

It Is Harder to Be Saved Than You May Have Been Told

Revelation 2:1-3:22

Many well-meaning preachers and authors inadvertently do the church considerable harm. They are well-meaning: often raised in churches that were anxious about their young people falling into sin, and therefore fixated on the evils of the world and the risk of divine judgment, these authors react by emphasizing the spectacular freeness of grace and its power to forgive the worst of sins. All this is true, but subject to abuse.

The root of the problem is inattention to Scripture. Rather than developing a careful understanding of grace and judgment based on detailed analysis of the Bible, contemporary teaching often develops out of: (a) reaction to the excesses of the past, (b) personal experience and anecdotes, and (c) biblical terms (such as 'grace' and 'forgiveness') abstracted from their biblical content. As a consequence, many people today consider themselves in relationship with God and safe from his judgment, when they are actually under his rebuke and in danger of coming under his wrath.

Revelation 2-3 obviously cannot alone provide a thorough understanding of grace and judgment. But it does at least provide a portion of data often neglected today. In short, because Revelation 2-3 is directed to churches that are theologically and morally loose, it is reactive, and strongly corrective. So, in application, we want to take seriously its warnings where the targeted sins still occur today, without supposing that we can from this text alone develop a comprehensive understanding of grace and judgment. The teaching of Revelation 2-3 is directly applicable where those same sins persist, but it is not – and does not purport to be – a complete treatment of grace and judgment, sin and forgiveness. We look to it for what it does teach, without extending its application beyond its original intention.

In short, what Revelation 2-3 teaches is that salvation is not easily attained. Certainly not by a single prayer. It requires a life of dedication to God alone, even in the face of opposition and adversity. It requires a life of obedience to God, and service to his people. It requires a life of holiness, in the face of a culture which promotes sin. It requires, in the words of Eugene Peterson, "a long obedience in the same direction."

Day 1: Revelation 2:1-7 What it took to be saved in Ephesus.

The church in Ephesus has three positive characteristics: they have worked hard for God, they have persevered through persecution from the

outside, and they oppose heresy from within their midst. Their one fault? They are in danger of forsaking their first love.

John does not explain what forsaking their first love entails. Presumably his first readers would know because, after all, it describes their current condition. What contemporary readers often take it to mean is that the first flush of enthusiasm after the conversion has largely dissipated. They need to return to being as giddy about grace and salvation as they were when first they came to Christ. But there is no indication in the text that this is what John has in mind. Instead, read against the background of the Old Testament, 'forsaking their first love' refers to believers renouncing God. Apparently their adverse circumstance – persecution and heresy – has worn them down, and is undermining their commitment to God.

The lesson for us: Are we succeeding where they succeeded? Are we avoiding failing where they failed? Are we diligently serving God, faithfully resisting opposition, and resolutely rejecting false teaching, without losing heart and giving up?

Day 2: Revelation 2:8-11 What it took to be saved in Smyrna.

The church in Smyrna has one positive characteristic, and that is enough to earn Jesus' unqualified approval. Their strength? Persevering in the midst of miserable circumstances. They are facing persecution, imprisonment, impoverishment, and possibly death, all due to Jewish leadership renouncing them to the Roman authorities. They have nothing, but are rich: in the midst of their suffering and poverty, Jesus commends them for hanging on to their faith. Though he does add one caveat: they must continue to hang on. If their faith survives their suffering, they will rule the world.

The lesson for us takes hold only when we face difficulty or hardship: Will we hold on to our faith in the face of adversity, and receive Christ's praise, or will we lose our faith?

Day 3: Revelation 2:12-17 What it took to be saved in Pergamum.

The church in Pergamum has one hugely positive characteristic: they have withstood persecution from pagan authorities, and kept their faith, even when one of their leaders was martyred. Hard to find fault with a church like that! But they do have one serious flaw: some of their members advocate a strategy of appeasement in order to avoid further persecution. This group advocates participation in emperor worship (presumably, provided they do not actually believe that the emperor is divine), and

condones the sexual immorality pervasive in that culture (perhaps on the grounds that it alienates the culture if the church takes a strong stance against rampant sin). God threatens to kill them if they persist.

We will consider the specifics tomorrow. For today, we focus on the underlying condition: cultural compromise. To avoid persecution and to increase acceptance by the culture, some in the church of Pergamum compromise on these two core values. They go along to get along.

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 accommodation on such cultural norms as religious relativism and sex outside of marriage. At a more subtle level, many books on doing church reflect accommodation: our culture is now different, and so we must change in order to be more effective. The question, though, remains open: 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? Are we honoring God, or falling under his judgment?

Day 4: Revelation 2:18-29 What it took to be saved in Thyatira.

The church in Thyatira has numerous positive characteristics: they have worked hard in service to God, they love one another, they trust in God, and (unlike Ephesus) they are doing more now than when they first believed. Despite all this, some in their midst advocate the same sort of accommodation as in Pergamum, compromising with emperor worship and condoning sexual immorality. If they persist, God will kill the compromisers.

These two sins remain potent today. While idol worship is uncommon in the U.S., religious relativism – the idea that all religions lead to God – is rampant. And sexual immorality is pervasive. If we are to avoid divine condemnation, we must reject relativism and avoid immorality.

Day 5: Revelation 3:1-6 What it took to be saved in Sardis.

We read nothing good about the current state of the church in Sardis. Once they were alive, but now they are asleep, and on the verge of lapsing into a coma, and then, into death. Return to their early days, Jesus urges, when they heard the gospel and welcomed it. Return to the early days, Jesus warns, when they obeyed, or else 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 it took to be saved in Philadelphia.

The church in Philadelphia – like that in Smyrna – has one positive characteristic, and that is enough to earn Jesus' unqualified approval. Their strength? Persevering in the face of persecution. They have been kicked out of the synagogue, but not out of the people of God. All they need do is to continue in their faith, and God will exalt them.

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 disparaged 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 it took to be saved in Laodicea.

The Laodicean church may be closest to our own. At least in one respect: it 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 wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.

Prosperity and wealth as such are neither evil nor detrimental. The question is: What do we do with them? Do we use them to provide for our own comfort and security? Or do we use them for the kingdom of God and the welfare of others? The church in Smyrna was impoverished in the world's eyes, but rich in God's. The church in Laodicea was prosperous in their own eyes, but impoverished in God's. Are we rich? or poor? In whose eyes?