

Conquer: Proclaim Christ. Receive the Prize.

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1. Introduction

Jesus Christ loves his church. He calls it his bride. Jesus desires the best for his bride, more than any groom you have known. So what words of love would he have for his church, to care for it, protect it, provide for it? He knows the environment that his people live in: both back in the first century and all the way to the 21st century of our time. He knows the times we live in: the onslaught of secularism, anti-religion, idol-worship, anti-gospel, and anti-Jesus. These things are not new to our era, they are just new to us. They have always characterized the world his bride has lived in. Jesus desires to see his church survive and thrive in the midst of these forces of evil.

What if Jesus had something he wanted to tell us, to help us in our struggle with the evil of our day? What if he had a message for his church? While he walked the earth, he had lots to say to his people. Much of this is recorded in the 4 Gospels. But then he left the earth. Did you know that about 65 years after he ascended to heaven, he did have a message for us, his church? To see what he said in that message, open your Bibles to the book of Revelation. It is the last book in the Bible. You will find it easier to follow this message if you keep the Bible open on your lap. I will be referring to the words there often during this message. Please turn with me to the first chapter in the book of Revelation.

If we took the time to read this 1st chapter we would see that this book that we call Revelation is a communication or message or revelation from Jesus Christ, through a man named John, for the help of God's people. The year is about 95 A.D. and according to v. 9 the church seems to be suffering some tribulation. This John was exiled by the authorities to the island of Patmos off the coast of present-day Turkey. Why? That same v. 9 says that it was because he held fast to the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

What happens in the last half of chapter 1 is that on a Sunday, the Lord's Day, John heard a loud voice like a trumpet telling him to write in a book what he is about to see and send it to seven churches. These churches are all names of cities in what we know today as western Turkey. John next turns to see the voice that was speaking and sees a magnificent person. Throughout this book of Revelation, John's hearing and seeing is in a vision. The words he hears and the sights he sees are highly symbolic. What does that mean? An example of this is in the time of Joseph in the OT. Pharaoh, the ruler of Egypt at that time, had a dream about 7 fat cows and 7 ultra thin cows. The meaning of the dream had nothing to do with cows. The dream was a message from God that Egypt would go through 7 years of plenty and 7 years of famine. What John hears and sees in his visions are like that. When we read this book, we must not interpret the images literally, but find the meaning God intends behind the symbols. The magnificent person John sees is Jesus Christ, fully God and fully man, the Ancient of Days, wise and powerful. It is this Jesus who has a message for each of these 7 churches.

Now we are ready to read chapters 2 and 3. Please follow along with me as I read Rev chapters 2 and 3. *Read Rev 2-3.*

In this message won't be able to discuss all the details of these 7 letters. But if we look at all of them together, they have a common main point. This is what we'll discuss.

* Pray

Let's stop to pray before we continue.

Mighty God, please show us how to interpret these letters. Help us to see your message for us in the messages to these 7 churches. Move our affections so we love what you say, seeing it as just what we need to hear. We want to know and obey what you say to the churches, to our church, to us. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

2. The Big Idea of the Letters

Did you notice that these letters have some things in common? Each letter starts with "The words of ..." that describes the sender of this letter. You can see one like this in 2:1. The descriptions in the first 5 letters come directly from the picture of the mighty reigning Christ pictured in ch. 1 in v. 12-20. You can take a look when get home this afternoon. And the last 2 letters describe Jesus in terms seen in other places in the Scriptures. The point? Jesus Christ, the mighty reigning Savior, has a message for his churches.

Next notice that after the description of Jesus, the writer, all 7 letters start with "I know ..." followed by something Jesus knows about that church. In 5 of the letters, he says, "I know your works." Friends, how would you like to receive a letter from Jesus saying, "I know your works."? [pause] The point? Jesus Christ knows what is going on in the life of the church and the culture they live among. Nothing escapes his notice.

