

10,8,20 The Spiritual Formation of the End Time Remnant (Part 2)

Let's start with reading a few passages to set the stage:

Phil. 4:9; "Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me, put it into practice."

Heb. 6:1; "Therefore, let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity."

2 Cor. 11:1; "Follow me in the same manner in which I follow Christ."

And in Hebrews 13:7; "Remember those who led you . . . and imitate their faith."

All of the examples given to us in scripture and in history are people we are to model our lives after – they represent our spiritual goal.

Most of what we've looked at so far in our last few studies are the character qualities of men and women who are far beyond where we are – they are people we're to "remember and imitate their faith", etc.

It's not how far along the path to maturity we are or how much we've achieved or how much we've failed; the thing which matters most is whether we're moving forward – however slowly this is for us.

It's our openness, our desire, in becoming like Christ that God honors; not our introspective evaluation of how far along we are.

So, please keep these things in mind and you will spare yourself a great deal of discouragement, even panic. We are to simply get up each morning and press on in spite of what we see in ourselves.

It's God Who sanctifies us; we don't sanctify ourselves – He will get us there if we're willing to go there.

1 Thess. 5:23-24; "Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass."

This isn't something we can do – it's something only God can do in us as we trust and pursue Him.

So, what we will be looking at in Revelation is not the part of that book that talks about trumpets, 100-lb hailstones or mystery Babylon; we are going to be looking at the specific qualities of the Lord's own character that He desires to form in us.

There are a couple of interpretive realities of Rev. 2 & 3 that we need to establish before we move into the letters themselves.

First, these letters are not written to a mixed-multitude.

The overcomers are not “the true Christians”, with the non-overcomers being “unbelievers” who have snuck into these congregations.

The letters are written to churches (ecclesia - God's "called out" ones), they were not written to the world or unbelievers, or to professing Christians. They are, in a sense, 'private' letters to God's own family.

As we'll see, the exhortations given in these letters are dealing with things that could *only* be understood and applied by those indwelt with God's Spirit.

The fact that there may be tares among the wheat does not change the intent or destination of the letters - they are written to seven "churches", “ecclesias” and from God's viewpoint, that designation refers to His people.

These letters are going to use the term “overcomers” to identify those within the churches who are moving forward with the Lord, versus those who are defecting from God's purpose in some way.

This is far from a new thought in the Bible. The concept of the remnant runs all the way from Genesis through Revelation.

As in the Exodus generation; all who left Egypt were saved, as evidenced by placing blood on the doorposts, but most of them refused to pursue God's purpose of entering Canaan.

Only a remnant was allowed to go in.

When we get to the New Testament, the word “remnant” is replaced with “overcomer”, but the principle is exactly the same.

This will become even more obvious as we go through the letters.

Just one other example: In Rev. 3:19 we see the following verse addressed to the non-overcomers, (the “lukewarm, wretched, miserable, poor, blind and naked”);

“As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten, therefore be zealous and repent.”

Compare that with this passage in Heb. 12:5-8;

“And you have forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you as to sons: “My son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; for whom the Lord loves He chastens, and rebukes every son whom He receives.” If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? But if you are without chastening, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate and not sons.”

God doesn't “child-train” unbelievers; just His children.

Even though it can be difficult sometimes to see the pressure in our lives as one of the most evident signs of God's personal love for us, the fact is that the circumstances and experiences of a growing believer, as painful as they may be, are the means by which God is getting us to where He wants us to go.

The very fact that you are involved in these studies, that you are hanging in there with all you are learning and that you are probably becoming increasingly aware of how much work the Lord still has to do in us, are some of the strongest evidences that you are exactly where the Lord wants you to be.

Again, it's your desire to honor Him coupled with your growing understanding of the nearness of His coming and your pressing on in spite of everything that makes you want to give up that is proof that you are right in the center of His will for you; whether it feels that way or not.

Think about what it's like when you try to talk to other Christians about the significance of this generation, or our time in history, the end of the age, or the nature, mystery and destiny of the Body of Christ.

