

Session 4 The Seven Churches: Called to Overcome (Rev. 2-3)

For **additional study material pertaining to this session, see mikebickle.org*

I. REVIEW: MESSAGE OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

- A. The book of Revelation is called the ***revelation of Jesus*** because it reveals the majesty of His heart and leadership in His plan to transition the earth to the age to come. Secondly, it is about events that will happen as part of His end-time plan to purify the Church, bring in the harvest, and replace evil governments. The main point in Revelation is to *reveal the Man behind the plan*.
¹The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him [Jesus] to show His servants—things which must shortly take place. He sent and signified it by His angel to...John. (Rev. 1:1)
- B. In Revelation 1-3, John shared a vision highlighting ***30 descriptions*** of Jesus' majesty, ministry, and personality, and ***18 eternal rewards***. Each description and reward communicates a specific insight about Jesus that is necessary in equipping the Church to overcome compromise. We identify the 30 descriptions from Jesus' titles, names, appearance, actions, and clothing.
- C. Revelation chapters 1 and 19 contain two of the most glorious descriptions of Jesus in the Bible. They describe *who He is* (how He thinks and feels) and *what He does* in His end-time plan.
- D. Jesus will come *only* in the context of a prepared Bride walking in deep unity with the Spirit.
⁷“For the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready.” (Rev. 19:7)
- E. We must understand Jesus' message to the seven churches. It is His instruction on what the overcoming Church looks like. In Revelation 1-3, we see truths that Jesus wants emphasized to prepare His Church to be used in the greatest revival in history—the end-time revival. He gives us a picture of what He wants in the Church, and defines the quality of love and spiritual maturity that the Church will need to overcome in the face of great temptation and persecution.

II. HOW TO APPLY THE 7 LETTERS: 4 WAYS

- A. ***Individually***: The letters were written to inspire wholeheartedness in individuals.
- B. ***Historically***: The letters were first written to seven actual churches in John's generation to address their spiritual condition and encourage them. Some see parallels between the spiritual condition of the seven churches of Asia in the first century and the spiritual climate of successive periods in church history. I am not sure this can be substantiated, but it is possible.
- C. ***Universally***: The letters were to benefit all churches throughout 2,000 years of church history. They were written to equip local churches to walk *corporately* in these truths together. Jesus spoke to individuals (“he” who has an ear), and then applied it to a group (“churches”).
⁷“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” (Rev. 2:7)
- D. ***Eschatologically***: They are to prepare the end-time church for the events of Revelation 6-19.

III. STUDYING THE 7 LETTERS: COMMON ELEMENTS

- A. **Revelation of Jesus:** Each letter begins with Jesus highlighting specific aspects of His majesty that the churches needed to equip them to overcome persecution and specific temptations.
- B. **Historical context:** It is important to gain information about the ways in which each church was challenged, politically, economically, and spiritually. Jesus strategically selected these seven churches, knowing that they would give prophetic insight into preparing the end-time Church.
- C. **Affirmation for faithfulness:** Jesus gave His affirmations before His corrections (Ephesus, Pergamos, and Thyatira). Two churches received no affirmation (Sardis and Laodicea).
- D. **Correction for compromise:** Jesus highlighted six temptations: immorality and idolatry (Rev. 2:14, 20), holding the doctrine of the Nicolaitans (Rev. 2:15), leaving their first love (Rev. 2:4), having a name of being spiritually alive but being spiritually dead (Rev. 3:1), and lukewarmness (Rev. 3:16). Two churches did not receive correction from Jesus (Smyrna and Philadelphia). The compromises He emphasized most were immorality, idolatry, and passivity.
- E. **Exhortation to respond:** Jesus gave actions that He required them to take, often with an element of warning. He warned them the most about *fear* (of persecution and rejection).
- F. **Promise for overcomers:** Jesus' promises are an incentive for diligent faithfulness to Him—most will have their greatest fulfillment in the Millennium. Insight into them helps equip us to stand in pressure. Jesus promised 18 eternal rewards in Rev. 2-3 (2:7, 10, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21).
1. Jesus taught on eternal rewards more than any other man in the Scripture. Here Jesus mentioned 18 rewards that equip His people to persevere by being anchored in eternity with confidence that our choices matter to such a degree that they will be rewarded.
 2. Jesus was speaking to believers who had already received the free gift of salvation. He was calling believers to live in such a way as to receive heavenly rewards.
 3. We receive salvation (justification) as a free gift, based on Jesus' worthiness (Eph. 2:8-9). Heavenly rewards are given according to the works that we do as our response of love and gratitude to Jesus for giving us so great and free a salvation. There will be a difference in the measure of glory of each one's reward (1 Cor. 15:41-42).
- G. 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)***
- H. “The angel to the church” refers to the apostolic leader over each church. The word *angel* is *angelos* in Greek; it refers to an angelic or human messenger (Lk. 7:24, 27; 9:52). It is translated “messenger” when referring to John the Baptist (Mt. 11:10). The messenger's responsibility was to guard the message and not let it be distorted through compromise, fear, or neglect.

