

Revelation 2&3

Getting Started:

One of the challenges we face with our modern translations is our tendency to not carry forward information from one chapter to the next in a Bible book. It's as though each chapter is an independent unit of thought. Revelation 1 contains many important truths and points to carry forward. Here are seven key thoughts to keep front and center as we move into chapters 2&3.

Review:

1:3 The outcome of engaging Revelation is intended to be positive and productive blessing.

1:5, 6 The 7 churches must grasp two key concepts concerning their relationship with Jesus, **1**. He is the ruler over the kings of the earth. He was a faithful witness who endured death and experienced the resurrection. As a result he is exalted and his rulership unquestioned.

2. The churches have life in Christ and their priority is to serve God's kingdom as priests to God alone. God has the exclusive right to their service. They're not to mix their service with the gods. For the churches this is challenging. The Roman gods do not rule the earth. The 7 churches must understand that holding allegiance to Christ alone means they are not to serve other gods in any way whatsoever. God's will is laid out for the churches in a very clear and unequivocal manner.

1:8 God is the Alpha and the Omega, who is and was and who is to come, the almighty. These phrases heaped together demonstrate the absolute sovereignty of God.

Alpha and Omega are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. This descriptor communicates that nothing is outside of God's control. No letters precede Alpha, and no letters follow Omega. God is eternal, and he alone is almighty. He is everything the Roman gods aren't. The churches need to remember who is speaking to them.

1:9 The faithful will suffer. John's faithfulness to Jesus has put him in a world of trouble. He reminds the churches that they too are called to the same faithfulness which will result in their own suffering. Hence the reference to suffering, kingdom, and steadfastness.

1:12-16 John's vision is meant to inspire the churches with an intimate sense of God's presence, power, sovereignty, and majesty in Jesus. Jesus stands among them, with them. Also, while the Roman gods may be resplendent in the eyes of the Roman people, there is one who is greater than they – Jesus. Compared to Jesus, the Roman gods are a rather shabby lot.

1:18 Jesus experienced death and resurrection. As such he alone holds the keys of death/Hades.

1:19 In light of all that's been presented, John's task is to write to the churches about two things, the present and the future. As one who stands among the churches, there are some things the churches need to know about what is happening and what will happen that's essential to them and their witness.

Moving out of Ch. 1, here are 3 key questions to ask the churches as we move into ch 2&3.

1. In light of Jesus and his relationship with the churches, in the presence of the majestic

one who rules over the kings of the earth, are they fulfilling their role as priests to God?

2. How are they responding to suffering, kingdom, and steadfastness? Are they continuing as faithfully as their brother John in exile on Patmos?

3. Will they read, heed, and find blessing?

The core:

Let's do a general overview of the letters. There's no evidence that these "letters" ever circulated individually among the seven churches (Metzger). As such, all the named churches saw what was written about themselves and the other six. This was meant as a group document. Each letter summarizes God's observations of each church with short punchy observations concerning each church and the church as a whole.

As well, there were likely more churches in the Province of Asia Minor than the seven identified. The fact that seven are singled out probably serves to use these literal churches as models of what God wants to say to the whole church in Asia Minor and beyond.

Interestingly, while they're all literal individual places, they all belong to Jesus, and they're all connected by their shared experience of responding to Roman authority. What really separates them is not so much their location, but their response to suffering for their faith.

Overview of the letters to the churches

A. While each church receives personal attention, all the letters share a repeated pattern of presentation. Here is the pattern:

- 1) Each is addressed to the angel of the church. Some scholars believe this to be a reference to the pastor of that church.
- 2) Command to write (connects with Ch 1) - Christ speaks.
- 3) Each starts with a portion of the Christ vision from Ch. 1 which begins with "oida" (I know). Jesus has a full exact knowledge of each church coming from a perfect clarity of vision. Always describes Christ in Revelation (Constable).
- 4) Commendation and or Correction identified
- 5) Call to repentance (pay attention)
- 6) Call to hear and overcome (hearing also implies an active response)
- 7) Conqueror's (overcomers) promise (connects with aspects from end of Revelation)

B. Two of the 7 churches (**Smyrna and Philadelphia**) are conquering in their response to suffering, kingdom, and steadfastness, while three (**Pergamum, Thyatira, and Sardis**) are in various stages of compromise, and two (**Ephesus and Laodicea**) are on the various stages of caving in.

What the letters to the 7 churches give us of summation of the three most common responses to suffering for one's faith, conquering, or compromising, or caving in.

When it comes to suffering for our faith, I think we know how we'd ideally like to respond. But suffering has a way of eating at us, and eroding our faith. Think about the Letter to the Hebrews. Given the opposite poles of conquering and caving in, most of us may be prone choose the

middle and compromise. The problem with compromise, however, is that we wind up with a two-faced (hypocritical) faith. When your faith is on the line, how do you respond? Think about situations where you must choose between fulfilling God's will or choosing your own path.

