



## False Teaching

### Seven Letters to the Churches: Revelation Series #2

Revelation 2:12-29

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Take a Bible and turn to Revelation 2. Many times when I preach, I am in the same series with Pastor David. He plans titles months ahead of time; I just use his title. If I do have to pick one, I do not feel like I am good at doing that so I take a phrase out of the passage or something like that. A couple weeks ago, I needed to come up with some titles and I picked “False Teaching” for this one. I actually forgot that I had even titled it that. I was sitting in my office this morning when I realized I have no outline for you—just the title which I am hoping does not summarize what I am doing

We will be looking at two out of the seven letters to the churches in Asia in Revelation 2-3. The two we are looking at today, Pergamum and Thyatira, deal with false teaching in the church.

Before we read these letters, I want to share a story that I think is helpful. It was clarifying and helpful for me to think through what is happening here. What was Jesus doing when He gave us this different perspective on end-times living? He spoke messages into these churches, and this story was helpful for me to think through this topic.

This past week, my family went to Kansas City which is where my mom lives, as well as my two brothers and their families. While we were there, we pulled out the home videos of Christmas of 1989 when I was six years old. I have a sister who is a year and a half older, a brother who is two years younger, plus my youngest brother who was not born yet. It was humorous to watch myself opening presents because my son, Carson, looked almost exactly like me at six years old. Our mannerisms and voices are fairly identical. My son, Malachi, looks a lot like my younger brother as well.

While watching these videos, we were amused at the excitement on our faces over small things, as well as the disappointment on our faces at times over the big things. One of the things I got that year was a remote controlled bulldozer. I opened it up and was excited at first—it was radio controlled. But then I looked at it again and saw that it was remote controlled with a cord. I was not happy about having a cord. I actually was disappointed and you can see it on my face.

After we opened our presents, the next 20 minutes was a video of me driving this bulldozer around. Normally, this would be pretty boring to watch. However, most of you know that my dad died almost two years ago. He was behind the camera videotaping me. As I was driving around, he would give me some kind of advice every few seconds.

“Daniel, why don’t you try dumping the scoop?” So I did that, and the screwdriver fell out.

“Now, lower it down and push it.” So I would do that.

“Daniel, why don’t you drive it over there and push this bag of trash?”

For about 20 minutes, he gave me instructions as I was driving the bulldozer around.

That memory is sweet for me, but it is also very difficult to hear his voice. Now, you are probably thinking, “How in the world can this relate to the passage?” It does. For me, I often imagine my dad’s voice giving me counsel and advice. As I make decisions, such as in parenting and facing temptations, I think, “What would Dad say? What counsel would he give? What advice would he have for me?” He lived here. He knew me and raised me. Now he has crossed the line to eternity. Looking back, what kind of perspective would he be able to give?

I imagine him saying things like:

- “Don’t give up.”
- “Hang on. It’s worth it.”
- “Don’t give in to temptation.”
- “Live for what matters. Do not live life for yourself. Do not live for the temporary pleasures. Live for what will last.”

These are the kinds of things I think Dad would say to me, though I do not actually think he is watching over everything that I do. There are some passages in Scripture that seem to imply that people in heaven might have some awareness of what happens on earth, but I think it is mostly helpful for me because it causes me to step back and get perspective on this life, especially the brevity of it compared to what eternity will be.

As I read these letters to the churches in Revelation, this is the perspective that I hear Jesus Christ giving. The book of Revelation deals with end times and constantly sets up for us what will happen when Jesus will win and conquer everything. However, the letters in these two chapters especially tell us that Jesus is calling to His church over and over again: “Listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.” What the Spirit says in every one of them is, “Overcome. Conquer. Hang on. Hang in there.”

One of the two main themes that comes up is “hang on and persevere in the face of external persecution.” We looked at that a little bit last week, as Jesus was talking to Smyrna and said, “Be faithful until death, because it is worth it.” Again, you have this perspective that Jesus is going to overcome. Because of that, you can stand up in the face of external pressure, persecution and even death.

There are other messages that these churches heard internally:

- Your struggle is internal temptation.
- Your struggle is unbelief.
- Your struggle is losing your first love.
- Your struggle is believing false teaching.
- Your struggle is giving into the allure of this world and growing cold.

In the face of both of these, whether it is external pressure, temptation or persecution, or whether it is in the church, Jesus is saying, “Hold on. It is worth it. I will win. Hold on and continue believing in Me.” We are going to look at two churches here, Pergamum and Thyatira. I want to look at Revelation 2, explain it along the way and then come back with three points of application but I am going to go ahead and give you the three points of application so you can begin thinking through them.

