

THE BOOK OF REVELATION

S03 PART TWO: THE EVALUATION OF THE SEVEN CHURCHES (REV. 2-3) – COREY STARK

I. PART TWO – THE EVALUATION OF THE SEVEN CHURCHES, WHICH ARE (REV. 2-3)

A. In *part two* of the book of Revelation, Jesus charged John to write the “*things which are*” (Rev. 1:19). Revelation 2-3 give us the clearest picture of *what Jesus desires* in His Church by revealing the “*blueprints*” for the *Church after God’s heart* that He is building (Mt. 16:18; Eph. 2:19-22; 5:27). This corporate *dwelling place* of God’s manifest presence will release His power, while being an eschatological “*Ark*” that sustains the saints in unified safety by giving provision, protection and direction during the Great Tribulation.

Eph. 2:22 You also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.

B. Jesus directs John to write seven letters to seven specific churches in Asia Minor (Rev. 1:11). In them He reveals another *85 distinct aspects* of His majesty, specifically magnifying 1-2 aspects of His character and ministry on behalf of each Church to empower them to *overcome the challenge* that He is highlighting, so that they might *obtain the promise* that He is giving. Jesus lists a total of *26 eternal rewards* for all those who sustain their dedication until the end, as motivation for them to resist temptation, endure persecution and overcome compromise associated with the mundane seasons of routine life (Rev. 2:7, 10, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21).

Rev. 1:11 What you see, write in a book and send it to the seven churches which are in Asia...

C. While giving practical instruction to *seven historical churches* (Rev. 1:11) Jesus is prophetically equipping the *universal Church* to overcome by highlighting the primary challenges common to all (Rev. 2:7). However, these seven letters find their primary application and ultimate fulfillment in the final generation who will experience the glory and crisis of the great tribulation (Mt. 24:21). Jesus is preparing the *end time Church* to prevail through the unique dynamics and unprecedented events of the end times in great victory (Rev. 3:11)!

D. Three reasons they are relevant for the end time Church not just historical:

1. *Book of Prophecy* – Revelation is described as prophecy 7x, transcending age, gender, socio-economic status, culture, generation and denominational preference (Rev. 1:3; 10:11; 19:10; 22:7, 10, 18, 19).

2. *Written to Churches* – Even as Paul’s letters were written to local churches (Rom. 1:7), yet are relevant for the universal Church past, present and future (Rom. 1:25), so also these seven letters remain relevant.

Rev. 2:1 “To the angel of the church of Ephesus write... 7 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22)

3. *Present Church Age* – Revelation 2-3 is part two of the book of Revelation, “*things which are*” (Rev. 1:19), referring to this present Church age when the “*fullness of the Gentiles*” shall be seen (Rom. 11:25).

4. *Canon of Scripture* – The 7 letters aren’t exempt from “*all Scripture*”, given by God for the profit of all.

2 Tim. 3:16 All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine... for correction, for instruction... 17 that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.

E. These “epistles” are *the final words* of instruction Jesus wanted to personally deliver to the Church prior to His return. Here we find strategic elements not previously given by the Spirit to the first century Apostles.

Jn. 16:12 “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.”

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II. BUILDING THE CHURCH AFTER GOD’S OWN HEART

A. God promised to shake everything that can be shaken to establish an unshakable Kingdom on the earth (Hag. 2:6-9; 1 Pet. 4:17; Heb. 12:25-29). He will create the “perfect storm” during the Great Tribulation to bring in the *great harvest* of souls (Am. 9:12; Acts 15:17; Mt. 24:14; Rev. 14:14-16), bring forth a *mature Church* in unprecedented unity, purity and power (Eph. 4:13; 5:27; Rev. 19:7; 22:17), and bring down the *antichrist system*, along with everything that hinders love (Rev. 6-19). The shaking is *for* us not *against* us!