We can see two more phrases in common with all the letters. Near the end, they all say, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." Notice that the phrase ends with "churches," plural. Look with me at the first letter, chapter 2:1. It is written to the church in Ephesus. But in v. 7 Jesus says to hear what the Spirit says to not just this church in Ephesus, but to the churches. These letters, addressed to specific individual churches, also seem to be written to more than just these 7 churches. Some of you have heard before that in the cultures that wrote the Bible, some numbers had more than a mathematical meaning. When we see the number 7 in the Bible, it often includes a sense of "fullness" or "completeness." So these historical 7 churches here represent all the churches of that day in Asia Minor. And even beyond that, they represent the church universal, churches in all areas and over all times in history. So we ought to read these letters as having something to say to us, a church in Medford, WI in 2016, even though our name isn't specifically included.

Back to our phrase, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” We all have ears. So won’t we all hear? Jesus says something similar in the Gospels. “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” (Mt 11:15). Jesus means that while we all have ears to hear what he is saying, we don’t all hear what he is saying. While talking right in front of you, did your dad ever say to you, “Do you hear me?!” He meant that he’s telling you something important, but you don’t seem to be listening. He’s pleading with you, and maybe scolding you, to listen with your mind, not just your ears. Jesus too is pleading with his churches to listen with their whole being. He would say, “Think about my words, over and over. Let them affect your desires. Let my words change you. Really hear them.” Friends, can you hear Jesus’ words in these letters? Will you? Do you have ears to hear? Then hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Let’s look at one last portion in common among these 7 letters. This one is the most important. Look at the 2nd half of 2:7. “To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.” The phrase “the one who conquers” is repeated in all the other 6 letters as well. In each case a promised reward is held out to the one who conquers. What is that reward? What does it mean to conquer? And how do we conquer? These are the questions we’ll look at in the rest of this message.

* Summary

Where are we so far? The mighty reigning Jesus Christ has a message for his church. He wrote it about 95 A.D., at the start of what the Bible calls the last days. He wrote it for 7 churches in Asia Minor. And he wrote it for every other church as well, including churches around the world in our day. He wants his people to hear what he says. In one word, what did he want to say? Conquer.

3. What is the promised reward for those who conquer?

So what is the promised reward for those who conquer? Let’s look at some of the descriptions. Look at 2:7, “To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.” This tree is seen in two places in the Bible: in the Garden of Eden at the beginning of time and in the New Jerusalem at the end of time. In the Garden of Eden the tree of life seems to represent the life giving presence of God. When Adam and Eve chose to disobey God, God separated them from this tree. More significantly, their sins separated them from the life giving presence of God. So too, our sins separate us from the life giving presence of God. But ... the tree of life shows up again after the final judgment for sins. When the New Jerusalem comes down out heaven from God, the tree of life is there. In the new paradise of God, men can fill themselves with the life giving presence of God. This means they can enjoy God’s presence and receive from him all that life was originally meant to be. If you want this, Jesus says that you must conquer.

Another description of the promised reward for those who conquer is seen at the end of the message to the church in Smyrna. Look with me at the last half of 2:11. “The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.” The first death is when your body dies. What is the second death? At the final judgment of God, when all are judged according to their deeds, Rev 20 says that the devil is thrown into the lake of fire where he will be tormented day and night forever and ever. Can you imagine such a place? A lake of fire, torment day and night, forever and ever. Then it says that “if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown in the lake of fire.” In 20:14 we read, “This is the second death, the lake of fire.” Friends, what a prize it is to escape the second death. If you want this prize, Jesus says that you must conquer.

One more ... Look at how Jesus describes the reward in his message to the church in Sardis in 3:5. “The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels.” These white garments stand in contrast to the garments soiled by the sins of some in the church. The sins upon their souls are like ugly repulsive stains upon a pure white shirt. But for the one who conquers, Jesus promises a soul clothed in white. For the one who conquers, Jesus promises to remove your stain of sins on your soul and to clothe you in white.

* Summary

So what is the promised reward for those who conquer? The promises we just looked at and the others in the letters are all describing different aspects of the same prize. To the one who conquers, Jesus promises the ultimate prize, forever life with God, away from all evil and suffering and death. Friends, pinch yourself awake and tell yourself that this prize will far exceed your best day ever in this life. You don’t want to miss this reward. You want to conquer to get it.

4. What does it mean to conquer?

I hope you are thinking now, “I want Jesus’ promised reward, but what does it mean to conquer?” Let’s look at the letters and ask, “What is going on in this church that would require a God-follower to conquer? Conquer what?” You might have noticed that these letters contain some words of approval, some words of rebuke, some words of warning, and some words of command. In these various parts we will find what it means to conquer.

