

## ***Revelation 2-3***

### **I. THE JUDGMENT SEAT OF CHRIST**

- A. Believers will be called to stand before the judgment seat of Christ. At the judgment seat Jesus will evaluate our life and we will either suffer great loss or earn great reward.
- B. Jesus' desire for us is that we receive great reward. He does not want us to suffer loss. Because of this, He has given us, in the Scripture, instruction so that we will know that things are important to Him and the things that will enable us to earn great reward.
- C. We must read the Scripture actively rather than passively. We should not be in a passive posture just waiting for the judgment day hoping that it will work out well for us. Instead, we should actively respond to Scripture and embrace Jesus' value system to position ourselves to hear "well done" when our lives are evaluated.

### **II. THE SEVEN CHURCHES OF REVELATION**

- A. In the seven letters to the seven churches of Revelation Jesus was addressing heart issues for three specific audiences:
  - 1. Believers alive at the time John actually wrote down the vision. Jesus' instruction was directed to real people at a real time.
  - 2. Believers throughout history who would face the same heart issues in varying degrees. Jesus' instructions are timeless. Man faces the same fundamental heart challenges in each generation.
  - 3. Believers at the end of the age who would face all of these heart issues with an increased intensity as this age comes to a close. Jesus' instruction to the churches was prophetic. Prophecy has the ability to speak in a historical moment while also speaking into things that are yet to come.
- B. With each exhortation Jesus includes the words "to him who has ears to hear what the Spirit is saying." All Scripture is given for us, but Jesus is clearly exhorting us to take what He is saying seriously.
  - 1. There is a possibility of reading His instructions and yet not hearing what the Spirit is saying.
  - 2. He wants us to avoid that loss, so He repeatedly exhorts us to listen intently and hear what the Spirit is saying in each instruction.
- C. With each exhortation Jesus also includes a promise of reward to the one who overcomes.
  - 1. He obviously intends us to overcome. He does not want us to be ashamed on that day, but to be found as an overcomer enjoying the pleasure of His affirmation and His rewards.

2. Becoming a overcomer is not automatic. It requires our own participation. That is why Jesus offers us rewards. He is motivating us to engage the process of overcoming.
  3. Not only is overcoming not automatic, it is also difficult. Jesus offers us large rewards not only as motivation but also because He knows it is difficult. However, these difficulties are aimed, not at discouraging us, but at forming us into a bride that can be His eternal companion.
  4. Our way is difficult but it is difficult because of the glory He wishes to bestow on us as His companion. His way was difficult as well.
- D. Responding to the messages in the letters to the seven churches is critical in learning to overcome. Not only is the content of the messages critical, but the order in which Jesus addresses the issues is critical as well. He addresses issues of the human heart in an intentional way and in a specific order.
- E. Jesus is identifying heart values that will prepare us to receive rewards and to overcome. It is critical that we respond to these messages and cultivate these heart values so that we are in a position to receive rewards from Him when we stand before the judgment seat.

### III. EPHESUS

***“Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love. 5 Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works..” – Revelation 2:4-5a***

- A. Jesus’ first rebuke was to the church that performed well, but had lost it’s first love. This is the first church Jesus addresses and it is significant that Jesus first addresses the issue of performing well in ministry but not remaining in love.
- B. When Jesus was questioned on the law, He had the same response (Matthew 22:37-40; Mark 12:29-31) clearly identifying loving God as the first and the greatest commandment. Jesus’ rebuke to Ephesus is a clear call to return to the first commandment.
- C. Love must always be the primary, all consuming characteristic of our devotion to Him. Love is not just a feeling, but it is also a heart commitment.
1. Our actions flow out of our love so it is not a sentiment Jesus is looking for, but something real and substation.
  2. Actions flowing from love are important, but actions without love are deadly.
- D. God Himself is love. When we fail to relate to Him in love, we fail to relate to Him as His is and we are in danger of drifting completely away from Him.
1. We cannot lose sight of the fact that He does not have love, but He is love. To love Him is to know Him as He is.

