rewards*. Every time Jesus spoke of one of the 22 eternal rewards, He warned us to have ears to hear, because it takes supernatural insight to grasp the 22 rewards. When reading each reward, pray, “Lord, show me more.”
- F. Fifth, it takes a *focused determination* to lay hold of the truths being referred to. We do not automatically respond in a deep and sustained way to them. It will take a tenacious commitment to maintain these truths in our lives long-term because of our propensity to lose touch with them.
- G. Jesus started by speaking to individuals (“he” who has an ear); then changed to addressing a group (the “churches”). There is both an individual and corporate response that the Spirit desires.
- H. Jesus was the only One in the NT to give this exhortation. He echoed Moses, who called Israel to “hear,” meaning to “have ears to hear” (Deut. 6:4-5), and the Father (Ps. 45:10).
⁴“**Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one!**”⁵**You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.**” (Deut. 6:4-5)

VIII. THE ANGEL TO THE CHURCH: APOSTOLIC LEADERSHIP

- A. “The angel to the church” refers to the apostolic leader over each congregation. The word angel is *angelos* in Greek. In the NT, the word refers to an angelic or human messenger (Lk. 7:24, 27; 9:52). It was translated “messenger” when referring to John the Baptist (Mt. 11:10; Mk. 1:2).
- B. The messenger was responsible to guard the message and not let it be distorted through compromise, fear, or neglect. The apostolic leaders are responsible before God to boldly proclaim what Jesus revealed in these letters and to establish an action plan to implement the truths. Leaders must not draw back when others become angry at Jesus’ message in Rev. 2-3.
- C. People follow whatever message is publicly proclaimed consistently with boldness.

IX. PROMISES TO OVERCOMERS: ETERNAL REWARDS

- A. Jesus gave His most in-depth teaching on rewards (mentioning 22 rewards). He knew what we would need to be motivated and stabilized during the release of the glory and crisis in His end-time plan. He reveals our rewards that we receive at the time of His coming (Rev. 11:15-18).
- B. These equip us to persevere by being anchored in eternity with confidence that our choices will be rewarded in eternity. When suffering is seen in God’s light, it loses its power to intimidate.
- C. Jesus was speaking to believers who had already received the free gift of salvation. He was calling them to live in a way to receive heavenly rewards. Salvation or justification is a free gift given to us. It is based on Jesus’ worthiness (Eph. 2:8-9). Heavenly rewards are given to us according to our works, or our response of gratitude to Jesus for giving us so great a salvation.
- D. There will be a vast difference in the measure of glory of each one’s reward. Most of these 22 rewards will be received by all believers in at least an introductory way. The issue in Revelation 2-3 pertains to what measure of the reward a believer receives. Since only overcomers receive the *fullest measure* of these rewards, it is important that we rightly interpret what Jesus intends when calling us to be overcomers in Revelation 2-3. These rewards refer to varying measures of the basic blessing of eternal life that all receive (1 Cor. 15:41).
- E. These rewards are not secondary or irrelevant, but rather they are a very important part of our destiny. Therefore, all believers should be very familiar with these rewards.
- F. Our obedience is deeply connected to our rewards. Some falsely teach that these rewards are given to all believers in fullness, regardless of how they live. This view takes these rewards out of their context, which requires repentance from certain things and to be faithful to the end. In Revelation 2-3, Jesus was not exhorting them to be born again. He was offering born-again believers rewards as incentives to greater diligence in the face of temptation and pressure.

X. JESUS PROMISED TWENTY ETERNAL REWARDS

To eat from the tree of life in the midst of Paradise (2:7); to receive the crown of life (2:10); to not be hurt by the second death (2:11); to eat hidden manna (2:17); to receive a white stone (2:17); to receive a new name written on the stone (2:17); to have power over the nations (2:26); to receive the morning star (2:28); to receive white garments (Rev 3:5); to receive a name that is not blotted from the Book of Life (3:5); for Jesus to confess one's name before the Father and angels (3:5); for one's persecutors to worship before their feet (3:9); for one's persecutors to know that Jesus loves them (3:9); to be made a pillar in God's temple (3:12); to have God's name, the New Jerusalem's name, and Jesus' new name written on them (3:12); to receive gold to make one rich (3:18); to receive white garments (3:18); to have anointed eyes to see more (3:18); to eat with Jesus (3:20); and to sit on His throne (3:21).

XI. UNDERSTANDING THE CALL TO OVERCOME

- A. An overcomer in this context is one who matures in the specific areas of faithfulness that Jesus emphasized in his or her life.
- B. To the church of Ephesus, overcoming meant to return to their first love for Jesus until the end of their life. To the church in Smyrna, it meant to be faithful in persecution even to death. To the church in Pergamos and Thyatira, overcoming meant to resist immorality and idolatry for the remainder of their life. To the church in Sardis, it was to be watchful, or to develop a prayer life and to hold fast the things that God entrusted to them from their earlier years. To the church in Philadelphia, overcoming meant to persevere in mature obedience for the remaining years of their life. To the church of the Laodiceans, overcoming meant to resist lukewarmness.
- C. Overcoming does not mean attaining perfection in one's character, but rather constantly reaching for victory with all our strength. The Lord evaluates us with great tenderness. He is very kind in His evaluation of our lives.
- D. Our greatest faithfulness is flawed, yet it is consistent in desire to press in and break through. Two examples of those who were counted faithful in their weakness are David and Abraham. Paul wrote that David fulfilled all of God's will (Acts 13:22) and Abraham's faith did not waver (Rom. 4:20).

XII. WHO ARE OVERCOMERS? TWO DIFFERENT CONTEXTS

- A. First, ***overcoming worldly unbelief***: All believers overcome in this general way by believing in Jesus and refusing heresies, as outlined in John's epistles (1 Jn. 4:1-5; 5:4-5).
- B. Second, ***overcoming unfaithfulness***: In a believer's life, as specifically defined in Revelation 2-3. To overcome means to walk in spiritual maturity, or to be consistent in obedience.
- C. Summary: As unbelievers, we ***overcome unbelief*** on the day we become born again. As believers, we ***overcome unfaithfulness*** only after we endure in obedience until the end.

XIII. WHO ARE OVERCOMERS? THREE VIEWS

- A. ***The eternal reward view***: Rightly teaches that the rewards in Revelation 2-3 are given in different degrees according to one's faithfulness in loving and obeying Jesus. Rewards are given in addition to the free gift of eternal life. Jesus is speaking to churches. The issue of salvation is settled; the issue in focus is the particular areas of unfaithfulness that Jesus emphasized in their lives. Not all Christians overcome the specific unfaithfulness Jesus highlights.
- B. ***The "all believers" view***: Wrongly teaches that all believers are overcomers, because of the very act of believing in Jesus is all that is needed to be an overcomer (1 Jn. 5:4-5). Faith in Jesus rather than faithfulness to Him is emphasized in this position. In other words, both the spiritually mature and immature believers are equally overcomers. Thus, all the rewards in Revelation 2-3 are automatically and fully given to all believers as being synonymous with the gift of eternal life. The thief on the cross will receive the same reward as Paul and John the Baptist.
- C. ***The loss of salvation view***: Wrongly teaches that believers in Revelation 2-3 are being exhorted to faithfulness to avoid losing their salvation. In this view, failing to overcome is synonymous with losing one's salvation. This view implies that we must overcome all spiritual immaturity to avoid losing our salvation. This implies that only mature believers are saved. For example, the diligent workers in Ephesus who lacked fresh love for Jesus would have lost their salvation if dying before renewing their first love (Rev. 2:2-7).