

Buy What Lasts Forever (Laodicea)

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- [0 : 00] Well, tonight we've come to the end of our tour of the seven churches, and we go out tonight with a bang. Revelation, in the form of a scroll, has visited six churches so far.
- I imagine by now it's looking a bit well-worn, and it has come to the seventh church, Laodicea. They've heard now the message of Jesus to the first six churches, and now the church is asking, what will his assessment be of us?
- We end on a bang tonight. Sadly, we don't end on a high. It would be great, wouldn't it, to hear that the church in Laodicea had stayed true, had not given in to spiritual apathy or buckled under pressure.
- Sadly, that's not the case. But as with the other six churches, there is still hope. But Jesus is writing to them, speaking to them, saying, there is time to turn it around.
- That's why he is speaking, isn't it? And that is where the encouragement comes from for us tonight. Not the state of the hearers of this letter, but the faithfulness of the sender of this letter and his commitment to his church.
- [1 : 15] The purpose of the whole book of Revelation, from start to finish, is to show these Christians that despite what they're going through and how they feel about it, Jesus is victorious.
- He has won. And to compel them then to stick with him to the end, no matter what. And that goes for us tonight. I hope that through this series, we've seen that whatever it is, whether it's spiritual indifference, getting a bad reputation, perhaps losing income or opportunity, being drawn aside by false beliefs, feeling different and under pressure to conform, even threats on our life, whatever it is that we might be facing for belonging to Jesus.
- I hope we have seen that it is worth carrying on with him through it. I hope we've seen too that even if we've taken a wrong turn, it is worth us turning back.
- It is vital that we do. He's called us to that, hasn't he? Repeatedly repent because Jesus is victorious. And his promise to us through these letters has been, if we are with him, then we stand to win too.
- Whatever we have had to go through to get there. And tonight, I guess we come to the heart of the issue because unlike many of the letters to the other churches, Jesus here does not mention any outside pressure.
- [2 : 47] Did you notice that? In fact, he says that outwardly they are doing really quite well. The only problem here is on the inside. And as we go from here and put revelation down for now, we need to know tonight that that is where Jesus' work really is.
- He doesn't promise any of these churches that he is going to change what they're going through, but he does call them to commit to him in their hearts in what they are going through.
- And he promises that he will hold them fast to the end. And we need to hear that from him again. And if we have not already, take it to heart tonight. Because these are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation.

His words are true in the extreme. The word Amen simply means let it be so. And so he is saying he's the one who does what he says.

We can trust his promises to us tonight. He's the faithful and true witness of what is, what has been, what will be. It's not simply that what he says is true, but what he says is only true.

[4 : 08] And he is the ruler over God's creation. We'll come back to that towards the end. But when somebody of this unequalled power and truth speaks to us, we are in no position are we to ignore him.

Why would we want to if all that he has to say is true? So let's hear his voice one more time in these letters. And firstly, sadly, he accuses this church in Laodicea of tepid trust.

Just notice in verses 15 and 16, how many times he repeats that they are tepid or lukewarm in their faith. I know your deeds, he says, that you are neither hot nor cold.

I wish you were either one or the other. So because you are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, I am about to spit you out of my mouth. He really spells it out, doesn't he?

I count four different ways that he says it there. You are neither hot nor cold. And it's a really vivid image. I imagine many of us have done it ourselves.

[5 : 10] Run a glass of water and taken a sip and it's warm. And it's not nice, is it? We don't sit down and drink it. What do we do? We tip it away and we run the tap through till it's cold and we pour another glass.

Or maybe you've been out for a coffee or a cup of tea and it's been delivered to you and it's not steaming hot. It's been sitting out on the counter. What do you do? You don't, I hope, sit there and drink it.

You send it straight back. Well, so says Jesus is this church. It is unpleasant to taste.

It is not good for anything, cannot be consumed. He wants to spit them out. It is a scathing review, isn't it? But surely you say, if we're talking about their faith, better surely that they're lukewarm than that they're cold.

You notice that Jesus says, I wish you were either one or the other. So is Jesus really saying that he would rather that they were stone cold than that they were lukewarm?

[6 : 16] Well, no. So why does he say that? Well, back then as now, cold water and hot water have their uses.

We value both, don't we? One commentary I read had this gem of insight into the first century world. Okay, ready? Okay, diners desired cold drinks when it was hot and hot drinks when it was cold.

Wait for it. According to Plato and other writers. Okay, I'm no expert, but I don't think we need a philosopher to unpack that for us.

Okay, cold drinks and hot drinks. Both have their uses, don't they? But I'm told Jesus' words would have landed particularly in Laodicea because their city was known for the poor quality of its water supply.