2. To not love Him wholeheartedly is to relate to Him on a way other than the way He in fact is.
- E. One of the primary jobs of the Holy Spirit is to enable us to love God wholeheartedly. We are so fallen, it is impossible for us to love God, or each other, rightly, but the Holy Spirit can empower us to love.
- F. In addressing this heart issue first, Jesus was setting it apart as the most significant issue and the one that must be addressed before the rest.

#### IV. SMYRNA

***“I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich)... Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer.” – Revelation 2:9-10***

- A. Jesus likewise warned the disciples about the issue of suffering repeatedly (Matthew 9; John 16:33). While different believers at different times in different places experience varying degrees of suffering, suffering is intrinsic to the Christian faith.
- B. Enduring suffering, rather than shrinking back, is critical to earning rewards. When our hearts do not embrace suffering when God allows it, we quickly fall away from the faith like the seed that sprouted in shallow ground and could not endure the scorching heat (Mark 4:6).
  1. God, in His wisdom, allows different levels of suffering to different believers, but we must posture our hearts towards suffering. Because God cares so deeply for each believer we can be confident that He will reward suffering in a way that is out of proportion to what we endured.
  2. If we do not position our hearts to endure suffering, we face a very real risk of falling away. Many who are now believers are at a very real risk of being swept away if suffering comes because they have never positioned their hearts to receive suffering as a part of their Christian life.
- C. Jesus overcame through suffering and this is why He calls us to the same posture of heart. He knows how much we are able to bear (I Corinthians 10:13), but He calls us to endure suffering so that we are not surprised if and when it comes.
- D. The issue of suffering is a love issue. Though we may be weak and fear, we suffer for those we love. Ultimately love is the strongest bond that exists, and a bond of love is required for suffering.
  1. When we suffer, it is an extravagant display of our love for Jesus.
  2. When we do not posture our hearts to endure suffering it is an indication that our love is shallow because love is always self-sacrificing.

3. True love will endure suffering because of love for another rather than shrink back from suffering for the sake of self-preservation.
- E. Jesus tenderly loves us. Not only will He not give us more than we can bear (I Corinthians 10:13), He is also tender with us (Matthew 12:30, Isaiah 42:3) even when we are weak.
1. All of us have shrunk back from suffering in various ways at various times.
  2. Our part is to intentionally posture our heart to endure suffering and Jesus will release the grace and power of the Holy Spirit to endure suffering. The testimonies of the martyrs demonstrate clearly that He releases grace in the hour of need for those who have anchored their hearts in love.
- F. Jesus clearly warned that the last days would be days of pressure and trials. The earth will experience suffering that has never before been, nor will ever be again. For the church in the last days, the issue of suffering is larger than just persecution for the gospel. It includes enduring the birth pangs that will come on the earth and shake it. There will be a great reward for the generation that endures this shaking.

## V. PERGAMUM AND THYATIRA

***“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... 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.” – Revelation 2:14; 20***

- A. Having addressed the issue of love and suffering, Jesus now addresses issues that will cause love to grow cold.
- B. The first issues Jesus calls the church to address are compromise and idolatry that flow from the ways of Balaam.
1. Balaam knew that he was not able to directly confront the people of Israel and curse them. He knew that God would defend them against their adversaries. However, he also realized that the people of God could be destroyed by corruption within.
  2. While God will protect His people from outward assaults, His people are vulnerable to corruption within that will ultimately destroy them. By embracing compromise in their hearts, they have the ability to do what the enemy cannot do with external assaults.
- C. Jesus clearly identifies two specific things that are related to the way of Balaam that have the ability to cause believers to stumble rather than overcome.
- D. Eating food offered to idols represents casualness towards the influence of darkness. Jesus is highlighting a familiarity with compromise or things that are questionable.

