

The Heeding Never Halts

Revelation 2, 3

Jesus started His messages to the seven churches each with an address, an introduction and then an observation. Next up is a verdict.

To Ephesus: *Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love.* You should recall from our previous lesson that the church in Ephesus was headlining their labors so much that they had to be sidelining something else, and here it is – their first love. Did you think perhaps that it was your service Jesus wanted most? When Martha wanted Jesus to tell her sister Mary to stop just sitting at His feet in adoration and worship, He gently told her that Mary had chosen the better part – love over labor and worship over work. It's not that work for the kingdom is unimportant, it's very much so. But God gave His only begotten Son to share and show His love. And His desire is, as the scripture points out, that "love begets love".

Now, Ephesus didn't lose their first love, they left it. That implies a choice was made; other things were prioritized higher. That kind of a choice is dangerous. We'll see why later.

To Smyrna: Significantly, this group has no verdict from the One with the flaming eyes, probably

because they are walking with Him in the flames of persecution and trials. This group has been/will be laying it all down for the Lord and He sees that. Tribulation, poverty and blasphemy are what has come to them from the world and Jesus has nothing negative to tell them. What does that tell you?

To Pergamos: *But I have a few things against you, because 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. Thus you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate.* Unlike His absence of a verdict for Smyrna, Jesus has plenty to say to this church. They are tolerating two false doctrines with three parts. First, is that of Balaam. This confused prophet (found in the book of Numbers) could authentically hear from the Lord but persistently placed himself in the position of a for-profit prophet. Balak, the king of Moab wanted him to curse the host of Israel and paid him to do so, but the Lord continually foiled his attempts. Time after time, blessings rather than cursings came forth from his mouth. Later, as a 'work-around', he told the king that if he could seduce the men of Israel to participate with his own women in their idolatry, they would be cursed by God. This was the stumbling block. Balak took his advice and many of the men of Israel ate things sacrificed to the false gods and had sex with

the Moabite women. They compromised their faith for the sake of pleasure and indeed, they received God's judgment. There are those in Christendom today who, knowing people's weaknesses, take full advantage of them for profit as well. Whether it is in the guise of social or network marketing schemes or ministries that will go off the air unless you send in your donations or the sweet sounds of the profit oriented music industry or stadiums full of 'fans' – take off the wrappings of Christianese and it's just for profit – Balaam's stumbling block.

The word Nicolaitans refers to ruling over the people. Christ set the example for His disciples that they should serve one another, not 'lord it over' each other. On the shores of Galilee, He directed Peter to feed and care for His sheep, not fleece them. Pergamos forgot this lesson, and their leaders lusted for power. It is the same in many churches today. Many people are, or want to be, in ministry for status and appreciation. Some very much like the authority it supposedly gives them to control the lives of others. Jesus said that He hates this. It is a satanic lusting and has no place in the true church. The 'authority' belongs to Christ and the leadership of his people is always to be demonstrated with humility and love.

To Thyatira: *Nevertheless I have a few things against you, because 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. And I gave her time to repent of her sexual immorality, and she did not repent. Indeed I will cast her into a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of their deeds. I will kill her children with death, and all the churches shall know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts. And I will give to each one of you according to your works.

"Now to you I say, and to the rest in Thyatira, as many as do not have this doctrine, who have not known the depths of Satan, as they say, I will put on you no other burden.

This is by far the largest verdict. It is given to the church that began around 600 AD when the Emperor Constantine claimed to embrace Christianity and thus it soon became the state religion. This is where Satan joined the church so to speak. We will show in more detail in chapter seventeen the migration of the false religion started by the prostitute Semiramus. She was the wife of Nimrod, the first empire builder after Noah's flood. In her religion, she of course deified her husband, herself and her illegitimate son, Tammuz. The scholar Hislop showed that Tammuz' god-identity became the Babylonian god Bel which later became Baal. The name Jezebel means "Baal is husband to". This make clear that the church in question here allowed this false religion to first influence it and then seduce it into idolatry.

