

2,3,22 Rev. 2:1-7 Ephesus

Before we get into the details of each of letters in chapters 2 & 3, we need to know why these letters were written beyond the obvious purpose of pointing out the strengths or weaknesses in the churches.

Since before creation even existed, God had (and has) an eternal purpose in mind which He has worked toward from the beginning – and that purpose the fullness of His glory expressed in His Son through the Church.

(Col. 1:16) “For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities— all things were created through him and for him.”

(John 1:1-4) “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life . . .”

The triune God created everything that exists through the Son. All creation, prior to the fall and in its perfected, eternal state, reflects the personality, creativity and character of Christ; like a finished work of art by an artist reflects the personality, talent, thoughts and desires of the artist.

The Church is the masterpiece of God in Christ.

All of creation is the visible, expressed image of the Son of God, and the crown of that creation, the greatest glory and expressed image, will be the spiritual Body of Christ - the Church.

(Rom. 8:29) “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.”

(Eph. 1:22-23) “God put everything under His feet and made Him head over everything for the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.”

We will see in these seven letters that in the Church there two types of believers; overcomers and non-overcomers.

The overcomers represent those within the Body of Christ who have pursued God's eternal purpose and will be honored for doing so. The non-overcomers have settled for less than what the Lord has purposed in Christ.

And these letters will show us exactly what characterizes each group.

The letters are written to "churches". The word "church" in the Greek is "ecclesia" which means God's "called out" ones.

They weren't written to unbelievers, or to professing Christians. They are private letters to God's own family, dealing with things that could only be understood and applied by those indwelt with God's Spirit.

Regardless of how men have redefined the ecclesia of God over the last 2000 years to include both the tares and the wheat, from Heaven's viewpoint, the Church Christ is building does not include unbelievers.

Even though it is true that in most Church gatherings there are those who are not saved; these letters in Rev. 2 & 3 are specifically written to God's own people.

I debated whether to spend time showing that not all believers are overcomers, but instead, for those who want to do their own study on this, I'll include a link to a site that identifies each of most popular views and shows why the following quote I'll read in a minute, by J. Sidlow Baxter, fits the context of the seven letters (this view also happens to match the teaching of remnant theology throughout the entire Bible).

<https://bible.org/seriespage/revelation-appendix-3-who-are-overcomers>

Now, Baxter's comments;

"Are all believers overcomers? Let him think twice who would answer a dogmatic 'Yes' to this question. The letters to the seven churches suggest otherwise to an unprejudiced reader. Our standing in Christ is no artificial position of immunity. As there are degrees of punishment [in hell] so there are degrees of reward [in heaven]. One is made ruler over ten cities, another over five. 'One star differs from another star in glory'."

So, let's start with the term "overcomer" itself, which will surface throughout our study of each letter.

“In the original Greek, the term overcomer means ‘to conquer or prevail.’ This verb is found 28 times in the New Testament and calls attention to the presence of war, contests, battles, and conflicts in man’s struggle with evil. The New Testament clearly teaches us, as does life itself, that we are in a conflict with specific adversaries. Even after salvation, the conflict still rages in and against the life of the growing Christian.”

Even though all believers are members of the Body of Christ and are secure in their salvation forever, the measures of glory expressed through each member of Christ’s body are vastly different.

(1 Cor. 15:40-42) “There are heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is of one kind, and the glory of the earthly is of another. There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for star differs from star in glory. So, it is with the resurrection (the rapture of the Church).”

While we wait for His return, the church is split between Christians that are grateful for their salvation and are looking forward to heaven.

Other Christians, who are *also* grateful for their salvation and destiny, have moved past infancy and their focus has shifted from *their* inheritance to *God’s* inheritance; from *their* purpose, to *His* purpose.

Their commitment is primarily focused on doing what they can to see God gain His heart’s desire and His full inheritance in the Church.

(Eph. 1:17-18) “(I pray) that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of *his* glorious inheritance in the saints.”

(1 Jn. 1:12-14) “I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven for his name's sake. I am writing to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. I write to you, children, because you know the Father. I write to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the

beginning. I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one.”

(Heb. 6:1) “let us leave the elementary doctrines of Christ and go on to maturity . . .”

