

Session 1 The Importance of Jesus' Message to the 7 Churches

I. JESUS IN 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. Second, it reveals events that will occur in His end-time plan to purify the Church, bring in the harvest, replace all the governments on earth, and transition it to the age to come.

¹The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him [Jesus] to show His servants—things which must shortly take place. And He sent and signified it by His angel to...John. (Rev. 1:1)

- B. In Revelation 1-3, John shares a vision which highlights **30 descriptions of Jesus'** majesty, ministry, and personality, and **22 eternal rewards**. Each description and reward communicates insight into Jesus' leadership that are necessary in equipping the Church to overcome compromise.
- C. I identify **30 descriptions** from Jesus' titles, appearance, and actions in Revelation 1-3. I recognize 24 descriptions in Revelation 1— 7 descriptions in 1:5-7 and 17 in 1:10-16; and 18 in Revelation 2-3, totaling 42. Since 12 are in both Revelation 1 and Revelation 2-3, I identify 30 distinct descriptions.
- D. Jesus revealed His majesty as the Son of Man (Rev. 1). He used the title *Son of Man* more than any other (85 times). The Son of Man is a title from Daniel 7:14 and speaks of the Messiah who will rule all the nations with His people. This title emphasizes that Jesus is fully God and fully human.

¹⁰I heard...a loud voice...¹¹saying, "I am the...First and the Last...¹³in the midst of the seven lampstands One like the Son of Man...¹⁴His head and hair were...white as snow, and His eyes like a flame of fire; ¹⁵His feet were like fine brass...His voice as the sound of many waters; ¹⁶He had in His right hand seven stars, out of His mouth went a...sword, and His countenance was like the sun shining in its strength. ¹⁷And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as dead... (Rev. 1:10-17)

II. THE ANGEL TO THE CHURCH: LEADERSHIP

- A. Jesus entrusted a specific message to the leadership team over each church in Revelation 2-3. The "angel to the church" refers to the senior leader and thus, the team of elders over each church. The word "angel" is *angelos* in the Greek. It may refer to a human or angelic messenger (Lk. 7:24, 27; 9:52). It was translated *messenger* when referring to John the Baptist (Mt. 11:10. Mk. 1:2).

¹"To the angel [messenger] of the church of Ephesus write, 'These things says He who holds the seven stars...'" ⁸"To the angel of the church in Smyrna write, 'These things says the First and the Last...'" ¹²"To the angel of the church in Pergamos write, 'These things says He who has the sharp two-edged sword...'" ¹⁸"To the angel of the church in Thyatira..." (Rev. 2:1, 8, 12, 18)

- B. The "messenger" of each of church was the one responsible with his leadership team to steward that message and not let it be neglected or distorted through compromise, fear, or neglect. They were to proclaim the message that Jesus spoke and then to establish an action plan to implement the truths.

III. COMMON ELEMENTS IN UNDERSTANDING JESUS' LETTERS TO THE 7 CHURCHES

- A. **Historical context:** It is helpful to understand the situation of the city where each church was. Each had specific challenges politically, economically, spiritually, etc. Jesus selected these churches for varying reasons, also knowing they would give insight into preparing the end-time Church.
- B. **Revelation of Jesus:** All seven messages begin with Jesus highlighting an aspect of His majesty seen in Revelation 1. Eighteen aspects of Jesus' majesty are highlighted in Revelation 2-3.
- C. **Affirmation for faithfulness:** Jesus gave a specific affirmation to five of the churches. However, two churches did not receive an affirmation (Sardis and Laodicea).
- D. **Correction for compromise:** Jesus' correction is not rejection. He corrected five churches: Ephesus (2:4), Pergamos (2:14), Thyatira (2:20), Sardis (3:1), and Laodicea (3:15-17). He did not correct two churches (Smyrna and Philadelphia). His strongest rebukes were for passivity, immorality, and idolatry (covetousness and/or sorcery: 1 Cor. 10:20-22; Eph. 5:5; Col. 3:5).
- E. **Exhortation to respond:** Jesus highlighted specific actions that He required them to engage in. He urged some to *repent of compromise* and some to *resist fear* of persecution or rejection.
- F. **Promise for overcomers:** In Revelation 2-3, Jesus promised 22 eternal rewards (2:7, 10, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21). Most of these promises will find their greatest fulfillment in the millennial kingdom. They include: to eat from the tree of life (2:7); to receive the crown of life (2:10); not to 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); Jesus to confess one's name before the Father and angels. (3:5); one's persecutors to worship before their feet (3:9); 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, and Jesus' new name written on them (3:12); to receive gold to be 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).

