

TO THE ONE WHO CONQUERS, PART 1

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Revelation 1:9-2:17

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## **Introduction**

As some of you who follow my wife on Facebook know, back in early December our 18-month-old Golden Retriever was electrocuted by some Christmas lights along the sidewalk of our neighborhood. Of course, we didn't know at first that it had happened; all we knew was that the next morning he would hardly walk and had developed a significant hematoma around his shoulder. A few days passed and the skin started bleeding and then all of the sudden half of his skin turned black. Frankly, it looked like he had some sort of skin-eating bacteria. It was insane as huge chunks of tissue suddenly began falling off. We were all, vet included, dumbfounded.

Until a couple days in when one of our vets asked us if Bennett had perhaps fallen asleep on an electric blanket. You see, Bennett's skin was starting to resemble that of a burn, like a cat who has chewed on a wire and been shocked. That's when it dawned on me, that, oh yeah, I had taken Bennett for a walk in a light rain the day before he started acting hurt. Once we had deduced then that he had most likely been electrocuted well then, the vets were able to start treating him, namely developing a plan for how we would help him heal over the next few months. You see, before we were all just kind of guessing, giving him various medicines, just hoping for the best. Once the doctors knew, however, what we were up against, now we were on the path to recovery.

It's only logical, right? You've got to properly diagnosis the problem before you can devise and implement the remedy, which is how we need to understand the next two and a half chapters of Revelation. You see, last week as we introduced this book and our new series we discussed at length how the book of Revelation is to be read and how it isn't. These principles will apply every week, to every passage, including this morning's.

You see, I venture to guess that Revelation 2 & 3 have been preached quite often in the church before. The letters to the seven churches seem fairly benign and safe. But the problem with this approach is that it treats these letters as a self-contained passage of Scripture, as if this is the only part of this book which these seven churches should read. But as we saw last week this whole book is an epistle to the seven churches and to all the church. In other words, this is just an introduction to everything to follow.

You see, our passage over the next two weeks is the diagnosis. This is the challenge that the universal church faces in one way or another. Right, check out this thought from Craig Koester, “The messages to the congregations establish the context in which the rest of Revelation is to be understood. They identify the congregations’ issues, ranging from conflict with outsiders to internal disputes over accommodation to Greco-Roman religious practices to attitudes of complacency,” (Craig R. Koester).<sup>1</sup> And don’t miss also how this whole passage begins and ends with Jesus. Right, we begin with this incredible portrayal of Christ, then the passage moves to a series of challenges or threats that the church faces, and then ends back in the presence of Christ. John sees the exalted Jesus, who directs Him to write to seven congregations about the challenges they face, while warning them of judgment and offering hope.

And, again, as we said last week, that Jesus address *seven* churches tells us that His words are for our consumption and consideration as well. You see, there are many similarities between these 1<sup>st</sup> century churches and our own.<sup>2</sup> First, there is **1. The problem of assimilation.** The church which must be in the world is in danger of becoming like the world. Just consider how upward mobility and increasing personal wealth often lead us to emulate the wealthy world

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<sup>1</sup> Craig R. Koester, *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AYB (New Haven, CT: Yale, 2014), 231.

<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the analogies of the seven churches and today’s churches see Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things*, 41-70.

around us. You were fine driving that modest car for all those years or living in that neighborhood, but now with more income your cost of living increases.

Second, there's **2. The problem of complacency**. As Jeff challenged us back in January, we act like fans of Jesus rather than His followers. I wonder if it were illegal to be a Christian and a crime, would there be enough evidence in your life to convict you? I think most of us are just enough religious to make us inconspicuous to those around.

Third, there's **3. The problem of persecution**. And it's not that you need to seek it out, but, as Gordon Fee observes, these letters to the churches are,

[A] call to a kind of stewardship and discipleship that will make the complacent uncomfortable enough to try to counteract it with fury and scorn, rather than with benign neglect. Rather than wearing gold or silver crosses around our necks, we would better portray our devotion to Christ by being more like the Crucified One amidst a world of self-centeredness and greed, (Gordon Fee).<sup>3</sup>

And so, for the next two weeks we'll focus on the first cycle of visions in the book of Revelation. For the sake of time we're splitting it into two messages, but understand that this is one fluid and unified vision. In it we learn that **We are more than conquerors in the reign and authority of Jesus Christ, who was, is to come, and is present now in the midst of the church.**

## **1. Lives in hope and obedience in the divine kingship of Jesus 1:9-20**

Over and over again throughout this vision Jesus references, **"To the one who conquers"** followed by a promise of everlasting blessing in the presence of God. In other words, His words are intended to encourage us to persevere through whatever challenge we face following Him in this fallen world. Thus, in this opening vision that centers around the awesome splendor and glory of Christ we see that **The one who conquers lives in hope and obedience in the divine kingship of Jesus.**

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<sup>3</sup> Fee, *Revelation*, 63.

