

“You’ve Lost that Loving Feeling” (Revelation 2:1-7)

How many of you like to get mail? If the truth were told, all of us enjoy receiving mail...with the exception of bills. There is something exhilarating about receiving a special note or card from someone. When I was experiencing homesickness in college, I used to love going to the campus mailroom and checking my mailbox. Just the sight of a piece of mail brought a smile to my face.

Now most of us have email, which allows us to receive mail throughout the day. For many of us, checking our email is the highlight of our day! Be honest. When you’re feeling discouraged and depressed, the course of your day can be altered by an encouraging email. Mail can be a great thing!

What if Jesus Christ sent you and your church some mail? Would you be excited to read it? You bet you would! Well, Jesus has sent you some mail. In fact, He has written you seven different letters. They are addressed to **“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”**¹ The first of these seven letters is written to the church in Ephesus. Let’s read the contents of this letter.

1. The Commission (2:1a). **“To the angel of the church in Ephesus write.”** All seven churches are addressed **“to the angel of the church in.”** The term **“angel”**² refers to one of God’s angelic creatures. Some find it strange that angels are the recipients of these seven letters. Yet Eph 3:10 informs us that what is taking place in the church is for the benefit of teaching the angels.³

This particular letter is written **“to the angel of the church in Ephesus.”** The church in Ephesus was founded by the apostle Paul,⁴ the believers were discipled by Aquila and Priscilla, taught by Apollos,⁵ pastored by Timothy (1 Tim 1:3), and instructed by the apostle Paul. Either directly or indirectly, Ephesus had been the recipient of eight New Testament books: the gospel of John, Ephesians,⁶ 1 and 2 Timothy, 1, 2, and 3 John, and Revelation.⁷ Ephesus was an influential city in the early church.

2. The Character (2:1b). John records the words of **“The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand.”** This phrase is a reference to the sovereign authority and control of Jesus Christ.⁸ Jesus holds His angels in His right hand (i.e., the place of honor and power). This phrase about Jesus’ character and the others contained in the seven letters are all taken from John’s vision of the glorified Christ (Rev 1:12-20).

The phrase which completes this verse, **“The One who walks among the seven golden lampstands”** is a reference to the intimate presence of Christ. The word **“walks”** is a word of comfort and warning. It is a startling reminder that Jesus not only stands “in the middle of the lampstands” (see Rev 1:13), He also actively pursues His desire to have deep fellowship with us. This reminds us that Jesus loves us, cares for us, and has time for us. He is concerned with His church. Not just the church of China, Sudan, and India but even the church of America. Jesus loves His church.

The word **“walks”** is also equivalent to “exercise dominion over” (Lev 26:12). Jesus is saying that He is the One to whom the church is accountable. Jesus patrols the grounds of His churches and is on the spot when needed. What a sobering reality! Jesus is present with us: right here, right now. He is walking among us to comfort and to judge. Both of these realities ought to change the way we live.

3. The Commendation (2:2-3). Jesus is in the business of appraising His church and Jesus always commends His church first, if He can. Jesus commends the church in Ephesus with the words: **“I know”** (*oida*). In each message to the seven churches, Jesus states, **“I know.”**⁹ Since this **“I know”** statement is present in each of Jesus’ messages, we should sense the significance of these words. Not only does this statement point to Jesus’ omniscience, it also shows us His interest in all that we do and experience. He is the great Evaluator and one day He will examine our deeds (1 Cor 3:12-15; 2 Cor 5:9-10).¹⁰

What about this church did Jesus know? Jesus recognized their **“deeds, toil, and perseverance”** (2:2a). These three words build upon one another. The word **“deeds”** (*erga*) refers to any action, task, or service. The word **“toil”** (*kopos*) is a word that means “to labor to the point of weariness.” In other words, “deeds done all out”! This word stresses the depth or degree of their labor for the Lord. The final word **“perseverance”** (*hupomone*) refers to the capacity or ability to endure, to remain under pressure or pain, over the long haul. This word stressed the extent of their labor (see 1 Cor 15:58).¹¹

The Ephesian church was an extremely orthodox church. They were strong in both doctrine and the work of the ministry. In 2:2b, Jesus says, **“you cannot endure evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false.”** The church at Ephesus refused to compromise their moral or doctrinal purity.¹² Apostles may be understood here as almost equivalent to our modern term missionaries. The church had **“put to the test”** (cf. 1 John 4:1) these visiting ministers and their doctrinal claims and had found them to be false.¹³ They called a spade a spade. They could smell a heretic a mile off because they knew God’s Word.

