

The scariest Bible verse. At least, the scariest to me. It doesn't have to do with the number 666, or the devil, or anything that you probably think of. It has to do with something so ordinary that you almost never think about it. And it's in *Revelation*.

Before we get to the "scary" verse, we need to talk about the original recipients of the letter of *Revelation* that John wrote. John was instructed to write to the seven churches in Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea. These churches were in the Roman Province of Asia, or modern-day Turkey. On a map, you can start with Ephesus, and go clock-wise around the list. They were all probably started by the Apostle Paul and his helpers a few decades before *Revelation* was written. They had been established long enough to have a reputation, and to have a history of deviating from their original good intentions.

John addressed the letter to the angels of these churches. It is never made clear whether the angels were literal angels assigned to these churches, or whether they are the lead elders of those churches, or possibly something or somebody other than that. It was probably self-evident to those churches even though it is unclear to modern readers.

The second and third chapters of *Revelation* are the words that Jesus spoke to these churches as recorded by John. Each of the seven churches gets their own, very specific message from Jesus. The message generally starts off with a recognition of their current status, goes into a critique of their actions, and ends with a promised reward for those who correct their actions.

The letters are written to the seven churches, but since the churches are made up of individuals, the letters are also written to the individuals in those churches. Also, though the letters are written to the churches that existed at that time, the messages are certainly meant to be applied to all other churches throughout all time.

The first church to receive its message was in Ephesus, a leading city of the region with the largest church. Ephesus was well-known for having a huge pagan temple dedicated to Artemis, and was well-known for its decadent life-style. Jesus praises the Christians for their hard work and perseverance. He is pleased that they cannot tolerate wicked people who want to be among them, and that they reject false apostles and the false teachings of the Nicolaitans. He criticizes them with a scary verse, but it is not the scariest verse.

Jesus tells the Ephesians that they have left the love they had at first for him. They started with a fervent, faithful love but now they have a shallow love for him. Their actions are faithful, but their hearts are not. He says that if they do not change, he will remove their lampstand, which

might mean that he will end their existence. That is scary, but he says that those who are victorious will get the right to eat from the tree of life.

The second church to receive its message was in Smyrna. Jesus recognizes that the people in that church are financially poor but are spiritually rich. Jesus knows they are being persecuted by the Jews, but points out that those Jews are of Satan, not God. He warns the church that it will surely suffer persecution.

However, Jesus reminds them that those who endure persecution and remain faithful to Jesus, even to the point of death, will receive life. Those who are victorious through persecution will not be hurt at all by the second death.

This message to Smyrna must have certainly opened some eyes. Jesus was clear that the persecution of the churches would be certain, long-lasting, and would include death. He was not sugar-coating his message in any way. The promise of not being hurt by the second death must have been encouraging, but bewildering. What was the second death?

The third church to receive its letter was Pergamum. Jesus acknowledges to the church that it lives in an evil city, so evil that Satan has his throne there. Even with the evil, and even with the martyrdom of Antipas in their city, they remained faithful and did not renounce the name of Jesus.

However, even with their faithfulness, Jesus is unhappy some of the Christians in Pergamum follow false teachings. He warns them to change their ways or he will certainly come to fight against them. That is scary, but not the scariest verse.

Jesus says he will reward each person who overcomes false teaching with hidden manna and a white stone with a personal, new name written on it. These rewards must have been very encouraging to those in Pergamum. Can you imagine Jesus giving you a white stone with a new name on it that only you and Jesus know? Talk about best friends forever!

The angel of the church at Thyatira got the fourth message. They must have been very encouraged to hear that Jesus knew of their deeds, love, faith, service and perseverance. That they were doing more than they did even at the first. The angel of Thyatira must have been on the edge of being prideful when he heard those words. Then Jesus lowered the boom.

Jesus is through with them tolerating a woman who pretended to be a prophet but was leading the people of the church into sexual immorality. He names this woman Jezebel, a direct reference to the most evil woman in the Old Testament. He says he gave her time to repent, but she has chosen not to. So, Jesus will torment her, kill her children, and make those who sin with her suffer intensely. Why so harsh? So all the churches will know that he knows their hearts and will repay each according to their deeds!

He asks the faithful ones in the church to continue to hold on, and they will be victorious. Those who are victorious will rule under his authority, **and** will be given a morning star. Can you imagine that? Receiving a morning star as your own?

