

Kingdom Discipleship Process 3: How do we Study the 7 Letters?

Revelation 2 – 3

A. Introduction

All 7 letters in Revelation 2 – 3 are written in the same format with 8 common elements and we can study it through these common elements:

1. Name and location of the Church

It is important to gain information about the situation that each church was challenged with politically, economically and spiritually. Jesus strategically selected these 7 knowing they would give prophetic insight into preparing the End-Time Church.

2. Revelation of Jesus

Each message begins by Jesus calling attention to specific aspects of His majesty as seen in Revelation 1 that were most needed for the situation of each church. 16 different aspects of Jesus' majesty are highlighted in Revelation 2 – 3.

3. Affirmation for being faithful

Jesus gave affirmation before correction (Ephesus, Pergamos, and Thyatira). 2 churches received no affirmation (Sardis and Laodicea).

4. Rebuke for compromise

This highlights 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). 2 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). These were enabled by false teachings on grace that did not require repentance.

5. Exhortation to respond

This highlights 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. Call to overcome

To overcome is to become mature in Christ as defined by the 7 areas of spiritual maturity.

7. Eternal rewards.

These are given as incentives for us to be diligent in faithfulness to Jesus. Most of these promises are for the Millennial Kingdom. Having insight into rewards is essential

to equip us to stand in pressure. Jesus promised us 22 eternal rewards in Revelation 2 – 3.

8. Exhortation to hear

All 7 specific areas are so important to Jesus that He ends each letter by saying, “*He who has an ear, let Him hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church.*” This exhortation emphasises that the truths in Revelation 2 – 3 are extremely important, and we need to pay full attention to them.

B. Name and Location of the Churches

1. The 7 letters are written to 7 historical churches in John’s time in Asia Minor, which is present-day Turkey — Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea.
2. These are 7 real churches with these actual conditions addressed in the letters. The spiritual conditions of the 7 churches give us a prophetic picture of the spiritual condition of the End-Time Church.
3. Why did Jesus select these 7 specific churches? It is because these 7 churches give us the clearest prophetic insight into preparing the End-Time Church.
4. It is important to study the historical context, background, and spiritual condition of each church. All 7 churches give us important insights into what really matters to God and what the “problem” of each church was.
 - a. Ephesus — Revival centre that has lost its first love for Jesus;
 - b. Smyrna — A church that is faithful in suffering and persecution, poor in the eyes of the world, but rich in the eyes of God;
 - c. Pergamos — A church with compromises: immorality, idolatry and doctrine;
 - d. Thyatira — A growing church but full of immorality due to wrong teachings on grace;
 - e. Sardis — A dead church that has a reputation but is without spiritual substance;
 - f. Philadelphia — A faithful and obedient church;
 - g. Laodicea — The biggest and richest church, but one that is lukewarm.

C. The Angel to the Church: Apostolic Leadership

1. The “*angel to the church*” refers to the apostolic leader over each congregation.
 - a. The word “angel” is “*angelos*” in the Greek. In the New Testament, the word refers to an angelic or human messenger (Lk 7:24,27, 9:52).
 - b. It was translated “messenger” when referring to John the Baptist (Matt 11:10; Mk 1:2).

2. The messenger was responsible to guard the message and not let it be distorted through compromise, fear, or neglect.
 - a. The apostolic leaders are responsible before God to boldly proclaim what Jesus revealed in these letters and to establish an action plan to implement the truths.
 - b. Leaders must not draw back when others become angry at Jesus' message in Revelation 2 – 3.
 - c. People follow whatever message is publicly proclaimed consistently with boldness.

D. Revelation of Jesus

1. Each letter begins with Jesus calling attention to specific aspects of His majesty. Jesus emphasised specific aspects of Himself that was most needed for the specific conditions of each Church.
2. Revelation 2 – 3 gives us 16 different aspects of Jesus' heart and personality that are necessary to prepare the End-Time Church to overcome.
 - a. Ephesus (Rev 2:1) — Jesus holds and walks closely with His people. He emphasises His tender care and deep commitment in the life and heart of His Church. He is deeply involved with His people.
 - b. Smyrna (Rev 2:8) — Jesus is the Source and Assurance of all our blessings. He emphasises His tender care for those who are being persecuted. He will repay us all that we may lose through persecution for His name's sake, and He understands our suffering as He also experienced death and suffering.
 - c. Pergamos (Rev 2:12) — Jesus will war against all that corrupts His people. He emphasises His zeal against sin and compromises.
 - d. Thyatira (Rev 2:18) — Jesus will release His fire and judgement against immorality. He emphasises His deity and power to war against immorality and to impart His holy fire to us.
 - e. Sardis (Rev 3:1) — Jesus releases the Holy Spirit and life to His people. He emphasises His impartation of the Spirit to revive His people.
 - f. Philadelphia (Rev 3:7) — Jesus is holy, reliable, and powerful. He emphasises His faithfulness and commitment to intervene and help us in testing and trials.
 - g. Laodicea (Rev 3:14) — Jesus is true to His Word and zealous for wholehearted love.