This transition from infancy to maturity is reflected in our prayers and actions. Are our prayers primarily focused on us or on Him? Do our actions reflect our commitment to finalize God’s eternal purpose in Christ by helping to draw in the fullness of the gentiles and to bring the Church to maturity?

The things we pray for and the things we do when no one but God sees, shows whether or not His purpose has genuinely captured our hearts.

Fortunately, one of the huge advantages of being able to study these seven letters is that we are allowed to see the Lord’s final word on what constitutes a growing believer from one who has stagnated.

And also, fortunately, we’ll see that the difference between the two is not what most would expect – definitely not the labels that contemporary Christianity has put on successful versus unsuccessful Christians.

Just as a foretaste of what I mean; God blesses the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, etc. And as Paul put in in 1 Cor. 1:26-29;

“Consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.”

All of this is going to come out as we move through these chapters, but it’s vital up front that we realize why this is so important to the Lord.

As He examines each Church, He is identifying, exposing, warning and giving promises and encouragement. To some, warnings are given to wake them up to

what they are blind to; to others, promises are given to encourage them to stay on the path they're on.

For example, we are going to see many good qualities in Ephesus, but the absence of "First Love" threatens to result in the removal of the lampstand – which is the light and testimony that makes a church a church, at least from God's point of view.

You can see why it is so important to know what God considers essential in an assembly. It's not what *we* think, what *we* might be impressed by; but its what *He* thinks that ultimately matters.

The single most important question any of us can ask ourselves is this:

“What are the bottom-line spiritual characteristics God must have that will ensure His continuing presence and activity in any church or in our own lives individually?”

This is the question that is addressed in the seven churches in Revelation 2 & 3. This is one of the most vital sections in all the Bible, because it reveals, through Christ's own eyes, the most essential qualities needed to have a living representative of Him in this world as over against lifeless Christian religion.

In these seven letters, Jesus sums up His supreme purpose for His people at the end of this dispensation. We see one consistently reoccurring exhortation for Christians – “to him who overcomes.” Above all other things, our Lord desires that each of His children become overcomers. Therefore, it would be good to look briefly at what this designation means.

In approaching this subject there are two things we must avoid:

- 1) Creating the impression that overcomers are super saints and that those of us who are not super saints could never be overcomers.
- 2) Making overcomers less than they are. They are not some elite class of super Christians, but they aren't status quo either.

As we saw earlier, the word “overcomer” means “to conquer” or “to prevail”. Overcoming does not mean achieving success, recognition, acceptance, prestige,

health, wealth, or popularity. In the context of Revelation chapters 2 and 3 its usage is exclusively related to the spiritual life of the one overcoming

As Sparks describes it,

“The Remnant in the Old Testament and Overcomers in Revelation chapters two and three have as their function to be God's testimony in a day of widespread spiritual declension and failure, to be vantage points, that upon which God can act and say, ‘Here is my thought expressed; here is the thing that I am after!’”

That’s going to become extremely obvious as we look at each letter. The Lord is very specific in each one regarding things that matter most to him. So, we need to look *personally* at these things. That will be the challenge to us.

What was the “first love” issue in Ephesus, or “the doctrine of Balaam” in Sardis, and why was Jesus concerned that in Sardis their works were “incomplete” - and do any of these things apply to us?

This is the Lord’s final word to Church; we should definitely try to make sure we get all we can from this.

So, let’s look at the first letter – the one to Ephesus in Rev. 2:1-7;

“To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: ‘The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands. ‘I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have abandoned your first love. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the first works. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.’”

We can see that Ephesus was what we would consider a doctrinally sound, highly energetic, evangelical Church. They exposed false teachers, they endured under pressure and didn't deny the Lord, they were solid as a rock.

Those were commendable qualities for any of us to have.

But because of their lack of what the Lord called "first love", they were at risk of losing their testimony for Christ in this world *in spite of* those qualities they possessed.

Also, Jesus says they "left" or "abandoned" their first love. They didn't lose it. Something can be lost by accident, but leaving is deliberate.

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 is complete love - a love that possesses you, a love that masters you... 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, and not realize that the lampstand has been taken away."

So, even though they left their first love, everything looked great on the outside.

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

"Not as a king who makes laws for his subjects, or as a general who gives commands to his soldiers, or even as Jehovah giving ordinances to his elect people, does the Lord direct His church. It is one with Him; the law of His life is the law of her life, and, therefore, in so far as the church abides in 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."

