

Title: Challenges We Are Facing  
Text: Revelation 2-3  
Theme: Love of God, love of truth and love of purity  
Series: Reset, Refocus and renew  
Prop Stmtnt: A genuine love for Christ will drive a love for truth and a love for purity.

Recently, my daughter who is in the Army went through Adverse Expeditionary Training. In other words, she spent several weeks in the Mojave desert near Death Valley, where daytime temps pushed close to 120 degrees. She and her fellow soldiers went, at one point, 36 days without a shower. Several of you went through the same thing. The adversity of training is designed to be as miserable and intense, perhaps more so, of battlefield conditions. It is part of being ready. War is no game.

When you read the Bible, particularly, the book of Revelation, you realize that there is a lot that is at stake. Life is no game. God is real. Satan is real. Sin is real. Heaven is real. The earth is real. Hell is real. Eternity is long. And you are real. While we do not like living under the weight of this pandemic, it is, in many ways a sobering reminder of the realities of this life and it is a call to consider the life to come. The combination of this pandemic with the election and serious social tensions has many people wondering what is going to happen to our nation. What is going to happen to us. Because of that, I have endeavored to remind you of the essential nature and calling of the church. I know that this world does not get this and I am not sure that many of you see it like you should as well. But, the seat of power in this world is not Washington, London, Beijing or Moscow. The kingdom of God is the story of this world and the kingdom of God is being established and spread by the church. That is where the battle is. Let's work backwards.

Revelation 20-22 describes the 1,000-year reign of Christ, the Great White Throne Judgment, the New Heaven and the New Earth and the Eternal State. Before that are chapters 6-19 which describes a series of events and cataclysmic judgments on the earth. Those judgment-events on the earth are linked to 7 seals of a scroll being opened, which leads to 7 trumpets being sounded, which leads to 7 angels being loosed who have 7 seven plagues which are poured out like 7 bowls. It all starts with a scroll that is bound with 7 seals, that can only be opened by One who is worthy which is described in chapters 4-5. The opening of the scroll in heaven directly determines what happens on the earth. And what is the Lord of Creation most concerned about on this earth? The local church. That is chapters 2-3. The local church is ground zero for God's plan on this earth. Now, in a minute, I am going to review Revelation chapter 1 and then preach from Revelation 2-3. But consider this:

- In order to see rightly what happens in eternity (20-22), you need to have a right view of what happens on the earth (6-19).
- In order to have a right view of what happens on the earth (6-19), you need to have a right view of what happens in heaven (4-5).
- In order to have a right view of what happens in heaven (4-5), you need to have a right view of the church (2-3).
- In order to have a right view of the church (2-3), you must have a right view of Jesus (1).

Read Revelation 1

## 5 observations from chapter 1

### 1) Jesus is the Sovereign King (5)

Jesus is the ruler of the kings of the earth. His authority is not yet recognized and therefore not yet followed, but it will be. Every act of rebellion he sees and every response of love and trust he sees. He is the faithful witness. He is the firstborn from the dead, meaning that his resurrection is the pattern that all of his followers will follow in. We live forever because he lives forever. But, his authority is so different.

He loves his subjects so much that he dies for them and his death, while loving and sacrificial and is infinitely effectual. Kings can die in battle in an effort to save their people and their kingdoms. Jesus died on the cross to defeat our enemy and did!. His death freed us from our sins (that is what by his blood means). We are freed from our sins. That means that the power of death is broken because death no longer has anything to charge us with and hold against us. While death is the enemy of these mortal bodies, death cannot even hold on to them for very long, as one day they will be resurrected as well. Jesus is the Sovereign King. To give your allegiance to anything or anyone else would be a waste and foolish. Jesus and only Jesus is the Sovereign King.

### 2) We (the church) are in his eternal kingdom (6)

Those whom he loves and has freed from their sins are the ones he has made to be his kingdom. Look at verse 6. Who is the “us”? It is his “servants” (v.1), which are his churches (chapters 2-3). The book of Revelation was written to these local churches because the people in his church are those whom he died for and are the members of his kingdom.