Hag. 2:6 “For thus says the Lord of hosts: ‘Once more (it is a little while) I will shake heaven and earth, the sea and dry land; 7 and I will shake all nations, and they shall come to the Desire of All Nations, and I will fill this temple with glory,’ says the Lord of hosts.

Heb. 12:26 He has promised, saying, “Yet once more I shake not only the earth, but also heaven.” 27 Now this, “Yet once more,” indicates the removal of those things that are being shaken, as of things that are made, that the things which cannot be shaken may remain. 28 Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. 29 For our God is a consuming fire.

B. Even as *Noah’s ark* was built according to the “divine blueprint” (Gen. 6:14-16; Heb. 11:7) as preparation to deliver all those with “ears to hear” during a time of unprecedented global shaking (Gen. 6-9), so also Jesus is building the end time Church as an eschatological “*ark of safety*” as our protection in the coming storm. We will *not only* endure, but *prevail* through the unique dynamics and unprecedented events of the end times in great victory (Dan 11:32-33)! God’s judgment saved the righteous and destroyed the wicked (1 Pet. 3:20).

Lk. 17:26 As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be also in the days of the Son of Man: 27 They ate, they drank, they married wives, they were given in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all... 30 Even so will it be in the day when the Son of Man is revealed.

C. Revelation chapters 2-3 give us the clearest picture of the corporate “*dwelling place*” of God that Jesus, our wise *Master Builder* is constructing (Ps. 132; Mt. 16:18; Eph. 2:22). This corporate “*resting place*” for God’s Spirit will not only release His power externally, but internally within the Church as well to sustain the saints in unified safety as He *commands the blessing* of His manifest presence (Ps. 133:1-3).

Mt. 16:18 I will build My Church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.

Eph. 2:19 you are... 22 being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit. (1 Pet. 2:5)

Ps. 133:1 Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwelt together in unity! 3 For there the Lord commanded the blessing — Life forevermore.

D. In these 7 letters, Jesus defines what is necessary for His people to reach the *highest ideals* that are in His heart for the Church in this age. He has great zeal to prepare His people for the *fullness* of God (Eph. 3:19).

Jn. 2:17 It was written, “Zeal for Your house burns in Me [Jesus] like a fire.” (Ps. 69:9)

Eph. 4:13 till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ... (Eph. 3:19; 5:27)

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E. Prior to the return of Jesus, the Church that He is building (Mt. 16:13-19) will emerge as a *mature Bride* in identity (Rev. 19:7; 22:17), who eternally functions as a House of Prayer (Isa. 56:7; Mt. 21:13; Mk. 11:17; Lk. 19:46), according to the order of the Tabernacle of David (Ps. 27:4; Am. 9:11-12; Acts 15:16-17).

1. Church – Jesus said, “*I will build My Church*” (Mt. 16:18) and described us as “living stones” built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit (Eph. 2:19-22; 1 Pet. 2:5). The Greek word for Church, “Ekklesia” relates to who we are in our *identity* as the “called out assembly” of God’s covenant people.

Mt. 16:18 On this rock I will build My Church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.

2. Bride of Christ – Although we relate to our Father as *sons and daughters* forever, our highest identity throughout all eternity is a *bride* who has fully matured into God’s image and likeness, equally yoked in love and made comparable to Him (Gen. 1:26-28; 2:18, 24; Eph. 5:25-27, 31-32; Rev. 19:7; 22:17). The Bride of Christ revelation isn’t related to our gender (Gal. 3:28), but speaks of a *position of privilege* in our relationship with God to experience *unhindered access* to the depths of His heart and mind (1 Cor. 2:9-11).

Eph. 5:31 “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” 32 This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the Church.

a. Men *and* women are both “sons of God” in accessing God’s throne – kingdom, power, glory.

Rom. 8:14 For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.

b. Men *and* women are the “Bride of Christ” in accessing God’s heart – emotions, affections, delight.

