

# Church At The End Of The World

*Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen.*

*(Revelation 1:7 ESV)*

*Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.*

*(Revelation 2:10 ESV)*

## **The Church In Laodicea**

**November 20<sup>th</sup>, 2016**

**Revelation 3:14-22**

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### **Introduction:**

Good morning! Open your Bibles to Revelation 3:14; that's on page 1030 in your pew Bibles. When you are opening your Bible to page 1030 you know that you are at the end of your series – no matter what your series is you are at the end of it! And so we are. We have been looking at the 7 letters of Revelation and we come today to the last of those letters. I mentioned a couple of weeks ago that the last 2 letters do not follow the general pattern. Generally speaking each of these letters begins with an introduction which is then followed by a commendation, an accusation, an exhortation and then finally a word of promise for all who persevere. The letter to the Philadelphians, which we read last week, contained no word of accusation; Jesus had nothing bad to say to those people. The letter we are reading this week contains no word of commendation; Jesus has nothing good to say about these people. There is such a thing as a completely useless church. This is not the first time Jesus warned us about that possibility. He said in Matthew 5:

“You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. (Matthew 5:13 ESV)

It is possible to become completely useless in the eyes of the Lord. That's a hard truth – and one I am very glad we were not dealing with last week on our anniversary Sunday. That would have changed the tone of the service dramatically, I imagine, but it is nevertheless an important truth for us to wrestle with and respond to this morning. So brace yourself now, for the Word of the

Lord, beginning at verse 14.

14 “And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: ‘The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God’s creation.

15 “ ‘I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! 16 So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. 17 For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. 18 I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see. 19 Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent. 20 Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. 21 The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. 22 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” (Revelation 3:14–22 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

## The Introduction

Jesus introduces himself to these folks in words borrowed from an Old Testament prophecy.

We’ve mentioned before that throughout Revelation Jesus is frequently found painting in colours borrowed from Old Testament canvases – so it is here. Let me read to you from Isaiah 65.

his servants he will call by another name, 16 so that he who blesses himself in the land shall bless himself by **the God of truth**, and he who takes an oath in the land shall swear by **the God of truth**; because the former troubles are forgotten and are hidden from my eyes. 17 “For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth, and the former things shall not be remembered (Isaiah 65:15–17 ESV)

Here the prophet says that in the new creation – in the new heavens and the new earth – all blessing and all truth will come from the God of Truth – or more literally, “The God Amen”. That’s the Hebrew word that is translated as “truth” here. The word ‘amen’ means truth. When you say “amen” at the end of someone’s prayer you are saying: “Yes, what he said”. “That’s true”, “I affirm that”, “I say that also”. It is a way of affirming or entering into and sharing in the words of the prayer. Here in Isaiah 65 the Bible says that God is the God of Amen – he is the one who decides what is right, what is reliable and what will endure into eternity and now here in Revelation 3 Jesus dips his paintbrush into those colours and applies that concept to himself. Jesus is saying that he doesn’t just say true things – HE IS THE TRUTH. He is the God of Amen. G.K. Beale writes here:

“Isaiah 65:16 and Revelation 3:14 are the only two passages in the entire Bible where “Amen” is a name.”<sup>1</sup>

So just like last week when Jesus said that he was THE HOLY ONE, here when Jesus says he is THE AMEN there can be no mistaking what he means. He is saying, I am God, I am THE TRUTH. I am the one who decides what endures into eternity and I am speaking to you in space and time therefore, you had better listen carefully. That is an introduction that is intended to get our attention.

Now, as I mentioned there is no commendation in this letter. Jesus has nothing good to say to these people. Therefore he moves immediately into accusation.

