

Study 4: Revelation Chapter 3

Introduction

“Ephesus was steadfast, but lacked love. Smyrna was persecuted. Pergamum was willing to compromise their faith. Thyatira was willing to tolerate immorality. Sardis became apathetic. Philadelphia was patiently serving God. Laodicea was self-sufficient and forgot its need for God.

These are the very same conditions that the church can find itself in today. While we are not faced with emperor worship, we are pressured daily to focus our attention on idols rather than God...”

Body of the Study

Sardis

The Characteristics of the Sardis Church

Philadelphia

The Characteristics of the Philadelphia Church

Laodicea

The Characteristics of the Laodicean Church

Homework and preparation for next week:

Re-read chapter 3

Read the notes as a review of the study

Read chapter four in preparation for the next study.

If you had a choice of being a member of any of these churches, which one would you choose, and why?

How did the characteristics of the churches reflect the characteristics of the cities? What characteristics reflect the cities where you are? How are these characteristics reflected in the congregations within those cities?

Notes for study 4: Revelation Chapter 3

Quotation from Dr Bill Humble's book¹.

"Ephesus was steadfast, but lacked love. Smyrna was persecuted. Pergamum was willing to compromise their faith. Thyatira was willing to tolerate immorality. Sardis became apathetic. Philadelphia was patiently serving God. Laodicea was self-sufficient and forgot its need for God.

These are the very same conditions that the church can find itself in today. While we are not faced with emperor worship, we are pressured daily to focus our attention on idols rather than God..."

Sardis

Sardis was located 80 km inland to the east of Smyrna, and had previously been an important city in Asia, governing over the kingdom of Lydia about 500 BC. It became the richest city in the world when gold was discovered in the Pactolus river, which ran through it. A temple of Artemis identical in size to the one at Ephesus, was never finished. An acropolis rose about 500m above the city, and a fortress was built on top of the mountain. With its vertical walls on three sides, and easily protected on the fourth, it was almost impregnable, and became a refuge for the citizens in times of siege.

A famous ruler of the Lydian kingdom was Croesus, who reigned about 550 BC. He made war against the Persians, and was defeated, destroying his own kingdom. Under king Cyrus, the Persians attacked Sardis. One Persian soldier observed a Lydian guard drop his helmet over the edge, and then climb down through a narrow crevice to retrieve it. During the night, the Persian soldiers used that route to invade the fortress and capture the city. Although attacks were frequent, the fortress only fell twice during the whole history of the city – to the Persians in 549 BC², and again in 218 BC when it was captured the same way by Antiochus the Great. It's wealth was retained into the second century AD, but had lost its position of political significance.

On the hills 12 km outside of Sardis was the cemetery, and was called "the thousand hills" because of the many tombs that were visible on the skyline from the city. It was at Sardis that the first gold and silver coins were struck, and it claimed to be the first city to discover the art of dyeing wool.

In A.D. 26, Sardis begged the Roman Senate to grant it the coveted honor of building a temple to Caesar, but that distinction went to Smyrna. The luxurious living of the Sardians led to moral decadence. Sardis was a city of peace--not the peace won through battle, but the peace of lethargy and past dreams. A great woolen industry flourished at Sardis, and this may account for Christ's reference to clothing (v. 4) (NIVBC).

Sardis was destroyed by an earthquake in AD 17, and rebuilt with help from the Roman Emperor Tiberius, both with grants from the national treasury, and with tax relief for 5 years³.

At the time of the letters to the churches, Sardis was a city with a great past, but no future. As it had grown rich, so it had also fallen to decadence and immorality, with a reputation for its pleasures and luxury-loving spirit.

The Characteristics of the Sardis Church

"...To the angel of the church in Sardis write: These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. ² Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die,

¹ Humble, The Seven Churches of Asia, p. 103

² Herodotus 1:84

³ The Annals of Tacitus, 2:47

for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God. ³ Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you. ^{REV 3:4} Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. ⁵ He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels. ⁶ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches...” (3:1-6 NIV)

The church had a *reputation of being alive* which has illusions to the city’s past history, *but they were dead* which shows their inactivity, with illusions to the visible necropolis on the hills in the distance. The church had become lethargic, and like the citizens of the city, was laid back and basking in the past.

