

The Revelation of Jesus Christ: a study for fellowship groups

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Part 2: The Overcomers (Rev 2:1 – 3:22) published 10/09/2003

During the *introduction* a title was given to the the vision set out in Chapters 1-3, which are commended to us with the words of John: "I was in the Spirit" (1:10). The section was called: **CHRIST IN THE MIDST OF THE CHURCH**. Christ was seen as 'Son of Man' in the midst of his church, and the apocalyptic language used to describe Jesus is drawn on in the messages which follow to the seven churches.

In many ways the section which we are dealing with now is the most important to get to grips with in order to understand the book as a whole. Jesus is still walking among the churches! It is easy to see how these letters were written in the context of each individual church at the time. Consider these examples (mostly there is both commendation and criticism, but these are exceptions):

Read Rev 2: 8-11 To the church in Smyrna

Smyrna is both just about the oldest city in Asiatic Turkey (founded about 1000 BC) and the longest remaining – in fact the only one still inhabited today (now called *Izmir*). Yet it was destroyed by a Lydian invasion in 600 BC and then rebuilt as a beautiful new planned city. In that context, Jesus says: imprisoned and persecuted as you may be, even looking death in the face, but don't be afraid: death isn't the end. There's the resurrection. It is the second death which really matters (19:20; 20:6,10,14,15; 21:8) and overcomers will have no need to fear that! The city is a bit like that ... it goes on for ever even though it seemed to have been killed off once. And Jesus is like that too! He is eternal, the First and the Last, and even though put to death he had power over death and came to life again. This is a message of encouragement to a suffering church.

Q Do we get an eternal perspective on life, or are we always thinking of the here-and-now?

Read Rev 3:14-21 To the church in Laodicea

If Smyrna was the oldest, Laodicea was the wealthiest of the cities. It was an important commercial centre at the crossroads of Asia. It was a banking centre but also also manufactured clothing (woollen) and medical products (particularly for the treatment of eye diseases). There had been an earthquake only a generation earlier and because of its importance Rome offered a subsidy for the rebuilding programme, but wanting to maintain independence Laodicea declined the subsidy and undertook the project from its own resources. In this affluent and tolerant society the church has, alas, lost its cutting edge. The city may have been rich, self-sufficient and well-clothed (3:17), but spiritually it was by contrast poor in the currency of eternity, blind to the things of God and naked in God's sight (3:18). Amazingly there was no natural water source in the city but water, the hot springs of Hierapolis, was piped by underground stone conduit with 1 metre diameter the six miles from one to the other (yes, 2000 years ago!). In this Jesus sees a picture of the members of Laodicea's church ... like the water from Hierapolis which at the end of its 6 mile journey had lost its heat (and its mineral content too!) and supposed goodness, yet was not cold and refreshing either, so also the church was neither hot nor cold. In effect, Jesus says: "you make me feel sick". That sort of water is only good as an emetic. Repentance is what is required, and dependence on God for supply (3:18) not independence. This is a message of rebuke.

Q Is complacency a problem for us as Christians in the U.K. today? List some of the dangers and challenges which are touched on in this letter, interpreting them in today's terms.

Q Does the word of God flowing through us lose some of its power before it reaches those who need it? Do non-Christians find our way of life unappealing, and if they do, is that to be expected (and accepted)?

Read Rev 2:1-7, 12-29; 3:1-13

This whole book is about the birthing of a new kingdom, God's kingdom. It is the presence of the King which establishes the kingdom. Perseverance is the qualification for reigning with Christ in his kingdom. Each of the sections of the book has a throne in view, and in this section it is the Father's Throne (3:21). Jesus was an overcomer and earned the right to sit with the Father on that throne. He wants to share that with those who overcome in the world today. We are reminded however that we are living on the earth where at present Satan has his throne (2:13) from which he exercises a limited degree of authority. Satan also has his synagogue (3:9) where theological error is promoted and where Satan's deep secrets (2:24) rather than mysteries of the kingdom of God are taught.

The Lord is looking for people who will overcome in his name all that they come up against. As then, so today. There are some places in the world where it is easier for the Gospel to be proclaimed, and some places where it more difficult because of persecution. Also there are some places where people are hungry for God's word, but others where there seems to be complete indifference ... apathy. Nevertheless, there are some basic principles to understand about being in God's church:

- o We have the presence of the risen Christ with us (2:1) whatever the situation.
- o We need to put the things of here-and-now into eternal perspective (2:10)
- o There will always be a door of opportunity open for witness (3:8) for those who have already opened the door of their own heart and allowed Jesus to come in (3:20)
- o The Overcomer's Package includes the hidden manna (referring to the legend that Jeremiah hid some in a cleft of rock at Mount Sinai, to be brought out when Messiah came), the stone of hospitality (referring to the *tessera hospitalis*, a large flat stone inscribed with the names of two parties who are sharing a meal. It is broken in half and the other person's half retained. There is an implied return invitation and the obligations which go with it.) and the morning star – the brightness of the glory of the Lord.

Q what doors would members of the group like to see opened up in their own experience?

Q what do the items listed above in the Overcomer's Package teach us about God's promises?

Q looking back at the passages in this study, what else is promised for the Overcomer?

Next study: Part 3 The Scene in Heaven (Rev. 4:1 – 5:14)