C. There is an interesting picture that emerges if one views the letters carefully:
Each letter opens with some aspect of the majestic Christ vision from ch 1

In the middle Christ gives his expectation that each church will pull up its socks and respond positively. The conquering churches need to remain fearless and steadfast, the compromising churches need to cut a straight path and live truthfully, and from the caving churches God wants passion and faithfulness and a return to truth.

God's judgments of each church seem harsh from our point of view

Ephesus may lose their witness – lampstand removed 2:5

Pergamum may suffer heavenly scourging 2:16

Thyatira may suffer sickness 2:22

Sardis may suffer a severe loss of privilege 3:5

Laodicea may suffer severe discipline 3:19

Each letter closes with some aspect of reward to the overcomers taken from the end of Revelation. Overcomers will eat from the tree of life, receive the crown of life, a white stone on which is written a new name, authority to rule, the morning star, white clothes, a place of honor (name in the book of life, be a pillar, the ability to sit on the throne with Christ.

The overcomers:

To each church John is instructed to include the call to “overcome”. What does this mean?

At the end of the letter to the Laodiceans Jesus says, **“He who overcomes I will grant to him to sit down with me on my throne, as I also overcame and sat down with my father on his throne.”** (3:21). This is obviously a reference to Jesus' death and resurrection.

There are 2 other references to note regarding overcoming. Jn 16:33,

“These things I have spoken to you so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world.”

And, 1 Jn. 5:3-5,

“For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome. For whoever has been born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world: our faith. Who is the one who overcomes the world, but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?”

Interestingly, Paul uses the same word for overcome we find in the letters to the 7 churches in Rom.8:35-39 when he describes believers as those who **“overwhelmingly conquer** through him who loved us.”

“Overcomers are followers of Christ who successfully resist the power and temptation of the world's system. An overcomer is not sinless, but holds fast to faith in Christ until the end. They do

not turn away when times get difficult or become an apostate. Overcoming requires complete dependence upon God for direction, purpose, fulfillment, and strength to follow His plan for our lives ([Proverbs 3:5–6](#); [2 Corinthians 12:9](#)).

The Greek word most often translated ‘overcomer’ stems from the word *nike* which, according to *Strong’s Concordance*, means ‘to carry off the victory. The verb implies a battle.’ The Bible teaches Christians to recognize that the world is a battleground, not a playground. God does not leave us defenseless. [Ephesians 6:11–17](#) describes the armor of the Lord available to all believers. Scattered throughout this narrative is the admonition to ‘stand firm.’ Sometimes all it takes to overcome temptation is to stand firm and refuse be dragged into it. [James 4:7](#) says, ‘Resist the devil and he will flee from you.’ An overcomer is one who resists sin no matter what lures Satan uses.” (Got Questions)

The first Adam, Adam, did not overcome the world. Rather he and Eve were overcome by temptation and sinned in the Garden of Eden. They fell into sin because they gave in to the serpent’s temptation. The last Adam, Jesus Christ, overcame the world. He was tempted but resisted and defeated Satan’s temptation. We see this in several places in Scripture. We see this in the wilderness (Matt. 4:1-11). But we also see this in the garden of Eden when Jesus could have pleased himself but instead trusted his Father (Matt. 26:39). And we most certainly see this in Jesus’ journey to the cross. Peter notes,

“For you have been called for this purpose, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you would follow in His steps, He who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth; and while being abusively insulted, He did not insult in return; while suffering, He did not threaten, but kept entrusting *Himself* to Him who judges righteously; and He Himself brought our sins in His body up on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live for righteousness; by His wounds you were healed. For you were continually straying like sheep, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls.” (1 Pet. 2:21-25)

Jesus continually refused to please himself and in the end to save himself. He continually entrusted himself to his Father. Overcomers are not shining paragons of spiritual virtue who never struggle with their faith commitment to Jesus. But they recognize that it’s only in the person and power of Jesus that they can overcome the world. It’s not about their strength, it’s about Jesus and believers standing in him. Is it possible to overcome the world? God thinks it is and he anticipates a positive response from the churches. Otherwise he never would have said “to the one who overcomes”.

As believers daily live out the death and resurrection of Jesus, they overcome the world.

Paul says in Gal. 2:20, **“I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself up for me.”**

The most severe word of correction:

There is one church for whom Jesus seems to reserve the most severe word of correction – Sardis, the dead church (3:5). Those who respond to Christ’s correction will wear white, and their names will be confessed before God and the angels, **and they will not have their names erased from the Book of Life.** The possibility of erasure from the book of life has caused much debate among

Christians. Some see in this phrase the conditional nature of salvation. This is to say, salvation once received can be lost by not living up to the standard to which Christ calls his people. A person can be saved by faith, but in the final analysis their salvation is conditioned on the quality of their works. The problem is that this approach changes the essential nature of grace based salvation to a grace/works based salvation. Justification by faith never includes works as part of the salvation equation. Paul is clear about this in Eph. 2:8, 9.