In the letter to the church in Pergamum, 2:13, Christ says “I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is. Yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.” This church is living where Satan’s work is most active. Satan opposes Jesus Christ and all who would follow him. Antipas, a faithful witness of Christ, was killed for it. How does Satan kill faithful followers of Christ? By inciting wicked men to do his work. In Pergamum, Satan has incited men to oppose the church of Jesus Christ.

If we were in that church, how might we know of the opposition? Our neighbors, our town-folk, our fellow students would talk against us and our Savior. They would treat us poorly because we claim the name of Jesus as our Lord. They might deny us jobs for not following them in wicked behavior and speech. Our children might get beat up. We might get beat up. And would the civil government come to protect our rights as citizens? Not if we live where Satan's throne is. The guilds in the Roman culture of this time each had gods that they worshipped. These gods protected and prospered their guild or so they believed. If you don't go to the dinner in honor of the god, you might lose your job. Worse, you might lose your life for worshipping a false god. The guild sees Jesus as a false god and a threat to the livelihood of the guild.

If you and I lived in such a place and one from our church was killed for holding fast the name of Jesus, ... imagine it ... what would be our temptation? We would want to protect ourselves, right? You might hear in the church foyer next Sunday, "Brother, just keep your mouth shut about Jesus and stay out of trouble. Don't you dare call attention to the rest of us by telling others about the cross of Christ." So when Jesus commends this church for holding fast his name and not denying faith in him, don't think for a moment that he meant holding fast his name in your heart while you deny him with your silence in front of your neighbors and coworkers and fellow students. In this context, when Jesus promises the reward to the one who conquers, he means to the one who does not deny him in front of others, even hostile others.

In the letter to the church in Thyatira, Christ rebukes the church. In 2:20, he says that he has something against them, that they tolerate a woman "who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols." The text doesn't say if the woman was someone from inside the church or from outside it. But some in the church were being led astray by her. And Christ rebukes the church for not opposing and correcting her teaching.

Sexual relations were designed by God to be a picture of the covenant love between Christ and his bride, the church. When sexual relations are engaged in outside of the covenant of holy marriage, they lie about Christ and his church. Immoral sexual relations paint a picture of the adultery of the church, of the church cheating on Christ, becoming unfaithful to him. This ought never be. So when you engage in sexual immorality, in your mind or in your body, by reading or watching pornography or by sexually touching someone who you are not married to, the stakes are much higher than doing a no-no. You are betraying Christ. You are belittling his faithful love for his bride. You are acting out adultery against your groom, Christ Jesus. What will be the reward of those who follow in these steps? Look at 2:22-23: great tribulation, death, and worst of all, Jesus says that he "will give to each of you according to your works." No forgiveness, no mercy. You will be judged according to your works. He's writing to a church. He's writing to our church. Conquering here means going against the crowded path toward sin, even if the crowd includes your coworkers or your friends at church, even if the sin feels so good and right. Jesus says, "Conquer."

As Jesus uses the word conquer here in these letters, it means holding fast to your testimony that Jesus Christ is Lord and not denying him. How might you deny him? It is not that you will say that you no longer believe Jesus is Lord and Savior. The denial is a functional denial: a silencing of your witness, a following after sins, a giving in to society's pressure to follow it in ways that effectively deny Christ. Conquer, don't deny your Savior by your silence or by your works.

Before we leave this question of what does it mean to conquer, let's look for a moment at what it does not mean. Read along with me Rev 2:10. "Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life." What do you see in this verse that conquering does not mean? Conquering does not mean the one who conquers will not suffer. Conquering does not mean the one who conquers will not be tested or have tribulation. Conquering does not mean the one who conquers will not suffer death, possibly as a martyr. Be faithful unto death means be faithful to God all the way to death. Or conquer all the way to death. At no point between now and death are you to get off the faithful train. When persecution comes, like it did for Antipas, the temptation to stop being faithful will rise. Our conquering looks like losing in this life. But it is the only way to gain the reward in the next. In the face of suffering and death, Jesus says you must conquer your temptation to stop being faithful to him.

