

Appendix C

The Seven Churches

“Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later.” (Revelation 1:19)

Introduction

It may seem surprising that I have included a discussion on the seven churches at the end of this book. There are two reasons for this. First and foremost, I have saved the best for last. If you want to have an intimate relationship with Jesus, a proper understanding of the messages to the seven churches will put you on the right track. Few Christians appreciate that the testimony of Jesus to the seven churches stands as a divine summation of what is important to Him. Second, the seven churches are presented at the end of this commentary because they do not contain apocalyptic prophecy. They do not conform to the four rules that govern apocalyptic interpretation. They are not chronological in nature and they are not limited by a starting point or ending point in time. Even more, the messages to the seven churches are not given in any discernable order. In fact, the messages to the seven churches can be rearranged in any order, there is no dilution or consequence, and there is no conflict with the seventeen apocalyptic prophecies found in Daniel and Revelation.

Some expositors on prophecy insist on treating the seven churches as though they represent seven periods of time or seven dispensations since Jesus was on Earth. This treatment of the seven churches is not supported by the text. All seven churches simultaneously existed when Jesus addressed them in A.D. 95. Antipas (the martyr) had recently died in Pergamum and Jezebel (the harlot) lived in Thyatira. Forcing the seven churches into seven time periods creates a number of unnecessary problems. For example, why should access to the Tree of Life be limited to overcomers living during the “so-called” period of Ephesus?¹ This is not a rhetorical question because the Bible plainly teaches that all overcomers will be granted access to the Tree of Life.² Therefore, any effort to impose seven time periods on the seven churches will put the Bible in a state of internal conflict. The specific promise made to overcomers in each church will be granted to all overcomers at the Second Coming.

The messages to the seven churches are timeless and universal. At any given time, the experiences of the seven church experiences are simultaneously taking place within Christianity. Some Christians are having the Ephesus experience right now and others are having the Laodicean experience. *When viewed in their totality, the seven churches represent the whole of Christianity at any time.*

When Jesus selected the seven churches identified in Revelation 2 and 3, other Christian churches in Asia Minor existed at the same time. However, He specifically chose these seven churches because, corporately speaking, they sum up the Christian experience. Please consider three points:

1. The number seven indicates completion and fullness in the book of Revelation (e.g., seven churches, seven seals, seven trumpets, seven heads, seven bowls, seven thunders, etc.). Generally speaking, Christianity in Asia Minor in A.D. 95 was teetering between apostasy and discouragement. Years of suffering and martyrdom had taken a heavy toll and many Christians were either giving up or compromising. This brink of extinction explains why Jesus spoke to the seven churches. The testimony of Jesus is not an ordinary event. Jesus had something extremely important to say and nothing is sharper or clearer than the truth spoken from God's own lips! Many Christians do not realize this, but Jesus speaking to the seven churches from Patmos is the equivalent of Jesus speaking to Israel from Mount Sinai. Jesus commended the seven churches for the good things they were doing, but He also condemned those churches who had compromised with evil. As we proceed with this study, keep this thought in mind: *Overcoming evil is an essential part of redemption.* Jesus emphasized this point seven times.
2. In A.D. 95, the original apostles and the apostle Paul were dead, all but John. Jerusalem had been in ruins for twenty-five years and Rome continued to persecute Christians because they were thought to be a sect of Jews. Therefore, when Jesus spoke to the seven churches, He spoke to the second and third generation of the Christian faith. Few of these people, if any, were alive when Jesus walked on Earth. Because each generation has to rediscover God for itself, religious behavior and beliefs constantly mutate. The

carnal nature is insatiable, restless, rebellious, and hostile toward God's laws, and Jesus intervened to ensure His gospel could grow. Christianity in Asia Minor was on the brink of apostasy or abandonment.

3. As a practical matter, Jesus commanded John to send copies of the book of Revelation to each of the seven churches. History records that Rome destroyed the seven churches by the third century A.D. and if seven copies of the book of Revelation had not been sent, two things might have happened. First, it is possible that Christianity might have deteriorated to the point where it could no longer survive as a religious body. Second, the book of Revelation might have been lost and what a loss that would have been for the final generation!

Christians Evicted From Judaism

An explanation about the origin of the seven churches might help us understand the true meaning of what John wrote nearly two millennia ago. During His brief ministry on Earth (A.D. 27-30), Jesus established a new religion that stood, and continues to stand, in direct opposition to all other religions. At first, this religion was called "The Way" because Jesus said of Himself, "**I am the way and the truth and the life.**"³ As the movement grew in size and notoriety, the Jews and other religious people found the name of the movement to be inflammatory because their title, "The Way," inferred there was *no other way* to God.

During His ministry, Jesus made many claims that were impossible for most Jews to accept. For example, what would you have thought if you were a devout Jew and heard a young carpenter from Nazareth say, "**I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.**"⁴ What would you have thought if you were a member of the Sanhedrin and heard Peter, a young fisherman from Galilee say, "**Salvation is found in no one else [than Jesus Christ], for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.**"⁵ The controversial nature of the title, "The Way," during those early years, eventually led the believers to be called "Christians."⁶

Even though the Jews hated and persecuted members of "The Way," Jerusalem served as the defacto headquarters of Christian-

ity for forty years (A.D. 30 to A.D. 70). The Romans considered Christians to be a sect *within* Judaism because of similarities between the two religions.⁷ To the Roman mind, Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and Christians were all Jewish sects. When the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in A.D. 70, they destroyed the temple of the Jews, as well as “the command and control center” of Christianity. This was God’s plan. Jesus eliminated Jerusalem as the headquarters of Christianity for at least four reasons:

1. Fleeing Christians carried the gospel of Christ throughout the Roman Empire.
2. Christianity became a standalone religious body that was separate and distinct from Jerusalem and Judaism.
3. Christianity (unlike Judaism) proved that it is not concerned with ethnic origin or nationalism. Anyone within any nation could become a Christian.
4. After Jerusalem was destroyed, Jewish influence and paradigms on Christianity became less powerful.

God is so wise. Everything He does is timely and comprehensive. He held back the destruction of Jerusalem for forty years after Jesus ascended, so the Christian movement could have time to mature. If God had destroyed Jerusalem too soon, Christianity might have disbanded. If He had waited too long, Jewish paradigms and customs could have engulfed Christianity.

Shortly after Jesus returned to Heaven, God sent the apostle Paul throughout the Roman Empire among the Gentiles to establish Christian churches.⁸ God foreknew that Christians living in Jerusalem would need help outside of Jerusalem. Paul’s efforts were fruitful and his tireless labor proved to be a great blessing for Christians when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Christians fleeing from Jerusalem found an established network of helpful brothers and sisters in the cities where Paul had established a church. The seven churches in Asia Minor were largely the result of Paul’s theological and missionary endeavors and they were ready to help fellow Christians escaping from Jerusalem.

Complexity

Christianity is a complicated religion because the plan of redemption has ten integrated elements that operate in perfect harmony. Look over this list:

1. Law
2. Grace
3. Faith
4. Obedience
5. Sin
6. Righteousness
7. Justification
8. Sanctification
9. Judgment
10. Restitution and Reward

Putting all of these elements together properly so that the Bible is not put into a state of internal conflict is a difficult exercise. While the Bible perfectly harmonizes all ten elements, it takes considerable effort to sort and synthesize the elements. I think one reason Christianity is so difficult to understand is because everything that God makes is complex. Consider the intricate functions of the human body, the constellations in the starry heavens, the diversity of life in the ocean, the diversity and balance within the animal kingdom, the diversity and importance of the plant kingdom, and how all of the elements of creation relate to life itself. God is never simple, but certain things about God can be simplified so that even a child can understand something about God's ways.

The Bible says that God is love. This is a simple concept that has enormous depth. The depth of God's love is found in details describing God. When a Bible student studies and synthesizes the details of God's actions and ways, the interwoven tapestry is beautiful and awe inspiring. Every action of God springs from love. To know God is to love God! If we examine a flower, a hummingbird, a whale, a polar bear or a newborn child, a DNA chain, or a picture taken with the Hubble Telescope, we marvel at God's attention to detail. All of His creations are intricate and deliberate and so are His actions. God has infinite wisdom and every design and action that He takes reflects His wisdom. Christianity is complex because God is rich in detail!

Sorting through the details and harmonizing the ten elements of Christianity listed above is an educational experience that transforms everyone who participates in it. There is nothing more fulfilling than understanding God's plan of redemption. There is

enormous beauty in Plan A and there is even greater beauty in Plan B! Studying God's creation and actions is life changing. He designed it this way because the more we understand about God and His love, the more we will want to please Him. After meeting with God, Moses was totally thrilled! He said, **"If you are pleased with me, teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favor with you."**⁹ There is nothing in the whole universe that is as interesting, as intricate, as loving, as magnificent, as powerful, and as wise as God.