It is interesting to note that the first four churches in this list of seven dealt with false teachers (2:2, 6, 9, 14-15, 20). This is why the Pastoral Epistles (1-2 Timothy and Titus) challenge pastors to “teach” their congregations. Ultimately, each one of us must know the truth so that we can protect our family and friends from unbiblical doctrine. How well do you think our church is doing in this area? As elders, pastors, small group leaders, and Sunday school teachers, are we guarding the flock from false teachers?

We are all responsible to “contend earnestly for the faith” (Jude 3). This can best be accomplished by systematically studying God’s Word. You don’t have to study up on all the major world religions and cults; you just need to read the truth! How does the FBI train its agents to recognize counterfeit bills? By having them study authentic bills so well that they immediately recognize a counterfeit. If you know God’s Word inside and out, you will be able to identify false teaching.

In 2:3, Jesus again declares, **“and you have perseverance and have endured for My names sake, and have not grown weary.”** Some 40 years had passed since this church was founded. Two generations had risen up in the history of this church. All the while Ephesus had remained faithful to Jesus Christ. At the core of their greatness was their dynamic ministry. This was a hard working group of believers, constantly serving Christ. Christianity was no spectator sport here. They didn’t come to church to be entertained. They were actively involved in the work of ministry.

But this does beg the question: Why does Jesus again commend their perseverance? The natural answer is perseverance is not something that is guaranteed in the life of a church or an individual believer. God is sovereign and He will accomplish His will in the life of every church and believer. Yet, in both cases, God holds individual believers responsible for their obedience to Him. In the case of an individual believer, while God does not guarantee perseverance, He does grant preservation. Yet Jesus expects every believer to persevere in his/her faith. But this requires diligence, labor, and faithfulness.

The Ephesian church is commended for their persistence and their purity, their diligence and their doctrine. On the surface, they appear to be a phenomenal church—the epitome of what every church should be.

4. The Correction (2:4-5). After praising their strengths, Jesus told the Ephesians in 2:4, **“But I have this against you.”** This is a frightening statement. Most of us don’t like when we know someone has something against us. It makes us uncomfortable. It disturbs us. But how would you feel if you knew that Jesus Christ had something against you? YIKES! This should prompt us to ask, “Jesus, do you have something against me? Have I grieved you?”

What was Jesus so upset about? The church had left their **“first love.”**¹⁴ This statement does not suggest that they no longer had any love for Christ at all.¹⁵ Rather, it means that the quality of their love for Him had weakened.¹⁶ The phrase **“first love”** holds two meanings: “as you loved me at first” and “my first love.” The first has to do with chronology; the second has to do with priority. These two meanings overlap and are complementary.

The Greek word translated **“left”** (*aphiemi*) means “to depart, leave alone, forsake, and neglect.” It can also be used of divorce,¹⁷ so the imagery here is very strong. When you lose your car keys, where are they? When you lose your sun glasses, where are they? If you think real hard about it, when you lose your car keys or your sunglasses, they’re right where you left them! And that’s the way it is with your first love for God. If you’ve lost it, guess where it is. It’s wherever you left it. Jesus says, go back and find it. Wherever it is, it’s still there because God hasn’t moved! He’s waiting for you to come back.

A couple was driving home from church. The wife was sitting in the front seat on the far right side. Her husband was in his usual place behind the steering wheel. Seemingly, a large gulf separated them. With lonely eyes, she looked at him and said, “Honey, do you remember when we first met, how close we used to sit to each other? You used to put your arm around me. What happened to those days?” With one hand firmly attached to the steering wheel, and the other resting on the empty seat between them, he said, “Well, I haven’t moved.” The distance was not because he had moved. A separation resulted because she had moved away. She had left her first love.

The Ephesians distanced themselves from their first love. They no longer loved the Lord Jesus as they did when they first came to Christ. They not only took their eyes off the Lord but they lost fellowship with Him. The principle is that regardless of how much of the Bible we may know, how much we serve Him, or how many past victories we have, we cannot walk with the Lord without loving Him. It is significant that of all the sins Jesus points out in these seven, the first sin He names is the one that grieves Him most: a loss of affection for Him. Our God is a jealous lover.

