

“An Iron Rod and the Morning Star”

Revelation 2: 18-29

Lifepath Church

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At Christmas time we often see images of Jesus that look like this. (Show slide of baby Jesus). Isn't he cute? Away in a manger...blah blah blah. I don't know if you remember Will Ferrell in the movie Talledega Nights (show Will Ferrell slide) said that he always prayed to “Dear Lord Baby Jesus.” Grown up Jesus was just a little too scary. Sometimes we prefer the Jesus we construct in our imagination to the actual Jesus who steps forth from the pages of Scripture. We've been reading through Jesus' letters to his churches in the book of Revelation, and in some of them Jesus could scare Will Ferrell pretty severely. We are to letter number four. Look with me at Revelation 2: 18-29. Listen now to the Word of God.....(read passage in NLT).

We're a long way from sweet little baby Jesus here, aren't we? Jesus has “eyes like flames of fire” (v 18). He threatens to throw someone “on a bed of suffering” (v 22) and “strike her children dead” (v 23). He wants all the churches to know that he is the “One who searches out the thoughts and intentions of every person”....and “will give to each of you whatever you deserve” (v23). Lord, whatever you give me, don't let be what I deserve! Am I right? Jesus is pretty fierce in this passage. In every one of these seven letters Jesus gives a promise of hope – a promise to Christians that stay faithful. But in this letter even the promise is fierce and

warlike: “They will rule the nations with an iron rod and smash them like clay pots” (v. 27).

Wow! What is going on here? How do we reconcile this warlike Jesus with the guy who said things like this: “Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matthew 11: 28-30 NLT). He doesn’t sound very gentle in the book of Revelation though, does he?

With this letter the best place to start is at the end. Let’s look more closely at that promise at the end of the letter and see if we can’t puzzle that out and then perhaps the meaning of the rest of the letter will fall into place. Look back at verses 26 and 27: “To all who are victorious, who obey to the very end, To them I will give authority over all the nations. They will rule the nations with an iron rod and smash them like clay pots” (Rev 2: 26-27 NLT). That’s a quote from Psalm 2. Remember, when the New Testament quotes the Old, if you want to understand what’s going on, don’t just look at the verse quoted. Go back and look at the whole chapter so you get the context. Look with me at Psalm 2. (Read Psalm 2 in NLT.) Ok, so the context for all of this is that the world is in rebellion to a good and loving God. And the world is very much in rebellion, isn’t it? It’s filled with dishonesty and greed and hate. Here’s a minor example. This week I took my car to my local mechanic and got it serviced and inspected. My mechanic’s name is James and he’s awesome. He’s been taking care of Allie and me for years. We pick up the car and ask, “All done James?” “Yep!” “Any problems with the car?” “Nope. It’s in great shape.” “Inspection done?” “Yep, you’re good to go!” I then drive the car directly from James the mechanic over to the dealership because there was a recall on some minor thing that the dealership had to fix. I won’t say which dealership it was, but it rhymes with “Razda.”

The dealership calls me later in the day. “Sir, we found multiple problems with your car. You need \$500 of new tires and your car should be realigned. Your air filter is dirty. And your brake fluid! Sir, your brake fluid has never been changed. That’s crucial for emergency stops and a safety issue. You need to fix all these things or you’ll never pass inspection.” “Um....really? That’s funny because I drove the car to you from getting my car serviced by my mechanic. He says it’s in great shape and it just passed inspection. You crook.”

I didn’t say you crook. The world is full of thieves and liars. What happened to me was pretty minor in the grand scheme of evil things, wasn’t it? Think about all the awful behavior by men in positions of power we’ve heard about lately - people using their power to use and abuse others. Think about all the dishonesty and ugliness in the world. Think about all of the victims of human trafficking. I recently heard a story about a twelve-year-old who was trafficked. I won’t burden you with that one. And think about some of the truly awful things going on around the world. As we speak Saudi Arabia is intentionally starving the children of Yemen in order to win a war. Intentionally starving children. If I were to show you pictures – which I won’t – it would break your heart. There is so much evil in the world. What is God doing about all of it? Pslam 2 says that God will send his anointed one, his Messiah, and he will give him “the nations as your inheritance, the whole earth as your possessions. You will break them with an iron rod and smash them like clay pots” (Psalm 2: 8-9 NLT). Sometimes people complain about the God of the Bible being judgmental. But those same people also complain that if God is really good ,why doesn’t he do something about the evil in the world? God coming to judge the world is about God putting things right. God’s judgment is putting an end to evil.

And Psalm 2 says that is why God sends his Messiah, his anointed Son. He has come to put an end to evil. To smash it with an iron rod and break it into pieces like a dirty old plate.

Now fortunately for us, the Messiah's first step in doing that is laying down his own life for us for all of us rebels. For all of us have done things that were wrong and hurt others. All of us have been rebels toward God. And, as Isaiah prophesied, by dying on a cross, "He was counted among the rebels. He bore the sins of many and interceded for rebels" (Isaiah 53: 12 NLT). The first phase of the Messiah's mission to smash rebellion and put the world right was to offer forgiveness to all who repent. And that offer still stands. Ask for forgiveness and Jesus will give it.

