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# THE REVELATION OF JESUS CHRIST

## LESSON 3 – The Things Which Are - Part 2

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### LESSON OBJECTIVE

The goal of this lesson is to understand the interpretation of the last three of the seven letters to the seven churches in their proper cultural and historical contexts, and to consider the resulting theological implications and personal applications.

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### GENERAL OUTLINE OF THE SEVEN LETTERS

- A. For the most part, the letters present the following seven-part organization
    - i. Each letter is opened with an address
    - ii. Citation of certain attributes of Jesus Christ (generally alluding back to chapter 1)
    - iii. An assertion of complete knowledge of the people addressed
    - iv. A description of the overall state of the church addressed (this can include praise, promise, censure, or warning)
    - v. A promise of the Lord's return
    - vi. A command to hear (i.e., listen and respond)
    - vii. A promise to the overcomers
  - B. The last two elements are reversed in the last four letters
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### SARDIS

#### Cultural and historical background

- i. Situated on one of a series of hills that formed a transition from the lower elevation of the Hermus plain to the higher elevation of Mount Tmolus, each hill is shaped as a small elongated plateau with steep sides
- ii. Sardis was almost impregnable to invaders, located on the top of a mountain
- iii. City founded around 1200 B.C. as the capital of Lydia, and as it grew, the elevated portion of the city on the plateau became the "old city" while the city expanded to the west and north of the "old city"
- iv. In 549 B.C., King Croesus of Lydia attacked King Cyrus of Persia and then fled back to Sardis; believing he was secure in the impregnable acropolis he slept while the Persians scaled the steep walls one by one; Croesus' army only protected the one normal entrance to the city, not the steep walls
- v. Was a rich city, hence the expression "as rich as Croesus"
- vi. Was noted for its carelessness, due to its wealth and location
- vii. Was known for its soft, easy life; in fact, Cyrus intentionally undertook a program of softening the men, playing down the military

- viii. History repeated itself in 195 B.C. when Antiochus the Great conquered Sardis, entering the city by climbing while the defenders only guarded the one known approach, the isthmus of land connected to Mount Tmolus on the south
- ix. In A.D. 17, the city was damaged by an earthquake and the Roman Emperor Tiberius contributed money to its rebuilding; the city responded by building a temple in his honor and minting coins with his likeness
- x. Under Roman rule, the old city ceased being used and the town moved about 5 miles away and became known as Saliki
- xi. The city was close to a junction of Roman roads and became a trade center, primarily for woolen goods (including dyed wools)
- xii. The imperial cult was prominent under Roman rule, but the chief religion was Anatolian, a worship of the forces of nature, especially the way nature is renewed
- xiii. People were preoccupied with death and immortality
- xiv. Patron deity of the city was Cybele, an Anatolian goddess also known as Artemis; remains of the temple to Cybele are still in the old city today
- xv. Special emphasis placed on ability of the deities to restore the dead, which was connected with certain hot springs about 2 miles from the city
- xvi. The city's splendor was in the past (and the same is true for the church there) when the old city stood

## Notes on Revelation 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."

Notice the description of Jesus that relates back to Chapter 1. He has the seven spirits of God (the Holy Spirit) and the seven stars, and for this reason he has intimate knowledge of the church at Sardis, including its works. The seven spirits refers to the fullness of the Holy Spirit and his ministry. (Isaiah 11:2) Jesus holds the Holy Spirit and can therefore pour forth the Holy Spirit on his people. (Acts 2:33) Jesus also holds the seven stars or messengers, which indicates that if there is going to be change in Sardis, it is going to start with the leadership. John emphasizes this because the church at Sardis is a "has been" church that is now dead; it still has a name that implies it is a living church, but in reality it's works indicate that it is nearly dead. This church will receive no commendation. Death always carries the idea of separation from something, not cessation of existence. Here, it is used as a separation from usefulness. In other words, the church is useless in that it is not fulfilling its designed purpose. (See, e.g., Romans 4:19, James 2:17 (faith that is dead, that is, useless at the bema seat of Christ because it does not produce good works)) This church is experiencing death, harboring on uselessness. Their reputation for being alive is based on being busy and giving a certain appearance, not on their true spiritual condition.