I remember attending my final Dean’s Chapel before graduating from Multnomah Bible College. The male Resident Director, Duncan Sprague, asked us, “Can you honestly say that you love Jesus Christ more today than you did when you first came to Multnomah?” This question haunted me. I thought long and hard about it. I immediately assumed I loved God more because I now knew Inductive Bible Study, Greek, Theology, and had studied through all 66 books of the Bible. Yet, I was flooded with memories from the summer before I enrolled at MBC. During those summer months, I prayerfully studied the Word on my knees with greater fervor and diligence. Now on the verge of graduating, I finally had to conclude that in many ways, I probably loved Jesus more before entering college. As a result, I’ve determined to do everything I know how to ensure that my love for Christ never leaves.

Ladies, imagine that your husband came home and said, “I don’t love you anymore. But nothing will change. I’ll still earn a living and pay the bills. We’ll still sit together and sleep together. I’ll still father our children. I just don’t love you anymore. Would that be good enough for you? No way. You would be devastated. Yet we say that to the Lord. “Jesus, I don’t love You like I once did. But I’ll still come to church. I’ll still serve You. I’ll still witness for You. I just don’t love You.

That’s not good enough for Jesus either! He wants a relationship, not a performance. Jesus says, “You’ve lost that loving feeling.” Is this serious? Absolutely: Jesus said that the greatest commandment is to love God (Matt 22:37-39). We must love Him with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength. If we fail to love Him, we disobey the greatest commandment. It doesn’t matter what else we obey, if we fail to keep the highest commandment. We have struck out! Leaving our first love is the greatest sin!

If our love for Christ is cold, it doesn't matter how faithfully we serve Him; or how rightly we believe; or how strongly we stand. If you miss first base, it doesn't matter how far you hit the ball, or how many bases you touch. If you miss first base, you're out! O-U-T! If you leave your first love, you're out of His favor.¹⁸ Service and orthodoxy are important but Jesus Christ wants our love too. "Beware of anything that competes with loyalty to Jesus Christ. The greatest competitor of devotion to Jesus is service for him."¹⁹ Therefore, we must always be wary of drying up.

- **Spend time worshipping the Lord.** Like the Ephesian Christians, if you are strong in the Scriptures, you may need to practice the presence of God by singing to Him. Since you'll be doing this for all eternity, it would be wise to begin to develop this discipline this side of eternity.
- **Maximize time with godly people.** Find people who are on fire for God and get with them so that they can inspire you and rub off on you. Don't allow negative people to pull you down. Pretty soon, you'll find yourself starting to think like them. Hang with those who are contagious for Christ.
- **Repent from the pride of busyness.** Some people think if they are doing a lot, they'll look busy, and if they look busy, they'll be valuable. Don't stay busy just for busyness' sake. Get away for the purpose of cultivating your love relationship with Christ in prayer and the Word. Remember, God never meant for your duty for Him to replace your love for Him. Duty and devotion must always go hand in hand.
- **Set an appointment with God.** It's easy to say "no" to God on a daily basis. We often presume that He's the One who will understand if we skip our time with Him. He's a gentleman and won't necessarily become irritated with you. Yet, God is not to be slighted—He's a jealous lover! Why not schedule an appointment with God in your day timer or palm pilot. Then see if you can say no to "God" when you see His name on your calendar.

Three Steps to Return to Your First Love (2:5): "Therefore remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place—unless you repent."

Step 1: Remember. Jesus says, "Therefore remember from where you have fallen." The word "therefore" refers back to a loss of love for the Lord Jesus (2:4). They fell from a deep love for the Lord. They fell from fellowship with Him. They fell from all heart to all head. They lost warm love for the Lord. The Greek word translated "fallen"²⁰ means that they were in a state of spiritual decline. This was more than an occasional slip. Jesus exhorts the Ephesians to "remember" from where they have fallen. This is critical. If we remember the love we initially had for God's Word, prayer, fellowship, and witnessing, we will be inspired to action.

