

Spiritual Survival

by Ray C. Stedman

My home is on the Rogue River in southwestern Oregon. As the river flows by my door it is a quiet, happily murmuring stream. But ten miles downstream it turns into a raging torrent, sweeping through the walls of Hellgate Canyon with unbelievable power and white-capped display. The varied assortment of rafters, kayakers, and boatsmen who challenge its course through the Coast Range have but one thought in mind---survival! A few hardy, experienced souls dare it on their own, but most rely on river-wise guides who thoroughly know the dangers, can instruct in the techniques of survival, and are able to build implicit trust in their knowledge and leadership.

By now you have doubtless discovered that life is very much like that powerful and treacherous river. Who hasn't felt at times that you are being carried along into unknown dangers quite beyond your control? Who hasn't breathed a sigh of relief during quiet seasons, only to have sudden intrusions of tragic circumstances press faith to the breaking point? We've all known (and perhaps succumbed to) the allure of powerful temptations to wrong-doing that can leave us shattered and disillusioned when they are past. Or thought we were doing okay only to discover that we had badly misjudged our state and woke up too late to recover.

All these perils and more are charted for us in the seven letters to the churches of Asia, found in Revelation 2-3. The encouraging factor is that they come from the great River-Guide himself, Jesus our Lord, who thoroughly knows the dangers which confront us, can advise knowledgably and accurately of the correctives needed to survive, and, in addition, offers incredible rewards to those who make the trip successfully to the end.

Each of the seven letters confronts a different situation and teaches a different lesson. The first, to the church at Ephesus, describes the one absolutely essential motivation to survival. It is to preserve continuously the warm and intimate love for Jesus that we first felt when we learned of that agony of self-sacrifice on our behalf which made salvation possible and brought us out of darkness into his marvelous light. If we lose that love by being drawn into side currents of man-pleasing or self-gratification or personal ambition we are in deadly danger of finding ourselves washed up on the shoals of life with little to show for having lived at all. "Watch your motivation," says Jesus, "there is only one that can see you safely through the perils of life---a genuine and often-renewed love for Me."

The letter to Smyrna faces a quite different danger. Here it is the terrible pressure to give up faith because it will mean ridicule, ostracism, affliction and outright persecution even to the point of death. We hate the thought that difficulties and hard trials are to be part of our lot, but Jesus tells us that only these can build the moral strength and trust that is needed to get us through. Modern examples include Alexandr Solzhenitsyn who suffered for years in Russian prisons and detention camps but who was sustained by a deepening devotion to Christ. His sturdy declaration of unpalatable truth has become a model to many of how one man can influence a whole generation. We believe that strong military forces are needed to preserve Christian civilization but Smyrna teaches us that Jesus can keep his church alive and vigorous in the midst of social and political upheaval. "Don't be intimidated by opposition," cries Jesus, "just as I died and came to life again, so can you, for the cross always leads to a crown!"

Pergamum stresses the need for integrity. The perils are subtle. One of them is sexual seduction. A young business man once told me of being with associates in a city away from home. His two friends planned to go out and find girls for a sexual party, but being a Christian he demurred and stayed in the room to write letters. After going to bed he was awakened by his two friends returning, accompanied by three girls. One of them promptly climbed in bed with him, awakening strong physical response. But he reminded himself of all he had

to lose, and what his Lord would think, and wisely dressed without a word of reproach and went down to get another room. The other peril at Pergamum was to seek for personal power at the price of integrity. This was the doctrine of the Nicolaitans. It is found in many offices today in the lure of The Inner Circle, entrance to which demands some surrender of moral principle.

"But," says Jesus, "don't forget that integrity maintained means greater intimacy with Me. Guard your morality with care!"

The letter to Thyatira develops the other side of the same problem. It teaches us that compromise destroys. Under the figure of the Old Testament queen, Jezebel, who introduced idolatry into Israel, a contemporary Jezebel teaches Christians that having another god is necessary to do business in the modern world. It pictures adopting the world's value system in place of the personal honesty which Christ requires. To lie, to shade principle, to promise what can't be delivered, is to begin a downward slide into moral disaster. The recent spate of indictments for inside trading on Wall Street is a case in point. Those indicted have testified to the way their moral perceptions were blunted by the lust for easy money--but now prison awaits! So a false god leads to certain destruction. "But remember," Jesus urges, "faithfulness leads to greater authority. He who overcomes will reign with Me."

Sardis is the church in deepest trouble. It started well but soon began to lean on a good reputation and that led to inner-coasting till before they knew it they were all but dead. The Lord's staccato command to them is, "Wake up, strengthen what remains." The lesson to each of us is clear: words are never enough. A reputation for past success will soon disappear if the deeds that built it are missing. It is a call for consistency. Begin again where you once were. Apathy and lethargy are deadly enemies so recognize them as such and come alive. "Those who do," says Jesus, "will find security and honor. Limited success is far better than phony achievement."

Alone among the churches, the church of Philadelphia merits the full approval of its Lord, without reproach of any kind. It is because its members are alert to their opportunities, compassionate to their enemies, and patiently aware that nothing will ever be fully set right till Jesus comes. Read the lives of the heroes and heroines of the Church and see how that pattern is repeated in each life. With the love of Jesus as a continuing motive, and a determination to faithfully reflect his character till he returns, men and women like Mother Theresa, Chuck Colson, Jim Elliott, Amy Carmichael, and thousands unnamed have earned the title, "of whom the world was not worthy." "I will acknowledge them as my own," Jesus declares, "in new ways they cannot now imagine!"

Laodicea is the church filled with self-sufficient members. They had two problems. One, there was a lack of full commitment; they were neither hot nor cold. And, two, there was an inaccurate self-image; they thought they were rich when they were really poor. They were both comfortable and complacent. But in the eyes of Jesus they were far from what he wanted his people to be. The church is not a country club, operated for the benefit of its members. It is not a performing arts center, offering high-quality entertainment. It is not a political action group, choosing up sides in the public arena. It is not a protest movement, radically seeking the overthrow of law and order. What it is intended to be is salt, and salty salt at that, flavoring life and arresting its corruption. And light, widely visible light, illuminating a dark and confused world. To be this, Jesus offers himself, in intimate and personal relationship, to be the source of all that's needed for ministry in this present age. "Nothing else will suffice," he says, "only my life lived through your life will do the trick. It will bring you through the shoals and rapids of life to share with me in the Final Triumph!"

So, can you make it through the dangers, toils and snares of this dangerous world? Of course you can---if you love your Leader, heed his warnings, and lay hold of his resources. Without him you cannot succeed; with him you cannot fail!

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