1. Turn away from false teaching. You are going to hear that in both of these letters. He said, “Turn away from false teaching.” But you can add idolatry, too, if you want. They go together in the way He describes them in these two sections. False teaching and believing false things lead to idolatry, or idolatry leads to believing false things. They go hand in hand. What we will see first is that we are to turn away from false teaching and idolatry.
2. Do not ignore false teaching or idolatry in the church. This is just a subtle difference from the first point that aims more at your own life and your own soul as an individual. Do not give in to false teaching. Do not begin to believe the subtle lies from the devil. In this second point, reminds them that they were part of something bigger. If you are part of this church, New Covenant, then you are part of something here where you are responsible to care for the other members of this church. What He said to them is, “Do not tolerate or ignore the false teaching or idolatry in the church.”
3. The last thing we are going to see is Jesus saying, “Hold fast to the end.” When we get to this point, I am going to back up and show how this theme comes up in all seven of these letters. Jesus is calling us to persevere, hold fast, continue in faith, overcome, conquer. We will see this and the promises that come at the end.

## **The Letter to the Church in Pergamum**

Let's begin with Revelation 2:12, the letter to the church in Pergamum. He said, "*And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: 'The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword.'*" Later in this section, we are going to see that the sword comes from His mouth. This is a picture of Christ. It is not a physical sword coming out of His mouth, but it is a symbol of judgment, wrath and consequence. It is tied to His mouth, showing that Jesus is coming and speaking condemnation and judgment.

In verse 13, He said, "*I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is. Yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.*" This place is mentioned twice as the place where Satan's throne is or where Satan dwells. It speaks of the evil and idolatry that would have characterized the place where they lived. He was saying, "I know that you are living in a very difficult place. You are living where Satan's throne is and where his rule seems to be dominant, yet you are standing up against that." There was external pressure coming to this church, even to the point of killing one of them. They stood and refused to deny Jesus Christ.

This is what we talked about last week with Smyrna, when He said, "Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. Be faithful until death." Now, He is saying to the church in Pergamum, "You have done that." He said, "*Yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you...*"

We don't know the story of Antipas, but we know he was likely killed having been persecuted for his faith. The praise for this church is that they were standing up against that. However, they were failing from within. Subtle unbelief and false teaching began to creep in and cause the church to crumble from within. As they stood strong against the opposition on the outside, there was another enemy, a dangerous enemy that came from within.

Look at verse 14:

*But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality. So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans.*

It seems like their specific false teaching was whatever this teaching of the Nicolaitans was. In the letter to Ephesus (Revelations 2:1-7), we find that they were known as a church standing against the teaching of the Nicolaitans. However, this church in Pergamum was beginning to have some who were holding to it.

We get a hint of what this teaching was when he pointed to the Old Testament story of Balak (Number 22-23), the king who wanted to attack God's people and overthrow Israel. He asked Balaam to curse them. Every time Balaam opened his mouth, blessing came out. However, we see that Balaam told Balak, "Why don't you put a stumbling block in front of them?" He couldn't defeat them outwardly or simply curse them and cause this kind of catastrophe on them from outside, but he said, "What if you could destroy them from within? What if you could cause them to drift away from their God?" He put a stumbling block before them, so that they would eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality.

Balaam was telling Balak, "What if you could tempt them into sexual immorality and let that cause them to drift away from their God?" This is internal sin and idolatry, and that is just what happened in these two churches. There is a reference back to that, and it seems like Jesus was saying, "There is a similar thing happening to you. You are strong against outward opposition, but stumbling block has come in and caused people in the church to fall into sin and drift away from God."

Here is what He said to them in verse 16: *"Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth."* This is a call to repentance.

In verse 17, He said, *"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it."* Many of these letters follow this structure. There is a praise, a rebuke, a call to repentance, then a promise to those who overcome, persevere and continue to hold fast to Christ.

We are going to look at this promise along with the others in a little bit, but let's read the letter to the church in Thyatira. You will see that there are many similarities. Someone pointed out that in these three middle letters there seems to be a progression where the church in Pergamum was just beginning down this path of false teaching and the church in Thyatira was already there. She is teaching, seducing and tempting people away from Christ. They had already begun believing and practicing this form of idolatry and immoral living.

