**Hold Fast**

Revelation 2:18-29

Here is one of many explicit references in Revelation to the Old Testament. ***Who was Jezebel?*** Well… It’s not a pretty story. Not one that kids Sunday School classes get into the details of. Yes, there are dogs involved, but not in the picture book / flannelgraph way. (Can you imagine the coloring page? What are the dogs licking there, Mommy? Well, you should probably color that part red, honey. Here’s the red crayon.) Ok, here’s the setup:

“And Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord, more than all who were before him. And as if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, he took for his wife Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and went and served Baal and worshiped him.” 1 Kings 16:30-31

In the flow of 1 Kings, when a new king is introduced the author categorizes that king as either good or bad. This king, Ahab, was not only bad, but was ***WORSE than all the kings before him*** and even worse than Jeroboam who was notoriously evil and idolatrous. What contributed to the wickedness of king Ahab? “He took for his wife Jezebel,” from Sidon.

There were **three baseline rules for kings** that God gave to Samuel when the first kings were anointed: 1) don’t take many wives, especially not from foreign nations; 2) don’t collect tons of wealth and 3) don’t build a massive army of horses and chariots. All three of those things, God warned, will lead a king away from trusting in and serving the Lord.

***What’s the first thing Ahab did?*** Married a wife from Sidon, where they worship Baal. So immediately Ahab sets the direction of his reign toward the worship of a foreign god. First executive order: build an altar to Baal in Samaria. (They weren’t supposed to worship in Samaria at all; but in Jerusalem. And they obviously weren’t supposed to worship any God but the Lord.)

From there the narrative in 1 Kings launches into the ELIJAH sequence, which does get featured in Sunday School. First, ***Elijah predicts a drought*** and it doesn’t rain for 3.5 years. File that length of time away. (3.5 Half of perfection. Revelation, like the book of Daniel, likes to use this 3.5 time frame.) In the midst of that drought God sends Elijah to help a widow in, of all places, SIDON (where Jezebel was from). So the problem wasn’t Sidon itself, but the hearts of people there and whether they were set to seek the true God or to worship false gods.

Then we get the confrontation of the ***450 prophets of Baal*** by Elijah on Mount Carmel. Super fun interaction. Easily the most sarcastic a prophet gets, taunting all the false prophets with possible reasons that Baal wasn’t lighting up their altar. Maybe he’s away on vacation. Maybe he’s taking a nap. Maybe… he’s in the bathroom and can’t “take care of business”? The Sunday School lesson stops with God lighting up Elijah’s altar and doesn’t get into what happens with those 450 prophets of Baal. (Again, you’d need that red crayon.)

Then Elijah outruns Ahab in a chariot, which is fun for all the cross country runners. He had to run fast, like a Floridian, because the rain was coming again. But then ***Elijah ran for his life to get away from Jezebel*** because she made a vow to hunt down the prophet and kill him. Elijah ran to the wilderness, assuming his life was over. But God cooked Elijah a really special cake that let him walk for 40 days to another mountain where the prophet had a unqiue 1 on 1 with the God of Israel; and it wasn’t through a storm or a fire or an earthquake but a gentle whisper, that God spoke to his discouraged prophet.

Then Ahab ***really wanted this one vineyard*** but the owner, a guy named Naboth, wouldn’t sell. So Jezebel solved that one for her husband by arranging to have Naboth accused of blasphemy so he was stoned to death, freeing up the vineyard to be a nice little gift for Ahab.

All of this led Elijah to a severe condemnation of king Ahab, denouncing his evil and pronouncing his imminent doom, along with all of his family. Here is the summary:

“(There was none who sold himself to do what was evil in the sight of the Lord like Ahab, whom Jezebel his wife incited. He acted very abominably in going after idols, as the Amorites had done, whom the Lord cast out before the people of Israel.)” 1 Kings 21:25-26

But then, there is this **shocking twist**.

“And when Ahab heard those words, he tore his clothes and put sackcloth on his flesh and fasted and lay in sackcloth and went about dejectedly. And the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, ‘Have you seen how Ahab has humbled himself before me? Because he has humbled himself before me, I will not bring the disaster in his days; but in his son's days I will bring the disaster upon his house.’” 1 Kings 21:27-29

So the Lord gave Ahab three years of peace. No conflict. No battles. No enemies attacking.

***And what does the king do?*** He hatches a plot with Jehosaphat the King of Judah (the southern kingdom of Israel) to attack Syria. Jehoshaphat hesitates and says, “Hey, we should inquire of the Lord on this and just be sure we’re not out of bounds.” Ahab agrees but says, “Sure, just don’t ask this one prophet Micaiah, he’s the worst.” But turns out, Micaiah was the only prophet around who actually listened to the Lord. Tragically, the two kings of Israel agree to disregard the word of the Lord through the prophet Micaiah and march off to war.

