

CO-CONQUERORS

Revelation 2:8-11

Many people who read the Bible tend to avoid Revelation. Even though the book's confusing imagery alienates some readers, God intended its strange contents to serve as a triumphant conclusion to the Bible's message rather than some opaque reading test of one's faith. That triumphal message begins with Jesus' letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2-3 in which Jesus describes the challenges confronting the churches and offers blessings to those who overcome them. Our consideration of those letters will seek to identify how they speak to Jesus' church throughout time and geography and what lessons they therefore hold for us.

"The one who conquers..."¹

Revelation opens with John's account of Jesus appearing to him in a vision in a way that emphasized Jesus' all-powerful, all-conquering identity (*Revelation 1:4-20*), a vision claiming that:

- Jesus is "the ruler of kings on earth" (*Revelation 1:5*).
- Jesus has a kingdom composed of specially commissioned people (*Revelation 1:6*).
- Jesus possesses "glory and dominion forever and ever" (*Revelation 1:6*).

Jesus revealed himself to John because he had an important message about the near future that he wanted John to deliver to seven churches in Asia (*Revelation 1:1, 3; 22:10; 1:9-11*), a group of individual churches selected to serve as representatives of Jesus' kingdom. That message focused on two important points:

- Even though Jesus rules with absolute sovereignty over the world and over his church, the letters reveal the church was experiencing an escalating conflict with evil spiritual forces working in the world through the nations that give their allegiance to them (*cf. Revelation 2:10; 12:17-13:18; Ephesians 6:10-12*).
- Even though, from the perspective of the church, the evil opposing them seemed overwhelmingly powerful, John's revelation reveals that Jesus had already defeated those evil spiritual forces and assured ultimate victory to those who remained faithful to him (*cf. Revelation 1:17-18; 2:9-11; 12:1-17*).

The message John delivered to the churches reveals both the problems confronting the church as well as the blessings Jesus promised to those who 'conquered' their problems. Jesus' description of his audiences' struggles offers insights into the challenges confronting his church, challenges organized by the evil spiritual forces working in our world. While the challenges

¹ All quotes from the Bible come from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (ESV Permanent Text Edition, Crossway, 2016) unless otherwise noted.

confronting the seven churches were specific to their time and place, they nevertheless reveal the means Satan uses to undermine allegiance to Jesus and included things like:

- **Misplaced focus** (*Revelation 3:1*) - We can misplace our focus by, for example, giving more attention to defending the institution of the church rather than conforming ourselves to the character of Jesus.
- **Arrogance and affluence** (*Revelation 3:17*) - We live in an affluent, self-assured culture that praises self-reliance and individualism. Such attitudes espouse an arrogance that cuts against Jesus' expectations (*cf. Matthew 20:20-28*). Because they prove so prevalent in our culture, we must not dismiss the very real challenge they present to us.
- **Persecution** (*Revelation 2:9-10, 13; 3:9-10*) - While we will most likely not encounter physical persecution, we do encounter psychological and social persecution daily. We live in a post-religious, post-truth culture that pressures us to accept its values and labels us extremists if we reject its beliefs.
- **Compromise and immorality** (*Revelation 2:2-4, 14-15, 20*) - Too often we allow things to compete with Jesus for dominance of our lives (career, education, sports, entertainment, relationships, etc.), revealing our lack of concern or belief in him. When we compromise Jesus' sovereign place over our lives, we create space for "disorder and every vile practice" (*James 3:16*).

In addition to identifying the problems affecting the seven churches, Jesus also issued promises to those who that managed to overcome their struggles. Those blessings include:

- **Life** (*Revelation 2:7, 11; 3:5*) – Jesus promised to free his conquerors from their slavery to death by restoring them to their place in Eden, a place of eternal life and connection to God.
- **Rule** (*Revelation 2:26; 3:21*) – Even though oppressed by world empires, Jesus promised his conquerors the right to rule the nations by joining him on his throne and sharing in his sovereign rule.
- **Identity** (*Revelation 2:17; 3:5, 12*) – While the world misrepresented and rejected Christians' identity, Jesus promises his conquerors a new and honorable identity.
- **Protection** (*Revelation 2:11 2:17; 3:5*) – Even though Jesus' promised "mana" to those who devoted themselves to him, his promises of protection focus, not merely on our present life, but on protecting their life after this life.

Even though Satan's challenges prove very real, very persistent, and very dangerous, Jesus' letter to the seven churches reminds us that we are not alone – he has already defeated Satan and guarantees our triumphant victory. Our embrace of his victory guarantees certain blessings ...if we choose to submit ourselves to his rule, if we become conquerors through him.