The letter we will look at next week is a church that looks alive but is actually dead. Someone has pointed out the progression of these three churches. However, you will see many similarities as we read this.

### **The Letter to the Church in Thyatira**

Look at verses 18-28:

*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.*

*I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first. But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols. I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality. Behold, I will throw her onto a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent of her works, and I will strike her children dead. 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. But to the rest of you in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not learned what some call the deep things of Satan, to you I say, I do not lay on you any other burden. Only hold fast what you have until I come. The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received authority from my Father. And I will give him the morning star. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."*

Jesus starts with praise. In verse 19, He spoke of their works, love, faith, service, patient endurance, and latter works. There were many good things happening in this church and many things to be commended and praised. However, He said, *"But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel..."* Again, this is an Old Testament reference. I doubt someone would have been named Jezebel at that time and leading that church. It is possible, but as you read Revelation, there are so many of these allusions and illustrations back to the Old Testament.

In the Old Testament story, Jezebel was an idolater who married King Ahab. Part of her example led God's people into idolatry and the worship of Baal. She may have literally been leading people into a sexually immoral lifestyle. There is a connection here to God's people being tempted toward other idols and other gods. Jesus was saying in Revelation 2:20, "You are tolerating her as she was teaching. She called herself a prophetess and taught and seduced servants to practice sexual immorality and eat food sacrificed to idols." These are the same two things mentioned in the letter to Pergamum.

It is very possible that the actual sins being committed were these two. It is also possible that this theme and illustration of idolatry throughout Scripture is a reference to God's people and their relationship to Him. The church is described in Revelation as the bride of Christ.

When God's people commit adultery and the bride of Christ goes after other idols, it is a picture of what it is like for a spouse to be unfaithful. Therefore, that is likely another explanation. We know that sexual immorality is sinful so we must avoid it and be careful in our opposition against it. It is something that is becoming a greater and greater temptation in our culture. It is certainly something to fight against. However, I don't want us to sit here and think, "If that is not my sin struggle, this doesn't apply to me." I think it is also very likely that what is being described here is the temptation to believe false teaching that subtly comes into the church and leads us away from our God.

Again, He calls us to repentance. He promises judgment on those who do not repent. To those who had not yet been caught up in this, He said, "Hold fast to what you have to the end." Then there is this command at the end: "*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*"

That gives an overview and understanding of what these two passages say. Now, I want to think through what this means for us. What are applications for us today?

### **Turn Away from False Teaching**

Thinking on the first point that we need to turn away from false teaching and idolatry, how do we hear what the Spirit is saying to us through these passages? These people were known as being able to stand up against the outside persecution. I don't think they were denying Christ as Deity or denying the Trinity. It doesn't seem like they doubted substitutionary atonement. They were holding fast to His name, but there was some kind of subtle false teaching that was creeping in.

We face this very same danger daily. It is easy for us to drift away. I think that, in a similar way, we can stand up against the major heresies attacking the Christian faith. Let's give some examples.

We could drift toward viewing our relationship with God through what has been described as legalism: "If I follow all of these rules, I will earn favor with God." No, that means I'm trusting more in my righteousness, which leads to self-righteousness and pride in thinking I am better than everyone else or that we as a church are better than everyone else. This leads toward a relationship with God that is based purely on what we do or what we don't do.

On the other hand, we can shift and slowly begin to believe lies that abuse grace. Paul warned against this can lead in Romans 6:1 when he said, "*What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?*" He talked about how we are saved and justified by

grace alone through faith alone. It is not of our works. We cannot earn favor with God. However, we have peace with God because, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. In Romans 4-5, Paul taught the themes of being justified, being declared righteous by God apart from our works and that our sins in the past, present and future are forgiven.

In our heads, I think we deny both of these examples. However, these things can subtly creep in. We can subtly begin to rest too comfortably in thinking, “I know I’m saved, and it doesn’t matter how I live.” We rest too comfortably in thinking, “It doesn’t really matter whether I engage in this kind of sin or not. I know the Bible says that it is bad, but I don’t know if that applies today or not.” It is easy for us to shift into what has been called “antinomianism”—a refusal to acknowledge the commands. There are imperative verbs in the New Testament where God calls us to things. He calls us to live, not in order to earn our salvation, but because of our salvation. Because of what He has done for us and because of who we are, we are to live differently.