Their eyes glaze over.

But you *want* to know these things. You want to learn, you're open and want to understand all that God will enable us to understand. That's evidence of the Spirit's work within you – you aren't quenching Him; you're receiving from Him.

So, take a deep breath and be confident that you are safe in spite of the civil war that rages in all of us.

It's much easier to learn the truths we'll be studying if you can focus on them and aren't distracted by spending time worrying about how you're doing spiritually. The Lord is going to get us there and He's going to meet us there with the strength we need each step of the way to glorify Him.

And along the same lines as "eyes glazing over" I need to spend a few minutes on a slight tangent.

This is just about something I'm seeing take place the wonderful world of eschatology teachers.

Several months ago, soon after I started listening to all the prophesy experts online, I kind of suspected that what I'm going to talk about might happen.

I'll start with a familiar passage; but I want to point out that most people only seem to focus on the first part (1 Chron 12:32).

“. . . the sons of Issachar, men who understood the times, with knowledge of what Israel should do. . .”

This is where I'm seeing a growing deviation among many of the YouTube teachers.

They seem to focus only on the easily observable current events we see happening as they're related to the signs of the times. Many of them have done excellent research on the signs listed in Matt. 24, 1st. and 2nd. Timothy, and other places in the Bible, as to the how these signs signal the nearness of the Lord's coming.

But beyond their acknowledgment that many in the church, especially in the pulpits, have resisted the Lord by not teaching eschatology at such a crucial point in our history, they don't seem to understand the true spiritual crisis within the body of Christ.

They expose Hillsong, Bethel, and the New Apostolic Reformation and seem to think that by doing this they've uncovered the real dangers the Church faces; but as we've seen in our studies, the reality goes much deeper than that.

They don't appear to see what's happening *behind* the signs and dangers to the Body of Christ.

Many of the contemporary prophecy teachers have become masters of the obvious and somewhat silent on the second half of 1 Chron. 12:32.

"What Israel should do."

For us, in our dispensation, the application of this verse would be to the Church. Truly understanding the times has got to go beyond the obvious if we are going to understand "what the Church should do."

I'll just give one example for sake of time. Recently, in a message given through a "Happening Now" conference in mid-September the speakers spent a great deal of time during their message assuring the audience (thousands in person and many more thousands online) that America is not under any kind of judgment. The main speaker said, "If our nation were under judgment, we would know it . . . when God judges, you know it."

In just that one sentence, he passed over the spiritual condition of God's people as being asleep to the deeper meaning of the events around them. He was basically saying "Peace, peace, when there is no peace."

We can't afford to underestimate the deceptive power of the enemy as related to the Church.

Many of these teachers have excellent insight regarding the enemy's work in the nations of the world; they can identify the growing formation of the Antichrist kingdom. And I greatly appreciate what they are bringing to us in this.

But without knowing *exactly* what God is after in our generation, they can't see clearly what the enemy is using to pull us away from God's ultimate purpose for us.

They are exhorting the Church to focus more on earthly solutions to our problems rather than spiritual ones. They want the nation to repent. But beyond calling

the Church to learn prophecy and avoid Bethel, they don't see the need for the Church to repent of its spiritual and moral departure from the Lord, which is the most important message that needs to be going out at this time in history.

They think the 'apostasy' only involves the mainline denominations, Dominion Theology and hyper-charismatics. But the real apostasy is not just false doctrine alone; it's also the enemy's work in pulling the Church from heaven to earth.

There is no teaching on the spiritual and moral formation of the remnant as being the overcomers at the end who have entered into a pursuit of Christ that goes beyond basic Christianity.

The crisis of our time, the end of the age of the Church and the invasion of the Kingdom of Antichrist all involve a great deal more than we're being told.

It's not enough to know we are at the end; we have to know the *spiritual* nature of the time we are in. We have to know the whole truth; not just part of the truth. We can't know what we, as the Church, are meant to do if we don't know what God is seeking to do *in us* in preparation for the fulfillment of His purpose for the Body of Christ.