Step 2: Repent. The second step to return to your first love is to "repent." The English word "repent" conveys the idea of sorrow or contrition. The Greek word does not carry that idea; it is more a total change of thought and behavior. It conveys both ideas of attitude and behavior depending on the context. "Repent" means to change one's thinking. It is clearly connected with changed behavior, as seen in the following phrase "and do the deeds you did at first."

In high school, I used to wear pink shirts. Don't ask me why. I just liked pink at that time. I would often say, "Real men can wear pink" (modestly implying that I was a "real man"). Over the course of time, I changed my mind regarding my pink preference. This led me to no longer purchase pink shirts. In this case, the meaning of "repent" is clear: change your attitude toward your love for Christ (2:4). Reverse your lackluster love into a burning love for the Lord Jesus. Think about the depth of love you have for Him. Change your apathetic love to an appreciating love for Him.

Step 3: Redo. Jesus urges the Ephesians to **“do the deeds you did at first.”** The context indicates that by first works Jesus wants this church to get back to their “first love” for Him, the love they had when they first became Christians (2:4). James 4:8 expresses this thought in his epistle when he writes, “Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.”

If the church does not remember, repent, and redo, Jesus gives an “or else” warning...**“or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place—unless you repent.”** Jesus is not afraid to give an “or else” to His church. He states that He will come in judgment to discipline His church for having a cold heart toward Him. Jesus always disciplines those He loves (Heb 12:4-11; 1 Pet 4:17). He would not love His church if He did not discipline it. To discipline is to care about the people you discipline. In this case this is a collective discipline of the entire church.

Jesus says that He will **“remove”**²¹ the church from a sphere of effectiveness or possibly out of existence totally. The removal of the lampstand is clearly figurative language. Does it refer to eternal damnation? Absolutely not! Nothing in the context supports this. Rather, what is in view is temporal in nature. If the church did not repent the Lord would remove the church’s ability to bear witness for Him.²² When this occurs, the light of the church goes out and results in the church no longer having an impact on its neighborhood or its world.

This eventually happened to the church in Ephesus when Islam invaded Turkey and wiped out Christianity in Ephesus. There is no church at Ephesus today, nor much of one in the modern city of Kushadesi, nearby. The country of Turkey, where all seven of these churches were located, is more than 98% Muslim today, a Mecca of false religion and a vast spiritual desert.

What is true in Turkey is also true elsewhere. Thousands of churches disappear every year throughout the world. Christ has removed many, many lampstands over the centuries. This is serious—no love, no light! The church that loses its love will soon lose its light, no matter how doctrinally sound it may be.

Jesus returns with another word of praise: **“Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate”** (2:6). Though they had left their first love they had not left their former hatred for evil. Jesus concludes by telling them to remain in the battle against sin. They are to remain true to the faith and resist false teaching. Note how sensitive Jesus’ heart is toward His church. He guards against deflating them by concluding with a note of praise. **“You hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.”** In essence, Jesus is saying, “We’re on the same team. We are a lot alike. We both hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans. Keep at it!”

While we know next to nothing about their doctrine, we can be more certain of their practices.²³ The key is the practices linked with Balaam (2:14-15) and Jezebel (2:20-23). The two sins found in both are idolatry and immorality.²⁴ The Nicolaitans were a sect of loose-living believers who had perverted and compromised the faith and were bad witnesses to the truth of the Gospel. They probably justified themselves with arguments about being “saved by grace” while they flagrantly lived in sin. The church at Ephesus took a stand against these men and their teachings and was commended for doing so.

It is immediately worth noting that the Ephesian church hates **“the deeds”** of the Nicolaitans. This is important. They don’t hate the individuals themselves but their wicked behavior. We do not often think of Jesus as hating someone. This is because we characterize Him as a glorified wimp. Obviously, Jesus is neither prissy nor weak. Jesus hates that which hurts. If we love people then we appreciate principles that help people. If we love passionately then we must hate passionately the principles that hurt people. We must distinguish between hating a concept and hating a person. The concept of the Nicolaitans was unrestrained indulgence. Jesus hates unrestrained indulgence because He knows that it will hurt people.

True love for the Lord involves hate. Our society does not hesitate to lower its standards. It does not hesitate to indulge in unvarnished sin. Society has no sense of shame or rebuke of such sin. Christians move in this society. If we buy into the values of our society we compromise Christ and Christianity. Christians must differentiate themselves from this society and its values. It is not enough to dislike the sins of society. We must “hate” those sins. We hate that which distorts and counterfeits the truth.

