

THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Lesson 8 - Chapter 3

We'll begin Revelation chapter 3 today but first let's review the fourth Believer's congregation discussed in Chapter 2: Thyatira. I also want to add some additional information about John's allusion to Psalm 2.

Open your Bibles to Revelation chapter 2 and move down to verse 26.

Last time in Psalm 2 verses 8 and 9 we read this: ***8 Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance; the whole wide world will be your possession. 9 You will break them with an iron rod, shatter them like a clay pot.***" (Ps. 2:8-9 CJB)

This passage in Psalm 2 is alluded to in Revelation 2:27. On the surface the context of this Psalm seems to be about King David. And yet it is clear to the ancient Sages that this also refers to a king from the royal line of David that was yet to come: the Messiah. Thus the background is that when verse 8 says that I (I meaning God the Father) will make the nations your inheritance, "your inheritance" is referring to the Messiah. However, the way it is constructed in Revelation 2:26 and 27 is that the person who receives authority to rule over the nations is the same person referenced in verse 26 who wins the victory and does what the divine vision-being (God) wants. In other words, the reference is to the Believer, and not to the Messiah. It is the Believer who will rule over the nations in Revelation 2:27. This is NOT what Psalm 2 says, however. In Psalm 2 the reference is decidedly to the king....or better the future king....the Messiah from the line of David. Do we have a conflict here?

In one of several "trustworthy sayings" found throughout 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus, the Apostle Paul outlines the incredible truth that those who persevere in faith are truly united to Christ and will live and reign with Him forever. In 2Timothy 2:11-13 we read this:

11 Here is a statement you can trust: If we have died with him, we will also live with him.

12 If we persevere, we will also rule with him, If we disown him, he will also disown us. (2 Tim. 2:11-12 CJB).

These 2 verses are packed with two powerful truths. First, if we persevere (or in the words of Revelation, if we win the victory) we will rule the nations with Christ. And second, if we should self destructively decide to disown Him, He will disown us. The first truth is a very pleasant thought for every Believer and backs up what we just read in Revelation 2:26 and 27. It is that in concert with Messiah, Believers shall rule over the nations. Just as God the Father delegated day to day authority over His Kingdom to His Son, Yeshua, so will Yeshua delegate some undefined portion of ruling over the nations of God's Kingdom to Believers. The second trustworthy statement is that should we ever decided to disown Jesus, He will also disown us. I won't spend but a moment with it but here is yet another proof that the once-saved-always-

saved doctrine is just that: a manmade doctrine, and one that defies Holy Scripture. While this verse is of course acknowledged by both sides as one that clearly speaks of losing one's salvation, the once-saved-always-saved doctrine adherents say that those people mentioned as ones who disown the Messiah and lose their salvation were never really Believers in the first place: they were pretenders. That is their usual answer every time we read any of the several places in the New Testament that clearly speaks of having our redemption history reversed. I must say that I am personally perplexed by such an argument because it is so intellectually dishonest and so very dangerous. Essentially the position is that it is impossible for any Believer to renounce one's salvation or have it removed from us, therefore of the many passages we are warned about it all are merely hypothetical and in every instance such a hypothetical is impossible anyway. Folks: in order to disown, you must first own. A non-Believer can't disown Christ because he never owned him in the first place. Paul's warning, and God's warning, is to Believers; not to non-Believers. It is to the saved; not to the un-saved.

Moving on to the second half of Revelation 2 verse 27, John's words are that "he" will rule them with a staff of iron and dash them to pieces like pottery. Who is "he"? Once again in this Revelation passage this can only be referring to Believers who overcome. However Psalm 2 is actually referring to the Davidic Messiah King. So what is happening is that God is affirming that the Believers' rule over the nations in the Millennium will not be symbolic; it will be real and tangible. We will be given a measure of authority to make decisions and mete out justice. In fact, the rule that our leader, Christ, will have and share with us will be utterly intolerant; that is the meaning of ruling with an iron rod. The king's rod is another word for the king's scepter; this is standard imagery in ancient times. Since iron was the hardest metal known to man up to and through the New Testament times, then an iron rod means that the rule is absolute, unbreakable, unyielding, and without compromise. Intolerant. By what standard of justice shall we Believers rule that is so inflexible? The Torah; the Law of Moses. It is the same standard that we are to be living by now, and shall live by until this present earth and Universe no longer exist. Is that allegory or hyperbole on my part? Hardly.

Matt. 5:17-19 CJB ¹⁷ "Don't think that I have come to abolish the Torah or the Prophets. I have come not to abolish but to complete. ¹⁸ Yes indeed! I tell you that until heaven and earth pass away, not so much as a yud or a stroke will pass from the Torah- not until everything that must happen has happened. ¹⁹ So whoever disobeys the least of these mitzvot and teaches others to do so will be called the least in the Kingdom of Heaven. But whoever obeys them and so teaches will be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Since these are the recorded words of Christ, shall we accuse Him of allegory or hyperbole or perhaps symbolism about the Torah (more literally translated "the Law") as continuing to exist and something to be obeyed until "Heaven and earth pass away"? Hardly.

^{CJB} Revelation 21:1 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had passed away, and the sea was no longer there.

Following the 1000 year Reign of Christ (its very name says that this era has a definite beginning and end) begins the eternal era, which has no end and thus cannot be measured in

years because years have no more meaning. The start of this new and final era is marked by the creation of a new earth and a new Universe. Justice will no longer even be necessary, so perfect will all things be as the Universe and humanity will be once and for all rid of sin and evil. Therefore the Law will finally become obsolete as there is no need of it. But until then the Law is our rule and command just as Yeshua instructed His followers on the Sermon on the Mount. The Torah is the Believer's standard yesterday, today and even in the Millennium no deviation from it will be tolerated. In fact that helps to explain why into the Millennium when even the Levite Priesthood will be resurrected and a new and fully operating Temple (including sacrifices) will be restored so every element of the Law can be brought about and obeyed. We read about this in excruciating detail in the final 8 chapters of Ezekiel.

Here is the final note of our review: the theme of God's rebuke of Thyatira centers on "that Jezebel woman" who claims to be a prophet, and who teaches the people the same things that were wrongly taught at Pergamum; mainly that it is OK to eat anything you want and to disregard God's laws about sexual morality. There are a couple of lessons we need to draw from this. First is that (biblically speaking) while prophets are rare, it seems that the Christian world seems to be full to the gills with them. Are they all real? Of course not. In fact, I'm not sure that any are. The test for a true Prophet is that they can't ever be wrong. However many of today's so-called Prophets usually make predictions that are both ambiguous and long term so that it is near to impossible to pin them down. Most, though, make definite predictions the bulk of which never happen; but their followers are so enthralled with them they never bother to follow up and see if their prophecies ever came about. My advice: if you just decide to stay away from self-appointed prophets you'll be right 99.99% of the time. And if you believe yourself to be a prophet, you'll be wrong about 99.99% of the time. We need no more prophecy than what God has given us in His Word. It is reliable and trustworthy. Many Believers in Thyatira gave audience, and allegiance, to a prophet that they believed was real (and she wasn't) and God determined to ban some of her followers from His Kingdom forever, and other followers would face severe personal tribulations as a result.

The second lesson is this: several of the 7 letters regard two things: sex sin and eating as pagans eat. Eating has always been a taboo subject for Believers as the Church has falsely taught as that Jezebel woman taught, and as Bil'am taught, that God worshippers can eat anything without restriction. In modern times the newest Church rebellion is about overthrowing restrictions on sexual behavior. It is trendy to teach that laws on sexual behavior were only for ancient people; and thus to obey them exposes a primitive and unenlightened mindset. Disobedience to one of God's laws is a slippery slope that leads to disobedience to others of God's Law. And I find it intriguing that in the letters to the 7 Churches, God seems to tie together the sins of eating anything we choose without restriction, and sexual immorality. Not that they are the same thing, but rather that (perhaps) a rebellion against the food laws can result in a rebellion against sexual behavior laws. The implication is there, but perhaps that is more than these passages intend; you be the judge.

Let's move on now to Revelation chapter 3, which starts with the letter to the Believers' community in Sardis.

READ REVELATION CHAPTER 3 all

The rather standard greeting that opens the letter to Sardis is employed that, once again, involves only a description and characterization of the divine-being who is speaking and continues to avoid His name. The description uses terminology taken from chapter 1 verses 4 and 16, and is also partially used in chapter 2 verse 1 in the letter to Ephesus. Here the divine being says that He has the sevenfold spirit of God and the seven stars. It is very difficult to discern exactly what this means. If we take the sevenfold spirit of God to mean the Holy Spirit as opposed to 7 archangels (and I certainly think that the Holy Spirit is the correct interpretation), then we see that the words say that this divine being “has” this sevenfold spirit. But “has” it in what sense? As the authority over it? Or, is it as Believers relate to the Holy Spirit, a person of God who resides inside of us; something we “have” because the Father sent Him to us when Messiah left us? Then because the sentence structure makes the verb “has” apply to both the sevenfold spirit and the seven stars, are we to take whatever relationship this divine being has to the seven stars in exactly the same way? That is, is the point that this being has authority over the seven stars or is it something else?

It was earlier established that this divine being indeed has authority over the 7 stars. So if we take that meaning to also apply to the sevenfold spirit of God (assuming it means the Holy Spirit), then we also have to take it to mean that this divine being has authority over the Holy Spirit. If we assume as does the bulk of Christianity that we are to identify this divine being of Revelation as Christ, then we have Christ having authority over the Holy Spirit. This of course defies the standard Christian doctrine of a co-equal Trinity in which none of the persons have authority over the others. On the other hand if we agree that the Father is preeminent over the other persons of the Trinity, then only the Father can have authority over the Holy Spirit, just as only the Father can have authority over the Son. While I’m sure this rather hurts our brains just to think about it, this is the reality of what we’re told to begin chapter 3 and I defy you to find any Revelation commentary that even wants to deal with it.

This passage is one of the many reasons that I have regularly drawn your attention to the fact that thus far nowhere has this divine being been given a name by the being Himself or by John. Further, we have seen a series of non-standard descriptions and characterizations that make identification of this divine being anything but certain. This is why I will not go further than to say that this is the God of Israel who is speaking, and I say that in the sense of God meaning the Godhead in general. Since a few thousand words have passed between us since our Introduction to Revelation, I’ll reiterate that I think the wisest and most humble position we should take is to admit that there is great mystery here that is currently probably beyond us. To insist upon a particular person of the Godhead or attribute of God who is speaking is an attempt to put God into a manmade box; but in reality, all we’re doing is putting ourselves into a box. We are doing to ourselves what millions of Jews did to themselves in the decades leading up to the first coming of Christ: insisting on a precise and clearly defined set of circumstances and a means of identifying the Messiah that were not at all biblically clear to them. When Christ returns, in some way He will be accompanied by God the Father as we find in Zechariah 14. What form or forms Christ and/or God the Father will manifest is impossible to tell at this point because it hasn’t happened yet. So it is best not to leap to doctrinal conclusions that merely fulfill institutional agendas or try to make the complex or unknowable simple and easy to comprehend. Keep watchful, and keep an open mind. Know God’s Word enough to recognize what you CAN know, and what you probably can’t know, at this time in

history.

While Sardis isn't quite as bad as Pergamum, it's not far. Sardis was only 27 miles due south from Thyatira; thus it could be traveled, on foot, in but a single day between the two cities. At one point it was one of the greatest cities in Asia as the capital of a region called Lydia. Their patron deity was Cybele and her likeness was stamped on coins. She is said to have had the power of resurrection from the dead. However about a half-century before John penned Revelation, an enormous earthquake leveled Sardis and by John's day it had still not recovered. The city was in a sad state, the economy was struggling, and so the Believers there (along with everyone else) had to work hard to make a living.

God immediately hits Sardis with a damning accusation: they're phonies. God says they have a reputation for being alive but in reality they are dead. Clearly this is talking about the Sardis Believers' spiritual condition. Some Bible versions have chosen to translate the Greek word **onoma** as "name" instead of reputation. Either way is correct as this word operates the same way as the Hebrew **shem** that means either reputation or name. Even in our day, but much less so that in ancient times, the term "name" was meant to include every aspect of that person's character. And it was usual, especially among Israelites, to give a child a proper name that the parents hoped would reflect the nature and character that this child would grow into. In our day, a name mostly means a legal personal identification. In ancient times, a name mostly meant character and reputation. Thus too many commentators say that what this means is that they still call themselves Christians but in fact don't have the inner spiritual faith of Christians. In my opinion this is just faulty exegesis. First, it is more than doubtful that the term "Christians" even existed in John's day. Second, this use of the term "name" as a proper name (Christian) would be significantly out of the norm for the 1st century. Rather this indeed is speaking about reputation.

So while early on Sardis had worked hard and their sincere outbound ministry earned them an admirable reputation in the community, they no longer retain the same inner character or passion for spreading the Good News. God uses the terms life and death to characterize their spiritual condition. At first they were spiritually alive, now they're spiritually dead. If you are alive spiritually you are saved and in God's will. If you are dead you are lost and out of God's will. And yet because of all of their activities that look so good, it serves as a disguise that effectively hides their spiritual state of decay; but not to the God who sees hearts. As with all things involving humans, few things are absolute. The worst people invariably have some good in them somewhere. So it is with Sardis: many in the congregation are spiritual goners, and many others are well on their way to joining them; but all is not lost. There is the tiniest bit of spiritual animation left within the group; but it is dangerously close to being extinguished altogether.

Before we go farther, I want to relate to you that as I read this the first thought that struck me was: how can a group of Believers be this spiritually lifeless and not be aware of it? Something has gone terribly wrong and all spiritual sensitivity seems to have become suppressed. And yet on the surface all looks pretty good and normal. Let me sum this up: they have become so lethargic in their Believers' duties that God is about to take away their light, which means reversing their redemption. And what is chief among the duties of all Believers? Not just to

proclaim the Gospel but to live it out. This group had become so inward looking that simply existing and keeping up a façade of religiosity was good enough.

Without doubt it is the leadership that is in question, here. This call from the Lord to wake up and strengthen what little remains before it's gone to is a call to the leadership to carry out their responsibility. God says that what you're doing is incomplete in His sight. So it's not that they weren't doing things that seemed to be good; they were doing them in the wrong spirit. They aren't being accused of eating food sacrificed to idols; or to being sexually immoral. In fact I dare say that these people were generally good upstanding citizens, admired and honored by the community. What was the remedy for their condition of spiritual coma? In verse 3 God says it is to remember what they had received and heard, and obey it, and turn from their sin. Bottom line: the Word of God and obedience to it had gone missing. This Church had become a social group of nice people, and they congratulate themselves in this every day. The leadership led them there and failed to notice the result.

Allow me a moment of preaching please; and I'm addressing this mostly to pastors and other Church leadership who might be listening. Is what passes for the Word of God in your congregation a biblical verse or two and then it is used, out of context, to validate a 5 point doctrinal or social sermon that you know your members want to hear? And have heard countless times in the past? When you went to Seminary was most of your time spent on becoming extraordinarily familiar with the Bible, Old and New Testaments, or was it learning how to do Church, how to manage the staff, how to raise money and keep the pews filled, and to defend your denomination's doctrines? Are you the Church Pastor and teacher and spiritual leader or are you its CEO?

I have been asked countless times how America, the West, and most of the world have come to the disastrous place that we have: godless, chaotic and without hope. And my answer is always the same: it begins at the pulpit. Leaders, God has shown us the way and given us the manual; but we have failed to heed it. We have failed to educate our people by bathing them in God's light, which is the Bible. Instead we have regaled our members with artistic oratory, humor, drama, and a music program second to none. We have failed by creating churches that either are more like elaborate concert venues or like secure fortresses than places that welcome the hurting and broken; or even more in our day, having answers for those seeking trustworthy truth and authenticity in a world of spin and lies. And if we're fortunate and are a well off church, too much the answer we give to those who come to us is to hand out food, certificates for free hotel stays, money for gas, and then a "we'll pray for you" promise that might happen one time. Rather we need to spend the time to truly learn God's Word and teach from it so that we can tell those who come to us that there is One who specializes in restoring that which is so broken it otherwise cannot be. And then we need to disciple those who come to us for the long term. But then that would require time and effort of both leadership and the congregation that is spent on something other than pleasing ourselves. Too much of the Church has become Sardis.

But lay congregation, you are hardly off the hook. The people in John's day didn't have Bible book stores or Amazon where getting God's Word costs no more than a Big Mac. I don't know of a Church who wouldn't give a Bible, free, to anyone who asked for one. God's Word

is at your fingertips in so many easy to access forms; but it's up to you to take the time and interest to use it. God doesn't make the Church leadership untouchable or unapproachable. And he doesn't make it such that every good idea is our responsibility to come up with or to carry it out. You have the job to discern. What is your goal of belonging to a certain congregation? Do you know the number one answer I get from people about why they go to the Church where they go? It isn't that they learn so much. It isn't that **there** are so many areas of service to participate in. It is that the Pastor is really funny. Sermons are short and humorous. The second most frequent response? The music is great. Perhaps we are in the age of Sardis.

Verse 4 is a mixed bag; on the surface there is much hope. But just under the surface there is nothing but judgment. The Lord says that despite the truly appalling spiritual condition of the Sardis Believers' assembly, there are a few.....a small handful...of members who have not soiled their clothes. That is, there is a godly remnant. "Soiling their clothes" if not a Hebrew expression certainly employs a standard Jewish cultural way of speaking about ritual defilement. Another more familiar biblical word would be "unclean". Let me say it this way: white garments are ritually clean garments. Soiled garments are ritually unclean garments. But there is another aspect to the idea of white garments that must be included otherwise our understanding is incomplete. White, clean garments symbolize righteous deeds and works that God's worshippers are to do. These righteous deeds and works are to come as the expected response to our Salvation; they don't bring us Salvation. Believers who like to speak of being saved, but do no good works and deeds for others, are (at best) incomplete. Yeshua's brother Jacob (known in English Bibles as James), put it this way:

James 2:14-18 CJB ¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers, if someone claims to have faith but has no actions to prove it? Is such "faith" able to save him? ¹⁵ Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food, ¹⁶ and someone says to him, "Shalom! Keep warm and eat hearty!" without giving him what he needs, what good does it do? ¹⁷ Thus, faith by itself, unaccompanied by actions, is dead.

¹⁸ But someone will say that you have faith and I have actions. Show me this faith of yours without the actions, and I will show you my faith by my actions!

So there are a handful of Believers left in Sardis who have not become unclean in God's eyes. And because they are NOT unclean, not defiled, then they are worthy to continue walking with the Lord in His light and in His redemption. Verse 5 then, again using the typical ending to one of the 7 letters, says to those who win the victory (meaning those who overcome the sin God exposed in them) will wear the same white garments as the remnant who was stayed pure. Then God says for them He will NOT blot their name out of the Book of Life. The Book of Life is a Heavenly book where the names of all who are redeemed and will live an eternity with God are listed. But what happens if your name isn't in that book? The opposite, obviously.

Believers hear me: this is another place where once-saved-always-saved doctrine followers say that this is just another hypothetical; and one that can't actually happen in reality. Or that these Believers were never really Believers. There is no hint of such game-playing in this passage. These are indeed Believers who have fallen or the Lord wouldn't be telling them to

return to what they first heard and knew. These are Believers who have been exposed for what they have become. And in His mercy God says to them that you DO have a chance to repent and change. But if you won't, He will erase your name from the Book of Life. Or to use the words of the verse, God will blot out your name. You can't have your name blotted out if it was never there. So your name was at one time in the Book of Life, but God has judged you unclean and therefore you have been removed.

God then says that "I will acknowledge him individually before my Father and before His angels". What a strong case this makes for Christ being this divine being! But rather than dwell more on how to understand this divine being, I think it is better to focus on the fact that we find these same words in the Gospel of Matthew. And while that shouldn't be surprising, what ought to be helpful is the context those words are said in.

Matthew 10:26-33 CJB ²⁶ *So do not fear them; for there is nothing covered that will not be uncovered, or hidden that will not be known.* ²⁷ *What I tell you in the dark, speak in the light; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim on the housetops.* ²⁸ *"Do not fear those who kill the body but are powerless to kill the soul. Rather, fear him who can destroy both soul and body in Gei-Hinnom.*

²⁹ *Aren't sparrows sold for next to nothing, two for an assarion? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father's consent.* ³⁰ *As for you, every hair on your head has been counted.*

³¹ *So do not be afraid, you are worth more than many sparrows.*

³² *"Whoever acknowledges me in the presence of others I will also acknowledge in the presence of my Father in heaven.* ³³ *But whoever disowns me before others I will disown before my Father in heaven.*

The context is persecution. Therefore I think it is likely correct to say that the context in Revelation regarding Sardis is also persecution. No doubt, just like all the other 6 Believing congregations, Sardis was under much pressure (not that they were necessarily being harmed in any way). They lived in a pagan environment and the pressure to conform to the social norms was ever present. The charges that God places against them reflected a condition of spiritual stagnation but looking outwardly vibrant to the community. As much as we might wish that we could find that happy middle whereby we please God and please the non-Believing world, there is no such thing. There is no neutrality; there is no spiritual Switzerland. I remember many years ago as a young man I was attending a church service and the pastor said: as a follower of Christ if you aren't a pariah to the world, you're not trying hard enough. Clearly he didn't mean that we should intend to antagonize the non-Believers and cause as much trouble as possible. Rather he meant that if we look and behave and live too much like the world then we're not working very hard to be victorious Believers.

Next week we'll tackle the letter to the Believers at Philadelphia.