**FAVORITE PASSAGES OF THE BIBLE**

***Revelation 2-3 – What Jesus Thinks Of Northwest***

While the book of Revelation seems to be off-limits to many Bible readers, I am drawn to it time and time again because it allows me to see the future through God’s eyes. Far too many are afraid of this apocalyptic book because of its figurative language and wild images and sci-fi type scenes. But to avoid this great book by the apostle John is like reading a great mystery novel but then failing to read the closing chapter that ties it all together as it reveals whodunit.

Years ago we used to go to the movie theater to watch 3-D films that required special glasses. If you did not wear these weird spectacles then the movie was all blurred and impossible to watch. Most 3D movies were total failures and thought cheesy through the 20th century until James Cameron, in 2009, greatly improved 3D filmmaking when he created *Avatar*, which grossed over 2 billion dollars worldwide.

Reading Revelation without the proper perspective is like watching those early 3D movies. What I mean by that is if you try to read this highly figurative book without the context of knowing the apocalyptic literature of the Old Testament then it is like watching a 3D movie without glasses. It all becomes blurred and confusing. Far too many get caught up in crazy off-the-wall speculations that do not fit the context. Revelation has 404 verses in its 22 chapters. From those verses are found 278 allusions in the Old Testament. Some scholars say there are closer to 400 to 500 references from the Old Testament. In other words, it’s impossible to read this book without a diligent study of books like Psalms, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel and Zechariah.

But I want to take you to probably the easiest chapters to understand in Revelation. Open your N.T. to chapters 2-3. There you will see in your red-letter edition words dictated to John to seven churches in Asia (modern day Turkey). I love Revelation because it highlights not only the great terrestrial battle of good vs evil on earth, but also the titanic celestial war in heaven. While the church was under attack below on earth, there was a real Star Wars going on in the invisible world above.

Before we learn the outcome of that heavenly war (chapters 12-22) we must start with the spiritual war fought by God’s people (chapters 1-11). Christ’s letters to these seven churches at Ephesus (2:1-7), Smyrna (2:8-11), Pergamos (2:12-17), Thyatira (2:18-29), Sardis (3:1-6), Philadelphia (3:7-13), and Laodicea (3:14-22) are extremely fascinating to me. As a gospel preacher that has labored for churches in Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Arkansas, Texas and Minnesota, as well as preaching in gospel meetings in many states and several foreign countries, I am extremely interested in knowing what Christ is now thinking of the audience I am addressing.

It is thought by many scholars that the apostle John had lived in Ephesus for many years and would have no doubt often traveled to these seven churches. I say that because they were within easy travel of one another on quality Roman built roads. Ephesus was only 49 miles from Smyrna, which was just 68 miles to Pergamos, which was 52 miles to Thyatira, which was 36 miles to Sardis, which was 24 miles to Philadelphia, which was 58 miles to Laodicea. That is just 287 miles from church 1 (Ephesus) to church 7 (Laodicea). John likely knew by face and name most all the brethren in these churches. I would assume that as he wrote Jesus’ summary of each church it would have broken his heart in two. Imagine Jesus telling me to tell you at this church, “*but I have this against you*…!” as He threatens to remove His fellowship (lampstand) from us. John had to write that about five of the seven churches. I’m sure it made him pray without ceasing for each church, asking the Lord to spare his life so he could return to preach to them to repent.

This passage in Revelation 2-3 both moves me to tears and motivates me to work more fervently. I read of the verdict of Christ’s judgment of what looked on the surface to be solid churches (read of Ephesus’ great works in 2:2-3; of Pergamos’ strong faith in 2:13; of Thyatira’s works, love, service, faith and patience in 2:19; of Sardis reputation of great faith in 3:1; of Laodicea’s … well, nothing good to say of this putrid lukewarm church). But then I read of the coming judgment of these Christians if they don’t repent (2:5, 16, 21; 3:3, 19). They will not only lose Christ’s blessed fellowship, but be killed and cast into fire.

The comfort of this passage comes from reading the judgment of Jesus to the churches of Smyrna and Philadelphia. It gives me hope that there are congregations of God’s people that love truth more than life itself and remain “*faithful unto death to receive the crown of life*” (2:10). There are churches that “*hold fast what you have that no one may take your crown*” so that Christ “*will write on him My new name*” (3:11-12).

Just as John almost certainly knew the names and faces of those who were receiving these letters from heaven, and would be motivated to fast and pray for their souls, so this section of scripture both haunts me, and thrills me, as I think of the names and faces of each of you. Legend has it that John was released from exile and was able to return to Asia once more. I can only imagine how this aged saint (likely nearing 100 years old) mustered the energy to once again make one last circuit to these seven churches to see how they responded to Christ’s letters. Did he find them alive or dead? Were they once more thriving, or boarded up and lost to history? We don’t know. All we do know is that there are no faithful churches in these seven cities today.

What’s to become of us here at Northwest? What is Jesus, at this very moment, writing in His summary letter to us? What would Christ dictate if He called and said to me what He said to John, “Rick, what you see, write in a book and send it to the church in New Hope” (to paraphrase Rev. 1:7).

Thankfully, we will each be judged individually, not collectively *(“You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy” –* Rev. 3:4). But the fact that right now Jesus is making judgments of us as a local church moves me to pray more fervently, study more diligently, preach more passionately, and labor more anxiously so that all of us, not just some of us, will one day wear robes of white and crowns of victory. As I read this great text I see each of you like my own children, and I long to say of you as John said of them, “*I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth*” (3 John 4).

I love you. - Rick