I'm not saying 'don't listen to them'. We don't have to throw the baby out with the bathwater. I still listen to them; especially J.D. I gain from him every week. For most of them, they're research is great, but sometimes their theology is off. So, I just want you to be alert to anything that raises a red flag and go into Berean mode when that happens.

Ok, end of tangent.

Now, let's look at the first letter.

Rev. 2:1-7; "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: "I know your works, your labor, your patience, 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; and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary. Nevertheless, I have this against

you, that you have left your first love. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent. But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God.”

We are going to see many good qualities in Ephesus, and the Lord commends them for these things.

But as Joseph Seiss writes,

“There is such a thing as having and exercising a sharp penetration into the true and false, a correctness of judgment in sacred things a zealous and self-sacrificing devotion to the right and true, and an earnest-minded severance from false apostles and all evildoers, and yet being without the first impulse in the heart of young disciples.”

Since we are focused in our study on the specifics of the overcomer qualities, we’ll be spending most of our time the one essential characteristic for all of us that must not be missing.

It’s called, “First love”. No matter what else is developing in us as we grow, we must always remember passages like 1 Cor. 13:2-3;

“If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing.”

We’ll need to discover exactly what the “love” is that Paul and John are talking about.

For example, if the love that’s required is based on emotion; we’d never know

whether we fully have this or not. Our whole life would be roller-coaster of self-appraisal and self-doubt.

Here are definitions of the two most frequent Greek words used for “love” in the New Testament:

First, “Phileo” is friendship love. It means to approve of; to like; to treat affectionately or kindly; to befriend; to be fond of.

One Lexicon puts it this way:

“Phileo occurs from bonding over similar interests. Friends, of course, care about one another, but it is similar interests that attract them to one another. Those experiencing this love are drawn to one another. “

It’s not used to describe the love we’re to have when we’re told to “love our enemies”. Phileo involves emotion and attraction. It’s hard to be emotionally attracted to your enemies.

“Agape” focuses on our will, not our emotion.

From the same Lexicon;

“Agape could be defined as charity. However, we often think of charity as giving away money or things, which doesn’t encompass all of what agape is about. Agape love is unconcerned with the self and concerned with the greatest good of another. Agape isn’t born out of emotions, feelings, familiarity, or attraction, but from the will and as a choice. Agape requires faithfulness, commitment, and sacrifice without expecting anything in return.”

As I said earlier, the love we are to have toward God is based on choice regardless of whether our emotions are undergirding our choice or not. It’s nice when they do because emotion is a powerful motivation to action; but even in the complete absence of feeling, we can still take our stand for the interests of Christ.

So, what exactly is "first love"?

First, a comment from a British theologian, Lance Lambert,

"It is not a question of the time of love. When you are young, you have first love, when you are old you have another kind of love. No, first love is a quality of love. It's priority-love. As far as I know, the Church at Ephesus will go on with its meetings. It will have its Bible studies; it will have its prayer meetings; it will have its evangelistic outreach; it will have all its elders, deacons, and workers and the apostles who come in and go out. Everything will continue. It will still, in one sense be a church, but the heart of the matter has gone. What a terrible thing it is that we can just rumble on with all our meetings, living on past history, living on past experience, past revelation and not realize that the lampstand has been taken away. The whole point of the local church is that it should hold the testimony of Jesus in the present." (Lambert)

Now, listen to S.J. Andrew's comments on this subject,

"The Church is one with Christ; the law of His life is the law of her life, and, therefore, so far as the church abides in Him, it is in full sympathy with Him, His truth is her truth, His purposes are her purposes, His strength is her strength. She loves and hates what He loves and hates. In the loss of First Love, the vital union of the Head and body is weakened; the body is no longer filled with the fullness of His life, and, therefore, He is not able to put forth His full power, either in gathering or in perfecting its members. In the loss of first love, the Lord is hindered in His teachings and actions." (Andrews)

When we are responding to the love of Christ, all we do will have the fragrance of His presence in us - the testimony of a light-giving Lampstand is preserved.