That's the neighboring cities Colossae and Hierapolis were known for having excellent water. Colossae had a good supply of cold water, perfect for drinking. Hierapolis had a hot spring that was ideal for bathing.

[7 : 23] But by the time the water got to Laodicea, it was apparently too tepid to bathe in and too mineral heavy to drink. It was good for nothing. And that's what Jesus is getting at.

Not that cold faith is better than warm faith, but that living faith that's put to work in one way or another is better than tepid faith that can't be used for anything.

So what about their faith was tepid? Well, Jesus tells them and us in verse 17, you say, I am rich. I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing, but you do not realize that you're wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked.

So sometimes people take lukewarm to be another way of saying something like half-hearted. It seems a very natural interpretation, doesn't it? But actually, Jesus says their condition is much worse than being half-hearted.

They're not half-hearted, are they? They're deluded. Of course, the problem with delusion is that you don't realize that you are deluded when you are deluded.

[8 : 34] The then U.S. Secretary of Defense Ronald Rumsfeld put it memorably when he spoke about unknown unknowns. There are things that you know that you don't know.

I know that I don't know how to do differential equations. I know that I don't know what that is. But those of you who are good at maths will be able to tell me that there is far more that I don't know than I don't know.

There are things in maths that I wouldn't even know what it was called if you showed it to me. So in Laodicea, it's not only that they're ignorant of their true spiritual condition, but that they are ignorant of their ignorance.

They're blind, and they don't know that they're blind. They are poor and naked, but they claim to be rich and to need nothing. If we met a person like that, who was poor and naked but claimed to be a millionaire, well, we would probably feel quite sorry for them, wouldn't we?

So Jesus says this church is wretched and pitiful. So how did they become so deluded? Well, the clue is in what they boast in. What do they say?

[9 : 47] I am rich. I am rich. We heard Jesus say recently about weeds that grow and choke the seed of his word so that it doesn't grow any fruit.

One of the weeds that can do that, he said, is the deceitfulness of wealth. Now, to be really clear, the Bible does not say that money is a bad thing, but it consistently warns us that the more money we have, the more tempting it is to imagine that we do not need anything, and the less, perhaps, we're likely to recognize our complete dependence on the Lord for everything.

Laodicea was a wealthy place. It's recorded that following an earthquake, they rebuilt the city without any help from Rome. That was unheard of at the time. They could claim a remarkable self-sufficiency in their finances, but that attitude had bled into the church so that the Christians of Laodicea, too, claimed a self-sufficiency.

We have enough. We don't need anything. But a self-sufficient faith that is blind to its dependence on Christ is good for nothing, says Jesus.

In fact, that is repulsive to him. Whatever we think of our city or our lives, I'm pretty sure the Laodiceans would be awestruck by the prosperity of 21st century Aberdeen.

[11 : 23] Most of us, I think, eat better than most kings have eaten throughout the history of the world. We also have far better health care. We live much longer than the Laodiceans would have.

Whatever claim that this church had to have wealth and need nothing, for the most part, we have more. So lest we start to believe, as they did, that we really do need nothing and forget our total dependence on Christ and neglect to pray, as he taught us to pray, give us this day our daily bread.

Hear Jesus' repute to a church with tepid trust. That kind of blind self-reliance, he says, is good for nothing but to be spat out by him.

Don't be deluded about your real condition apart from him. What are we apart from the Lord Jesus Christ? He says we are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, naked.

Do we believe that? Or do we think really we're okay, but Jesus is just there when we really need him? I wonder what these Christians in Laodicea would have made to Jesus' words to the church in Smyrna, just a few lines before.

[12 : 47] They would have heard it only a few minutes before Jesus speaks to them. When he said to the church, I know your afflictions and your poverty, yet you are rich. I wonder, would they have smirked inwardly?

If those guys are rich, what does that make us? Dirt poor, says Jesus, compared to a desperately dependent church that has nothing apart from me.

So where does true value come from then? Well, Jesus tells them in our next point from verse 18, where he says, I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire so that you can become rich, and white clothes to wear so that you can cover your shameful nakedness, and salve to put on your eyes so that you can see.

So much money and nothing to do with it? No, says Jesus. Time to buy. I've got enough. Nothing we really need. No, says Jesus. You need the very basics.

And there is only one supplier, and it is him. Notice how the three things he offers them meet the real needs that they have. He said they were poor, so he tells them to buy pure value from him, gold refined in fire, and become rich.

[14 : 07] He said that they were naked, so he says, buy pure clothing from him, white clothes, and cover their shame. He said that they were blind, so he says, buy healing cream from him, salve your eyes and see.

So he hasn't pointed out their needs to rub it in, has he? He's not just pointing the finger. He's pointed out their needs so that he can supply what they don't have.

