

Churches of Revelation: Conclusion
Revelation 2-3
ABC 11/14/21

Over the past several weeks we've examined the 7 churches of Revelation & looked at a church that was so strict in their doctrine that they forgot to love (Ephesus) & another so focused on loving that they neglected teaching sound doctrine (Thyatira). We've seen a church that was just going through the motions with little spiritual life (Sardis), & the church of Laodicea, whose members were wealthy & self-confident about their standing before God, but were disgusting to Him. We've also seen churches like Smyrna & Philadelphia, who were considered to be weak & helpless, but were true followers of Jesus allowing His strength to shine in their weakness. These 7 churches have given us tremendous insight into what Jesus expects of His church today. We must examine our own hearts & motives, striving to become the kind of church that He expects us to be. After all, this is His church & He alone has the right to judge whether or not our deeds are pleasing to Him. As we know, no church is perfect. There's always room for improvement. Every church & every Christian needs to repent of some sin or find some area where God wants you to grow. God loves you the way you are but He doesn't want you to stay that way. Therefore, the question I pose today is this: *How does all this apply to you & to our church?* As we've seen, these letters apply directly to individuals & churches today. The observations & counsel given to each church didn't come from human wisdom but by divine inspiration as they come from Jesus Himself & He plainly states what the church is to be & do & also what the church isn't to be & isn't to do. This isn't to be theoretical to any one of us. It's to be practical. Because we know what Jesus thinks about His church we need to apply that to ourselves on the personal level & together on the corporate level. What is Jesus saying to you through these letters? What is Jesus saying to us through these letters? God has given us the things He commends the church for & those that He condemns. Taken together they serve as a plumb-line to measure & compare ourselves against the perfect standards that Jesus has for His bride, the church. Jesus loves His people enough to not only comfort them but also to confront them. He loves His people enough to convict, cleanse, & challenge them with warnings of judgment. Whether in the 1st century or 21st century, the church is in a battle on a

daily basis with sin, evil, & suffering. As followers of Jesus, you face temptation every day to turn from Him, to compromise with the world, to trust in yourself, & give in to sin. We're in a battle that's being waged in our lives & in our church which is part of a much bigger battle between the Kingdom of God & the kingdom of Satan. In Rev 2-3 we see Jesus walking among these churches in the midst of battle & He's speaking to them & calling them to persevere, to walk with purity in a world of sin, to live with passion, & to proclaim the gospel courageously. Jesus comes to His church & speaks clearly about their spiritual condition, encourages them, comforts them when they're enduring & trusting Him, & calls them out when they're compromising & their faith is waning & warns them not to fall away. It's my prayer that we'd be comforted & strengthened where we need comfort & strength. At the same time, I'm praying we'd be convicted where necessary & that Jesus would allow us to know that He is King & Lord & Savior & Judge & He's coming soon & will bring reward & judgment.

1. The Author of all these letters is Jesus. Let me just read how He introduces Himself:

The One who holds the 7 stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the 7 golden lampstands... The 1st & the last, who was dead, & has come to life... The One who has the sharp 2-edged sword... The Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, & His feet are like burnished bronze... He who has the 7 Spirits of God & the 7 stars... He who is holy, who is true, who has the key of David, who opens & no one will shut, & who shuts & no one opens... The Amen, the faithful & true Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God (2:1, 8, 12, 18, 3:1, 7, 14).

That is the One who writes all these letters. What does this tell us about our Savior? Many things, but let's look at just 4.

A. Jesus Knows Us Truly. Many of these letters begin with Jesus saying, **I know your deeds, I know you better than you know yourselves.** The picture is clear: Jesus knows His church better than we know ourselves. Jesus says to the church in Sardis, **I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead (3:1).** That's a frightening verse. Is it possible for a church to have all the signs of life yet when Jesus looks at it He says, **you are dead?** Yes, & that's scary. There's no room for hypocrisy when Jesus knows us truly. That's why we read 7x, **He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.** Jesus is speaking to each of us. He's showing us our blind spots & we need Him to do that. We need Jesus to show us where we're fooling ourselves.

We're all prone to spiritual self-deception, to overestimate our spiritual condition & think we're fine when we're far from it. That's a dangerous thing. Jesus knows us truly. We must listen to Him.

B. Jesus Loves Us Deeply What Jesus is doing in these letters is caring for His churches because He loves us. He's calling His church away from sin & destruction. To Laodicea, for whom He has nothing good to say & wants to vomit out of His mouth, He says, **Those whom I love, I reprove & discipline** (3:19). When your 3-year-old runs into the street it's a loving thing to yell sternly & strongly to stop them & impress upon them not to do it again. Jesus is lovingly speaking to those who are wavering in their faith & walking into sin & He sternly & strongly speaks to them because He loves them. He holds out hope even to a church that nauseates Him. He says, *Repent & we'll have a meal together* (3:21). The reason He's speaking to these churches is to hold out hope to them. Grasp that truth. None of us are beyond the hope of Jesus. No matter what your past, no matter what your present, you aren't beyond the hope of Jesus. He loves you deeply. It's a good thing that the One who knows us truly loves us deeply.

C. Jesus Guards Us Zealously Jesus protects, provides for, & preserves His church. These letters are a wonderful gift He's given us. You know you battle with sin but we have Jesus' counsel to us in this fight. He's present among us, He'll protect us, & preserve us to the end. He's guarding us & pulling us back & keeping us from wandering & wavering in our faith & encouraging us to press on.

D. Jesus Uses Us Purposefully He not only wants to sustain & strengthen us in the battle, He wants to use us in the battle. Why? So that others might know of His mercy & grace & come to know that the One who died on the cross & rose from the grave is the only One who can save us, keep us, & use us. Jesus' purpose isn't to just keep us in His kingdom. His purpose is to use us to advance His kingdom. Based on these truths (Jesus knows us truly, loves us deeply, guards us zealously, & uses us purposefully), let's think how Jesus talked to His church here. He addresses specific things in each of these 7 letters but don't forget that the whole book would be sent to all these churches. The church of Ephesus didn't just get Rev 2:1-7. They also heard what Jesus said to Smyrna,

Pergamum, Thyatira & so on. Jesus is addressing specific situations but also speaking to all of His churches then & today.

2. How did Jesus commend His church? He does so in 4 primary ways: **A.** He commends His church for their **perseverance**. This concept of **perseverance** or patient endurance is emphasized. Writing to the church of Ephesus, Jesus says, **I know your deeds & your toil & perseverance**. Then in vs 3, **you have perseverance & have endured**. The idea is that the church is enduring even while being persecuted. They're holding firm in the midst of struggle. Then you get to Thyatira. Jesus says to them, **I know your deeds, & your love & faith & service & what? Perseverance (2:19)**. Jesus says to the church of Philadelphia, **Because you have kept the word of My perseverance...** (3:10). Let that stick in your mind, **patient endurance & faithful perseverance**. This is what Jesus is commending them for in the midst of battle, enduring with patience. **Perseverance** in Ephesus showed in that they didn't tolerate evil or heretical teachers. They hated false teaching & worked hard to keep it from infiltrating their church. They tested their teachers to make sure what they were teaching was true & faithful to God's Word. They didn't grow weary in guarding the church from falsehood. Jesus commends them for their **perseverance** in guarding the church.

B. Jesus commends His church not just for faithful perseverance but also for the faithful proclamation His name. At Pergamum they're living in the middle of what Jesus called **Satan's throne** & Antipas is killed for faithfully proclaiming the gospel. To Philadelphia Jesus said, **I have put before you an open door which no one can shut (3:8)**. The church in Philadelphia had walked through a door to His kingdom personally & were leading others through as well. Opportunity was there & they walked through proclaiming Christ, & He commends them for this. It wasn't popular nor easy to proclaim Jesus in any of these cities. There was governmental opposition from Rome for Christians who wouldn't participate in the worship of Caesar. There was economic opposition. The church in Smyrna was impoverished because of the proclamation of the name of Christ & their perseverance in His Word. It was economically & socially advantageous to fit in with society. But the followers of Jesus who persevered & proclaimed His name couldn't do that. This faithful perseverance & proclamation would lead to economic deprivation & social ostracism. Jesus says

slander will come against Christians in places like Smyrna (2:9) for holding fast to God's truth & proclaiming God's Son, Jesus as the Messiah. It's becoming more common in our culture for Christians who believe the Bible & who proclaim the gospel as the only way to salvation, to not only be labeled *intolerant*, but also as, *dangerous & evil*. Any of you science fiction fans? Have you read *Dune* by Frank Herbert? It was written in 1965 & is considered the best piece of science fiction ever written. A new movie of it just came out & I realized it had been over 40 years since I read the book so I re-read it. & enjoyed it again. I'm even geek enough that I read all the appendixes. In Appendix II, *The religion of Dune*, I came across this statement:

The Commission of Ecumenical Translators convened on a neutral island of Old Earth, spawning ground of the mother religions. They met 'in the common belief that there exists a Divine Essence in the universe.' Every faith with more than a million followers was represented, & they reached a surprisingly immediate agreement on the statement of their common goal: "We are here to remove a primary weapon from the hands of disputant religions. That weapon – the claim to possession of the one & only revelation."

Doesn't that describe our society today? Believe whatever you want but don't claim you have *the one & only revelation*? To believe & proclaim that Jesus is the only way, truth, & life (Jn 14:6) leads today to charges of being out of touch, anti-gay, anti-choice, anti-intellectual, anti-diversity, ignorant, fanatical, follower of fairy tales, & arrogant. The more we persevere & proclaim the name of Christ, the more opposition will come. Don't be surprised when it happens & don't shrink back. There will be increasing pressure to fit into our culture. Just as Jesus called His church in the 1st century to hold fast & keep proclaiming His name & hold fast to His Word, He's calling us to persevere in His Word & proclaim His name even in the midst of opposition.

C. The 3rd thing Jesus commends His church for is trusting God amidst testing in the world. Look at Smyrna & see what Jesus says to them. This is a church that is experiencing suffering, tribulation, poverty, & slander as they proclaim Christ. Here's what Jesus says to them. **2:10**

What an astounding verse. Jesus tells His followers that He's going to let the devil throw them into jail. Remember, people weren't imprisoned as punishment, they were imprisoned with a view toward being killed soon. That's why He says, **be faithful until death** (2:10). Why is Jesus allowing the devil to throw them in prison to be killed? The answer is in the text, **that you will be tested**. What's being tested? Their faithfulness to Jesus. Will these Christians trust God even when they're

ripped from their families, thrown into prison, & put on the chopping block? That's the testing God allows or ordains Satan to cause for His saints. That's what we see throughout the Bible. Its Joseph in Gen, the story of Job, & Jesus being led by the Spirit into wilderness to be tempted by the devil. God allows, even ordains, these things for our good. But also know that Satan is defeated & always subordinate. He's not in control. He's on a leash & can do nothing to God's people apart from God's permission for God's purpose. All through these letters we've seen Satan trying to sabotage the church. We see references to synagogues of Satan, the devil about to throw people into prison, living where Satan's throne is, where Satan dwells, & the false teaching of the church in Thyatira is described as **the deep things of Satan** (2:24). Satan was trying to sabotage the church then & he's doing the same thing today. He is tempting, discouraging, & attempting to deceive Christians. This is real. But God is sovereign & He uses these things to sanctify us. Jesus says, **you will be tested, & you will have tribulation... Be faithful unto death.** In other words,

Tough times will come but trust Me all the way. This is for your good. It's as if Jesus is saying, I know you don't understand this now. You don't understand your trials & suffering. But trust Me & persevere in faith. Don't stop proclaiming the gospel even if it costs you everything. Don't stop living for & proclaiming Me because the crown of life is coming.

Trust God even when you don't understand what's going on.

D. Finally, these churches are commended for loving God & walking in purity. Picture the names of the few in Sardis who haven't soiled their garments with the sin of the world. They were walking with Jesus in a manner worthy of His name. These are the things Jesus commends His church for: faithful perseverance, proclamation of the gospel, trusting God amidst testing, & loving God & living in purity. He also had some words of rebuke.

3. Condemnation There appear to be 2 main causes of rebuke in these letters. **A.** One is compromise. We've seen how there was pressure from government, society, & finances that misled many who settled for less than what God called them to. There's compromise in the church when there's tolerance of sin in the church. False teaching, idolatry, & immorality are tolerated in some churches. We see the influence of the Nicolaitans & the teachings of Balaam & Jezebel. God's people are being seduced into practicing sexual immorality & eating food sacrificed to idols & this was being tolerating in the church. Because of this tolerance of false teachers, false teaching & sin

spread throughout the church. There were teachers in the church saying, *It's no big deal. Don't lose your job just participate in the feast & give a nod to Caesar. You know your heart & that you're only doing this for the good of your family & you don't really mean it.* This kind of false teaching was leading to compromise in the church. Jesus rebukes the church for not zealously confronting evil & error in their midst. Because of this, these churches began to look just like the world around them. There was no longer any distinction between the church & the pagan culture surrounding them. There was compromise for financial gain, social acceptance, & personal safety. They were coming up with ways to justify idolatry & immorality in their midst. Think about how easy it is to do that. You need to provide for your family which means you need a job which means you need to belong to a guild & that demands worship of false gods. When the guild functions & festivities lead to idolatry & immorality, you'd dishonor the host & embarrass yourself if you left, so you stay. If you proclaim the name of Christ too much, you'll be brought before the Roman governor & be killed. What kind of witness will you have if you're dead? It can be very easy for the church to begin to blend in with the world. Clearly, there's a message for us today. While we live in a different context than the 1st century, it's just as easy for us to blend into the world in seemingly justifiable ways for the same reasons they did then. Compromising draws us from Christ & we don't even realize it. Jesus rebukes His church for compromise & 2ndly, for

B. Complacency. Compromise & complacency are never acceptable to Him. Ephesus had a lack of love. Laodicea is lukewarm & good for nothing. Jesus says, *You make Me want to vomit.* Why such a strong statement? Because this church was marked by self-satisfaction & self-sufficiency. They were content & complacent. These were wealthy Christians in a wealthy city who had everything they needed. The mentality of the city was reflected in the church. Just as the city saw no need of help from Rome, the church perceived no need for help from God. Sound familiar? We're some of the wealthiest people to have ever lived. It's easy for us who have everything we need to lose sight of the depth of our need for God. Let us be warned. These rebukes are applicable to us. Let us hear the danger of being seduced by material & physical wealth to the point where we're blind to our spiritual poverty. This complacency is seen in our failure to complete the works of God & failure to

confess the Word of God. Jesus says to the church in Sardis, **I have not found your deeds completed** (3:2). In other words, they'd sat back & settled for less than all out obedience. They obeyed the commands that were comfortable to them. The rebuke that comes up over & over in these letters & is the opposite of the most dominant praise. The most frequent praise from Jesus in these letters is to those who faithfully endure & obey no matter the cost. The most dominant rebuke is a failure to do this. To Ephesus He says, *You're holding on to the Word. You're zealously fighting false teachers in your midst & that's good. But I have this against you, you've forsaken the love you had at 1st* (2:4). 40 years earlier, Acts 19:10 tells us, **all who lived in Asia**, that's a lot of people, **heard the word of the Lord, both Jews & Greeks**. How did this happen? Because of what was happening at Ephesus. Christians there heard the gospel, believed it, & proclaimed it because they loved people enough to tell them that Jesus died on the cross, rose from the grave, & could save them from their sins. This love poured out in faithful evangelism throughout Asia. But now Jesus rebukes the Ephesian church. Why? Because they were no longer doing this. There's a warning here for all of us. Let's be honest, there's compromise & complacency within us all. It's subtle & dangerous. So what do we do? Jesus commands His church:

remember from where you have fallen, & repent & do the deeds you did at first (2:5)... Be faithful until death (2:10)... repent (2:16)... hold fast (2:25)... Wake up, & strengthen the things that remain (3:2)... remember what you have received & heard; & keep *it*, & repent (3:3)... hold fast what you have (3:11)... buy from Me gold refined by fire so that you may become rich, & white garments so that you may clothe yourself, & *that* the shame of your nakedness will not be revealed; & eye salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see (3:18).

Don't pretend like everything is OK. Listen to Jesus, remember, repent, & continually trust in Him. Some people wrongly think of Christianity as simply accepting a benefits package that Jesus wants to give us & there's nothing for us to do in return. The reality is that overcoming sinful conduct is hard work, which we're enabled to do with the help of the Holy Spirit. Notice that Jesus isn't yet writing off any of these churches. He's telling them they all have different issues & struggles, but the remedy is the same: **Repent!** & notice that Jesus gives them time to do so. What grace! He also gives us time to repent. We have time to turn from our sin, to stop compromising, & to rise out of our complacency. Don't just hear this & move on with life as it is. Jesus is speaking to us today.

Repent & turn from sin. Repent & receive from Jesus exactly what you need. Here's His gracious invitation to Laodicea. He says, **I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire (3:18)**. Find your treasure in Jesus. Get alone with Him & call out for Him to free you from your self-sufficiency which says you can do this on your own. You can't. You need Jesus. Clothe yourself in His righteousness, holiness, & humility. Fix your eyes on Him & allow Him to open them to see clearly. Jesus says, *Come to Me for all these things*. What a gracious command that is. Jesus is the only source of treasure & truth & life. As He offers this command, Jesus warns His church,

repent ... or else I am coming to you & will remove your lampstand out of its place—unless you repent (2:5b)... repent; or else I am coming to you quickly, & I will make war against them with the sword of My mouth (2:16b)... if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, & you will not know at what hour I will come to you (3:3).

These are startling vss that seem to imply that Christians are in danger of being rejected by Jesus. What's going on here? Is that possible? Jesus is doing here what we see throughout Scripture. God gives warnings to His children about falling away to keep them from falling away. There are passages throughout the Bible that warn us not to fall away. That makes some think Christians can lose their salvation. For example, Heb 3:12-14 tells us,

Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is *still* called "Today," so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end.

Some infer passages like from this that it's possible for Christians to lose their salvation. But don't miss the context. These passages aren't written to Christians who are thriving & growing in their faith & saying to them, *One day you may fall away*. No, these passages are written to those who are wavering in their faith & God's saying to them, to you, & to me, *Don't fall away!* This kind of warning keeps us from falling away. It's one of the means God uses to draw us back to Himself. I don't want you to be confused on this. By grace through faith, true followers of Christ will persevere to the end. Everyone who is born again is born again forever & will persevere to the end. This is guaranteed by God the Father. 1 Pt 1:3-5 says,

Blessed be the God & Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to *obtain* an inheritance *which is* imperishable & undefiled & will not fade away, reserved in

heaven for you, who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed.

It's guaranteed by God the Father through the work of God the Son. Jesus says in Jn 10:27-29,

My sheep hear My voice, & I know them, & they follow Me; & I give eternal life to them, & they will never perish; & no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given *them* to Me, is greater than all; & no one is able to snatch *them* out of the Father's hand.

When you're in the hand of Christ & the hand of the Father, you're secure. Paul writes in Eph 1:13-

14, ...you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of *God's own* possession, to the praise of His glory. The

whole Trinity is involved in keeping followers of Jesus to the very end, Father, Son, & Holy Spirit.

One of the ways God keeps us is by warning us not to fall away. In those times when we're wandering from God, wavering in our obedience & trust in Him, drifting into compromise &

complacency, He gives us good & gracious warnings to pull us back to Himself. But that doesn't

mean we sit back & coast because God is going to keep us to the end. No, it's by grace through

faith that true followers of Christ will persevere to the end. We work hard to persevere to the end.

The Christian life is nowhere described as coasting on a rainbow road. No, instead we're running a

race, fighting a battle, & waging a war all the way to the end. Jesus says, **the one who endures to**

the end, he will be saved (Mt 24:13). Again, Heb 3:14, which we just read, says, **we have become**

partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end. & then Heb

10:36 says, **you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may**

receive what was promised. We work by God's grace through faith to persevere to the end. What

about those who don't endure? What about the people who fall away from Christ & His church &

don't come back? We all know some who at one point confessed faith in Jesus & claimed to be

Christians but now have nothing to do with Him & maybe even completely deny Him. What about

them? 1 Jn 2:19 says of such people, **They went out from us, but they were not *really* of us; for if**

they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but *they went out*, so that it would be shown

that they all are not of us. In other words, their falling away shows they weren't truly followers of

Christ in the 1st place. There were people in these 7 churches who were embracing false teaching

& living in idolatry & immorality & who claimed to be Christians, but wouldn't repent & wouldn't

listen. This showed they weren't truly followers of Jesus in the 1st place. We must let Jesus' warnings be a wake-up call to us to return to Him & refuse to settle for compromise & complacency in our lives in any way. We must see the gracious God convicting us of sin & drawing us back to Himself. We must hear His warnings to us as evidence of His grace. If you profess to be a Christian but refuse to repent & walk with Christ, be concerned about the authenticity of your salvation. Be concerned about the state of your soul. I urge you, do not ignore His voice, repent & return to Him as His child.

4. Rewards Thankfully, these letters end with rewards promised to those who overcome. Jesus promises eternal life to those, who, by His grace through faith, overcome & persevere to the end. To **overcome** is to prevail or conquer & is mentioned in every letter. Overcoming, by its nature, is an improvement in our works or deeds. We overcome when we conquer bad habits, resist temptation, & take control of our thoughts. In every letter we read about those who overcome or conquer. 2:11 says, **He who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death.** In other words, Jesus says, *They may kill you, it doesn't matter. You're going to live forever with Me. To die is gain. Your name is in the book of life (3:5) & you shall share in My reign.* This is total vindication, triumphant victory, shared participation in the reign of Christ, & permanent citizenship in the City of God. This is the reward. In His City, with His Name, forever & ever. We also see language of feasting over & over again. You conquer & you will eat from the tree of life, have a meal with Christ. It's not just permanent citizenship in the City of God. The picture is for those who endure to the end & persevere in faith & who will join in the perpetual celebration with Jesus in the presence of God. This is message from Jesus Himself to all His people of all times, including us. **He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches** (7x; Rev 3:22). Let me close with a quote:

It's time for the church to be about the ministry of reconciliation—for God's people to boldly & faithfully proclaim His gospel & for His church to be salt & light in this dark & desperate world (Mt 5:13-16). That was the Lord's message to the churches in Revelation. He commanded them to put off worldliness & corruption, to renew their love for Him, & to guard the purity of His gospel & His church. Virtually every admonition, rebuke, warning, & call to repentance our Lord makes in these letters is applicable to the church in the 21st century... It's time for us to pay attention to the letters to those churches in Revelation & heed Christ's call to reform His church.¹

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

¹ John MacArthur, *Christ's Call to Reform the Church: Timeless Demands from the Lord to His People*, p 13