

The Conquering Christ

Message 2

Stand Firm in Persecution

Revelation 2:1-3:22

Jesus on Patrol

Revelation is a book which records a vision from Jesus and about Jesus. The first scene was a vision of Jesus Himself in all His heavenly glory. The engaging teacher, the masterful healer, the amazing exorcist, the friend of sinners and comforter of the poor, the Son of Man, is now the Terminator of Heaven. Jesus shines with unbearable glory and bears invincible weapons. John was one of Jesus' closest companions. He walked with Jesus, ate with Jesus, watched Jesus die, and was there when Jesus returned to heaven. When John saw Jesus, we should have expected him to rush over to embrace his master and friend, Lord and Savior. But even John almost perished in the presence of Jesus. Jesus – the Terminator of heaven. But we saw last week that this glorious Jesus is the same man who lived among us and died to save us from our sins. In the face of Jesus' terrifying power we can trust Him because He has proven His love for us. No other man or woman can or would do for us what Jesus did. He suffered the horrifying death of crucifixion and the more terrifying anger of God for our sins. Jesus endured three days in hell and finally rose again to set us free once and for all from the power of sin and the tyranny of Satan. Jesus did all this because He loves us. No other love surpasses this love of Jesus for His people.

And now Jesus is on patrol. This magnificent warrior patrols the churches to guard and protect us from the enemy. This does not mean we will not suffer – for there is a war on. Yes, we will suffer – but the presence of Jesus guarantees that we will win. The Terminator comes to kill, and anyone who attacks His church will die. That is good news for us!

Jesus is also the faithful witness. Revelation is about judgment, and Jesus is the faithful witness. He knows all, and He always tells the truth. Judgment will be based upon His report to the court. In tonight's passage Jesus gives us His evaluation of the seven churches who received this letter.

You would think that of all the difficult passages in the book of Revelation, chapters two and three should be fairly easy to understand. They appear to be Jesus' assessment of seven churches in first century Asia Minor. But the meaning of these chapters has been heavily disputed. One common view is that they represent seven church ages. If you read such a view with a decent understanding of history, you should be able immediately to see the weakness of such an interpretation. Furthermore, Revelation has been viewed as a message of the end for *this generation* in every century since the third. Dividing three centuries into seven eras produces a much different result than so dividing 10 or 20 centuries. This does not seem to be a very stable approach to understanding the book. Finally, Revelation itself gives no support for the idea that seven church ages are meant. A more likely, but somewhat esoteric view, is that the churches reflect seven periods of the Old Covenant. This view is outlined in James Jordan's book, *A Brief Reader's Guide to Revelation*. However, the primary point of chapters two and three is that the faithful witness is patrolling the churches and has something to say to them.

Every message begins with the phrase "I know". Jesus knows. You cannot hide from Him. His fiery eyes penetrate into every place and every heart. No one escapes His judgment. You may hide your true self from your parents, your pastor, and even your friends – but Jesus knows. He knows your good deeds and your bad, the motives of your heart and the thoughts of your mind. So when Jesus speaks, what He says is irrefutably true. And what He predicts is certain to happen.

These messages were directed to real churches in Asia Minor (present day Turkey) in the middle of the first century. They apply to us as warnings and encouragements. Jesus is the same today as two

millennia ago. The church in every age must listen to His voice and obey His commands. As we read through these chapters, you must ask yourself, “Does this describe my church? Does this describe me? What must we do to obey?”

