

The Letters to Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea

by John F. Walvoord

The letters to Sardis and Philadelphia in the book of Revelation highlight the importance of faithfulness, repentance, and restoration in the life of the church.

Scripture: Revelation 3:15, Revelation 3:19-22

Topics: "Church Discipline", "Spiritual Revival"

Description

John F. Walvoord preaches on the messages to the churches of Asia Minor in the book of Revelation, highlighting the warnings and exhortations given to each church. The church of Laodicea is rebuked for its lukewarmness, self-sufficiency, and spiritual poverty, with a call to repentance and restoration of fellowship with Christ. The invitation is extended to all to open the door to Christ, receive His rebuke and correction, and partake in the blessings of fellowship and future reign with Him.

Transcript

The third chapter of the book of Revelation contains the final three messages of the churches of Asia: those addressed to Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea respectively. The city of Sardis mentioned first in this chapter was located in West Asia Minor about fifty miles east of Smyrna and thirty miles southeast of Thyatira. It was an important and wealthy city located on the commercial trade route running east and west through Lydia. An ancient city with a long history, Sardis had come back into prominence under Roman rule. At one time it was the capital of the Kingdom of Lydia. Much of its wealth came from its textile manufacturing and dye industry and its jewelry trade. Most of the city practiced pagan worship, and there were many mystery cults or secret religious societies. The magnificent Temple of Artemis dating from the fourth century B.C. was one of its points of interest and still exists as an important ruin. The remains of a Christian church building, which have been discovered immediately adjacent to the temple, testify of postapostolic Christian witness to this wicked and pagan city noted for its loose living. The church to which the letter was addressed continued its existence until the fourteenth century, but it never was prominent. Today only a small village known as Sart exists amid the ancient ruins.

The Letter to Sardis: The Church That Was Dead (3:1-6)

3:1 And unto the angel of the church in Sardis write; These things saith he that hath the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars; I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead.

Christ the Possessor of the Spirit. The message addressed to the angel of the church of Sardis is notable for several reasons. Like the letter to Laodicea it is an unmixed message of rebuke and censor. It is almost devoid of any word of commendation such as characterized the word of Christ to the other churches. The reason for the sad condition in Sardis was that the people were surrounded by the grossest form of idolatry. As Andrew Tait states,

The people of Sardis were idolaters--they worshipped the mother goddess, Cybele. The fragments of the temple that was erected to her honour still remain, and there are two stately columns, with Ionic capitals, which are fully 60 feet high and about 6 1/3 feet in diameter, whose bases are deeply imbedded in the rubbish that has fallen down from the citadel. Her worship was of the most debasing character, and orgies like those of Dionysos were practiced at the festivals held in her honour. Sins of the foulest and darkest impurity were committed on those occasions; and when we think of a small community of Christians rescued from such abominable idolatry, living in the midst of scenes of the grossest depravity, with early associations, and companionships, and connections, all exerting a force in the direction of heathenism, it may be wondered that the few members of the church in Sardis were not drawn away altogether, and swallowed up in the great vortex.⁹⁶

G. Campbell Morgan observes that there is a change in approach beginning with this letter:

There is a marked change in our Lord's method of address to the church at Sardis. Hitherto He has commenced with words of commendation. Here, He commenced with words of condemnation. In the other churches, evil had not been the habit, but rather the exception, and therefore it was possible first to commend. Here the case is reversed, and no word of commendation is addressed to the church as a church.⁹⁷

In relation to Sardis Christ is introduced in verse 1 as the One that "hath the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars." This reference to the fact that Christ has the seven Spirits of God is similar to the description given in 1:4. Alford notes that in 1:4 the seven spirits are declared merely to be before the throne. In both cases, however, the Holy Spirit is in view.⁹⁸ Here there is an apparent allusion to the sevenfold character of the Holy Spirit as resting upon Christ according to the prophecy of Isaiah 11:2-5. There the Holy Spirit is described thus: "the spirit of the Lord... the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord." There also He is described as coming from God and resting upon Christ. A similar description is found later in Revelation 5:6. This portrait of Christ points out the qualities which insure the righteous judgment of the wicked, and it is in this character that Christ is introduced to the church of Sardis. In addition to having the sevenfold Spirit of God, Christ is revealed as the One who has the seven stars, interpreted in 1:20 as the angels or messengers of the seven churches. The fact that the leaders of the church represented by these messengers belong to Christ makes their leadership and transmission of the message all the more authoritative and responsible. The same description of Christ as holding the seven stars in His right hand was given in relation to the letter to the church at Ephesus in 2:1 to make clear that the leaders of the church are responsible to no human representative of Christ and must give account directly to the Lord Himself.

Of the church at Sardis He declares, "I know thy works." As in the case of the other churches, the actions and testimony of the church at Sardis are an open book to the omniscient Lord, and nothing is hid from His searching gaze. That which is not visible to man is perfectly apparent to Him, and He defines that which He sees in the closing part of verse 1 in a word of sharp condemnation: "Thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead."

The church at Sardis evidently had a reputation among the churches in the area and was considered a spiritual church and one that had an effective ministry and testimony for God. From the divine standpoint, however, it is considered as a church that had only a name of being alive and actually was dead as far as spiritual life and power were concerned. This searching judgment of Christ as it relates to the church of Sardis is one to be pondered by the modern church, which often is full of activity even though there is little that speaks of Christ and spiritual life and power. Barclay observes that a church

is in danger of death when it begins to worship its own past...when it is more concerned with forms than with life...when it loves systems more than it loves Jesus Christ...when it is more concerned with material than spiritual things.⁹⁹

3:2-3 Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God. Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent. If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee.

Indictment and warning. Though the church at Sardis was classified as being dead in the sight of God, it is obvious from verse 2 that there were some in the church who still had true life and spirituality. Otherwise it would not have been possible to "strengthen the things which remain." On the other hand a full restoration of the will of God was also impossible. In the best manuscripts the article is omitted before "works," hence, literally, "not any of your works have I found perfect before God." They are therefore exhorted to be watchful lest a further invasion of spiritual deadness come upon them.

