

Christ And The Churches—Part 2

Revelation 3

We are still listening to what the Holy Spirit has to say to the churches, for these messages from Christ belong to our day, as well as to the first century. Churches are people, and human nature has not changed. So, as we continue our study, we must not look on these letters as ancient relics. On the contrary, they are mirrors in which we see ourselves!

1. Sardis, The Feeble Church (3:1-6)

Ancient Sardis, the capital of Lydia, was a most important city. It lay about fifty miles east of Ephesus at the junction of five main roads; so, it was a center for trade. It was also a military center, for it was located on an almost inaccessible plateau. The acropolis (fortified part of the city) of Sardis was about 1,500 feet above the main roads, and it formed an impregnable fortress. The main religion in the city was the worship of Artemis, one of the “nature cults” that built on the idea of death and rebirth.

Sardis was also known for its manufacture of woolen garments, a fact that has bearing on Christ’s message to the church. Sad to say, the city at that time was but a shadow of its former splendor, and the church, unfortunately, had become like the city—it was alive in name only.

The message to Sardis is a warning to all “great churches” that are living on past glory. Dr. Vance Havner has frequently reminded us that spiritual ministries often go through four stages: a *man*, a *movement*, a *machine*, and then a *monument*. Sardis was in the “monument” stage, but there was still hope.

- a. There was hope because Christ was the Head of the church, and He was able to bring new life. He described Himself as the one possessing the seven Spirits and the seven stars. There is only one Holy Spirit (**Eph. 4:4**), but the number seven demonstrates fullness and completeness.
 - i. The Holy Spirit gives life to the church, and life is exactly what the people at Sardis needed. The sevenfold Spirit of God is pictured as seven burning lamps (**Rev. 4:5**) and as seven all-seeing eyes (**Rev. 5:6**).
- b. All of the church’s man-made programs can never bring life any more than a circus can restore a corpse. The church was born when the Spirit of God descended on the Day of Pentecost (**Acts 2**), and its life comes from the Spirit.
 - i. When the Spirit is grieved, the church begins to lose life and power. When sin is confessed and the church members get right with God and with each other, the Spirit infuses new life—revival!

- c. Christ also controls the seven stars, the messengers of the churches (**Rev. 1:20**), referring most likely to the pastors. Sometimes it is a pastor's fault that a church is dying, and the Lord of the church must remove the star and put another in his place.
- d. There are no words of commendation to the believers in Sardis. Nor did the Lord point out any doctrinal problems that required correction. Neither is there any mention of opposition or persecution. The church would have been better off had there been some suffering, for it had grown comfortable and content and was living on its past reputation.
 - i. Like the city itself, the church at Sardis gloried in past splendor, but ignored present decay. In fact, even what they did have was about to die! Why? Because the believers had gone to sleep. Twice in its long history, the citadel at Sardis had been captured, each time because sentries had failed to do their jobs faithfully.
 - ii. It is when the church's leaders and members get accustomed to their blessings and complacent about their ministry that the enemy finds his way in.
 - iii. The impression is that the assembly in Sardis was not aggressive in its witness to the city. There was no persecution because there was no invasion of the enemy's territory. No friction means no motion! The unsaved in Sardis saw the church as a respectable group of people who were neither dangerous nor desirable. They were decent people with a dying witness and a decaying ministry.
- e. Our lord's counsel to the church began with, "Be watchful! Wake up!" (see **Rom. 13:1ff**). The "sentries" were asleep! The first step toward renewal in a dying church is honest awareness that something is wrong.
 - i. When an organism is alive, there is growth, repair, reproduction, and power; if these elements are lacking in a church, then the church is either dying or already dead.
- f. The Lord warned the Ephesians saints that He would come and remove their lampstand if they did not repent (**Rev. 2:5**). He warned the church at Pergamos that He would come and make war with the sword of the Spirit (**Rev. 2:16**). If the believers at Sardis did not follow His orders, He would come as a thief, when they least expected Him, and this would mean judgment.
- g. However, a remnant of dedicated people often exists in even a dying church. The Christians at Sardis had life, even though it was feeble. They were working, even though their works were not all that they could have been. The Lord admonished them

to strengthen what remained and not to give up because the church was weak. Where there is life there is hope!