God's attention to detail is worth our attention because God's complexity provides a number of exits for those who want to deviate from God's will. In other words, the Bible can be easily distorted and made to say whatever you want it to say because the Word of God is not simple. This problem happened in the seven churches and it continues today. Our response to God's complexity reveals far more about us than you might think. A person may claim to be a Christian and behave like the devil (this took place in Pergamum) or a person may claim to be a Christian and behave like Christ (this took place in Philadelphia). Both churches claimed to be Christian! You might think that the gospel of Jesus is all about Jesus, but the gospel of Jesus also reveals who and what we really are. The gospel of Jesus can be compared to pressing your fist into a lump of clay. If the clay is soft, a perfect reflection of your fist will occur. If the clay is hard, the clay will remain unchanged. The gospel of Jesus reveals who we really are.

An honest-hearted person will seek out God's truth even when the truth is contrary to what he wants to believe. Whenever a person comes to a point in his life where he is willing to believe that God's truth is *always* beneficial, he will pursue truth, regardless of the consequences, because he knows that result will produce a higher plane of living. The truth seeker wants to walk more closely with God and like Moses, he prays, **"teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favor with you."** The prayer and experience of honest-hearted people goes something like this: "Lord, I don't care what the truth is, what it costs or where it may lead. Please open my eyes that I may understand it and subdue the natural stubbornness in my heart so that I may live it."

"Getting Saved"

Much can be written about the topic of "getting saved." For purposes of discussion, let us consider two alternative views of salva-

tion. Individuals holding one view claim that salvation is punctiliar, that is, it comes at a specific moment in time. The textual basis for this group is Romans 10:9,10: **“That if you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.”** Other people claim that salvation takes a life time. They believe that if you do everything that God commands for the rest of your life, you will be saved. The textual basis for this group is Romans 2:13: **“For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God’s sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous.”** While these texts appear to be in conflict on the surface, further study reveals there is no conflict between them. When all of Paul’s words are properly put together, both texts in Romans are harmonious with the whole Bible because the Bible is not internally conflicted. (If the Bible is factually conflicted, then the Bible cannot be true because truth is proven by the harmony that comes from the sum of its parts.)

Many people put the Bible in a state of internal conflict without realizing what they are doing. This error occurs when a person advocates a position which the whole Bible does not advocate. Even though the two positions mentioned above are theologically opposed, both views actually harm the gospel of Jesus! The gospel of Jesus teaches that salvation is both a punctiliar event and a lifetime process.

A quick survey of the seven churches reveals that most of the churches had drifted away from the importance of holiness or they had degenerated into legalism. The first group distorted the importance of sanctification and the second group distorted the gift of Christ’s righteousness. Naturally, the second group was smaller than the first because freedom from obedience is more attractive to our rebellious nature¹⁰ than the demands of legalism.

Remember, the seven churches were second and third generation Christians. This means that in A.D. 95, the seven churches had been around long enough to see where their theology was going. If a surveyor is off by one-half of a degree when surveying one acre, the consequence will not be very dramatic. However, if a surveyor is off by one-half of a degree when surveying ten sections (ten square miles), the consequences will be dramatic! A small error

at the beginning will have drastic results given enough distance or time. The seven churches existed in A.D. 95, sixty years after the time Jesus ascended, and the subtle consequences of early errors had become crystal clear. According to Jesus, six of the seven churches were in serious trouble and they needed to repent of their toxic faith and evil behavior.

Three Types of People

Human beings can be divided into three groups. There are “right brained” people and “left brained” people and a few people who can use both sides of their brain. In the United States, there are Republicans, Democrats, and Independents. There are rich people, poor people, and a middle class. There are healthy people, sick people, and people whose physical condition is determined by the amount of work to be done. There are good people, bad people, and careless people. There are young people, old people, and middle-aged people. You may recall from our study on the fifth trumpet that there are saints, religious wicked, and non-religious wicked people, too.

Three groups also have varied understandings of salvation. There are people wanting to be saved *in* their sins (the group avoiding obedience) and those wanting to be saved for doing what is right (the group insisting on obedience). However, there is also a middle group. From the beginning, there has been a small group of people genuinely interested in knowing and walking with God.¹¹ Many people become a Christian to avoid hell. This motive will not yield good results because it usually develops into an attitude of doing the absolute minimum to avoid hell. In other words, many Christians will only go as far as necessary to be saved. Anything beyond meeting the minimum prerequisites is rejected as legalism. The gospel of Jesus is not about loving the Giver to earn the gift of eternal life. The gospel of Jesus is about having communion with God here and now. If eternal life is the goal of your Christian experience, you have missed the essential purpose of the gospel of Jesus. However, if walking with God is your objective, the gospel of Jesus will show you how. You will often repeat the precious words of Moses: **“Teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favor with you.”**

The Bible declares this verdict: A person controlled by the carnal mind cannot walk with God, our carnal nature will not permit it! **“Those who live according to the sinful nature have their**

minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace, the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God.”¹²

The Greek word *nikao* means to conquer, to subdue, to overcome. The idea expressed in *nikao* is infinite – something ongoing forever. Jesus used *nikao* seven times when speaking to the seven churches because true Christianity involves a lifelong struggle with the carnal nature. When people understand the true gospel of Jesus, they learn that salvation is a two-sided coin. Redemption includes justification. When we surrender our heart to Jesus, to go - to be - to do as He directs, God sees us as though we never sinned. This is the punctiliar moment that salvation begins. Redemption also includes sanctification. Because we are naturally rebellious, we have to re-surrender to Jesus and His gospel each day and this involves the huge struggle of overcoming our inherent rebellion toward God's way of love. Overcoming the power of sin is humanly impossible. This is why Jesus sends the Holy Spirit to each person seeking transformation. If we are willing to be transformed, we have the privilege of walking with God. This is the work of a lifetime.

Bottom line: Unless we surrender to the gospel of Jesus, there is no justification. Unless we are overcomers, there is no sanctification, and consequently, no justification. Seven times Jesus stated the relationship between justification and sanctification to the seven churches.

Horse First, Cart Follows

Every born again Christian has to be on guard that he does not put “the cart before the horse.” Sanctification does not merit salvation or eternal life because the law declares that everyone sins. In fact, no sinner can live for long without sinning. Sinning (violating the gospel) is in our nature. Overcoming temptation and sin is a tiring and difficult experience and many Christians give up on it after a few years. However, those who press on, fighting “the good fight of faith,” do experience a series of amazing victories! In fact, the reality of Jesus Christ is renewed each time Christ performs a miracle within an overcomer. There is nothing quite like this experience.

There is nothing that proves the existence of Jesus Christ better than personally experiencing your life changed by His power!

Our challenge is to fight the good fight of faith year after year without becoming exhausted and discouraged. If a person attempts to sanctify himself in his own strength, he will soon give up because victory will be illusive, too difficult, and ultimately, impossible. Many Christians give up on the sanctification process shortly after joining a church, but they are ashamed to openly admit it. Instead of standing before the church and confessing defeat, one of two scenarios usually plays out when a person gives up. The first scenario goes something like this: The Christian continues to attend church services, sing praises, give offerings, and appear respectable. He maintains *a form of godliness* by publicly staying within “church boundaries,” but he remains a slave to sin. He has no victory in his life over sin and lives a double life. In the presence of other Christians he acts like a Christian, but in the darkness he has a demon. The second scenario is just as bad: A Christian will change his theology in order to end the struggle with sanctification. He will justify his behavior by distorting Bible texts that permit him to fulfill the desires of his carnal nature. Both behaviors are fatal and clearly identified in the seven churches.¹³

If an honest-hearted person asks Jesus for enlightenment (a greater understanding of truth) and strength to overcome the demands of the carnal nature (greater conformity to God’s will), Jesus will hear his petition and that person will prevail and be changed! (Addicts usually require special help to do this.*) When Jesus sees that a sinner is humble (teachable) and repentant (wants to be

***Note:** An addict, by definition, is a slave to his addiction. He has no will power to overcome his addiction. God understands the slavery of addiction and He has given caring people insight on ways to help addicts who want to be set free. A properly balanced recovery involves a physical component (including diet, exercise, and the use of medication if or as required), a mental component (behavior modification therapy, accepting and respecting boundaries, accountability, etc.), and a spiritual component (learning how to love others, discovering God’s power, finding healing, peace, joy and wholeness through Jesus). Of course, an addict can have the assurance of salvation (punctiliar moment) before he is free of his

Continued on following page.

changed), He sends the Holy Spirit to that sinner and the battle with a particular temptation is *miraculously* neutralized. The strength to overcome sin comes from Christ. He alone is able to neutralize our attraction for wrong doing. This is a profound truth that every Christian must personally experience. The life of Jesus was an outstanding success because Jesus asked the Father for strength to do what He could not do. **“During the days of Jesus’ life on Earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.”**¹⁴