Without this love the Life is quenched and the light goes out.

As Abraham demonstrated in the sacrifice of Isaac, Abraham's highest "priority" in love was God – that's "first love". He may have *felt* more for Isaac,

. . . but his *decision* established his priorities. That's first love.

First love is not based on emotion but on our will; choosing Christ over self and religion.

Priority love means that what God gains from our faithfulness has priority over whatever *we* might gain.

Another way to put this is to say that His inheritance in us (the perfected Church as the eternal dwelling place of God) is a higher priority to us than *our* inheritance.

So, how is this relationship of love maintained practically?

Amos 3:3 – “How can two walk together unless they be agreed”.

This is an OT illustration of the truth of the 1 Jn. 1:3-7 exhortation – “if we walk in the light, we have fellowship . . .”

This means that we have to stay transparent with God at all times, no matter how we feel. We must stay sensitive to all that a relationship with our Savior means.

If we sin, we say, “sorry” and move on. But if we lose that transparency, that “first love”, then we lose our sensitivity to the Spirit's leading, His correction, His encouragement – we lose intimacy in the relationship.

To put it in 2020 terms; the Church at Ephesus had fallen from relationship to religion. They were faithful at being busy, but they had little time for Christ Himself.

Also, the legalism of religion convinces us that we are always falling short, when in reality God would not only be satisfied, but He would be pleased with our childlike faith in walking with Him.

Our eyes aren't to be focused on us, but on Him.

"First Love" gives the Headship of the Church to Jesus Christ without any strings attached – He is free to do as He desires.

If He wants to do a "new thing" (as Isaiah spoke of in Isaiah 43:19), He is free to do so. If He wants to continue what exists, He is free to do that also. The ultimate issue is the sovereignty of the Lord, not our agendas or desires.

He has become the priority of our lives.

Over the years I've heard all the arguments about whether Truth or Obedience or Commitment or whatever, is *the* most important thing in a Christian's life.

From the viewpoint of the Son of Man, our closeness to Christ Himself is our number one priority . . .

From which truth, obedience and all other Christian actions flow – because Christ is only glorified if it's *His* life and not our *imitation* of His life that is expressed in us.

With that relationship intact, everything become possible; without it, nothing we do has any real value no matter how impressive it may be to those around us.

Becoming like Christ means simply this; that by God's indwelling Spirit in combination with the engrafted Word and the fellowship of the saints, we begin to discover, increasingly, that we are taking on the *desires* of Jesus Christ. His interests, wants, and joys are becoming ours.

And as Christ begins to live in us, as We begin to see life from his viewpoint, we become increasingly dependent on His Spirit for the ability to put into action the desires that are growing within us.

This is the essential purpose and effectiveness of "First Love" – of transparency and of relationship with God - and this is why that priority love must be preserved at all costs.

Finally, knowing all this, it's no surprise that the promise to the overcomer given in Rev. 2:7 is related to relationship, to intimacy.

“To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God. . . “

The overcomer who clings to Christ in time, will enter a special intimacy in eternity. The "tree" is symbolic of the work and person of Christ (Gal. 3:13 & Isa. 53:2), and "eating" is symbolic of intimate fellowship; as shown in Rev. 3:20;

Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me.

Legalism or religion puts us outside the place of fellowship with the Lord. But if priority love is held to, we are brought into a closeness with Christ that allows us to understand the truths of His Word and to be led by Him.

And we will have an advanced and personalized intimacy with Him in eternity.

I'll close with some comments by Andrew Murray that are actually more urgent and applicable to our time than to his;

“There is a danger of our being more occupied with the things that are coming than with Him who is to come; there is such scope in the study of coming events for imagination and reason and human ingenuity, that nothing but a deep and humble waiting on God can save us from mistaking the interest and pleasure of intellectual study for the true love of Him and His appearing.”