

## **What Jesus Says to the American Church, and to Us Revelation 2:1-3:22**

The Bible presents us with three core realities: (1) the main way that God speaks to us in through his Word to the first-century church, yet (2) their circumstance is much different from ours, so God's word to us might be significantly different from his word to them, and (3) no one biblical book covers a topic exhaustively. So what did God say to them in their circumstance? Given differences between their circumstance and ours, what might he be saying to us in ours? (We'll leave aside what he might be saying to us through other churches in other biblical texts.) Generally, it is worth adding, each church faces a particular circumstance or has taken on a particular character, and that church's oracle centers around that circumstance or character.

**Day 1: Revelation 2:1-7 What God says to us through his word to the church in Ephesus.** The church in Ephesus has three characteristics: they worked hard in service to God, they faced – and endured – persecution, and they were beset by – but opposed – heresy. Their one fault? The second two characteristics – persecution and heresy – were undermining their dedication to the first, to service. That is, of the three things they had done well, they were doing all three with less vigor and enthusiasm lately, now that persecution and heresy had worn them down.

Both the appropriate parallel to – and the contrast with – us is readily apparent. The parallel: Are we doing as well in these three areas (hard work, enduring struggle, and opposing heresy)? The verdict on the American church is a resounding no: much of the American church considers service of God optional, though beneficial; mostly we live in extravagance and greed, spending even beyond our abundant means; and people hardly know even the basic Christian doctrines anymore, and so cannot discern truth from error. All this even though we do not face persecution and we do have the New Testament to guide us.

That leaves open the verdict on us as a church and on us as individuals. Are we – are you – working hard for God? In the absence of persecution and its challenges, are you persevering in faith through the competing demands on your time, and through life's disappointments and sorrows? Are you studying the Bible and learning theology, so that you can recognize the difference between truth and heresy?

**Day 2: Revelation 2:8-11 What God says to us through his word to the**

**church in Smyrna.** The church in Smyrna faces one circumstance, manifesting in three developments: they are facing persecution, leading to (a) imprisonment and possibly death, and (b) poverty, all due to (c) opposition from synagogue officials who reject Christians as heretics. Despite their suffering and their poverty, Jesus commends these Christians as rich. If they persist in faith, this underclass will be crowned world rulers.

Our circumstance strongly contrasts with theirs, but the appropriate parallel is ready at hand. We are neither persecuted, imprisoned, or in danger of martyrdom ... but do we care about, learn about, and pray for those who are? We are not poor, let alone due to persecution, but do we give to, or pray for, those who are? We face only minimal opposition, and even that which we do face is often the consequence of Christian obnoxiousness, rather than due to skeptics' persecution. So the basic question for us is whether in our freedom, prosperity, and safety, we actively care for those in the world today whose situation more nearly approximates the church in Smyrna?

**Day 3: Revelation 2:12-17 What God says to us through his word to the church in Pergamum.** John – and Jesus – highlights two characteristics of the church in Pergamum: it faces persecution and martyrdom, and it tolerates a male leader who condones idolatry and sexual immorality. The Christians are commended for steadfastness in the former, but criticized for complicity in the latter.

The latter warrants further exploration. Toleration of these two sins is symptomatic of an underlying condition, specifically, cultural accommodation. To avoid persecution and to increase acceptance, the ancient church compromised on these two core values of the surrounding culture: the political authorities required emperor worship, and the people expected sexual freedom. This church leader advocates going along in order to get along.

We will consider the specifics tomorrow. For today, we focus on the underlying condition: cultural compromise. Cultures assert subtle but strong pressure on all groups to accept certain beliefs and to follow certain practices. Inevitably these impact the church. So, in the contemporary American church we see increasing flexibility or accommodation on such cultural norms as religious pluralism (or, better, relativism) and sex outside of marriage. At a more subtle level, most books on being a pastor or leading a church reflect similar thinking: our culture is now different, and so we must change in order to be more effective. The question, though, is open to debate: Who is evangelizing whom? If we become more like the

culture in order to win the culture, are we converting them, or are they converting us?

