

## Chapter Three

### Letters to the churches in Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea

**3:1 And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: He who has the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars, says this: “I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.”**

Sardis is another poor, dusty village in western Turkey, about 40 miles east of Izmir. It was later named *Sardo* or *Sart*, and was once the capital of the Lydian kings. Christ is portrayed here as seeing everything that goes on, and holding the church’s authority in His hand.

*Seven spirits of God:* The all-seeing, omniscient God. See notes on 1:4.

*Seven stars:* The church leaders. See notes on 1:16.

*You have a name that you are alive, but you are dead:* Here was a church with a *reputation* of being strong in the faith and a *reputation* of being under the Holy Spirit’s influence. However, much of their faith had fizzled away. By neglecting *spiritual* matters they had become a *spiritually* dead church. What little spirit, perseverance and faith they had left needed to be shored up and reinforced (strengthen the things which remain). It seems to be implied that no hardship was pressing against this congregation, which is perhaps why they were in their current condition.

- They had forgotten the Gospel of salvation (vs. 3)
- They were as the sleeping virgins who were not ready for the bridegroom (vs. 3)
- Some had soiled their garments (implied in vs. 4)
- They had begun the work and not sought to complete it (vs. 2).

This is a picture of the lazy church, a congregation who had received the word, was saved, and apparently became bored with their salvation. Falling asleep implies a lack of readiness. They had not kept their lamps full of oil and were therefore not ready for the bridegroom’s arrival. He would soon come upon on them while they were asleep (spiritually dead), and the door would be forever closed. (Matt 25:1)

**3:2 Wake up, and strengthen the things that remain, which were about to die; for I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of My God.**

Just as in the parable of the virgins who had fallen asleep (Matt 25:1ff), Jesus admonishes this church to “wake up.” They were asleep—spiritually dead. They had let their faith and perseverance fall by the wayside; allowed their spiritual life to fall away. They had grieved the Holy Spirit (Eph 4:30) bit by bit, quenching Him little by little. (1 Thess 5:19) There was still a flicker of fire left (“things that remain”). It was this dying fire that needed stirring up with a poker and fresh wood added to the glowing coals that were about to die permanently.

Their deeds were not maturing (complete) from God's perspective, though from a worldview, they appeared to be a dynamic and spiritually vital church. Note Paul's dissertation to the Ephesian church concerning completeness (maturity):

(Christ) gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, *to a mature man*, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. (Eph 4:11–13)

Today's Christians need to study the Word of God instead of relying on Sunday morning services to "recharge" them. How many times have I heard Christians tell me, "I go to church to get fed." If church service is the only place one is getting spiritual nourishment, it's no wonder we have so many weak brethren.

These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deut 6:6-9)

That was the Old Covenant. Can the New Covenant be any *less* important? Doesn't sound like a casual intercourse with God, does it? The teachings were to be on their HEART. They were to be taught DAILY. In all daily events, they were to discuss God's word. When they got up in the morning and when they went to bed at night. Everywhere an Israelite looked was to be evidence of the written Law. Go to any event today, be it Thanksgiving, Christmas, or a football game, and you would be hard pressed to get a conversation going about the bible.

In comparing the OT ordinances to NT Christianity, the writer of Hebrews constantly exalts the latter over the former. Daily meditation on God's Word is the only way a Christian is going to mature in regards to understanding God's will. Like those in Sardis, we today have institutionalized the preacher, dedicating our giving to keeping him employed so we can pursue our jobs, pastimes and family time. Maturity is gained through a firm foundation of understanding God's mind as revealed in His written Word. The issue of deeds rings of James' letter, where he warned, "faith without works is dead." (James 2:26) "You have a name—a reputation—that you are alive, but you have a *dead* faith." They had not kept the faith, as mentioned the next verse.

**3:3 Remember therefore what you have received and heard; and keep it, and repent. If therefore you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come upon you.**

They had forgotten the Gospel that had saved them; they had forgotten their reconciliation to God. (Rom 5:11)

The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, *practice these things*; and the God of peace shall be with you. (Phil 4:9)

As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, having been firmly rooted and now *being built up in Him and established in your faith*, just as you were instructed, and overflowing with gratitude. (Col 2:6–7)

The Sardis Christians were not like the Thessalonians, who had received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that they became an example to all the believers. (1Thess 1:6–7) The Thessalonian church didn't get established and built up in the faith by attending Sunday morning services.

*If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief.* Jesus' coming is typically described in this manner. He will sneak in unexpectedly and without one's knowledge. (Joel 2:9) He told His disciples, "...you be ready too; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour *when you do not think He will.*" (Matt 24:44) The thief coming in the middle of the night upon people sleeping safely in their beds has to do with readiness and being clothed. Those who sleep remove their clothing. The Christian is to be clothed with Christ. (Gal 3:27) "Behold, I am coming like a thief. Blessed is the one who *stays awake and keeps his clothes on*, lest he walk about naked and men see his shame." (Rev 16:15)

Christ's first coming is typically described in the OT as a *negative* event. It was called "the Day of the Lord," designed to wreak terror and havoc, not usher in some Golden Age. (Amos 5; Oba 15; Zeph 1; Mal 4:5) What we call the *Second Coming* actually had to do with the end of the Jewish Dispensation, not a future "rapture."<sup>1</sup>

**3:4 But you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their garments; and they will walk with Me in white; for they are worthy.**

Thayer defines 'soiled' (*moluno*) as *to pollute, to stain, to contaminate, to defile; used in New Testament of those who have not kept themselves pure from the defilement of sin, who have soiled themselves by fornication and adultery.* The ancient Jews considered holiness to be the "garment of the soul." If we take that idea in the light of "the soul returning to God who gave it" (Ecc 7:7), the picture of presenting ourselves before God (soul returning) conveys the importance of keeping our soul clean.