The previous history of Sardis should have warned them concerning the possibility of sudden and unexpected judgment. Although the situation of the city was ideal for defense, as it stood high above the valley of Hermus and was surrounded by deep cliffs almost impossible to scale, Sardis had twice before fallen because of overconfidence and failure to watch. In 549 b.c. the Persian King Cyrus had ended the rule of Croesus by scaling the cliffs under the cover of darkness. In 214 b.c. the armies of Antiochus the Great (III) captured the city by the same method. The city of Sardis at the time it received this letter was in fact in a period of decline as compared to its former glory, having been reduced by these invasions.. The spiritual history of the church was to correspond to the political history of the city.¹⁰⁰ Their works are also declared to be not perfect, literally, "not fulfilled," that is, not achieving the full extent of the will of God. Their works were short either in motive or in execution, and they are exhorted to fill to the full the opportunity for service and testimony.¹⁰¹

Not only are they exhorted to be watchful and strengthen the things which remain, but they are also warned to remember the truth that they have received and heard, and to hold it fast and to turn away from any defection from it. If they refuse to heed the exhortation, Christ promises that He will come upon them as a thief, meaning that He will come upon them unexpectedly with devastating suddenness and bring judgment upon them, as He explains: "Thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee." The same symbolism is used at the second coming of the Lord, but here the figure is not related to that event. The judgment upon the church at Sardis, however, is going to be just as unexpected, sudden, and irrevocable as that which is related to the second coming.

3:4-6 Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with me in white: for they are worthy. He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my Father, and before

his angels. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.

Invitation and promise to godly remnant. To those individuals in the Sardis church who overcome, the promise is given that they shall be clothed in white raiment. In reference to the white robes, Morgan observes,

In Scripture the robing of the saint is ever an expression of the saint's own service and character. In the description of the white-robed multitude in Revelation, it is said that their white robes are the righteousness of the saints--not the righteousness of God, but the righteousness of the saints. This is to say, that fidelity of character and of service shall presently have its outward manifestation.¹⁰²

Swete suggests that white apparel in Scripture denotes (1) festivity; (2) victory; (3) purity; (4) the heavenly state.¹⁰³ The thought seems to be that the righteousness of the saints bestowed in the form of a garment is a token of their acceptability to God and the divine recognition of their office and ministry as the priests of God. They have not defiled their garments as others have done in Sardis, and now they are promised that in the future they will have the heavenly white garment and will walk with Christ because they are judged as "worthy."

Further it is promised, "I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels." This verse has troubled expositors in view of other promises of the Scripture which seem to indicate that a person who has once received Jesus Christ as Saviour is forever secure in his salvation. How then can his name be blotted out of the book of life? Seiss interprets the expression "I will not blot out his name out of the book of life" as referring to the name of a believer as written in heaven. He writes,

There is a celestial roll-book of all those who name the name of Jesus. But it depends on the persevering fidelity of the individual whether his name is to continue on that roll or to be blotted out.¹⁰⁴

To make the continuance of our salvation depend upon works, however, is gross failure to comprehend that salvation is by grace alone. If it depended upon the believer's perseverance, the name would not have been written there in the first place. Other explanations of the meaning of the book of life have been given which are more satisfactory. Some have indicated that there is no explicit statement here that anybody will have his name blotted out, but rather the promise that his name will not be blotted out because of his faith in Christ. The implication, however, is that such is a possibility. On the basis of this some have considered the book of life not as the roll of those who are saved but rather a list of those for whom Christ died, that is, all humanity who have possessed physical life. As they come to maturity and are faced with the responsibility of accepting or rejecting Christ, their names are blotted out if they fail to receive Jesus Christ as Saviour; whereas those who do accept Christ as Saviour are confirmed in their position in the book of life, and their names are confessed before the Father and the heavenly angels. In either interpretation the implication of the passage is that those who put their trust in Christ and thus overcome by faith have the privilege of being recognized as the saints of God throughout eternity even though they come from such a church as Sardis where the spiritual testimony was at a low ebb and much was offensive to their holy Lord.

In keeping with the prophetic foreshadowing of the church age as seen in the other churches, some have held that the church at Sardis is a picture of the church in the time of the Protestant Reformation when a great mass of Christendom was dead even though it had a name that it lived. During those years only a small believing portion took their stand for true biblical revelation and trusted in Christ as Saviour. The

characteristics of the church in Sardis remarkably parallel those of the church in the period of the Protestant Reformation. This fact seems to confirm the judgment that the message delivered to this first century church was prophetic of the future of the church at large during this period.

The message is therefore a series of exhortations not only to the church of the first century but to those who need the same exhortations in every century. To such the commands are given to be watchful, to strengthen the things which remain which are ready to die, to remember the truth and experience of the past, to hold fast that which remains, and to repent in mind and heart. The message also includes the warning of the alternative of divine judgment. The promise of the benefits of eternal life is given to those who heed the invitation, who are represented here as a godly remnant within the church at Sardis. As in the other churches the message closes with the individual invitation "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches."

The Letter to Philadelphia: The Church Faithful to Christ (3:7-13)

The message to the church at Philadelphia is in some respects one of the most interesting of all the messages to the churches. Here is a church which was faithful to Christ and the Word of God. The city of Philadelphia itself, known in modern times as Alasehir, is located in Lydia some twenty-eight miles southeast of Sardis and was named after a king of Pergamos, Attalus Philadelphus, who built the city. The word Philadelphia, meaning "brotherly love," is found six other times in the New Testament (Rom. 12:10; 1 Thess. 4:9; Heb. 13:1; 1 Peter 1:22; 2 Peter 1:7a,b). Here the word occurs for the seventh and final time, but only here is it used of the city bearing this name.