Rev. 22:17 And the Spirit and the bride say, “Come!” (Eph. 5:31-32; Gal. 3:28; Rev. 19:7)

3. House of Prayer – Jesus said, “*My house is a house of prayer*” (Isa. 56:7; Mt. 21:13; Mk. 11:17; Lk. 19:46). This describes what we do in our *function* as a kingdom of priests who eternally minister to God by agreeing with the truth of *who He is* (i.e. worship) and *what He’s doing* (i.e. prayer). The priestly ministry of prayer is the *primary way* God releases His governmental power through Jesus and His people, now and forever (1 Pet. 1:5, 9; Rev. 1:6; 5:10; 20:4; 22:5). This is seen in Jesus engaging in intercession *forever* (Ps. 110:4; Isa. 53:12; Lk. 22:32; 23:34; 1 Tim. 2:5; Heb. 5:6, 10; 6:20; 7:11, 15, 17, 21; 1 Jn. 2:1). The highest governmental authority is the One upon the throne and the intercessors in agreement. One person in unity with God is the majority! The Church are the only ones with the authority to contend with darkness (Mt. 16:19). Prayer releases more grace in each geographic region (2 Chr. 7:14; Joel 2:12-17; 28-32).

Lk. 19:46 “It is written, ‘My house is a house of prayer’... (Mt. 16:19)

4. Tabernacle of David – The LORD said, “*I will raise up the Tabernacle of David*” (Am. 9:11-12; Acts 15:16-17). This describes the order in which we function as a house of prayer (i.e. Davidic order), which is from the place of encountering God in day and night prayer with worship (prophetic music/singing), that is fueled by the beauty of God and is the primary catalyst for world missions. Davidic prayer watches will pray for *missions*, with *music*, from *intimacy* and be the first place of the *convergence* of heaven and earth.

Am. 9:11 “On that day I will raise up the Tabernacle of David, which has fallen down, and repair its damages; I will raise up its ruins, and rebuild it as in the days of old; 12 that they may possess the remnant of Edom, and all the Gentiles who are called by My name,” Says the LORD... (Acts 15:16-17)

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III. FIVE WAYS TO APPLY THE SEVEN LETTERS

A. *Individually*: Although each of the seven letters was written to local historical churches, it was meant to inspire a *wholehearted response of love* that is unique and required for each individual believer within each.

Rev. 2:7 “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.”

B. *Corporately*: The most powerful application is when local churches express these truths together (Rev. 1:12-13; 2:1). If we live in corporate unity according to His agenda and on His terms in a focused and intentional way long-term, we prepare a corporate “*resting place*” for Him to dwell (Ps. 132), imparting the *commanded blessing* of His presence that releases His power, while sustaining us in unified safety (Ps. 133).

Rev. 2:1 “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 [*corporate churches*]...’ (Rev. 1:20)

C. *Historically*: Each letter was written to a local historical church in John’s day to address the actual conditions they were experiencing naturally, socially, economically, politically and spiritually. We can learn much by studying their historical context. For example, Laodicea literally had two streams of water that flowed into the city; one hot and the other cold, causing their water source to be “lukewarm” (Rev. 3:15-16).

Rev. 3:15 “I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. 16 So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth.

D. *Universally*: Even as Paul’s letters were initially written to local historical churches (Rom. 1:7), yet were prophetic and have been relevant for the universal Church past, present and future (Rom. 1:25), so also these seven letters remain relevant for equipping all the saints in every nation and culture for the past 2,000 years.

Rev. 2:1 “To the angel of the church of Ephesus write... 7 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22)

Rom. 1:7 To all who are in Rome [*local church*], beloved of God, called to be saints... 25 Now to Him who is able to establish you... by the prophetic Scriptures made known to all nations [*universal Church*]...

E. *Eschatologically*: These seven letters find their primary application in the final generation in which the end time Church will partner with the Spirit to hasten Jesus’ return (2 Pet. 3:12; Rev. 22:17) and transition this age into the Millennium. They were strategically given to strengthen, encourage and equip the people of God for the glory and crisis of the great tribulation. Because the Philadelphian Church “kept guard” over Jesus’ word to persevere, He will “keep guard” over them to preserve them from the negative impact of trial (Jn. 17:15)!