**3:2** "Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God."

Even what remains (works) is about to die, that is, become useless for its designed purpose. Jesus tells them to be watchful and strengthen that which remains. They need to wake up to what is going on around them. It is as if the church is dying out but because of

their lack of discernment, the church members do not know it. They do not see issues, sin, and opportunities; they are blind to spiritual truth. They are warned to take heed and strengthen that which remains. We are not told specifically where they have failed, but it involves their works, which are not perfect or complete.

**3:3** "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."

It is not the case that the church members do not know what is right. They are reminded to go back to the original teachings given them, and how they received it with joy, and repent, that is, they need to change their thinking about how they are living and bring their lives back in line with the original teaching they received and appropriate works should evidence their repentance. If they do not repent, temporal judgment will come without announcement. We have several examples in the Bible of God disciplining his children with affliction and even death. (Acts 5:1-11; 1 Corinthians 11:30)

**3:4** "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."

There is a sin problem in the church; people are living in a manner inconsistent with their positional righteousness in Christ. Only a few remaining members have abstained from the sin, symbolized here by keeping their garments white. They are the ones that will enjoy intimate fellowship walking with Jesus; this has nothing to do with salvation, but fellowship. (Revelation 19:7-8, the white garment is the righteous acts of the Saints)

**3:5** "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."

Note in 1 John 5:4-5 that the term "overcomer" refers to all Christians. Overcomer comes from the Greek word *nikao*, meaning to conquer or have victory over (Nike shoes takes their name from this word; it does not mean "just do it"). This verse is not teaching that works earn salvation. It is a statement of assurance of salvation, that all overcomers will receive white raiment and that there is no risk of their names being removed from the Book of Life. (John 10:27-28) Although salvation is assured, the level of intimacy of the fellowship is not (see the previous verse). Jesus will acknowledge them before His Father. (Matthew 10:32)

**3:6** "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches."

Jesus ends the letter by saying listen and do it. Note that the "churches" are to listen, indicating that although each of seven churches is specifically addressed, the messages are intended to be studied by and have application to other churches.

## Discussion questions

- i. How do we know whether our church is dead or alive?
- ii. How do I know whether I am experiencing life or experiencing death?
- iii. If you were to give a description title for the church at Sardis, what would it be? The church of \_\_\_\_\_.

## PHILADELPHIA

### Cultural and historical background

- i. This is the city of “brotherly love,” now known as Alasehir
- ii. It was originally in Lydia about 25 miles southeast of Sardis
- iii. It was located in the valley of the Cogamis River, a tributary of the Hermus, and was founded around 140 B.C.
- iv. It was built along an important trade route that went through this valley and also served as the Roman postal route during the 1<sup>st</sup> century
- v. City was very defensible as it was on a broad hill that sloped from the river valley up toward Mount Tmolus on the south and east
- vi. The purpose of the town was the spread of Hellenism (Greek language and culture) to the area and eastward; by A.D. 19 the Lydian language disappeared and was replaced with Greek
- vii. The city was on the edge of the Katakekaumene (sometimes spelled Catacecaumene, which means “I burn down”), an area with active volcanoes and frequent earthquakes
- viii. In A.D. 17, an earthquake destroyed the 12 cities in the Lydian Valley, including Sardis and Philadelphia; the land never settled and for years there were tremors and the people lived in constant fear of another big earthquake
- ix. Emperor Tiberius contributed money to the rebuilding efforts; in addition to contributions to building a monument to Rome, the people established the cult of Germanicus (named after Tiberius’ adopted son and heir)
- x. The city name was changed to Neokaisareia (sometimes spelled Neocaesarea, meaning “new Caesar”), but the name disappeared after 25 or 30 years
- xi. During the reign of Vespasian (A.D. 70-79), it took the name Flavia, but continued to also be called Philadelphia
- xii. Due to a famine in A.D. 92, Domitian issued an edict that half the vineyards be cut down and no new ones replanted; instead they were to plant corn even though they could not make as much money doing so

### Notes on Revelation 3:7-13

**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;"

Jesus is said to be the one who is holy, which means that Jesus is God (for only God is holy). Jesus is not merely a god, or divine, but is God. Jesus is “true,” that is, he is genuine, the real article in a world of pretenders and counterfeits. Jesus also holds the key of David, a reference to Isaiah 22:22. Jesus holds the key (of entrance) to the Kingdom and only he can open the door to it. There are not other roads to salvation.