**Day 4: Revelation 2:18-29 What God says to us through his word to the church in Thyatira.** God's word to the church in Thyatira is largely the same as his word to the church of Pergamum, with the main difference that the heretical leader is female, rather than male. Still, the two key sins are the same: sexual immorality and idolatry. Despite an entire list of commendable features – deeds, love, faith, service, and perseverance – and despite doing even more of these good things once persecution flared, these two sins trip them up, potentially fatally.

These two sins remain potent today. While idolatry is less a problem in the U.S. than in much of the rest of the world, its opposite – blasphemy – is rampant here. Idolatry involves the worship of other gods; blasphemy involves invoking the name of God without serious intent (as often in wedding vows, when the couple is not practicing Christians). Sexual immorality, though, is rampant throughout the U.S., and almost as rampant in the American church as in the broader culture.

Jesus' rebuke of the church in Thyatira deserves careful attention: despite a wide range of commendable attributes, overall this church is a failure, due to sexual immorality. If we are to avoid divine condemnation, we must also avoid sexual immorality. This sin is far too seductive for us to avoid without close support from one another. At the very least, we should be in encouragement and accountability relationships which help us remain faithful to Christ.

**Day 5: Revelation 3:1-6 What God says to us through his word to the church in Sardis.** We know nothing in particular about the context in which this church lived, because Jesus focuses entirely on its character: they were once alive, but are now asleep, on the verge of lapsing into a coma, and then, into death. Return to their early days, Jesus urges, when they heard to gospel and received it. Return to their early days, Jesus warns, when they obeyed, or else their names will be erased from the book of life.

This sort of warning is often over-applied today. Many – perhaps most first-generation converts – come to faith with great initial enthusiasm, much like falling in love. Then, much like getting married, they devolve into a more stable emotional state, marked less by extreme highs than by steady commitment. Jesus is not calling us to return to the early, over-excited state of infatuation. But he is calling us to show continued signs of life, to continue serving him and others. So this church prompts us to ask:

do I continue to show signs of life and perform deeds of service to God and to others? Or have I fallen asleep? Am I at risk of falling into a coma?

**Day 6: Revelation 3:7-13 What God says to us through his word to the church in Philadelphia.** This church was rejected by their spiritual half-sisters, the synagogue, and turned over to the pagan Romans for persecution. It clung valiantly to survival and to Christ. So Jesus offers no rebuke, but only promise: he holds the key to the doors that really mattered; locked out of synagogue, they were welcomed into the temple – and kingdom – of God.

There was a time – and still may be, in parts of America – where Christians formed the religious majority, and set the tone for the culture as a whole. But in the Northeast, we tend more to be the mocked minority, holding to religious commitments that are derided as intolerant, and to moral commitments that are rejected as oppressive. To the extent that we find ourselves in such circumstances, God's word to the Christians in Philadelphia is his word to us also: he welcomes us into his kingdom.

**Day 7: Revelation 3:14-22 What God says to us through his word to the church in Laodicea.** The final church may be the closest to our own, and to ourselves. At least in one respect it undoubtedly is: the church in Laodicea is prosperous; by prevailing standards, wealthy. In another respect, hopefully, we are not at all similar to them: they are doing nothing useful for God. In his eyes, measured by what matters to him, they are not well-off; they are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.

Prosperity and wealth as such, we often remind ourselves, are not evil or even detrimental. True enough. Though, likely we all recognize that they are often harmful in at least two respects. For one, the effort to acquire them can be all-consuming, leaving us with little time or energy to be useful to God or to ministry. For the other, as our wealth increases, so does our security, a sure sign that we are trusting more in money than in God. So wealth is not quite the innocuous companion and welcome friend that we might like to believe.

Is there a solution? Probably not once-for-all-time. But there could be a recurring treatment: every year that we enjoy prosperity, we could give away an uncomfortable amount of money to the work of God or to other charity. Treat it like a diet: nothing too severe, but enough to break habits of over-consumption, and to remind oneself that wealth – like food – is prone to excess.