### 3) Jesus is returning to receive what belongs to him (7)

Life is not going to go on and on and on as it has. In his first coming, Jesus invaded our world. Things changed. Kingdoms rose and fell all in preparation for his coming. Assyrian, Babylonian, Medo-Persian, Grecian, and the Roman empires were all predicted and described throughout the OT in preparation for the true King’s advent. If I asked you how many of you want Christ to return, many of you would say, “yes.” But, when you read the book of Revelation, you need to realize that his return is accompanied by a lot of upheaval. His first coming was quiet, but his return will not be. He is coming and he is coming on time and he will not be denied. There is nothing that can stop him from coming and there is nothing that has to happen for him to come back. And know this, Jesus plays for keeps. Yes, he is loving, but his love is not mere sentimentality. He loves purity. He loves truth. He loves holiness. He loves all that is right and good. He is gracious to those who repent, but because his love is not a cheap love, his kingdom and his reign is a terror to those who reject him and who want to be king. There is no room in his kingdom for another king, another kingdom or another allegiance.

### 4) Jesus is glorious beyond compare and description (12-17)

How can you look for more than a second or two at the sun shining in full strength? You can't! How can mortal man stand before the glory of Jesus? You cannot on your own. This description makes it very clear that Jesus has no competition. He has no rival. He has no equal. Fools mock Jesus. Jesus has the keys to death and Hell. He opens and he closes and as the living one, he is alive forevermore and has the keys forevermore. He is the eternal king. There will never be a moment in eternity when Jesus is not king.

5) Jesus loves and is very involved with his churches. (12-13)

Jesus is in the midst of the lampstands (13) and the seven lampstands are the seven churches (20) that Jesus is sending this book to. Jesus knows his churches. He knows this church. He knows your life. He knows if we are serious about what following him. Covid, national unrest, political angst, family and relational stress all contribute to the pressure cooker we live in. The pressure cooker reveals cracks in the foundation. Jesus sees beyond the history, size and reputation of a church. He knows what really is. And Revelation 2 and 3 are letters that Jesus sends to his churches to encourage, admonish, and in some cases warn. Jesus loves his church and Jesus is serious about what he loves. What should we be on high alert about? What are the challenges we need to anticipate?

1. **Loving someone or something else more than Christ.** (2.1-7)

The church at Ephesus was one of the stronger and more influential churches. By the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century, this church was known for its doctrinal integrity, vigilance and faithfulness. But over time, something was missing. Love for correctness had become more important than love for Christ. Beloved, the purpose of knowing our Bibles well is so that we will know, love, trust and worship God. Knowledge that does not produce love for God will become an idol and it is a very deceiving idol because knowing theology is a good thing. But we have to be on high alert about thinking that we are well taught and believing that is all that matters.

Do I love Christ? Do we love Christ? Look at how Jesus talks about this. *“you have abandoned the love you had first. Remember therefore from where you have fallen.”* Fallen! He looks at the church at Ephesus and while there were many things to commend, it was fallen. Jesus said that the first and the greatest commandment was to love God with all of our heart, and soul and mind and strength. But it is easy to love God for what he does, instead of loving him for who he is. But loving God for his gifts is not loving God. We are all prone to the danger and heresy of the prosperity gospel. Love God and life will be comfortable. Love God and you will be prosperous. Love God and your family will be safe and protected. Love God and life will be smooth and wrinkle free. In that way of thinking, loving God is a tool, a path, a bus that I take to get to the destination of comfort, prosperity, a happy family and ease. But Christ is not the ticket so I can get the life I want. Christ is life and Christ is Lord. John was not living his best life now on the isle of Patmos and several of these churches were not the hottest things going. Life that centers around Christ does not always mean circumstantial bliss, but loving Christ above all centers us to see our lives as they should be seen and understand our time here and our role here for what it is.

Remember, repent, repeat. Remember when you loved Jesus because you treasured him above everything. What has replaced that? Disappointment? Hardship? Repent. Then go back to loving

Christ and fueling that love by spending time with him and with people who will encourage you to love him. How is your love for Christ? Is it fitting given his love for you?

## 2. **The cost of persecution.** (2.8-11)

There is no rebuke for the church at Smyrna. This was a church that was feeling the crush of persecution. Jesus reminds them that he is the first and the last and the one who died and who came to life. Persecution is not romantic. It is hard. Persecution is difficult to bear. And yet, persecution is the story of our people. It is one of the reasons why I warn you so much about the prosperity gospel. The prosperity gospel has no room for persecution and no substance for those who face it. The true gospel was born from death and was purchased by faithfulness unto and through death, even death on a cross. Christ commands all those who profess faith in him to be baptized, which the Bible describes as being baptized into death (Romans 6). This is for keeps and we can expect to pay a cost. One of the challenges of persecution is being willing to identify with those who are being persecuted. When you do, you know that you run the risk of facing the same treatment.

