

THE REVELATION

INTRODUCTION TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES - Chapters 2 and 3

Context: In this part of our story, the King (Jesus) sends letters to His citizens who are in enemy territory (this fallen world). Those citizens await His rescue, and He promises that He is coming (to start the *war* that begins in chapter 4!). Those citizens are also His beloved bride, the Church. While the 7 letters to the 7 churches are often treated separately, they are all best studied *as a group* for several reasons:

- Each letter ends with “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the *churches*.” Notice that all 7 letters end with the plural *churchES*. While each church receives some individual attention, they are all meant to hear ALL the letters (as well as the rest of the story told in Revelation).
- Only when the letters are tied together do you see the full picture that Jesus is trying to communicate, and He does so on several levels (as often in Revelation). This will be more fully explained below.

The Differing Views of the Letters: There are three major views in terms of the recipients of the letters:

1. *First*, that the letters were written primarily to churches in the 1st century to address their 1st century problems.
2. *Second*, that the letters were written to symbolically point to churches at different periods in history, with each church representing a different historical period.
3. *Third*, that the letters were written to symbolically address problems encountered by churches throughout the church age (“churches have always had a variety of problems”).

I’ll go for *View #4*...that “all of the above” apply. While it is true that there is content in each particular church that would have had greater significance to those churches at the time (and it is *important* to see that), it’s also not hard to see how the churches have generally fit historical periods, as well as always having a variety of issues at any given point in history.

How the FORM of the letters to the churches in Revelation communicates on *several levels*:

The letters follow the form of an *imperial edict* in ancient times, and have some common elements with Old Testament covenant forms, so would have been familiar to both Jews and Greeks. In both cases, we are talking about a letter from a King (God the Son) to His subjects. Here are the 7 common elements:

1. **Church (addressed to believers)**
2. **City (Destination)**
3. **Critic/Caesar/Christ (Author’s Self-Description)**
4. **Commendation(s) - (the “+’s”)**
5. **Criticism(s) – (the “-’s”)**
6. **Correction(s) (Exhortation)**
7. **Citizen Encouragement/Close (Promise to His citizens)**

In each piece of each letter, Jesus communicates on several levels:

1. **Church:** To *believers*, this Greek word is transliterated *ecclesia*, which is best understood as “the called-out ones” or “those who are called out,” indicating their status as citizens of His kingdom. Trying to say that this is a mixed group (believers and unbelievers) is problematic because Jesus says in each case, “I know you” or “I know your _____”. This stands in stark

contrast to what He says to unbelievers (i.e. Matthew 7:23): "I never knew you!" These letters are to Christ's bride, the Church, those who have been forgiven through His blood...

2. City (Destination):

- Seven individual, historical churches, that form a circular path on the map
- Each church had a particular set of circumstances
- Each church also seems to represent a period of time in history (characterized by the kinds of issues facing that church, as a generalization)
- Each church *also* seems to represent general characteristics of particular churches or groups throughout the church age (i.e. "there have always been churches like _____ somewhere...")

3. Critic/Caesar/Christ (Author's (Jesus') Self-Descriptions):

- Point to Jesus' present IDENTITY as the resurrected, glorified King (and coming King and Judge)
- Point forward to Jesus as the Second Adam, the One Who redeems believers from their death in the first Adam...
- Point to the contrast between the one who brought death and the One Who conquered death
- Address the particular problems of a given church using that part of His character which best applies to their situation
- Taken all together, the self-descriptions of the seven letters point back to (and complete the picture we have of) Jesus in Chapter 1 of Revelation, making Revelation 1 a powerful chapter about the deity and nature of Jesus Christ

4. Commendations:

- Point to Jesus' intimate knowledge of the situation of each individual church and how important they were to Him
- Point to the positive accomplishments of each of the individual churches in terms of both faith and practice
- Point to the importance of "wisdom," the integration of faith/knowledge and works/practice (and their dependence on each other)
- As always, rewards are based on performance

5. Criticisms (Rebukes):

- Point to changes in their "faith and/or practice" that need to be made in order to return them to a proper state of fellowship with their Father
- For most of the churches, this would involve repentance, a *change in their thinking* about their ideas and/or actions. If the focus was changing their thinking about their actions, then the result (of course) would be a change in their behavior...

6. Corrections (Exhortations):

- Point to "areas in need of improvement" and/or give a closing word of encouragement. If any reader of these notes is involved in management, you know that it is always a good habit (in meetings) to move from a negative to a positive, and close with a note of encouragement. You want to give some pointers that involve practical application... Here Jesus plays a great manager!

7. Citizen Promises/Closing:

- Point to the present IDENTITY of believers, pointing forward to their future experience of God's presence in His Kingdom.

- Point to promises from the King to His citizens, to be fulfilled after He wins the war against His enemies. In Revelation, all the promises point to their fulfillment in chapters 19-22. As will be seen below, these promises are made to all believers.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SEEING THE 7 CHURCH LETTERS AS A SINGLE UNIT

When seen together, it is much easier to see how the 7 churches of Revelation 2 and 3 communicate Christ's message more clearly and fully. While each church has its own positives and negatives which Christ addresses, it is only as we read "across" them that we see what they all share and the fulness of Christ's message.

