

Being an Overcomer #2

Last time we talked about being overcomers, mostly from the book of 1 John, but the book of Revelation says a great deal about it in very specific terms, so we are going to start looking at chapters 2-3, 12:11, and 21:7-8.

Rev. 1:19-20 - Jesus appeared to John, and gave a revelation of His glory, of various matters dealing with seven specific churches in Asia, and of the great events that would take place in the last days, leading up to Jesus' return to judge the world and to usher in His eternal, heavenly kingdom. 1:19 is a miniature outline of the book – chapter one is “those things which thou hast seen”, chapters 2-3 are “the things which are”, and chapters 4-22 are “the things which shall be hereafter”.

Rev. 2-3 – contain “letters”, or messages from the glorified Christ Jesus to the seven churches of Asia. These were seven cities in what is now western Turkey, all within a 75 mile radius or so. There were obviously many more than seven churches around the world at that time, so why just seven, and these seven? Probably because it was God's intention to record the revelation for all time as a part of our Bible, and he knew that ANY church could find its similarities in at least one of the seven.

There have always been many interpretations of Revelation, but there are 3-4 basic ways to look at chapters 2 and 3. There is some validity in them all.

1. The letters are written to the 7 literal churches in those cities at the time of writing. This is obviously true, but there has to be more significance than that, or it would not have been preserved as Scripture for us.
2. The seven churches represent seven periods of church history. This may have an element of truth, and it is possible to see certain applications (e.g., that “we live in the days of the Laodicean church”), and yet there are a few difficulties:
 - a. Trying to identify when one period ends and another starts is a matter of opinion, admitting no satisfying resolution.
 - b. The churches at the time of writing were all existing at once, so it seems artificial to think of the seven as a sequential ordering of distinct ages or periods. We can probably agree that certain parts of church history seem to align more with one of the churches than with others.
 - c. Interpretations would also vary greatly depending on whether you are Catholic or Protestant, and the century in which you live (of course that is true of a great deal more than just Revelation).
3. The letters are written to apply to Christians in all these centuries. Whenever we live, we can take the warnings and promises of all 7 churches as applying to us.
4. In addition, we can consider the messages as they apply either to a local church, a whole denomination, or to us as individual believers.

What are the “seven stars” in Jesus' right hand? What are the “seven candlesticks” (really lampstands)? 1:20 gives the answer – the seven stars are “the angels of the seven churches”, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

But what are the “angels” of the churches? “Angel” means “messenger”. Many people consider them to be the pastors of the churches, others hold them to be real angels, in the normal sense of the word. Both views are defensible but both have difficulties. I tend toward the view that they are actual angels, because I don't see any where else in the book where a pastor is called an angel, and I don't believe that these seven churches only had single pastors for whole cities. See Ac. 20:17. In any case, I don't think it is critical to our current topic of overcoming.

Lampstands are for the giving of light, by burning oil. That light is firstly to the members of the church, as we are enlightened by the teaching of the Word and the illumination of the Holy Spirit. After that, the church itself becomes a light to the world around. We are to be like light shades – the world cannot look directly at God's light, but they can see it indirectly, as it shines through us. A lamp shade is not itself the light, but transmits the light. The light is Christ (see John 1).

Church #1: Ephesus – the Wearied Church

Jesus describes himself as “he that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand, who walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks”.

Commendations to the church:

1. He acknowledges their works, endurance, and labors for the Name of Christ, all done without fainting.
2. They would not bear them that are evil (in behavior or in doctrine)
3. They had the discernment and will to expose men who falsely claimed position or authority
4. They hated the deeds of the Nicolaitanes. This will be covered more fully in church #3 (Pergamos), but for now consider it to be the efforts of some to introduce an invalid power structure into the church, with an ungodly clergy/laity distinction.

Rebuke: 2:4 – “Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love.”

So Ephesus shows a church that is well-established and is doing all the right things. They are serving God faithfully. They are concerned with the moral and doctrinal purity of the church, and resist following deceivers. Yet they have allowed their service to become dry and rote. They have lost the zeal and fervency that they had when they were new believers in a new church. They would never deny the Lord, but their spiritual life has become just “ho-hum”.

Warning: 2:5 – “Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works: or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent.”

Why does it say to do the first works, if he already commended them for their unfainting labors? He is not talking about just serving God (they never stopped), but that they should do their works in the way that they used to do them. i.e., with enthusiasm and joy, motivated by love and thankfulness to their Savior.

The really sober warning is that if they did not respond, he would remove their lampstand. There are many individual Christians who have gotten so weary and dried up that they finally just abandon the faith and the light is gone out of their lives. But there are also whole churches (like Ephesus) that just fizzle out. Maybe they once had life, and God spoke to them through anointed ministry and even the gifts of the Spirit, but for some reason they left their first love and the life of the church became mere religious works. Then people start drifting away, and the pastors get discouraged. They may try various programs or “revivals” but to no avail – the lampstand has been removed!

Sometimes people realize that a church is dead, and so move on to some new church, where it happens again. Why? It may be that the second church is facing the same difficulties as the first, but it may be because the people who are leaving have the root problem in their own lives. They are just taking their spiritual deadness somewhere else, hoping that a change of scenery will pump some life back into their wreck of a spiritual life. For that kind of a person, the answer is not a new church but to get their own spiritual life in gear again. Then they may find some company, and together, find some light returning to the church that they were tempted to leave.

Promise to overcomers: “To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God.”

This isn’t talking about the earthly paradise of Eden, and that tree of lie, but the heavenly paradise that we read about in chapters 21 and 22. Do you want to be a part of that heavenly kingdom, the New Jerusalem? Then determine to overcome by maintaining your first love to the end.