In Hebrews 10.32-39, we heard about the believers who accepted the fact that by identifying with their persecuted brothers and sisters that they would lose property and homes. Yet, they did it because they considered their brothers and sisters to be more important than their homes. That was a powerful statement about their solidarity, but having gone through that and having rebuilt their lives a bit, they were hesitant to go through it again. We can understand that. Persecution weighs us down. But, there is something worse, much worse than persecution. And that is unfaithfulness. Determine now to be faithful. Cornerstone, we need God's grace to endure. This pandemic has been tough, but we are not being singled out because of our beliefs. We need to let the weight of this help us be honest about what we really trust in and see where our faith is weak.

## 3. **False teaching.** (2.12-17)

The church at Pergamum had endured a lot. But now, they were accepting teaching that was attempting to erase the lines of sexual purity that God had established. We need to be prepared for unbelievable pressure to cave in to society's demand that we accept Lesbianism, Gay, Bi-sexual, Trans, and Queer as normal and ok. Or, just not to talk about it. If we are silent about this because we do not want to be labeled as being hateful, we will be guilty of loving the world and hating God. This issue is coming to our door and we need to be ready. If we are not faithful on this issue, we will not have a church. Tolerating false teaching destroys the gospel and that destroys the church. The number of churches that have imploded on this issue in the last 50 years is grave. It is also one of the reasons why so many of them have closed their doors. They no longer have a message. We have to be humble and vigilant.

## 4. **Lack of discernment.** (2.18-29)

The church at Thyatira was known for their good works, love, faith, service and patient endurance. There were so many things to commend about this church, but they refused to confront a woman in the church who was very influential and was leading people into all sort of sin. This church sounds like there were a lot of very kind and merciful people who just didn't

want to create waves and therefore, it seemed easier to ignore problems than address them. But, if we don't deal with problems, Jesus will. He will not tolerate a church that misrepresents him.

How did they get to this point? Looking at the whole picture it appears that they allowed all of their good deeds to be their validation as if that would give them a pass on dealing with this obvious issue. This is so tempting for us as well. We can look at many things in our church family that are good. There are many things that we are doing well, but that never puts us in a position where the Lord needs us. He doesn't need us. Our faithfulness in one area is never an excuse to be slack in another. That is true for us personally as well as a church. One of the ways we protect ourselves from theological compromise is by emphasizing and practicing expositional preaching and teaching. And yet, while preaching theologically and expositionally is necessary so is listening theologically, listening expositionally and valuing weighty preaching.

#### 5. **Going through the motions.** (3.1-6)

The church at Sardis had gotten to the point where she was just going through the motions. She was still living off the fumes of her faithful past, but faithfulness in the past is no guarantee of faithfulness in the future. Every generation has to believe the gospel and defend it. To those of you who have been raised in this church, you have been blessed. But, you have to take this to heart. If you are not faithful. If your heart is not in the gospel and the church, like the church at Sardis, there may remain those who are true, but by in large the church will fade.

#### 6. **Being concerned about insignificance.** (3.7-13)

The church at Philadelphia was not big or influential and it would have been tempting to think that my church is rather insignificant. Therefore, it really doesn't matter what happens to her. Not so! Not so at all! Jesus knows this church. He knows her faithfulness, her endurance, her steadfastness through persecution and even promises to preserve her through the trial that is about to come on the whole world. Of all the churches that would likely cave, this little one would be it, but she doesn't. Insignificant in the eyes of others does not matter to Christ. Faithfulness to keeping his word and not denying his name does.

#### 7. **Being blind to our real condition.** (3.14-22)

The church at Laodicea was unusually wealthy. Whatever she needed, she was able to buy. It sounds as if there were enough influential people who were members that she was not threatened by some of the persecution that others were facing. But, her self-reliance came at a cost. She did not really need anything. She thought that she was doing okay. Nothing could be further from the truth. If you took a picture of this church, she looked good. Her colors coordinated, her marketing was stellar, her events were legendary and her members were impressive. But, if you took an x-ray of her, she was full of cancer and she had no idea.

To every church, Jesus said, "he who has an ear to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." These challenges are real, but they are given that we might take them to heart. Will you ask God to give you ears to hear what the Spirit is saying and grace to respond in humility

and obedience. This is his church and by his grace we will be faithful to the end. Jesus is worth a beautiful bride.