- h. What was different about this dedicated remnant? They had: 1) not defiled their garments (**Rev. 3:4**); 2) they had not compromised with the pagan society around them, nor had they grown comfortable and complacent. It was this devoted spiritual remnant that held the future of the church's ministry.
- i. "Wake up! Be watchful! Repent! Remember the Word you have received and obey it!" This is the formula for revival.
- j. The promise in **Revelation 3:5** ("clothed in white raiment") would have been especially meaningful to the people who lived in a city where woolen garments were manufactured.

Notes: "Book of Life"

- It would appear that God's "Book of Life" contains the names of all the living, the wicked as well as righteous (**Ps. 69:28**). **Revelation 13:8** and **17:8** suggest that the names of the saved are written in the book from the foundation of the world—that is, before they had done anything good or bad. By God's grace, they have been chosen in Christ before the beginning of time (**Eph. 1:4**; see also **Matt. 25:34**).
- Jesus told His disciples to rejoice because their names were "written in heaven" (**Luke 10:20**). The Greek verb is in the perfect tense, which means it can be translated (as Kenneth Wuest does in his Expanded Translation), "Your names have been written in heaven and are on permanent record up there." It is not likely that Jesus would contradict Himself in this important matter!
- If the names of believers (the elect) are written from the foundation of the world, and if God knows all things, why would He enter the name of somebody who would one day fall and have to be removed from the book?
 - We are enrolled in heaven because we have been born again (**Heb. 12:23**), and no matter how disobedient a child may be, he or she cannot be "unborn."
- As unbelievers die, their names are removed from the book; thus, at the final judgment, the book contains only names of believers (**Rev. 20:12-15**). It becomes "the Lamb's Book of Life" (**Rev. 21:27**), because only those saved by the Lord Jesus Christ have their names in it. All the others have been blotted out, something God would never do for any true child of God (see **Ex. 32:32**; **Rom. 9:3**).
- It is a book of *life*, and lost sinners are *dead* (**Eph. 2:1**).

The warning here is that we not grow comfortable in our churches, lest we find ourselves slowly dying. The encouragement is that no church is beyond hope as long as there is remnant in it, willing to strengthen the things that remain.

2. Philadelphia, The Faithful Church (3:7-13)

As most people know, *Philadelphia* means “love of the brethren.” Certainly, brotherly love is an important mark of a Christian. We are “taught of God to love another” (**1 Thess. 4:9**): by God the Father (**1 John 4:19**), God the Son (**John 13:34**), and God the Spirit (**Rom. 5:5**). But it is not enough to love God and our fellow believers; we must also love a lost world and seek to reach unbelievers with the good news of the cross. This church had a vision to reach a lost world, and God set before them an open door.

Philadelphia was situated in a strategic place on the main route of the Imperial Post from Rome to the East, and thus was called “the gateway to the East.” It was also called “little Athens” because of the many temples in the city. The church was certainly located in a place of tremendous opportunity.