***“hating even the garment defiled by the flesh.” – Jude 1:23***

1. When we begin to allow things that are doubtful and it does not sting in our hearts any more we open ourselves up to even more compromise.
  2. We cannot afford to tolerate things that are questionable or things that bring false worship into our lives. Jesus is warning us not to participate in any way, even second hand, in the worship of darkness. This worship may be the worship of actual demons or idols, but it can also be expressed in the worship of men, ideas, systems, governments, movements, or anything that sets itself up to receive praise and glory from men.
  3. We cannot afford to participate in any way with false worship. What we tolerate, we subtly embrace. Compromise is never stagnant. It always increases.
- E. Refusing compromise is an expression of love to Jesus.
1. When two people become married, they have a responsibility to cut themselves off from various relationships with the opposite sex in order to preserve and nurture their marriage. They do not just cut themselves off from sexually immoral acts, but they also create distance between themselves and other members of the opposite sex.
  2. This distance is an expression of love for their partner and it serves a secondary purpose of protecting themselves from little compromises that lead to a larger compromise. Men and women rarely fall into adultery immediately. It is little compromises, that are not in and of themselves wrong, that eliminate the proper distance between two unmarried individuals that positions them for a place of deeper compromise.
  3. Jesus is calling this church, out of her love for Him and her union to Him, to create a proper distance between herself and other lovers. Eating meat offered to idols isn't the entire issue. The issue is creating familiarity with idolatry and avoiding proper distance that keeps the heart inflamed with love for Jesus.
  4. The root issue is love. Married people in love find it easy and a joy to avoid improper relationships with others that they relate to in order to fuel and protect their love. Married people who have grown dull in love are more likely to be more "friendly" with the opposite sex than they should be, opening the door to compromise.
- F. Sexual immorality has a unique ability to destroy individuals and communities (I Corinthians 6:15-20). No other sin affects the human person the way sexual sin does. At the same time, the sexual appetite has unusual power to enslave the human person when it is not kept within the bounds that God has placed around it.
1. At the end of the age, sexual sin will be one of the most pervasive sins precisely because of the power of its allure and the bondage it brings to the human person.
  2. God can protect believers from all sorts of assaults from the enemy, but engaging in sexual immorality completely opens up believers to bondage and darkness.

3. Humanity has been enslaved to sexual sin in every generation, but the enemy will leverage sexual immorality in an unusual way at the end of the age. The ability of technology and media to spread images and video will cause the depth of perversion in sexual immorality to increase at a rate never before seen in human history.
  4. The entire goal and aim of the proliferation of sexual immorality will be to enslave humanity. Believers in compromise will not be able to overcome and the church will come under God's judgment when she tolerates immorality because she will be enslaved to darkness and the lust of the flesh making her unable to carry the full measure of the Holy Spirit.
  5. Believers must be particularly ruthless with sexual immorality. Just as with meat offered to idols, believers must keep themselves from any measure of compromise. It is not enough merely to abstain from immoral acts, believers must also avoid any entertainment, media, or conversation that glorifies or even tolerates immorality. Even the quiet tolerance of promiscuous lifestyles must be avoided.
  6. Those who are married must even seek to avoid the spirit of the age in their own sexual relations, instead seeking to relate to their spouse in a godly way.
- G. We cannot tolerate those who teach and lead others in immorality. Jesus specifically references once who is calling herself a prophet. No matter how gifted a person is, or how anointed they seem, we cannot allow them to minister or teach if they allow compromise or promote it.
1. In mercy God often allows anointed people to minister for a period of time with power even if they have opened the door to compromise. This is both his mercy to that individual and also His concern for those they are ministering to.
  2. When a person's ministry is accompanied by power even though they are embracing compromise, never interpret that as God's approval. It is God's love for believers that causes Him to release power for them even when it comes through an impure vessel. Never forget that many who prophesied and worked miracles will be ultimately cast away at the judgment seat (Matthew 7:22-23).
- H. The Holy Spirit will release grace for sexual purity amidst temptation. The church is to relate, as Jesus did, those who have been trapped into sexual sin with compassion, but the church must call those trapped into sin into purity by living in the power of purity. Mercy is available for those who have stumbled sexually, but only for those who are repentant and wholeheartedly embrace the call to purity.

## VI. SARDIS

***"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**

- A. Jesus' rebuke to Sardis recalls His instruction in the Garden of Eden. Obedience to God's instruction leads to life. Refusing His instruction leads to death.
1. Responding to God's instruction is not a passive thing, but it is an active response. Each day we must deliberately live life in obedience to His commands.
  2. "Coasting" is not an option in our life in God. We must intentionally build relationship with Him every day.
- B. The rebuke to Sardis is located strategically in the list of churches. Obedience to the instructions Jesus gave to the previous churches (the first works of love, enduring suffering, avoiding compromise, etc.) is the way to avoid falling into deadness. We must "remember what we have received and heard" so that we will not succumb to death.
- C. Reputation is a deadly thing. Believers can have a reputation of piety and devotion long after the inner man has begun to die. Jesus cuts right through the possibility that He will evaluate the church externally by addressing the heart issue.
- "For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart." – Hebrews 4:12***
1. Jesus refuses to relate to us externally because the kind of communion that God desires with man requires that we are compatible with Him internally and not just externally.
  2. Life and death are the summary issues of redemption. Life flows from God and sin leads to death. God's entire aim in redemption is that we be filled with life while the end result of sin is death. Death can never be accepted as normal.
- D. Jesus also intends that we be completely aware of times and seasons. Refusing to respond to the instructions He gave to the previous churches can lead to have a dull spirit that does not even recognize when Jesus comes to us.
1. When we do not respond and become dead, He comes to us as a thief. Jesus will come upon the world as a thief, but believers are to be watching for Him in expectation aware of the times and season.
  2. He does not want His coming to shock us as it will the world, but if we allow our spirits to grow dead, it will. We have to keep our inner man alive by responding to Jesus' instruction.

## VII. PHILADELPHIA

***“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...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 3:8,10-11***

- A. To the church at Philadelphia, Jesus highlights faithful obedience and perseverance even in the midst of little strength.
1. One of our greatest stumbling blocks to reward in God and our life in God in general is how little we esteem the small things of life. While it is good and right to do “big things” for God, our life and character is formed in how we live faithfully in the small things.
  2. Being obedient in the small things requires perseverance. Perseverance is the ability to keep going when we feel weak and not only when we feel strong.
  3. Perseverance is also the ability to be obedient and keep going even when it seems like our small acts of obedience have not been immediately rewarded. Perseverance is the ability to endure in confidence that Jesus will reward our faithfulness, even if we do not see that reward in this age and in this lifetime.  
***“All these people earned a good reputation because of their faith, yet none of them received all that God had promised.” – Hebrews 11:39 NLT-SE***
  4. Not seeing immediate reward and feeling the pain of little strength are true tests of perseverance and earn a crown of reward.
- B. Many believers have an unrealistic expectation of feeling strong all the time. Constant strength leads to self-confidence, which is deadly to a life in God.
1. Feeling strong is one of the primary heart cravings of fallen man. By nature, man avoids weakness and dependence and yet these are the very heart postures that are required for intimacy with God.
  2. We must be delivered from our deadly self-centered confidence. It is the root of all sin because, in the garden, man made the decision to live by his own inner discernment rather than in dependence on God’s moral judgments.
  3. Jesus esteems those who, feeling weak, are faithful and persevere because they have repented from the sin of the garden and embraced a posture of dependence.
  4. This does not usually look and feel glorious, but each moment of perseverance and obedience is creating a memorial before God and will be richly rewarded.
  5. This is why Jesus exhorts the church to hold onto their faithfulness and perseverance, in the midst of feeling weak, with tenacity so that they will not lose their crown.

- C. Many believers are preparing for the pressures of the last days with an incorrect mindset. Many want to feel “strong” when weakness is the very thing that the last days will require.
  - 1. The shakings that earth will endure in the last days are designed by God to shatter men’s strength and sadly that is often the very thing we are holding on to.
  - 2. It will be a church that is constantly aware of its own weakness that will be glorious because it will have learned to lean in to Him and persevere in the measure of strength that He gives.
  - 3. It is not the strength of the believers in the last days that will be their crown. It is their tender, persevering love for Jesus in the midst of shaking and turmoil. He is not going to reward our strength on that day. He is going to gloriously reward our love and devotion to Him *especially* when it flowed out of a heart that felt weak.
  