IV. HOW TO APPLY THE MESSAGES IN THE 7 LETTERS

- A. **Individually:** The letters were intended to inspire obedient love and persevering faith in individuals.
- B. **Corporately:** The most powerful application is when local churches walk in these truths together. Jesus gave insight on how to prepare the end-time Church for the most difficult time in history.
- 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 of the spiritual conditions of these seven churches in 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).

V. HE WHO HAS AN EAR, LET HIM HEAR: 3 IMPLICATIONS

- A. The exhortation that Jesus repeated the most in His earthly ministry was to have ears to hear what the Spirit is saying. He emphasized it at least 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)*

1. There is both an individual and a corporate response that the Spirit desires to these truths. Jesus spoke this exhortation to individuals—“*he*” who has an ear, let “*him*” hear. Jesus also desired that these truths be applied corporately—“*to the churches*.”
2. Jesus was the only one in the NT to exhort people to “hear” what that the Spirit was saying. He echoed Moses’ call that Israel “hear”—thus, to “have ears to hear” (Deut. 6:4-5).

⁴*Hear, O Israel...⁵You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart... (Deut. 6:4-5)*

- B. First, it signaled that the truth being proclaimed was *very important to Jesus*.
- C. Second, it calls us to *pay careful attention*. Jesus is saying that there is more than what is immediately obvious. Jesus calls us to pursue diligently the deeper truth being set before us.
- D. Third, it takes the *supernatural help of the Spirit* to grasp it. The unaided mind of a devoted believer will not be able to grasp fully truth being set forth without asking the Spirit for help.

VI. WHO ARE OVERCOMERS? THERE ARE TWO DIFFERENT BIBLICAL 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). Faith in Jesus rather than faithfulness to Him is emphasized here.

⁴*Whatever is born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. ⁵*Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?* (1 Jn. 5:4-5)*

- B. Second, *overcoming unfaithfulness*: In a believer’s life, this is specifically defined in Rev. 2-3. To overcome means to walk in spiritual maturity or to be consistent in obedience.

²⁰*“You allow...Jezebel...to teach...My servants to commit sexual immorality...²⁶He who overcomes...until the end, to him I will give power over the nations...” (Rev. 2:20-26)*

1. To the church of *Ephesus*, overcoming meant to *return to their first love* for Jesus. To the church in *Smyrna*, it meant being *faithful in persecution*. To the churches in *Pergamos and Thyatira*, overcoming meant to *resist immorality and idolatry* for the remainder of their life.
 2. To the church in *Sardis*, it was to be watchful to *cultivate a vibrant relationship with Jesus* and to hold fast the things that God entrusted to them. To the *Philadelphians*, it was to *persevere in mature obedience*. To the *Laodiceans*, to overcome *spiritual lukewarmness*.
- 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.

VII. WHO ARE OVERCOMERS IN REVELATION 2-3? 3 VIEWS

- A. **The “all believers” view:** This view wrongly teaches that all believers are overcomers, stating 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. Here, both the spiritually mature and immature believers are equally overcomers. Thus, all the rewards in Revelation 2-3 are *fully* and *automatically* given to all believers as being synonymous with the gift of eternal life.
1. Our love and obedience in this life is deeply connected to our rewards in the age to come. 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 being faithful to the end.
 2. 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.
*¹¹For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.
¹²If anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw,
¹³each one's work [life decisions] will become clear...the fire will test each one's work...
¹⁴If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. ¹⁵If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.
(1 Cor. 3:11-15)*
- B. **The “loss of salvation” view:** This view wrongly teaches that believers in Revelation 2-3 are being exhorted to faithfulness to avoid losing their salvation. In this view, failing to *fully* overcome in an area of their spiritual life is synonymous with losing one's salvation. This view suggests 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 they had died before renewing their first love (Rev. 2:2-7).
- C. **The “eternal reward” view:** This 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. I assume that most of these 22 rewards will be received by most believers—at least in an introductory way. Revelation 2-3 pertains to the *measure* of these rewards that a believer will receive. These rewards are not of secondary importance to our destiny.
- ⁴¹There is one glory of the sun...and another glory of the stars; for one star differs from another star in glory. ⁴²So also is the resurrection of the dead. (1 Cor. 15:41-42)*
1. Since only overcomers receive the *fullest measure* of these rewards, it is important that we interpret and value what Jesus intends in calling believers to be overcomers in Revelation 2-3.
 2. An overcomer in this context is one who matures in the specific areas of faithfulness in their life that Jesus emphasized in this passage.
 3. Overcoming does not mean attaining perfection in one's character but rather constantly reach for victory with all our strength. He is kind in His evaluation of our lives.