The church is not condemned for the external influences of Emperor worship, nor the practices of the Nicolaitans. Rather than succumbing to the external influences, the church had just died spiritually.

The Lord calls them to wake up and be on the alert “...*Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die...*” (3:2 NKJV). The situation was dire, but not totally hopeless. It was possible for them to get moving again. “...*I have not found your works perfect before God...*” (3:2 NKJV) means that they were not *complete*. They may have been strong in the beginning, but they had withered away, and not *gone on to perfection* (Heb 12:1-5).

The Lord’s instruction is to “...*Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent...*” (3:3 NKJV). There must have been a time when they were faithful, but rather than *holding on* to the faith, they had *let go*. If they did not respond, the Lord’s judgment would come upon them.

“...*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...*” (3:3 NKJV). The city had twice suffered a surprise attack because they were not awake to the enemy *who came like a thief in the night* and totally overthrew them. This same false sense of security will result in the loss of the church’s place with God.

Harkrider notes⁴:

A church is in danger of death: (1) when it begins to worship its own past, living on memories rather than accepting the challenge of ascending new plateaus (Phil. 3:13-15); (2) when it shows more concern with correct form than with spiritual life (1 Cor. 13:1-3); or (3) when emphasis is placed upon the material rather than the spiritual (Col. 3:1-4). Brethren should heed these inspired warnings and remain vigilant.

Not all of the church members had been caught up in the lethargy “...*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...*” (3:4 NKJV). It is *individual Christians* who are judged by God, and are *made worthy* by the blood of the Lamb. The church has a corporate function (for the Christians to act as a collective body to worship and serve God, and to encourage one another). But it is the individual relationships that we have with God that result in our salvation, not because we are a member of a “faithful church” (however, I am not advocating that we should be members of an “unfaithful church” !!!). Jesus likened their situation to *defiled garments*, and *walking in white* (purity) which would be particularly reminiscent of the wool dyeing industry.

There is assurance for those who are obedient to God “...*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...*” (3:5 NKJV). But at the same time, there is an implication for those who do not repent and obey – our garments are stained; our names *will be blotted out* from the book of life; our names will not be confessed before God (this is a reference

⁴ Harkrider, p. 49

to eternal judgement, when the books are opened – Jesus will not give us “the white stone” which is His vote in our favour). Finally, comes a warning “...*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches...*” (3:6 NKJV). We must listen to what God has to say.

Philadelphia

Philadelphia lay on the main highway along the Hermus River valley that connected Smyrna to Phrygia and further east. It was established by King Attalus II Philadelphus of Pergamum (159-138 BC) as a “missionary city” to spread the Greek culture into the region, and named Philadelphus – the city of brotherly love – because of his love for his brother Ecumenes II. By AD 19 the Greek language had taken over and the Lydian language ceased to be spoken in Lydia.

Philadelphia became a strong fortress city, being strategically located to control one of the Empire’s major highways from Rome to the east. Like many of the other cities in the region, it was destroyed by a major earthquake in AD 17, and rebuilt under help from Tiberius. To avoid the earthquakes, many of the residents fled the city and lived in the surrounding countryside where they would be safe from falling debris from the many aftershocks that followed.

The region was famous for its grape growing and fine wines. Consequently, Dionysus, the Greek god of the vine and wine was worshipped, and became the chief god in the city. Because of the multitude of temples and festivals to pagan gods, it was often called “little Athens”. Most of the opposition to the church came from the wealthy Jews who had built a beautiful synagogue in the city.