As a result, this church's leadership spiritually became Jezebel. Christ says that He gave her time to repent... and she did not. Having begun around 600 AD, this church still exists today, and so of the four church eras that continue to contemporary times, she has indeed had time to repent. Of course, not all within the structural organization of this church have bought into the perversion of Jezebel – Jesus says to them, *I will put on you no other burden.*

Many believe that this deceived church will provide the basis for the false religious system of the tribulation. Unless there is repentance, she and her adulterous companions will be cast into the great tribulation – the last three and a half years of the tribulation, the time of God's bowls of wrath. "Her children" are not in the Book of Life of the Lamb. Despite religious appearances, God sees into the innermost being and knows their true state.

One of the attractions or promises of the false religion 'descended' from Semiramis was the ability to discover the *depths of Satan*. "In the days of the New Testament, many non-Christian religions (such as the Ophites and various Gnostic groups) said they knew the "deep things of Satan." The ancient Christian writer Tertullian says that if you asked a Gnostic about their cosmic mysteries, they would furrow their brow and say, 'it is deep.' How could Christians ever fall for *the depths of Satan*? Perhaps the

deceptive reasoning went this way: 'To effectively confront Satan, you must enter his strongholds, and learn his depths in order to conquer him.' People use similar reasoning in misguided spiritual warfare today." – Guzik

To Sardis: *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. You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy.* If you are following along, as you should be, with your Bible, you'll note that this verdict actually follows the 'command' rather than preceding it and thus presents itself as a warning as well. The warning is that they will miss His coming because they are not watching. They don't watch because they have stopped believing. Jesus spoke of their kind in Mat 24 when He said, *Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his master made ruler over his household, to give them food in due season? Blessed is that servant whom his master, when he comes, will find so doing. Assuredly, I say to you that he will make him ruler over all his goods. But if that evil servant says in his heart, 'My master is delaying his coming,' and begins to beat his fellow servants, and to eat and drink with the drunkards, the master of that servant will come on a day when he is not looking for him and at an hour that he is not aware of, and will cut him in two and appoint him his portion*

with the hypocrites. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Mat 24:45-51)

Yet "even in Sardis" are a few that still have sincere faith, a few that haven't defiled their belief in Christ and His return with liberal theology or the ways of the world.

This church also continues to this day.

To Philadelphia: *Indeed I will make those of the synagogue of Satan, who say they are Jews and are not, but lie—indeed I will make them come and worship before your feet, and to know that I have loved you. 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.* John frequently referred to himself in his gospel as the one Jesus loved. It was never an ego issue, it was a thankful humble perception. How about you? Do you really know that Jesus loves you? John said so before the cross; we say so because of the cross.

It is this awareness that gives the believer the strength in spirit to persevere in faith. Even when the whole world and seemingly a large part of the church is going the way of the world, you can keep His command to hold on.

Part of Christ's verdict to this group is to keep them "from the hour of trial", that is, the tribulation. Jesus used two OT saints to describe the two last days groups of His people – Noah and Lot. Noah was

protected in the midst of God's judgment whereas Lot was taken out of way before (just before) God's judgment. Noah represents the faithful Hebrew remnant whom God will protect during the tribulation and Lot pictures the church, especially this one – Philadelphia. This is the group who I am inclined to believe will experience the rapture. Philadelphia as a church era is around today; however, individual believers who characterize the perseverance of Philadelphia have been around since the resurrection of Christ. The rapture has always been imminent.

To the Laodiceans: *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— I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see. As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten.* These people are lukewarm and thus distasteful to God. They are completely deceived concerning their condition and yet, amazingly, they are loved by the Lord. As a consequence, they will be rebuked by Him and chastened – it is quite possible that they will also experience the tribulation intended, really, just for Israel. We spoke earlier of their

'temperature' and their 'comfort zone' and how disastrous they are to spiritual health. But let's look at the Lord's remedies.