* Summary

What does it mean to conquer? Our call to conquer in this life does not mean we won't suffer or even die for Christ. To conquer means that we hold fast our public witness for Christ, even in the face of great trials.

5. How do we conquer?

How do we conquer? Imagine trying to live for Christ in a place where it is hard to do so, where everyone around you is enjoying the pleasures of illicit sexual sin and applauding others who do so, where you might lose your job if you publically profess that Jesus is the Lord of your life, where your neighbors might turn against you if you publically honor Christ Jesus as Lord, where you are denied health care if you mark yourself as a follower of Jesus, where you label yourself for death by beheading if you publically affirm that you are a Christian. All these are realities right now for Christians around the world. How do you conquer in these situations? Must you be courageous? Surely. Must you have a strong resolve to follow Christ? Surely. Must you treasure the reward promised by Christ greater than you treasure the reward from sin or avoiding suffering? Surely.

But where does the courage and strong resolve and right treasuring come from? They come from inside you, ... but not from inside you. Where is the source, the spring, for courage and resolve to do right and right treasure? 1 John 5:4 says, "For everyone who

has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.” The words “overcome” in both of these sentences are the same Greek word translated “conquer” in the letters to the 7 churches. So we could say, “For everyone who has been born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that has conquered the world—our faith.” To be one of those who gain the rewards promised to those who conquer, you must have genuine faith in God. You must be born again. If not, you will find you do not have what it takes to conquer.

* Summary

How do we conquer? By courage and strong resolve to follow Jesus and right treasuring, that all come from being born again and having genuine faith in God.

6. Practical

Let’s drill down to more specifically apply what these letters teach us about conquering sin and evil.

We are not all in the same situation. Some of you are going through some significant suffering at the hands of evil. Maybe that is in your home or in your workplace or at school. And you are still counting God as good and his promised reward as enough for you. Your hope is in Jesus Christ. Jesus would say to you that he knows your works, your patient endurance, and your bearing up for his name’s sake. He would say to you to hold fast his name and not deny faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior no matter what the cost.

Some of you are letting yourselves be led into behavior that the Bible would call wicked. It might be sexual sin or something else. You have stopped listening to what God’s word says about these behaviors. And you have welcomed influences into your life that have told you that these wicked things are not wrong. These influences might be your real life friends, your Facebook friends, Pinterest pages, films, songs. Jesus says to you that he has something against you, that you tolerate these wicked influences in your life, that you are committing adultery with him and you know it. Jesus calls you to repent.

For some of you, your soul is distant from God. Some of you are about to die spiritually. Jesus would say, “You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. Remember, then, what you have received and heard. Keep it, and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you.”

Some of you are going through life doing your best to not suffer for being a Christian. You were made by God to proclaim his glory. But you are almost silent unless you are sure you’ll receive no criticism for standing with Christ. Jesus would say to you, “But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember

therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.”

For all of us, here are 3 tips for improving your ability to conquer sin and evil inside and outside of you:

1. Consider him who is speaking to you: the mighty reigning Jesus. His mercy is great – he came the first time giving his life in exchange for all who will repent of their sins and trust in his saving work. This means he purchased your ability to conquer. Likewise, his judgments are pure – he will come the second time to judge the living and the dead, and all who refuse to repent and prize his Lordship will be thrown into the lake of fire. Consider him who is speaking to you.
2. Consider the reward. Psalm 16:11 says that in God’s presence is fullness of joy. Nowhere else is joy like that. And the same verse says that at his right hand are pleasures forevermore. Nowhere else are such high and lasting pleasures. Trading away heavenly pleasures for the fleeting meager pleasures of sin is a fools game. Consider the reward.
3. Consider your life. You won’t conquer sin and evil if you don’t see it. Look inside you for your sins. Ask God to help you see your sins and ask him to help you repent of them. Look outside you, so you won’t miss the evil influences coming at you. Ask God to help you see and have the courage to turn away from those ungodly influences. Consider your life.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, almost 2000 years ago, the last days began. Jesus sent the book of Revelation, including these 7 letters, to lovingly help his church prepare for the difficulties that would come. Friends, are you ready to face the difficulties?

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

* Pray