- a. The only major problem with the location was that the area was prone to earthquakes. Philadelphia sat on a geological fault, and in 17 BC it was destroyed by a severe earthquake that also destroyed Sardis and ten other cities.
- b. Jesus Christ presented Himself to the church in Philadelphia as “He that is holy.” This tantamount to declaring that He is God, which, of course, He is. Jesus Christ is holy in His character, His words, His actions, and His purposes. As the Holy One, He is uniquely set apart from everything else, and nothing can be compared to Him.
- c. But He is also the One who is true—that is genuine. He is the original, not a copy; the authentic God and not a manufactured one. There were hundreds of false gods and goddesses in those days (**1 Cor. 8:5-6**), but only Jesus Christ could rightfully claim to be the true God.
- d. It is worth nothing that when the martyrs in heaven addressed the Lord, they called Him “holy and true” (**Rev. 6:10**). Their argument was that, because He was holy, He had to judge sin, and because He was true, He had to vindicate His people who had been wickedly slain.
- e. Not only is He holy and true, but He also has the authority to open and close doors. The background of this imagery is **Isaiah 22:15-25**. Assyria had invaded Judah (as Isaiah had warned), but the Jewish leaders were trusting Egypt, not God, to deliver the nation.
 - i. One of the treacherous leaders was a man named Shebna who had used his office, not for the good of the people, but for his own private gain. God saw to it that Shebna was removed from office and that a faithful man, Eliakim, was put in his place and given the keys of authority.

- ii. Eliakim, was a picture of Jesus Christ, a dependable administrator of the affairs of God's people. Jesus Christ also has the keys of hades and of death (**Rev. 1:18**).
- f. In the New Testament, an "open door" speaks of opportunity for ministry (**Acts 14:27; 1 Cor. 16:9; 2 Cor. 2:12; Col. 4:3**). Christ is the Lord of the harvest and the Head of the church, and it is He who determines where and when His people shall serve (see **Acts 16:6-10**). He gave the church at Philadelphia a great opportunity for ministry.
 - g. But could they take advantage of it? There were at least two obstacles to overcome, the first being their own lack of strength (**Rev. 3:8**). Apparently, this was not a large or a strong church; however, it was a faithful one.
 - i. They were true to God's Word and unafraid to bear His name. **Revelation 3:10** suggests that they had endured some special testing and had proved faith.
 - ii. It is not the size or strength of a church that determines its ministry, but faith in the call and command of the Lord. God's commandments are God's enablements. If Jesus Christ gave them an open door, then He would see to it that they were able to walk through it!
 - h. The second obstacle was the opposition of the Jews in the city (**Rev. 3:9**). This was really the opposition of Satan, for we do not battle against flesh and blood (**Eph. 6:12**). These people may have been Jews in the flesh, but they were not "true Israel" in the New Testament sense (**Rom. 2:17-29**).
 - i. How were these Jews opposing the church at Philadelphia? For one thing, by excluding Jewish believers from the synagogue. Another weapon was probably false accusation, for this is the way the unbelieving Jews often attacked Paul. Satan is the accuser, and he uses even religious people to assist him (**Rev. 12:10**).
 - j. The believers in Philadelphia were in a similar situation to that of Paul when he wrote **1 Corinthians 16:9**—there were both opportunities and obstacles! Unbelief sees the obstacles, but faith sees the opportunities! And since the Lord holds the keys, He is in control of the outcome! So, what do we have to fear? Nobody can close the doors as long as He keeps them open. Fear, unbelief, and delay have cause the church to miss many God-given opportunities.

The Savior gave three wonderful and encouraging promises to this church. *First*, He would take care of their enemies (**Rev. 3:9**). One day these people would have to acknowledge that Christians were right (see **Isa. 60:14; Phil. 2:10-11**)! *Second*, he would keep them from tribulation (**Rev. 3:10**). This is surely a reference to the time of tribulation that John described in Revelation 6—19, "the time of Jacob's trouble."

Knowing the Bible Series, Stephen Witmer, Crossway; Life Application Study Bible, Tyndale; ESV Study Bible, Crossway; King James Open Study Bible, Nelson; Be Victorious, Warren W. Wiersbe, David Cook.

- k. This is not speaking about some local trial, because it involves “them that dwell on the earth”. The immediate reference would be to the official Roman persecutions that would come, but the ultimate reference is to the tribulation that will encompass the earth before Jesus Christ returns to establish His kingdom. In many Bible scholars’ understanding, **Revelation 3:10** is a promise that the church will not go through the tribulation, but will be taken to heaven before it begins (see **Thess. 4:13—5:11**). The admonition, “Behold, I come quickly,” would strengthen this view.
- l. The *third* promise to the Philadelphians is that God would honor them (**Rev. 3:12**). The symbolism in this verse would be especially meaningful to people who lived in constant danger of earthquakes: the stability of the pillar, no need to go out or to flee, a heavenly city that nothing could destroy.

