



HANG TIME

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Earlier this month, Warren Bendix went dumpster diving behind his apartment in Stuart, Florida. As he was digging around in the trash, something caught his eye. Somebody had thrown away an 8 x 10 picture. It was a framed photo of the space shuttle blasting off from the launch pad. Warren thought that looked pretty cool, so he took it home.

The more he looked at it, though, the less he liked the frame. So he decided to replace it. As he began to take the picture out and removed the back, to his complete astonishment he found a stash of money -- stacks of \$100 and \$20 bills, \$3,100 in all. Kind of gives new meaning when you hear about the space shuttle's payload. Police say unless somebody can prove it's theirs, Warren gets to keep the treasure for himself.

I like that story and I hope he gets to keep it. Here's a man who is searching for who knows what, who thinks he has found one great thing, not realizing that if he just peels back the layers he's going to find something far more fantastic and life changing beneath the surface.

Scripture is a lot like that space shuttle photo. We recognize it's worth something so we dust it off and carry it around. We're happy to have it. But if we would just stop once in a while to peel back the layers and really dig into it, we will discover something far more fantastic and life changing beneath the surface.

That's been true for me as I have been investigating these letters in Revelation. I've read them many times, and sometimes I think I already know them so I won't be able to get anything else out of them. But there is way more to the Bible than what you get by just skimming the words. It's what I love most about God's Word. There is always, always so much more to discover. I just want to put in a plug here for digging into your Bibles and not giving up until you find the hidden treasures that are waiting for you.

We've been taking these letters in Revelation out of their original "frame" to see what's really behind them, and what we find is this incredible wealth of encouragement for the Christian faith.

John, as we have said before, was writing down his vision on the island of Patmos. If we look at a map and plot out where these seven churches were that Jesus addresses in the seven letters within Revelation, we can see that there is an order to the way they appear.

They follow the route a courier would take from Patmos, starting with Ephesus and making a loop up and around until they stopped at the final city, Laodicea.

For each of these letters, we've been identifying one word themes that provide the main takeaway point so we end up with seven key words to help us as we strive to be all in, all out and all up for God. The letter to Ephesus focused on love. The letter to Smyrna talked about courage. Last week we looked at the letter to Pergamum and explored how purity is important to our faith.

This morning we reach the midway point in our journey through this series as we come to the letter to Thyatira.

Revelation 2:18-29

To the angel of the church in Thyatira write:

These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze. I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first.

Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling. So I will cast her on a bed of suffering, and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely, unless they repent of her ways. I will strike her children dead. Then all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds.

Now I say to the rest of you in Thyatira, to you who do not hold to her teaching and have not learned Satan's so-called deep secrets (I will not impose any other burden on you): Only hold on to what you have until I come.

To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations-

*'He will rule them with an iron scepter;
he will dash them to pieces like pottery'-*

*just as I have received authority from my Father. I will also give him the morning star.
He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*

Of all the letters, this one is the longest. Which is somewhat ironic, because it's also one of the hardest to understand. The extra word count doesn't make it easier. Some of the important details of what was happening in Thyatira were lost centuries ago. We don't know anything about this Jezebel woman who was causing so much grief. She obviously had a lot of influence for Jesus to spend so much time addressing the problems she was causing. It appears to be similar issues to what was happening in Pergamum – eating

food sacrificed to idols and sexual immorality. But we're missing chunks of information that would be helpful for deciphering parts of the letter.

That's okay for this morning, though, because I want to tackle this letter differently than the rest. Since this letter contains some of the same themes we addressed last week with the Pergamum letter, we're not going to dissect it line by line. Instead I want to zero in on one sentence in particular that we find toward the end.

A couple hundred years ago, the author William Hazlitt was commenting on the way some people write letters. He said, "All the pith is in the postscript." The good stuff, the most important material is sometimes tacked on at the end. A great example of that is the young woman who took a trip to India. She wrote home to her friends, telling them all about her adventures, the food, the wildlife, etc. Then she concluded her letter by saying, "P.S. – You will see by my signature that I am married."