**3:8** "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."

That Jesus knows their works is a complement here. The open door that no one can shut is a ministry opportunity for them. Just as the city was founded as a missionary city for the

Greek language and culture, and was successful at it, this church is a missionary church that is successful at it.

**3:9** "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."

Note that we would normally find the "complaint" here, but we do not; this church and the one at Smyrna have no rebuke from Jesus. Their Jewish persecutors (see Revelation 2:9, unsaved Jews) will be made to bow down (translated "worship") before them. This is irony, as most Jews expected a time when Gentiles would bow down to them. (Isaiah 45:14, 60:14; Zechariah 8:22-23) Because they have rejected Jesus as Messiah, they will bow down. (Philippians 2:11)

**3:10** "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."

They will be kept from the "hour of temptation." By "temptation," it is meant "testing." This refers to the tribulation or Daniel's 70<sup>th</sup> week. Jesus does not say that they are to be kept from tribulation, but the hour or time of tribulation. They will be kept from the entire 7-year period; this is further indication of a pre-tribulational rapture of all Christians (see Revelation 3:13, this message is for all the churches).

**3:11** "Behold, I come quickly: hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown."

By coming "quickly," Jesus does not mean soon but suddenly. Holding fast means remaining faithful, which will result in getting a crown of reward. (see 1 Corinthians 3:9-15; 2 Corinthians 5:10) If a person does not remain faithful, God will raise another to accomplish his will and that person will get the crown. We see confirmation elsewhere that one can lose rewards. (2 John 8)

**3:12** "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."

The overcomer (any believer) will be a pillar, that is, unshakeable. This is particularly encouraging to a people fearful of earthquakes. Moreover, they will not have to go out anymore. This is a reference to the Sabbath, but rather than being one day in seven, it is permanent rest in the Lord (remember, in the Old Testament, the Israelites had to go out and gather manna six days of the week, but on the seventh day were forbidden to do so). (See Hebrews 4:9)

**3:13** "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches."

Jesus ends the letter by saying listen and do it. Note that the "churches" are to listen, indicating that although each of seven churches is specifically addressed, the messages are intended to be studied by and have application to other churches.

## Discussion questions

- i. Does the Bible teach anywhere that we are to make life decisions based on our perception that God has opened or closed a door?
  - ii. What is it about this church that makes it particularly commendable?
  - iii. If you were to give a description title for the church at Philadelphia, what would it be? The church of \_\_\_\_\_.
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## LAODICEA

### Cultural and historical background

- i. Laodicea means “the rule of the people,” indicating a democracy
- ii. Paul knew of the church but had not visited it personally (Colossians 2:1) during his first Roman imprisonment
- iii. Located about 40 miles southeast of Philadelphia, in the Lycus Valley at an important juncture on a major Roman highway that began at Ephesus
- iv. Is located about 10 miles west of Colosse and 6 miles south of Hierapolis
- v. City was defensible because of the surrounding mountains, but was dependent on neighboring cities for water
- vi. Main highway across Asia Minor went through Laodicea, and a second highway from Pergamum to Perga went through Laodicea
- vii. Probably founded by Antiochus II (261-46 B.C.) and named for his wife, Laodice
- viii. Was a great commercial and financial center because of its location (on the crossroads)
- ix. Major manufacturing product was a soft, glossy black wool that was made into garments
- x. Also, a famous school of medicine was located there; the physicians followed the teachings of Hierophilus (350-250 B.C.) and developed a number of medicines, including a well-known medicine applied to the eyes
- xi. Near the city were famous mineral springs
- xii. The temple of Men Karous (the god of the valley) was located there
- xiii. After a great earthquake in A.D. 60, the Romans did not offer any money for rebuilding, probably because Laodicea had such great wealth it did not need it; instead Laodicea rebuilt itself and contributed to the other cities damaged
- xiv. Paul was prohibited from entering Asia in about A.D. 50 (Acts 16:6), but reached Ephesus in A.D. 52 and while there, Epaphras evangelized the Lycus Valley, primarily Laodicea (Colossians 1:6-7)