Although nothing is known about the origin of the Philadelphian church, it has had a long history of faithfulness to the Lord. Long after all the surrounding country had succumbed to Muslim control under Turkey, Philadelphia held out as a Christian populace till 1392. (NIVBC)

Humble notes⁵:

We know that when Polycarp was burned to death at Smyrna, Christians from Philadelphia died in the flames with him. We know, too, that Jews helped gather wood for the fires even though it was the sabbath, evidence of the hostility seen in this letter.

The Characteristics of the Philadelphia Church

“...To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. ⁸ I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. ⁹ I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars--I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you. ¹⁰ Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth. ^{REV 3:11} I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. ¹² Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on him my new name. ¹³ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches...” (3:7-13 NIV)

The letter to the church of Philadelphia has no condemnation – only praise. Where the other letters begin with a statement relevant to the vision of chapter 1, this letter begins “...*These things*

⁵ Humble, p. 61

says *He who is holy, He who is true...*” (3:7 NKJV). Holiness and truth are attributes of God, and the faithful brethren at Philadelphia would have had a strong sense of identity with them.

John then adds “...*He who has the key of David, He who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens...*” (3:7 NKJV).

The reference to the "key of David" alludes to Isa 22:20ff. and the incident of transferring the post of secretary of state in Judah from the unfaithful Shebna to the faithful Eliakim. The "key" (GK G3090) signifies the power of the keys that were normally held by the king himself, unless delegated to another. The use of the name "David" points to Christ as the Messiah, who alone determines who will participate in his kingdom and who will be turned away. This may allude to the false claims of certain Jews at Philadelphia who argued that they, not the heretical Nazarenes, would inherit the kingdom of David (v. 9) and thus excluded the followers of Jesus. But the true Messiah, Jesus, will exclude them instead! (NIVBC)

Jesus is the one who has the key, and He is the one who opens the door of heaven (and He alone), which is beyond man to open or close. In a parallel to the door of heaven, the brethren in Philadelphia have a door of opportunity to spread the gospel “...*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...*” (3:8 NKJV). This is an exact parallel to the “missionary city” that had pervaded the community with the Greek culture – and the church has the opportunity to spread the gospel in the same way!

The brethren were obviously faithful – for not only did they have no condemnation – but they also had Jesus’ praise – *you have kept my word, and not denied my name.*

However, like the church in Sardis, the Jews were an obvious opposition, and are described in the same way. “...*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...*” (3:9 NKJV). The Christians in Sardis may face persecution from the Jews, but the situation would turn around, and the Jews would become subject to the Christians. This could be a reference that Jesus foresaw in the spreading of the gospel – that Jews would also be converted, but more likely refers to the fact that although the Jews may slander the name of Christ on earth, at the final judgement *every knee shall bow, and every tongue shall confess Jesus as Lord.*

John uses a tortology – a play on words – to describe their relationship with God “...*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...*” (3:10 NKJV). Humble notes⁶:

Notice the play on the word “keep” in Revelation 3:10: “Because you have kept my word of patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial which is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell upon the earth.” The Lord promises to keep those who have kept His word. What a glorious promise!

Emperor worship was a trial which was to come upon the whole Roman Empire. It had already begun at the time John wrote the letters, and would get worse over the next century. It hung like a sword above all of their heads. The clear message to the saints at Philadelphia is that if they are faithful to God – even in the face of death and martyrdom, then God would preserve them from eternal death. “...*Behold, I come quickly! Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown...*” (3:11 NKJV).

In reminiscence of the earthquakes that destroyed the city and caused the people to flee to the countryside in fear of their lives, Jesus gives a statement of assurance “...*He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more. And I will write on him the name of My God and the name of the city of My God, the New Jerusalem, which comes*

⁶ Humble p. 61

down out of heaven from My God. And I will write on him My new name...” (3:12 NKJV). Like the white stone given to the Christians in Pergamum (2:17), they will have God’s vote in their favour. He closes with the common call for action and obedience “...*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches...*” (3:13 NKJV).