E. Affirmation for Faithfulness

1. Jesus gives affirmation to 5 Churches — Ephesus, Pergamos, Smyrna, Thyatira and Philadelphia.
2. Two Churches received NO affirmation — Sardis and Laodicea.

3. Jesus' affirmation reveals to us what each church did right and what Jesus wants.
4. Ten things that Jesus affirms:
 - Good works
 - Endurance
 - Hatred towards evil
 - Hatred for wrong doctrines
 - Being persecuted for His name's sake
 - Faithful to Jesus' Name
 - Love
 - Service
 - Faith
 - Obedience

F. Correction/Rebuke for Compromise

1. Jesus' correction and rebuke tells us what He dislikes and what we must do. We also need to know that Jesus' correction is not rejection (Rev 3:19; Heb 12:4–6).
2. Five Churches received correction from the Lord.
 - a. Ephesus — For losing their first love for Jesus;
 - b. Pergamos — For idolatry and wrong teaching;
 - c. Thyatira — For immorality;
 - d. Sardis — For dead works;
 - e. Laodicea — For being lukewarm.
3. Jesus used the word “against” for Ephesus, Pergamos, and Thyatira. These are things He really hates.
4. Jesus gives the strongest rebuke against passivity, immorality, and idolatry. All these are due to wrong teachings on grace.

G. Exhortation to Respond

1. We must respond to Jesus' correction through repentance and changing our attitudes.
2. Jesus gives 7 specific actions for us to respond:
 - a. Return to First love (Rev 2:5);
 - b. Do not be afraid of persecution and suffering (Rev 2:10);
 - c. Watch out for doctrinal compromise (Rev 2:16);
 - d. Watch out for moral compromise (Rev 2:21–22);

- e. Overcome spiritual deadness (Rev 3:3);
- f. Hold on and persevere in obedience (Rev 3:11);
- g. Recognize our spiritual poverty and return to God (Rev 3:17–18).

H. Call to Overcome

1. An overcomer in this context is one who matures in the specific areas of faithfulness that Jesus emphasised in their lives.
 - a. To the Church of Ephesus, overcoming meant returning to their first love for Jesus until the end of their lives.
 - b. To the Church of Smyrna, overcoming meant being faithful in persecution even to death.
 - c. To the Church of Pergamos and Thyatira, overcoming meant resisting immorality and idolatry for the remainder of their lives.
 - d. To the Church of Sardis, overcoming meant being watchful, developing a prayer life, and holding fast to the things that God had entrusted to them from their earlier years.
 - e. To the Church of Philadelphia, overcoming meant persevering in mature obedience for the remaining years of their lives.
 - f. To the Church of Laodicea, overcoming meant resisting lukewarmness.
2. Overcoming does not mean attaining perfection in one's character but rather constantly reaching for victory with all our strength. The Lord evaluates us with great tenderness. He is very kind in His evaluation of our lives.
3. Our greatest faithfulness is flawed; yet, it is consistent in desire to press in and break through.
 - a. Two examples of those who were counted faithful in their weakness are David and Abraham.
 - b. Paul wrote that David fulfilled all of God's will (Acts 13:22) and Abraham's faith did not waver (Rom 4:20).
4. Two different contexts of overcomers
 - a. Overcoming worldly unbelief — All believers overcome in this general way by believing in Jesus and refusing heresies as outlined in John's epistles (1 Jn 4:1–5, 5:4–5).
 - b. Overcoming unfaithfulness in a believer's life as specifically defined in Revelation 2 – 3. To overcome means to walk in spiritual maturity or to be consistent in obedience.

5. As unbelievers, we overcome unbelief on the day we become born again. As believers, we overcome unfaithfulness only after we endure in obedience until the end.
6. Three views of overcomers:
 - a. *The Eternal Reward View*
Rightly teaches that the rewards in Revelation 2 – 3 are given in different degrees according to one's faithfulness in loving and obeying Jesus. Rewards are given in addition to the free gift of eternal life. While the issue of salvation is settled, the issue in focus is the particular areas of unfaithfulness that Jesus emphasised in their lives. Not all Christians overcome the specific unfaithfulness Jesus highlights.
 - b. *The All-Believers View*
Wrongly teaches that all believers are overcomers because of the very act of believing in Jesus is all that is needed to be an overcomer (1 Jn 5:4–5). Faith in Jesus rather than faithfulness to Him is emphasised in this position. In other words, both the spiritually mature and immature believers are equally overcomers. Thus, all the rewards in Revelation 2 – 3 are automatically and fully given to all believers as being synonymous with the gift of eternal life. The thief on the cross will receive the same reward as Paul and John the Baptist.
 - c. *The Loss of Salvation View*
Wrongly teaches that believers in Revelation 2 – 3 are being exhorted to faithfulness to avoid losing their salvation. In this view, failing to overcome is synonymous with losing one's salvation. This view implies that we must overcome all spiritual immaturity to avoid losing our salvation. This implies that only mature believers are saved. For example, the diligent workers in Ephesus who lacked fresh love for Jesus would have lost their salvation if they died before renewing their first love (Rev 2:2–7).