The city of Philadelphia had a long history and several times was almost completely destroyed by earthquakes. The most recent rebuilding was in a.d. 17. The land area around Philadelphia was rich in agricultural value, but had noticeable tokens of previous volcanic action. Grapes were one of the principal crops, and, in keeping with this, Dionysus was one of the chief objects of pagan worship. Through the centuries, a nominal Christian testimony continued in this city of Philadelphia and prospered even under Turkish rule. But all nominal Christians left the city for Greece after World War I.

The message addressed to the church at Philadelphia has the unusual characteristic of being almost entirely a word of praise, similar to that received by the church at Smyrna, but in sharp contrast to the messages to Sardis and Laodicea.

3:7 And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write; These things saith he that is holy, he that is true, he that hath the key of David, he that openeth, and no man shutteth; and shutteth, and no man openeth.

Christ the holy and sovereign God. The letter addressed to the angel of the church of Philadelphia is introduced in verse 7 by the description of Christ as preeminently the holy One and the One who is always true. Such a one is qualified to call the Christians of Philadelphia to a life of faith in Him and a corresponding life of holiness, even as Peter wrote, "But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation" (1 Peter 1:15). As the One who is true, Christ is the Author of truth in contrast to all error or false doctrine. In the midst of so much that is false and perverted, Jesus Christ stands alone as the One who is completely true. This aspect of the person of Christ, linked with His holiness earlier in the verse, brings out the great truth that right doctrine and right living go together. There can be no holiness without truth.

Christ is also presented as the One who has the key of David, the One that opens in such a way that no man can shut, and the One who shuts so that no man can open. The description of Christ as He is introduced to the Philadelphian church is less similar to the vision of Christ in chapter 1 than any of the other presentations to the seven churches. He is declared in 1:18 to "have the keys of hell and of death." Here the allusion seems to be to Isaiah 22:22 where, speaking of Eliakim the son of Hilkiah, it is recorded that "the key of the house of David will I lay upon his shoulder; so he shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open." Eliakim had the key to all the treasures of the king, and when he opened the door it was opened, and when he closed the door it was closed. Christ, the great antitype of Eliakim, has the key to truth and holiness as well as to opportunity, service, and testimony. To the church at Philadelphia surrounded by heathendom and wickedness, Christ gives assurance that He has power to open and close according to His sovereign will.

3:8-9 I know thy works: behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it: for thou hast a little strength, and hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name. Behold, I will make them of the synagogue of Satan, which say they are Jews, and are not, but do lie; behold, I will make them to come and worship before thy feet, and to know that I have loved thee.

Commendation and promised victory. Christ says to the church at Philadelphia as to the other churches, "I know thy works." The entire panorama of testimony and witness in Philadelphia was before Him as He wrote words of commendation for their faithfulness to the Lord. In keeping with the description of His person in verse 7, He declares to them, "Behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it." Ramsay explains the reference to the door as arising from the geographical situation of the city of Philadelphia. He states,

The situation of the city fully explains this saying. Philadelphia lay at the upper extremity of a long valley, which opens back from the sea. After passing Philadelphia the road along this valley ascends to the Phrygian land and the great Central Plateau, the main mass of Asia Minor. This road was the one which led from the harbour of Smyrna to the north-eastern parts of Asia Minor and the East in general, the one rival to the great route connecting Ephesus with the East, and the greatest Asian trade-route of Mediaeval times... Philadelphia, therefore, was the keeper of the gateway to the plateau.¹⁰⁵

The testimony of the Philadelphian church was divinely ordained by God and assured by His power and sovereignty. It is significant that the testimony of this church continued through the centuries in evident fulfillment of His promise that they should have an open door.

The church at Philadelphia is commended by Christ with the words, "For thou hast a little strength, and hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name." Some have interpreted the expression "little strength" as a word of rebuke rather than commendation. It is obviously short of a full commendation, but it is evident that the thrust of the passage is that Christ recognizes in the Philadelphian church at least a significant degree of spiritual power which comes from God, and this assured them a continuance of their testimony through the open door which He had set before them. Also they are commended for having kept His Word; that is, they had guarded and kept the truth of God as it was committed to them and had not departed from the faith, that system of doctrine which was held by the apostolic church.

Added to their other commendable qualities, the church at Philadelphia manifested a loyalty to the name of Christ Himself and had made a public confession of their trust in Him. In recognition of this fact He says to them, "Thou hast not denied my name." As the result of their faithfulness in witness He promises that

their adversaries, described in verse 9 as "synagogue of Satan," will be forced to acknowledge that the Philadelphian church were true servants of God. The reference to the synagogue of Satan and to those who say they are Jews is to unbelieving Jews who were opposing the witness of the gospel in Philadelphia and making it difficult for the Christians to bear a good testimony before the pagan world.

Tait observes,

The most inveterate enemy of the Church of Christ were the Jews. We read of them in Thessalonica, in Smyrna, and here in Philadelphia; and in every case most hostile and embittered against Christians. In Palestine, they were the sole persecutors of the Church; and, elsewhere, if they did not directly oppose the gospel, they instigated others to do so. In Smyrna, the same term, "Synagogue of Satan," is applied to them as here.¹⁰⁶

Tait goes on to note, however, that their very opposition to Christ some-times led them to faith.

We have seen in the history of the Church, many who were its greatest enemies--who were infuriated against it--led to the feet of Jesus. Nothing is too hard for the Lord.¹⁰⁷

There does not seem to be any evidence that there was satanic opposition in all the churches, though it was found in Pergamos and Smyrna. The Philadelphian church overcomes this opposition and has ultimate victory over it. McCarrell observes:

The Philadelphia letter reminds that any true church at any time, and especially during the last days, meets Satanic opposition...through imitation, religious ritualism, and hypocrisy--opposition strengthened by mixture of worldliness and religiousness--Church and State.¹⁰⁸

Those in the church today who are experiencing such affliction and persecution may be assured that however violent the opposition and however direct the efforts to thwart and hinder the work of God, in the end there will be victory for the cause of Christ.