## **The Accusation**

He says in verses 15-16:

‘I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! 16 So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. (Revelation 3:15–16 ESV)

Once again Jesus seems to be drawing on the local situation here to make his point. Laodicea was part of a cluster of 3 cities. Her neighbour Hierapolis had hot springs that were world renowned for their healing and restorative effects. Colossae, their other neighbour had cold water springs that produced clean and drinkable water. Laodicea had neither. Her water was transported in from Colossae and by the time it arrived it was no longer cold, it had never been hot and it had taken on the taste of the pipes. It was, effectively, good for nothing. Right? Hot water you can bath in, cold water you can drink, but what are going to do with this? This water – these people – are no longer good for anything but to be thrown out, spit out and trampled under foot.

The basic problem here obviously is compromise and pollution. Listen to what Jesus says in verse 17:

For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. (Revelation 3:17 ESV)

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<sup>1</sup> G.K. Beale, *The Book Of Revelation NIGTC* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), 299.

These people – who are supposed to be Christians – sound like everyone else in Laodicea. The city of Laodicea had a certain reputation in the ancient world. They were famous as a centre for commercial banking, they had a world-renowned medical school and they were known to have a very independent streak. In fact, when their city was destroyed by an earthquake in AD 60 they rebuilt the city themselves without ever asking for money or help from Rome. They were rich, they were proud and they were independent. And now the church was indistinguishable from the city.

“you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing”

When you sound like the city that you live in you have lost your voice and your usefulness in gospel mission. That’s not my opinion, that’s what Jesus said:

“You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people’s feet. (Matthew 5:13 ESV)

That is the situation in the church at Laodicea. They are compromised, they are polluted, they taste like PIPE and they sound like the WORLD. They are USELESS in terms of Christian witness AND YET. Jesus offers them a word of hope.

## **The Exhortation**

That’s amazing! There shouldn’t even be a verse 18 in this letter, right? I mean if any of us are writing this letter and we’ve already said that this church has blown it, this church is compromised, this church is UTTERLY INDISTINGUISHABLE FROM THE world then there would be no verse 18. There would be no exhortation or calling. We would reject this church and move on – wouldn’t we? Aren’t you glad we’re not Jesus? Jesus is not done with this church. He says in verse 18:

I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see. (Revelation 3:18 ESV)

What is Jesus saying here? There are a variety of symbols and some of them we have seen before. In the Bible “gold refined by fire” usually indicates a process of purification. Fire liquefies the

gold so that it can be separated from impurities and pollutants. So for example we see in Job 23:10:

But he knows the way that I take; when he has tried me, I shall come out as gold. (Job 23:10 ESV)

Job was undergoing some serious suffering and he understood that the effect of that would be personal and spiritual purification. He would come forth as gold. Are you understanding what Jesus is saying here? He is saying to these folks in Laodicea who are so polluted and so compromised: “You have a serious problem and serious problems require drastic solutions. You folks need to spend time in the fire.”

Now I don't think you need to have the gift of prophecy to be alarmed at the contemporary applications of this passage. The church in North America is the church of Laodicea. Now there are great churches and terrible churches and every kind of church in between in North America but as a whole, it would be hard to argue that we are not the church of Laodicea. We are thoroughly compromised and we sound no different than the world. We sing their stupid songs – SOMETIMES IN CHURCH, God have mercy – we think their thoughts, we hold their values, we speak their language – we taste like pipe and we have lost our saltiness. We have a serious problem and the most common solution for that type of problem in the bible is persecution, tribulation and fire. In Zechariah 13:9 God says:

And I will put this third into the fire, and refine them as one refines silver, and test them as gold is tested. They will call upon my name, and I will answer them. I will say, ‘They are my people’; and they will say, ‘The LORD is my God.’” (Zechariah 13:9 ESV)

And you say: “I don't want to be those guys!” – No! You DO want to be those guys! Those are the only ones who were saved! The others were too far gone. God saves a wayward, compromised, polluted remnant by throwing them in the fire. Old Testament and New, this is how God purifies his people.

The other symbols that Jesus uses here in Revelation 3 all mean basically the same thing. He tells them to get white garments for themselves – we already talked about that 2 weeks ago; that's from Revelation 6:

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. 10 They cried out with a loud voice, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” 11 Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been. (Revelation 6:9–11 ESV)

You get a white robe by remaining faithful and giving testimony even at the cost of your life.

