

Hold On to the Son of God (Thyatira)

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[0 : 00] Well, our letter is now halfway around its tour of the seven churches, and I wonder what you have taken away from Revelation so far as it's made its way through our church.

You heard about a church that was busy. They had a packed church calendar. They were also well taught. They could tell truth from lies. But somewhere in the busyness, they had lost the love they had at first.

Their first love had been suffocated under the weight of what they were doing for the Lord, and that can happen to churches. It can happen to us as well. I wonder what you took away from what Jesus said to that church.

You heard about a church that was suffering intensely for Christ. Their faith had left them poor in a rich city and given them a bad name against the authorities.

But Jesus said, don't give up. Keep going. Even when you or others go to prison for my name, I wonder, what did you take away from Jesus' message to that church?

[1 : 13] We've not yet heard Jesus' words to the church in Pergamum. We'll circle back to it, so I won't spoil it just yet. We might not feel that we're in the position of any of these churches just now, but these are situations that any church can find itself in, and therefore every church can learn from.

Remember, we saw right at the beginning that these are not kind of seven individual letters, but they are one letter to all the seven churches. This is a message of Jesus Christ to his whole church. And so the series title that I've gone with for our time in these chapters is, Dear Church, Love Jesus. On the one hand, that is the medium, isn't it?

These are love letters from Christ to his bride. But on the other hand, it is also the message, isn't it? That Jesus is saying to his church in every time and place and in every situation that what he wants from us is our love for him.

And in some ways, to love Jesus, it will look the same in every time and place, but for all Christians around the world. But in some context and in some situations, to love Jesus will take on specific forms, faced with certain pressures, certain temptations.

[2 : 35] To love him purely and faithfully will look different. And so I wonder, have these letters, as we come through them, have they turned up the temperature of your heart or maybe rekindled your first love for the Lord Jesus Christ?

And is that fresh love now showing in the way that we live our lives day to day for him and in the very circumstances and in the pressures that we face day to day?

Well, tonight we're going to see some more ways that we love Jesus. Jesus calls us to love him as a church. But before we get into this letter to Thyatira, let's just remind ourselves who it is that we are listening to tonight.

It is not first and foremost me, but these are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze.

This is Jesus speaking. In all of his divine and all his royal glory, we sang just now about what it means for him to be the Son of God.

[3 : 46] I will proclaim the Lord's decree. He said to me, you are my son. Today I have become your father. Ask me and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possessions.

This is Jesus speaking, the ruler of the kings of earth, the king of kings and the Lord of lords. The very universe, the fabric of reality is held together by the power of his word.

And tonight he is speaking to me and you. He is speaking to his church. So let us listen to his voice and let's take to heart what he says this evening.

Firstly, let's hear his delight in growing works. Now just put yourself back in that room in the city of Thyatira for a minute and think how wonderful it would be to hear these words read out.

What is the Son of God going to say to us first? I know your deeds, he says, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first.

[5 : 01] That's what Jesus knows about us. He knows our church and he is delighted with us. And he's not just had a glance at the website and he's not like one of these kind of mystery worshipers who comes to one service and then writes a review.

No, he says in verse 23, I am he, look, he searches hearts and minds. He has looked into the inmost being of this church and he is delighted.

Do you know what he sees? He sees their faithfulness. It's a beautiful list, isn't it? In the Greek, it has a bit of a kind of a lovely rhythm to this verse. I know your deeds and your love and your faith and your service and your perseverance.

It's as if Jesus, Dr. Jesus, listens into the heartbeat of this church and this is what he hears. This is the heartbeat of this church and he is delighted.

It's as if Jesus is searching through the messy drawer of this church. Okay, you have one of these in your home, don't you?

[6 : 14] It's the drawer where everything goes, that everything that doesn't have a home somewhere else is full of the odds and ends, isn't it? And maybe we look at a church like Thyatira or a church like ours and we just see maybe the mess and the odds and the stuff that doesn't have a place anywhere else.

But the one with eyes like a blazing fire opens that drawer in this church and he discovers treasures as he pulls out each one.

Love, faith, service, perseverance. He smiles because he is delighted at what he has found in this church.

I know this has been said before in this series, but I don't think we can hear it enough times that if our trust is in this Jesus tonight, then he is delighted with us.