***And Ahab gets killed with a randomly shot arrow***. Not a happy ending exactly. But not as bad as it would go for old Jezebel. You have to turn to 2 Kings for that. And that’s where the dogs come in and the need for the red crayon. We’ll just summarize that she met a “sticky end” and leave it at that. Justice was done in fulfillment of the Word of the Lord. Not even any bones left to bury.

So **Jezebel** is synonymous in the Bible with evil, temptation, immorality and idolatry. She embodies the world, and worldliness and compromise. We had neighbors in Kentucky who named their daughter Delilah and we never had the courage to tell them the Samson and Delilah story in the Bible. It’s a similar story of an Israelite marrying a non-Israelite and getting into trouble with compromise and immorality. But hey, at least they didn’t name their daughter Jezebel.

Delilah, Jezebel, Solomon’s 700 foreign wives… These accounts are in the Bible as ***warnings to God’s people*** like this one in Proverbs 5, ironically written by Solomon:

“For the lips of a forbidden woman drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil, but in the end she is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a two-edged sword. Her feet go down to death; her steps follow the path to Sheol.” Proverbs 5:3-5

Solomon took a “do as I say, not as I do” approach to teachings like this. ***Joseph is the positive example***, who dealt with Potiphar’s wife trying to seduce him for weeks, maybe months, but resisted her and in the final moment of crisis, ran for his life, leaving his cloak in her hands. Back to Proverbs 5 and the warning of the adulterous woman:

“And now, O sons, listen to me, and do not depart from the words of my mouth. Keep your way far from her, and do not go near the door of her house… lest at the end of your life you groan, when your flesh and body are consumed, and you say, ‘How I hated discipline, and my heart despised reproof!’” Proverbs 5:7-9,12

This passage in Revelation 2 is also a warning. It is a call from our Lord and Savior Himself to **heed the warnings** of Solomon, of Elijah when facing Ahab and Jezebel, of King David lamenting his failure in Psalm 32 and 51. Will we listen to these warnings or will we be fools who stray into danger and are shocked when we fall into sin?

The letter to the church in Thyatira is ***an exhortation to holiness*** – to protect our own hearts and in the process, protect one another. We will see **three essential commitments** to protect our holiness and avoid the siren song of the many Jezebels in our culture today. First:

**How to Protect our Holiness:**

1. Focus on Jesus, the all-seeing, all-righteous **Judge**

“And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: ‘The words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze.’” Revelation 2:18

Each letter opens with ***an introduction about King Jesus***. They immediately lift our eyes to the throne of God and invite us to shift our focus from this messy, dark world we live in to the glory and goodness of Jesus. This one reminds us of **chapter one** where we see Jesus revealed in glory, eyes blazing with fire, hair white as wool, a white robe and golden sash and feet like burnished bronze. And that points us back to Daniel 10. The prophet:

“I lifted up my eyes and looked, and behold, a man clothed in linen, with a belt of fine gold from Uphaz around his waist. His body was like beryl, his face like the appearance of lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and the sound of his words like the sound of a multitude.” Daniel 10:5-6

I had to look up beryl, and found it’s **a shiny gemstone** that can be pretty much any color you want. It seems like we are working with shades of orange and yellow, so that’s the way my mind takes it here. Shiny, glorious, radiant, pure. In Daniel 10 it’s not just his feet but his arms and legs a brightly polished bronze. This is a glorious heavenly being. Based on the comparison with Revelation 1 and 2, most scholars conclude the human-like figure in Daniel 10 is Jesus.

The trouble with that simple 1 to 1 conclusion is later in Daniel 10:

“Then he said to me, ‘Fear not, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your heart to understand and humbled yourself before your God, your words have been heard, and I have come because of your words. The prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me twenty-one days, but Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, for I was left there with the kings of Persia.’” Daniel 10:12-13

This is a problem because Jesus wouldn’t need help from Michael, the archangel. That would be the other way around. How could any human or demonic prince resist Jesus for three weeks? They couldn’t resist Him for 3 nanoseconds.

But I show you this to show you an important ***principle of Bible interpretation*** regarding this kind of prophecy. You’re not going to find very many 1 to 1, “this is that” allegorical, symbolic signs. It’s just now how most prophecies and visions like this work. There are callbacks and links, there are parallels and symbolic pointers. But everything is couched in mystery and various layers of interpretation.