I. Promise of Eternal Rewards

1. Jesus gave His most in-depth teaching on rewards. He knew what we would need to be motivated and stabilised during the release of the glory and increase of crisis in His End-Time plan. He reveals the rewards that we will receive at His Second Coming (Rev 11:15–18).
2. 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.
3. 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.
 - a. Salvation or justification is a free gift given to us. It is based on Jesus' worthiness (Eph 2:8–9).
 - b. Heavenly rewards are given to us according to our works, or our response of gratitude to Jesus for giving us so great a salvation.

4. There will be a vast difference in the measure of glory of each believer's reward. Most of these 22 rewards will be received by all believers in at least a minimal way. The issue in Revelation 2 – 3 pertains to what measure of each reward a believer will receive.
5. Since only overcomers receive the fullest measure of these rewards, it is important that we rightly interpret what Jesus' intention is when He calls us to be overcomers in Revelation 2 – 3. These rewards refer to varying measures of the basic blessing of eternal life that all receive (1 Cor 15:41).
6. These rewards are not secondary or irrelevant but rather are a very important part of our destiny. Therefore, all believers should be very familiar with these rewards.
7. 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.
8. In Revelation 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.
9. Jesus promised 22 eternal rewards
 - a. To eat from the tree of life in the midst of Paradise (2:7);
 - b. To receive the crown of life (2:10);
 - c. To not be hurt by the second death (2:11);
 - d. To eat hidden manna (2:17);
 - e. To receive a white stone (2:17);
 - f. To receive a new name written on the stone (2:17);
 - g. To have power over the nations (2:26);
 - h. To receive the morning star (2:28);
 - i. To receive white garments (3:5);
 - j. To receive a name that is not blotted from the Book of Life (3:5);
 - k. For Jesus to confess one's name before the Father and angels (3:5);
 - l. For one's persecutors to worship before their feet (3:9);
 - m. For one's persecutors to know that Jesus loves them (3:9);
 - n. To be made a pillar in God's temple (3:12);

- o. To have God's name written on them (3:12);
- p. To have the name of the New Jerusalem written on them (3:12);
- q. To have Jesus' new name written on them (3:12);
- r. To receive gold to make one rich (3:18);
- s. To receive white garments (3:18);
- t. To have anointed eyes to see more (3:18);
- u. To eat with Jesus (3:20);
- v. To sit on His Throne (3:21).

J. He Who Has Ear, Let Him Hear What the Spirit is Saying to the Church

1. The exhortation that Jesus repeated the most in His earthly ministry was the call to have ears to hear what the Spirit is saying. This was written 16 times — 8 times in the Gospels and 8 times in Revelation (Matt 11:15, 13:9,43; Mk 4:9,23, 7:16; Lk 8:8, 14:35; Rev 2:7,11,17,29, 3:6,13,22, 13:9).
2. There are 6 implications:
 - a. It signaled that the truth being proclaimed was extremely important to Jesus.
 - b. It calls us to pay careful attention. Jesus is saying that there is more than what is immediately obvious. We must not be content with understanding only what is on the surface. Jesus calls us to diligently focus on pursuing deeper truths that are being set before us.
 - c. We have to cultivate our ability to hear and to have an open heart to receive the Word of the Lord. It will take a focused determination to lay hold of the truths being referred to (Mk 4:24; Lk 8:18).
 - d. It takes the supernatural help of the Holy Spirit to grasp it. The unaided mind of even a devoted believer will not be able to automatically comprehend the truth being set forth. Jesus is making it clear it is beyond our natural ability. Jesus wants us to ask the Spirit for help.
 - e. True hearing will give rise to a response, change, and taking action. We do not automatically respond in a deep and sustained way to truth. It will take a tenacious commitment to maintain these truths in our lives long-term because of our propensity to lose touch with them.
 - f. He most often gave this exhortation related to eternal rewards. Every time Jesus spoke of one of the 22 eternal rewards, He warned us to have ears to hear because it takes supernatural insight to grasp the 22 rewards. When reading each reward pray, "Lord, show me more".

3. Jesus started by speaking to individuals (“he” who has an ear) then changed to addressing a group (the “churches”). There is both an individual and corporate response that the Spirit desires.
4. Jesus was the only one in the New Testament to give this exhortation. He echoed Moses who called Israel to “hear”, meaning to “have ears to hear” (Deut 6:4–5), and the Father, who called the Bride to “listen” (Ps 45:10).