He knows. He knows. He knows the quiet, perhaps unseen ways that you put others before yourself to serve them. He knows the way you trust him in your prayers to him each day.

[7 : 22] He knows your love for him and for others in his name. And he knows when you carry on with all of that, when it's really tough and when it's costly, he sees that, brothers and sisters, and it delights his heart.

You remember that vision that we saw in chapter one of Jesus, the high priest. He's walking among the lampstands. He is present and he is working in his church. Well, what is he doing as he walks and he works among his church?

Zephaniah says in chapter three, the Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one he will save. He will rejoice over you with gladness.

He will quiet you by his love. He will exalt over you with loud singing. You know, tonight Jesus is rejoicing over us.

But you say, well, the next word in the passage is nevertheless. He's going to go on to say, but I have this against you. But we shouldn't rush ahead. Okay, let's sit in this delight.

[8 : 30] Because the next verses, they don't kind of counterbalance what he says here. It's not like this kind of evens out Jesus' favor into a sort of tolerance of us.

We still wonder, don't we, however long we've been Christians, whether secretly in heaven where we can't see. He's kind of weighing up whether our faith and our love and service really outbalance our failures and our selfishness and our disobedience.

And if we're honest, we're a bit nervous about what he might find if he were to look into our heart, into our church as he looks at us. Well, friends, he does know our works.

And he does see our hearts. But let us remind ourselves that on the scale of heaven, if you're a Christian, your faith is in the Son of God, that God has lifted your sin off the scale.

And he has given it to Jesus Christ to carry. And instead of that, he has laid on that scale all the goodness and the righteousness of Jesus. So that a scale that was once tilted all the way against you is now tilted all the way for you.

[9 : 40] And that is the only scale that God has got. So that he looks at us now. And if we're Christians, he sees only the goodness of his Son. And his Son knows our works.

And do you know what? He is delighted with us. And we pray that would be increasingly so, don't we? Look what he says at the end of verse 19.

I know your deeds. And that you are now doing more than you did at first. Or your latter works exceed your first. So not only is it good, not only is he delighted, but it is growing.

Now, that's in direct contrast with what you saw in the church in Ephesus. Okay, they had forsaken their first love. Their love had diminished, grown cold.

Well, in Thyatira, they have outperformed their first works. Their love has grown. It's heated up. And surely that's part of his delight in them, isn't it?

[10:40] Part of a parent's delight in their child is seeing them grow. I look at videos of Caleb a year ago. And I see his little personality, okay, smaller, much quieter than it is today, than it will be.

And it gives me so much joy to see what he's become, to think what he will be. Look how they've grown, we say. Well, that is part of Jesus' delight in his church, to see us growing up, becoming ever more like him, developing constantly in our desire and our ability to serve him, growing in the expression of our love for him.

We don't want to be a church, do we, that only grows numerically, but not spiritually. We don't want to be the equivalent of a child who grows taller, but who never really grows up, kind of a teenager in an adult's body.

We want to delight and to please the Lord, so we love him. And we show him that we love him in ever more intentional, ever more committed ways.

Let's pray, won't we, that our deeds would grow, that our latter works would exceed the first. Some of our more kind of organized work as a church is on pause over the summer, life group studies, little lambs, our kids and teens work.

[12:03] It's a good time, isn't it, as we take stock to say, however you serve him here, that Jesus is delighted with your service.

And it pleases him that while those things are on pause, as a church we're taking opportunities for other gospel work. All those camps that happened, that loads of our young people went and worked with these teenagers and children, pointing them to Jesus, holiday club, legacy.

He is delighted that we want to do that in the summer while we have the opportunity. Why?

Because he is delighted with growing works in his church.

But he also disciplines those who compromise. This is our second point. Nevertheless, he says, I have this against you.

You tolerate that woman Jezebel who calls herself a prophet. By her teaching, she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols.

[13:10] Now, I guess you could kind of picture some in the room that night, kind of thinking smugly at our first point. Well, we've kind of got one up on Ephesus, haven't we?

But one area that Ephesus excelled in was at testing false teachers, remember? By contrast, what Jesus has against the church in Thyatira is that they have tolerated a false teacher.