Laodicea

Laodicea was the last of the seven churches, and lay in the valley of the Lycus river, about 150 km east of Ephesus. It was on the main Roman road from Ephesus to Syria, and was a prosperous and wealthy city because it levied taxes on all of the trade that moved across Asia. The region was also famous for woollen cloth and dyeing. It particularly developed a soft and glossy-black wool that was used to make highly prized and widely sought after garments.

It was also a huge banking centre and centre of commerce for the region, and a medical school outside the city produced and exported a medicine known as “Phrygian powder” which was used as an eye-salve as a remedy for weak and ailing eyes.

Harkrider notes⁷:

The city was so prosperous that when an earthquake devastated it in A.D. 60 during the reign of Nero, the city officials refused financial aid from Rome. Tacitus, the Roman historian, inferred that it was unusual that any city would be rich enough to rebuild itself (The Annals of Tacitus, 14:27:1). This feeling of self-sufficiency may have permeated the church. They lived in a city that had openly refused Roman aid and carried through with proud independence in reconstructing itself. Against this background of boastful affluence, the flourishing church was exposed to the standards of its environment and thus, spiritually, felt self-sufficient and saw no need for the benefits Christ might bestow.

The water for the city was piped from Hierapolis, about 10 km away. The water was full of minerals, and constantly and continually blocked the pipes. The water had a “mineral” taste that was *not nice*, and was hard to swallow.

Laodicea was also a centre of imperial worship.

The Characteristics of the Laodicean Church

“...To the angel of the church in Laodicea write: These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God’s creation. ¹⁵ I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! ¹⁶ So, because you are lukewarm--neither hot nor cold--I am about to spit you out of my mouth. ¹⁷ You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. ¹⁸ I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see. ^{REV 3:19} Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. ²⁰ Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me. ^{REV 3:21} To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I 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...” (3:14-22 NIV)

Jesus introduces Himself as “...*the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God’s creation...*” (3:14 NIV) which is reminiscent of the statement in 1:5. The strong message to the church immediately follows “...*I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other!* ¹⁶ *So, because you are lukewarm--neither hot nor cold--I am about*

⁷ Harkrider, p. 55

to spit you out of my mouth...” (3:15-16 NIV). Their behaviour was like the water that flowed through the pipes into their city – it was distasteful! Jesus didn’t want to swallow it, but rather to spit them out! The church felt comfortable and self-sufficient – yet Jesus says that they are distasteful.

Laodicea was a rich city, and the citizens enjoyed their wealthy position “...*You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked...*” (3:17 NIV). Whilst they might have had physical (monetary) riches, they were spiritually destitute, and didn’t know how poorly off they were. They prided themselves in being self-sufficient, but they were neglecting their total reliance on God.

God calls them to recognise their true state “...*I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see...*” (3:18 NIV). They would have immediately recognised the significance of the statements. Rather than the black woollen cloth, Jesus calls them to wear white (indicating purity), and to buy gold from Him, rather than rely on the bankers in the city. Even though they had eye salve from the area, yet they were blind to reality.

The Lord rebukes them so that they might repent “...*Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent....*” (3:19 NIV). Jesus wants them to rely on Him, rather than themselves, and to be a part of the church, rather than be excluded. “...*Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me...*” (3:20 NIV).

Faithfulness to God in the face of adversary with its consequences is called for, as with the other churches “...*To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I 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...*” (3:21-22 NIV).

SARDIS

Living in the past, but are dead

The City

- Once capital of kingdom of Lydia – a dominant city 700 years earlier
- Population ~ 100,000
- A Temple of Artemis was under construction, but never finished
- Once the wealthiest city in the world
- Thought they were impregnable, but were twice infiltrated when they least expected it

Strengths

- Did some works – had a reputation as being alive
- Some have not compromised their faith