Rev. 3:10 Because you have kept My command to persevere, I will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth. 11 Behold, I am coming quickly!

F. Jesus *did not* leave the final generation with the *greatest number* of believers, living in the *greatest crisis* on earth, during the *greatest transition* of human history without sufficient information. There were approximately only 100,000 believers in the first century Church, while having an estimated 2 billion at the end of the age when they will literally “keep the prophecy” of this book by living it out (Rev. 1:3; 22:7).

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IV. SEVEN COMMON ELEMENTS IN THE SEVEN LETTERS

A. *Formal Address*: This refers to the apostolic leader over each congregation. The word “angel” is ‘angelos’ in the Greek and can refer to either an *angelic* or *human messenger* (Mt. 11:10; Mk. 1:2; Lk. 7:24, 27; 9:52). Apostolic leaders are responsible before God to *guard the message* from being distorted or diluted by *boldly proclaiming* their truths clearly, consistently and tenderly, while *establishing a clear action plan* to implement them practically. People follow what their leaders publicly proclaim and currently model consistently.

Rev. 2:1 “To the angel [messenger] of the church of Ephesus...”

B. *Revelation of Jesus*: Jesus magnifies specific aspects of His *personality* and *ministry* to empower each church to overcome the particular challenge they are facing if they respond in faith. Jesus highlights another 85 *specific aspects* of His majesty (Rev. 2-3), plus the 52 *aspects* (Rev. 1) gives 137 *descriptions total!*

Rev. 2:18 “These things says the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and feet like fine brass...”

C. *Affirmation for Faithfulness*: Jesus gives each church affirmation for their faithfulness, as evidenced by their works, before giving correction when necessary. He told them what moved His heart in their progress, faithfulness and dedication to Him. Laodicea is the only church to receive no corporate affirmation.

Rev. 3:1 “To the angel of the church in Sardis write... “I know your works...”

D. *Correction for Compromise*: Jesus correction *is not* His rejection (Pr. 3:11-12; Heb. 12:5-11; Rev. 3:19). He had things “against” Ephesus (2:4), Pergamos (2:14) and Thyatira (2:20), while Smyrna and Philadelphia received no corporate correction. The three primary compromises were *passivity*, *immorality* and *idolatry*, which were enabled by false teaching on grace that did not require repentance; i.e. the “doctrine of Balaam” (Rev. 2:14), the “doctrine of the Nicolaitans” (Rev. 2:15) and the “doctrine of Jezebel” (Rev. 2:24).

Rev. 2:4 “Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love.”

E. *Exhortation to Respond*: Jesus often gave required actions in response to His correction, along with an element of “warning” (Rev. 2:5, 16, 22; 3:3). The warnings that Jesus gave the most were against *passivity* (being distracted with their increased blessing) and *fear* of persecution or rejection.

Rev. 3:19 “As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent.”

F. *Promise for Overcomers*: Jesus gave 26 *eternal rewards* as incentive for diligent faithfulness (2:7, 10, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21). Gaining insight into these rewards is critical for equipping the Church to stand faithfully under pressure long-term. Although the primary application of these promises is for the Millennium and beyond, we may begin to experience them a little bit now in this age in both our lives and ministries.

Rev. 2:17 “To him who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna to eat.”

G. *Appeal for Wholeheartedness*: This was Jesus’ primary N.T. teaching given a total of 16 times and has both an individual and corporate response. This phrase signals its *importance* to Jesus, to pay *careful attention* to it, that *supernatural help* is required to understand it, as well as a *focused determination* on our part to attain it.

Rev. 2:29 “He who has an ear, let him hear [individual] what the Spirit says to the [corporate] churches.”