Seven Churches

Ephesus was the most prominent city in Asia Minor. Although not the capital of the Roman province of Asia, she possessed the right of *cataplous*, first landing, “which meant that senatorial governors must land there when they arrived to enter on their year of office.”¹ Ephesus was the largest port and the most prosperous city in the province. Paul spent two years establishing the church there – his longest stay in any city. The amazing temple of Diana was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

This was a strong church, at least by appearances. She consistently identified and expelled false apostles and heretics. But the church at Ephesus had a potentially fatal flaw. Her love had grown cold. Jesus was very pleased with her doctrinal zeal, but her lack of love was such a serious problem that she was in danger of being “removed”. Notice that Jesus does not specify *which* love had grown cold – for Him or for their neighbors. That is because the two are linked. John explained this in his first letter. 1 John 4:8 says, “Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.” And in verse 20 he says, “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.” This is the point that Seamas made two weeks ago. It is not enough to seek God. The one who truly seeks God also seeks to love his neighbor, particularly the poor and oppressed. Now Jesus says, if you do not love others, you will be removed.

Does this describe your church? Does it describe you? Do you pour out your heart and spend your energy serving the needy among you? If not, Jesus says you must repent. Correct doctrine is not enough. The demons have correct doctrine. You will go to hell with your correct doctrine unless you love others. Repent, so that you will receive life and enter into paradise.

Smyrna was also a great seaport. This very ancient city had been destroyed in 600 B.C. and was rebuilt by Alexander the Great. It was one of the oldest allies of Rome and thus competed with Ephesus and Pergamum for the title “first in Asia”. To this premier city which died and came back to life Jesus revealed Himself as “the first and last, who died and came to life.”

Smyrna and Philadelphia were the only two churches which received no criticism from Jesus. Smyrna was a poor church, but spiritually she was rich. She had been persecuted by Jews, but so far she had remained faithful. Jesus encouraged her to continue standing firm, even though the persecution would intensify. Her persecutors were Jews, but obviously they were not serving God. That is why Jesus called them a synagogue of Satan. They claimed to worship God, but the truth is they were led by Satan to attack the church. Some people cringe when they hear such talk, as though it were anti-Semitic. It is not. Frankly admitting that Christians were persecuted by Jews in the first century has nothing to do with our opinion of Jews today, and certainly is no justification for Christians to turn the tables now. Jesus calls us to love our enemies and do good to those who hate us – whether Jews or Gentiles, black or white, conservative or liberal. Anyone who calls himself a Christian and persecutes anyone else has denied the faith, and anyone who persecutes Christians attacks Jesus.

We might wish that Jesus would have comforted this poor, faithful, struggling church with the news that persecution will soon be over, but He did not. Instead He told them that some of them would be

¹ G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1966) p. 29.

imprisoned and implied that they would even die. His encouragement is if they remain faithful He will reward them with a crown of life, and He promises that they will escape the second death. The second death will be explained later in the book, but from this we can see that it is worse than the first death. The Smyrnans also know that Jesus had survived death, and that gives them hope.

Is this your church – poor, persecuted, and faithful? For most of you I doubt it. Most of us are comfortable, if not rich. But the important lesson here is that Jesus sometimes allows the godly faithful to die – and that is not a tragedy, because eternal life awaits them after death. The early church really believed this – to the point that some Christians provoked the authorities so that they would be thrown to the lions and die sooner. The bishops tirelessly rebuked this tactic, but it shows how vividly they believed in the resurrection. Do you welcome death? Do you seek the crown of life? Or would you compromise to save your life?

Pergamum was the capital of Roman Asia and “the centre for the worship of Asclepius, the serpent-god”². Thus Jesus said Satan’s throne was there. Like the church in Smyrna, the church here was faithful through persecution, even when one of their members was executed for his faith. But to this church Jesus said faithfulness and bravery in persecution is not enough. Doctrinal faithfulness and moral purity are necessary also. Balak was a prophet who was hired by Balaam, king of Moab, to trouble the Israelites as they traveled from Egypt to Canaan. You can read this story in Numbers 22-25. Balak proposed using Moabite women to entice the Israelite men with sex and lead them into idol worship, knowing this would provoke God’s anger. Nothing is known about the Nicolaitans outside of these references in Revelation, but presumably they also taught false doctrine and promoted immoral behavior. As in centuries before, this provoked God’s anger – and Jesus warned the church in Pergamum that He would come personally and attack them unless they repent of this sin.

Thyatira was a commercial center. Among her many trade guilds, one of the foremost was the bronze guild. The world translated “burnished bronze” is found in no other Greek literature. Some scholars think it may be the brand name for the particular bronze made in Thyatira. Jesus is saying, “My feet are stronger than your world-famous bronze armor.”

Thyatira was the opposite to Ephesus. This church was full of love and service, but was doctrinally careless. They would have said, “Doctrine doesn’t matter as long as we all love Jesus.” Wrong. Doctrine matters to Jesus. He threatened to come and strike down their prophetess who was misleading them and kill her followers. He reminded this church that He knows the mind and heart. They will not escape His judgment. This church must act quickly to expel this prophetess and anyone who refuses to repent of her teaching. Beside this, the church was doing well. Their love and service were commendable. If they were faithful to rule their own affairs well, Jesus would give them a role in ruling the earth.

Is your church active in ministry, but careless about doctrine and morality? Do you build houses for the homeless and go on mission trips, but neglect solid teaching in your Sunday school? Are you devoted to doctrine and to purity? Recent polls show that doctrine among evangelicals is shamefully weak. We tend to be ignorant of even the most basic teachings of scripture. Similar studies also show that evangelicals are not morally distinguishable from unbelievers. Just last week I heard a campus minister say that Christian students are telling him any sort of sexual intimacy is moral as long as there is no penetration. Such people must be taught the truth and called to repentance. And any church that refuses to rule her own affairs will have to contend with Jesus when he comes to clean house. I fear that many of our churches will not survive His coming. The application for you is this. Do not think that by doing ministry activity you will be pleasing

² Ibid., p. 37.

to God. Do serve others. But also apply yourself to a careful study of doctrine, and pursue purity.

The church in **Sardis** appeared to be the perfect church. They were at peace, undisturbed by doctrinal disputes or persecution. They had a positive reputation in the community. They should have remembered Jesus' words, "Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets." (Luke 6:26) The peace of Sardis was not the peace of perfection, but the peace of death. This church did not dispute theology because they did not know any theology. They did not care about the poor. And they did nothing positive to spark opposition from Satan. This is a church that is AWOL in the spiritual battle surrounding them. They are content and at peace while others are fighting and dying for Jesus. No wonder Jesus threatened to attack them. They were spiritual traitors. Sardis was build on an impregnable spot. She had never been taken by assault, but twice she had been defeated when an enemy sneaked in. Jesus promised to sneak into this apparently prosperous church and destroy it unless they repent.

Is your church comfortable, at peace, prosperous, and respected by all? Beware! You may be in danger of destruction. Jesus calls you to repent of your complacency, laziness, and hard-heartedness. If your church refuses to repent, you must flee to a church which is spiritually alive. How about you personally? Are you engaged in the work of Jesus' Kingdom? Do you throw yourself into knowing God and serving man? Or is Christianity more of a game than a way of life? Do you come to RUF for fun and friendship, or to seek God and hear His voice? Beware! You may not know God after all.

Philadelphia is the other church without any glaring flaws. Jesus commended them for keeping His word and not denying His name. Apparently they were being persecuted by false Jews – Jews who claim to be followers of Moses, but who reject Jesus whom Moses prophesied. Jesus says Satan is behind such people, so He calls them a synagogue of Satan. Jesus makes two profound promises to this church. He will cause these false Jews to bow before them, and He will protect this church from the greater persecution to come.

Jesus identifies Himself to Philadelphia as the one "who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens." (Revelation 3:7) He also has set before them "an open door, which no one is able to shut." (Revelation 3:8) Some people see this as a reference to opportunities for successful evangelism, but that is unlikely. The keys of the Kingdom are for opening and closing the entry to the Kingdom. (See Matthew 16:18-19) So the door is not an opportunity for witness, but an opening into the presence of God. This is especially clear in the next message to Laodicea. Jesus is saying this faithful church will always be able to look forward to unimpeded fellowship with Him. Is that what you want? The message is clear – if you want to know Jesus, keep His word and stay faithful to Him.

Laodicea was situated between Hierapolis and Colossae. Hierapolis had medicinal hot springs, and Colossae was watered by a cold mountain stream, but the water of Laodicea was lukewarm and disgusting. It was useful neither for healing nor for drinking. This was an apt metaphor for the church in Laodicea. They thought they were rich, prosperous, and self-sufficient, but in reality they were "wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked." Laodicea had a thriving textile industry, a medical school, and was a banking center. The church made the mistake of thinking that since they were materially prosperous they were pleasing to God. Big mistake! Jesus has the x-ray vision to see under the surface, and He saw that these proud Christians were spiritually bankrupt. Jesus urged them to get true riches from Him. They must trade the rich garments, the famous eye salve, and the gold deposits of Laodicea for the white garments, spiritual ointment, and heavenly gold that Jesus offers. If they do, He will fellowship with them. But if they do not repent, their spiritual nakedness, blindness, and poverty will be exposed – to their shame. Jesus offered this stern rebuke because He loved the Laodiceans. He did not want these Christians to be humiliated. He did not want to remain locked out of their lives. Jesus was knocking to be admitted into their lives.

We live in a rich, prosperous, and peaceful country. Almost everyone in America is in danger of the sort of blind complacency of the Laodicean church. When you can sleep in to 10:00 A.M., go to a one-hour service on Sunday, and be thought a decent Christian – something is dreadfully wrong with the church. Jesus is disgusted by this sort of Christianity! Such people may be born again, but they are an embarrassment to the faith. Jesus sees through superficial Christianity. He has the x-ray eyes, and He knows! He knows your mind and heart. Jesus says, “You are naked, blind, and poor. Do not be deceived by your material wealth and prosperity. You cannot clothe yourself, or heal yourself, or prosper yourself. Come to me! I have the clothes, the medicine, and the wealth you need. I will give you *all* you need. Come to me!”

The Faithful Shall Conquer

Every message to these churches ends with the phrase, “to the one who conquers.” This is the big question before us tonight. Will you be a conqueror? Or will you be a loser? Jesus revealed Himself first as the Terminator because there is a war on. You probably are not often aware of it. Most of the time we go about our business attending class, eating lunch with friends, watching TV, etc. We are oblivious to the unseen war about us, and our Christian friends are just as bad. Satan hates Jesus, he hates all who love Jesus, and he will do anything to destroy Jesus’ Kingdom. He will try to kill your friends, torment you, and persecute you if he thinks these things will erode your faith. What is even worse, Satan will assist you in gaining wealth, popularity, and success – because he knows that these are even more effective in killing your spirit. On your own you are no match for him, but Jesus is on your side – and with His help, you can defeat all the attacks of the enemy. You can be a conqueror if you stick close to Jesus! But if you stray, you will fall.

Note that this battle does not require Jeff Shaw’s assault rifle. It does not require physical strength, social skills, or intelligence – money, or possessions. All it requires is faithfulness to Jesus and His word. Never deny Jesus, and always cherish His word. If you do, you will apply yourself to learn the doctrine taught in the scripture, and you will love and serve people around you. If you are truly faithful to Jesus and His word, serving Him will be the first, last, and all-encompassing goal in your life. If you refuse to dabble in Christianity, but throw yourself into the fight – with whatever resources you have – you will conquer. This is Jesus’ promise.

Jesus promised each church a reward for conquering with Him. But these are not solely future rewards they are available now in some measure. If you will give up this rotten life that looks so good and follow Jesus instead, He will give you these gifts to sustain you along the way. Jesus will give you first life, then strength, food, His name, most profoundly Himself, and finally eternal life. You are not in this alone! Jesus the Terminator has given Himself to you. You will conquer if you stick with Him. Trust Him who died for you to give you the victory over all your enemies. Only remain faithful.

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