"buy from Me gold refined in the fire" – "buy" here really means to simply be in the market place. "Gold" is imagery for true faith and royal status. "Fire" speaks of trials, hardships and tribulation. Christ's first remedy is that they should put themselves in the place or heart attitude wherein faith is found. You don't literally buy faith, but you need to be looking for it, desiring it and thus in the 'place' of being receptive. Where is faith found? The Bible says, *So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.* (Rom 10:17) And don't you know that it is usually the hardships of life that drive us back to God's Word, back to the place of being willing to really HEAR it. Notice Jesus says to "buy from Me". That is, He is the source, no one else.

"white garments, that you may be clothed" – white garments in prophecy always speak of righteousness and again, the language is clear that you obtain it only from Jesus. The church can be so self oriented that there is a mistaken impression that if you think you're 'OK', Christ will agree; it all depends on your 'self-image'.

"anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see" – this seeing is spiritual discernment. "Anoint" points to the work of the Holy Spirit. Thus, fundamentally, Christ is telling these folks that they need to get saved, filled and schooled in the Word.

The next thing we'll consider is Christ's command to each church.

To Ephesus: *Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent. But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.* "Remember" is His first command – that is, remember where you used to be in relationship with Me. It's like He's saying, "You thought that weeding out the bad guys, the phonies was a high calling, but your over-focus on it has really been a descent, a falling from the heights of your first love."

Repent is mentioned twice in this command. The consequence of disobedience to it is that Christ will distance Himself from them. Recall that He was first seen "in the midst" of the seven golden lampstands. Of course, this is a dire situation. He also repeats His hatred for the DEEDS of those who 'lord it over His heritage'.

To Smyrna: *Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.* His command to those who suffer great persecution is twofold – fearlessness and faithfulness. Now, why would a loving God let the devil persecute the targets of His affection unto the death? He

says simply, "that you may be tested".

Now, I've never been a fan of tests – I hate the stress. But we've got to understand that God's tests aren't designed to see you fail but to make you fly. God knows the end from the beginning and His Word says He'll not give you a test for which there is no way out. (See 1 Cor 10:13) And everyone is tested – even Jesus was. We may look at such testing as cruel or sad but that's only because our vision is entirely myopic spiritually. You see, the rewards of testing resonate with joy throughout eternity.

Now, "ten days" may refer to the ten waves of Roman imperial persecution which came upon the church during this era. Notably, however, the first mention of ten days in the Bible (where it is standing on its own) is in 1 Sam 25:38. When David was being persecuted by Saul, he did the right thing in protecting gratuitously the herds of Nabal, a very wealthy man. David later asked Nabal for a gift in kind for his men so they could eat. Though the request was reasonable, Nabal snubbed David and even mocked him. As a result, David told his men to gather and get ready to do Nabal and all his household in. Now, Abigail, Nabal's wife was a godly woman and wise. She got to David first with a load of goodies and a humble, insightful attitude. David repented of his vengeful anger and waited on the Lord.

About ten days after Nabal heard of this, the Lord smote him and he died, and David took Abigail to be his own wife. Lesson – though the trials and testings you encounter may be mortally difficult, God is the One who will make things right – and permanently so.

To Pergamos: *Repent, or else I will come to you quickly and will fight against them with the sword of My mouth.* Again, repentance is on the table. Repentance simply means a change of mind resulting in a change of direction. The Lord says that to refuse to repent will mean that He will come suddenly to His church and fight against "them" with the sword of His mouth. Who's "them"? These were the ones who were holding to the doctrines of Balaam and of the Nicolaetans. Thus Christ says that He will deal with the offenders, not the offended.

To Thyatira: *But hold fast what you have till I come.* I'm inclined to believe that although this can be a general command and a necessary one for all believers, that it is speaking to those from this church who will enter the tribulation unsaved but who, during the course of it, come to true faith in Jesus Christ. If they do not pay, during that time, for their faith in Jesus with their lives, they may find refuge with the faithful remnant of Israel.

