

## **A Church at Risk Revelation 3:14-22**

**Day 1: Revelation 3:14 The Amen, the faithful and true witness, and ruler of God's creation.** At the bleakest time in Israel's history, as the nation suffered in exile, God promised a new day to come, a blessed time, when the nation would be reestablished in peace, prosperity and world preeminence. When this promise comes to pass, Israel will be his witnesses to other nations, declaring among all peoples that he alone is God and savior, without rival among others who claim to be gods: "You are my witnesses," declares the Lord, "that I am God" (Isa 43, esp vv 10-12). He is "the God of Amen," the God whose word is true, and whose promises are sure. God "will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind" (Isa 65:16-17).

John takes all these promises and hopes for an idyllic future, and transfers them to Jesus (Rev 3:14). Christ fulfills the role assigned Israel of old: he is the witness of God's salvation. He fulfills the role assigned to God of old: he is the 'amen' (i.e., the faithful and true), the God whose word is true and whose promises are sure; he is the one who saves, who recreates all things, and who rules over this new creation.

In drawing these correlations, John makes several points for his readers, and for us. For one, the fulfillment of God's promises has begun, no matter how challenging their lives now seem. Christ rose from the dead and redeems God's people, as promised. For another, Jesus is divine. He plays the role assigned to God in Old Testament. No surprise here, as John misses no opportunity to ascribe divinity to Jesus. Yet his point is not merely theological, but also practical. These believers are suffering for the name of Christ. Hang on, John urges, for Christ has acted to save, and salvation is found in him alone, so as they persevere through suffering, they will be saved, and their persecutors condemned. For a third, all this prepares the believers in Laodicea to receive the word – the hard word – that John is about to deliver: this oracle comes from him whose word is faithful and true, from him who rules over the new creation, and brings to pass what he promises (and also what he threatens). They must listen carefully, and so must we.

### **Day 2: Revelation 3:15-16 Neither cold nor hot, only lukewarm**

We have this same idiom in English, though, ironically, it carries a different meaning. As a result, the original meaning of this passage is widely misunderstood.

In English, the maxim encourages strong convictions and clear-cut behavior: whether good or bad, either is better than a tepid mediocrity, or middle-of-the-road equivocation. Yet this makes no sense in spiritual terms: either holiness or sin is better than half-hearted obedience?

The original readers would have instantly grasped John's meaning. The nearby city of Hierapolis was renowned for its hot springs and healing spas. Colossae was famous for its cold springs and refreshing drinking water. Laodicea had neither. Instead, it had to pipe in its water from surrounding regions. By the time the water arrived from either source, both hot and cold had become tepid and unpalatable, good for neither sauna nor drinking, but only for spitting out. So Jesus' point is that we must be good for something, anything, rather than useless. In some way – any way – we must serve him, his followers, or his world. He is not particular about what we do, only that we do something useful.

### **Day 3: Revelation 3:16 I spit you out!**

This language can pass right by us without its intended emotional impact, unless we recall those television shots of baseball heroes which linger on their subject just a moment too long, and catch them in the gloriously disgusting act of expectoration. (What is it about playing ball that requires constant spitting?) Or unless we recall the last time we tasted something so disgusting that the only recourse was to spit it out. More to the point, while we rightly celebrate Jesus' love for us, he also warns us that we can potentially disgust him, if we prove good for nothing. And if we disgust him, he spits us out. Not just out of his mouth, but also out of his church, and out of his kingdom.

Whenever a biblical text speaks like this, the theologically alert jump up to ask, "Does this mean that a Christian can lose salvation?" The question is intriguing at a theoretical level, but irrelevant on a practical level. Both poles of the historic theological debate – Calvinists, who insist that salvation cannot be lost, and Arminians who insist that it can – agree on the practical consequence: they concur that professing Christians whose lives do not reflect their claim to faith will not make it into heaven. Where they disagree is over what exclusion from heaven says about their conversion: Calvinists suppose that their faith was never genuine; Arminians suppose that their faith was genuine but died. Since this issue is largely theoretical, it need not actually be resolved.