The pith is in the postscript. When it comes to this letter to Thyatira, one of the most significant messages is slid in there like a postscript, almost after the fact. But I think it's at the heart of what Jesus wanted to communicate:

Now I say to the rest of you in Thyatira, to you who do not hold to her teaching and have not learned Satan's so-called deep secrets (I will not impose any other burden on you): Only hold on to what you have until I come.

Since this is to the rest of the church, I'm guessing that may have been the majority of the people. At the beginning of the letter, Jesus had commended this church for its perseverance, and he returns to that theme at the end with the encouragement to "hold on to what you have until I come." That's the sentence that stood out to me most in this letter, and it's that idea of perseverance that I'd like to explore with you this morning.

Perseverance can be defined as "persisting in a belief or course of action in spite of difficulties or discouragement." Now that's a definition that isn't going to help this word win any popularity contests. It implies trouble right from the get go. To have it means to face difficulties. To persevere means to endure discouragement. It just doesn't sound like a lot of fun.

And yet Scripture seems to place a high value on this quality. James wrote in his letter,

James 1:4

Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

Without perseverance, we not only don't finish things – we're unfinished ourselves. The act of holding on changes us and shapes our character to be more what God wants us to be.

So Jesus says, “Only hold on to what you have until I come.” Rather than cover a lot of verses this morning, I’d like to just camp on this one and really try to understand it thoroughly. To do that, I want to break it into its three natural sections: “holding on”, “what we have” and “until Jesus comes”

Holding On

In the human body, there are 21 forearm muscles and seven hand muscles that all get involved in your ability to hold on or grip something. It is a more complex action than we realize. If you want to improve your grip for sports or opening jars or just a heartier handshake, you need to train every one of those muscles.

There are all kinds of different exercises to do that. You can buy many specialized types of resistance equipment to help you. My personal favorite – the Captains of Crush grippers. Those should give you great Popeye arms. But here’s the big revelation: The only way to improve your grip *is by gripping things that aren’t easy to hold on to*. You have to work with objects that test the limits of your strength and endurance to squeeze or lift or hang from.

That’s the concept behind perseverance. To get better at holding on, we have to do what doesn’t come easily or naturally. The whole point is that it takes work. Which shouldn’t really surprise us – none of the words we’ve looked at so far in Revelation have come naturally. We don’t stick with our first love automatically, courage isn’t an instinct and we certainly aren’t pure unintentionally. They all take a choice. Nothing worthwhile is easy.

So it takes practice for us to do what Jesus is telling us when he says “hold on.” But what does that mean? What does it look like? I love the simple image of a hand gripping something, because it gives us such a concrete metaphor to work from.

Let’s take a bottle of Coke for example. I try to whenever I can. In order for you to grab a Coke and a smile, two things are required. First, your hand has to make contact with the bottle. This isn’t rocket science here: If you’re not touching it, you’re not grabbing it. But once you make contact with the bottle, you can’t just touch it – you have to press in on it. Contact in and of itself isn’t gripping: to gain the necessary friction, your fingers need to wrap around even closer and put some force into it.

Those mechanics apply on a spiritual level as well. If we’re wanting to hold on the way Jesus described, we first need to put ourselves in contact with those things we want to hold on to. We’ll talk about what those might be in a minute. But if we’re not having that contact, it means we have let go. I got a call this week from an old friend I haven’t seen in years. His life is a mess right now. And as he was telling me what has been happening, he was regretting the fact that he hadn’t been going to church anywhere for a long time. He had lost contact with a Christian community, so he didn’t have the support he needed when times got tough. And he has seen the cost of not holding on.

Now I'm not here to lay a guilt trip on anyone for skipping services. God doesn't love you because you're here on Sundays – he just loves you period. But part of holding on like Jesus said is putting yourself in contact with other believers and with his Word.