To Sardis: *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. Over and over and over again, the Lord tells his whole church to watch. Clearly, it is a fundamental part of good spiritual health. Then comes the command to strengthen and this is the word first used in Luke 9:51 of Jesus when He knew that it was time to go to Jerusalem and by crucified, that He “steadfastly set His face” to go. It was a firm resolve, unshakeable. This is the strength He tells Sardis to have.

To Philadelphia: *Behold, I am coming quickly! Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown.* Because He will come suddenly, the Lord tells these believers to hold fast “what you have”. Now, what do they have? Well, there’s a crown involved. Paul wrote, *Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing.* (2 Tim 4:8) Philadelphians look forward to the coming of the Lord, to His appearing in the clouds of heaven, to the sound of the trumpet call, to the voice of the archangel, to the glorious resurrection and rapture of the Bride of Christ.

To the Laodiceans: *Therefore be zealous and repent.* Several of the churches have been told to repent, some more than once. To the Laodiceans, He adds, “be zealous”. There’s an appeal to zeal when it’s truly of the Lord. Legalistic zealots have been the plague of the ages, but humble, loving zeal is beautiful in the heart

of a sincere Christian. It produces the likes of the apostles. It’s not ‘wide eyed’ hyper-energized nonsense but it is a ‘fire in the belly’ so to speak.

And now, we’ll look at Christ’s exhortation to His churches. It is the same for all of them -- *He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.* He is making clear that the Spirit is speaking to all the churches and that much of what He has spoken to individual congregations applies to all. But we have to have “an ear” to hear it. We need to have the heart that wants to hear from the Lord and not one that’s content with just going through the motions.

Significantly, the exhortation to the first three church eras precedes the promise, while it follows for the last four. Recall, the last four eras continue until today. By studying the nature of the promises, we also note a difference between the two groups:

Group of three and their promises

- Access to the Tree of Life in the midst of the paradise of God
- No hurt from the second death, i.e. taking part in the first resurrection
- Hidden manna (divine understanding), a white stone (ticket to the wedding banquet or a sign of friendship or acquittal in court) and a new name (new nature)

Group of four and their promises

- Power to rule over the nations (during the millennium)
- Christ will not blot out name from Book of Life (Great White Throne)
- To be a pillar (principle, steady part) of the New Jerusalem (coincident with the new heaven and new earth)
- Sit with Christ on His Throne (throughout eternity)

As you can see, the fulfillments of the first promises come unto all the saints in heaven during the church age all the way up to the wedding feast of the Lamb. The fulfillments of the next four come after these, that is after the tribulation, and follow chronologically the events running through the millennium, the Great White Throne judgment, the New Jerusalem and eternity future. The point of demarcation between the two groups and the fulfillment of the associated blessings is the tribulation period.

Prior to the rapture of the church and thus prior to the tribulation, the Holy Spirit is in the church; thus obeying the exhortation to hear what He says to the churches pertains to our obedience in this life to the will of God. Naturally, the stated blessings follow this obedient life in heaven.

Then something happens concerning the Holy Spirit. The apostle Paul, writing to the church in Thessalonica, spoke concerning it, *For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work;*

only He who now restrains will do so until He is taken out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord will consume with the breath of His mouth and destroy with the brightness of His coming. (2 Thes 2:7,8) The One who restrains is indeed the Holy Spirit and since His work during the church age is in and through the church, if He is taken out of the way, so must be the church.

Thus, the point of demarcation between the two sets of promises is not only the tribulation but the rapture and the ‘taking out of the way’ of the Holy Spirit. Since the exhortations to hear Him in the second group follow the blessings, it seems to point to the need for the church (Hebrew and gentile) to continue to heed Him during and after the tribulation on into eternity.

In our next lesson, we’ll look more closely at the promises given to the seven churches. Hopefully, you can recognize that even in speaking to the seven churches in the age of grace, Christ has the tribulation and consequently His Hebrew followers in mind. God’s not through with the Jew.