



LESSON 31

Foundations Curriculum

Revelation, Part 1: The Letters to the Seven Churches

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Introduction

Revelation, Part 1: The Letters to the Seven Churches

In this thirty-first lesson, we will talk about the letters that Jesus sent to the seven churches. We will learn what Jesus Himself thinks about them, through the problems He identified, the recommendations He made, and the promises He left. The letters will be divided into three distinct groups, in which we will identify the churches that receive no rebuke, the churches that receive only rebuke, and the churches that receive both praise and rebuke.

We want to draw attention to the subject that will be addressed here, for these are letters sent by Jesus to the churches. We will seek to pay attention to the different voices and visions heard and seen by John. We can point out the vision of Jesus as the Lamb, in chapter 6; as the Warrior, in chapter 19; but in chapter 1, he has a personal encounter with the glorified Christ. It is far more than a vision, for as John falls to the ground, Jesus places His right hand upon him — something that does not happen in visions. Here we are dealing with a specific appearance of Jesus to John, dictating the things he was to write to the churches.

It is a revelation that Jesus receives from the Father about how His glorification will unfold in history, especially in the time of the end.

The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show His servants—things which must shortly take place. And He sent and signified it by His angel to His servant John.

Revelation 1:1 (NKJV)

However, before revealing the manifestation of His glory to the world, Jesus speaks with His church. This fits with what Peter says: “*judgment must begin at the house of God*” (1 Peter 4:17), as well as with the words of Jesus when He warned that “*to whom much is given, from him much will be required*” (Luke 12:48).

Let us, then, dwell on what Jesus thinks about the church in His letters. We consider this to be the most important subject of all. In these letters we can learn everything that matters to Jesus.

These letters are addressed to the seven churches of Asia, and all of them begin with the expression “To the angel of the church in.” We believe Jesus is not referring to any heavenly angel.

It is true that God has used, and does use, angels in His process of communication. Let us note that the biblical pattern occurs as follows: God the Father speaks to angels, who speak to some man, who speaks to the people. This pattern can be seen in the book of Daniel and is commonly found in the Old Testament. However, this is not what we see happening in Revelation.

Another theory common throughout history is that this angel would be the bishop responsible for the work in the city. However, this theory does not hold up, because in the first-century church there was not a single bishop; rather, there were several who worked together in the same city.

Without wishing to dogmatize or to have the final word on this subject, we consider that the letters were addressed to everyone in the church, but they were directed to the leadership, to the presbytery, for three main reasons: they are the human recipients; they are responsible before God for what happens in the church; and, in addition, the corrections that need to take place in the churches are the responsibility of the leaders to attend to.

For the purposes of this study, we will divide the seven letters into three distinct groups:

- 01 those addressed to churches that receive no rebuke;
- 02 those addressed to churches that receive only rebuke;
- 03 those addressed to churches that receive both praise and rebuke.

What Jesus expects from the churches that need no correction is that they keep everything He has entrusted to them, that they consider what has been given to them through great sacrifice. Even where there is no rebuke, all the work and sacrifice must not be in vain. In this category are the churches of Smyrna and Philadelphia.

The Church in Smyrna

This church was undergoing great suffering; it was persecuted by the Jews, and Jesus encourages them not to fear the suffering, but to be faithful until they receive the final reward.

I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich); and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.

Revelation 2:9–10 (NKJV)

Here Jesus makes clear that He will deliver us from the second death, but not from the first. We need to receive this word from Jesus and accept, in peace, what God has determined will happen to the human race.

The Church in Philadelphia

Jesus makes the same reference to persecution on the part of the Jews, gives some promises, and warns this church to hold fast to what it has.

I know your works. See, I have set before you an open door, and no one can shut it; for you have a little strength, have kept My word, and have not denied My name. Indeed I will make those of the synagogue of Satan, who say they are Jews and are not, but lie—indeed I will make them come and worship before your feet, and to know that I have loved you. Because you have kept My command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth. Behold, I am coming quickly! Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown.

Revelation 3:8–11 (NKJV)

It is interesting to remember that Jesus promises to deliver this church from an evil that would disturb the whole known world of that time. It is known that the world was invaded by the Islamic empire, that six of the seven churches were completely destroyed, but the church of Philadelphia has kept the Christian testimony to this day, and is found in the region of Turkey, in the city of Alesieh.

In the second group of churches, which receive only rebuke, are found Sardis and Laodicea.

The Church in Sardis

This city was very wealthy, historically known for having a population that was self-sufficient, self-confident, and self-indulgent (used here in the sense of demanding little of itself, of being undemanding when it came to itself). They lived for pleasure and for rest, without much sacrifice and with little work.

And to the angel of the church in Sardis write, 'These things says He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars: "I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead. Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God. Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent. Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you."

Revelation 3:1–3 (NKJV)

This church had an excellent reputation throughout Asia. But Jesus has a different opinion: “you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.” We should not trust in the reputation given by men; let us listen to what Jesus has to say, for man does not know how to judge.