***CS Lewis and Tolkein had a friendly rivalry*** on this exact point. Lewis wrote the chronicles of Narnia as a direct allegory. Aslan is Jesus. It’s a direct 1 to 1 symbol. The white witch is the devil.

Tolkein did not like that kind of obvious allegory. He went for a more nuanced symbolism in his writing. So if you tried to say that Gandalf is Jesus, Tolkien would be annoyed with you. Does ***Gandalf the gray wizard*** have some characteristics that are like Jesus? Sure. He is wise. He is powerful. He is a shepherd to the other main characters. And does he die at some point and come back to life… spoiler alert: yes. But still, not a direct Jesus symbol.

To get to Jesus in the Lord of the Rings you have to combine aspects of Gandalf, Frodo and Aragorn because they all point to Jesus in different ways. THAT may feel super nerdy to you, but it’s actually a really helpful way to think about this kind of Old Testament symbolism. This shiny man in Daniel 10 isn’t Aslan, it’s Gandalf. ***He’s not exactly Jesus, but he certainly points to Jesus***. He is holy, powerful and there to help God’s servant, Daniel.

Ok, back to Revelation 2.

**How to Protect our Holiness:**

1. Focus on Jesus, the all-seeing, all-righteous **Judge**

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***The Bible is so helpful at guiding and filling our thoughts.*** What were visions FOR, like the ones in Daniel 7 and 10? These glorious, hard to understand, blinding experiences of the divine were meant to capture the imagination and raise more questions than they give answers. They direct our hearts and minds to the spiritual world where God is visible and His kingdom reigns.

The first key to protecting our holiness is filling our minds with Jesus.

***Focus on HIM.*** Anyone here struggle to keep your thoughts focused? You sit down to read your Bible and your to do list for the day immediately pops onto your eyeballs. You pause to pray and 10 different worries send up emotional flares. You are just driving down the road and some old temptation appears in your mind.

It is a physiological fact that **your brain cannot think about two things at once**. Multi-taskers are doing one thing on autopilot. So to replace a worry or fear or temptation all you have to do is introduce a new thought and the other one puffs away. It will be back, of course. But we can learn to “set our minds on things above, and not on earthly things.” We can choose to think about “whatever is noble, right, pure excellent and praiseworthy.” We can train ourselves to put off the old self and put on the new self, which is “created in the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.”

Christian music is very helpful for this. So is Scripture memory. I find podcasts to be great for this during my drive time. Whatever helps you focus on Jesus.

**How to Protect our Holiness:**

1. Focus on Jesus, the all-seeing, all-righteous **Judge**

“And all the churches will know that I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you according to your works.” Revelation 2:23

The eyes of Jesus blaze with holy, all-seeing fire. His feet are steady, unchanging, unshakeable and righteous. **He is the One** who walks on the turbulent water and commands the wind and sea to be calm. He is the one who knows every heart and every mind, who perceives the thoughts and intentions of your heart. Jesus is the judge of all mankind who will render to each one perfect justice, according to our works.

Thankfully, ***the Judge of all people is also our Savior.*** So for the true follower of Jesus, He comes down from His judgment seat, places his arm around you and walks you directly to God the Father saying, “This one is with me,” and that is the end of the legal proceeding. If you belong to Jesus by faith all of your sins have already been paid for and are separated fromm you as far as the east is from the west. They are nailed to the cross and you bear them no more, praise the Lord!

So the critical question is **whether you truly belong to Jesus**. Is He still your JUDGE or has He become your Savior? Because He is one or the other. The first key to protecting our holiness is to focus on Jesus. In this letter we see Him unveiled as the glorious, all-seeing, all righteous judge. Here is His assessment of the church in Thyatira.

**How to Protect our Holiness:**

1. Focus on Jesus, the all-seeing, all-righteous **Judge**

“I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first.” Revelation 2:19

For so many people at Oakwood ***this is exactly how Jesus sees you.*** You work hard. You pray sincerely. You love people. You trust deeply in the Lord Jesus. You serve and help. You endure patiently, without complaint.

And notice the ***contrast with Ephesus***, the first letter, who abandoned their first love. Not Thyatira. They are commended for their love and their latter works EXCEED the first.

Some of you really need this encouragement today: Jesus knows your work, He sees your faith, He delights in your love and patient endurance. For you Jesus says in verse 25, “Only hold fast to what you have until I come.” Just hold on a little longer. Jesus is coming!

