

Messages to the Churches of Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea

Revelation 3

Revelation 3 - *“And to the angel of the church in Sardis write, ‘These things says He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars: “I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead. ² Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God. ³ Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent. Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you. ⁴ You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy. ⁵ He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels. ⁶ “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”’*

⁷ “And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write, ‘These things says He who is holy, He who is true, “He who has the key of David, He who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens”: ⁸ “I know your works. See, I have set before you an open door, and no one can shut it; for you have a little strength, have kept My word, and have not denied My name. ⁹ Indeed I will make those of the synagogue of Satan, who say they are Jews and are not, but lie—indeed I will make them come and worship before your feet, and to know that I have loved you. ¹⁰ Because you have kept My command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth. ¹¹ Behold, I am coming quickly! Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown. ¹² He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more. I will write on 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 I will write on him My new name.

¹³ “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”’

¹⁴ “And to the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write, ‘These things says the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God: ¹⁵ “I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. ¹⁶ So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth. ¹⁷ Because you say, ‘I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing’—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked— ¹⁸ I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see. ¹⁹ As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent. 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 dine with him, and he with Me. ²¹ To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne. ²² “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”’”

Background Notes

Revelation 2 and 3 contain seven letters or messages to seven churches of the 1st century Roman province of Asia. Each letter was addressed to the “angel” of that particular church. It’s possible that the seven angels may refer to special guardian angels appointed specifically protect each of the churches. However, the word “angel” literally means “one sent with a message,” so the word can be translated “messenger.” Most likely these letters are specifically addressed to the human leaders of these seven local churches.

Each of these seven 1st century letters has an enduring message for all churches in every age, and has plenty of practical application as well.

The letter to Ephesus is a message for the church that has left its first love. The letter to Smyrna is a message for the persecuted church. The letter to Pergamum is a message for the compromising church. And the fourth letter to Thyatira is a message for the church that tolerates false doctrine.

In Revelation 3 we have the letters to the churches of Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.

Doctrinal Points

1. The church at Sardis represents the lifeless church.

Sardis was a wealthy city, the capital city of the region of Lydia. Magnificent ruins can be seen in ancient Sardis today, and the remains of a 1st century church have been found in the excavations.

The church at Sardis was rebuked for being lifeless. This does not mean that there were no true believers there – it means that they were no longer vibrant believers. Do you know of any churches or Christians like that today? They may be orthodox in their doctrine, but they are no longer joyful and vibrant – they're stagnant, cold and lifeless in their walk of faith.

Looking at the church of Sardis from the “stages of Church history” viewpoint, the condition of Sardis was the condition of the post-Reformation “state churches.” They were characterized by a condition of dead orthodoxy! This can happen to individual Christians as well, including you and me. We can be strict and correct in our doctrine, but cold and lifeless in our Christian walk.

How do we keep such a condition from happening to us and to our churches today? The answer is right here in verse 2: “*Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God.*” We need to be watchful so that we don't lapse into cold orthodoxy! Bible study, prayer, fellowship and Christian service provide life and strength to believers and to church fellowships.

Remembering the truth that we received and repentance for sin are also important: “*Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent....⁴ You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy*” (v3-4). Walk in righteousness. Those who overcome will be rewarded with white garments, the reward for righteous living. In addition, they can be sure that their names will not be erased from the Book of Life (v5).

If this were the only verse in the Bible dealing with salvation, the implication would seem to be that some believers will actually lose their salvation and have their names erased from the Book of Life! However, this verse doesn't actually say that, and many other Scriptures indicate the eternal security of the believer: once saved, always saved. So, this verse is confirmation of both sides of the great truth of the perseverance of the saints. True believers will persevere and overcome, and those who persevere and overcome are true believers.

Let's wake up! Let's show life and get active! Let's be watchful, and strengthen our spirits! The Church at Sardis represents the lifeless church.

2. The church at Philadelphia represents the faithful church.

Verses 7-13: *"And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write, 'These things says He who is holy, He who is true, 'He who has the key of David, He who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens':⁸ 'I know your works. See, I have set before you an open door, and no one can shut it; for you have a little strength, have kept My word, and have not denied My name.⁹ Indeed I will make those of the synagogue of Satan, who say they are Jews and are not, but lie— indeed I will make them come and worship before your feet, and to know that I have loved you.¹⁰ Because you have kept My command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth.¹¹ Behold, I am coming quickly! Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown.¹² He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more. I will write on 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 I will write on him My new name.*

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

Only two of the seven churches received no rebuke from the Lord: Smyrna, the persecuted church, and Philadelphia, the faithful church. Notice that the believers at Philadelphia had kept the Lord's Word and had not denied His name (v8). What a great testimony! Can that be said of each one of us? That's what it means to be faithful – to keep the Word of the Lord and not deny His name.

The Lord told the believers of the church of Philadelphia that He was putting an open door of opportunity before them, and no one could shut that door because He had the key. Even the radical Judaisers (called the synagogue of Satan here) could not stop the work of the Lord – and someday they would have to acknowledge that God was on the side of the Christians! The promise of the "open door of opportunity" has motivated Christians and ministries and individual Christians to serve the Lord around the world. Don't miss your open door of opportunity, the opportunity that the Lord sets before you!

In verses 10-12 a promise is made, that the faithful believers will be kept from the great time of trouble that would come upon the whole world in the future, and that they would be given a place of honor in the New Jerusalem of the future. We believe that this is a prophetic promise that the Church will be preserved from the Tribulation Period of the future, and will be rewarded in Christ's future kingdom here on this earth. The church at Philadelphia represents the faithful church.

3. The church at Laodicea represents the lukewarm church.

"And to the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write, 'These things says the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God:¹⁵ 'I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot.¹⁶ So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth.¹⁷ Because you say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing'—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked—¹⁸ I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see.¹⁹ As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent.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 dine with him, and he with Me. ²¹ To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne. ²² "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

The Lord drew upon three things about the 1st century town of Laodicea in His message to the Laodicean church.

1. Laodicea was known for making a medicinal eye salve – but the Laodiceans were rebuked for being blind: *"Because you say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing'—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked— ¹⁸ I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see."*
2. Laodicea was also known for producing an expensive cloth for garments. The Laodiceans, as we see, are rebuked for being naked (v17-18).
3. Laodicea got its water supply from hot water and cold water springs in nearby Hierapolis. The water came by large hot water and cold water ceramic pipes that can still be seen in the ruins today. Unfortunately, by the time the water got to Laodicea, the hot water was not hot and the cold water was not cold. The water was lukewarm. The Laodiceans were rebuked for being lukewarm (v16).

What a description of a large portion of the professing church -- and even many believers -- today. Trusting in their success, wealth and status for their sufficiency and security, they have become indifferent, apathetic, half-hearted, unconcerned and lukewarm towards the Lord! The Lord will spit such proud and complacent churches out of His mouth in disgust.

The true believers at Laodicea were exhorted to live righteously and to find their sufficiency in close communion with Christ. That's the meaning of verse 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 dine with him, and he with Me."* This verse can be applied to salvation, but in the context, the proper interpretation is fellowship – fellowship with the Lord! Do you have communion and fellowship with the Lord each day? The church at Laodicea represents the lukewarm church.

Practical Application

Don't just attend church!

Do you just attend church -- or are you a vital member of your church? Just attending church is not a biblical position. Notice -- in all seven letters it was expected that those who heard the messages from the Lord would get active and get involved!

Remember what you were taught... repent for being indifferent and having a lukewarm attitude to the Lord... hold fast to what you have... strengthen what remains... take advantage of open doors! What powerful exhortations for us! Don't just attend church!