Maybe it’s not even a theological false teaching. Maybe it is just that we begin to believe the false teaching of this world that this temporary life is all that matters. This is all there is. We can begin to doubt: “Is there really anything after this? Is it really worth it to abandon everything and follow Christ?” We can begin to live for wealth, materialism, comfort and ease, following along with the sins of this world. It is what John calls “*the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life*” (1 John 2:16).

We begin to give in to the thinking of this world with subtle and gradual things that creep in. These go together.

- For some of us, the temptation may start with wrong actions, and, because we like those actions and the way they make us feel, we begin to shift our beliefs, leading us to believe false teaching.
- For others, it begins with false teaching—such as an abuse of grace—and it leads to idolatry and a wrong kind of living.

Either way, we must turn away from any false teaching or idolatry.

### **Do Not Avoid False Teaching or Idolatry in the Church**

I think it is also helpful to look at these two churches and what Jesus said to them; He did not just call individuals to turn away from these things. To Pergamum, He said, “I have a few things against you as a church. You have some there who hold to this teaching.”

He said it even stronger to the church in Thyatira. In verse 20, He said, *“But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality...”* This is a call for us to be intolerant of this behavior and care enough to confront for one another.

Jesus gave us a principle in Matthew 18 to lovingly come alongside those who are overcome by sin and call them back to Christ. We must also realize that following that life of sin leads to destruction. It is not good for them. So it is loving for us to come alongside that person confront them and call them back to repentance and faith in Christ. If they don't, Jesus said, *“Bring another with you. Bring two or three witnesses to talk to that person. If they don't, get the church involved and have the church help. If they continue to show evidence for this lack of repentance, then it will eventually come to the point where you cannot affirm that person's faith or call them a brother or sister in Christ.”*

In Acts 20:28-31, there is a call to the elders of the church to watch out and care for the flock. They must look out for false teaching that creeps into the church. Paul said to the elders:

*Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears.*

There is a call for elders of this church to watch out, be careful, be on guard, lest false teaching creeps in and destroys from within. However, it is not just the elders' responsibility. If you have joined this church, you have affirmed the church covenant, where we say together, *“We will not neglect to gather together, but will support and treasure the biblical preaching of the whole counsel of God, the faithful observance of baptism and the Lord's Supper, and the loving exercise of church discipline.”*

As members we have a responsibility to care for the other members of this church. We must care for others who are following Christ and seem to be drifting away.

### **Hold Fast to the End**

The last command Jesus gives us here is that we hold fast to the end. In verse 25, He said, *“Only hold fast what you have until I come. The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations...”* Let's look at the way each of these

letters ends. There is a constant, repeated call to overcome and conquer. This has been called the doctrine of perseverance.

- To Ephesus in Revelation 2:7, Jesus said, *“To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.”*
- To Smyrna in Revelation 2:11, He said, *“The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.”*
- To Pergamum in Revelation 2:17, He proclaimed, *“To the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it.”*

The meaning of some of these statements is debated—such as the exact interpretation of why Jesus used manna or a white stone. In the Old Testament, God supplied manna for His people and sustained them. That may be a reference back to how Christ will sustain you. He is all you need and will care for you. Some have said the white stone is a symbol, a ticket that was given to someone to receive them into fellowship. There are other ideas on that as well, but, as you come to the end of all these descriptions and explanations, regardless of your interpretation of the white stone, it is clear the meaning here is eternal reward and satisfaction in fellowship with Christ.

- To Thyatira in Revelation 2:26-28, Jesus said, *“The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received authority from my Father. And I will give him the morning star.”*
- To Sardis in Revelation 3:5, Jesus revealed, *“The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels.”*
- To Philadelphia in Revelation 3:12, Jesus vowed, *“The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. Never shall he go out of it, and I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name.”*
- To Laodicea in Revelation 3:21, Jesus promised, *“The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne.”*

Let’s go back through them again. There is a promise given to the overcomer and, in each of these, He also said what it means and looks like to overcome.

- In Revelation 2:4-5, He said the overcomer must repent of forsaking that person's first love for God and return to do the works he/she did at first.
- In 2:10, Jesus emphasized to Smyrna that the overcomer must be faithful until death in order to receive the crown of life. That is what we looked at last week.
- In the passages here, He said the overcomer must repent of ignoring false teaching in the church or repent of believing those false teachings—the teachings of Jezebel—that lead to idolatry. He's calling to repent and overcome, or there will be coming judgment.
- In 3:3-4, Jesus proclaimed to Sardis that the overcomer must repent of spiritual deadness.
- To Philadelphia in Revelation 3:10-11, Jesus asserted that the overcomer must hold fast in the midst of persecution to what he has received.
- To Laodicea, Jesus declared that the overcomer must be zealous and repent for being lukewarm.