Many people think Jesus was a success in overcoming sin because He was God. He is God, but Jesus came to Earth as a God without any power of His own! Jesus laid aside His divine powers and prerogatives before He came to Earth. He could only do whatever the Father gave Him the power to do! Jesus said, **“I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself . . . By myself I can do nothing . . . for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me.”**¹⁶

Paul clearly understood the intricate relationship between justification and sanctification. Think about Paul’s words in Romans: **“For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last** [For in the gospel of Jesus there is a righteousness which has been created by God Himself. The righteousness created through the perfect life of Jesus enables God to save man from the beginning of redemption

addiction, but the addict must also understand that the assurance of salvation is based on overcoming (the work of a lifetime). As long as the addict is engaged in an effort to overcome his addiction, he is justified in God’s sight through Christ’s righteousness. This point is emphasized because the law of sin is at work in the lives of all sinners. As long as addicts and non-addicts alike are engaged in an effort to overcome sin, God’s grace (justification) covers our deficiencies and His promise to neutralize sin’s power is unwavering.¹⁵ Remember, the essential difference between addicts and non-addicts is the depth of slavery to sin.

to the end of redemption], **just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith’** [in other words, the righteous will forever live in a “go-be-do” state, going as God directs, doing as God commands, being all that God requires of them – even throughout eternity!] . . . **For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.** [Staying within the boundaries is essential, but obeying the law cannot save anyone! Sinners cannot possibly manufacture the righteousness needed for salvation.] **Is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too, since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith.** [This means that people who do not know the law, but live up to the demands of the Spirit and those who know the law and live up to the demands of the Spirit are saved through the same faith. Everyone who obeys the Spirit of God will be sanctified and saved.] **Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law** [because the law of God is perfect, righteous and true. The law of God has been given to accelerate our knowledge of where the Spirit will lead].”¹⁷

Saul as J3, Paul as C1

If you have read Appendix B, you will recall that mankind can be divided into three basic groups and each group has four divisions. When Saul was a J3, that is, an arrogant Jew who worshiped his religion as though it were God, he was self-righteous according to the law and without fault in his own eyes.

“For it is we [born again believers in Christ - C1] **who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in** [the circumcision of] **the flesh – though I myself have reasons for such confidence. If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: Circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless. But** [the Lord showed me the errors of my gross behavior and beliefs and] **whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I**

have lost all things. [I am not sad about this!] I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from [obeying] the law, but that which is through faith in Christ– the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.”¹⁸

After Paul’s experience on the road to Damascus, he understood that the righteousness required by God for our salvation cannot be produced by a sinner. This does not mean that the law of God is imperfect! It means that unless God provides the righteousness required for salvation, no one can be saved. Justification does not eliminate the necessity for sanctification! Sanctification is the process that reveals genuine faith! Analyze Paul’s words in the following text and remember, he had been a Christian for more than twenty years when he wrote them. **“I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do– this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God’s law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? [There is only one solution.] Thanks be to God – [victory is possible] through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God’s law, but in the sinful nature a slave to the law of sin.”¹⁹**

Near the end of his life, Paul wrote these inspiring words, **“I have fought the good fight [of sanctification, overcoming my sinful nature], I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day– and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.”²⁰**

Repeat Seven Times: Overcoming Is Essential!

The gospel of Jesus declares that sinners cannot overcome every temptation to sin on their own. The gospel of Jesus also declares

that Jesus will purify us of our sins if we confess our sins to Him. **“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”**²¹ When we claim this promise, Jesus may not neutralize the temptation or remove the power of a particular sin for a period of time (perhaps a lifetime) because He wants to see if we love Him more than the sin that besets us. In such a case, the sinner might think that Jesus is not listening because he remains caught in a dreadful torment. Like Paul, the sinner wants the power to overcome, but his sinful nature demands satisfaction. What will the sinner do? Will he endure the torment while waiting on the Lord to give him victory or will he throw in the towel, give in and sin again? Our choices reveal our desires. If the sinner loves the Lord more than he loves the sin, he may stumble around for a bit, but he will keep pestering the Lord for purification until the Lord neutralizes the power of that sin and delivers Him from it. This is where the battle of faith occurs and what it means to “wrestle with the Lord” as did Jacob.²²

Many Christians reject the idea that sanctification is an inseparable component of salvation. Such Christians do not think it necessary to be saved *from* their sins. They want to be saved *in* their sins. But Jesus makes it perfectly clear to the seven churches that justification and sanctification are inseparable by stating seven times that overcoming is a mandatory attitude for salvation. Paul adds, **“If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children [that is, you have no father who loves you, who trains you and prepares you for the challenges of life] and [if you have no father you are] not true sons. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us [while having this carnal nature] for our good, that we may share in his holiness. *No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful.* Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been *trained* by it. Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. ‘Make level paths for your feet,’ so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed. Make every effort to live in peace with all men and**

to be holy; without holiness [sanctification] no one will see the Lord.”²³

Bottom line: A pseudo-Christian is a person who *pretends* to be a Christian. He sings praises and says all of the right words, but he prays without receiving power because he is unwilling to go-be-do. His heart and affections are elsewhere.²⁴ The essential difference between a pseudo-Christian and a genuine Christian is not intellectual ascent to truth, it is the direction of love. A born again Christian loves in an outward direction – he loves God and His Word with all his heart, mind and soul, and his neighbor as himself.²⁵ A pseudo-Christian loves in an inward direction – he is self-centered, he loves personal comfort, religious traditions, his assets, and the admiration or approval of others.²⁶ Keep these two distinctions in mind as we examine the seven churches because Jesus requires His followers to fight against the selfish demands of the carnal nature until death or the sealing occurs and God removes the carnal nature.

(**Note:** For further discussion on the topics of justification, sanctification and the seal of God, please see my book, *Jesus: The Alpha and The Omega*, Chapters 4-8. These chapters may be freely downloaded over the internet at: <http://www.wake-up.org/Alpha/Subjindex.htm>.)

Ephesus

“To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands: I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and *do the things you did at first*. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices [behaviors] of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.”²⁷

The salutation to Ephesus begins with “To *the angel* of the church in Ephesus.” The message to Ephesus is directed *to the angel* of the church in Ephesus because a specific angel was assigned the task of overseeing the needs of the church at Ephesus. Notice how this unfolds. When this vision begins, John saw Jesus walking among seven candlesticks and Jesus had seven stars in His right hand.²⁸ Each candlestick represents a church and each star represents an angel assigned to a church.²⁹ These seven angels stand before God³⁰ and they are delighted to do whatever God commands. In this particular case, Jesus had assigned seven angels to serve the seven churches and each angel had the responsibility of seeing that each church received “the testimony of Jesus.” This process is not unusual because God uses angels to accomplish specific tasks. The apostle Paul wrote, “**Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?**”³¹

Jesus identified Himself to the church at Ephesus as the One “who holds the seven stars in His right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands.” Jesus used this descriptive language to show that He is the Head of the Church.³² “Walking among the lampstands” means that Jesus is directly involved with His church family on Earth. He intimately knows the condition of each member.

Jesus commended the people at Ephesus for their perseverance and fidelity to righteousness in the face of persecution. Jesus also commended the church at Ephesus for testing those who claimed to be apostles but found that they were infiltrators sent by the devil. Jesus scolded the church because they had lost their first love for Him. The joy and enthusiasm of their first love had died. The church at Ephesus had become cold and indifferent and Jesus threatened to remove Ephesus (their lampstand) from His presence if they did not repent of this apostasy. Did you notice that losing your first love for Jesus is an apostasy?

What causes a Christian to lose his first love for Jesus and become a pseudo-Christian? When we love anyone or anything more than Jesus, our first love for Jesus *evaporates*. The following text explains how we can tell if we love Jesus foremost. “**A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another. . . . You are my friends if you do what I command. This is my command:**

Love each other. . . . If you love me, you will obey what I command.”³³

A genuine Christian loves in an outward direction whereas a pseudo-Christian loves in an inward direction. This is a critical difference and every Christian needs to be aware that he faces two deadly forces each day. Our first enemy is our fallen sinful nature and our second enemy is the devil. Our carnal nature is a self-resurrecting monster that selfishly demands first place in everything every day. The devil knows this and he preys on this natural inclination.³⁴ Paul clearly understood the problem. He knew that if he allowed his sinful nature to take over, he too would become a pseudo-Christian in no time. This is why he wrote, **“I die every day – I mean that, brothers – [I have to crucify my carnal nature every day] just as surely as I glory [rejoice] over you in Christ Jesus our Lord.”³⁵** The carnal nature can only be put to death through a daily charge of Holy Spirit power. If a Christian does not pray and drink in God’s Word, his spiritual battery will die, his spiritual radio will go silent, and he will lose communion with God. If a Christian becomes too busy to pray, if he doesn’t have some quiet time with God, he will soon become weak in resolve and purpose. *The Christian experience cannot be sustained without reconnecting to Jesus on a daily basis.*³⁶ This simple truth can be summed up as follows: “One week without Bible study and prayer makes one weak.”