People wearing white robes appear several times in Revelation. Those saved from the nations during the great tribulation have them. (7:9, 13) "Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter by the gates into the city." (22:14) Thus, white robes give one the *right* to eternal life (tree of life) and grants them passage into the Holy City. This sums up what Jesus is saying: "They will walk with Me, for they are worthy."

Those who had kept themselves unstained by the world (James 1:27) were the true remnant, not visible churchgoers. Their names would be confessed before the heavenly assembly as the One True church. Neither 'Baptist,' 'Pentecostal,' 'Mormon,' 'Catholic,' neither 'Lutheran,' nor any other man-made title shall be heard on that Day. I wear the name 'Christian'—*Christ in me.*

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<sup>1</sup> This is not to deny any future coming, merely that the popular verses used to support that position are taken out of their intended context. It has reached a point in Christendom that any and every scripture, including those found in Old Testament, are ripped out of history and shoved into the future. Jesus said, "all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." (Luke 24:44) Paul wrote they had been fulfilled (Rom 3:21). Yet these predictions center on the person of Christ, not on future cataclysmic world events.

**3:5 He who overcomes shall thus be clothed in white garments; and I will not erase his name from the book of life, and I will confess his name before My Father, and before His angels.**

Those able to persevere until the end of life and remain faithful will be clothed in robes of righteousness (see notes on 3:18) and salvation. (Isa 61:10) In the story of the Prodigal Son, the father gave the errant son “the best robe” (Luke 15:22), a symbol of wholehearted admission back into the family. Those not part of Jesus Christ’s family will be eternally naked, forever barred from His presence.

*Book of Life:* The first reference to such a book was when Moses pleaded with God to blot his name from “Thy book which Thou hast written.” (Exo 32:32) Psalms 69:29 refers to those who were to crucify Jesus, that their names were to be blotted from “the book of the living.” The wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous. (Psa 1:5)

There is a line of thought supposing that each time a person sins, their name is blotted out from the Book of Life until such time as the person repents and is forgiven. The name is then added once again to the book. This cycle repeats itself, much like a boy plucking flower petals and chanting, “She loves me, she loves me not...” Those unlucky enough to die with the wrong petal pinched between their fingers wind up in eternal Hell. The problem with this is threefold:

- The Book of Life is a *symbol* of salvation. It’s not a real book with an angel appointed to write and erase names each time a person sins and repents.
- The context suggests that this blotting out occurs at the *end*, not *during* one’s life. *He who overcomes* shall be clothed in white garments. The clothing occurs *after* the overcoming. The “and” connects our overcoming with further promises: *He who overcomes* will not have his name erased. *He who overcomes* will have his name confessed before the Throne.
- Christ saved us from past, present, and future sins. A person’s fate *at* judgment depends on what was going on *before* judgment, so that the practical problem is salvation from the conditions that brings judgment. Present and future salvation are inseparably connected, and any attempt to make rigid distinctions between the two divides the brotherhood.
- It leaves little room for grace. We can sin in ignorance. Is confession based only on what we know to be sins? What about sins of which we’re unaware? Misplaced remarks that offend others? A seemingly benign teaching that causes someone to stumble? God’s grace is not turned on an off like a water faucet, nor are we erased from the heavenly roll call one minute and penciled in the next.

Confession is a prerequisite to forgiveness. (1 John 1:9) However, *confess* means *to say the same thing, to agree with*. If we say that we *have not* sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us. (1 John 1:10) This is a confession to God: *we have sin inside of us*. To be in disagreement with God: *I don’t have sin in me*. The agreement with God comes from a humble spirit. It’s not referring to a singular *act*, but of an *attitude* of admitting or not admitting our condition. We need to stop thinking of God as a machine, where we mumble a quick prayer and hit the ENTER key. Lean on Him as our Heavenly Father, as a child leans on its earthly dad.

*Name will be confessed before Father and angels:* This denotes Jesus knowing who we are. He *knows* us by name, just as we *know* His voice. (John 10:27) Those names not confessed are asked to leave: “Depart from Me...I never *knew* you.” (Matt 7:23) How wonderful to have Jesus confess your name before the God of the Universe and before the Heavenly Assembly. How horrible for those who don’t have a representative, whose name will not be named, but who will be banned into Eternal Darkness because they refused to accept Christ’s sacrifice.

**3:6 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”**

See notes on 2:7

**3:7 And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: He who is holy, who is true, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, and who shuts and no one opens, says this:**

*Philadelphia* means *brotherly love* in Greek. It is a city of Lydia in Asia Minor, situated near the eastern base of Mount Timolus, founded and named by the Pergamene king, Attalus II Philadelphus. After the death of Attalus III in 133 BC, Philometor annexed it to his entire kingdom and later allowed it to come under Roman jurisdiction. It is now known in Turkey as Alah-Sheker, located 40 miles NE of Smyrna.