Repentance comes up over and over and over again. There is an emphasis on the life of continual repentance and faith. There are conditions given here: "If you continue..." or "If you hold fast..." or "If you overcome..." He will hold you fast. There are truths in God's Word that speak of Christ holding those who have been given eternal life in Him. The Father has you in His hand. John 10:28 talks about God giving you eternal life, and no one can snatch, pluck, or grab you out of the Father's hand. That is sweet, hope-giving truth.

Romans 8:29-30 has a chain of verbs and actions that God has done in accomplishing your salvation. It says, *"For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified."*

Do you see this chain of events that God is doing through our salvation? Everyone He knew, He predestined, called, justified and glorified. When we talk about glorification, that is something that has not happened for us yet. It will happen when Christ returns or when we die and are made new; when He finally and completely saves us. He will then rid us of sin and make us spotless. We stand before Him freed from our sin nature. When we are glorified, our salvation is finally and completely finished. However, this passage in Romans is in the past tense, therefore it is as good as done.

So there is this chain of events that are going to happen. If you have been born again and given new life, you will be glorified. However, there are so many passages like these in Revelation where there are conditions—warnings—to continue. I think the God Who holds us fast does it

through various means. One of the means by which He causes you to persevere is by giving you these warnings. He calls you and says, “This is what you need to do.” He is holding fast to you, but He is also calling you. This is not trick wording. He is legitimately calling you to hold fast and cling to Him. You must continue in the faith; continue following Him; continue believing; continue turning to Him.

There are passages in Hebrews that give these warnings that, if we continue in sin, drift away and never return, then we are showing that we should not have assurance. We are not someone who is characterized as being redeemed, regenerated and given new life. There is a summary sentence here from this passage. It is to turn away from evil beliefs and living and hold fast to Christ until the end.

Let’s step back to where we started to get some perspective on this world in which we live. It is helpful in the day-to-day temptation, to think of the end because we get so focused on what will feel good for the next day or the next week; what will make us happy for the next hour. We forget that we are in the middle of a war. There are things happening in this world that we don’t see. We have an enemy who would love to shipwreck our faith and destroy our church. If he can’t do it from external persecution, he will do it from within. He will try to subtly cause us to drift away from God and lose sight of what is eternally important. He will cause us to forget about what we have been saved from and about whom we are in Christ. We begin to believe these lies and forget that we are living in a war. We are living with an enemy who is attacking.

Do you remember in the Old Testament when Elisha was with his servant who was afraid of a battle (2 Kings 6)? Elisha prayed and asked God to open his servant’s eyes. He says something like, “Greater are those who are with us than those who are against us.” His servant was thinking, “There’s no way. Look at this enemy around us.” The text says, “*Then Elisha prayed and said, ‘O LORD, please open his eyes that he may see.’ So the LORD opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw, and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha*” (2 Kings 6:17).

This is the kind of perspective we need. We must realize that we are living in the last days. We have been since Christ died and rose again. We are living in a world that is beyond what we see. We face attacks and temptations that are the plan of the enemy, whether they are persecutions from without or temptations from within. What Christ says to us is, “Turn away and hold fast. Turn away from those subtle temptations and lies of unbelief. Hold fast and cling to Me to the end.”

Let’s pray.

Father, open our eyes that we may see what is important and what is eternal. God, remind us of the truth of the gospel. You have redeemed us. Jesus died for our sins, rose again, and lives. He is reigning and ruling and He coming back. He is making all things new. God, help us to live for You. Help us to stir up one another to love and good works; to hold fast to the end. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

When I fear my faith will fail,  
Christ will hold me fast;  
When the tempter would prevail,  
He can hold me fast.

I am precious in His sight,  
He will hold me fast;  
Those He saves are His delight.  
He will hold me fast.

He will hold me fast,  
He will hold me fast;  
For my Savior loves me so,  
He will hold me fast.

He'll not let my soul be lost,  
Christ will hold me fast;  
Bought by Him at such a cost,  
He will hold me fast.

I could never keep my hold,  
He will hold me fast;  
For my love is often cold,  
He must hold me fast.

He will hold me fast,  
He will hold me fast;  
For my Savior loves me so,  
He will hold me fast.

(Words by Words: [Ada R. Habershon](#); music by [Robert Harkness](#); 1906)

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