As for salve to anoint the eyes, most scholars believe that refers to spiritual discernment. The famous medical school that I mentioned as being in Laodicea interestingly enough was renowned for a compound that they produced that was believed to cure blindness. So the irony here is that while they are good at helping people see in a physical sense they are themselves utterly without discernment in a spiritual sense and that needs to change. They are blind guides for the blind and they need to do business with the Great Physician themselves before they can be useful to other people.

That brings us to a unique element in this letter that is not present in the other letters. In this letter there is an invitation, which is appropriate given that many of these people, apparently, are not saved.

## **The Invitation**

In verse 20 Jesus speaks directly to the individuals in the church at Laodicea. The church may be dead – their witness may be forfeit but there are still people there who can respond to Jesus so Jesus says:

Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. (Revelation 3:20 ESV)

There are 4 singular pronouns in that verse – Jesus has clearly turned his attention to individuals. He is talking to hearts here. He is saying that its not too late for you. The door is still open for you. The possibility of an intimate relationship with me still exists! I’m on the outside – of your church and of your heart, but that can change! I haven’t given up on you. I’m here appealing to you. Open the door!

We talked about the metaphor of the door last week. It is a metaphor generally of personal

conversion. Jesus says:

I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved (John 10:9 ESV)

This is not rocket science! Jesus is the door and Jesus is knocking on the door. He is saying: “Come on! Come through! Come to me and be saved!”

The opportunity for salvation is still at hand. What you don’t want is to knock on that door AFTER it has already been closed. Jesus warned about that. He said:

“Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able. 25 When once the master of the house has risen and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, ‘Lord, open to us,’ then he will answer you, ‘I do not know where you come from.’ (Luke 13:24–25 ESV)

The door isn’t open forever! At some point, for all people it closes. Either when you die or when Christ returns if you have not opened the door to Jesus then you are forever outside, in the ark under judgment. That’s what Jesus said. But he wants better for these people so he is going to bless them with some fire and some pressure and some trouble. He is going to shake the house, rattle the windows and knock on the door. Its not over for these people, there is still time to let Jesus in.

And if they do then there is the promise of reward.

## **The Promise**

He says in verse 21:

The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. (Revelation 3:20–21 ESV)

If you persevere in your faith and witness – if you conquer by not compromising – then Jesus promises you eternal rest and responsibility. Do you remember how the Chronicles of Narnia end? Do you remember the last battle? The king and his companions fight to the death. They refuse to quit and to abandon Aslan and Narnia and they are one by one forced through the door that leads to death. And as they each pass through the door they realize that is also the door to

life. Eternal life. They meet Aslan on the other side in a beautiful world that has been there waiting for them all along and he bids them enter and to follow him further in and further up – do you remember that? But for those who compromised – for those who tried to stand in the middle – for those dwarves who would not pick a side – do you remember what happened to them? Though they died they never entered in. They spent their eternity in the dark, unable to see, filled with bitterness and trapped in malice.

That is what Jesus is saying here. Everybody dies. Pick a side. Stand your ground and when you die you will live with Jesus in the New Heavens and the New Earth. Further in and further up forever.

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” (Revelation 3:22 ESV)

## **Reflecting And Responding**

Did you notice that? To the “church-ES”. This letter isn’t just for the church in Laodicea. It is for them but it is also for us. God expects us not just to UNDERSTAND this letter but also to apply it prayerfully and spiritually in every generation. So I want to end today by hearing the message in this letter for our church today. As I read this letter it seems to me like God is reminding us that:

### 1. Compromise is not a winning strategy

I have no idea why it is that this lesson seems so hard for God’s people to learn but it was hard for me to learn. When I first entered ministry back in 1994 every leadership conference I went to as a young pastor was about how we could learn to lead like the business leaders, or the sports leaders or the political leaders. They would bring in UNSAVED CEO’s or just borderline saved athletes and we would all be expected to get out our notebooks and write down everything these worldly leaders said so that we could take it back and apply it in the household of God. We were going to learn how to lead from the rulers of this world. Despite that Jesus said:

“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. 26 It shall not be so among you.” (Matthew 20:25–26 ESV)

Jesus explicitly said that we were not to copy the rulers of the world – and yet we do. We so want to be like them. We want to be pastors and CEOs, we want to be shepherds AND the captain of the football team. And in the end we taste like pipe, we sound like Oprah and no one listens.

Now I am certainly not advocating for cultural indifference. Paul became all things to all people to win some. He talked like a Jew to reach Jews, he talked like a Gentile to reach Gentiles – he quoted Greek philosophers on Mars Hill and he quoted from the Old Testament when he preached in the synagogue. He was adaptable and contextualized but he was not accommodated or compromised – those are different things. Its one thing to speak to people in a language they can understand, its another thing to sound exactly like those people. We need to be in the world, but not of the world. We need to be in close contact with the meat but we can never ever taste like the meat.

“Salt is good, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? (Luke 14:34 ESV)

Once you sound like the world, you’re good for nothing. Over the long haul compromise has never been a winning strategy.

As I read this letter it also seems like God is reminding us that:

2. He is more holy than we want to admit and more tender than we could ever believe

In this letter we meet Jesus in all of his awesome holiness. He comes to this church as THE JUDGE; as THE AMEN – as the standard of what is true and what is right and he finds this church well short and far outside of what is expected and he will not stand for it. File this letter under the heading “Passages that prove that Jesus is not Santa”. It’s a thick file. Do you remember when we used to read verses like Habakkuk 1:13?

*Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity (Habakkuk 1:13 KJV)*

Do you remember when we used to believe that sin was AN OFFENSE to a HOLY GOD? But you say, ‘Pastor, that was in the Old Testament, God is a Christian now and he will never reject

anyone.’

Then why does Jesus say in this passage:

I will spit you out of my mouth. (Revelation 3:16 ESV)

Why did he say in his flesh that:

Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. 41 The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, 42 and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 13:40–42 ESV)

My dear friends GOD HAS NOT CHANGED. He is still holy and he will not abide with sin. He will not even look upon it. In the end if you are not cleansed by the blood of Jesus Christ shed upon the cross then you will be outside, away from his gaze, in the dark FOREVER.

This passage is telling us to remember the holiness of God.

But it is also showing us the tenderness of God. Listen to what Jesus says:

I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. (Revelation 3:20 ESV)

I stand at the door and knock. How is it that the God of the universe does not simply kick down the door and drag these rebels into the street by their hair and slaughter them like the criminals that they are? They have betrayed Christ and spurned his blood and made peace with the world that crucified their Savior – how can Jesus stand at the door and knock? And yet he does. He speaks to them as a husband at the door.

What a contrast! By the way, that’s the point. The message of this passage is found in that contrast. God is saying that the opportunity remains for these people – and for all people hearing this today – to embrace Jesus Christ in all of his tenderness and mercy. You can be forgiven. You can surrender, you can open the door and receive Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior today. You can enter the kingdom of God as a son or daughter and move further in and further up FOREVER. You can do that today – thanks be to God!

Or you can keep the door closed. You can be a tiny king or queen in the castle of your own delusion. He will not kick the door down. He will only knock, call and appeal. But if you leave him outside then he will leave you outside in the dark, away from God forever. Don't take my word for that – listen to Jesus. He said:

When once the master of the house has risen and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, 'Lord, open to us,' then he will answer you, 'I do not know where you come from.' 26 Then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets.' 27 But he will say, 'I tell you, I do not know where you come from. Depart from me, all you workers of evil!' 28 In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Luke 13:25–28 ESV)

This is who God is – in all of his holiness and mercy. This is the day of salvation and this is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God. Let's pray together.