IV. EPHESUS: RETURNING TO OUR FIRST LOVE (REV. 2:1-7)

- A. The primary message: the church of Ephesus was affirmed for their diligent work and perseverance in standing for truth, but corrected for lacking love for Jesus in their labors.
- B. Jesus' revelation of Himself: He holds the seven stars and walks in the midst of His people. He holds, supports, directs, protects, and anoints His servants, and is deeply involved with His churches, protecting those who walk with Him, as Adam walked with God in the garden of Eden.
¹“To the angel of the church of Ephesus write, ‘These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands...’” (Rev. 2:1)
- C. Jesus affirmed their perseverance in their labor and in standing for truth (v. 2, 6).
²“I know your works, your labor, your patience [perseverance], and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars...” (Rev. 2:2)
- D. Jesus corrected them for neglecting to cultivate their first love for God (v. 4). He exhorted them to remember, repent, and act in the ways that they had in their former days (v. 5). He promised them a place “in the midst” of the paradise in the New Jerusalem (v. 7).
⁴“Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love. ⁵Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works...⁷To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God.” (Rev. 2:4-7)

V. SMYRNA: FAITHFULNESS IN SUFFERING (REV. 2:8-11)

- A. The primary message: the church of Smyrna was called to continue to walk in the grace of fearlessness and faithfulness in persecution.
- B. Jesus' revelation of Himself: He is the First, the source of all blessing, and the Last in seeing the end of all things. Therefore He can assure us that all His promises will come to pass. As a man, He died and came back to life. Having suffered when He was cruelly killed, He understood their suffering in persecution, but He had prevailed with power, knowing the way to full victory.
⁸“To the angel of the church in Smyrna write, ‘These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life...’” (Rev. 2:8)
- C. Jesus affirmed their love and perseverance in persecution (v. 9) and exhorted them not to fear (v. 10). He gave them no correction and promised them authority over the nations (v. 11).
⁹“I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich)...¹⁰Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison...be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life...¹¹He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death.” (Rev. 2:8-11)

VI. PERGAMOS: A CHURCH WITH COMPROMISE (REV. 2:12-17)

- A. The primary message: the church of Pergamos was affirmed for their faithfulness in not yielding to fear in persecution, and called to refuse to yield to sin in the midst of a perverse culture. They were to stand up against Balaam's false teaching that allowed immorality and idolatrous feasts.
- B. Jesus' revelation of Himself: He has the two-edged sword (v. 12). This emphasizes His zeal to intervene against the evil government of the Roman Empire as well as sin in the church. There are five references to Jesus' sword (Rev. 1:16; 2:12, 16; 19:15, 21). Four times it refers to the sword of His mouth. When He speaks, the Spirit releases the sword of judgment on His enemies.
¹²*"To...the church in Pergamos write, 'These things says He who has the sharp two-edged sword...'" (Rev. 2:12)*
- C. Jesus affirmed their faithfulness in not yielding to fear in the midst of persecution (v. 13).
¹³*"I know your works...you hold fast to My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days in which Antipas was My faithful martyr, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells." (Rev. 2:13)*
- D. He corrected their compromise in tolerating immorality and idolatry (v. 14). He exhorted them to repent (v. 16) and promised them hidden manna and a white stone (v. 17).
¹⁴*"But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught...to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality...¹⁶Repent, or else I will...fight against them with the sword of My mouth...¹⁷To him who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna to eat. And I will give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name written which no one knows except him who receives it." (Rev. 2:14-17)*
- E. Augustine said, "Lust yielded to becomes a habit, and a habit not resisted becomes necessity [addiction]."

VII. THYATIRA: COMMITTED, YET TOLERATING IMMORALITY (REV. 2:18-29)

- A. The primary message: the church of Thyatira was commended for their love and ministry, but warned not to tolerate Jezebel who promoted immorality and idolatry.
- B. Jesus' revelation of Himself: the Son of God, with eyes of fire and feet like brass. Being the Son of God emphasizes His deity and power to withstand Jezebel. His eyes being like fire speak of His love for His people and His judgment, or zeal to remove all that hinders love. His feet like brass speak of judgment against sin. He promises to tread down all that is identified with Jezebel.
¹⁸*"To...the church in Thyatira write, 'These things says the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet like fine brass...'" (Rev. 2:18)*
- C. Jesus releases either the *fire of grace* or the *fire of judgment*, depending on how His people respond to His leadership.