Now note, though, how this whole vision begins with John defines himself by his to relationship to the churches and then by his companionship with them in affliction. This will be a pervasive theme over and over again throughout the book: **Faith in Christ entails both present affliction and a share in Christ's kingdom.** Affliction can mean a variety of things, though, including poverty, imprisonment, and ostracism for the faith. But because the redeemed are already a kingdom they endure in Christ for the sake of Christ. And so, we are called to remain faithful to Christ regardless our circumstance, but we can be hopeful and we can have confidence that we will persevere because of the faithfulness and grace of God.

Now in this vision John sees, **“seven golden lampstands, and among the lampstands was one like the Son of Man, dressed in a robe and with a golden sash wrapped around his chest,”** (Revelation 1:12-13). This opening vision draws on Daniel 7:9-14 to depict Christ as a powerful, priestly, and present figure. But by attributing both features of the Son of Man *and* the Ancient of Days to Jesus, John shows us how Jesus partakes of God's identity and reign. This is the sovereign God who holds dominion and authority and, thus, is worthy of all loyalty and devotion. But as priest, He stands among the churches correcting and exhorting them. Right, His sovereignty and dominion and His presence among them are all meant to strengthen the churches, to encourage them to conquer and overcome, to say ‘You will be victorious because I am victorious!’<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, Jesus commissions John anew to prophesy. You see, while the presence of Christ is meant to give the churches a sense of security and hope it is also a call to discipleship, because the one who speaks calls those who hear to obedience. We've got to wrap our minds

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<sup>4</sup> Beale adds, “John's audience, like Isaiah's, is meant to take confidence in God's sovereignty by allowing it to strengthen their prophetic witness,” (G. K. Beale and David H. Campbell, *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015], 49).

around this and around the tension we'll encounter throughout Revelation. Consider how Greg Beale puts it, "The mystery that Christ reveals to John is the reality that His rule coexists with the suffering of the churches. This is in fact the mystery of the cross, the same mystery by which Christ Himself, though the Creator of the universe, had to submit to the power of death. ... This mystery is applied here to the church, in both its present and future situations," (G. K. Beale).<sup>5</sup>

You see, what we're going to find in these seven letters to the churches to follow is a variety of circumstances. Some of these churches were facing violent persecution, others dealing with doctrinal issues, and then others with heart issues. There's no one theme that necessarily ties all seven together except this call to be re-centered on Christ. That's the point. This world will pull you in many directions and there are many idols beckoning you to themselves. Some of us, even in this church, put our hopes and fears on politics, on identifying with this party or that, on who occupies the White House and the halls of Congress. Some of us, even in this church, put our hopes and fears on income/wealth/possessions, on finding security in our banking and investment accounts. Some of us, even in this church, put our hopes and fears on social circles, finding comfort in being well-liked and included.

Each of us, inherently, puts our hopes and fears in the things of this world because we've grounded our identities in all sorts of things other than Jesus Christ. John's vision of the risen Lord shows us His divine kingship and makes it clear where our identity and loyalties are to be found. It is that, and that alone, which will enable us as followers of Jesus to persevere through trial, temptation, persecution, and even confrontation with the idols of our hearts. And so, we look upon Him and then we look inwardly as we listen to these seven letters.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 51.

## 2. Demonstrates love for Christ with a missional love for others 2:1-7

In the church at Ephesus, we see that **The one who conquers demonstrates love for Christ with a missional love for others**. Now as the text was read earlier you probably noticed a general rhythm or structure to each letter. There is:

1. Command to write to an angel of a church
2. Christ's self-description
3. Commendation of the church's good works
4. Accusation because of some sin
5. Exhortation to repent with a warning or encouragement
6. Exhortation to discern the truth of the preceding message
7. Promise to the conquerors

Now Ephesus is a pretty unique church in the New Testament in that we get to follow the life of this church over the course of forty or so years. We see its birth in the book of Acts, its doctrinal growth and development in Paul's letter to them. We see the church's struggles both practically and doctrinally in the two letters to Timothy and the three letters that bear John's name. And so, unlike the other six churches, we can really read a lot of scriptural context for the church at Ephesus when we come to chapter 2.

Jesus commends them, first, namely on how they have preserved right doctrine. In other words, theologically this church was on point. Moreover, it means they made it! All the false teaching that they were dealing with as depicted in the Pauline and Johannine letters has been refuted and overcome. Ephesus was a doctrinally sound church. But, **"You have abandoned the love you had at first," (Revelation 2:4)**.