This is why people get confused when someone tells them that they're in a stagnate church. They look around and see all of these good things happening

under the leadership of compassionate, steadfast, doctrinally sound elders and pastors, and they get very indignant at the suggestion that something might be wrong. Based on appearances, the church looks the *opposite* of stagnant.

When we get to the church at Sardis, we'll see more on this, but listen to our Lord's words to them in Rev. 3:1;

“These are the words of Him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars: ‘I know your deeds; *you have a reputation* that you are alive, but [in reality] you are dead.”

When we understand what “first love” implies, we'll realize we may not have been measuring spirituality the same way the Lord measures it.

Here's some input by Sparks on this;

“The Lord could not be satisfied with a number of quite good things if that one thing - the essence of it all - was left behind. No wonder He says do the first works, go back again. There's no doubt that they made a marvelous and costly response to the Lord. I love to read that story in Acts 19 and 20 of Paul in Ephesus; tremendous riot where the people would have torn that apostle limb from limb. And some of these Ephesians acted for his preservation – ‘Don't you go out there, you stay in here. We'll come between you and them’; and would not allow him to go out to them in their wild rage. They wanted this man kept because for them he was God's channel of so much. It's all such a wonderful picture of how they appreciated what had come to them. Now, later, in Revelation 2, the Lord says, ‘You've fallen from that, you've left that. You haven't given up Christian work, you haven't given up all Christian virtues, there's lots of good things about you - but *that's* the thing that matters.”

We all talk about Christianity being a relationship, not a religion; and that true discipleship *is based on* relationship. But we sometimes forget what the implications of a relationship with Christ are.

There's one phrase that is repeated in literally every one of the seven letters in Rev. 2 & 3. So, to say that this phrase is important to the Lord would be an understatement; it's the *single most important* qualification of a disciple of Christ. The phrase is this: “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit is saying . . . ”

This is actually the character quality of Christ Himself that qualified Him to be able to know His Father's will and to minister to others.

(Isa. 50:4 AMP) "The Lord God has given Me the tongue of disciples [as One who is taught], that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. He awakens Me morning by morning; He awakens My ear to listen as a disciple."

Is our relationship with Christ a living, communicative relationship, or is it more of a routine, Sunday morning Christianity relationship?

To make some personal applications, we'll need John the Baptist to help us with this.

(Luke 3:2-4) "The word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'"

Israel was in need of repentance long before John came on the scene, and Jehovah sent prophets to call His people back to Him. So, why John – and why then?

In the generation chosen to witness the first coming of Christ, God sent John to prepare His people for His coming.

All of the Old Testament scriptures were indispensable to the nation of Israel, but at the time of the coming of the Messiah, God shifted the emphasis in His message to His people from an appeal to remember the former days to a very specific call to prepare their hearts to meet their Lord face-to-face.

John's message in Luke 3 would be received by those "with ears to hear what the Spirit (was) saying".

And that message was rejected by those who simply wanted to continue to study the Law and Prophets each sabbath – those who believed that this would be sufficient and that anything beyond that was unnecessary.

Later, Jesus would rebuke them for being able to discern the weather, but not the time they were living in.

Now, jump ahead to our generation. The Holy Spirit has been sending His message of the soon coming of Christ to those “with ears to hear”, and pastors worldwide have been searching out and studying the signs Jesus gave about this generation and the implications of this so they could prepare those under their care for the Lord’s coming, just as John sought to prepare Israel for His first coming.

But especially in our nation, most pastors are not only rejecting this message, they are simply teaching “the Law and the prophets every Sabbath” (or in our case, the basics of the Christian faith every Sunday) with no understanding of either the meaning or urgency of our time in history, or the need to prepare the Church to meet her Lord face-to-face.

History is repeating itself, just as the Bible said it would.

(2 Pet. 3:3-4) “Most importantly, you *must* understand that in the last days scoffers will come . . . asking ‘Where is the promise of His coming?’”

‘Sure, He’s coming eventually, but where’s the evidence that it’s now?’

Pastors who censor the Word of God; who won’t teach Eschatology (which makes up over 1/3 of the Bible), are not in a “first love” position before God. Christ is not their priority, Christianity is.

These pastors, if they were in Israel 2000 years ago, would have seen the ministry of John the Baptist as both presumptuous and irrelevant.