Others think that salvation cannot be lost. They say that 3:5 must be applied to people who inhabit the church but who were never believers in the first place. They just tagged along with the Christian crowd with no real commitment to Christ. And when persecution arose, they fled the church for safer places, or they turned on their former Christian family.

G K Beale comments, **“Those to be ‘erased’ were considered for a time by the church community as those who would receive the inheritance. Their claim to faith was taken at face value because for a time they played the part. Their purported place in ‘the book of life’ will be revealed as a sham when they find at the last judgement that their names are, after all, not in the book. . . . The counterfeit character of people in the church will be revealed at the last day when they do not receive the final reward.”**

I wonder if Judas is an example of Beale’s comment?

Beale offers several reasons as to why 3:5 probably isn’t referring to a believer’s loss of salvation.

- 1) None of the letters to the other churches includes the idea of loss of salvation for those who fail to overcome.
- 2) It is possible that the 4 references to “onoma” (Grk), “name” (Eng.) throughout this letter (vv1, 4, 5a, 5b) are related by a common theme that contrasts genuine believers with false Christians.
- 3) In John’s scheme throughout, the names of those who ultimately prove themselves unbelievers are never at any time connected positively with the book of life, but only the books of judgement.

There is a third possibility. Many theologians see this phrase as a grammatical device called a “litotes”. It’s a figure of speech that states a positive idea in a negative way for emphasis. Thus, “I will not blot out his name” is seen as a powerful way to say that the names of overcomers are permanently secure and will be preserved in the book of life. The Greek text shows this phrase as a double negative which has led to this understanding. We have modern equivalents of litotes when we say that something isn’t too shabby – meaning it’s very good. Or, it’s not rocket science – meaning it’s easy. Thus, this phrase is a very positive affirmation of the believer’s security in Christ. Dr. Dan Merritt says that in the days of the Roman imperial rule disloyal citizens could have their citizenship nullified and their names erased from the citizenship rolls of Rome. He suggests that what is being said here is something like, unlike Romans who can have their names erased from citizenship in Rome, God will never ever erase the overcomer’s name from the citizenship rolls of God’s kingdom. They are secure.

With this range of interpretive options, a clear decisive meaning is not entirely possible. But this

should never cause thoughtful believers to blunt or lessen the sheer weight of what's said here. Instead, it ought to make every reader sit up and take notice, take stock of how they're living out their faith. Think about what Paul says in **1 Cor 3:1-15**; and Peter says in **1 Peter 4:15-18**.

George Beasley – Murray makes this observation,
“If the exalted Lord has the power to strike out names from the book of life, this is because the book is his, he writes it. The symbol thus conveys that alike election and redemption are in Christ and through Christ. From first to last the believer is dependent on his Lord.

Keep this thought in mind – God will do with his church what he needs to do in order to get his church to do what he called to do. God can and will respond with, to quote Sheldon, a severe mercy. God takes what we receive by grace through faith in his son seriously.

Imagine that you are one of the seven churches. What thoughts go through your mind and heart as you hear the majestic sovereign Jesus address your fellowship? Do you question Jesus' evaluation? What he sees? Do you minimize his evaluation, or do you shrink under your pew hoping no one will recognize you? Or, do you see the corrective in his message and move toward a faithful response?

Jesus' concluding comment to Laodicea, the 7th church.

“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.” (3:20).

This passage has often given at evangelistic services in bygone days as a call to unbelievers to come to Jesus for salvation. But the context of the verse clearly points out that this call is to believers. Jesus is calling his church to soften their heart and open the door to intimate fellowship. I take this to mean that he's inviting them to positively respond to correction and direction and to receive the reward of this response, intimate fellowship.

Please pay attention to who's knocking and calling. It's Jesus! Jesus obviously cares for his church and patiently waits for a positive response.

Making it Real:

The composite picture that emerges is that the church serves the faithful, crucified, risen, and sovereign Jesus who sees the church in all its constituent parts with full and exact knowledge from absolute clarity of vision. He truly knows us inwardly and outwardly. His encouragement to us is to follow him faithfully being willing to suffer for our faith (to death if necessary) in a world that does not know him. We are to heed the call to self-examination and correction where needed and respond positively. When Jesus has put away all that is evil, those who overcome can expect rewards they will enjoy in eternity. Compromising and caving in believers cannot expect the same experience of enjoyment in the New Jerusalem.