In a very real sense, the church today is like the Philadelphian church, for God has set before us many open doors of opportunity. If he opens the doors we must work; if He shuts the doors, we must wait. Above all, we must be faithful to Him and see the opportunities, not the obstacles.

3. Laodicea, The Foolish Church (3:14-22)

As with some of the previous churches, the Lord adapted His words to something significant about the city in which the assembly was located. In this case, Laodicea was known for its wealth and its manufacture of a special eye salve, as well as of a glossy black wool cloth. It was also located near Hieropolis, where there were famous hot springs, and Colossae, known for its pure, cold water.

The Lord presented Himself as “the Amen,” which is an Old Testament title for God (see **Isa. 65:16**, where the word *truth* is the Hebrew word *amen*). He is the truth and speaks the truth, because He is “the faithful and true Witness” (**Rev. 3:14**). The Lord was about to tell this church the truth about its spiritual condition; unfortunately, they would not believe His diagnosis.

“Why is it that new Christians create problems in the church?” a young pastor once asked Warren Wiersbe. “They don’t create problems.” Wiersbe replied. “They *reveal* them. The problem has always been there, but we’ve gotten used to them. New Christians are like children in the home: They tell the truth about things!”

The Laodicean church was blind to its own needs and unwilling to face the truth. Yet, honesty is the beginning of true blessing, as we admit what we are, confess our sins, and receive from God all that we need. If we want God’s best for our lives and churches, we must be honest with God and let God be honest with us.

“The beginning of the creation of God” (**Rev. 3:14**) does not suggest the Jesus was created, and, therefore, not eternal God. The word translated “*beginning*” means “source, origin” (see **John 1:3; Col. 1:15, 18**).

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The Lord demonstrated for areas of need in the church at Laodicea.

- a. **They had lost their vigor (vv. 16-17).** In the Christian life, there are three “spiritual temperatures”; a burning heart, on fire for God (**Luke 24:32**), a cold heart (**Matt. 24:12**), and a lukewarm heart (**Rev. 3:16**). The lukewarm Christian is comfortable, complacent, and does not realize his need.
- i. If he were cold, at least he would feel it! Both the cold water from Colossae and the hot water from Heiropolis would be lukewarm by the time it was piped to Laodicea.
 - ii. As believers in Jesus Christ, we have every reason to be “fervent in spirit” (**Rom. 12:11**). Fervent prayer is also vital (**Col. 4:12**). It was as the Emmaus disciples listened to the Word that their hearts warmed.
 - iii. We enjoy a beverage that is either hot or cold, but one that is tepid is flat and stale. That is why the waitress keeps adding hot coffee or fresh iced tea to our cups and glasses. The second law of thermodynamics requires that a “closed system” eventually moderates so that no more energy is being produced. Unless something is added from the outside, the system decays and dies.

The church cannot be a “closed system.” Jesus said, “without me ye can do nothing” (**John 15:5**). The Laodicean church was independent, self-satisfied, and secure. “We have need of nothing!” but all the while, their spiritual power had been decaying; their material wealth and glowing statistics were but shrouds hiding a rotting corpse. Their Lord was outside the church, trying to get in (**Rev. 3:20**).

- b. **They had lost their values (vv. 17-18a).** The church at Smyrna thought itself poor, when it was really rich (**Rev. 2:9**); the Laodiceans boasted that they were rich, when in fact they were poor. Perhaps we have here a hint of why this church declined spiritually: They had become proud of their ministry and had begun to measure things by human standards instead of spiritual values.
- i. Laodicea was a wealthy city and a banking center. Perhaps some of the spirit of the marketplace crept into the church so that their values became twisted. Why is it that so many church bulletins and letterheads show pictures of buildings? Are these the things that are most important to us? Jesus said he was about to vomit them out of his mouth!
 - ii. The solution? Pay the price to get true “gold tried in the fire.” This suggests that the church needed some persecution; they were too comfortable

(**1 Peter 1:7**). Nothing makes God's people examine their priorities faster than suffering.