We should also note that when Jesus calls this church's attention to remember what they have received and heard, He is calling them to keep these truths and to repent. The Lord wants us to pay attention to the fact that the truths reach us through the sacrifice of thousands of brothers and sisters throughout the history of the Church, and through those who preached the Word of God to us. We must keep what belongs to the past, remember in the present, and watch, which pertains to the future.

In other words, a church that does not keep, does not remember, and does not watch ends up dying. Jesus does not point to a specific sin, but says they are dead. Another thing is that even when a church is doing badly, there will always be those who keep the truth.

The Church in Laodicea

Here we find no reason for praise. Jesus accuses them of being lukewarm.

I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth. Because you say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing'—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked—

Revelation 3:15–17 (NKJV)

There is a common tendency to think that someone is lukewarm when they lack fervor for something. Jesus, however, considers as lukewarm the one who believes he needs nothing, who thinks he is doing well spiritually. The cold person openly declares that he does not want God; the lukewarm person, even while saying he wants God, in practice does not want Him.

In the third group of churches, those that receive both praise and rebuke, are found Ephesus, Pergamos, and Thyatira. We will give greater attention to this group, since we believe we have more in common with them than with the others. These churches had many positive qualities, but they constantly ran the risk of overlooking their problems because they could see so many positive things. That is why Jesus reminded these three churches of what He had against them.

The Church in Ephesus

After praising their right conduct, Jesus complained that they had abandoned their first love.

I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars; and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary. Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love.

Revelation 2:1–4 (NKJV)

Could this first love be that enchantment that occurs “at first sight,” or shortly after conversion? The apostles taught that we should grow in love. Therefore, the love of someone mature, experienced in relationship with the Lord, is far greater than that of someone who has only just come to know Him. In order to identify what this first love is that Jesus refers to, let us first look at the praise He gives.

According to Jesus, the Ephesians had much labor and perseverance; they rejected the practices of wicked men; they discerned false apostles; they endured trials for the name of Christ — yet

they had abandoned their first love. The following text helps us understand what Jesus was talking about.

Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent.

Revelation 2:5 (NKJV)

Let us note that Jesus tells them to return to the practice of the first works, not to the first love. The truth is that we can be full of works that are not founded on love for Christ. This is the first love: having Jesus as the goal and doing everything out of love for Him. For Jesus, the motive behind what we do matters greatly. It does no good to have a long list of labors and perseverance if our motivation is not love for the Lord Jesus.

Motivation is so important to Jesus that He says: “if you do not repent, I will remove the lampstand from among you.” In other words, He would remove His presence from the midst of the church, even though it had so many good works. Jesus perceived that He had been replaced, in their hearts, by work — by works themselves.

The Church in Pergamos

We have another example of a church that received praise for not having denied the faith, despite much persecution. But against them, Jesus held the fact that they had accepted, in their midst, spurious doctrines, such as those of Balaam and the Nicolaitans.

I know your works, and where you dwell, where Satan's throne is. And you hold fast to My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days in which Antipas was My faithful martyr, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells. But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality. Thus you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate. Repent, or else I will come to you quickly and will fight against them with the sword of My mouth.

Revelation 2:13–16 (NKJV)

Beyond the rebuke, Jesus says that if they do not repent, He will come against them with the sword of His mouth, with which He would wound those who had drifted from sound doctrine. In other words, words of judgment would go out from the mouth of Jesus to wound them.

May we have zeal before the Lord! Beyond knowing times and seasons, may we desire to know His opinion of us.

The Church in Thyatira

Jesus acknowledges that they had works, love, and faith. But against them weighed the fact that they tolerated Jezebel.

I know your works, love, service, faith, and your patience; and as for your works, the last are more than the first. Nevertheless I have a few things against you, because you allow that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, to teach and seduce My servants to commit sexual immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols. And I gave her time to repent of her sexual immorality, and she did not repent. Indeed I will cast her into a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of their deeds. I will kill her children with death, and all the churches shall know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts. And I will give to each one of you according to your works.

Revelation 2:19–23 (NKJV)

The letter to the church in Thyatira teaches us that tolerance displeases the Lord. Problems will always appear in the church; we will always run into errors. Let us not forget that among the twelve disciples closest to Jesus there were problems, and that Paul's letters show that in every church the brothers and sisters faced very difficult situations.

Jesus does not disqualify us because of the serious problems that arise in the midst of the church, but we will be disqualified if we are tolerant of those problems. What existed in the church of Thyatira was considered by Jesus to be spiritual prostitution. It becomes clear to us that it is not enough to have faith, love, and perseverance if, together with all of this, we are tolerant of wrong things.

After this brief look at the seven churches, we will now examine the promises Jesus makes to the overcomer at the end of each letter. In every situation, Jesus was counting both on those who would persevere faithfully and on those who would repent and overcome. These are promises that fill us with joy, and we dare say they surpass all the other promises He had made while He was here on earth, and the promises He sent through the apostles.