They may not have persecuted him like the Pharisees did, but they would have ignored him and his message, just as contemporary pastors are doing now.

First love is priority love; it’s relationship, and relationship is open communication with the Lord. It’s paying attention to what He’s saying and it’s doing all we can to make sure we are hearing and obeying Him.

We have to settle this, either we are at the end of the Church age or we aren’t. If we aren’t, then life goes on, business as usual. If we are, and we’re not preparing for what that implies, because our pastor doesn’t seem to care; then we might want to reconsider the implications of verses like these;

(1 Thess. 5:4-6) “But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief. You are the children of light, and the children of the day: we are not of the night, nor of darkness. Therefore, let us not sleep, as others do; but let us watch and be sober.”

So, what is the Spirit saying to us in this generation? What’s He saying to us personally? Can we hear Him? Maybe it would be more accurate to say, “Are we *willing* to hear Him?”

Phil. 2:13 tells us that God is at work in us “to will and do of His good pleasure”. This is the essential purpose of "First Love", and this is why *listening* love must be preserved at all costs - nothing else will accomplish God's ultimate goal for us.

Even though there is an abundance of external signs indicating the nearness of the Lord’s return, there is something else happening for some that is equally significant.

In 1 Kings 19 Elijah heard a “small still voice”, and millions of believers around the world (those who have ears to hear what the Spirit is saying) - deep in their spirits, they are hearing what one author has called “the whisperings of preparation” to meet the Lord.

The time has come; that’s simply the reality of this generation. Very soon all of human history will change. Christ will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel and the trumpet of God, and we who are alive and remain will be caught up to meet Him in the air – and He will reign for 1000 years on the throne of His father David in Jerusalem.

There are two final topics in the letter to Ephesus: The Nicolaitans and the Tree of Life. I’ll touch on each briefly and then we’ll close.

(Rev. 2:6-7 AMP) “Yet you have this [to your credit], that you hate the works and corrupt teachings 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 grant [the privilege] to eat [the fruit] from the tree of life, which is in the Paradise of God.”

According to Irenaeus (an early church historian), the Nicolaitans were followers of Nicolaus of Antioch who was a proselyte who had forsaken true Christian doctrine and decided to “live in unrestrained indulgence”.

They believed that the human body was evil and only the human spirit was good. A Christian could do whatever he wanted with his body and God would minister grace and forgiveness to him because of the purity of his spirit.

A very convenient theology for those who wanted to be part of the orgies involving 1<sup>st</sup>. century cult prostitutes, which were commonplace in Ephesus.

Finally, the “Tree of life”.

The following is a quotation by J. Hampton Keathley. I want you to see, in detail, why this reward to overcomers is not something given to all believers. As we’ve seen in 1 Cor. 3 and other passages in past studies, the idea of giving everyone a “participation trophy” just for showing up, is not a heavenly concept.

“First, the tree of life is literal. It is not just a symbol for eternal life or for the person of Christ. In Revelation 21:1-22:5, John is describing the eternal state which includes the new heaven and the new earth with the new Jerusalem, a literal place with some 25 verses devoted to its description.

Second, having a right to the tree of life is not equivalent to salvation, nor is it necessary for the maintenance of life. Why? Because possession of eternal life and the maintenance of eternal life comes from possession of Jesus Christ who *is* our eternal life. All believers possess eternal life at the point of believing in Christ (John 3:16). Furthermore, eternal life, as God’s gift to those who believe, is never maintained by what we do. Compare 1 John 5:11-12; John 1:12; 3:16, 18, 36; 5:24; 6:47; 11:25, 26; 20:31; 17:3.

Third, the tree of life, then, must offer a superlative experience and blessing though the details are simply not explained to us. It is left with a certain vagueness, but in 2 Corinthians 12:4 we read that Paul, when he was caught up to Paradise, heard inexpressible words which a man is not permitted to speak. Hodges writes, ‘The vagueness surrounding the promise of the tree of life is an example of the deliberate inexplicitness of the rewards which are mentioned. Almost all of the other promises have something of the same undefined, but numinous, character.’

It is simply a special reward for those who overcome through a walk of faithfulness; it is a reward of special blessing that will somehow enrich the blessings of paradise. I am reminded of Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 15:58 which promise: "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord."