

Session 6: The 7 Letters - A Call to Biblical Radicalism

I. THE FOUR SECTIONS OF THE BOOK

- A. John's Commissioning
- B. The 7 Letters to the 7 Churches
- C. The Throne Room Experience
- D. The Transition From this Age to the Next

II. THE CALL TO BIBLICAL RADICALISM WITHIN THE BOOK OF REVELATION

In this session we're going to look at the second part of the four. We will look at the call to Biblical radicalism contained within the book of Revelation from the lips of Jesus Himself in the 7 letters to the 7 churches. These letters are Jesus' pastoral, prophetic and apostolic exhortations to actual communities. These pastoral, prophetic and apostolic messages are essential to heed as we approach the return of the Lord. These letters ground the message of the return of Jesus firmly in reality and in our day to day context.

I have no energy to study these letters just to gain an understanding of the information contained in them; we need to study them to obey them. Jesus' words in these letters are like a scalpel to all of our religious games, youthful zeal and shallow sentiment. If we heed these letters and we live obedient to what Jesus said in them, everything will change.

- A. The Scriptures portray a church at the end of natural history that burns with radiance, intensity, purity and maturity. They speak of a redeemed company who "burn and shine" (John 5:35). We need clear Biblical teaching on this issue of wholeheartedness. I want to use the word "radical" because it encapsulates the spirit of what I believe God is inviting the church into in this hour of history before the second coming. The term "radical" articulates the sort of *unbalanced disposition that authentic believers through history and Scripture have embodied.*

- B. Many of us feel restricted, handicapped and unwilling to burn our bridges and sink our ships unto abandonment to Jesus and His purposes. One of the reasons why is because we've been seduced by the pop-Christian value of "balance." Balance is unbiblical. Balance is uninspiring. Balance is empty and without power. None of our heroes were balanced. No prominent figure in Scripture was balanced. Balanced people don't change history. No one wears T-shirts with balanced people on it.
1. When people use the term "balanced" they mean 'not disruptive.' The Gospel is disruptive. It will violate all of our comfort zones and demand of us "more." Balanced and harmony is a myth. The Sermon on the Mount is not balanced. It's disastrously radical. Joel 2 is not balanced. It's extreme. Romans 12-14 are not balanced.
- C. In an hour of widespread apostasy, false religion, the executing of prophets and wicked government God didn't send a balanced man to Ahab and Jezebel or to Herod. He sent Elijah and John the Baptist.
- D. God has promised to release the spirit of Elijah on the earth before the second coming; of which John the Baptist operated under. John the Baptist was a picture; a mere foreshadowing of what would emerge on the earth in the final generation.

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins. A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken." A voice says, "Cry!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the LORD blows on it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever. Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news; lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, "Behold your God!" Behold, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will tend his flock like a shepherd;

he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young. (Isaiah 40:1-11)¹

"Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction." (Malachi 4:5-6)

This is he of whom it is written, "Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.' Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. (Matthew 11:10-14)

And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ." And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No." So they said to him, "Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said." (John 1:19-23)

1. Any leader in the body of Christ on the earth right now that is not promoting the spirit of Elijah and the grace that rested upon John the Baptist is selling his people short. And any believer that doesn't have the life of Elijah or John the Baptist in their understanding as the 'ceiling' of grace that is available to them has been duped.
2. The requirement upon the people of God in our generation is radical wholeheartedness.

¹ This passage is entirely eschatological. It speaks of the conclusion of Israel's final humbling and the physical appearing of her Messiah. This "voice" was fulfilled in John the Baptist's ministry but in a very limited way. John was national; this passage speaks of something global. And the result is a literal exodus from captivity into the promised land with Jesus at the head.

...The day of the Lord is great and very terrible; who can endure it? (Joel 2:11b)

3. While Joel lays out what wholeheartedness looks like, we need it to be expounded. The 7 letters in Revelation 2-3 do just that.
- E. These men were not radical for the sake of being radical. They were not driven and motivated by a sense of youthful zeal and sentimental passion. They heard the voice of the Lord telling them what God loves the most and what God hates the most. They were motivated by grace and they were driven by both fear and love.
- F. The 7 letters were given to John so that we would know what Jesus cares about the most and what He hates the most. The letters are primarily and principally about how the corporate people of God are to carry their hearts in transition; and they are meant to be the cultural blueprint for the church.
- G. The divine information contained in the letters save us from shallow and sentimental zeal and rhetoric that pervades so much of pop-culture Christianity. And they rescue us from being ignorant of what God is after in our churches. Jesus' piercing words protect us from superficiality and urge us to test ourselves. They remind us that nothing is hidden from His eyes and nothing goes unnoticed.
- H. The 7 letters explain how abandonment must be focused. Wholeheartedness is never random, generic or broad. It's focused, narrow and unbalanced. **The central message of the 7 churches is focused abandonment.**
 1. For Ephesus it was returning to their "first love"
 2. For Smyrna it was not "fearing" and being "faithful unto death"
 3. For Pergamum it was "repenting" of the false teaching they had embraced
 4. For Thyatira it was repenting of "tolerating" sexual immorality & idolatry
 5. For Sardis it was "waking up" and "strengthening what remained"
 6. For Philadelphia it was being confident before God's favor towards them and to hold fast to what they have
 7. For Laodicea it was being "zealous" and "repenting" of lukewarm-ness

III. INTRODUCING THE 7 LETTERS

- A. These 7 letters show us the kind of Church that Jesus is laboring, interceding and longing to establish. They reveal the pastoral heart of Jesus. These letters tell us what Jesus thinks about the church. Commenting on Jesus walking among the lampstands/churches (2:1), Sam Storms writes:

“He is present in and among his people. He guards and protects and preserves the church. He is never, ever absent! No service is conducted at which he fails to show up. No meal is served for which he does not sit down. No sermon is preached that he does not evaluate. No sin is committed of which is he unaware. No individual enters an auditorium of whom he fails to take notice. No tear is shed that escapes his eye. No pain is felt that his heart does not share. No decision is made that he does not judge. No song is sung that he does not hear.

How dare we build our programs and prepare our messages and hire our staffs and discipline our members as if he were distant or unaware of every thought, impulse, word, or decision! How dare we cast a vision or write a doctrinal statement or organize a worship service as if the Lord whose church it is were indifferent to it all!

Do you care “What Christ thinks of the Church”? Or are you more attuned to the latest trend in worship, the most innovative strategy for growth, the most “relevant” way in which to engage the surrounding culture? Yes, Jesus cares deeply about worship. Of course he wants the church to grow. And he longs to see the culture redeemed for his own glory. All the more reason to pray that God might quicken us to read and heed the “words” of Christ to the church in Ephesus, then, and to the church now, whatever its name, denomination, or size. It obviously matters to him. Ought it not to us as well?”²

- B. The letters define for us spiritual maturity. Similarly, they explain what sort of maturity is necessary for the Church to live, love and lead in the midst of the Great Tribulation.
- C. These letters define the truths and focus necessary to equip the Church to walk in love for Jesus. Our love is expressed as we:

1. **Obey His commands**

² To the One Who Conquers: 50 Daily Meditations of the 7 Letters of Revelation 2-3

2. **Heed His warnings**
 3. **Believe His promises** (especially the 22 eternal rewards promised to overcomers)
- D. The end of this age will bring great challenges but these challenges will bring even greater rewards. Thus the 2-fold central message of the 7 letters is:
1. **A Call to Maturity** – Jesus explains how he defines maturity in this throughout the letters
 2. **A Call to Overcome** – Jesus explains what to overcome and how to overcome it (1 John 5:4-5; Revelation 12:11)

IV. HOW ARE WE SUPPOSED TO UNDERSTAND AND APPLY THE 7 LETTERS

Teachers and commentators throughout history have been confused about how to apply and appropriate these letters. Because they were addressed to literal historic churches in Asia Minor many cannot believe that the rest of the book is designed for anyone but them. This is the “preterist” view. However, on the other hand, those who see the book as being primarily about the future fail to address the full scope and intention of these 7 letters. Thus, it’s necessary that we view them rightly taking into consideration all that God designed them for. We are to understand them:

- A. **Individually:** the letters were written to provoke response from individuals. Those individuals are the believers in the first century through to the end of this age. The issues are directly relevant to those in the first generation and to those in every generation until the end of the age.
- B. **Corporately:** the most powerful application is when local churches walk in these truths together embracing and obeying all that Jesus commanded. We need to bear in mind that these were letters written with a corporate body in mind. The fullness of the letters is experienced in the local church context.
- C. **Historically:** the letters were first written to seven historical churches in John’s generation to address the actual conditions of seven real churches. It was written to them and their situations. This does not mean though that God meant them to be only understood historically (as Preterists argue).

- D. **Generically/Universally:** the letters were intended for all churches in the first century until the second coming just as the Gospels and Epistles for specific people and churches as well as all churches past, present, and future. Any believer can pick up one of the letters and obey Jesus in them and receive a blessing.
- E. **Eschatologically:** the letters are designed to prepare the End-Time Church for the events seen in Rev. 6-19. This is when there will be the most believers in history living in the most difficult time in history. In view of the sheer population and magnitude of crisis, the letters are relevant to the final generation. The greatest number of people in history will go through the greatest crisis in history; and these letters explain how to live in such a way that we “overcome” all that occurs.

V. THE COMMON ELEMENTS IN THE LETTERS

A. Literary Features of the Letters

1. A COMMAND TO WRITE TO AN ANGEL OF THE CHURCH
2. A SELF-DESCRIPTION BY JESUS DERIVED FROM THE VISION OF CH. 1, INTRODUCED BY THE FORMULA, “THESE THINGS”
3. COMMENDATION OF THE CHURCH’S GOOD WORKS
4. AN ACCUSATION OF SOME SIN
5. AN EXHORTATION TO REPENT WITH EITHER A WARNING OF JUDGMENT OR WORD OF ENCOURAGEMENT
6. AN EXHORTATION TO DISCERN THE TRUTH OF THE PRECEDING MESSAGE (“HE WHO HAS AN EAR . . .”)
7. A PROMISE TO THE OVERCOMERS

B. Common Elements of the Letters

1. **Historical context:** It is important to gain information about the situation that each church was challenged with politically, economically and spiritually. Jesus strategically selected these seven knowing they would give prophetic insight into preparing the End-Time Church.

2. **Revelation of Jesus**: Each message begins by Jesus calling attention to a specific aspect of His majesty as seen in Rev. 1 that was most needed in the situation of each Church. Eighteen different aspects of Jesus' majesty are highlighted in Rev. 2-3.
3. **Affirmation for faithfulness**: Jesus gave affirmation before correction (Ephesus, Pergamos, and Thyatira). Two churches received no affirmation (Sardis and Laodicea).
4. **Rebuke for compromise**: Jesus told them what they must not do. Jesus' correction is not rejection. He had things against 3 churches: Ephesus (2:4), Pergamos (2:14) and Thyatira (2:20). Two churches did not receive a correction (Smyrna and Philadelphia). The compromises He gave the sternest rebukes for were passivity, immorality and idolatry (covetousness and/or sorcery; Col 3:5; Eph 5:5; 1 Cor. 10:20-22).
5. **Exhortation to respond**: Jesus told them what they must do. Jesus gave actions that He required often with an element of warning. The warnings that Jesus gave most were against **passivity** (distraction with their increased blessing) and **fear** (persecution/rejection).
6. **Promise for overcomers**: Jesus gave incentives for diligent faithfulness. Most of these promises are for the Millennial Kingdom. Insight into rewards is essential to equip us to stand in pressure. Jesus promised us 22 eternal rewards in Rev. 2-3 (2:7, 10, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21).

VI. EIGHTEEN DESCRIPTIONS OF JESUS

¹ To...Ephesus write, "These things says He who holds the seven stars...who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands..." 8 To...Smyrna write, "These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life..." 12 To...Pergamos write, "These things says He who has the sharp two-edged sword"...18 To... Thyatira write, "These things says the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet like fine brass"...3:1 To...Sardis write, "These things says He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars"... 7 To...Philadelphia write, "These things says He who is holy, He who is true, "He who has the key of David"...14 To...the Laodiceans write, "These things says the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God"... (Rev. 2:1-3:14)

- A. The faces of Jesus:
1. He who *holds* the seven stars
 2. He who walks in the midst of the seven lampstands
 3. The First
 4. The Last
 5. He who was dead
 6. He who came to life
 7. He who has the sharp two-edged sword
 8. The Son of God
 9. He who has eyes like a flame of fire
 10. He who has feet like fine brass
 11. He who has the seven Spirits of God
 12. He who *has* the seven stars
 13. He who is holy
 14. He who is true
 15. He who has the “Key of David”
 16. The Amen
 17. The Faithful and True Witness
 18. The Beginning of the Creation of God

VII. EMBRACING THE CALL TO OVERCOME

- A. These 7 letters have this prominent theme of calling believers to overcome. This call must be trumpeted in our generation loudly and boldly. For there are many in the covenantal community that are not of the covenantal community. John called these people:

“They went out from us but they were not of us; for if they were of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.” (1 John 2:19)

- B. At the end of the age, there will be many who “fall away” (2 Thess. 2:3) because of the pressure. John defines those who depart as those who were with us but not of us; that is, they were not born of God. The End-Time crisis will put pressure on those who are not of us causing them to take an antagonistic role against Jesus and His saints.

- C. Having said that: an overcomer in this context of the 7 churches is one who matures in the specific areas of faithfulness that Jesus emphasized in their life. This is not being born again but is made possible by being born again. In other words, Jesus is speaking to regenerate believers in these communities about how to obey Him and how to receive rewards for their faithfulness.