Christ portrays Himself to this church as the One in whom holiness and truth dwell, from where those attributes originate. Although Jesus appeared to be a failure in the world’s eyes, He rose from death and the grave as King. The world does not perceive Him as holy and true. The world sees Christ as a good man, a prophet, a great teacher, but only the true believer sees Him for who He truly is: Savior of a lost world.

*Key of David:* Note the prophecy concerning Eliakim concerning this symbol:

I will clothe him with your tunic, and tie your sash securely about him, I will entrust him with your authority, and he will become a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the house of Judah. Then I will set the key of the house of David on his shoulder, when he opens no one will shut, when he shuts no one will open. And I will drive him like a peg in a firm place, and he will become a throne of glory to his father’s house. (Isa 22:21–23)

Keys represent authority. David, who had regal authority, could open or shut the kingdom of Israel to anyone he pleased. He exercised this authority when he made Solomon his successor instead of the older Adonijah. Admittance to the kingdom (the church) of the Gospel, and the kingdom of heaven are within Christ’s authority alone. He can open a door no one can shut. He can also close a door no one can open.

When Jesus told Peter that He would give him the keys to the kingdom of heaven, He signified that Peter would open up a door. This was fulfilled literally when the apostle preached (opened) the Gospel to the Jews (Acts 2:41) and Gentiles. (Acts 10:44–47; 11:1; 15:7)

**3:8 I know your deeds. Behold, I have put before you an open door which no one can shut, because you have a little power, and have kept My word, and have not denied My name.**

The open door may be understood to mean *an opportunity*. Paul spoke of "...praying at the same time for us as well, that God may *open up to us a door for the word*, so that we may speak forth the mystery of Christ." (Col 4:3) Thus, it could be that Christ gave the Philadelphians a way to preach and further the Divine Message.

*A little power:* Power almost always means *authority* in the bible. Thus, the Philadelphians had very little authority or political influence. They were probably a small band of Christians, meeting in houses and keeping faithful to the Word. They had not denied the name of Christ. People filling large buildings are not necessarily spiritual-minded worshippers. A small gathering of believers in a broken-down building can be powerful in love and good works.

**3:9 Behold, I will cause those of the synagogue of Satan, who say that they are Jews, and are not, but lie—behold, I will make them to come and bow down at your feet, and to know that I have loved you.**

This is the fourth time Satan is mentioned in these letters to the seven churches. Note:

- Synagogue of Satan—False Jews (Smyrna, Philadelphia)
- Throne of Satan—Persecution by Jews (Pergamum)
- Teachings of Satan—False Doctrine (Thyatira)

Jews did not frequent Satanic temples. The allegory refers to the Jews following the devil due to their own blindness. (See notes on 2:9 concerning the synagogue of Satan.) They claimed to be the true people of God. In rejecting Christ, however, they had been rejected by the One holding the key of David, who had locked them out and opened up a door for the Gentiles instead. This is a central theme in Revelation.

*I will make them to come and bow down and see that I have loved you instead:* The destruction of Jerusalem had not yet taken place, meaning that Revelation was written prior to that event, not after. Once overthrown, the Jews would "worship" (give praise to God) before the church's feet (in a provisional sense) in recognition that God loved the latter over the former. It describes a complete and utter defeat of the Jewish nation.

It's important to understand the Middle Eastern perspective on this issue. To a Muslim, defeat is understood as being disarmed of weapons, having one's city leveled, and foreign laws put into place. Truces, treaties, and compromises are actually seen as victories in their way of thinking. The complete and utter destruction of Jerusalem and its temple by Gentiles was seen by the Jews as total defeat. Proclaiming or initiating some kind of legal transfer of power from Jewish to Gentile simply wasn't in their play book. It had to be a complete and visible destruction of their entire system.

The transfer of the kingdom from the Jewish nation to the Gentiles put the latter in a position of authority. Since the unbelieving Jews would no longer be God's chosen, they would find

themselves cast out and in subservience. The destruction of Jerusalem essentially decimated the Jews, scattering them across the Roman world. Christianity spread its influence in their wake. In a judicial sense, the Jews “bowed down” at the Gentiles’ feet. Jesus told the High Priest during His trial, “you shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven.” (Matt 26:64) The implication that Caiaphas would be alive when Jesus returned described the fulfillment of the Jews bowing down in a judicial sense to the New Covenant. It was also a fulfillment of a promise given to the children of Israel, warning them of what would happen if they did not obey God:

The Lord shall make you the head and not the tail, and you only shall be above, and you shall not be underneath (you will not bow down at anyone’s feet), if you will listen to the commandments of the Lord your God...But...if you will not obey the Lord your God... curses shall come upon you and overtake you (you will bow down to others).” (Deut 28:13–15)

Scripture shows that this happened on a number of occasions. Israel disobeyed God to the point of near extinction. The rejection of His Son was the final act that initiated His divorce from the Jewish nation. They lost their place, being subjugated from their once lofty position, and “bowing down” to the Bride of Christ, the Christian church.