Now, John calls her Jezebel. That's probably not her real name. Revelation names are often symbolic. It's also not a common name, so it's quite clear who John has in mind when he uses this name.

And that is Jezebel, the wife of Ahab, who was a king in Israel in one and two kings. Now, you can go back and read that another time. But just to give you a flavor of what this Jezebel was like, let me give you some taster verses.

So the first thing we learn about her is in 1 Kings 18, verse 4, which begins, while Jezebel was killing off the Lord's prophets. It's never a good way to start, is it?

[14:20] Then 1 Kings 21 from 25, there was never anyone like Ahab who sold himself to do evil in the eyes of the Lord, urged on by Jezebel, his wife.

So all the evil kings in the books of Kings, she is the only wife who is credited with having anything to do with it, urging him on to evil.

Or 2 Kings 9, verse 30, when Jezebel's son asks the king of Judah whether he comes in peace, the king replies, how can there be peace as long as all the idolatry and witchcraft of your mother Jezebel abound?

Does that give you a flavor of what John is getting at when he uses this name? There'd be quite a contest, I think, to see who's the least likable male character in the Bible.

But I think Jezebel is the clear winner in the female category. And that is who John compares this false teacher to. And incredibly, the church in Thyatira tolerate her.

[15:24] We don't want to discourage her, they might say. She's not always on the mark theologically, but she's a really inspirational speaker. She doesn't refer to the Bible much, but she goes much deeper than our other preachers.

Nobody falls asleep in her sermons, they might say. Meanwhile, she is teaching Jesus' servants to participate in the sins of their society.

Now, in that context, sexual immorality at eating food sacrificed to idols, it's probably not two separate things, but two parts of the same thing. So, for example, just imagine for a moment that you have got a small business in Thyatira.

You run a jewelry business. You've got a shop on the main street in Thyatira. And the Metal Workers Guild would hold a dinner in the temple of the patron god, Artemis of the Silversmiths or something.

Food would be served. Patrons would be honored. Business would be done. Sacrifices would be made. Cult prostitutes would be brought out.

[16:32] Okay, this was the glue of Roman society. This was the business lunch of the Roman Empire. And so not going along to that, the guild dinner or whatever, it would be like cutting yourself off from life.

It would be like trying to kind of run a business, but without having a bank account. It would be virtually impossible. The difference is that the trade guild wasn't something that Christians could participate in without crossing lines.

It was out of bounds. So then imagine, okay, someone you trust in the church, an influential person in the church, an inspirational speaker, stands up at the front and tells you that despite what you've been told, really there is a way that you can go to the pagan temple and eat the idol food and sleep with the women there and still be a Christian.

Now that jewelry business owner would want to hear more, wouldn't he? You can imagine that. That's how false teaching got into a church like Thyatira.

That's often how it gets into churches today. We, in our sinfulness, want a license to participate in the sinful practices of our world and false teaching will gladly offer us that.

[17:48] But Jesus is clear that the church was wrong to tolerate it. So who's to blame for the consequences? Well, Jesus says, firstly, that he holds it against the church and church leaders in particular.

Interestingly, that is a singular you in verse 20, not a plural, suggesting that it is specifically against the angel or the messenger of the church himself.

In short, the minister hasn't been doing his job. Anyone can come to church. Any Christian can be part of the church, but not anyone can teach the church. And those who have followed the false teaching are clearly not blameless.

Jesus threatens to bring intense suffering on them unless they repent. In fact, the word is tribulation, which is presumably what they hope to avoid by compromising with the world around them.

Tribulation for being a Christian. The irony is that they will now face great tribulation for playing at being a Christian. Friends, it is never safe to go halfway with Jesus.

[18:54] But notice that Jesus is clear throughout our passage that it is her teaching. Verse 20, it is her ways by which she misleads my servants.

Her teaching, her ways, they still do it, but Jesus holds her accountable for it. We've seen this distinction in other places between those who falsely teach and those who are falsely taught.

Now, those who have been deceived by false teaching desperately need to give up the lies, desperately need to turn to Jesus and submit to his word.

Eternity depends on that. But Jesus saves his very harshest words for those who do the deceiving. Listen to these words that he says in the Gospels.

If anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to stumble, he says, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and be drowned in the depths of the sea.