First key to protecting our holiness is to focus on Jesus. Second key:

**How to Protect our Holiness:**

1. Fight for high standards of **Purity** and devotion, **Together**

“But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel who calls herself a prophetess.” Revelation 2:20

Now even in this faithful, Jesus-loving church that was enduring and *increasing* their service there was a massive issue. To be called Jezebel, as we saw earlier, is no minor title in the Bible…

It seems MOST of the church in Thyatira was NOT following this woman and her teaching and immoral practices. But the church as a whole was ***TOLERATING her presence***. And that was their failure. They were non-confrontational. They didn’t want to stir up conflict.

Probably this woman started out fairly innocent. In order to call herself a prophetess she ***probably started out just teaching a Sunday School class*** or leading a Bible study. And a lot of what she said and taught was probably spot on. But little by little, small compromises crept in. Little details that would have raised an eyebrow, but she had been around a long time and people had come to trust her and to shrug their shoulders and say, “Well, it’s just Jezebel.”

Unfortunately there are no shortage of modern examples of this. ***Rob Bell*** was one of the great communicators in the church 20 years ago, producing these really creative NOOMA videos that presented Biblical truth in short, creative ways. But Rob became enamored with his own intellect and eventually wrote the book Love Wins, denying orthodox Christian doctrines like judgment and hell.

More recently ***Joshua Harris***, who became famous in his early 20s for the book, “I kissed dating goodbye,” and then took over one of the most prominent mega churches in DC deconstructed his faith and kissed Christianity goodbye and his wife goodbye announcing himself a homosexual.

**Both Bell and Harris are modern day Jezebels**, using their church platforms to teach false doctrine and lead people into moral compromise. And sadly, they are not alone. One after another prominent pastors give in to different temptations to water down Biblical teaching and tolerate immorality.

Look at the grace of the Lord Jesus:

**How to Protect our Holiness:**

1. Fight for high standards of **Purity** and devotion, **Together**

“I gave her time to repent but she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality…” Revelation 2:21

Even a flagrant false teacher, overtly enticing people into sexual sin Jesus gave time and opportunity to repent. The Lord sought to discipline her with physical consequences:

**How to Protect our Holiness:**

1. Fight for high standards of **Purity** and devotion, **Together**

“Behold, I will throw her onto a sickbed… and I will strike her children dead.” Revelation 2:22-23

Those who follow her teachings and practices Jesus “threw into great tribulation.” The Lord disciplines those he loves. Hebrews 10 tells us that discipline in the form of suffering is a tool our God and Father uses because He loves us as His children. If the Lord never disciplines you it means you aren’t actually His child.

The follower of Jesus should be very familiar with the “referee’s whistle” of the Holy Spirit that calls you out when you go astray or get too close to danger and temptation. We should quickly recognize the chastening hand of God in our hearts and circumstances.

***THIS IS NOT KARMA.*** It is very easy for the teaching of God’s discipline to slide into the false idea of karma that there is a one to one correlation between some particular sin and some particular consequence or lack of blessing. We simply cannot know when blessing is unearned favor or generous mercy or when suffering is a discipline or consequence and not simply God’s sovereign will for us.

In a lot of ways it doesn’t matter. **Our REPONSE to the suffering is what matters**, regardless of what brought it on. Does pain and struggle and loss draw you CLOSER to the Lord or tempt you to turn away? Do frustrations and trials become excuses for sin instead of motivations to resist sin?

Brothers, sisters, this is **why we so desperately need each other**! Look at verse 24.

**How to Protect our Holiness:**

1. Fight for high standards of **Purity** and devotion, **Together**

“But to the rest of you in Thyatira who do not hold this teaching… to you I say, I do not lay on you any other burden.” Revelation 2:24

***Jesus is so gracious. So patient.*** So merciful. For those who have strayed into sin, He calls us firmly back to Himself. He commands us to repent and forsake the things that would lead us into temptation.

But when we come back to Him, when we confess our sins and repent, He does not chastise us or look down on us in anger. He embraces us like the Father of the prodigal son. He assures us that our sins are already paid for and He takes our burdens upon Himself.

Feel this truth today: ***“I do not lay on you any other burden.”*** Earthly leaders love to place burdens on us. They love to use people to advance their own agenda. Not just in communist countries but even in the church, sadly. But not Jesus. His yoke is easy and His burden is light. He has done the heavy lifting already.

His whole goal is to ***keep you from having to carry your SIN***. Surrender it all to Jesus. Let Him carry it for you.