**3:10 Because you have kept the word of My perseverance, I also will keep you from the hour of testing, that hour which is about to come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell upon the earth.**

The term *hour* is not found in the OT. It was the shortest period of time understood by the ancient world. It implies an appointment, as when Christ’s crucifixion was to take place. (John 8:20; 13:1) Paul told the Galatians that he did not yield in subjection to false brethren “for even one hour,” implying the shortest length of time. We would say, “I didn’t give in for one second.” *Hour* may also be understood as Time in general. Jesus said to the centurion, “Go your way; let it be done to you as you have believed.” And the servant was healed *that very hour*. (Matt 8:13) In other words, the servant was healed *at that time*. In this context then, a *time* of testing was to come upon the whole earth.

The *hour of testing* from which this church was to be exempt could be viewed in light of what the angel says: “Fear God, and give Him glory, *because the hour of His judgment has come*.” (Rev 14:7) Concerning the destruction of Jerusalem, Jesus warned His disciples, “For this reason you be ready too; for the Son of Man is coming *at an hour when you do not think*.” (Matt 24:44) Many want to read into this a future coming. Jesus told His disciples, “you will not finish going through the cities of Israel *until the Son of Man comes*.” (Matt 10:23) How we can confuse “going through Jewish cities” to mean anything else begs the question. The context is quite clear, however: “*There are some of those who are standing here* who shall not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom.” (Matt 16:28) The coming in His kingdom happened in the apostles’ lifetime, but it wasn’t done in a physical sense.

*Test those who dwell upon the earth*. While the bible uses *earth* to mean *mankind*, it can also mean humanity, the physical land, or the land of Judah. Note how *earth*, *flesh* and *land* are used interchangeably in these two verses:

God looked on the *earth*, and behold, it (the earth) was corrupt; for all *flesh* had corrupted their way upon the *earth*. (Gen 6:12)

I brought you into the fruitful *land*, to eat its fruit and its good things. But you came and defiled My *land*, and My *inheritance* you made an abomination. (Jer 2:7)

Was it the ground, water and foliage that been corrupted? Or is it referring to the people? This time of testing was to come upon the “whole world.” Does this mean every human on the planet? Paul told the Christians at Rome, “I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, because your faith is being proclaimed *throughout the whole world*.” (Rom 1:8) Most scholars agree that “whole world” typically meant “the known world,” or, in some cases, the Roman Empire and its possessions. In other places, the term does include everyone on the planet, as in the whole world laying in the power of the devil. (1 John 5:19)

### **3:11 I am coming quickly; hold fast what you have, in order that no one take your crown.**

The hour of testing seems to be connected with Jesus’ coming spoken of here. The hour of testing was *about to come*. The testing seemed to threaten what they had—their crown of Life.

Jesus said, “I am coming quickly.” (22:7, 12, 20) It was to be *immediate*, precipitating the need to hang on to their faith. Any other meaning would be deceptive. Some argue that *coming quickly* refers to the future, and that 1<sup>st</sup> Century Christians, understanding it in that context, were to remain faithful regardless of the calendar. Jesus is seen as motivating them to remain faithful by His coming. However, the word ‘quickly’ is used nowhere in scripture to imply anything other than what it means. To suggest otherwise places the meaning of anything in the bible as suspect and wide open to interpretation.

Some scholars believe this time of testing was the period of Christian persecution led by Trajan, which was worse than what was handed out under Nero and Domitian.<sup>2</sup>

*Your crown:* We will receive an imperishable crown as a reward for our faithfulness, (1 Cor 9:25), one that will not wither or fade away; a crown of eternal life. (James 1:12)

### **3:12 He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he will not go out from it anymore; and I will write upon him the name of My God, and the name of the city of My God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God, and My new name.**

The Philadelphian church was to be exempt from the hour of testing, yet Jesus still told them, “He who overcomes...” Although we are to bear one another’s burdens, (Gal 6:2) the best we can do is commiserate with them. The bible says that ultimately, “each one has to bear their own load.” (Gal 6:5) Each person must work out their own salvation in fear and trembling. (Phil 2:12)

*He who overcomes:* All Christians “overcome” if they remain faithful until death. The NT makes some distinction between Christians who have passed on and those still alive. The early church, for example, suffered martyrdom; we do not. Yet avoiding martyrdom doesn’t jeopardize anyone’s eternal reward. Jesus’ parable of a man who hired field workers at different times of the

<sup>2</sup> This opinion is not supported by historians. Trajan was, in fact, a fairly humane emperor. See *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Vol. I, p. 626—Edward Gibbon.

day shows this truth. Those who worked all day were angry over those who worked only an hour. (Matt 20:12) The point of the parable is that no one earns their way into heaven. We are just as much in God's presence as those Christians who have already died. (Heb 9:24; 10:19; 12:22, 23) Martyrs do, however, seem to have a special place in God's eyes, something we'll examine in chapter 6.

*Pillar in the temple of My God:* The word 'pillar' means *established*. The tabernacle (a shadow and type of the church) was made up of pillars that supported the hanging curtains. (Exo 27:9ff) James, Peter and John are called pillars, signifying their strength in establishing and supporting the church. (Gal 2:9) The church is the pillar and support of the truth. (1 Tim 3:15)

The promise is made that the faithful believer will be established in the house of God and that they would not be told to leave. Although the Christian already has eternal life (John 3:36; 1 John 3:15), the context here suggests that being established in the temple of God is *after* death. *He who overcomes* will be established. This interpretation parallels the other rewards promised to the other churches in Revelation: they are *after* the overcoming, not before.