This principle flies in the face of the central value of North American society—tolerance. Jesus bears no compromise with the values of this world. Our society is rigorously non-judgmental but Jesus asserts that we are to be judgmental [not in the sense of judging motives]. “Live-and-let-live” is no biblical value. We all make judgments; we are just afraid to admit that we do. Jesus calls for open criticism of the behavior of this world. Even more, He calls for us to “hate” the values of this world. How is your “hate” doing? Are you exercising it?

5. The call (2:7a). Jesus says, “**He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.**”²⁵ Note the change from an appeal to the individual, “**he who has an ear,**” to the plural, “**what the Spirit says to the churches.**” This change broadens the appeal of each message to all the churches because the messages are representative and applicable to all of us. Here, the Spirit of God, who is the Spirit of truth and the author and teacher of Scripture, is calling on us to evaluate our openness to respond to the things that need to be learned and applied in these messages. In other words, He is saying, “It is not enough to have good intentions. You must follow through!” To “**hear what the Spirit says**” means to really listen and respond to what the Spirit says.²⁶

6. The Challenge (2:7b). Jesus declares, “**To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God.**” Before we go any further we must determine who is this one who “**overcomes.**” Many assume that the overcomer is a reference to all Christians.²⁷ Interpreters who hold this view appeal to 1 John 2:13; 4:4; and 5:4-5 where John referred to his readers as overcomers. However, in 1 John 2:13 and 4:4, John said his readers had overcome the world, not that all Christians are overcomers. In 1 John 5:4-5, he wrote that only believers in Christ *can* overcome the world, not that every believer in Christ *does* overcome the world. In this context, it is clear that John is using this term differently. In each of the seven usages, there is a conditional aspect attached to overcoming.

In this context, the one who overcomes by maintaining his first love is able to “**eat of the tree of life.**” Eating with someone implies fellowship; the one who overcomes, then, will fellowship with his Savior. It refers to experiencing the joy of reward in heaven for overcoming in spiritual battles and remaining intimate with Christ through it all. The term “**tree of life**” is mentioned 11 times in three books of the Bible. The first time is in Genesis 2:9 where we are told that God planted in the garden of Eden, the Tree of Life, next to the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. After they sinned by eating from the second tree, Adam and Eve were banished from the Tree of Life, lest they live forever in their fallen state. The term is used in a figurative sense in the book of Proverbs.²⁸ But in Revelation 22:2, the reference seems to revert to a literal tree,²⁹ or better, a number of trees,³⁰ in the New Jerusalem, bearing 12 crops of fruit, one each month, bringing healing to the nations.

The Tree of Life was in the garden of Eden, the original Paradise. It was where Adam was supposed to enjoy intimacy with God. Adam, in his unfallen state, had access to this tree but when he fell God kept him from it (Gen 1:26-28; 3:22). In the future, overcomers will have access to it again (cf. Rev 22:14). God is going to provide the overcomers with intimate fellowship with Christ in a place called the “**Paradise of God.**” “**Paradise**” is a Persian word meaning “a pleasure park, or garden.” The Greek Old Testament uses it to translate the garden of Eden in Genesis 2:8-10. To the oriental mind it meant the sum of blessedness. Christ, as the “last Adam,” is the restorer of Paradise lost (Rev 22:1-4, and 14).

There is a connection between the Tree of Life and man's rule over the earth. The Tree of Life is reserved for overcomers who will rule and reign as co-heirs with Christ; and viewing Adam's position in the Genesis account—created to rule and reign, in possession of life, with the fruit of the tree at his disposal—the same would hold true. The fruit of this tree was in Genesis, and will be in Revelation, a provision for the rulers in the kingdom.

Are you an overcomer? In summary, an overcomer is a Christian who does not lose devotion to the Savior while carrying out duty for the Savior.

In 1964, Coach Bill Bowerman from the University of Oregon, and one of his former students, Phil Knight, formed a company called Blue Ribbon Sports. Eight years later, with Knight at the helm as President and CEO, Blue Ribbon Sports became Nike, Inc., named after the Greek goddess of victory. The Nike swoosh has come to symbolize victory. For Nike, doing one's best is victory. The word "overcomes" is translated from the Greek verb *nikao*, the noun form of the word *nike*. The verb and noun refer to winning, being victorious, and overcoming an opponent.