In the letters we have studied, the promises give us a panorama of what it is to live in eternity with Christ. They show us that everything we might have in this world — riches, pleasures, honor — when compared with these promises of Jesus, becomes like chaff in the wind, like children's dreams, or like the illusions of madmen. This is the truth regarding the value men place on the things of this world.

We believe that, through these promises, Jesus wants to instill in His bride a true and unshakable holy “ambition” for everything the overcomers will receive. May Jesus fill our hearts with this desire!

The Promises to the Overcomers

Church of Ephesus

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God” (Revelation 2:7).

Each promise is related to the problem that was identified. In this church a lack of love was identified. Here it is as if Jesus were saying: “let your heart feed on constant love for Jesus, and

He will feed you for all eternity, with the indescribable life that He has; He Himself is the tree of life.”

Church in Smyrna

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death” (Revelation 2:11).

Smyrna was a church that suffered in body, damaged by imprisonments and deaths. And the promise of Jesus is that the overcomer will in no way suffer the harm of the second death. The Lord will deliver those who suffer for Him, physically, from the greatest suffering and pain that can exist — the second death.

Church in Pergamos

“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 to eat. And I will give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name written which no one knows except him who receives it” (Revelation 2:17).

Pergamos was accused of serious doctrinal errors. It is as if this church had despised all the suffering Jesus endured, by despising His doctrine. It lacked intimacy with Christ, with His life and His teachings. For those who overcome, who do not let themselves be carried away by strange doctrines, who have intimacy with the mind of Jesus, there is reserved a fellowship with Him never before experienced by any saint who lived on this earth. These will have access to the hidden manna and to fellowship with Jesus, with a right to a new name that, for all eternity, only He and we will know. The King of the universe is promising a relationship of complete exclusivity and personal intimacy.

Church in Thyatira

“And he who overcomes, and keeps My works until the end, to him I will give power over the nations— ‘He shall rule them with a rod of iron; They shall be dashed to pieces like the potter’s vessels’—as I also have received from My Father; and I will give him the morning star” (Revelation 2:26–28).

In this church there appeared Jezebel, the false prophetess who felt powerful because she was deceiving many. We believe this is the main motivation of false prophets: to make themselves great figures. Here Jesus promises, to those who keep His works to the end, authority over the nations and the morning star. In other words, the overcomers will govern the nations together with Him. Jesus also promises them the morning star. What distinguishes this star from all others is that it can be seen even with the sun shining.

In Revelation 21 we see that Jesus will be the sun that will shine with glory over the eternal city. But here we are seeing the promise that the overcomers will not become invisible before that light, but will shine like the morning star. This reminds us of the prophecy of Daniel:

Those who are wise shall shine Like the brightness of the firmament, And those who turn many to righteousness Like the stars forever and ever.

Daniel 12:3 (NKJV)

Government and radiance, for all eternity, together with Jesus!

The Church in Sardis

“He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels” (Revelation 3:5).

Sardis had a good reputation among men, but was dead before God. The overcomer, however, will be clothed in white garments, and his name will not be erased from the Book of Life. To have white garments means to be pure before God and before men. The promise guarantees eternal salvation, for the name will never be blotted out of the Book of Life, and will be confessed before God and before the angels.

The Church of Philadelphia

“He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more. I will write on him the name of My God and the name of the city of My God, the New Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God. And I will write on him My new name” (Revelation 3:12).

Philadelphia was another church that suffered greatly. To this church, the promises include being one of the permanent pillars of the temple of God, and having the name of God and of the New Jerusalem inscribed upon it.

The Church in Laodicea

“To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne” (Revelation 3:21).

Laodicea can be considered the worst of the seven. They considered themselves spiritually rich and prosperous. And Jesus promises the overcomer that he will sit with Him on His throne. Jesus shows that He still loves this church, and that is why He disciplines it and wants it to repent. Even though they were doing very badly before the Lord, they could still be overcomers. Jesus seeks to draw them with a wealth far greater than they could imagine — not merely to govern the nations together with Jesus, but to sit with Him on His throne.

It is interesting to note that, in every letter, the Lord adds: he who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. May we be able to hear the Holy Spirit!

CONCLUSION

In this thirty-first lesson of the Foundations Curriculum, we studied the letters that Jesus sent to the seven churches. We identified three types of churches with regard to rebuke and praise. We also saw that promises exist for all of them. Applying what we found in Revelation to our own reality, we saw that Jesus keeps His expectation set on those who will persevere to the end and on those who will repent and become overcomers. We were encouraged to hear the voice of the Spirit to the churches, to persevere to the end, and to be the object of these promises.

CONSIDER CAREFULLY

- 01 As you read these letters, do you notice how much richness there is in the book of Revelation?
- 02 Are you listening to what the Spirit says to the churches?
- 03 How do you feel in light of all these warnings and promises?
- 04 What matters more to you: the opinion of men, or the opinion of Jesus?

*having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets,
Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone.*

Ephesians 2:20 (NKJV)

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