Weaknesses

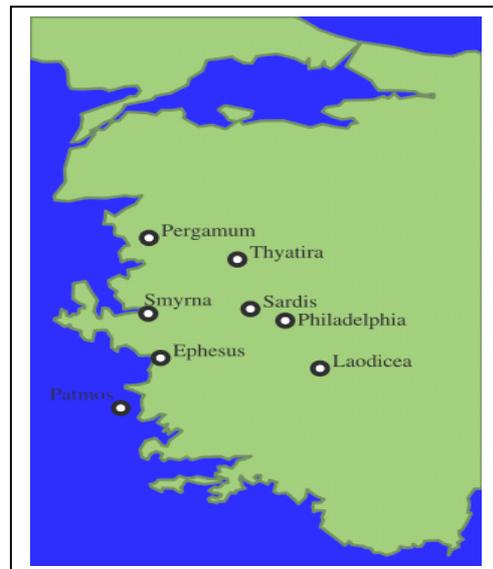
- Spiritually (almost) dead & ready to die
- Trying to live off their reputation
- Their works were not perfect before God

Lord's Instructions

- Remember how you received and heard
- Hold fast and repent
- (Strengthen the little bit of faithfulness you have left)
- If you don't watch, I will come as a thief in the night

He who Overcomes...

- Will be clothed in white garments
- I will not blot his name from the book of life
- I will confess his name before My Father and His angels



PHILADELPHIA

Faithful, with an opportunity to outreach

The City

- City of brotherly love
- Established by King Attalus II ~ 140 BC as a “missionary city” to spread Greek culture
- Remained a free Christian city amongst the Muslim world until 1392
- Some Christians from Philadelphia were martyred with Polycarp in Smyrna
- Destroyed by an earthquake in AD 17 and many people fled and lived out of the city to avoid falling debris
- Many wealthy Jews had built a large synagogue, and opposed the christians

Strengths

- Responded to the open door of evangelism
- Have kept God’s word, and not denied Jesus
- Have kept God’s command to persevere

Weaknesses

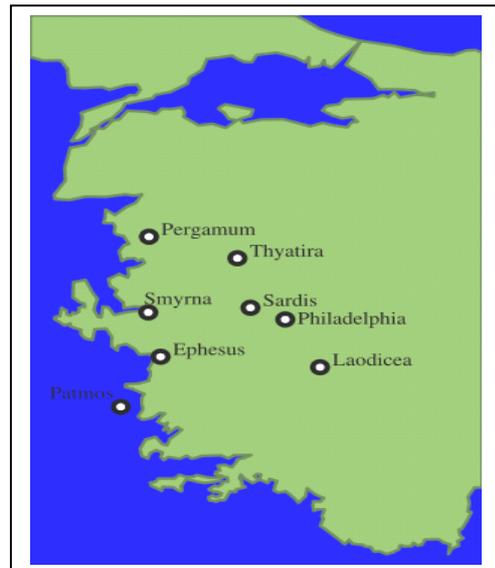
- None

Lord’s Instructions

- I have set an open door in front of you (an opportunity for outreach)
- Hold on to what you have (remain faithful)
- I will keep you from the hour of trial (persecution)
- The rebel Jews will acknowledge that I have loved you

He who Overcomes...

- Will be made a pillar in the temple of God
- Will not leave the city of God
- Will have the new name of God written on him



LAODICEA

Distasteful. Forgot their need for God

The City

- Prosperous and wealthy city that levied taxes on the trade across Asia
- Huge banking centre (as a result of wealth and trade)
- Destroyed by an earthquake in AD 60, and refused Roman help to re-build (self-sufficient)
- Supplied with (mineralized) water from Hierapolis
- A centre of Emperor worship
- Famous for glossy-black wool and dyeing
- Famous for “eye salve” ointment

Strengths

- None

Weaknesses

- Lukewarm
- Think they are rich and have need of nothing, but are wretched, miserable, poor, blind and naked

Lord's Instructions

- Be clothed in white garments (purity), (in contrast to the black cloth they were famous for)
- Anoint you eyes with eye salve that you might see (wake up to yourselves!)
- Be zealous and repent
- Respond to the Lord's invitation (I stand at the door and knock)

He who Overcomes...

- Will sit with Jesus on His throne