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V. TWENTY-SIX ETERNAL REWARDS PROMISED TO OVERCOMERS (REV. 2-3)

A. In Revelation 2-3, Jesus magnifies 1-2 specific aspects of His character (personality) and His ministry and applies them to the unique circumstance and challenge facing each church. Jesus' *revelation* of Himself isn't arbitrary, but very specific to provoke a very specific response in His people, empowering them to overcome the *challenge* faced to obtain the *reward* given. If we desire the specific reward, then we must "overcome" the specific challenge by seeking the empowerment intrinsic to the specific revelation Jesus gives of Himself.

B. Who is an overcomer? First, all believers *overcome worldly unbelief* in a general way by believing in Jesus and refusing heresies as outlined in John's epistles (1 Jn. 4:1-5; 5:4-5). Second, all believers have an opportunity to *overcome unfaithfulness* in their life, as seen in Revelation 2-3 by walking in spiritual maturity, which is being consistent in our obedience over time. As *unbelievers* we "overcame" worldly unbelief when we were "born again". As *believers* we "overcome" unfaithfulness as we persevere in sustained dedication, under pressure and over time until the end.

C. An "overcomer" in this context is one who *matures* in the specific areas of faithfulness in their life that Jesus emphasized was necessary to stand against a very specific challenge that He identified. Overcoming *does not* mean attaining to perfection in one's character, but rather being wholehearted by consistently reaching for victory with all of our strength. Jesus is very gracious to us in His evaluation of our lives.

1. To the church in *Ephesus* "overcoming" meant to return to their first love for Jesus until the end.
2. To the church in *Smyrna* "overcoming" meant to be faithful in persecution even unto death.
3. To the church in *Pergamos* "overcoming" meant to resist immorality and idolatry until the end.
4. To the church in *Thyatira* "overcoming" meant to resist false prophetic, immorality and idolatry.
5. To the church in *Sardis* "overcoming" meant to be watchful and hold fast what God entrusted to them.
6. To the church in *Philadelphia* "overcoming" meant to persevere in mature obedience until the end.
7. To the church in *Laodicea* "overcoming" meant to resist lukewarmness, while reaching for maturity.

D. Jesus gave *twenty-six eternal rewards* to inspire and empower the Church to overcome: Eat from the *tree of life*, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God (Rev. 2:7); The *crown of life* (Rev. 2:10); Shall *not be hurt by the second death* (Rev. 2:11); Some of the *hidden manna* to eat (Rev. 2:17); A *white stone* (Rev. 2:17); On the stone a *new name* written which no one knows except him who receives it (Rev. 2:17); *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 Jesus also received from His Father (Rev. 2:26-27); The *morning star* (Rev. 2:28); *Walk with Jesus in white* (Rev. 3:4); Clothed in *white garments* (Rev. 3:5); Jesus will *not blot out his name* from the Book of Life (Rev. 3:5); Jesus will *confess his name* before His Father and before His angels (Rev. 3:5); An *open door* (Rev. 3:8); Make the synagogue of Satan, who say they are Jews and are not, but lie *worship before your feet* (Rev. 3:9); Make the synagogue of Satan, who say they are Jews and are not, but lie... to *know that I have loved you* (Rev. 3:9); Jesus will *keep you from the hour of trial* which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth (Rev. 3:10); Made a *pillar in the temple of My God*, and he shall go out no more (Rev. 3:12); Jesus will write on him the *name of My God* (Rev. 3:12); Jesus will write on him the *name of the city of My God*, the New Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God (Rev. 3:12); Jesus will write on him *His new name* (Rev. 3:12); Jesus counsels to buy *gold* refined in the fire, that you may be rich (Rev. 3:18); Jesus counsels to buy *white garments*, that you may be clothed, *that* the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed (Rev. 3:18); Jesus counsels to buy and anoint your eyes with *eye salve* that you may see (Rev. 3:18); Jesus will *come in to him* (Rev. 3:20); Jesus will *dine with him*, and he with Me (Rev. 3:20); To *sit with Jesus on His throne*, as He also overcame and sat down with His Father on His throne (Rev. 3:21).