- D. Jesus affirmed their ministry, love, service, faith, and perseverance in persecution (v. 19).
¹⁹ ***“I know your works, love, service, faith, and your patience [perseverance]...” (Rev. 2:19)***
- E. He corrected their toleration of idolatry and immorality—lacking in moral purity—(v. 20) and warned of His discipline (v. 21-23). To overcomers, He promised power over the nations (v. 26).
²⁰ ***“Nevertheless I have a few things against you, because you allow [tolerate] that woman Jezebel... to teach and seduce My servants to commit sexual immorality...”²¹ I gave her time to repent of her sexual immorality, and she did not repent. ²²I will cast her into a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent...²³ I will kill her children with death...²⁶ He who overcomes, and keeps My works until the end, to him I will give power over the nations...” (Rev. 2:20-26)***
- F. Believers are sometimes made sick and even die under God’s judgment. God’s discipline includes Satan being permitted to make the unrepentant sick (1 Cor. 5:1-5; 11:30-32).
³⁰ ***For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep [are dead].***
³¹ ***If we...judge ourselves, we would not be judged. ³²But when we are judged, we are chastened [disciplined] by the Lord, that we may not be condemned [go to hell] with the world. (1 Cor. 11:30-32)***
- ¹ ***It is reported that there is sexual immorality among you...⁵ deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord... (1 Cor. 5:1-5)***

VIII. SARDIS: REPUTATION WITHOUT SPIRITUAL SUBSTANCE (REV. 3:1-6)

- A. The primary message: the church of Sardis was called to repent of their spiritual passivity.
- B. Jesus’ revelation of Himself: He has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars. He will release the sevenfold diverse ministries of the Spirit to them (Isa. 11:2) and will hold His people in His hands, which speaks of being deeply involved in their life and ministry.
¹ ***“To the angel of the church in Sardis write, ‘These things says He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars...’” (Rev. 3:1)***
- C. Jesus gave them no affirmation, but corrected their spiritual passivity and lukewarmness (v. 1). They had a reputation of being spiritually alive, but lacked a sense of the Spirit’s presence and inspiration in life. He exhorted them to be watchful and strengthen the things that remained (v. 2) as they remembered and repented (v. 3). He promised them white garments, that He would not blot their names out of the book of life, and that He would confess them before the Father (v. 5).
¹ ***“I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead. ²Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain...³ Remember how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent...⁵ He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the book of life; but I will confess his name before My Father...” (Rev. 3:1-5)***

IX. PHILADELPHIA: FAITHFULNESS UNTO ETERNAL REWARDS (REV. 3:7-13)

- A. The primary message: the church of Philadelphia was affirmed for their faithfulness to Jesus.
- B. Jesus' revelation of Himself: He who is holy and true and who has the key of David. Jesus is holy, transcendent (infinitely superior to all). Thus He is worth whatever it costs to love and obey Him. He is true, reliable in His extravagant promises (Rev. 3:12). He has the key of David, which includes being the heir of all God's promises to David and having great authority.
- ⁷"To...the church in Philadelphia write, 'These things says He who is holy, He who is true, He who has the key of David, He who opens and no one shuts...'" (Rev. 3:7)*
- C. Jesus affirmed their faithfulness to obey in the face of temptation and great persecution (v. 8). He gave no correction, but exhorted them to hold fast, to continue to persevere (v. 11). He promised to make them a pillar in God's temple and to write on them God's name (v. 12).
- ⁸"I know your works...for you...have kept My word, and have not denied My name...¹¹Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown. ¹²He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God...and I will write on him the name of My God and the name of the city of My God, the New Jerusalem..." (Rev. 3:8-12)*

X. LAODICEA: SPIRITUAL PRIDE AND LUKEWARMNESS (REV. 3:14-22)

- A. The primary message: the church of Laodicea was promised deeper fellowship with God and authority in His eternal kingdom *if* they zealously repented of their lukewarmness.
- B. Jesus' revelation of Himself: He is the Amen because His promises are sure, and the Faithful Witness because what He speaks is reliable as He revealed their failures (v. 15-17) and promises (v. 20-21). He is the beginning of creation, being the *First Cause* and having all authority over it.
- ¹⁴"To the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write, 'These things says the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God...'" (Rev. 3:14)*
- C. Jesus gave them no affirmation for their faithfulness. He corrected their lukewarmness and spiritual pride (v. 15-17). He exhorted them to buy gold refined by fire (v. 18), and promised them deep fellowship with God and authority over the nations (v. 20-21).
- ¹⁶"Because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth. ¹⁷Because you say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing'—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked...¹⁹be zealous and repent. ²⁰Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone...opens the door, I will come in to him...²¹To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne..." (Rev. 3:16-21)*

XI. QUESTIONS FOR SMALL-GROUP DISCUSSION (e.g., FCF FRIENDSHIP GROUPS)

1. Identify one point that inspired or challenged you. Why? What will you do differently to apply it?
2. Identify one point that you want to impart to a younger believer. Why? How will you approach this?
3. Identify one point that you would like to gain more understanding of. How will you seek to gain it?