The same should be true of every Christian; we are winners if we do our best for Jesus Christ. Whenever you see the Nike name or emblem, I hope you will call to mind its meaning—overcomer.³¹ May this remind you to ensure that Christ is your first love so that you will persevere as an overcomer.

ADDENDUM: THE SEVEN CHURCHES OF REVELATION 2-3

The apostle John wrote seven letters to seven historical churches. Each dealt with actual conditions of church life in John's day. Yet, while these letters may be historic, they are nonetheless contemporary commentaries on the state of today's church. Any reader of Revelation 2-3 immediately notices the prophetic similarities between the church of the first century and the church of the 21st century. This has led some interpreters to suggest that these seven churches are representative of the whole of church history. The following is an example:

1. Message to Ephesus (2:1-7) – The Early Church (33-100 AD)
2. Message to Smyrna (2:8-11) – The Persecuted Church (100-313 AD)
3. Message to Pergamum (2:12-17) – The State Church (313-800 AD)
4. Message to Thyatira (2:18-29) – The Immoral Church (800-1290 AD)
5. Message to Sardis (3:1-6) – The Dead Church (1000-1517 AD)
6. Message to Philadelphia (3:7-13) – The Revived Church (1517-1860 AD)
7. Message to Laodicea (3:14-22) – The Materialistic Church (1860-Present)

Although this interpretation is indeed interesting, it has several weaknesses. First, there has never been any consensus on which church represents which period in church history. Second, this prophetic scheme doesn't fit every category of church history in every period. Third, this view is very subjective, making it rather unlikely even as a secondary interpretation. Fourth, though the Bible teaches imminence (i.e., Christ could return at any moment), we really do not know when Christ is returning. Therefore, the church at Laodicea may not characterize the church when Christ returns. Finally, while this view may characterize the history of our country, it does not necessarily hold true for the rest of the world.

Fast Facts

1. The seven churches did exist in John's day in Asia Minor (what is now Turkey). "Seven" is the number of completeness, perfection, and fulfillment. These seven churches perfectly represent the strengths and weaknesses that have been and will be characteristic of various churches throughout history.
2. The warnings and exhortations given to the above churches apply to us today. Though each letter is written to a specific church, all seven letters close with the words, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." It is important to note, the word "churches" (*ekklesiáis*) is plural. John is writing for all who will listen!

The Literary Structure

1. The commission ("To the angel of the church in...")
2. The character (Christ's self-description in Rev 1:12-20)
3. The commendation (Laodicea lacks this)
4. The correction (Smyrna and Philadelphia lack this)
5. The call ("He who has an ear, let him hear...")
6. The challenge ("To him who overcomes...")

Addendum: This sermon series will not delve into extra biblical sources, historical research, or archeological findings. Although these sciences can be of great importance (and can add considerable pizzazz to a sermon), they are not necessary to a proper understanding of a given passage. It is also difficult to discern fact from fiction when consulting extra-biblical tools. Our study of the seven churches will attempt to focus on what we *can* know from the biblical text itself.

ADDENDUM: THE OVERCOMER PROMISES IN REVELATION 2-3

The identity of the “overcomer” has troubled Bible students throughout church history (Rev 2:7; 11, 17, 26-28; 3:5, 12, 21). This has led to four views. View #1: The one who fails to overcome loses his/her salvation (Rev 2:11; 3:5). This view must be dismissed because it contradicts the clear teaching of Scripture (e.g., John 5:24; 10:28-29; Rom 8:38-39; Eph 2:8-9). Paul also writes to the believers at Thessalonica: “whether we wake or sleep [i.e., whether we are morally alert or spiritually slothful], we should live together with Him” (1 Thess 5:10). This unconditional promise further solidifies the believer’s security.