But what about all who refuse to repent and ask for forgiveness? What about everyone that hardens their heart and continues to abuse, to lie, to steal, to use others? What about those who, as Psalm 2 puts it, seek to "free themselves from slavery to God"? (Psalm 2: 3 NLT). Will they be allowed to continue running this world and getting away with it forever? The book of Revelation says, "No." Three times in the book of Revelation it quotes this line about the Messiah coming with a rod of iron from Psalm 2 to help us understand what Revelation is all about. The biggest moment in Revelation describes the return of Jesus. And it describes it this way: "Then I saw heaven opened, and a white horse was standing there. Its rider was named Faithful and true, for he judges fairly and wages a righteous war. His eyes were like flames of fire, and on his head were many crowns. A name was written on him that no one understood except himself. He wore a robe dipped in blood, and his title was the Word of God. The armies of heaven, dressed in the finest of pure white linen, followed him on white horses. From his mouth came a sharp sword to strike down the nations. He will rule them with an iron rod. He

will release the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty, like juice flowing from a winepress. On his robe at his thigh was written this title: King of all kings and Lord of all lords” (Revelation 19: 11-16 NLT). The unrepentant thieves and abusers, the human traffickers, the ones who intentionally abuse and starve children will be no more. God save you, crooked car dealership! He will “break them with an iron rod and smash them like clay pots” (Psalm 2: 9 NLT).

And, to get back to our letter in Revelation 2, the promise is that when Jesus breaks the evil of this world that we will participate in that. “To them I will give authority over all the nations. They will rule the nations with an iron rod and smash them like clay pots” (Revelation 2: 26-27 NLT). It’s a common theme in the New Testament that when we are joined together with Jesus by believing and submitting to him, everything he has he shares with us: he shares his righteousness before God with us; he shares his status as God’s son so that we become sons and daughters of God; he will share his resurrection with us; and on and on. I guess it’s no surprise that he promises to also include us in the breaking of evil itself. Those armies dressed in white and riding on white horses following Jesus from heaven in Revelation 19 might include you and me.

But hang onto your iron rods, just a moment. Before you go out in righteous anger and start smashing the crooked car dealership or whoever else is doing wrong, remember that right now, how is the Messiah is dealing with evil? By laying down his life for the rebels on the cross. We do what our Messiah does when he does it. Right now, the only role of God’s people is to invite all to repent and offer them forgiveness. I don’t smash the dealership. I just say, “Hey, y’all might want to rethink your life choices because Jesus is coming and y’all aren’t going to like it.” Right now we offer forgiveness. That’s how he deals with evil right now. But it is

comforting to know that eventually evil will be dealt with, even evil that refuses to repent. And we will somehow participate in putting an end to evil.

And that's the key to understanding the rest of this fourth letter in Revelation 2. Jesus says to the church, "But I have this complaint against you. You are permitting that woman - that Jezebel who calls herself a prophet - to lead my servants astray. She teaches them to commit sexual sin and to eat food offered to idols" (Rev 2: 20 NLT). What exactly were this woman and her followers teaching? The scholars are unsure or divided but they believe that the city of Thyatira all of the different merchant guilds - the bakers, the weavers, the potters - all had their own guild halls where the merchants would meet and have banquets. If you wanted to do business in the city you needed to belong to one of these guilds. You need to be in the engineers guild or the IT guild in order to practice your profession. It's how you made your contacts and did your deals. But at the business banquets at these guild halls the first thing they did was to make a sacrifice to the pagan gods. So if you were a Christian, you had to choose between not participating in the business community or making a compromise with the pagan culture. A tough choice. "Jezebel" is apparently saying that it's ok to make this compromise with the culture in order to do business.

The tough choice is still before us. How do we as servants of the Messiah do business and conduct our lives in a world that often asks us to compromise? To get back to my silly little story about the car dealership. I'm sure there are some honest people in that shop. Not everyone in the office is a crook. But even the honest ones have to turn a blind eye to the systematic way that people are being ripped off by their employers. Do they hang on to the pay check and compromise with the evil going on around them? Jesus' point is this: you are the Messiah's

people. The Messiah is the one God sends into the world to deal with evil. Right now he offers forgiveness but the day is coming when all evil must be ended. He will take an iron rod and smash evil like a clay pot. And the Messiah's people join him in that. Right now we too offer forgiveness, but, in the end, we will also have a part to play in putting an end to unrepentant evil. Now, how, as someone who is called to put an end to evil, can you also participate in it? The answer is, You can't. So don't.

That is what he means when he says, "I will give (you) the bright morning star" (Rev 2: 28 NLT). Strangely, in the Scriptures both Satan and Jesus are called the Bright Morning Star. What he is saying, is I will give you both the defeat of Satan and his evil and I will give you the goodness of God's Son. But he is also saying this: the morning star is the brightest thing shining in the night sky just before dawn breaks. That is who you are called to be. Right now, the world may be covered with darkness. Right now, people may cheat, lie, use and abuse. Right now, people go around with anger and hostility and racism. Right now, night covers the earth. But you, you be different. Don't conform to the darkness around you. You shine forth the light of the messiah like a bright star in the night sky. Shine with gentleness and honesty and kindness. Shine, because the dawn is coming. The dawn is coming when all darkness will be smashed to bits and the world cleansed. Shine out now and you show them all that morning is on the way.

Amen