[19:56] Better. Better than what? Better than what he will do to them. So, verse 22, I will cast her on a bed of suffering and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely unless they repent of her ways.

I will strike her children dead. Punishment is meant to echo what happened to the original Jezebel. She was thrown out of a window to her death.

So, Jesus will throw this Jezebel onto a bed of suffering. Striking her children dead is probably a reference to her followers either leaving her or actually dying from the tribulation so that she loses her following, her influence.

Now, the details are unclear. We don't know exactly what happened, but it's not comfortable reading, is it? This is not gentle Jesus, meek and mild.

This is judge Jesus. This is jealous Jesus. He tells us in verse 23, this is what he wants the churches to know.

[21 : 03] Look, then all the churches will know what about him? That I am he who searches hearts and minds and I will repay each of you according to your deeds. We love the I am sayings of John's gospel, don't we?

Well, in Revelation, Jesus says, I am the one who searches hearts. He is the one with eyes like a flame of fire.

There is no getting around this, friends. The risen and reigning Lord Jesus, he cannot be ignored. He cannot be shrugged off. Once they beat him and they spat on him, but no more.

Now he is the one who judges every heart and who sees every thought and who judges our deeds. And he will discipline and if necessary punish those who teach others to compromise and those who follow that teaching and do compromise.

That is what he wants us to know. Now that should make us uncomfortable. But does it not also make us safe?

[22 : 11] That this Jesus will not allow lies to destroy his church. That he will stop you from going back into sin and death even if it hurts.

That is how committed he is to his church, to you, his servants. And that's not the last word, is it? Just if you think of how damaging this false prophet was and then look at verse 21.

What does he say? I have given her time to repent of her immorality. Given her time. Imagine that. The Lord Jesus Christ himself put up with this false teacher in his church.

Why? Because he is patient. And his word tells us he wants no one to perish but all to come to repentance. Even those who are wolves and try to deceive his servants.

And verse 22, he will discipline her followers unless they repent of her ways. What's he saying? That there is a way back, friends, for those who have bought into lies and those who sell lies.

[23 : 22] It is to turn and throw away the lies and come to the Son of God and receive his word and submit to it and live it. This is tough language but it is tough love.

Paul's words in Romans 11, as I reflected on this this week, they helped me to get my heart around this. I hope they help us together. When Paul says, note then the kindness and the severity of God. Severity towards those who have fallen. But God's kindness to you provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you too will be cut off. And even they, he says, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in.

For God has the power to graft them in again. See then the kindness and the severity of God. Friends, you cannot deceive God about who you are and what you are doing.

But you can receive him whoever you are. Whatever you have believed, whatever you have said, whatever you have done, there is a way back. And there are lots of lessons for us here that we could draw out lessons for us as elders about taking our responsibility seriously to guard this pulpit.

[24 : 45] There's lessons for us together as Christians as we receive teaching on a Sunday, as we listen to podcasts, as we read books, to be on guard about being tempted to compromise our faith by what we hear, by what we read, to be careful that we are not buying into falsehood.

But specifically, I think, for any of us who have made peace with the sins of our society, who have made room in our lives for sinful practices that our culture elevates, that we're not confessing a sin, that we're not turning away from, well, you need to know that that is not a safe place to live.

Don't be deceived. You cannot go halves with Jesus. He won't let you. He is jealous over his servants. He will not share us with the world. Do not test him.

Give yourself to him. Leave the lies behind. Flee to him because he disciplines those who compromise. And finally, he directs us to hold on.

Now, thankfully, it's clear, isn't it, that most of the church hasn't been taken in by the lies. So what about those who have stayed faithful to Jesus? Verse 24, Now I say to the rest of you in Thyatira, to

you who do not hold on to her teaching and have not learned Satan's so-called deep secrets, I will not impose any other burden on you except to hold on to what you have until I come.

[26 : 21] What does he say to the rest of us? Hold on. Hold on to me. Don't let go. He doesn't add, does he, to that basic call to live the Christian life and stay true to him.

Some of the churches, some of the Christians needed to act right now, to change right now. But to those who have stuck with Jesus, he says, just keep sticking with Jesus.

Just keep sticking with him. Now, compared to learning Satan's so-called deep secrets, perhaps that sounds pretty dull. You were always wanting to hear, aren't we, about the newest devotional app or the latest book about being a Christian or the latest program for spiritual renewal.