3:10-11 Because thou hast kept the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth. Behold, I come quickly: hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown.

Promise of deliverance from hour of trial. One of the outstanding compliments given to the Philadelphian church is contained in verse 10. Because of their faithfulness the Christians in Philadelphia are promised that they will be kept from the hour of trial which will come upon the earth as a divine judgment. It should be noted that this deliverance is not only from trial but from a period of time in which the trial exists, "the hour of temptation." If the expression had been simply deliverance from trial, conceivably it could have meant only partial deliverance. The expression seems to have been made as strong as possible that the Philadelphian church would be delivered from this period.

Many have observed also that the preposition "from" (Gr., ek) is best understood as "out of rather than simply "from." Other instances of the use of the same verb and preposition together, such as John 17:15 and James 1:27, would indicate that it is perhaps too much to press it to mean an absolute deliverance. In view of the context of the book of Revelation, however, as it subsequently unfolds the horrors of this very tribulation period, it is evident that the promise here to the church at Philadelphia is one of deliverance from this time of trouble.

This conclusion has, of course, been resisted by all posttribulationists as an unwarranted interpretation of this passage. If this promise has any bearing on the question of pretribulationism, however, what is said emphasizes deliverance from rather than deliverance through. As far as the Philadelphian church was concerned, the rapture of the church was presented to them as an imminent hope. If the rapture had occurred in the first century preceding the tribulation which the book of Revelation describes, they were assured of deliverance. By contrast, those sealed out of the twelve tribes of Israel in 7:4 clearly go through the time of trouble. This implies the rapture of the church before the time of trouble referred to as the great tribulation. Such a promise of deliverance to them would seemingly have been impossible if the rapture of the church were delayed until the end of the tribulation prior to the second coming of Christ and the establishment of the kingdom.

This passage therefore provides some support for the hope that Christ will come for His church before the time of trial and trouble described in Revelation 6 to 19. This time of tribulation will overtake the entire world, as God inflicts His wrath upon unbelieving Gentiles as well as upon Christ-rejecting Jews. The Philadelphian church is therefore promised deliverance from the time of trouble which will overtake the world but will not overtake them. By so much they are encouraged to bear their present suffering and to continue their faithfulness and patience as they bear witness for the Lord Jesus.

The Lord's coming for them is compared to an imminent event, one which will come suddenly without announcement. In view of this expectation they are to hold fast to their testimony for Christ in order to receive their reward at His coming. The expression "quickly" is to be understood as something which is sudden and unexpected, not necessarily immediate.

In this passage the rapture of the church is in view. The coming of Christ to establish a kingdom on earth is a later event following the predicted time of tribulation which is unfolded in the book of Revelation itself. By contrast, the coming of Christ for His church is portrayed here as elsewhere in the book as an event which is not separated from us by any series of events, but is one of constant expectation in the daily walk of the believer in this age. This promise was historically true as directed to the church at Philadelphia. If the church at Philadelphia foreshadows a future period of church history just as other churches seem to do, the promises given to this church can be taken as given to all churches bearing a true witness for Christ even down to the present day.

Many churches may fulfill the characteristics of the other churches mentioned in these chapters of Revelation and share the condemnation that is involved. It is also true that some churches like the church in Philadelphia are worthy of commendation and bear a true testimony for the Lord Jesus. Individual Christians living in expectation of coming deliverance from this present world can therefore anticipate the coming of Christ for them. In regard to the hope of Christ's return, J. N. Darby writes:

That which characterizes the church of Philadelphia is its immediate connection with Himself; It is Christ Himself who is coming. It is neither knowledge nor prophecy that can satisfy the heart; but the thought that Jesus is coming to take me to Himself is the blessed hope of one who is attached to Him by grace.¹⁰⁹

3:12-13 Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out: and I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, which is new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God: and I will write upon him my new name. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.

Invitation and promised reward. To the Christians of Philadelphia promise is also given as it is in the earlier letters that salvation and blessing and eternity to come will be their portion. They are not only promised the implication of verse 11 that they will have a crown of reward if they are faithful but they are promised in verse 12, "Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God." This is of course a figure of speech. The entire heavenly city is considered a temple. In keeping with the symbolism, the Philadelphian Christians will be permanent like a pillar in the temple and, speaking figuratively, they will stand when all else has fallen. This perhaps had peculiar significance to those who were in Philadelphia because of their historic experiences with earthquakes which frequently had ruined their buildings and left only the pillars standing. They are assured of continuance throughout eternity because of their faith in Christ as the One who enables them to overcome the world.

Further, the promise is given, "He shall go no more out." This seems to mean that they will no longer be exposed to the temptations and trials of this present life and will have their permanent residence in the very presence of God. In addition to this promise Christ gives them a threefold assurance that they will be identified with God, because (1) they will have the name of God, (2) they will have the name of the city of God, the new Jerusalem, and (3) they will have a new name belonging to Christ. The expression "new Jerusalem" is a reference to the future eternal city described in Revelation 21 and 22. Some like Trench spiritualize the city and deplore the concept that the city will actually come down from heaven. The new Jerusalem, however, will probably be just as literal as the new heaven and the new earth.¹¹⁰ Those who, like the Philadelphia Christians, are faithful in their testimony and sure in their salvation are promised these eternal realities attending those who receive Christ as Saviour and Lord. As they have been faithful in receiving grace in the present age, so they will be rewarded by God with full tokens of their salvation in eternity to come.

As in the messages to the other churches, the church of Philadelphia is given the invitation to hear "what the spirit saith unto the churches." The challenge to all who hear today is to receive Jesus Christ as Saviour and, having received Him, to bear a faithful witness for the Lord. This will confirm their salvation and their possession of eternal life with God. Like those in Philadelphia, they can contemplate not only present but future deliverance from this world and the enjoyment of all the privileges of eternity because of the Lord's provision.