There's also an element of pressing in closer. Just sitting through church for an hour a week is nothing more than slight contact with other Christians. That's not exactly gripping tight to God's people. You can be completely anonymous. Pressing in closer would be getting to know people and letting them get to know you. And sometimes that's hard to do with church people. We're not ALL that lovable. But as we said, the only way to improve our grip strength is through holding on when it isn't easy to do. It's much more natural to keep to ourselves than it is to be vulnerable enough to let other people in.

Church isn't the only example. You could say the same thing about the Bible. Reading a chapter is making contact; letting the chapter read you is pressing in closer. Run your life through the words of Scripture as a filter. Wrestle with what a text to figure out what it means for your own life. You can use the SOAP acronym to help you. Choose a Scripture verse, Observe what stands out to you about it, Apply it to your life and Pray that God will help you live it out. Doing that kind of exercise is when you start to hold on to the Bible. And some passages are not naturally easy to grasp. That's okay – you don't have to rush on – there's no deadline. I once camped out on Psalm 23 for weeks and it was really good to see how much God had to show me from just one passage.

The action of holding on takes practice, it takes contact, and it takes pressing closer. With that definition, what I have been holding on to? What do I need to hold more tightly? That question brings us directly to the next part of the sentence. Jesus told the church: “Hold on TO WHAT YOU HAVE.” What exactly did the church have? What was he talking about?

To what you have...

Before we answer that, let's go back for a minute to a physical hand grip. There are different kinds of grip and you use them for different purposes. In the movie Twister, there's a scene where Helen Hunt and Bill Paxton are caught in the path of this huge tornado. So they find this metal bar that's cemented to the ground, and they hold on for dear life. It's one of those white knuckle kind of grips, and by the end of the scene, the entire building around them has been blown away by the twister. Their reason for holding on was clear: their own survival.

That's one kind of grip. But sometimes we hold on for the sake of the thing we're holding. Did you ever do that experiment in school where you had to carry an egg around for a week without breaking it? It was supposed to be practice for caring for a child someday. There were always a few kids in class who were definitely not ready for parenthood. But the point of the exercise was to hold the egg in a gentle, protective way so that it survived.

Two distinct ways to hold on – when we need a lifeline and when we need to guard something and protect it. And I think there are both elements in Christ’s words here. First there’s our own survival. What we’re holding on to is a lifeline for us

Deuteronomy 30:20

...and hold fast to him. For the LORD is your life...

Jesus himself is what we’re holding on to, and he is our salvation. He is our rescue. Everything in life will try to pry our fingers up and sweep us away from him. But anything else we try to hang on to will not last. The older I get the more I realize how other things I’ve tried to grab at have no staying power. What I need is Jesus.

We hold on fast to the truth that what Christ did on the cross for us was enough to make us right with God. We hold on fast to the truth that God’s love for us is real and strong. We hold on fast to the truth that God is righteous and will one day bring total justice to the earth. We hold on fast to the truth that there is meaning in life and God offers us purpose. We hold on fast to the truth that God is bigger than our fears and that he walks with us through the valley of the shadow.

Those are all what we have that we cling to for our survival in this world. Those rock solid promises of Scripture give us a firm hand hold, and we need to grip them with all we’ve got to make it through life. We can wrap ourselves tightly around them because they will stay secure when everything else is blown away. The Lord is our life.

There are also things we are called to hold on to, because if we don’t, they will get away from us and be gone. Paul told Timothy,

1 Timothy 6:20

Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to your care.

Christ offers us freedom, but if we don’t hold on to it, it will be eroded by pressure to perform. Christ offers us joy, but if we don’t hold on to it, it will be eaten away by our circumstances. He offers us peace, but if we don’t hold on to it, the worries of life will crowd it out. He offers us family, but if we don’t hold on to it, we will slip into isolation and loneliness. He offers us power to change, but if we don’t hold on to it, we will stay stuck where we are.