Church:

Each letter begins with "To the church..." Seen together, that should tell us that Christ's emphasis is on those who have been *called out* to be His citizens, His bride.

Christ's Self-Identification:

While Christ's description of Himself in each of these 7 letters is specific to each church, it is extremely important to recognize that, when seen together, these descriptions all point back to chapter 1. Together they reiterate the identity of the Coming King, Judge and Redeemer: Jesus. *Take a look at Christ's description in chapter 1, and then read these descriptions seen together:*

1. EPHESUS: "These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands..." (1:12, 13, 16)
2. SMYRNA: "These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life..." (1:17-18)
3. PERGAMUM: "These things says He who has the sharp two-edged sword..." (1:16)
4. THYATIRA: "These things says the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet like fine brass..." (1:14-15)
5. SARDIS: "These things says He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars..." (1:4, 16)
6. PHILADELPHIA: "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, and shuts and no one opens..." (1:5, 16 – bigger key!)
7. LAODICEA: "These things says the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God..." (1:5)

Citizen Promise:

Each letter, near its conclusion, contains a promise, usually translated, "To the one who overcomes..." Many pastors and professors argue that the "one who overcomes" does so either: (1) *in order to* become a believer, or (2) *in order to* obtain what is promised. What we will see, however, is that when you see the promises as a whole, they point to things that *all* believers will experience in Christ's future rule, as spelled out in Revelation 20-22. In other words, **just like ALL** the self-descriptions point BACK to chapter 1 and Christ's identity, ALL the promises point forward to the future described in Revelation 20-22, which ALL believers will share. The amazing piece is that each promise is still specific to each church for a specific reason! That's what I call a classic example of the inspiration of God's Word...

Take a look at what these promises look like when tied together as a unit or whole:

1. EPHESUS: "To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God." (see Rev. 22:2)
2. SMYRNA: "He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death." (see Rev. 20:6, 21:8)

3. PERGAMUM: "To 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." (see Rev. 22:4)
4. THYATIRA: "And he who overcomes, *and keeps My works until the end*, to him I will give power over the nations— 'He shall rule them with a rod of iron; They shall be dashed to pieces like the potter's vessels' — as I also have received from My Father; and I will give him the morning star." (Notice that Thyatira introduces *an exception* to the rule by giving a 2nd condition: "and keeps My works until the end." The idea here is that reigning with Christ requires more than simply being a believer. Reigning is for those who have earned that authority, a reward to given to those who persevere.) (see 22:16)
5. SARDIS: "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 and before His angels." (20:15)
6. PHILADELPHIA: "He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more. I will write on him the name of My God and the name of the city of My God, the New Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God. And I will write on him My new name." (see 21:24, 22:4)
7. LAODICEA: "To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne." (see 20:4)

While some of these *might be* debatable, seeing them together as a whole helps you recognize that Jesus is making promises to His citizens (and bride) that He will fulfill in chapters 20-22 *based on His victory*. An "overcomer" is anyone who has the victory *in Christ*. Those who hold that overcoming is based on perseverance must wrestle with the following issues:

- To say that "overcoming" equals perseverance confuses the Correction/Exhortation part of each letter (which depend on the readers' present action) with the promises (which are spelled out in chapters 20-22).
- If overcoming involves perseverance, why would Jesus *ADD* the requirement of perseverance ("AND keeps My works until the end") to the promise to the church in Thyatira?! Unless one tries to argue for "degrees of perseverance," it is very strange unless Jesus is trying to say that perseverance is something different than overcoming.
- While the phrase is most often translated "the one who overcomes," in each case the Greek word is functioning as a noun, and would point to an identity, not action. A better translation would be "the overcomer," "the victor," or "the conqueror" (all valid translations of the word). When we think of people to whom we apply those titles, aren't we typically speaking about *who they are* because of something that was *already done*?
- Those who argue that the promises are conditional usually do some mental gymnastics around at least a couple of the promises. "...will not be harmed by the second death." So some Christians might be harmed by the second death? What does *that* mean? "I will not blot his name out of the Book of Life." Might some believers arrive in heaven simply to have their name blotted out?! If the promises are seen as fulfilled for every believer in the future, there is no need for trying to "work around" problems that aren't there...
- Finally, those who argue that the promises are conditional usually say that while the Apostle John *clearly* used "overcome" as a synonym for *faith in Christ* (true for all believers!), Revelation is "different." They argue that because Revelation is prophetic, it should be understood differently. The 7 letters, however, were written to address present concerns, *just like all the other letters in the New Testament*, and those letters are not part of the

tribulation account. It is interesting that the Apostle John is the ONLY writer in the New Testament to use the Greek word “overcome” (in its verbal and participial forms, for those who can appreciate the grammar)¹, and he ONLY uses it in 1st John and Revelation. In line with how we view an overcomer or “victor” as someone has *already won*, take a look at the passages in 1st John where the Apostle uses the word:

