

REVELATION 3

I. BKGRD. John writes this epistle from exile on Patmos, a roughly horseshoe-shaped rock-quarry island about 6 mi. wide and 10 mi. long, approximately 25 miles off the coast of Asia Minor, due west of Miletus. Patmos provided an ideal place of confinement for political prisoners.

The epistle is addressed to 7 churches located on a major travel route connecting population centers of Asia Minor (Turkey). Dwelling amid the immorality of secular religions, the squalor of slavery with its dehumanizing effects, the delusion of the mystery religions, and the persecutions by the Jews and the emperor, the fledgling Christian assemblies of the 7 Asian cities constantly stood in jeopardy.

There are seven similarities among the seven letters:

1. In each, Christ knows their works;
2. Each letter includes a promise to those who overcome;
3. Each gives an exhortation to its hearers;
4. Ea. has a particular description of Christ relevant to that message/church
5. Each letter (exc. that to Laodicea) has a commendation;
6. Ea. (exc. Smyrna and Philadelphia) contains a rebuke;
7. Ea. an exhorting, yet encouraging promise.

Chapter 3 contains the last three letters to the seven churches: Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.

II. TEXT

vv. 1-6: Sardis – 500 years before John wrote this letter, Sardis (modern Sart, Turkey) was one of the richest and most powerful cities in the world. Located some 35 mi. SE of Thyatira and 40 mi. inland from the Aegean Sea, the city was the ancient capitol of Lydia. It degenerated morally and ethically and was conquered by Cyrus of Persia, then by Alexander the Great, and finally leveled by an earthquake in 17 AD. Later, it was rebuilt by Tiberius Caesar.

Sardis was still relatively important, but no where near like it was in its heyday. The people tended to live in the past and the church there was guilty of the same backward look. Sardis was noted far and wide for its idolatrous worship of CYBELE (pronounced *sibel-LEE*), the goddess of nature in Asia Minor.

v. 1a Christ describes Himself as the One who has the “**seven spirits**,” (7 being the number of perfection and/or completion) or “seven-fold Spirit,” a ref. to the Holy Spirit. He is the Spirit of the seven churches; i.e., there is the one Holy Spirit with seven manifestations here to the seven churches. Cf. also Isa. 11:2 for a 7-fold description of the H.S.:

“The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him-- the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD...”

It's significant that Christ says He has the Spirit but no evidence of THEM having the Spirit! The ministry of the Holy Spirit is to empower, teach, guide and equip believers for Christian living – this was tragically missing at the church at Sardis. The “dead church” label is a sure giveaway of its need for the *filling* ministry of the Holy Spirit!

Jesus holds the “**7 stars**” (1:16,20), the messengers/ministers of their responsibility to preach and teach the absolute necessity of walking in the Spirit! (cf. Gal. 5:22ff).

The church at Sardis was living on moth-eaten reputation; they once had the fire and zeal of new converts, but they were now existing in the “flesh,” which is the meaning of the word “dead” in v. 1. No believer can live on past victories; complacency and a lack of vision always lead to decay . . .

v. 3 "Come like a thief..."

1. NOT a ref. to the 2nd coming because here its conditional upon the church's repentance;
2. BUT...cf. Mt. 24:42,44 *"Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come....So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him."*

v. 4 The Promise: the believer will walk with Jesus dressed in **"white"** (cf. Rev. 3:4-5,18; 6:2,11; 7:9,13,14; 19:11-14). Second, their name will remain the Book of Life; third, acknowledgement before the Father (v. 5).

Prophetic Application: The Protestant Reformation and post-reformation era (1517 – 1750 AD.). Reformed, but not revived. Essential doctrines were reclaimed (justified by faith alone, *sola scriptura*, etc.) but rituals and traditions still remained. Complacency and a new brand of legalism set in and few tasted the power of the Holy Spirit for Christian living. If you don't believe its dead, go to Europe today and notice the huge cathedrals filled with tourists, not worshipers; its definitely post-Christian. Protestantism in Europe is all but dead today.

vv. 7-13 (the 6th letter) **Philadelphia** – located about 30 mi. SE of Sardis; was toppled by the same earthquake that leveled Sardis in 17 AD. Rebuilt by Tiberius Caesar, the great builder of cities. A city of commercial importance as it was located on a major trading route leading to the central plateau of Asia. Philadelphia was in the middle of a huge vineyard district and had a thriving wine business. *Bacchus*, the god of wine, had many devotees there; as you can imagine, drunkenness was a chronic social problem. The large Jewish population there was responsible for much of the persecution against the Church. Geographically, the city was the gateway to the high central plateau of the province of Asia in Asia Minor.