View #2: The overcomer is equivalent to a special name for believers because of the ultimate triumph of their faith. According to this view all “genuine” believers persevere and overcome the world by living godly and obedient lives (1 John 5:5; Rev 21:7). Overcoming is equivalent to faithfulness or obedience, which proves the genuineness of salvation. Unfortunately, the Bible does not guarantee that all believers will live victorious, holy lives. On the contrary, it is sadly possible for believers to backslide terribly and to remain in that backslidden state until death (1 Cor 11:29-32; Jas 5:19-20; and 1 John 5:16). Fuller says it well, “A command that everyone keeps is superfluous, and a reward that everyone receives is nonsense.” See J. William Fuller, “I Will Not Erase His Name From The Book of Life: Revelation 3:5,” *Journal of Evangelical Society* 26:3 (Sept 1983), 299.

View #3: The overcomer is a title for all believers because of initial faith in Christ. According to this view, all believers become overcomers the moment they believe in Jesus Christ (1 John 2:13; 4:4; 5:4-5). Faith, not faithfulness is the primary focus point in this position. However, in 1 John 2:13 and 4:4, John wrote that his readers had overcome the world, not that all Christians are overcomers. In 1 John 5:4-5, he wrote that only believers in Christ *can* overcome the world, not that every believer in Christ *does* overcome the world. Moreover, the letters in Revelation 2 and 3 present very different contexts than that of 1 John 5. In each of the seven usages, there is a conditional aspect attached to overcoming (esp. 2:26).

View #4: The overcomer refers to faithful believers rewarded for their perseverance. According to this view, the promises of rewards are given to believers to encourage them to overcome trials through faithfulness (Luke 19:11-26; Rom 14:10-12; 1 Cor 3:11-15; 9:27; 2 Cor 5:10). The word translated “overcome” (*nikao*) means “to be victorious in a contest or conflict.” Hence, “overcomers” are conquerors or victors. The context of Revelation 2-3 restricts the meaning of the overcomer from all believers (“them”) to a faithful believer (“he”) who overcomes specific conflicts (see John 16:33). The primary weakness with this view is that some of the rewards can be difficult to interpret as something other than salvation. Nonetheless, this view is the most convincing and will be presented throughout this series.

Overcomer Promises

1. To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God (2:7).
2. He who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death (2:11).
3. To him who overcomes, to him I will give *some* of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it (2:17).
4. He who overcomes, and he who keeps my deeds until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations; and he shall rule them with a rod of iron, as the vessels of the potter are broken to pieces, as I also have received *authority* from my father; and I will give him the morning star (2:26-28).
5. He who overcomes will thus be clothed in white garments; and I will not erase his name from the book of life, and I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels (3:5).
6. He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he will not go out from it anymore; and I will write on him the name of My God, and the name of the city of My God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God, and My new name (3:12).

7. 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).

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Notes

¹ Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22.

² Other views include (1) human messengers i.e., pastor/teachers or elders; (2) human delegates; (3) a personification of the prevailing spirit of the church.

³ This also explains why elsewhere angels are looking on with such interest at what God is doing in His church (1 Cor 11:10; cf. 1 Pet 1:12).

⁴ He stayed in Ephesus longer than any other city (Acts 20:31). Paul had evangelized it and used it as a base of operations for at least three years (Acts 18:19-21; 19; 1 Cor 16:8). He was so successful in his ministry there that his ministry turned the city upside down (Acts 19:11-41). The silversmiths launched a riot because they lost their business of making shrines of Artemis.

⁵ See Acts 18:18-26.

⁶ Paul wrote the book of the Bible to the Ephesians fifteen years after he founded the church there.

⁷ Likewise, Paul was in Ephesus when he wrote 1 Corinthians.

⁸ The word “holds” (*krateo*) means, “to be strong, mighty, to prevail.” When it comes to the church, Jesus is strong. He holds sway over and is sovereign over the church. He is Commander in Chief.

⁹ To five of the seven churches, Jesus says, “I know your deeds” (2:2, 19; 3:1, 8, 15). To the church of Smyrna, Jesus says, “I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the blasphemy. . .” (2:9). To the church of Pergamum, Jesus says, “I know where you dwell. . .” (2:13).

¹⁰ Do you live in the knowledge that Christ is always with you—reading your every thought, perceiving your every motive, hearing your every word, and watching your every action? Do you rely on Him, rest in Him, and respond to Him in obedience to His Word? Do you realize that one day you will have to give an answer to Him for the way that you have lived?