1. The apostle John is very clear that the necessary prerequisite for overcoming is being born of God.

“Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?” (1 John 5:5)

2. And He is also very clear that all who are truly born of God will overcome.

“Everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world.” (1 John 5:4)

3. And He also made it clear that overcoming the world included all the forces that we experience in this age that war against our souls. In other words all the things that the 7 churches were called to overcome fall under John’s definition of “the world.”

“For all that is in the world – the desires of the flesh and the desire of the eyes and pride in possessions – is not from the Father but is from the world.” (1 John 2:16)

- D. Jesus was calling believers to embrace faithfulness to Himself in view of the fact that the sole grounds of their faithfulness was their justification and regeneration. The fact that we are justified and regenerated does not guarantee our victory in an automatic, mechanical, clinical sense. Yes, all who are born of God overcome and will be brought to glorification. That is not what's in view here. What's in view here is the call to overcome specific temptations that assail the people of God to the end that we might be *rewarded* in the age to come – not *saved* in the age to come.
- E. To the church of Ephesus overcoming meant to return to their first love for Jesus until the end of their life. To the church in Smyrna it meant being faithful in persecution even to death. To the church in Pergamos and Thyatira overcoming meant to resist immorality and idolatry for the remainder of their life. To the church in Sardis it was be watchful or to develop a prayer life and to hold fast the things that God entrusted to them from their earlier years. To the church in Philadelphia overcoming meant to persevere in mature obedience for the remaining years of their life. To the church of the Laodiceans overcoming meant to resist remaining lukewarm.
- F. Our greatest faithfulness is flawed yet it is consistent in desire to press in and break through. Two examples of those who were counted faithful in their weakness are David and Abraham. Paul wrote that David fulfilled all of God's will (Acts 13:22) and Abraham's faith did not waver (Rom. 4:20). Our faithfulness is overshadowed by Jesus' faithfulness to us. It's what makes our faithfulness acceptable to God and precious to Him. For:

“By a single offering He has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.” (Hebrews 10:14)

VIII. PROMISES TO OVERCOMERS: ETERNAL REWARDS

- A. Jesus gave His most in-depth teaching on rewards (mentioning 22 rewards). He knew what we would need to be motivated and stabilized during the release of the glory and crisis in His End-Time plan. He reveals our rewards that we receive at the time of His Coming (Rev. 11:15-18).
- B. These equip us to persevere by being anchored in eternity with confidence that our choices will be rewarded in eternity. When suffering is seen in God's light, it loses its power to intimidate.

- C. Jesus was speaking to believers who had already received the free gift of salvation. He was calling believers to live in a way to receive heavenly rewards. Salvation through justification by grace alone through faith alone is a free gift given to us. It is based on Jesus' worthiness (Eph. 2:8-9). Heavenly rewards are given to us according to our works, or our response of gratitude to Jesus for giving us so great a salvation.

- D. There will be a vast difference in the measure of glory of each one's reward. Most of these 22 rewards will be received by all believers in at least an introductory way. The issue in Rev. 2-3 pertains to what measure of the reward a believer receives. Since only overcomers receive the fullest measure of these rewards, it is important that we rightly interpret what Jesus intends when calling us to be overcomers in Rev. 2-3. These rewards refer to varying measures of the basic blessing of eternal life that all receive (1 Cor. 15:41).

- E. These rewards are not secondary or irrelevant but rather they are a very important part of our destiny. Therefore, all believers should be very familiar with these rewards.

- F. Our obedience is deeply connected to our rewards. Some falsely teach that these rewards are given to all believers in fullness regardless of how they live. This view takes these rewards out of their context which requires repentance from certain things and to be faithful to the end. In Rev. 2-3, Jesus was not exhorting them to be born again. He was offering born again believers rewards as incentives to greater diligence in the face of temptation and pressure.

IX. JESUS PROMISED 22 ETERNAL REWARDS

To eat from the tree of life in the midst of Paradise (2:7); to receive the crown of life (2:10); to not be hurt by the second death (2:11); to eat hidden manna (2:17); to receive a white stone (2:17); to receive a new name written on the stone (2:17); to have power over the nations (2:26); to receive the morning star (2:28); to receive white garments (Rev 3:5); to receive a name that is not blotted from the Book of Life (3:5); for Jesus to confess one's name before the Father and angels. (3:5); for one's persecutors to worship before their feet (3:9); for one's persecutors to know that Jesus loves them (3:9); to be made a pillar in God's temple (3:12); to have God's name, the New Jerusalem and Jesus' new name written on them (3:12); to receive gold to make one rich (3:18); to receive white garments (3:18); to have anointed eyes to see more (3:18); to eat with Jesus (3:20) and sit on His Throne. (3:21).