Jesus was unhappy with the members at Ephesus because the loss of first love is fatal. Left unchecked, the Christian church at Ephesus would become a pseudo-Christian church. Think about this. Jesus told the church that He would abandon them if they did not repent. Do you think that Jesus has abandoned any church groups over the past 2,000 years? I do. Do you think it is possible for people to attend a worship service and Jesus (through the Holy Spirit) is not present? I do. The message sent to Ephesus is a timeless message for all Christians. If we lose our first love for Jesus, we lose Jesus. **“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love.”³⁷**

Jesus said to the church at Ephesus, **“But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.”** Nicolas, of Alexandria, Egypt was a brilliant philosopher who lived during the first century A.D. and he distorted Christ’s teachings by merging gnostic ideas with them. This

caused a subtle but steady departure from the truth that Jesus came to reveal about the Father. In terms of behavior, Gnosticism contaminated the importance of sanctification and this robbed the gospel of its transforming power.

Long before Jesus came to Earth, Gnosticism began as a school of thought in the hedonistic philosophies of the Greeks and Romans and it included the creeds of Plato and Philo. As time passed, Gnosticism also included concepts taken from mystical religions in India and Persia. The Gnostics at Ephesus treated the Word of God as though it was an allegory (a parable having many different shades of meaning). Even though various schools of thought existed within Gnosticism, gnostic philosophy might be summed up as a collection of clever ideas that speak about right and wrong, good and evil, life and death, but the result is always the same. Self becomes self's savior. Today, Gnosticism has morphed into modern concepts that include "higher learning," "moral relevancy," and "humanism." Gnosticism belittles man's need for Jesus and it overrides God's commandments with human traditions. The church at Ephesus hated the Nicolaitan *practices* so Jesus commended the Ephesus church on this point.

Jesus closed His remarks to the church at Ephesus saying, "**He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the Tree of Life, which is in the paradise of God.**" The phrase "He who has an ear." means there is a hidden message which pseudo-Christians cannot appreciate. The hidden message is this: Those who walk in the Spirit each day and overrule the carnal nature through the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit can enjoy the Tree of Life *right now*. In a spiritual sense, those who abide in Christ have life already!³⁸ They do not have to wait to reach the paradise of God to receive the fullness of life. We can spiritually eat from the Tree of Life (the Word of God) and the joy and peace that comes from communion with God goes beyond human understanding.

God did not allow Adam and Eve to eat from the Tree of Life after they sinned because access to the fruit of this tree sustains life indefinitely.³⁹ In a spiritual way, all who have the first love experience will joyfully obey the teachings of Jesus and they will live forever.⁴⁰ Even more, Jesus would not ask us to be an overcomer if overcoming was impossible. All things are possible through

God and overcoming is only possible through God! The gospel of Jesus includes the power to be transformed (sanctified). Through the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit, the carnal nature can be temporarily neutralized so the spiritual nature might flourish. (Remember, Peter temporarily walked on water so that he might come close to Jesus.) I cannot think of anything better than being victorious over my carnal nature and living with Jesus forever.

Smyrna

“To the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These are the words of him who is the First and the Last [Alpha and Omega], who died [for you] and came to life again. I know your afflictions and your poverty – yet you are rich [in the two things that really count, love and faith]! I know the slander [lies and distortions] of those who say they are Jews [the chosen people] and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer [for I am with you]. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer [deadly] persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of [eternal] life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes [who does not capitulate] will not be hurt at all by the second death.”⁴¹

Three points in this message invite further analysis.

1. Early Christians (remember, this message was given to the church at Smyrna in A.D. 95) saw themselves as the Israel of God, a remnant which had been called out of apostate Israel.⁴² The trouble in Smyrna was that some Jewish converts were determined that Jewish traditions be imposed on all church members. (The apostle Paul constantly faced this issue in his day. Jewish converts to Christianity wanted to bring their Jewish bondage and baggage into the church.) Jesus bluntly addressed this apostasy. He called the advocates of Judaism members of “the *synagogue* of Satan.” Theologically speaking, there is a world of difference between a synagogue and a church. A church consists of followers of Christ. They believe that salvation comes through faith in Him. He is the Savior of all who repent of their sins and follow His teachings. A synagogue on the other hand, consists of people who believe that salvation comes through

the observance of the law. Jesus understood the conflict between Christianity and Judaism for He had lived among the Jews. In fact, He had been condemned to death by Jewish authorities for blasphemy.⁴³ Jesus told the church, **“I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.”**

There was intense conflict in Smyrna between Jewish converts and Gentile converts. The conflict centered around the fact that Christianity declared Judaism to be obsolete. The obsolescence of Judaism was a very hard thing for Jewish converts to accept. Can you imagine being told that Jesus terminated your religious views *and culture*? The differences between Jews and Christians are insurmountable. Christians do not have a high priest on Earth, they do not need animal sacrifices, they do not need to attend feasts or participate in temple services, and they do not need circumcision. In fact, they do not need *anything* that Judaism has to offer. *Redemption: Plan B stands on its own two feet because it has an entirely different covenant.*

Freedom from Judaism was an endless source of conflict in Smyrna because Jewish converts wanted to observe their Jewish traditions and Gentile converts refused to go along. (Of course, Gentiles had religious baggage, so they too, were not without fault.) The conflict between Jewish and Gentile believers became so great during the first half of the first century A.D. that the church almost perished before it got started. Thankfully, God chose a young zealous Jew to deal with this problem. After God showed the apostle Paul the truth about Christianity and the falsehoods of Judaism, He sent Paul around the empire to tell everyone. It has been said that one man separated Christianity from Judaism. Paul wrote fourteen of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament. However, it was Jesus who delivered Christians from the Jews through Paul. It was also Jesus who delivered Israel from Egyptian bondage through Moses.

2. Jesus identified Himself to the church at Smyrna as **“the First and the Last [Almighty God], who died and came to life again [for your sakes].”** Jesus described Himself with this language so that His followers might remember that the servant is not greater than the Master.⁴⁴ Jesus

knew there would be many martyrs for His sake in the church at Smyrna. In A.D. 95, Christianity was an illegal religion in some parts of the Roman Empire. The evil Emperor Domitian (A.D. 81-96) put many Christians to death before he was murdered. Then, Nerva (A.D. 96-98) ascended to Domitian's throne. However, Nerva became ill shortly after he became emperor and died within two years. Then, Trajan (A.D. 98-117) came to power and even though he did not actively seek Christians to kill them, he mandated that if a Christian was found, he was to be arrested and executed unless he immediately renounced his faith. The ten days of persecution mentioned by Jesus evidently referred to a purge that would take place in Smyrna. Roman governors frequently used loyalty tests and purges to maintain control over their subjects, for no governor wanted to be charged with treason against Caesar and lose his head. Jesus warned the Christians in Smyrna of the coming purge and He encouraged them to remain faithful "even to the point of death," because those who are put to death for His sake would, like Him, live again.

One more point. You need to understand the significance of loyalty tests used in Roman times. A non-Roman citizen did not have to do anything wrong to be arrested. He could be arrested for no other reason than to question his loyalty to Caesar and his government. Loyalty arrests and tests were used in Asia Minor to keep sedition and revolt to a minimum. Non-Roman citizens would be brought before a magistrate and questioned. If they regarded Caesar as God, worthy of loyalty, obedience and worship, there was no problem. On the other hand, anyone showing less than 100% loyalty to Caesar as a God was punished with sudden death. The Romans reasoned, "Why should the security and power of the empire be threatened by people who do not love Caesar?" The use of "loyalty tests" makes Paul's words to the Romans perfectly clear, "**That if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.**"⁴⁵ You can see that saying "Jesus is Lord" before a Roman magistrate in Smyrna would mean sudden death and within this context, doing so at a moment's notice required a great deal of faith in God each day.

3. Jesus also added, **“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.”** There is a hidden message in this phrase. Overcoming the fear of torture and death is not a normal human instinct. We instinctively do everything possible to protect ourselves from suffering and death. The hidden message that comes through the Spirit is this: God will give a martyr’s courage when a martyr’s courage is required. In other words, overcoming the fear of death is possible through God’s grace because God’s grace is more powerful than our fears! So, Jesus’ words contain a wonderful promise when He said, “Be firm in your stand for truth and remain loyal to me, even to the point of death, and you will not be hurt at all by the second death.” This is good news because the second death is a death for which no grace will be given nor will there be any recovery!