**How to Protect our Holiness:**

1. Fight for high standards of **Purity** and devotion, **Together**

“Only hold fast what you have until I come.” Revelation 2:25

What a promise! What a gracious command! **Jesus is coming**. Soon. Our victorious Warrior King is on His way and simply calls us to hold on. Stand firm. Be strong in the Lord and in His mighty power. Don’t stand on your own, because you won’t stand long. Be strong in Him and lock arms with one another.

In this spiritual battle with the cosmic forces of evil and their human counterparts, ***we are fools to walk alone***. What soldier would race into battle without his company, without his full battalion? Only a fool! Soldiers learn to submit to their lieutenants, captains and generals and to advance together as directed.

“Only hold fast what you have.” ***Whatever faith you have. Hold onto it.*** Whatever confidence you have in the Lordship and glory of Jesus, hold on to that. Whatever obedience you can muster to the commands of Christ, loving your neighbor, serving one another, persevere in that. Faith. Hope. Love. Hold on. Jesus is coming.

Focus on Him. Fight for holiness and purity TOGETHER with your brothers and sisters in Christ. Join a group of some kind. Find an accountability partner or a D group. Don’t walk alone. One more key to protecting our holiness.

**How to Protect our Holiness:**

1. Find hope in Christ’s return and everlasting **Reward**

“The one who conquers and who keeps my word to the end, to him I will give authority over the nations.” Revelation 2:26

The promises in the seven letters are not just for those who “believe,” but for those who OVERCOME, who conquer, who keep the words and teachings of Jesus to the very end.

This promise is a reference to **Psalm 2** where God the Father gives authority to His Son to rule the nations with a rod of iron. The nations rage, the peoples plot in vain against the Lord and against His anointed King. But God on His throne just laughs at the silly plots of human kings. He says, “As for me, I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill.”

Human kings build their little anthills and call them kingdoms. God has his own mountain called Zion and King Jesus is seated there. God the Father promises the Anointed King -the Lord Jesus - that the nations will be His heritage forever, He will break them to pieces and rule them with a rod of iron. “Blessed are all who take refuge in Him.” Read Psalm 2, that’s your hyperlink homework for this letter.

Be encouraged, brother, sister, by the coming of our Lord Jesus and the rewards He promises. We will not just float with Him forever on comfy clouds, playing harps. ***We will RULE with Him forever.*** We will cultivate the new heaven and earth and have dominion over it on behalf of King Jesus.

**How to Protect our Holiness:**

1. Find hope in Christ’s return and everlasting **Reward**

“And he will rule them with a rod of iron as when earthen pots are broken in pieces.” Revelation 2:27

Now pause and consider how radical this statement was at the end of the first century. Rome was at the height of its power. ***Roman emperors*** would periodically flex their muscle and demand that people say, “Caesar is Lord.” Many Christians died refusing this profession of allegiance. And to them King Jesus says, “You will rule.” ***You will reign over these petty human emperors***, even if they kill you. By swinging a sword at followers of Jesus emperors like Domitian destroyed THEMSELVES, breaking their own lives into pieces like pottery. Just read about the emperors. It’s like a soap opera.

**How to Protect our Holiness:**

1. Find hope in Christ’s return and everlasting **Reward**

“And I will give him the morning star.” Revelation 2:28

“He who has an ear to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” May we have ears to hear what our Lord is saying to us. According to ***Revelation 22, Jesus declares HIMSELF to be the bright morning star.*** So here Jesus is promising to give us HIMSELF in all of His fullness. And His return is called the wedding celebration of the Lamb. But almost certainly Jesus means the symbolism of the morning star to communicate glory and victory and holiness.

From the darkness of night we see that last star (actually Venus) still holding out. What a picture of the Christian standing firm through the long night, waiting for dawn. Then the Son of God will rise like the sun in heaven with healing in his wings and will welcome each of us into the fullness of His radiant glory, and we will be changed. Our mortal bodies will be clothed with immortality, our remaining sin will be purged away once and for all, our sadness and pain will become a thing of the past, and we will REIGN with Jesus forever and ever. Amen.

**How to Protect our Holiness:**

1. Focus on Jesus, the all-seeing, all-righteous **Judge**
2. Fight for high standards of **Purity** and devotion, **Together**
3. Find hope in Christ’s return and everlasting **Reward**

***So this letter is a call to holiness and endurance.*** And Jesus gives us three keys to stand firm to the end. First, focus on HIM. Don’t let your eyes stray to the wind and the waves. Fix your eyes on Jesus, the author and FINISHER of your faith. Second, fight for holiness and purity TOGETHER with other believers. Don’t walk alone. Third, find hope in the soon return of our Lord and think often about eternity, the new heaven and earth, and the joy that will be ours when we see Jesus face to face.

Let’s pray.