Philadelphia is the faithful remnant, those that cling to the Word of God; those that study the Word of God together Sunday mornings!

v. 7 Jesus' self-description: "holy and true" (*"I Am the Way, the Truth and the Life..."* Jn. 14:6).

"He who holds the key of David" – Jesus is the rightful heir to David's throne inasmuch as He is the descendent of David genealogically as well as the Messiah. The Davidic Covenant promised eternal blessings through David's greater son, the Messiah – which will be fulfilled in Jesus Himself. The description goes back not to ch. 1 like the other descriptions, but all the way back to Isa. 22 (vv. 21f prophecy concerning Messiah: *"I will clothe him with your robe and fasten your sash around him and hand your authority over to him. He will be a father to those who live in Jerusalem and to the house of Judah. I will place on his shoulder the key to the house of David; what he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open."* Jesus - the Gateway! The Door...the **"Key."** The Giver of Heavenly opportunities; if He closes the door, don't even look for a window (like the Dallas Holmes popular song encouraged)!

v. 8 "I know (*oida*; Latin: *video*: I see; I perceive) **your deeds"** – comforting to faithful and hard-working Christians; intimidating to the half-hearted and lukewarm. Their evangelism and perseverance were praised.

The **"open door"** is one of evangelistic opportunity: Paul said in 1 Cor. 16:8f *"But I will stay on at Ephesus until Pentecost, because a great door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many who oppose me."*

These believers were smart enough to realize that they had but a **"little strength,"** so they had to rely on Christ to open the way; to miraculously open doors of opportunity to share their faith; they had to depend on Christ alone to open and close doors as HE chose! No "super-saints" here! We're just common folks ministering to the folks that come. Even a church of 25,000 in Colorado Springs would just barely touch the county of El Paso (550,000 in the greater metro area); less than 1 in 20 reached!

v. 9 Remember Jesus' scathing rebuke of the religious leaders in John 8:44ff? *"You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies. Yet because I tell the truth, you do not believe me! Can any of you prove me guilty of sin? If I am telling the truth, why don't you believe me? He who belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God."*

Someday the Jews will confess that Jesus is Messiah and Lord (cf. Rom. 11:25f; Zec. 12:10; Phil. 2:9-11).

There's not a hint of rebuke for this church! What's say we BE LIKE THEM!

v. 10 Most of this letter is composed of promises; over 7,000 promises in Scripture! Some very important ones in this letter: first, the "open door of opportunity;" they must open their minds to the Truth, then He will open their hearts! The greatest promise given to any of the seven churches is found here: to be kept OUT OF **"hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth."** Jerusalem fell in 70 AD., thus this cannot refer to that event; it awaits future fulfillment.

The Greek preposition used here is CRITICAL! Remember, *koine* Greek is the most precise language mankind has ever come up with. The NIV translates it **"I will also keep you from the hour of trial"** – "from" would accurately translate the Greek preposition *apo*; but that is NOT the preposition used here. Some who believe that the Church will in some sense or degree go THROUGH the Great Tribulation would like to see it translated **"be kept safe THROUGH..."** requiring the Greek preposition *dia*. Problem: that is NOT the preposition used here. What IS used is *ek*, which has ONE and ONLY ONE meaning in Greek: OUT OF! The Church will be kept OUT OF, not safe through or from the Great Tribulation; we will be physically removed prior to the judgments of God being poured out as described in chs. 6-19.

The judgment is for those that **"live on the earth"** – in Rev. 13:8 *"And all that dwell upon the earth shall worship him, whose names are not written in the book of life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world"* (KJV). Cf. also they that dwell upon the earth or similar in 6:10; 8:13; 11:10; 17:8. These people are unquestionably men and women that have rejected Jesus Christ as Lord of their lives; they ARE NOT SAVED!