Pergamum

“To the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the [deadly] sharp, double-edged sword [that comes from His mouth]. I know where you live – where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city – where Satan lives. Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: You have people there who hold to the teaching [lies] of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality. Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching [lies] of the Nicolaitans. Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them [the advocates of Nicolaitan doctrine] with the sword of my mouth. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it.”⁴⁶

When Jesus spoke these words, Pergamum was the cultural and religious center of Asia. Pergamum was an old, highly respected city. At one time, Pergamum had been the Roman capital of

Asia. The practice of worshiping the Roman emperors began at Pergamum. The city had many pagan temples and Eastern Mysticism was very popular. Pergamum was a big city and it had a large class of educated and wealthy people. In His message to the church at Pergamum, Jesus said twice that Satan had his throne in Pergamum because as a city, Pergamum was the undisputed queen of false religion. Pergamum was the ivory tower of false religion for Asia and as a city, it hated Christians. Jesus observed this hatred when He mentioned the death of faithful Antipas. The hatred expressed toward Christians explains in part, why some Christians in Pergamum were willing to make so many compromises with the devil.

Gentile converts brought pagan baggage, such as their practices of sexual immorality and eating meat offered to idols, into the Christian church at Pergamum. Jesus referred to Balaam in His message to Pergamum because Balaam was an Old Testament prophet who agreed to put a curse on Israel for a sum of money. However, when Balaam attempted to speak curses, blessings came out of his mouth instead. Finally, the distraught prophet revealed to King Balak (the enemy who hired Balaam to curse Israel) that Israel could only be defeated if Israel was enticed into sexual immorality. After learning this, King Balak conspired with a number of Moabite women to become sexually involved with the Israelites. Soon, the Israelites were lured into sexual immorality with these women. Then, the women invited the Israelites to participate in sacrifices offered to their gods. Food and wine was offered to Baal and many Israelites joined with the Moabites in worshiping Baal. As a result, God became furious with His people and He punished Israel with a plague that killed 24,000 Israelites.⁴⁷ The parallel is that sexually immoral people infiltrated the church at Pergamum. Their sinful ways caused the church to lose its connection with Christ. The devil promoted this behavior because he knows that when our connection with Jesus is broken, the power to overcome sin is gone.⁴⁸

You may recall that the apostles imposed four specific rules upon Gentile converts at the first general conference of the Christian Church in A.D. 49. At that meeting the apostle James said, **“It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain (a) from food**

polluted by idols, (b) from sexual immorality, (c) from the meat of strangled animals and (d) from [drinking] blood.”⁴⁹

When Jesus spoke to the church at Pergamum, He affirmed the Spirit led decision of the apostles by promising to destroy the sexually immoral unless they repented. Jesus’ words leave no room for debate. He forbade sexual immorality and eating food offered to idols. Eating food polluted by idols was a superstitious ritual which was supposed to give the consumer the powers of the god to whom the food was first offered. The devil merged this pagan practice with the words of Jesus to create a distortion of His words. When Jesus was on Earth He said, **“Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your forefathers ate manna and died, but he who feeds on this bread will live forever.”**⁵⁰ Jesus made these remarks within the context of eating the Passover feast. His words were a metaphor. The lamb (the flesh) eaten at the feast *represented* Jesus, the wine *represented* His blood, and the bread *represented* His broken body.⁵¹ Some members of the Pergamum church, who had pagan backgrounds, ate food offered to idols. The devil used these people and their pagan background to distort Jesus’ words making it *appear* that Jesus justified eating food offered to idols. Very clever.

Jesus also mentioned that some Christians in Pergamum had accepted the teachings of Nicholas. This should not come as a surprise because Pergamum was a center for Gnostic training. The Gnostics treated Scripture as though it were “spiritual” or allegorical. In other words, the Gnostics put a layer of “philosophical fuzz” between the Word of God and its obvious meaning so that ordinary people could not be confident about the meaning of God’s Word (that is, separating right from wrong). This has been (and continues to be) one of the devil’s best tools for leading Christians astray. How many times have you heard it said, “The Bible does not mean what it says?” Or even worse, how many times have you heard a Bible passage quoted out of context? The devil is a master at putting the Bible in a state of internal conflict. When lay people begin to believe the lie that “ordinary people cannot understand

God's Word," or "we have to trust the opinions of godly experts and the traditions of the church," the devil has gained control of the church. There is no substitute for "a plain thus saith the Lord." Jesus was furious with those Christians who had become advocates of Nicolaitan doctrine. They were leading the church astray. Jesus warned, "**Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.**" (Incidentally, this is the same sword that kills the wicked at the Second Coming.⁵²)

In His closing remarks, Jesus offered a special reward to those who would overcome the devil's deceptions. Jesus said, "**To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it.**" The hidden message for those who have ears to hear is that overcomers may spiritually partake of Heaven's manna right now! Currently, the physical food of angels is not available to us. Unlike ordinary food offered to meaningless idols, the Word of God is real food.⁵³ God's Word provides the energy and vitality we need. Jesus is the source of life, strength, joy, and peace.

The promised white stone will be a precious stone that bears the inscription of a secret name. This secret name is an affectionate name which the Father will give to each saint. The white stone will serve as a password enabling the overcomer to enter into God's glorious throne room. Think about it. Every overcomer will be permitted to enter into God's presence *to hear truthful answers to any of his questions*. Contrast this privilege with the Gnostic's pursuit of "higher knowledge" that leads to darkness and separation from God. Standing in the presence of the brilliant light that engulfs the Father, an overcomer will have the opportunity to commune with the Father.⁵⁴ I can think of no higher privilege.

Thyatira

The church at Thyatira had a serious problem. Review the words of Jesus and consider what He said: "**To the angel of the church in Thyatira write: These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze. I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first. Nevertheless, I have this against you: *You tolerate* that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a**

prophetess. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling. So I will cast her on a bed of suffering, and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely, unless they repent of her ways. I will strike her children dead.

Then all the [seven] churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds. Now I say to the rest of you in Thyatira, to you who do not hold to her teaching and have not learned [from gnosticism] Satan's so-called deep secrets (I will not impose any other burden on you): Only hold on to what you have until I come. To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations – ‘He will rule them with an iron scepter; he will dash them to pieces like pottery’ – just as I have received authority from my Father. I will also give him the morning star. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”⁵⁵

Did Jesus Really Say This?

Jesus spoke to church members at Thyatira with words of comfort and condemnation – comfort for the believers who were doing right and the promise of death – that is right, death for those who were doing wrong. The BIG problem in Thyatira (as in Pergamum) was sexually immoral leadership. Jesus was angry with church leaders at Thyatira because they tolerated a woman named Jezebel in their church!⁵⁶ The devil is particularly gratified when an immoral person holds a position of religious authority because they can do enormous damage. During the first decade of the twenty-first century, more than 5,000 Catholic priests have been charged or found guilty of sexually abusing children. These revelations have cost the Catholic church more than two billion dollars, as well as a membership decline that is measured by the thousands. In Thyratira's case, a prominent woman named Jezebel* was openly advocating sexual immorality and this made Jesus very angry.

***Note:** The Jezebel in Thyatira should not be confused with Jezebel, the wife of King Ahab who lived about a thousand years earlier.

Jezebel must have been a very bright and capable woman. She called herself a prophetess, but she was not a prophetess of God. She prostituted Jesus' teachings by leading others to do the very things that Jesus condemned! She justified sexual immorality through Gnostic logic and philosophy. Jezebel taught that sex was not limited to the confines of marriage and she freely engaged and encouraged others to participate in sexual immorality. She also endorsed the popular belief that eating flesh offered to idols insured the blessings of *all* gods.

The Bible does not itemize everything that Jezebel taught, but we know enough to determine why Jezebel was successful within a Christian church. Jezebel promoted and endorsed ideas that gratified the sensual passions of carnal members. It is amazing what ignorant people will do (or will not do) when someone presuming to speak for God defines right and wrong for them! How unfortunate it is that millions of Christians would rather follow a charismatic pastor than search the Scriptures for themselves. As a recent example of this problem, consider the Worldwide Church of God, whose founder, Herbert W. Armstrong died in the 1990's. His successor eventually informed the church that several core doctrines of the church were factually wrong. Within a few weeks, most of the lay members agreed and the church imploded. Today, Armstrong's church has all but disappeared. How could this happen? Here are two questions to think about. Were the members of the Worldwide Church of God following a religious leader or the changeless gospel of Jesus? Did the Bible suddenly change when Mr. Armstrong died?

Jezebel skillfully merged contemporary pagan practices with Christian ideals. This made the commitment threshold for Christian converts so low that pagans could join the church at Thyatira without having to renounce their pagan ways! This is an area where Christians have particular vulnerability. In fact, many Christians today teach that Jesus will unconditionally accept any person who believes in Him. This claim is false because it is not entirely true.⁵⁷ The Bible does teach that Jesus will accept any *repentant* sinner who comes to Him seeking forgiveness, but the key words are "repentant sinner." The devil believes there is a God and he trembles, but he has not stopped or repented of his evil deeds.⁵⁸ Because Jezebel lowered the threshold of what it meant to be committed to Jesus, members in the church of Thyatira were not required to forsake their sinful habits and ways. Thus, false

teachings and lower standards gave the illusion that the church was growing and prospering. Membership swelled and the church was packed, but the members of the church were not growing in sanctification. In fact, many of the members in Thyatira were becoming more like the devil instead of Jesus.