The Letter to Laodicea: The Church with Unconscious Need (3:14-22)

The seventh and concluding message to the seven churches of Asia is addressed to the angel of the church in Laodicea. This city founded by Antiochus II in the middle of the third century before Christ and named after his wife Laodice was situated about forty miles southeast of Philadelphia on the road to Colossae. Under Roman rule Laodicea had become wealthy and had a profitable business arising from the production of wool cloth. When destroyed by an earthquake about a.d. 60, it was able to rebuild without any outside help. Its economic sufficiency tended to lull the church to sleep spiritually; and though there is mention of the church as late as the fourteenth century, the city as well as the church now is in complete ruins.

There is no evidence that Paul ever visited the church in Laodicea, but it is evident that he knew some of the Christians there from his reference in Colossians 2:1 where he speaks of his "great conflict" for the Christians both at Colossae and at Laodicea and for others whom he had not seen. Salutations are also sent to the church at Laodicea in Colossians 4:15. Some believe that the epistle to the Ephesians was also sent to the Laodiceans. In any event the church had had a long history, and at the time this letter was

addressed to it by Christ it was a well-established church.

3:14 And unto the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write; These things saith the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God;

Christ the eternal and faithful Witness. As in His introduction to other churches of Asia, Christ describes Himself in an unusual way as "the Amen" in addressing the angel of the church "in" Laodicea, as the best texts read, instead of "the church of the Laodiceans." The frequent use of Amen, meaning "so be it," is a feature of the declarations of Christ and is usually translated "verily," or used as an ending to a prayer. As a title of Christ it indicates His sovereignty and the certainty of the fulfillment of His promises. As Paul wrote the Corinthians, "For all the promises of God in him are yea, and in him Amen, unto the glory of God by us" (2 Cor. 1:20). When Christ speaks, it is the final word, and His will is always effected.

Christ is called the faithful and true Witness in contrast to the church in Laodicea which was neither faithful nor true. Christ had been earlier introduced as "the faithful witness" in 1:5 and as "he that is true" in 3:7. The fact that Christ is both a faithful and a true witness gives special solemnity to the words which follow.

Finally, He is described as "the beginning of the creation of God." As "the beginning" (Gr., arche), He is not the first of creation but He is before all creation.

As Alford observes, arche, out of this context could possibly mean "that Christ is the first created being: see Gen. 49:3; Deut. 21:17; and Prov. 8:22."¹¹¹ While Arians took it this way, the whole context of Revelation indicates that Christ is God the Creator rather than a created being. As Alford states, "In Him the whole creation of God is begun and conditioned: He is its source and primary fountain-head."¹¹²

No doubt the Laodiceans were familiar with the letter to Colossae which must have been in their possession for at least a generation. There Christ is described as "the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature" (Col. 1:15), and as the One "who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead" (Col. 1:18). In a similar way Christ declares in Revelation 21:6, "I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end." As the Laodiceans had reveled in material riches, Christ reminds them that all of these things come from Him who is the Creator.

3:15-16 I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.

The indictment: neither cold nor hot. With this introduction of Himself, Christ addresses His message to the angel of the church in Laodicea without a word of commendation and with the most scathing rebuke to be found in any of the seven letters. The letter is first of all addressed to the angel or minister of the church. Because of the mention of Archippus in Colossians 4:17, some have suggested that Archippus may have been the angel or minister of the church in Laodicea. Paul had strictly charged Archippus, "Take heed to the ministry which thou hast received of the Lord, that thou fulfil it" (Col. 4:17). In verse 15 he had sent greetings to the church in Laodicea and stated in the following verse that the Colossians should also read a letter they would receive from the Laodiceans. Though it cannot be determined whether this is a letter now lost or a reference to the epistle to the Ephesians, there seems to be concern on the part of the Apostle Paul even at that time for the spiritual state of the church at Laodicea. It is improbable that Archippus was still pastor of the church, however, as thirty years or more had elapsed since the epistle to the Colossians was written. The state of the church, however, may well have stemmed from faulty ministry and leadership on the part of Archippus whether or not he was still pastor.

The difficulty seems to be that the church was lukewarm rather than cold or hot. The word translated "lukewarm" (Gr., *chliaros*) is used only here in the New Testament and refers to tepid water. It is obvious that in this portion of Scripture Christ is referring to three different spiritual states which may be enumerated respectively as a state of coldness, a state of warmth or fervor, and a state of lukewarmness. Christ had reference to the fact that many in the world are cold to the things of Christ, that is, the gospel leaves them totally unmoved and arouses no interest or spiritual fervor. Such were many who were later won to the gospel, but in their prior cold state they had no evidence of grace or of salvation. By contrast those who are described as hot are those who show genuine spiritual fervor and leave no question as to the presence of eternal life, the sanctifying power and presence of the Holy Spirit, and a fervent testimony manifesting to all that they are believers in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The normal transition is from a state of coldness to a state of spiritual warmth and is manifested in the experience of many prominent servants of God. The Apostle Paul himself at one time was cold toward Christ and bitter in his persecution of Christians; but once he met Christ on the Damascus Road, the opposition and lack of interest were immediately dissolved and replaced by the fervent heat of a flaming testimony for the Lord. The One whom he formerly persecuted then became an object of such affection that he would cheerfully die for Christ's name. Similarly Moses in the Old Testament, though not always identified with his people Israel, when faced with a choice of either going the way of the Egyptians or the way of the people of God, according to the Scriptures chose to suffer affliction with his people rather than to enjoy the pleasures of Egypt for a brief season. It is obvious that he also manifested fervency in a real work for God. Such has been the pattern also of countless souls who have been won from spiritual deadness and coldness to fervency of Christian testimony.