That said, most find it difficult to comprehend certain spiritual concepts. For example, we live on earth yet have our citizenship in heaven. (Phil 3:20) The New Jerusalem exists here and in the hereafter. On earth, it is the church and those who obey the gospel who are brought into the kingdom of God's Son. (Col 1:13) Keep in mind there was a transition period taking place during the apostles' time, where both covenants co-existed. One was passing away, the other was being revealed. Salvation is seen in the NT as a *present* fact (Gal 3:13; 1 Pet 1:18; Rev 5:9), and in other scriptures as a thing *yet* to come. (Rom 8:23; Eph 1:14; Heb 9:11; 10:1) The old *covenant* was being dismantled (Eph 2:15; Col 2:14), and in the process of passing away. (Heb 8:13; 2 Cor 3:7, 11-14)

*I will write upon him the name of my God:* Three names (titles) are given to every faithful Christian: God's name, the church's name, and Christ's name. *Christian* means *Christ in man*.

The Jewish priests had "Holiness to the Lord" written on their foreheads. This was God's *mark*. The followers of the beast also have a mark written on them. (Chapter 13) Thayer translates the Greek word *ónoma*, *used for everything which the name covers, everything the thought or feeling of which is aroused in the mind by mentioning, hearing, remembering, the name, that is, for one's rank, authority, interests, pleasure, command, excellencies, deeds etc*. The word translated *written* denotes that which is recorded so as not to be forgotten. It is an indelible mark, a permanent engraving upon the souls of the faithful.

*Name of the city of My God*, referring to the New Jerusalem. The High Priest had the names of the 12 tribes of Israel engraved on his breastplate. These made up the people of God. The Christian church, called the New Jerusalem, replaced the nation of Israel.

You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, *to the general assembly and church of the first-born* who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all. (Heb 12:22–23)

*My new Name:* That name which is above every name—Jesus. (Phil 2:9)

### **3:13 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.**

See notes on 2:7

### **3:14 And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God, says this:**

Laodicea was located in Phrygia, now a part of modern Turkey. The Greeks called it Disopolis (city of Jupiter) Paul had “agonized” over them (Col 2:1), suggesting a history of spiritual concerns.

Jesus is presented to this church as being the Faithful and True Witness. This phrase identified God’s sufficiency as being proof of their faithfulness. “May the Lord be *a true and faithful witness against us*, if we do not act in accordance with the whole message with which the Lord your God will send you to us.” (Jer 42:5) Jesus later shows up in chapter 19, on a white horse, “and He who sat upon it called Faithful and True; and in righteousness He judges and wages war.” (Rev 19:11) God’s promises are included here:

He who sits on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.” And He said, “Write, for *these words are faithful and true.*” (Rev 21:5)<sup>3</sup>

*Beginning of the Creation:* The Head of all things, the first-fruits, the Alpha, literally, the Word of God which began the Creation. The authority of Christ’s title is established as a reminder to the Laodiceans, preparing them for coming words of warning.

### **3:15–16 I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I would that you were cold or hot. So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth.**

The summation of their deeds: You are ambivalent. You are wishy-washy. You neither accept false teaching nor reject it. You don’t completely embrace the Christian faith. You don’t support good nor do you oppose evil. This is a condition of some religious groups today. Denominations have adopted an ecumenical<sup>4</sup> attitude. Their banner phrase is “Judge not, lest ye be judged.” Don’t rebuke anyone for their creeds or beliefs, since we’re all God’s children. Let’s lay aside our doctrinal differences and strive to get along. This philosophy is absolutely contrary to what the bible teaches concerning the need to obey God and be unified in the faith.

Laodicea’s problem was a lack of passion. They had ecclesiastical pretension and resources (“I am rich”), but only from a worldly standpoint. In God’s eyes, they were destitute. Millions place their faith in fancy buildings, expensive ornamentation and high-tech gadgetry, believing that such evidence reveals a church’s true spirit and is proof of God’s blessing. These same folks will drive past a sad little church building, holding a dozen-or-so members and a volunteer preacher, and cluck their tongues sympathetically—“Look at that poor church...they’re not very blessed by God...they must be doing something wrong.”

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<sup>3</sup> See notes on Revelation 22:6 concerning the promise of the New City and those who dwell in it.

<sup>4</sup> The belief that all churches can throw away doctrinal differences and unite as one.

*I wish that you were either cold or hot:* Jesus didn't know what to do with this church.

What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah? For your loyalty is like a morning cloud, and like the dew which goes away early. (Hosea 6:4)

Lukewarm denotes the Laodicean's predisposition towards being irresolute in their devotion to the Lord. Like the children of Ephraim and Judah, Christ was divided as what to do with their on-again-off-again loyalty. They seemed to be "good" Christians but were tangled up in sin.

*I will spit you out of my mouth:* Literally, vomit. "You make me wanna puke, because you think you are a strong church, when in reality, you are spiritually bankrupt!" This is stated in the next verse. Churches tend to lean on a rich variety of "ministries," congregational numbers, parking lot acreage and other such things to gauge their spirituality. They forget that God only looks upon the hearts and intentions of those inside the building. There's nothing wrong with any of it, but they can be the pretty frosting covering a rotting interior.