- **1 John 2:13-14** I write to you, fathers, Because you have known Him who is from the beginning. I write to you, young men, Because you *have overcome* the wicked one. I write to you, little children, Because you have known the Father. I have written to you, fathers, Because you have known Him who is from the beginning. I have written to you, young men, Because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, And you *have overcome* the wicked one.
- **1 John 4:4** You are of God, little children, and *have overcome* them, because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.
- **1 John 5:4-5** For whatever is born of God *overcomes* the world. And this is the *victory* that *has overcome* the world—our faith. Who is he who *overcomes* the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

Why would we assume that Revelation should be understood differently than 1st John when (if John is simply being consistent) understanding the word the same way solves so many problems?! This seems to be an issue of theology determining interpretation (in my opinion). Understanding the promise section as promises to all believers is also consistent with a closing promise from a King to His citizens, which He then fulfills at the end of the story...

“He Who Has An Ear”:

Near the end of each letter to a church, Jesus says, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” Early readers would have recognized this as something Jesus said during his earthly ministry, further confirmation that the Living Lord was speaking (i.e. Matthew 13:9: “He who has ears to hear, let him hear!”). The difference here is the more specific imperative, “what the Spirit says to the churches,” since the church was inaugurated at Pentecost. While this statement is repeated 7 times across the 7 churches, the most important thing to notice is that for each church, Jesus asks us to hear what the Spirit is saying to the **CHURCHES**... Since Revelation is meant to be seen as a whole, so are the letters to the churches. They are meant to form a picture that does several things: they point back to the identity of Christ (Rev. 1), they point forward to His future glory, they address specific present issues in each church, and they point forward to the promises of a better future and eternity (Rev. 20-22)!

¹ As a note to students of Greek grammar: In contrast to the consistent use of *present indicatives and imperatives* (or the *protasis of a conditional sentence*) in the Correction/Exhortation section in each letter, the Promises always begin with *substantival participles* (“the overcomer”, “to the overcomer”). The clear shift in form in each case alone should be enough to demonstrate that the promise section is *distinct and different* from any other part of the letter.

From another study I wrote: In order to give you a better idea of the way the noun phrase is translated, take a look at the following examples, taken from several places in the New Testament. In each case, the participle has an article and a present tense form:

Literal:	Traditional Translation:	Closer:	Best (Identity):
The Sowing ὁ σπείρων	The one who sows (Matthew 13:3)	The sowing one	The Sower
The Betraying ὁ παραδιδούς	The one who betrays (Matthew 27:3)	The betraying one	The Betrayer
The Judging ὁ κρίνων	The one who judges (John 8:49)	The judging one	The Judge
The Receiving ὁ λαμβάνων	The one who receives (Revelation 2:17)	The receiving one	The Recipient/Receiver
The Persecuting ὁ διώκων	The one who persecutes (Galatians 1:23)	The persecuting one	The Persecutor
The Coming ὁ ἐρχόμενος	The One who comes/arrives (John 11:27)	The coming One	The One who has come
The Believing ὁ πιστεύων	The one who believes (John 3:16, 1 John 5:1,5)	The believing one	The Believer
To the Non-Working τῷ μὴ ἐργαζομένῳ	The one who does not work (Romans 4:5)	The non-working one	The Non-Worker
The Overcoming ὁ νικῶν	The one who overcomes (1 st John 5, Rev. 2,3)	The overcoming one	The Overcomer/Victor

In each of these cases, does it seem like the focus is on a “continuous, persistent, present and consistent” action? Of course not! *How many times* did Judas betray Jesus in order to be labeled a “betraying one”? *How many times* will someone (in the future) receive a stone in order to be “the recipient”? How many times did Jesus have to come into the world before He could fulfill the Old Testament prophecies concerning the “the coming One”? Should a believer *continually* “not work” in order to be counted as righteous? Was Paul *busy* persecuting believers when the statement was made about him? In each case, the consistency of the “action” should be determined by the context and what we know about the person involved. In most cases, there is an emphasis on the *identity* of the “one” involved. *If* repetition or continuity is involved, it is based on the person and the context. In each case, we need to ask the question, “Is this person *consistently, continually and presently* doing the action that is used to described them?” Since the obvious answer in most cases is, “NO,” shouldn’t we choose to evaluate each situation based on the CONTEXT and how the author speaks about them based on their description?

Translating “the one who overcomes” as “the overcomer” in the letters to the 7 churches is consistent with treating the noun phrase *as a noun*. And once you translate all seven instances as “the overcomer,” it is much easier to see it as an *identity* issue, *not* an activity issue... Beyond that, translating the phrase as a noun makes it much easier to connect it to John’s usage of “the overcomer” in 1st John 5:5: “Who is *he who overcomes* (ὁ νικῶν) the world, but *he who believes* that Jesus is the Son of God? In other words, *every believer is an overcomer*.”