Come to me, he says, and get lasting worth, an inheritance stored up for you in heaven that will never perish, spoil, or fade.

Stored up for you somewhere where rust cannot destroy and thieves cannot break in and steal. Lasting worth. Come to me, he says, and get true righteousness, a covering of spotless purity to put on over the naked shame of your sin and your falling short.

Come to me, he says, and get the eyes of your hearts opened and real spiritual enlightenment to cure the darkness of your heart and your mind.

[15 : 20] Come to me. Come to me, he says. And he can give us all of that, friends, whether you would call yourself a Christian here or not. He holds out to you everything that you need, everything that we need, and says, come and get it.

It is laid out before you. It is spread on the table. It is available only for me, but there is an endless supply. Come freely by.

Take it. It is yours for having. You would think it's one of the lessons we can only really take in when our hearts have been changed by the Spirit, the truth that God does not point out our sin and failings to heap shame and guilt on us.

No, he convicts us of our sins so that we can come to him for forgiveness. He points out our wrongfulness so that we can come to him for righteousness.

Proverbs says, faithful are the wounds of a friend. Your friend's honest words can hurt, can't they? But when we know that person, we trust that they speak only for our good, that we would take whatever it is they have to say, even if it's stung.

[16 : 36] Or friends, when God points out our sin, it hurts, but they are the faithful wounds of a friend. Just look what Jesus says next in verse 19. Those whom I love, I rebuke and discipline.

Even as Christians, we struggle with that one, don't we? If he really loved me, would he really point out my failings? Would he really pick apart my heart like that?

Well, he says the opposite is true. That proverb goes on, faithful are the wounds of a friend, profuse are the kisses of an enemy. An enemy can flatter you to death, but a friend never will.

A friend will tell you the truth, even when it hurts, the truth you don't want to hear. And Jesus is speaking tonight as our very best and eternal friend. And he wants us to hear what is true.

And he never, ever tells us what is wrong without himself holding out the solution. So tonight, friends, why wouldn't we take it? Why would we not recognize who we are and hear his offer and run to him and receive what he is freely giving to us tonight?

[17 : 55] Surely it's only the self-sufficiency of our hearts that keeps us from him, isn't it? If we thought we really needed what Jesus had to offer, would we not cry out to him for it?

So be earnest and repent, he says. Here I am. That word earnest there could be translated zealous or eager. He says, don't hold back.

Okay, no manners at this dinner table. Go for it, he says. At different times in the past, Christians in this country who've taken the gospel seriously and responded wholeheartedly were mocked as enthusiasts.

Now, I find that really funny. It's such a British insult, isn't it? To call someone an enthusiast. You want to be reserved, moderate about religious things.

Too much excitement is unbecoming. Attitude has been prevalent at times. It still lives in the church today, doesn't it? But Jesus says, if you're being called an enthusiast for me, then you have understood.

[18 : 58] Be earnest, eager, zealous, serious. Be all in. Throw your life upon me. Come after me. That is what he wants.

Many of us might not think of ourselves as being spiritually self-sufficient. I trust that many of us are not. But I wonder, have we plateaued into a kind of Christianity that doesn't take things too far?

Doesn't take Jesus' words too seriously? I wonder, would we describe ourselves tonight as being earnest or zealous in our faith?

Because he has what we need and he says he is here. And we cannot afford to leave him waiting. The next verse is possibly one of the best known in Revelation and the Bible.

The picture of Jesus standing at the door and knocking is captured in a very famous painting by William Holman Hunt. It's called The Light of the World. And one thing we're likely to miss maybe about that image is that it puts Jesus on the outside of the church.

[20 : 10] Notice that? I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door I will come in and eat with that person and they with me.

Do you hear that? It's an offer. It's an invitation. And it's a rebuke. He has not just arrived at church. He has been put out in the cold. But where is he and what is he doing?

He's still at the door and he's still knocking to come in. And notice when he is let in what he says he will do. Tell us off.

Stand there silently. He will come in and eat with us. And we with him. He comes with no hard feeling, no telling off, only reunion, communion with Christ.

Throughout these letters we have heard these are the words of and seven glorious descriptions of who it is who is speaking to us, the risen and the reigning Lord Jesus. We've heard his voice and now he says if we do hear his voice and we do open up to him, then what we get is life with him.

[21 : 20] Life with him in it. A feast with Jesus every day. All that we need supplied by him. Remember those words we started with back in chapter one, verse three. Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of these prophecy and blessed are the one who hear it and take to heart what is written in it because the time is near.

And so three verse 20 comes as a kind of reminder at the end of this introduction to the rest of the book of what it is we stand to gain if we hear his voice and take to heart his words and open up to him.