**3:17 Because you say, "I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing," and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked**

This was sin of the Pharisees, who held up themselves as Abraham's offspring. In God's eyes, however, they were children of Satan. (John 8:33-44) It is the Great Harlot's sin, who said in her heart, "I sit as a queen. I'm not a widow. I won't mourn." (Rev 18:7) It is the sin of presumption concerning one's spiritual condition. I don't need God. I don't need to study the bible. I don't need to go to church. I'm a good person. I am spiritually endowed and have need of nothing. Prior to coming to Christ, this is the attitude of most: I'm not a sinner; I don't need to repent; I do good when I can. The Laodiceans had returned to their previous way of thinking. They rested in the presumption, "once saved, always saved." There is one who pretends to be rich, but has nothing; another pretends to be poor, but has great wealth. (Prov 13:7)

*Rich* and *poor* in scripture are symbolic of spiritual wealth or poverty. Paul spoke of he and his fellow apostles as poor yet making many rich, as having nothing yet possessing all things. (2 Cor 6:10) Christ was rich, yet became poor for our sake, that through His poverty, we may become rich. (2 Cor 8:9) God chose the poor of this world to be rich in faith. (James 2:5)

*Blindness* is portrayed throughout scripture, describing those who fail to see their true spiritual state, being blind to spiritual truth in general.

Be delayed and wait. Blind yourselves and be blind. They become drunk, but not with wine; they stagger, but not with strong drink. For the Lord has poured over you a spirit of deep sleep, He has shut your eyes, the prophets; and He has covered your heads, the seers. ...because this people draw near with their words, and honor Me with their lip service, but they remove their hearts far from me, and their reverence for me consists of tradition learned by rote. (Isa 29:9-13)

*Nakedness* is listed as this church's final condition. Being clothed is a symbol for readiness, or being in a certain condition. Nakedness symbolizes poverty. (Matt 25:36) Joseph accused his brothers of being spies to look at the undefended parts (nakedness) of the land. (Gen 42:9) There

is no creature hidden from His sight, *but all things are open and laid bare* to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do. (Heb 4:13) In speaking of Babylon, God said, “Your nakedness will be uncovered, your shame also will be exposed; I will take vengeance and will not spare a man.” (Isa 47:3) Jerusalem sinned greatly, therefore she has become an unclean thing. All who honored her despise her because they have seen her nakedness; even she herself groans and turns away. Her uncleanness was in her skirts; she did not consider her future; therefore she has fallen astonishingly; she has no comforter. (Lam 1:8–9) When God promised His covenant with Israel, He was to “cover her nakedness.” (Ezek 16:8) The Laodicean church was in a miserable condition of spiritual poverty and in a state of shame before the Lord.

**3:18 I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire, that you may become rich, and white garments, that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and eye salve to anoint your eyes, that you may see.**

Although this church was in bad spiritual shape, all was not lost. Christ offers them a way out of their miserable condition. Scholars would have written volumes on what this church needed for a game plan. But Christ’s simple recipe to reform: faith, righteousness and truth.

*Buy from Me:* In other words, “Let’s make a transaction.” However, Christ always offers such things without cost. “I will give to the one who thirsts from the spring of the water of life without cost.” (Rev 21:6)

*Gold refined by fire:* “...the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.” (1 Pet 1:7) Jesus’ eyes are “flames of fire” (Rev 1:7), which test (discern) a person’s heart.

*White garments:* Spiritual garments cover spiritual shame, and appear five times in Revelation. He who overcomes will be clothed in white garments. (3:4–5) The 24 elders who overcame wear white garments. (4:4) Blessed is the one who stays awake and keeps his garments, *lest he walk about naked and men see his shame.* (16:15) God clothed Isaiah in a garment of salvation. (Isa 61:10) Garments are thus a symbolic portrayal of one’s condition, attitude, or relationship. God wears garments of vengeance. (Isa 59:17) Awake, awake, clothe yourself in your strength, O Zion; clothe yourself in your beautiful garments, O Jerusalem, the holy city. (Isa 52:1) The armor of God that covers the body is the breastplate of righteousness and the girdle of truth. (Eph 6: 13–14)

*Eye salve:* Medicine to help receive sight. Truth’s design is to expose reality, while a lie attempts to cover or hide what is real, thus, the *closed* or *blind* eye. Those who embrace the wisdom of men (1 Cor 2:5) don’t understand they are lost in sin; their eyes are closed. Jesus called the Pharisees “blind guides of the blind.” (Matt 15:14) When Peter asked what the Lord meant, Jesus replied, “Are you *also* lacking in understanding?” Thus, spiritual blindness involves misunderstanding the *meaning* of God’s Word. Memorizing scripture is of little value if its meaning is not grasped. The French philosopher Voltaire memorized the entire bible in order to argue against its tenets with Christians. He died a lost sinner, admitting at the end that he may have been wrong in his assumptions.