Jesus condemned Jezebel for using “the mysteries of religion” (Satan’s dark secrets or superstitions) to manipulate and control an uninformed laity. The “mysteries of religion” is a catchall phrase that describes meaningless rituals and traditions. I call this phrase “religious bamboozle.” Religious leaders have used religious bamboozle for millenniums to sway and control laymen. Invariably, television documentaries about primitive tribes show a witch doctor conducting a meaningless, but grossly expensive ritual to invoke healing or the blessings of some tribal god. Do not laugh at the poor heathen; similar traditions occur in Christianity today. For varied reasons, many lay people do not study their Bible to understand God’s truth for themselves. The result is that they end up playing “follow the expert.” Since religious bamboozle does not make sense to anyone, somehow this lack of understanding makes the “mysteries of religion” (Satan’s dark secrets) special and sacred. It is very sad. Religious leaders maintain respect, authority, and dominion over their subjects using religious bamboozle and Jezebel was no exception.

Jesus Exposed Jezebel’s Nakedness

Jesus knew Jezebel’s motives and the results. He condemned her for: (a) leading others to commit sexual immorality; (b) leading others to eat food sacrificed to idols; (c) defending her actions with religious bamboozle – Satan’s “deep secrets,” and (d) her defiant attitude concerning her sins. Evidently, Jezebel was confronted with her errors, but she refused to repent and the religious leaders of the church were not willing to throw her out of the church. (Every time someone is removed from church membership, certain members become angry and rebellious. The social consequences surrounding church discipline can be long lasting and pervasive. For this reason, many church leaders are reluctant to do what is right in God’s sight.) Jesus clearly expressed His position on Jezebel’s actions and the church’s tolerance. Because she refused to repent and because church leaders had not addressed Jezebel’s evil behavior, Jesus said that He would turn her bed of pleasure into a “bed of suffering.” Jesus also promised to inflict great suffering on

those who followed her example. In fact, Jesus promised to strike her children dead. Whether the children mentioned in verse 23 were biological offspring or spiritual offspring, the Bible does not say. In either case, Jesus made His point radiantly clear: Death to all Christians who participate in sexual immorality.⁵⁹

Don't Give Up!

Jesus closed His remarks to the church at Thyatira saying, **“To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations – ‘He will rule them with an iron scepter; he will dash them to pieces like pottery’ – just as I have received authority from my Father. I will also give him the morning star. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”**

Jesus encouraged the church at Thyatira with two wonderful promises for those who have ears for what the Spirit says. First, overcoming sin is possible through repentance and the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit.⁶⁰ People who persevere and fight the fight of faith will reign with Jesus! They will share in His awesome authority and at an appointed time, the redeemed will sit in judgment on those who harmed them.⁶¹ Second, Jesus says that every overcomer will be given “the Morning Star.” The Morning Star is Jesus Himself.⁶² Jesus offers every repentant and faithful sinner His perfect righteousness.⁶³ This is a gift that is beyond measure because His righteousness is the ticket to eternal life! I cannot think of any gift more wonderful than this.

Sardis

“To the angel of the church in Sardis write: These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God [the seven angels] and the seven stars [in His hand]. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God. Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent. *But if you do not wake up*, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you. Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name

from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”⁶⁴

The church at Sardis was known for its religious zeal. Something was taking place at the church all of the time. They met together several times each week. They prayed, worshiped, worked and played together as one big family. So, what could be wrong with that? Jesus told them, **“I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up!”⁶⁵** Jesus said, **“Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent.”⁶⁶** The church at Sardis was on the wrong track. An active church life is not a substitute for spiritual growth. It takes a trained eye and spiritual discernment to distinguish between the two. The devil was at work in Sardis. The church was active and busy, but it was dead spiritually because it was not focused on the Word. Instead, Sardis was focused on “church life.”

Church life is the social interaction that involves a group of people having similar religious views, whereas spiritual life is the process of maturing in God’s truth under the firm, but loving discipline of Christ. Church life is important and what is sweeter than genuine fellowship with like believers? Unfortunately, the basis for church life should not be the joy of socializing fellowship, but a love for the discovery of truth. There is much to learn about Jesus and His gospel. Many Christians think church life is synonymous with spiritual life, but attending church services and listening to inspiring music and preaching is no substitute for personal study, meditation, and prayer. Nothing can take the place of actually doing your own homework! Spiritual life requires time with God and His Word and *there is no substitute for this*. For many people, worship is a social occasion and they go to church to be entertained with a good sermon and being told what to believe. On the other hand, walking with God and obeying His Word at all costs is the worship that God seeks. Jesus said, **“God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.”⁶⁷** If church life does not continually put worshipers through the essential truths of the Bible, and if church life does not teach worshipers how to study the Bible and ask questions, and if church life does not produce Christians who love the Lord with all their heart, mind, and soul and their neighbors as themselves, the result will be a congregation that seems active and alive, but in reality, is spiritually dead! This was the situation in Sardis.⁶⁸

The Christian Church has two objectives: Soul winning (the preaching of justification) and soul building (the teaching of sanctification). The carnal nature does not mind hearing about justification (that is the free part of the gospel), but it hates to hear about sanctification (that is the hard part of the gospel). Putting Jesus' Sermon on the Mount into daily practice is the hardest thing on Earth to do! Living by faith is very difficult. When the doctrines of justification and sanctification are out of balance, church life becomes a substitute for spiritual life.

Church members at Sardis were sure of their salvation. They accepted the gospel of justification. They loved the freedom in Christ which justification offers. They were happy to hear that Jesus had paid the price for their salvation, but they were not maturing spiritually, that is, they were not becoming Christ-like. Jesus reminded them of the necessity of sanctification saying, **“Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent.”**

Thousands of churches today have disconnected the gospel of justification from the power and necessity of sanctification. Churches like Sardis are everywhere! Many Christians deceive themselves with self-assured salvation even though they are spiritually dead! On the other hand, when the cart is put in front of the horse, there is an equally serious problem. When sanctification is disconnected from the importance and necessity for justification, Christians enter a toxic and destructive experience consisting of legalism and self-righteousness. The narrow road leading to Heaven has two big ditches on each side and the devil is constantly trying to push Christians into the ditch of legalism or the ditch of presumption. Both ditches have the same result, spiritual death. Jesus warned the dead church at Sardis, **“But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.”**

To Him That Overcomes

There were some faithful members in Sardis. Jesus said, **“Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes [soiled by sinful deeds]. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name**

before my Father and his angels. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

There is a hidden message in these words and it is different than what you might think at first. The faithful people in Sardis knew that church life was no substitute for spiritual life. Throughout history, people who have had an intimate fellowship with God understand the rigors and failures involved with discipleship. Every disciple of Jesus has to be corrected and disciplined to grow. Jesus described His disciples as people having clothes that are unsoiled. In other words, the faithful saints in Sardis were examples of His life. They were willing to “go-be-do” as Jesus directed and He promised that overcomers will, like them, be dressed in His flawless righteousness someday.

The Book of Life

Jesus also gave a message to the church at Sardis that is widely misunderstood. He promised that He would never blot out the names of the overcomers from The Book of Life. Most Christians interpret these words of Jesus in one of two ways:

1. Some Christians believe that once a person receives Christ as Savior, his name is written in The Book of Life at that time. Therefore, he cannot be lost because Jesus will not blot out any name found in The Book of Life. This means that once a person is saved, he is forever “saved.”
2. Other Christians believe that a person must overcome every sin in order to be saved. This implies that people who give up or fail to achieve perfection will be blotted out of The Book of Life.

There are several problems with both views.

The doctrine of “once saved, always saved” is disputed by the text itself. Jesus says seven times in Revelation 2 and 3 that salvation belongs to overcomers. This means there is a distinct relationship between our behavior and salvation. On the other side of the coin, and equally important, Jesus indicates that salvation is not based on human perfection or human righteousness. Even though some of the saints in Sardis had not soiled their garments, they still needed to be dressed in the white garment (the wedding garment) of Christ’s righteousness.

The Bible teaches that a person can live and walk with God while having *the assurance of salvation* and then lose it by turning away from the Lord and doing wicked things!⁶⁹ Conversely, the Bible teaches that a wicked person can repent and be saved!⁷⁰ Consider Lucifer's fall along with a third of the angels. Also, consider Adam and Eve's fall. At one time all of these beings were perfect, but they turned away from righteousness by committing sin. By sinning, they fell under the penalty of God's law which demands death. On the other hand, consider the numberless multitude that will come out of the Great Tribulation and be saved!⁷¹ In both cases listed above, salvation is dynamic, that is, salvation will be granted to everyone who overcomes whatever the Holy Spirit requires them to overcome. This explains why rejecting the Holy Spirit becomes unpardonable.⁷² When a new challenge comes into our lives that needs to be overcome, the Holy Spirit provides the power to overcome it. If we refuse to cooperate with the Holy Spirit, it is impossible to overcome because there is no power to overcome and non-overcomers have no place in Heaven.