So, have you? We have heard the voice of the living God, haven't we? Have you taken it to heart what he has said?

Have you opened up to him? Could you describe yourself as sitting with Christ and feasting with him tonight? Is that you?

If you have tuned out his voice or not done anything about what he has said, well, this is your opportunity to change that. Be earnest and repent, he says.

[22 : 32] Open the door. Let him back in. Renew your relationship with him. He says there is no hard feeling. He says he will spread the table and we will gain true and lasting value from him.

And we do that, finally, because Jesus offers a final throne. Hear this great promise from the risen Lord Jesus to the one who is victorious.

I will give the right to sit with me on my throne just as I was victorious and sat down with my father on his throne. One of our best buyers over the last year at home has been the Big Picture Story Bible.

It's great, because it's the big picture of the Bible and it has lots of big pictures. It's great for preschool kids. But it includes a line that is so simple but so profound.

And yet, I think, we gloss over this or miss it maybe in the story of the Bible. It's on the page where Jesus ascends into heaven. Listen to what it says. And then suddenly, Jesus left them. He was lifted up into the sky.

[23 : 46] He took his throne in heaven and began his kingly rule. He took his throne in heaven and began his kingly rule. That is what happened the day that Jesus ascended.

He was enthroned in heaven as the ruler of God's creation. He sat down with his father upon his throne to rule over all things forever.

If you read on, perhaps, this evening or in the week, you'll see the next two chapters of Revelation are dedicated almost entirely to that truth. A throne in heaven and one sitting on the throne and the lamb upon the throne.

And that lamb is standing as he has been slain, a slaughtered lamb. Because his journey to the throne, remember, was through what?

Suffering, rejection, slander, falsehood, shame, death on the cross, being buried in a tomb before being raised to victorious and glorious life and being raised to heaven to be seated upon the throne.

[25 : 00] He won. through his suffering and his death and for his obedience gained a crown that will never fade and a throne that will never end.

And hear his words, that is exactly what the risen and reigning Lord Jesus Christ holds out to us tonight, brothers and sisters, to those who, like him, are victorious, who patiently endure hardship for him and the gospel, who let go of our lives now, perhaps physically, but always in our heart and will and desire, who are partners with John and the churches in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus.

To them, he says, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne just as I was victorious and sat down with my father on his throne.

And what a promise that is. Can we quite take it in that he holds out to us a place in his kingdom to sit upon his throne and to share in his rule over his new world forever and ever?

Isn't that, isn't that promise worth anything to us? Wouldn't we do anything that Jesus asked?

[26 : 27] Would we not take to heart anything that he told us to be with him on his throne? We started our series eight or nine weeks ago with the question, what would Jesus say to a church like ours?

Dear Bon Accord, love from Jesus Christ. What would that letter say? And he has said so much to us over these Sunday evenings, hasn't he? He's warned and encouraged and corrected and comforted.

Maybe even in areas that we weren't aware of. We didn't realize we needed him to say that, but he has. I'd love to know, actually, what it is that you've taken away from these letters.

What struck you? What surprised you? What's changed for you in big or in little ways? It's something maybe to ask each other over coffee if you're brave enough or in the week if you see each other.

What have you taken away from it? But above all, what's the message we go out with as a church? Dear church, love Jesus.

[27 : 32] Bon Accord Free Church, love him, hear him, take to heart his words, cling to him, stick with him, live for him, die for him.

That is his call to his church across the world throughout the ages in all circumstances. And to those who do, he says, he promises as he has each night that we have read his words, eternal life with him in his forever kingdom.

So whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. Dear church, love Jesus.

Let's pray for that together now as we close. Lord Jesus, how we thank you that you do come to be with those who open up to you.

We thank you that you are present and working in your church and among us. We thank you that you're with us tonight. We thank you that we have heard your voice because we've had your word open in front of us.

[28 : 54] And Lord, how we pray again that you would give us a heart to receive what you have said. Lord, we thank you for all that you have spoken. Lord, even when it has been hard to hear, you assure us that you speak only out of love, that if you did not love us, you wouldn't rebuke us.

And so, Father, we pray that you would help us where we need to turn to turn, that when we need to open to you, that we would open. But Lord, we confess that we always need to grow in our love for you.

Lord, we do not love you as we should. And so, help us, we pray, to love you more and more or to grow in our obedience and faithfulness to you.

Lord, we pray that you would address, Lord, what we do not even realize we need addressing in our lives. Lord, we are that ignorant. Lord, draw us near to you, we pray, individually and as a church.

Lord, how we pray that we would grow in our maturity and our love for you and our service of you together. Lord, that in a year or two years or three or five or ten years or a hundred years, we might look back and see the fruit, Lord, of your word in our lives as you have grown us.

[30 : 15] This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.