Jesus condemned the Jewish religious leaders because they failed to understand the

*principles* of scripture, counting ritualism as more important. (Matt 23:16ff) When the Jews harassed Jesus' disciples for picking grain on the Sabbath, He rebuked them for their lack of understanding the difference between the *letter* of the law and the *spirit* of the law. He told them, "If you had known what this means..." (Matt 12:7) Not only did they fail to understand the intent of scripture, but the false view of their own spiritual condition caused their blindness. This is why Jesus told them, "If you were blind, you would have no sin; but now you say, 'We see.' Therefore your sin remains." (John 9:41)

### **3:19 Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; be zealous therefore, and repent.**

You have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor faint when you are reprov'd by Him; for those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives." It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. (Heb 12:5–8)

*Be zealous, therefore:* Here is the sin of this church—they lacked zeal; they were indifferent, dispassionate, and comfortable. The word *therefore* infers from the previous verses, and makes a summary of their condition. Their lack of faith and understanding, coupled with unrighteous behavior is summed up as, "because of the things just mentioned, you need to have zeal; you need to have enthusiasm." Unlike the Philippian church, who waited eagerly for their Savior. (Phil 3:20), the Laodiceans were indifferent in their relationship to the Lord. They were like those in prison, scratching off the days of their existence on a cell wall, viewing with equal disparity the many marks of the past and the looming blank wall before them. They had reached a state of somnolence and apathy.

This condition is prevalent today in congregations. Members "worship" once a week (or once a year) to renew their spiritual "fire insurance" policies, while believing themselves to be in good standing with God. They don't need bible study nor care about the person sitting next to them. Some scratch off the Sundays, checking off the squares of the required worship items—pray, sing, tithe, take the Lord's Supper, and hear a sermon—*done!* In their mind, they think themselves righteous because they've fulfilled an obligation distilled from some scriptural prescription. There is no zeal for what they are *supposed* to be—a Spirit-filled believer giving thanks to God for saving their wretched, worthless souls—and *telling others about it!* Like the Pharisees, they believe that ritualistic worship makes them righteous, when in fact, God hates it. (Isa 1:14; Amos 5:21–23; Hosea 6:6)

### **3:20 Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him, and will dine with him, and he with Me.**

In these few words, Christ's relationship to sinners is described. A thousand volumes of theological texts could not sum it up better than this one simple sentence.

*I stand, I knock, I speak:* Christ waits patiently, like a persistent salesman who won't go away. The knock on the door is the signal to the sinner's heart, an inner warning that something needs attending to. It's the tug at one's conscience—the situation is grim. The voice follows the

knock. The knock is enigmatic, a general *sense* of something. The sinner may hope the salesman just goes away. He doesn't want to be bothered. He knows in his gut what the man at the door is trying to sell. The voice, however, clarifies the call to attention. Salvation and rescue are being announced. The foolish person tunes out such signals, focusing their attention on the world. The wise person gets up and moves to answer the call. They realize someone's at the door offering something they need.

It's important to note the context here: Jesus is speaking to *Christians*—standing members in the church of Christ. Although preachers use this verse to invite lost sinners, it's directed at those already in the Body.

*I will come in to him, and commune with him, and he with Me:* The word enters the heart and a change is invoked by the power of the Holy Spirit. If any man is *in Christ*, he is a new creature, the old things have passed away, behold, new things have come. (2 Cor 5:17) All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. (Gal 3:27) The concept of "asking Jesus into your heart" is based on Revelation 3:20. However, it is grossly misapplied. Christ's standing, knocking and speaking are elliptical expressions. Anyone *hearing* the Lord's words responds by *opening* and *communing* with the Lord. Much more is involved than a transaction arbitrated by some guy in a suit helping you through the Sinner's Prayer.

### **3:21 He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.**

Two thrones are hinted at here: the Father's throne, which Jesus sits on, and His throne, which we sit on. Jesus sits *with* His Father, and we sit *with* Jesus. Since Jesus sits *with* the Father, and we sit *with* Jesus, the inference is to one throne, or a single point of authority.

A throne was the chair of a king. It is a symbol of royal government and refers to the king's role as a judge. (Psa 122:5; Isa 16:5) Since God alone is the true King, His throne points to His royal authority (Psa 11:4; 45:6), especially to that as Judge. (Psa 9:4, 7) This image of God's throne and center of authority is carried over into the NT. (Acts 7:49; Rev 4:2) In Revelation, God's royal authority is given to Jesus, the heir to David's throne. (Luke 1:32; Acts 2:30)

Although the throne implies rule and authority, there is also a throne of mercy, as shown in the Ark of the Covenant. It was from this throne that God contracted His covenant with Israel:

You shall put the mercy seat on top of the ark, and in the ark you shall put the testimony which I shall give to you. *There I will meet with you;* and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim, which are upon the ark of the testimony, I will speak to you about all that I will give you in commandment for the sons of Israel. (Exo 25:21–22)

Jesus is promising the right to sit with Him on His throne to those who overcome. However, a great multitude of saved stand *before* the throne from every nation, tribe, tongue and people. (7:9) Sitting and standing denote different roles or attitudes. *Standing* signifies the ministry between Christ and church, which is *ongoing* and *unfinished*. (Heb 10:11) *Sitting* implies a finished work. He who overcomes will *sit* and *rest*. After Jesus finished His earthly ministry, He *sat down* with the Father. He was finished with His work. When we finish our earthly sojourn, we too will sit down with Him, our walk having been finished.