Christ is offering us both a lifeline and an inheritance, something we hold on to because we need it, and something we hold on to because it is too precious to let go.

Are we clinging to Christ like our lives depend on him? Are we guarding what he’s entrusted to us and putting a hedge around what we believe? Holding on has both qualities to it.

The best news in this verse we’ve been looking at is that it implies Jesus is on the way. He tells the church to hold on to what they have until he arrives.

Until I come...

It reminded me of what you see on emergency shows when somebody calls in a crisis and the person on the other end of the line says, "I want you to stay on the line with me until help arrives." They encourage the caller to keep holding on.

I was curious about why they always say that, so I called our resident expert to get the scoop. Brad Snodgrass is a real live 911 dispatcher, and he says things like that all the time. So I asked him, "Brad, why do you want to keep people on the phone?"

He gave me three basic reasons. He said if it's a police call and there's a situation in progress, the reason for telling the person to hold on the line is because they are the **eyes and ears** of the dispatcher. They can give real time updates about what is happening on the ground so that the police know what they're walking into.

In a medical emergency, Brad said sometimes the goal is simply **keeping** a person **awake**. Staying on the line and hearing the sound of someone's voice on the phone can be just enough to prevent them from drifting into unconsciousness, which can in turn make all the difference in their chances of recovery.

If the person on the phone is a parent or relative of someone in crisis, then the call serves as **reassurance**. The dispatcher can help calm the caller with the knowledge that they're not alone and that someone will be there soon to help.

Christ is asking us to stay on the line and hold on until help arrives, and he does it for these same reasons.. We are his eyes and ears on the ground. We stand in for him until the day he is physically present again on the earth. We are his representatives, which means there is a good chance somebody in your life is basing their opinion of Jesus on what they see in your faith. That's a pretty motivating reason for hanging on.

The voice of Christ telling us to hold on until he comes back is also what helps keep us awake. I need to be reminded of that, because when I think about the possibility of him showing up any time, it re-energizes me. It makes me want to be more alert. That's why Jesus says toward the end of Revelation,

Revelation 16:15

Keep watch! I come unannounced, like a thief. You're blessed if, awake and dressed, you're ready for me.

It's a motivator. Mostly, though, knowing Christ is coming back for us is that reassurance that we're not alone. We have not been abandoned. Jesus, the bridegroom, can't wait to get back to his bride, the church. Love compels him to keep his promise.

If we had it in our minds that Jesus could actually return at any time, wouldn't it make holding on just a little easier? The early church fully expected that, and we're a couple thousand years closer to when that day will be.

Maybe you're feeling today like all the strength has left your fingers and you are hanging on by a thread. You're feeling the rope slip through your grasp and the thought of having to work harder at it is overwhelming. I want to leave you with my own postscript, and that is this: Yes my holding on is important, but what I can count on is that he will never let me go. In the middle of our trying to hold on, Christ is the one holding on to us. Speaking about his followers, Jesus said,

John 10:28

I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand.

The pith is in that postscript. Knowing that nothing can separate me from the love of Christ takes away so much fear. When we're faithless, he remains faithful.

One of my favorite things to do when my kids were babies was to watch their little hands grab on to my finger. Babies can have this incredibly strong grasp. But I never would have counted on that grasp to support them – I was holding them in my arms the whole time they were holding on to me.

Why do we think God would do anything less for his children? Nothing can take us out of his hand.

When David was experiencing his desperate days in the wilderness, running from King Saul and barely surviving, he wrote this psalm to God:

How is your grip holding up this morning? If you've been letting things slip, I hope this morning challenges you to press in close. If you've been taking what you have in Christ for granted, I hope you will be inspired to guard it and cherish it. And if you're barely getting by, struggling to hang on at all, rest in the assurance that God has you firmly in his grasp and he will hold you steady until the end.