Our hearts cry out, don't they? Burden us, Jesus. Give us more to do. Give me a Bible reading plan. Send me a way to listen to that teaching.

Get me on that program, don't we? Now, there are some great helps and resources out there, but here's the secret that the nuts and bolts of being a Christian every day don't change.

[27 : 32] And they haven't changed since the Bible was written. And if holding on to that seems boring to us, perhaps we have not been Christians long enough.

Or perhaps we have not been tested severely enough. If you've ever seen videos of salmon trying to swim up the river, you know that they have to swim hard against the current just to stay where they are, don't they?

Let alone to make any progress. Well, that is us, Christians, isn't it? Just to hold on, just to stay where we are, we can't stop swimming. Jesus says, hold on to what you have until I come.

He's not giving us nothing to do. He's given us a task. Hold on. And he's given us a time frame until I come. And the rest of the Bible assures us that the time until Jesus comes, we will be sorely tempted and opposed.

And we know that our grip on him is not always the strongest. We are swimming against the stream and we are not always very good swimmers.

[28 : 39] So when Jesus says, I'm not asking you to do anything except to hold on, our heart should cry out thanks to him for that and cry out mercy and help and strength to keep us holding on, to keep us going in him.

You know what happens to those salmon when they stop swimming? They don't stay where they are, do they? They're swept down the stream. Well, don't let that be us. I reckon the Christians in Thyatira felt really unglamorous and really ignorant and really weak and really ordinary compared with Jezebel and her teaching and her following.

They didn't know anything except what Jesus had left them and holding on to that was tough for them. And perhaps that is you tonight. Simply, simply holding on is enough.

And that is tough as well. Perhaps you're craving something new, the silver bullet, the new way. But Jesus assures us that holding on is completely worth it because he finishes with a promise to those who hold on to the end.

The one who is victorious and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations. That one will rule them with an iron scepter and dash them to pieces like pottery just as I have received authority from my father.

[30 : 10] One commentator I read observes, there's nothing pedestrian about that, is there? By submitting to Jesus now, we will reign with him then. By holding on to what we have now, we are being trained to hold on to a royal scepter then.

We wouldn't believe it, would we, unless Jesus himself was saying, us rule with Jesus over the nations. You know, that quote he quotes comes from Psalm 2. Isn't he the Psalm 2 king?

Isn't that Psalm all about him? Well, yes, but what is he saying? United with the Son of God, we will share in the rule of the Psalm 2 king.

We will rule under him and we will rule like him. He will give us authority just as the Father has given him authority and he will give us the morning star.

That's a way of describing preeminence and power in Scripture. So, the angels in Job are described as the morning stars. But Jesus himself at the end of Revelation describes himself like this, the root and offspring of David and the bright morning star, the preeminent among the preeminent, the glorious, the most honored, the highest among the highest.

[31 : 31] So, it could be a way of saying that we receive greatness in his kingdom or it could be a way of saying that we receive him in his kingdom. And here's the great thing, both are true.

Both are true. Holding on to the end will be tough. Reaching the end will be a victory, but it will all be worth it, says Jesus. to hear him say then, come you who are blessed by my Father and inherit the kingdom prepared for you before the foundation of the world.

So, whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. Hold on to the Son of God to the end and we will reign with him for eternity.

let's commit ourselves to him now as we pray together. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you that you know us through and through, that you see our hearts, that you know our weakness, that you know our temptations.

Father, we thank you that you know us and you love us. We thank you that in Jesus you are pleased with us and delight in us. And Lord, you know from experience your life on earth that to remain faithful is tough.

[33 : 08] In a world that is full of sin and temptation, where daily we are under pressure, Lord, we pray for your strength. Lord, have mercy upon us, we ask. You promise to give us every day what we need.

We ask, Lord, for that daily bread that each day you would keep us, that we might be victorious in the end. We thank you for that wonderful promise that whatever we suffer now and whatever it costs us to stick with you, that you promise us a kingdom that will never end.

Honor and glory in your kingdom and you are king. Lord, we pray that you would be all our hearts desire and all our hearts delight. Keep us to the end, we pray, who we ask in your precious name. Amen.