To sit down with Christ and share the administration of his kingdom was an eschatological promise. It was a promise extended to both the church *ad requiem* (“at rest”) and the church temporal. The church temporal would reign with Christ on earth (Rev. 1:6; 2:26,27; 5:10; cf. Matt. 19:28); the church *ad requiem* would reign with Christ in the hereafter. (Rev. 2:10; II Tim. 4:8) To reign with Christ was one of the future expectations the first century church eagerly awaited. (II Tim. 2:12) Although the kingdom was given to Christ as a *matter of law* upon his ascension and coronation (Acts 2:33; Heb. 1:13; cf. Dan. 7:13), it remained for him to vanquish his enemies as a *matter of fact*. When all enemies were put under his feet (I Cor. 15:25; Heb. 2:8), then the kingdom would no longer be in *futuro*, but in possession (Dan. 7:22; Matt. 25:34), and the saints would reign with Christ. If Christ has not come, then the saints do not yet reign, and have not yet been redeemed, adopted, or manifested. If Christ has not come, then we are yet servants and not sons. (Rom. 8:23; Gal. 4:1.2) But Christ is come and the church today enjoys the fullness of blessings in Christ.<sup>5</sup>

In his speech to the Jewish leaders, Stephen said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man *standing* at the right hand of God.” (Acts 7:56) The standing signified Christ ministering as High Priest, which agitated the Jews immensely. (Acts 7:57) There was no way they were going to accept the crucified Galilean as Supreme Intercessor between them and God. After all, it was they who had crucified the man. Yet Jesus had told the High Priest, “Hereafter you shall see the Son of Man *sitting* at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven.” (Matt 26:64) As a Jewish religious leader, Caiaphas would have immediately understood Jesus’ meaning: Sitting at the right hand of power implied that the work of the anticipated Messiah was done, and that the Son of Man was in the position of absolute authority and judgment.

He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power. *When He had made purification of sins, He sat down* at the right hand of the Majesty on high. (Heb 1:3)

He, *having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, sat down* at the right hand of God, waiting from that time onward until His enemies be made a footstool for His feet. (Heb 10:12–13)

Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, *and has sat down* at the right hand of the throne of God. (Heb 12:1–2)

Jesus sat (completed His work) when He made purification for sins. Once the sacrifice had been made, there was no longer any need to continue standing. It is up to each person to accept the sacrifice *already given*. In a sense, as long as a person lives, Christ *stands*, waiting to be their Savior. If they reject that knock and voice at the door, they will see Christ sitting as their Judge, not standing as their Savior.

From another perspective, the High Priest *stood* as mediator between God and man (Heb 10:11), while Jesus *sits* to rule and judge the world. The overcoming Christian sitting with Christ shows our partaking with Him in judgment.

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<sup>5</sup> *The Consummation of the Ages*, p. 120

Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? Do you not know that we shall judge angels? (1 Cor 6:2–3)

Unlike the other six churches, the Laodiceans are given the grandest description of heavenly reward, that of sitting with Christ on His seat of power. The church in the worst spiritual condition is made the greatest promise.

**3:22 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”**

See notes on 2:7.

NOTES CONCERNING THE 7 CHURCHES

Here is what each of the seven churches seem to represent:

- Ephesus: Fallen/Works-Oriented
- Smyrna: Faithful
- Pergamum: Attacks from outside the church
- Thyatira: Attacks from inside the church
- Sardis: Spiritually Dead
- Philadelphia: Perfect/Complete/Mature
- Laodicea: Indifferent/Without Passion

Note that Jesus is described to the first three churches as the church’s Ruler or Head. He is the Resurrected One, and Wielder of the Word of God. His relationship to the *church* is emphasized. To the latter four churches, His relationship to *God* is emphasized. He is the Son of God to Thyatira, the Spirit of God to Sardis, the Holy and True One to Philadelphia, and the Beginning of God’s Creation to the Laodiceans.

Also note that to the first three churches, the promises are given *after* the statement, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” To the latter four churches, the promises are given *before* the statement.

These two differences concern the reasons for Christ’s coming (or *presence*, as the word is more accurately translated). For example, His coming to Ephesus and Pergamum was to carry out some form of judgment: Ephesus would have its truth removed while Pergamum would be “slain” with Truth. This was Christ’s coming to *them*. To the unrepentant Jews, His coming would be something entirely different.

Some congregations were warned of *specific* comings while others are *non-specific*:

|              |                                    |          |
|--------------|------------------------------------|----------|
| Ephesus      | Jesus coming to remove their light | Specific |
| Pergamum     | Jesus coming quickly to make war   | Specific |
| Thyatira     | Hold fast until He came            | Generic  |
| Sardis       | An unknown time when He would come | Generic  |
| Philadelphia | Jesus coming quickly—hold on tight | Generic  |

The two notable differences are Smyrna and Laodicea, where the context suggests that Christians in Smyrna would be killed (tribulation, suffering, imprisonment, testing—*be faithful til death*. 2:9, 10). Therefore, Christ's coming was not part of Smyrna's counsel. Laodicea, on the other hand, did not have to concern themselves with Jesus' coming—He was already standing at their door. *He had already come*, in other words. This was because of their dire spiritual predicament.

The letters to the seven churches show the kingdom of God as it existed in its infancy on the earth. Having God's written revelation and will in the NT, we would expect today's churches to be in better spiritual shape. Unfortunately, today's congregations have the same problems those in John's day faced. We may not have to deal with eating meat sacrificed to idols and government persecution, yet worldly lifestyles, spiritual indifference, and false doctrines are alive and well today. This is why the letters are here—to get Christians to recognize that what we face today are the same old problems all Christians have faced.