This promise reaffirms the promise of 1 Thess. 4:17 and 1 Cor. 15:51ff that the faithful Church will be physically removed from this planet before the global judgments of Rev. 6-19 ensue. HALLELUJAH!

v. 11 The exhortation: HOLD ON!

v. 12 The promise to **"him who overcomes"** is found in all seven of the letters (1:7,11,17,26; 3:5,12,21). The root is *nikao*: to subdue (lit. or fig.):--conquer, overcome, prevail, gain the victory.

"New name" to be given: like Abram (Abraham), Sarai (Sara), Jacob (Israel), Peter (Simon), Paul (Saul).

Prophetic Application: 1750 – 1970: the great missionary era of the church: The China Inland Mission, the Student Volunteer Movement, Salvation Army. During this period the Church sensed its need for revival; God sent the Wesleys, Geo. Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, Chas. Finney, Chas. Haddon Spurgeon, D.L. Moody and many others across American and England. Every Home for Christ (1948), Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (1950), Campus Crusade for Christ (1951), Youth With a Mission (YWAM, 1960), birth of Calvary Chapels (1965), Vineyards and the modern non-denominational church growth movement.

vv. 14-21 Laodicea: Compromise and Apostasy – Laodicea was an extremely wealthy banking center about 40 mi. E of Ephesus. It was noted for its banking establishments, textile industry and medical school and its healing eye ointment. The city was notable for its preoccupation with entertainment and luxury: it had a huge public race track (chariots races; hippodrome, not coliseum or NASCAR...), three lavish theatres, one of which was half again the size of a football arena! Despite its wealth and renown Laodicea had a civil engineering problem shared with L.A. and Colo. Spgs. : a plentiful domestic water supply of good quality. Several sources were tapped - main supply was an aqueduct from Heirapolis to the N., bringing tepid, soda-laden water from the resort town famous for its natural hot mineral springs. All of these characteristics are referred to by Jesus in the letter!

v. 14 Jesus describes Himself as the “**Amen**” which means “let it be so” or “I believe” and is usually spoken in response to some truth or promise of God. This affirmation was sadly lacking in the church...

Sadly, there is not ONE WORD OF COMMENDATION for this church!

v. 15 Most of this letter is a severe divine denunciation.

v. 16 Laodicea had a problem with its water supply: piped in from Heirapolis, it was lukewarm and caustic.

“**Spit you out of my mouth**” is lit. “vomit.”

v. 17 Their diagnosis of their spiritual condition and Christ’s was VERY different! Usually is The church is rebuked for its focus on material wealth (and too little on spiritual health) as the criteria for SUCCESS. They had accumulated properties, buildings and opulent appointments, large salaries, budgets and staff but neglected the spiritual things of REAL value.

v. 18 Note the contrast between THEIR gold and Jesus’; THEIR clothes and His; THEIR eye salve and that which He administers.

“**White clothes**” – cf. 3:5 Sardis “dressed in white,” 4:4 “dressed in white,” Rev. 19:7-8, 14.

Laodicea took pride in 3 things:

1. Financial wealth, prosperity - refused Senate help after the earthquake of 60 AD.
2. Extensive textile industry. Lycus valley>>glossy BLACK wool>>black cloaks, carpets.
3. Famous for the eye salve produced by its medical school>>powdered collyrium, eye salve.

In other words, they had health, wealth and prosperity! That’s why that teaching is so wrong in the Church today! The things which kept Laodicea from the grace of God are the same things that some in the Church today tout as God’s will for all of us to claim! Notice that Jesus still loved them: “Those whom I love, I discipline” (3:19). They were a part of His Church; lukewarm believers in view here.

Prophetic Application: 1970 – present. The birth of “higher criticism,” “de-mythologizing” the historical Jesus, pre-occupation with “success,” materialism, budgets and size of staff, “membership” bragging rights, etc. More concerned with comfort than consecration; more concerned with material wealth than spiritual health; more concerned with feeling better about themselves than confronted with the need for personal holiness.

III. SUMMARY / APPLICATION / RESPONSE

Two churches VERY BAD (Sardis and Laodicea); one VERY GOOD (Philadelphia)! The two good churches Jesus addresses finds only commendable (Smyrna and Philadelphia) were financially poor and humble compared with the others. The two VERY BAD churches (Sardis and Laodicea) included many from the ruling classes and were well-off; THEY thought they were OK; Jesus DIDN’T. Let’s be like the good guys!