Promises Made

Jesus made a promise to the overcomers in Sardis that is often distorted by people who insist that once saved means always saved. Jesus said, **“He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the Book of Life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels.”**⁷³ We know from Prophecy Six that The Book of Life is the book sealed with seven seals. We know The Book of Life is not used in judgment and it is not opened until the end of the 1,000 years.⁷⁴ Knowing these things, let us take a moment and review each of the rewards Jesus offers to the overcomers in the seven churches. As you review each reward, ask yourself *when* will the rewards be distributed.

Ephesus: The right to eat from the tree of life

Smyrna: The second death will not hurt you

Pergamum: The right to eat hidden manna and the receipt of a white stone

Thyatira: You will receive authority over the nations and the Morning Star

Sardis: I will never blot our your name from The Book of Life

Philadelphia: I will write on you the name of my God and the name of His city

Laodicea: I will grant you the right to sit with Me on My throne

Clearly, these rewards will be given to overcomers *after* the saints are taken to Heaven at the Second Coming. The same timing applies to the church of Sardis. The problem for most people with Revelation 3:5 is timing. Jesus was not talking about manipulating The Book of Life when He spoke to the church at Sardis. (Remember, The Book of Life was written and sealed up before the world was created. Revelation 17:8) Rather, Jesus promised the overcomers in Sardis that He would never blot out their names from The Book of Life *after* they arrive in Heaven. This means overcomers will live forever with Jesus!

Jesus does not require sinless behavior for salvation! If He did, then no one could be saved. No one other than Jesus has lived a perfect life and no sinner can live a sinless life until the carnal nature is removed and the sealing takes place! The good news is that John tells us there is a sin that does not lead to death. This sin is accidental sin.⁷⁵ If we say we are without sin, the Bible says we are liars.⁷⁶ So, the promise Christ gave to the overcomers in Sardis has to be kept within the context of His words to all seven churches. What did the church at Sardis need to overcome? They had substituted church life for spiritual life and as a result, they had become spiritually dead. Jesus insisted they wake up so that He might walk among them and make disciples of them! Everyone who overcomes this temptation will never have his name blotted out of The Book of Life.

Philadelphia

“To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. [Jesus holds the key to everything.] What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. [Jesus said,] I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars – I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you.

Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth. I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on him my new name. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”⁷⁷

The church in Philadelphia struggled with the synagogue of Satan just like the church at Smyrna. In fact, the seven churches were beset with all kinds of problems. Ephesus had lost its first love. Pergamum was beguiled with the devil’s lies and Gnosticism. Thyratira was corrupted with Jezebel’s teachings about sexual immorality. Smyrna was threatened by ongoing persecution and Sardis was an active church, but it was spiritually dead. Philadephia was weak, but hanging on and Laodecia had grown indifferent. As Jesus looked down from Heaven upon His seven churches, no wonder He was not very happy.

Unfortunately, many Christians distort the message to the church at Philadelphia because they want some texts to support a pretribulation rapture. However, Jesus’ words to Philadelphia do not imply a pretribulation rapture. Because the church in Philadelphia was weak and suffering from persecution, Jesus told the members at Philadelphia that He had made a way for them to go through their suffering. This is the point of the open door. By His grace they could *go through* this experience and overcome it. He also told them that He would keep them during the hour of trial that was going to come upon the whole world. This promise belongs to everyone having the Philadelphia experience.

Think about this for a moment. Did Jesus offer to protect the people in Philadelphia from the Great Tribulation and allow the other six churches to go through the Great Tribulation? Of course, not! The words of Jesus have to be understood within context. They were spoken to the people living in Philadelphia in A.D. 95. *Jesus directed His words to them because their experience will become the experience of those living during the Great Tribulation.* Jesus

encouraged the suffering members in Philadelphia to hold fast to their faith because He would never leave them or forsake them.

When Jesus spoke to the church at Philadelphia, the members were very weary and discouraged by persecution. Early Christians knew from Jesus and Paul that the end of the age would be marked with persecution and death. Jesus did not add to their discouragement by telling them about the end of the world, but instead, Jesus attempted to cheer them up with these words: **“Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from [through] the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth. I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown.”** You will notice that I crossed out the word “from” and inserted the word “through.” The Greek preposition used in Revelation 3:10 has many different meanings. In today’s English, the word “through” is a better translation, but they mean the same thing in this sentence. If I take something *from* you, the word “from” indicates origin. If I take some candy *from* the dish, again the word “from” indicates origin. Translators used the word “from” in Revelation 3:10 because Jesus means, “I will also keep you “from the origin of” the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world. . . .” In today’s English, the word “through” implies from beginning to end a little more clearly. For example, if I went through four years of residency to become a medical specialist, this implies that I was there from beginning to end.

Jesus promised to sustain the beleaguered church at Philadelphia during the Great Tribulation that would come upon the world. This promise is interesting for two reasons. First, Jesus assures those who are suffering from persecution that He sees their pain and in His strength, they can endure and be victorious over it. Second, Jesus indicates that some Christians will have the Philadelphia experience at the end of the age because the Great Tribulation only occurs at the end of the age. Jesus encouraged the church at Philadelphia saying, **“Hold on to what you have. . .”** These words are inspiring when the fires of persecution are hot. It’s human nature to give in or give up to stop the pain, but those who overcome will be rewarded beyond their wildest imagination!

By the way, there is also a secret message to Philadelphia: All overcomers will be given a special name tag when they get to

Heaven. Jesus said, **“I will write on him the name of my God... the name of the city of my God, and I will also write on him my new name.”** This name tag will permit its owner to travel anywhere in God’s universe. You will be recognized throughout God’s universe as a very special person because YOU overcame the temptation to give up, and YOU were trained through suffering on Earth for the exalted role that God has given you throughout eternity. Those who endured much will be rewarded with much. Those who endured little will be rewarded accordingly. Your life and your situation determines your victory over the curse of sin and your reward will be appropriate! Jesus wants everyone to know who YOU are throughout eternity, so He will give you a glorious name tag.

Laodicea – Avoiding Conflict

Since conflict and war is at the forefront of current events and the topic of spiritual warfare is paramount for Christian living, this is a perfect time to examine the church of Laodicea. The church at Laodicea was full of Christians *avoiding* war. The church had a deadly problem. They had muted the power of the gospel.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is like a sword, it always causes war.⁷⁸ Jesus was a victim of this war! The gospel of Jesus is an advancing gospel of love, but God’s love condemns the carnal heart which loves itself. Truth condemns people who reject it and it saves people who receive it. The gospel of Jesus liberates people who love truth and their victory over darkness produces persecution by those in darkness. Few things can tear families or nations apart like differences in religion. War erupts when the advancing gospel of Jesus confronts the establishments and traditions of religion. The church at Laodicea, even though it was less than 40 years old, did everything possible to avoid conflict. Wealth and affluence had compromised the advancement of the gospel in Laodicea. Church members had muted the gospel to protect their jobs and positions of respect in a pagan community. *History proves that the gospel of Jesus mutates into various forms of pseudo-Christianity when Christians are not persecuted.* In fact, this explains why God handed the saints over to the little horn power in Daniel 7 for 1,260 years!⁷⁹ Throughout the Dark Ages, the church in the wilderness maintained faith in Christ because of persecution.

Ancient Israel also proved that faith in God mutates into false religion when there is no persecution. Moses warned the children

of Israel at the gates to the Promised Land, **“Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day. Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. . . . For I know that after my death you are sure to become utterly corrupt and to turn from the way I have commanded you. In days to come, disaster will fall upon you because you will do evil in the sight of the Lord and provoke him to anger by what your hands have made.”**⁸⁰ The Old Testament confirms that Israel repeatedly abandoned God every time it became militarily secure, wealthy, and affluent and the same behavior is documented throughout Christian history. What does this say about the carnal nature of man?

When the church at Laodicea compromised its faith, the church died spiritually. Like the church at Sardis, they thought they were doing just fine even though their condition made Jesus almost vomit! Christians in Laodicea did not recognize their true condition before God. They were not focused on the cause of Christ or the objectives of the gospel. They did not detect the ongoing war over their souls. They could not see the sophistry of the devil’s warfare. They were preoccupied with making money and spending it. They were affluent and enjoyed the good life.

The gospel of Jesus wars against acquiring riches and selfish indulgence because the carnal nature is selfish. Unfortunately, many Christians are living the Laodicean experience today. The gospel of Jesus has become an intellectual assent to truth rather than a life of service for God and man. Many Christians are willing to give money to promote the gospel, but they are unwilling to give themselves.

“To the angel of the church in Laodicea write: These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God’s creation. I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm – neither hot nor cold – I am about to spit you out of my mouth.