¹¹ It is interesting to note what Jesus thinks is important. What we deem important may not be the same as what He thinks is important. Jesus commends the church for hard work. Many people today do not value a healthy work ethic, but denounce it as unworthy of a “balanced” Christian. However, the Bible never advocates a “balanced” life in the sense of being lazy or compromising our devotion to God. It declares the importance of a “sober” life, a dedicated life and a life yielded to God. Relying on His grace and strength, we serve Him with our whole heart.

¹² On his last visit to Ephesus, about forty years before the writing of Revelation, Paul addressed the problem of false teachers. He called the elders throughout Ephesus to come to a meeting in Miletus. In his farewell message, he challenged them with some important issues (Acts 20:29-31).

¹³ The false teachers undoubtedly claimed to be functional apostles (cf. 2 Cor 11:13) rather than official apostles (Acts 1:15-26).

¹⁴ In the Greek, the phrase “your first love” precedes the phrase “you have left” making the first phrase very emphatic.

¹⁵ A generation earlier, the church at Ephesus was commended for its love (Eph 1:15, 16; 6:24). They became more task oriented than person oriented.

¹⁶ Some commentators understand the phrase “first love” as a “failure to maintain the commitment once made to help and serve one another” (i.e., a lack of love for fellow believers). See J. Ramsey Michaels, *Revelation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), 71.

¹⁷ See Louw & Nida, Electronic Ed.

¹⁸ Lawson, *Final Call*, 82-83.

¹⁹ Preaching Today Citation: Oswald Chambers, *Leadership*, Vol. 4, no. 3.

²⁰ Gk. *peptokas*: perfect active indicative from *pipto*.

²¹ The word “remove” (*kineo*) means to set in motion, to move. We get our English words “kinetic” and “cinema” from this Greek word.

²² Five of the seven churches must repent if they are to be counted among those who overcome. See Rev 2:5 (Ephesus); 2:16 (Pergamum); 2:21–22 (Thyatira); 3:3 (Sardis); 3:19 (Laodicea).

²³ Scholars differ on their understanding of this group. Some think they were the followers of Nicolas according to early church Fathers (cf. Acts 6:5). Since their heresy seems to be associated with the doctrine of Balaam in Rev 2:14-15, some believe this was an antinomian sect that advocated license in matters of Christian conduct, including free love.

²⁴ Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation: ECNT* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 120.

²⁵ See Matt 11:15; Mark 4:9, 23; Luke 8:8; 14:35; cf. Matt 24:15; Mark 8:18.

²⁶ “He who has an ear (This is a figure of speech where “ears” are put for the “willingness to obey”), let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches...” This is normally the introduction of an Old Testament prophetic judgment oracle.

²⁷ Some argue that the seven letters are written to churches that have a mixture of both Christians and non-Christians. However, in a biblical sense churches never contain unbelievers. Churches are not buildings or social gatherings. Churches are assemblies of believers. Since the Lord was writing to churches, He was writing exclusively to believers. The word faith only occurs twice in these letters (Rev 2:13, 19) and in both cases it is affirming the fact that the readers already have faith, not calling them to believe. Surely if these seven letters were addressed to unbelievers, we would find repeated calls to trust in Christ. Instead, we find none.

²⁸ The Tree of Life appears four times in the book of Proverbs and its use there helps us understand its presence in Genesis and Revelation. Solomon referred to wisdom (Prov 3:18), righteousness (Prov 11:30), satisfied hope (Prov 13:12), and controlled speech (Prov 15:4) as a tree of life. These are all the fruits that would have provided Adam and will provide the overcomers with what they will need to rule effectively in the millennial kingdom and beyond.

²⁹ In the book of Rev, the Tree of Life is literal. It is not just a symbol for eternal life or for the person of Christ. In Rev 21:1-22:5, John is describing the eternal state, which includes the new heaven and the new earth with the New Jerusalem, a literal place with some 25 verses devoted to its description. It is not a symbol. The Tree of Life in Eden and the Tree of Life in the New Jerusalem (Rev 22:2, 14, 19) appear to be literal trees.

³⁰ It is probably not just one tree, but a collective term referring to a whole row of trees that exist between the river and the avenue described in Rev 22. This is all a part of the beautiful park or paradise of God.

³¹ See Robert N. Wilkin, *The Road to Reward* (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2003), 57-58.