- c. **They had lost their vision (v. 18b).** The Laodiceans were "blind." They could not see reality. They were living in a fool's paradise, proud of a church that was about to be rejected. The apostle Peter teaches that when a believer is not growing in the Lord, his spiritual vision is affected (**2 Peter 1:5-9**). "Diet" has a bearing on the condition of one's eyes, in a spiritual sense as well as a physical one.
- i. The people could not see themselves as they really were. Nor could they see their Lord as he stood outside the door of the church. Nor could they see the open doors of opportunity. They were wrapped up in building their own kingdom that they had become lukewarm in their concern for a lost world.
 - ii. The solution? Apply the heavenly eye salve! The city of Laodicea was noted for its eye salve, but the kind of medication the saints needed was not available in the apothecary shop. The eye is one of the body's most sensitive areas, and only the Great Physician can "operate" on it and make it what it ought to be.
- d. **They had lost their vesture (vv. 17-22).** Like the emperor in Hans Christian Andersen's story, these Christians thought they were clothed in splendor when they were really naked! To be naked meant to be defeated and humiliated (**2 Sam. 10:4; Isa. 20:1-4**). The Laodiceans could go to the market and purchase fine woolen garments, but that would not meet their real need. They needed the white garments of God's righteousness and grace. According to **Revelation 19:8**, we should be clothed in "fine linen, clean and white," and this symbolizes "the righteous acts of the saints."
- i. Salvation means that Christ's righteousness is imputed to us, put to our account, but sanctification means that His righteousness is imparted to us, made a part of our character and conduct.
 - ii. There is no divine commendation given to this church. Of course, the Laodiceans were busy commending themselves! They thought they were glorifying God, when in reality they were disgracing His name just as though they had been walking around naked.

The Lord closes this letter with three special statements:

- First, *an explanation*: "As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten" (**Rev. 3:19a**). He still loved these lukewarm saints, even though their love for Him had grown cold. He planned to chasten them as proof of His love (**Prov. 3:11-12; Heb. 12:5-6**). God permits churches to go through times of trial so that they might become what He wants them to become.

- Second, *an exhortation*: “Be zealous therefore, and repent” (**Rev. 3:19b**). The church at Laodicea had to repent of their pride and humble themselves before the Lord. They had to “stir up that inner fire” (**2 Tim. 1:6**) and cultivate a burning heart.
- Finally, *an invitation* (**Rev. 3:20-22**). We often use these verses to lead lost people to Christ, but the basic application is to the believers. The Lord was outside the Laodicean church! He spoke to the individual (“*if any man*”) and not to the whole congregation. He appealed to a small remnant in Sardis (**Rev. 3:4-5**), and now He appeals to the individual. God can do great things in a church, even through one dedicated individual.

Christ was not impatient. “I have taken My stand” is the sense of the verb. He “knocks” through circumstances and He calls through his Word. For what is He appealing? Fellowship and communion, the people’s desire to abide in Him. The Laodiceans were an independent church that had need of nothing, but they were not abiding in Christ and drawing their power from Him. They had a “successful program” but it was not fruit that comes from abiding in Christ.

Note that when we invite Him in, the supper room becomes a throne room! It is through communion with Christ that we find victory and become overcomers indeed.

The letters to the seven churches are God’s X-rays, given to us so that we might examine our own lives and ministries. Judgment is going to come to this world, but it first begins at God’s house (**1 Peter 4:17**). In these letters we find encouragement as well as rebuke.

May the Lord help us to hear what the Spirit is saying today to the church, and to the individuals in the churches!

Homework: Come, Let Us Adore Him!. Read Revelation 4—5 .