You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see. Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline [torment]. So be earnest, and repent.

Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”⁸¹

The church at Laodicea was full of “rich young rulers.”⁸² They mistook their affluence and wealth as evidence of God’s approval when in fact, God condemned them for misusing His wealth. The value of money is determined by the good it produces. When God gives wealth to people, He also imposes accountability for its use. This will prove to be a big surprise for many on Judgment Day! The carnal heart loves money because money brings power, gratification, and selfish satisfaction. Money can buy almost anything. When people have too much money, few will desire or wait to see God’s providence. Money can rob us of faith in God because there is no need to seek or wait upon the Lord. Money can shut out Christ’s discipline and rebuke. Money can distort justice and ruin integrity. Money is harmful and this is why Jesus said, **“It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”**⁸³ Self-indulgence and money are brother and sister in the carnal heart. This is why Jesus said, **“No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.”**⁸⁴

The “rich young ruler test” wars against the core of our carnal nature. Jesus gave up everything He owned in order to save us and He does not ask less of His disciples.⁸⁵ Carefully notice in Matthew 19 that Jesus did not ask the rich young ruler to donate his wealth to the temple. Rather, Jesus told the rich young ruler to sell his possessions and give the proceeds to the poor. Can you imagine

the joy of finding poor people needing financial help? Jesus hit the rich young ruler where it hurt most. He did not want to give his wealth away. He loved money. His wealth meant more to him than God or those who lived in poverty. This was the basic problem in Laodicea. The Christians at Laodicea were happy with their riches. They did not realize that they were serving money rather than God and this made Jesus nauseous. Money is so deceitful! No one but Jesus could have told the church at Laodicea their true condition. Who would have believed His threat unless He spoke it Himself?

The Tables Turned

Overcomers who pass “the rich young ruler test” will reign with Jesus as “rich young rulers” throughout His universe.⁸⁶ Jesus can offer no greater reward than what He offered to the Laodiceans. Think about this. Jesus not only gave His life for us, He offers to share His throne with us! What amazing love! Overcomers will be exalted because they loved God and their neighbors more than money *while living with a carnal nature!* Holy angels cannot experience such a test for they do not have a carnal nature. When properly understood, the gospel of Jesus transforms an egocentric heart into a theo-centric heart. The gospel of Jesus subdues the selfish nature so that the spiritual nature can grow stronger. Jesus assures victory to every person who keeps his eyes on Jesus and keeps his heart open to the Holy Spirit. **“For everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith.”⁸⁷**

Conclusion

We have examined the seven churches. We have considered their faults and their strengths. We have also considered the admonition of Jesus to each church. If there is anything that you should remember about this study it is this: Salvation is a two-sided coin. The minute you totally surrender your life to Jesus and are willing to go - be - do as He directs, the assurance of salvation is yours! To keep this assurance alive and intact, you must begin to fight the fight of faith. You must overcome temptation and be transformed through the imparted power of Christ. This process will last a lifetime. As long as you allow Jesus to discipline you (disciple you), you are justified in God’s sight. That is, God sees you as though you never sinned. The righteousness of Jesus covers you. The primary objective of redemption is not eternal life. The primary

object is walking with God each day throughout the rest of eternity.

Seven times, Jesus made it clear to the seven churches that overcoming temptation is not optional. Sanctification is both necessary and possible through His power. After showing John the Great Tribulation story including the persecution of the saints for forty-two months, the martyrdom of the saints during the fifth seal, the physical appearing of the devil, and the mark of the beast, Jesus emphasized the necessity of overcoming an eighth time. **“He who was seated on the throne said, ‘I am making everything new!’ Then he said, ‘Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.’ He said to me: ‘It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life. *He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son. But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars—their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death.*’ ”**⁸⁸ Isn’t it interesting that the book of Revelation ends where it began? Believers in Christ can be overcomers through the strength that Christ imparts. Paul knew about the miracle of having our desire for sin neutralized. He wrote, **“I can do everything through him who gives me strength.”**⁸⁹ If we are willing to walk with the Lord, He will be our God and we will be His children.

Remember the seven rewards promised to overcomers:

1. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.
2. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.
3. To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it.
4. To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations – ‘He will rule them with an iron scepter; he will dash them to pieces like pottery’ – just as I have received authority from my Father.

5. He who overcomes will be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from The Book of Life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels.
6. To him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, New Jerusalem, which is coming down out of Heaven from my God; and I will also write on him my new name.
7. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne.

These rewards mean very little to those who are spiritually dead. Jesus deliberately worded His remarks this way. If the rewards of Heaven appealed to our carnal nature, Heaven would be filled with selfish people intent on *getting* their free reward, instead of walking with God and serving others! By obscuring these eternally magnificent rewards with spiritual words, Jesus ensured the carnal nature would not be attracted to them. This is why Jesus says seven times that those who have ears to hear, let him hear what the Spirit is saying. Everyone who follows the Holy Spirit can understand the messages to the seven churches. They do not require a Greek expert or a great deal of study. They do require an endless struggle against the carnal nature. The seven messages also contain a warning that any deviation from the gospel of Jesus must be corrected as quickly as possible. If a deviation is not corrected quickly, the damage only gets worse with the passage of time.

One day, each overcomer will be exalted as a hero. The angels will honor those who overcame sin through Christ's imparted strength. Jesus will honor every saint because He overcame the world and won the war for his soul. The Bible predicts a time is coming when all of God's saints will stand before His throne. I cannot think of anything more wonderful and more joyful than falling on our faces before the Father and the Lamb and praising them for the priceless gift of redemption they freely offered.

References

1. Revelation 2:7
2. Revelation 22:14
3. John 14:6; italics mine See also Acts 9:2; 19:9.
4. John 14:6
5. Acts 4:12, insertion mine
6. Acts 11:26
7. Acts 24:14
8. Acts 13:2; Ephesians 3:8,9
9. Exodus 33:13
10. Romans 8:7
11. Genesis 5:22,24; 6:9
12. Romans 8:5-8
13. Revelation 2:14,15; 3:9
14. Hebrews 5:7-9, italics mine
15. Romans 6:14-18
16. John 5:19, 30
17. Romans 1:17; 3:28-31, insertions mine
18. Philippians 3:3-9, insertions mine
19. Romans 7:18-25, insertion mine
20. 2 Timothy 4:7,8
21. 1 John 1:9
22. Compare Genesis 32:24-30 with Ephesians 6:12.
23. Hebrews 12:8-14, insertions and italics mine
24. Isaiah 29:13
25. Matthew 22:36-40
26. Matthew 23:28
27. Revelation 2:1-7, insertion and italics mine
28. Revelation 1:12-16
29. Revelation 1:20
30. Revelation 8:2
31. Hebrews 1:14
32. Ephesians 1:22, Colossians 1:18

33. John 13:34,35; 15:14,17; 14:15
34. Galatians 5:19-21; 1 John 2:15-17
35. 1 Corinthians 15:31, insertion mine
36. John 15:5
37. John 15:9
38. 1 John 5:12
39. Genesis 3:23,24
40. John 8:51
41. Revelation 2:8-11, insertions mine
42. James 1:1; 2:1; Ephesians 2; Romans 11:25
43. Mark 14:61-64
44. John 15:20
45. Romans 10:9
46. Revelation 2:12-17, insertions mine
47. Numbers 22-25
48. 1 Corinthians 5:11; John 15:5,6
49. Acts 15:19,20, insertions mine
50. John 6:54-58
51. Luke 22:19,20
52. Revelation 19:21
53. Matthew 4:4; John 4:32-34
54. See 1 Timothy 6:15,16
55. Revelation 2:18-29
56. Compare Numbers 25:1-9 with 1 Corinthians 5:11.
57. Ezekiel 14:6-8
58. James 2:19
59. See also Colossians 3:5,6 and Revelation 22:15.
60. Romans 6
61. 1 Corinthians 6:1-3; Revelation 20:4
62. Revelation 22:16
63. Romans 1:17
64. Revelation 3:1-6
65. Revelation 3:1

66. Revelation 3:3
67. John 4:24
68. Compare the situation in Sardis with Matthew 7:21-23.
69. Ezekiel 18:24-26
70. Ezekiel 18:27,28
71. Revelation 7:9,10
72. Matthew 12:31,32
73. Revelation 3:5
74. Revelation 20:12
75. 1 John 5:16,17; Romans 7:19
76. 2 Chronicles 6:36; 1 John 1:10
77. Revelation 3:7-13, insertion mine
78. Matthew 10:34; Hebrews 4:12
79. Daniel 7:25
80. Deuteronomy 8:11-14; Deuteronomy 31:29
81. Revelation 3:14-22
82. Luke 18:18-23
83. Mark 10:25
84. Matthew 6:24
85. Matthew 10:37,38
86. Revelation 1:6; 20:4; 21:24
87. 1 John 5:4
88. Revelation 21:5-8, italics mine
89. Philippians 4:13