The third state, that of lukewarmness, is what characterized the church in Laodicea. This state refers to those who have manifested some interest in the things of God. They may be professing Christians who attend church but have fallen far short of a true testimony for Christ and whose attitude and actions raise questions concerning the reality of their spiritual life. They have been touched by the gospel, but it is not clear whether they really belong to Christ. Such was the case of the messenger of the church at Laodicea as well as his congregation.

Trench comments that Jeremy Taylor, in his sermon "Of Lukewarmness and Zeal," "urges well that it is the 'lukewarm' not as a transitional, but as a final state, which is thus the object of the Lord's abhorrence." Trench cites Taylor as saying, "In feasts or sacrifices the ancients did use *apponere frigidam* or *calidam*; sometimes they drank hot drink, sometimes they poured cold upon their gravies or their wines, but no services of tables or altars were ever lukewarm."¹¹³

To the angel of the church in Laodicea Christ therefore addresses this sharp word of rebuke. Both the messenger and the church are neither cold nor hot. They can hardly be classified with the worldly who are totally unconcerned about the things of Christ nor with those who unmistakably bear a true testimony for the Lord. This intermediate state of lukewarmness is the occasion for the extreme statement which Christ makes that He will spue them out of His mouth.

Ramsay comments on the state of the church at Laodicea as follows:

The ordinary historian would probably not condemn the spirit of Laodicea so strenuously as St. John did. In the tendency of the Laodiceans toward a policy of compromise, he would probably see a tendency toward toleration and allowance, which indicated a certain sound practical sense and showed that the

various constituents of the population of Laodicea were well mixed and evenly balanced.¹¹⁴

It is apparent that there is something about the intermediate state of being lukewarm that is utterly obnoxious to God. Far more hopeful is the state of one who has been untouched by the gospel and makes no pretense of putting his trust in Christ than the one who makes some profession but by his life illustrates that he has not really honored the Christ whose gospel he has heard and professed. There is no one farther from the truth in Christ than the one who makes an idle profession without real faith. The church at Laodicea constitutes a sad picture of much of the professing church in the world throughout the history of the Christian era and serves as an illustration of those who participate in the outer religious worship without the inner reality. How many have outwardly conformed to requirements of the church without a true state of being born again into the family of God? How many church members are far from God yet by their membership in the professing church have satisfied their own hearts and have been lulled into a sense of false security?

In the history of the human race no one has been harder to reach for Christ than the religionist, the one who is quite satisfied with the measure of his devotion to God and with the items which to him represent religion. Far easier to win are the harlots and publicans than the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Especially sad is the fact that in the church at Laodicea the minister or angel of the church is here described as lukewarm.

The indifference embodied in the term "lukewarm" in this passage seems to extend to their conviction respecting the central doctrines of the Christian faith, such as the necessity of the new birth and the need for a dramatic change in life and perspective required of a true Christian. If those who are shepherds of the flock never make clear the necessity of the new birth and do not proclaim accurately the depravity and sin of the human heart and the divine remedy provided alone in the salvation offered by the crucified Christ, one can hardly expect the church itself to be better than those who lead it. The result is churchianity, membership in an organization without biblical Christianity and without membership in the Body of Christ accompanied by the miracle of the new birth.

It is remarkable, however, that in the indictment of the church in Laodicea none of the sins mentioned in the preceding churches are itemized. On the one hand there are no works which are commended, but on the other hand there is no citation of departure in doctrine or morals. Perhaps such defection did not occur, or it may have stemmed from the sin of being lukewarm. In either case the quality of being lukewarm assumes the dimension of being utterly intolerable by God.

3:17-18 Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked: I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eyesalve, that thou mayest see.

Their poverty in riches. The lack of spiritual perception, devotion, and faith in God manifested in the lukewarm state is revealed in the exaltation of material wealth in contrast to spiritual riches. The Laodiceans were well provided for as far as material goods were concerned, and Christ quotes the pastor representing the church as boasting, "I have need of nothing." Their lack of economic need seems to have blinded their eyes to their dire need of spiritual riches. Christ points this out by saying that they do not know that they are "wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked." As in the other churches,

the state of the pastor is the state of the congregation. They are "wretched," a term Paul uses in reference to himself in Romans 7:24. They are "miserable" (pitiably), an expression Paul also uses in 1 Corinthians 15:19 of one who does not believe in resurrection. In describing the Laodiceans as "poor" Christ indicates that they are extremely poor, that is, reduced to begging. In addition to those indications of their need, they are described as "blind" (unable to perceive spiritual things), and "naked" (stripped of clothes, or without proper clothes). Their spiritual condition was the exact opposite of their supposed sufficiency in temporal matters.

The church at Laodicea with their unconscious need were lulled into false contentment by their temporal sufficiency. Spiritually they were in a wretched state but did not realize it. Without the real joy of the Lord, they were miserable in spite of their temporal wealth. They were poor because they were without real and eternal possessions and were lacking the eye of faith that could ascertain the true riches which endure forever. They were blind to things which could be seen only by spiritual sight, and they were naked of spiritual clothing, the righteousness which comes from God, even though they were clothed with rich garments of silk and wool. The Laodiceans are typical of the modern world, which revels in that which the natural eye can see but is untouched by the gospel and does not see beyond the veil of the material to the unseen and real eternal spiritual riches.

To these who were in such unconscious need, Christ addresses a word of admonition. He could command but instead, with a touch of irony, He offers His advice: "I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eyesalve, that thou mayest see." Barclay observes that the city of Laodicea was famous for two kinds of medicine, namely, an ointment for sore ears and an eye powder for sore eyes. He states,

The tephra Phrygia, the eye-powder of Laodicea, was world-famous. It was exported in tablet form; and the tablets were ground down and applied to the eye. This Phrygian powder was held to be a sovereign remedy for weak and ailing eyes.¹¹⁵

There is gentle irony in the exhortation for them to buy these needed spiritual things. The fact was that though they were well endowed with the riches of this earth, what they needed they could not buy. The gold of which Christ spoke was not obtainable at their bankers. There may be an allusion here to Isaiah 55:1 where the invitation is given, "Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price."