Patience! We are almost to the scariest verse in the Bible, but first let's discuss the letter to Sardis. Jesus says that Sardis has a reputation for being alive, but is a dead church. He begs them to come alive and repent. However, there are still a few faithful believers in Sardis, and Jesus wants them to stay faithful.

The reward for the faithful is spectacular. Their names will be in the book of life, and Jesus will personally acknowledge them before God and his angels. Try to imagine that. Jesus standing before God and his angels calling out your name as one of the faithful. Gives me the shivers to think that could be my name he is calling out.

Two churches to go. Jesus has only good things to say to the church at Philadelphia, the first city named for brotherly love. Jesus compliments them for enduring trials even though they have little strength left. Since the church has been faithful, he will open doors for them that nobody can shut, and will have their enemies acknowledge that Jesus loves them. Since they have been faithful, Jesus will protect them from some of the upcoming trials, and will make them an integral part of the coming kingdom of God.

Can't you imagine how happy those Christians at Philadelphia must have been when they received this message from Jesus. They had been the true and faithful servants Jesus had talked about while he was on Earth. We at Laodicea looked at the Christians at Philadelphia in a new, rather envious way now.

OK, time for the scariest verse. But you cannot understand why it is scary unless I explain something to you. In your life, water is an everyday, mundane subject. With your pipes, and pumps, and dams, and water towers...it's everywhere, and water is virtually free. Want hot water, you've got it. Want cold water, you've got it. You can even have frozen water or steam whenever you want it.

You have no conception of the true value of water. In my time, water was the key to life. The Romans understood this, so they were the first people to perfect the art of moving water from one place to another using aqueducts, pipes, and storage tanks. Consequently, they could build cities and military bases wherever they wanted. Rome was an empire built on water systems.

The exact opposite was also true, whenever water became unavailable or unhealthy, entire cities were snuffed out of existence. Drought, broken aqueducts, unhealthy water supplies, could end the life of a city, and even an entire people. The subject of water was never far from our minds, as is evident with the many times Jesus talked about water.

Now...the scariest verse in the Bible. Jesus wrote the last of the seven letters to the church where I was an elder, the church at Laodicea. We at Laodicea had no excuses. A few decades

before, the apostle Paul had written us a letter that told us how to behave and believe.<sup>1</sup> We were so proud of the letter that we had shared it with everybody. I guess, over time, we forgot to pay attention to it ourselves.

Laodicea was a wealthy city, and some of the people of our church were very rich. We sometimes equated wealth to goodness. We must have been *very* good people who God loved *very* much because we were *very* rich. We were *very* wrong.

In our message, Jesus cautions us that our physical wealth is worth nothing since we are in spiritual poverty. He warns us to acquire spiritual wealth by accepting his discipline and repenting of our actions. If we do so, he will give us the right to sit with him on this throne.

Jesus starts his letter to us by referring to the two sources of water supply for our city. Laodicea had no big natural fresh water springs. It got water from the northwest from the area known as Hierapolis. This area had hot mineral water springs, and hot mineral water baths were the hit of the area.

The other source of water was from Colossae, in the opposite direction. It had a cold, fresh water spring. This water was remarkably refreshing to drink.<sup>2</sup>

The trouble was, by the time the hot mineral water got to Laodicea, it was no longer hot. By the time the water from Colossae got to Laodicea, it was no longer cold. We were inundated with lukewarm water that always made us want to gag.

When Jesus said the following we knew exactly what he was talking about. "I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot: I wish you were cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spew you out of my mouth."

In more modern terms, you are good for something or you are good for nothing. The Bible tells us of the many ways we can be good for something in the name of Jesus. However, if we choose to be good for nothing, Jesus will vomit us out of his mouth. Is there anything scarier than that?

Fortunately, Jesus gave us an incredible alternative. This was his parting message to us, and it applies to you, too. "Those whom I love, I correct and discipline, so be zealous, and repent."

You've heard the scariest verse in the Bible to me. Now, want to hear one of the most peaceful verses in the Bible?... What happens if we are zealous and repent? Jesus says, "I will come in, and we will eat together."

<sup>1</sup> Colossians 4:16

<sup>2</sup> *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes*, by E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O' Brien, Pages 9-10