- D. Because the church in Philadelphia obeyed Jesus’ command to persevere, even though they had little strength, He will keep and protect them from more severe testing that will come on the earth.
  - 1. This severe testing will come precisely because men are confident in their own strength. The testing and shaking of the last days will shatter all their strength.
  - 2. The church in Philadelphia will avoid this testing because they learned perseverance and weakness in the midst of smaller trials.
  
- E. The perseverance of this church was so valuable to Jesus that He was very clear to them that they were to hold on to what they had with tenacity.
  - 1. Because of the crown attached to it, they were to hold fast to it no matter what it took. Jesus was very serious because He did not want this church to lose such a valuable reward.
  - 2. The reward offered for perseverance and faithfulness in weakness is the very presence of God for all eternity (Revelation 3:12).

## VIII. LAODICEA

***“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... As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent.” – Revelation 3:15-17,18***

- A. It is significant that Jesus addresses the issue of love with the first church and with the final church. In rebuking the final church, He contrasts His own love for them (Revelation 3:18) with the coldness of their love.

1. In rebuking the first church, He exposed their lack of love in spite of an excellent performance. In His final rebuke, he addresses the issue of a mediocre heart, but contrasts it with the burning fire of His own heart.
  2. His heart is burning in love for the churches therefore the only logical response is that they live with a burning heart. You can almost hear the wonder in Jesus' voice that they were ambivalent in love. He knows most reject Him, so He expects coldness from lost men. Believers however are called to live in a hot flame of love because they have felt the love of the One who is a consuming fire. To be neither opposed to Jesus, nor filled with His love is a horrible place.
- B. The deadly sin of the church was to have turned from coldness towards Jesus, but to become passive in their love towards Him because they imagined they had achieved a place in God that they have not.
1. While the church in Philadelphia was persevering in weakness, Laodicea was confident in their own strength and ability. They felt rich, strong, and in need of nothing.
  2. In reality, their inner man was not living in the fire of love and her garments were man-made rather than purchased from God with the currency of perseverance, love, and faithfulness.
- C. Jesus addressed the issue of self-confidence positively with the church of Philadelphia because they had turned from self-confidence. He addresses the same issue negatively with the church in Laodicea.
1. Philadelphia was persevering in obedience with little strength earning a massive crown.
  2. Laodicea had confidence in their strength and so had become subject to delusion. They did not recognize that they were naked and blind.
  3. Their confidence had caused them to lose the reach in their spirit towards God. They had settled back in a place of achievement that leads to the delusion of self-confidence.
- D. Love is the issue that Jesus addresses at the beginning and the end because the First Commandment is the thing that will lead to the maximum reward at the judgment seat. A heart in love with God is the way to do the works that are most helpful and avoid a false delusion of reward and achievement that will lead to passivity.
1. Love is the goal and each church reveals dangers that are faced in living a life of wholehearted love.
  2. The church at Ephesus was cold in love because they performed so well in ministry. Their labor had become a substitute for love. It is possible that they also were relating to Jesus on the virtue of their works rather than the basis of His love.

3. The church at Laodicea had grown cold in love because they had assumed a place of achievement and success that was not real.
4. It is deadly to relate to Jesus on the basis of our works and labors rather than on the basis of His love. It is just as deadly to become confidence in a life of mediocrity out of a false confidence in Jesus' love.

## **IX. SUMMARY**

- A. Jesus will evaluate us at the judgment seat, but he wants this to be a place of reward and celebration rather than pain. Though that is His heart's desire, the possibility of pain and shame is very real and should provoke us to sobriety in the way we live.
- B. There are several significant passages that give us insight into how Jesus will evaluate us at the judgment seat. Revelation 2-3 is one of these passages because Jesus intentionally addresses issues in the church that are faced by believers throughout history and correlates them with specific rewards. This tells us that this passage is specifically given for the purpose of preparing us for reward and celebration at the judgment seat.
- C. Revelation 2-3 should not only be used for evaluation and intentional living, but also for prayer. Regularly praying through the issues highlighted in these two chapters will keep these heart values before our heart and will release an urgency and grace to live intentionally in these specific areas.