Now, what was the love they had at first? Most people assume its simply Jesus Himself. In other words, that Ephesus is intellectually devoted to Christ, but it's become more head knowledge than heartfelt. And listen, this is true, but what Jesus says here is more than just about the church's love for Him. You see, as I just mentioned, we first meet this church in Acts 16-19

and quickly we watch the church rapidly expand and grow, so much to the extent that a riot breaks out because all these new Ephesian Christians are getting rid of all their household idols and the Ephesian economy is being wrecked by the radical witness the church gave to Jesus.

And so, it's important to understand that **The first love the Ephesians held was a love of Christ that manifested itself in radical, faithful holiness of living and witness to Jesus.** Right?

Here in Revelation 2 we see that the Ephesian church had gotten so complacent because of the soundness of their doctrine, in the correctness of their ecclesiology, the proficiency of their theology, the lucidity of their understanding, the fluidity of their verbosity that they had stopped simply living out their faith. And so, we find that the one who conquers, the one who overcomes complacency, comfort, laziness, half-heartedness, is the one who demonstrates their love for Christ with a missional love for others.

Now, again, the rest of this book will explore in further depth the temptation the church faces and the power to conquer, but even now we must begin to search our hearts and to see how the words to the Ephesians are words spoken by our Lord to us today. You may be the most theologically astute person, you may have read your Bible cover to cover 100 times, you may be involved here, you check all the boxes, but is your day-to-day life a testimony that points to your overwhelming love for Christ. Do you live on mission, to make Christ known in your words and deeds? Frankly, it's clear Jesus speaks these words to you and me today; may we overcome, may we conquer.

### **3. Faithfully follows in the suffering steps of the Crucified One 2:8-11**

Now a moment ago I outlined the general structure of each of these letters. I said 'general' because this next letter to Smyrna is an exception to that rule. It is simply a word of encouragement with no accompanying rebuke. Instead we read, **"Thus says the First and the**

Last, the one who was dead and came to life,” (Revelation 2:8). Right, Jesus’ words of encouragement are rooted in the truth of His deity, His atoning death, and His resurrection. I think Gordon Fee puts it well when he says, “Whatever else a suffering church may need to hear, at the heart of things is the reality of Christ’s resurrection,” (Gordon Fee).<sup>6</sup> Christ, and Christ alone, is all we need.

Now, the exact details of the Smyrnans suffering is unclear but it is likely that Jews in Smyrna were seeking to bring trouble on Christians by disavowing them as not a Jewish sect, thereby requiring them to participate in emperor worship. You see, the Jewish religion enjoyed a unique place and special privileges allowing them to practice their own faith and not participate in Roman civil religion. The early church, however, and correctly so, viewed themselves as the fulfillment of the Jewish religion, that all that had been instituted and promised in the Hebrew Bible had now been fulfilled in Jesus. Thus, it seems, part of the Jewish persecution of the church in Smyrna was to strain the relationship between the church and local Roman authorities.

Now, admittedly, in our world today of ‘tolerant speech’ the phrase “synagogue of Satan” may seem a little much, but consider what Paul says of the Jews who had rejected Jesus, “In their case, the god of this age has blinded the minds of the unbelievers to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God,” (2 Corinthians 4:4). Paul’s point, and affirmed here, is that their rejection of Christ mean that they remained under the control of satanic deception. And so, we must be clear that this isn’t anti-Semitic or derogatory, but rather a statement of the spiritual condition of those of Jewish ethnicity who have rejected Israel’s Messiah.

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<sup>6</sup> Fee, *Revelation*, 30.

As a result of these attacks the church at Smyrna had become socially ostracized from civic life. They were unable to participate in economic life. They were struggling to make financial ends meet, all the while being verbally abused and slanders. Jesus warns them of imprisonment and even possible martyrdom to come. But to their physical poverty Jesus reminds them they are spiritually rich in Him. To their physical suffering and death Jesus reminds them they are spiritually alive in Him. It is clear that Satan attacks their physical welfare because ultimately, he wants to destroy their faith. But Jesus declares here what will be a repeated promise of encouragement throughout this book: Ultimately, one may lose one's life for the sake of Christ, but there is a far greater victory that awaits!

**The one who conquers faithfully follows in the suffering steps of the Crucified One.**

Suffering is a hard concept for us to understand and accept. Part of the reason is because of the heresy of the Prosperity Gospel which tried to assure Christians that God only wants you to be wealthy and healthy and if you have enough faith then that's what you'll be. Jesus clearly refutes this teaching, calling for faith to endure suffering. But I think more than that, we struggle to understand and embrace the reality of Christian suffering because it forces us to choose on this day which god we will serve.