### Notes on Revelation 3:14-22

**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;"

Jesus is called the “Amen.” The term means “so be it” or “may it be true” and is a title God used for himself. (see Isaiah 65:16, the God of “truth,” that is, the God of Amen) Thus, Jesus is being designated as God and as a keeper of the promises, a God of Amen, a God of yes. (2 Corinthians 1:18-20) Jesus is the Amen of God, confirming and fulfilling the

promises. Jesus is the Amen and the faithful and true witness, because that is what this failing church needed. Jesus is the "beginning of the creation of God," in the sense that he (Jesus) inaugurated it. (See John 1:3)

**3:15** "I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot."

We would expect a commendation here, but there is none. Indeed, this church receives the harshest commendation of the seven. This is the lukewarm church. This is a reference to their mineral waters, which can only be drunk hot or cold, but lukewarm mineral water will cause one to vomit because of the foul taste and odor of the water. This probably pictures a church that will only do right when it does not inconvenience. Jesus would prefer the church to be cold than lukewarm, probably because a cold church is more likely to bring about some people that will effect change, whereas in the lukewarm church everyone becomes complacent and unchanging, content with their lukewarmness. Revival comes to the cold, not the lukewarm.

**3:16** "So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth."

Jesus does not have fellowship with the lukewarm.

**3:17** "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:"

They believe they are self-sufficient, but they are not. This is reflected in their history when they financed the rebuilding of the city after the earthquake rather than receiving funds from the Roman government. They believe they are blessed because of their physical possessions, but the reality is they are spiritually impoverished and spiritually blind, thus unable to recognize their own impoverishment. They were not always lukewarm, they started on fire but with time they became lukewarm.

**3:18** "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."

Jesus tells them to get real gold, spiritual gold, for this is a wealth in terms of a relationship with God. They also need to buy white garments (contrasted with the black garments made in the city); these garments represent righteous acts. They also need eye salve so their spiritual eyes can see (again, a reference to a product the city was known for). God offers them real gold, real clothes, and real medicine. (See Isaiah 55:1-2)

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

The word for "love" here is *phileo*, not *agape*. The former is a love of feeling, whereas *agape* is volitional love. Nowhere in the Bible does it say that God loves (*phileo*) the unsaved, though God loves (*agape*) the unsaved. Here, in reference to saved people, we read that God loves (*phileo*) them, he has strong emotional feelings toward them. Because of those feelings, he will discipline and train them. The goal of the training is their repentance, a change of thinking that will result in good works.

**3:20** "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."

This is not a salvation verse, but a fellowship verse. If you want to be on fire, open the door to fellowship. All of the church programs in the world will not accomplish repentance and enthusiasm for God if the individuals in the church leave Jesus standing at the door knocking. The reference to any man hearing his voice indicates that although Jesus is knocking, many people do not hear him. Their spiritual senses are dulled from disuse.

**3:21** "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."

The thrones were often in the form of a long sofa so that more than one could be seated at it. The invitation here is for all the overcomers to sit with Jesus. Recall, the overcomers are not super-Christians, just Christians.

**3:22** "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches."

Jesus ends the letter by saying listen and do it. Note that the "churches" are to listen, indicating that although each of seven churches is specifically addressed, the messages are intended to be studied by and have application to other churches.

## Discussion questions

- i. How can you buy real gold from Jesus?
- ii. What does it mean that the people in Laodicea could not see or were spiritually blind (i.e., explain what spiritual blindness means in the day-to-day life of the believer in practical terms)?
- iii. If you were to give a description title for the church at Laodicea, what would it be? The church of \_\_\_\_\_.

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## COURSE BIBLIOGRAPHY

Henry M. Morris, *The Revelation Record*, Tyndale House Publishers (1983)

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## RECOMMENDATION

It is highly recommended that each person taking this course read chapter 3 for this lesson and chapters 4 and 5 for next week in Henry M. Morris' commentary.