What matters is what both sides agree on: whether these professing Christians were never truly saved, or were saved and lost it, the reality is that they do not enter heaven. Jesus spits them out of his mouth, out of

his people, and out of heaven. The severity of the consequence warrants our giving careful attention to our spiritual condition lest the same fate befall us.

#### **Day 4: Revelation 3:17 Millionaire slum-dog**

Jesus develops an additional metaphor to reinforce the preceding point. In his previous oracle to the church in Smyrna, Jesus assured them that though they were poor (materially), they were rich (spiritually) (2:9). In Laodicea, he offers just the opposite diagnosis: these Christians are (materially) wealthy, but spiritually impoverished. Not content merely to state the point once, he underscores it: they are wretched, they are pitiful, they are poor, they are blind, and they are naked. Socio-economically, they are high-flyers; spiritually, they are bottom-feeders.

Is there an inherent correlation between material wealth and spiritual poverty? Likely not; the New Testament speaks of a number of wealthy individuals who were also godly and generous. Still, wealth carries at least two spiritual temptations. For one, the effort required to gain wealth can overwhelm any time or energy for serving God and others. For the other, once gained, wealth can serve as security, displacing reliance on God.

The Laodicean church, more than any of the other six churches described in Revelation 1-3, should give us pause. Jesus does not claim that wealth is *always* culpable, or even that wealth in itself is *ever* culpable. Nonetheless, in their case, wealth bred self-confidence and self-satisfaction, as it seems to do no less in our own day. Given that most – not all – of us are prosperous professionals, we do well to be alert to these tendencies in our lives. Socio-economically, we as a congregation bear the closest parallels with the church in Laodicea; let us endeavor that we do not bear a close parallel spiritually.

#### **Day 5: Revelation 3:18 The cure for all that ails**

Jesus does not just point out problems, he offers the solution. The problem: they are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. The solution: himself. John picks up the last three descriptions: poor, blind, and naked, and finds in Jesus the answer to each. The poor can buy from him gold refined in fire; the naked can buy dress whites to cover their nudity; the blind can buy healing ointments. Ironically, all three times those without money buy expensive items from Jesus. In this way, Jesus underscores that in ultimate matters, we have nothing in ourselves of value to offer him, but he offers us great valuables. As the old hymn celebrates, “I’d rather have Jesus than silver or gold; I’d rather be His than have riches untold.”

We run amiss when we aim at more detail: What do the various metaphors – gold, white clothes, salve – represent? They do not represent various different concrete realities. The repetition simply serves artistry and emphasis. All three metaphors make the same point: spiritually, we are needy, and Jesus provides fully. Provided we recognize our need, and appeal to him.

### **Day 6: Revelation 3:19-20 Tough love**

To this point, Jesus' language has been strong, even insulting: "I spit you out of my mouth! You are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked." Yet he speaks not out of animosity, but out of love; not to condemn, but to redeem: "Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline." His verdict on them is not final, but remedial: "Be earnest and repent." He offers this rebuke from their doorstep: if they are willing to accept correction, all they need do is to open the door, and he will enter to reconcile and restore them. Far beyond that, he will permit them to share his throne with God in heaven.

So we see here two aspects to Christ's character, not just one. He is fierce and demanding; he is loving and rehabilitative. We tend to accentuate one side of Jesus' character at the expense of the other. In the eighteenth-century, Christians arguably emphasized Jesus' wrath and judgment; in the twentieth, arguably his love and mercy. Scripture, though, does not alternate between these extremes like some patient struggling with bi-polar disorder. Instead, the Bible affirms both sides of his character in the one passage. On the one hand, Jesus insults the arrogant and rebukes the useless. On the other, he gently calls and warmly welcomes the repentant. Jesus may not always speak gently to us, yet he always offers what we need, whether the harsh word of rebuke, or the warm word of reassurance.