What if following Jesus were to cost you your job? Your house? Your ability to make a living? What if it cost you your friends, your reputation? I'm sure we'd like to all sit here and say we'd stand by Christ but we don't know. I go back to the question we asked of Ephesus, what does our present lifestyle and history say? Right? If we're presently committing ourselves entirely to our income, our social groups, if we're presently committing all our time to our kids' activities, if we're giving ourselves to entertainment or emotion-numbing drugs, if our present life doesn't show a vigorous commitment to Christ then it only follows that were following

Christ to become costly that we would fall away. How many have just drifted away this past year when suddenly worshiping Jesus wasn't as convenient as it used to be. May we decide today to overcome; may we conquer.

#### **4. Resists accommodation in the face of pressure and temptation 2:12-17**

Now in Pergamum we have a bit of a blend between the circumstances in Ephesus and Smyrna. Jesus begins, "I know where you live—where Satan's throne is. Yet you are holding on to my name and did not deny your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness who was put to death among you, where Satan lives," (Revelation 2:13). You see, the city of Pergamum possessed the oldest temple to emperor worship in the Roman Empire, and so with that the city had become, frankly, a demonic stronghold.

No doubt, this will be one of the areas that you and I will struggle to truly comprehend as we journey through Revelation, that being the reality of the unseen realm. You see, I think most Christians can acknowledge the existence of demons and the possibility of their engagement with the material world. We read accounts of possession and the like in the New Testament and we believe them to be true. But you and I live our day-to-day lives in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century Western world relatively unaware of the unseen realm. In large part I think this is because Satan is smart and knows that he will have more success attacking the church and deceiving the lost through more subversive means than outright persecution or manifestations like we imagine from *The Exorcist* or some horror movie. No, it seems Roger Kint was right in *The Usual Suspects* that, "The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist."

And so, grasping the notion of a city being Satan's throne like we're told of Pergamum can seem quite odd to us. The notion of demonic strongholds where evil spiritual presence seems greater than in other places can seem a little antiquated. But we need to understand how such

things manifest themselves. You see the nature of demonic presence in Pergamum didn't correlate with insane supernatural occurrences like books flying across the room or children levitating in their sleep. No, as we see here in Revelation 2 demonic presence and activity resulted largely false religion, false teaching, and immorality.

Scripture characterizes Satan largely as a deceiver. People were so deceived by the demonic into worshiping idols and living accordingly that they hated the truth of the Gospel and those who held to it, which is why they persecuted the church so intensely. We read that at least one member of the Pergamumian church had been put to death for his faith. And so, the point is that these believers would have had ample reason to renounce Christ for the sake of their own physical welfare.

But they had not, Jesus says! They had borne persecution well. And yet, there were signs of them starting to allow false teachers. In other words, as the devil was seemingly unsuccessful in his overt attacks on the church, he was now trying a subtler form of attack by implanting false teachers among the church. The phrase, "the teaching of Balaam" (Revelation 2:14) is a reference to Numbers 25, suggesting that some within the church were trying to have it both ways. They were trying to follow Christ but also occasionally participate in pagan activities in order to 'keep the peace.' In other words, the biggest issues this church seemed to be facing was cultural accommodation. They've rebuffed violent trials but have let down their guard in other areas.

Thus, Jesus says, "Repent!" (Revelation 2:16) If they don't recognize these false doctrines now and deal with them then He, Himself, will come with the sword of His mouth, meaning He will purify His church. It's like Jesus telling them, 'You may feel like you need to

do this to keep the peace, to make a living, or to stay liked by your neighbors, but I promise you a greater peace, a greater life, a greater prestige than you could ever find in this world.

## **Conclusion**

That's the message to these first three churches and that's the message to every Christian of every generation. Exalt Christ! Center yourselves on Him and everything else will take care of itself. Now, of course, we recognize the work we have as Christians in discerning how to apply our faith. In other words, I always get a little amused when someone says to me, 'We're a gospel only church,' or 'We just preach the cross.' Well, we all do, hopefully. So did the Ephesians. My point is that centering ourselves on Christ *involves* and *entails* doing the work of applying the cross into our circumstances and contexts, so we can't be naïve and pretend that all our issues which just work themselves out by themselves. No, it's in the work of seeing the world, ourselves, and our circumstances through the lens of Christ that brings clarity and resolution to how then we should live.

I hope you see this morning just how much the church needs to engage in honest introspection, to admit and to own our idols. If we can't do so, or if we refuse to do so, or if we get offended and take our ball and go home when someone else (like a pastor) points out our idols, if we can't do this work Jesus is clear that He'll do it for us. In many ways I believe the trials and strife we've been experiencing this last year is due to the fact that the church has chosen to do nothing for far too long. We've allowed all sorts of various idols creep into our "religion" and have dressed them up in choir robes to make them look acceptable.

And so, I simply want to challenge every single one of us to discern those things and places we actually prioritize over the risen Lord. Just look at the way He is portrayed in Revelation, look at who He is, and then ask, "Is He portrayed like that in my own life? Do I

regard Jesus as highly as the Bible does?" May we decide today to overcome. May we be more than conquerors.