It is obvious that Christ is referring not to the physical items which are mentioned but to their spiritual counterparts. They were to obtain gold from Christ, that is, the true riches and, more specifically, that which corresponds to the glory of God Himself. They were to have white raiment speaking of righteousness which God provides. The merchants of Laodicea were famous for their manufacture of a certain black garment which was widely sold. They grew their own glossy black wool used in making this garment. There may be a reference to the contrast between that which the merchants could provide, a black garment, and a white garment which God alone could supply. In any case the white garment alone would be a satisfactory covering of their nakedness before God.

Christ also advises them to anoint their eyes with eyesalve. In this exhortation He states that they lacked spiritual insight. In the temple of Asklepios in Laodicea there was a famous medical school. Here again there may be relevance to what the Laodiceans were accustomed to doing, that is, using medicine for

eyesalve, in contrast to their real need of having their spiritual eyes opened. Both pastor and people seem to have been blind to the things of God. There are few passages in Scripture more searching, more condemning, more pointed than the message to this church, and few messages are more needed by the church today, which in many respects sadly parallels the spiritual state of the church at Laodicea.

3:19 As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent.

Warning to repent. To such in the Laodicean church as would listen, Christ says, "As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent." Obviously this verse is not addressed to those who are still cold, those who are still out of Christ, those who make no pretense of putting their trust in Him. It is directed rather to those who profess to follow Christ and who in some sense may be classified as belonging to Him. These are the objects of the love of God. If they are in a lukewarm state, short of what they should be spiritually, they are the objects of the rebuke and chastening judgments of God. God is not seeking to discipline those who make no pretense of following Him but rather deals with those who claim to be His children. If by faith they have entered into the fold, even though they still fall short of a true testimony for God, they become the objects of God's divine chastening just as children are corrected by a faithful father.

The exhortation is addressed to "as many as I love." The word used for love is not *agapao*, as in 2:4 but rather *phileo*, a term for affection with less depth. Those who are the objects of His affection are also the objects of His rebuke and chastening. The word translated "rebuke" (Gr., *elegcho*) could also be translated "expose, convict, or punish." It is not simply a verbal rebuke but is effective in dealing adequately with the person who is rebuked. Such are also chastened (Gr., *paideuo*), which means to train, discipline, or educate a child. It is evident that Christ has in mind here those few in the Laodicean church who are actually born again but whose lives have taken on the same lukewarm characteristics as those about them who are merely professing Christians. The fact that they are rebuked and chastened is evidence that they are true children of God, as such a program is not addressed to those who are unsaved (cf. Heb. 12:3-15).

Though the state of lukewarmness should never exist in those who have believed in Christ, Christians are often indistinguishable from those who are merely making an idle profession. God, however, knows the difference. Those who are truly His are the objects of His chastening judgment. The Scriptures faithfully warn us as in the words of Paul to the Corinthians in I Corinthians 11:31-32: "For if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened of the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the world." In other words the true believer has an alternative. If he will judge himself and put away his sin, God will not be required in that case to bring chastening judgment upon him. If he will not judge himself, however, it is clear that God will undertake to deal with him. As Darby observes,

The immediate occasion, object, inner spring of all the terrible judgment which is coming, is the professing Church itself. It ought to have been God's witness on the earth, Christ's epistle known and read of all men; but, having become corrupt, it is this professing Church that primarily and definitely brings down the wrath of God.¹¹⁶

3:20-22 Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me. To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne. He that hath an ear, let

him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.

Invitation and promise. Having concluded the messages to the seven churches culminating in the message to the church at Laodicea, the invitation becomes a personal one to all who will hear the words of warning. The prophetic foreshadowing provided in the seven churches as representative of churches found throughout the entire history of the church has special application in connection with the church at Laodicea. Under this point of view the state of this church is typical of the church of the last days and is therefore an exhortation to self-judgment and dedication to the will of God especially appropriate for consideration in modern days.

To all who will hear, Christ gives the invitation contained in verse 20. Christ is represented in relation to the church as well as to the individual as standing outside the door and awaiting an invitation to come in. This is, of course, true of any local professing church. Christ must be invited to come in and become the center of worship, adoration, and love, but it is also true of the heart of man. In this present age God does not force Himself upon anyone. No one is saved against his will. No one is compelled to obedience who wants to be rebellious. The gracious invitation is extended, however, that if one opens the door--the door of faith, the door of worship, the door of love--Christ will come in and, having come in, will sup or dine with the one who thus permits Him to enter.

Morgan observes,

The only cure for lukewarmness is the re-admission of the excluded Christ. Apostasy must be confronted with His fidelity, looseness with conviction born of His authority, poverty with the fact of His wealth, frost with the mighty fire of His enthusiasm, and death with the life divine that is in His gift. There is no other cure for the loneliness of heaven, for the malady of the world, for the lukewarmness of the Church than the re-admitted Christ.¹¹⁷

Some like Swete consider the picture here to be eschatological. To them the opening of the door represents the joyful response of the church to Christ's last call, that is, His second coming. Contrast to this is afforded in Matthew 25:10.¹¹⁸ It is hardly true, however, that at His second coming Christ will knock at the door and invite men to let Him in. The picture here seems more applicable to the present, when Christ remains on the outside unless He is welcomed.

Some have found in this imagery a parallel to the scene in the Song of Solomon chapter 5 where the bridegroom stands outside the door and knocks in the middle of the night attempting to awaken the bride within to open the door and permit him to enter. A similar idea is found in Luke 12:35-36 in connection with the second coming of Christ: "Let your loins be girded about, and your lights burning; And ye yourselves like unto men that wait for their lord, when he will return from the wedding; that when he cometh and knocketh, they may open unto him immediately." The point in all these illustrations is that Christ does not force Himself upon any but awaits the human decision relative to the recognition of His person and the blessings that will come if He be admitted.

What blessed condescension is revealed here in the attitude of God, the infinite Creator and Sovereign, who awaits the decision of His creature who is so unworthy of the least of divine blessing. The attitude of Christ throughout the present age is one of knocking at the door, waiting for men to decide to receive Him. The day will come when this attitude will be changed. He will come in power and glory, leading the armies of heaven, no longer awaiting the decision of men; but then by His own power and majesty, He will take control, judging those who did not invite Him to come in and rewarding those who opened the door and

received Him unto themselves.

The Scriptures do not enlarge upon what constitutes the fellowship except that the word used for "sup" indicates that it is the main meal of the day, the one to which an honored guest would be invited. The significant thing is that the one who invites Him in will sit down at the same table with Him and partake of the same food. This undoubtedly represents things that are of mutual interest: the things of God, the things of salvation, the things of our hope, the present sustaining grace of God, and the blessings of God provided through salvation in Christ. Christ is to become the center of our fellowship and that upon which we feed. How rich is this feast, how representative of that fellowship which will be ours throughout all eternity to come.

In keeping with the promises given to the overcomers in the other churches, the promise is made to the Laodicean church to "sit with me in my throne." This promise like the others is not granted to those who are especially spiritual within the church but rather to all who are genuine Christians who overcome by faith and are victorious over the world (1 John 5:4). To such is the promise granted that they will sit with Christ in His throne. What amazing condescension! To those who previously came under the condemnation of being lukewarm to such an extent that they were in danger of being spued out of the mouth of Christ the promise is now given that they will share His glory. It is obvious that this hinges upon their separation from the lukewarm stale and their manifestation of true devotion to Christ.

In this portion of Scripture as elsewhere in the New Testament, the present position of Christ is contrasted to His future millennial reign. Now Christ is sharing the Father's throne and glory, and this forms the basis of His promise to the overcomer. The day will come, however, when He will establish His own throne on the earth (Matt. 25:31) which will be the fulfillment of the predicted throne of David, subject of Old Testament prophecy. Then He will rule with power and glory not only over the nation Israel but over all nations. In that future time when His sovereignty will be manifested to the entire world, those who put then-trust in Him will reign with him as His bride and consort, as the ones who have identified themselves with Christ in this present age of grace.

In the church at Laodicea there was so much that was obnoxious to God and so little that was commendable. Yet Christ extended His personal invitation to them even as He extends to all who will receive it today. This invitation involves recognizing Him as Saviour and Lord and entering fully into the blessings of the Christian life. As in the messages to the other churches, the message to the church at Laodicea concludes with "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches."

Taken as a whole the messages to the seven churches of Asia constitute a comprehensive warning from Christ Himself as embodied in the exhortations to each of the churches. There is warning to the churches of today to "hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches." The church at Ephesus represents the danger of losing our first love (2:4), that fresh ardor and devotion to Christ which characterized the early church. The church at Smyrna representing the danger of fear of suffering was exhorted, "Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer" (2:10). In a modern day when persecution of the saints has been revived, the church may well heed the exhortation "Fear not." The church at Pergamos illustrates the constant danger of doctrinal compromise (2:14-15), often the first step toward complete defection. Would that the modern church which has forsaken so many fundamentals of biblical faith would heed the warning! The church at Thyatira is a monument to the danger of moral compromise (2:20). The church today may well take heed to the departure from moral standards which has invaded the church itself. The church at Sardis is a warning against the danger of spiritual deadness (3:1-2), of orthodoxy without life, of mere outward

appearance, of being, like the Pharisees, whited sepulchers. The church at Philadelphia commended by our Lord is nevertheless warned against the danger of not holding fast (3:11), and exhorted to keep "the word of my patience," to maintain the "little strength" that they did have and to wait for their coming Lord. The final message to the church at Laodicea is the crowning indictment, a warning against the danger of lukewarmness (3:15-16), of self-sufficiency, of being unconscious of desperate spiritual need. To contemporary churches each of these messages is amazingly relevant and pointed in its searching analysis of what our Lord sees as He stands in the midst of the lampstands.

The present age is an age of grace, an age in which God is testifying concerning Christ and His work, an age in which those who wish to hear may receive Christ and be saved. The invitation given long ago to the seven churches of Asia to hear what the Spirit says is extended to men today. A loving God would have men hear and believe, turn from their idols of sin and self, and look in faith to the Son of God, who loved them and gave Himself for them.

96 The Messages to the Seven Churches of Asia Minor, p. 299.

97 The Letters of Our Lord, p. 68.

98 Henry Alford, The Greek New Testament, IV, 579.

99 William Barclay, Letters to the Seven Churches, pp. 87-88.

100 Cf. J. D. Douglas, The New Bible Dictionary, p. 1144.

101 Cf. G. A. Hadjiantoniou, The Postman of Patmos, pp. 91-92.

102 Morgan, p. 75.

103 Henry B. Swete, The Apocalypse of St. John, pp. 51-52.

104 J. A. Seiss, Letters to the Seven Churches, p. 201.

105 W. M. Ramsay, The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia, pp. 404-5.

106 Tait, p. 352.

107 Ibid., p. 354.

108 William McCarrell, Christ's Seven Letters to His Church, p. 57.

109 Seven Lectures on the Prophetical Addresses to the Seven Churches, pp. 158-59.

110 Richard Chenevix Trench, Commentary on the Epistles to the Seven Churches in Asia, p. 246.

111 Alford, IV, 588.

112 Ibid.

113 Trench, pp. 261-62.

114 Ramsay, p. 425.

115 Barclay, p. 113.

116 Darby, p. 181.

117 Morgan, p. 108.

118 Swete, pp. 63-64.

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