

The Revelation to John  
Chapter Three  
Letters to Three Churches  
Sardis, Philadelphia, Laodicea

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**The Church at Sardis**

Sardis was a very wealthy city built on a very steep hill so that the people thought that nobody could succeed in conquering them. However they were conquered twice because they relied totally on their hill location and did not post watchmen. Overconfidence can lead to big problems for individuals or groups. A great earthquake in 17AD did a lot of damage but it was rebuilt. The most important religious worship was of the god Cybele. The main problem with the city and the church seems to be complacency that led to a lack of reality in their deeds. At this church the faulty members dominated the membership. He does not speak of a lack of first love but certainly without such a fervent love for Jesus no congregation will be pleasing to God. The Jews and Romans did not bother this church as they did others in the area and perhaps the reason is that the church was so content with mediocrity. When the world considers the church to be of no threat, it has failed. We are not to be in conformity with the world. The world should hate the church:

*John 15:19 "If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you."*

**Rev 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.'"**

Presentation of Jesus: He presents Himself as the person Who has the Holy Spirit and the stars to the seven churches.

I will repeat my discussion of the seven Spirits of God from chapter one. His reference to “the seven spirits who are before His throne” is certainly his way of saying the Holy Spirit. John never uses the term “Holy Spirit” although he does use the word “Spirit” and certainly when he uses this reference he is referring to the Holy Spirit. He may be taking this manner of speaking of the Holy Spirit from the perfect meaning of the number seven and from:

*Isaiah 11:2 “And the Spirit of the Lord will rest on Him, The spirit of wisdom and understanding, The spirit of counsel and strength, The spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.*

Isaiah here refers to the seven-fold nature of the Holy Spirit: of the Lord, of wisdom, of understanding, of counsel, of strength, of knowledge, and of the fear of the Lord.

We already know that the seven stars are the messengers of the churches and they probably refer to the elders of the churches.

Jesus does not start off this letter with complements! He knows the deeds of this church and that their reputation is that they are alive but He knows that they are dead! I know many churches that have a wonderful worldly reputation but, from what I know, they are not telling the council of God to the congregation and to the world. If we have a good reputation with the world, we should worry:

*John 1:10 “He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him.”*

*John 15:18 “If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you.”*

*John 15:19 “If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.”*

*1John 3:13 “Do not marvel, brethren, if the world hates you.”*

Our church should not be popular with the world. We should be teaching an exclusive Gospel message. When our churches have a goal of being popular with the world then the leadership is not of God. James spoke of dead works:

*James 2:17 “Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself.*

**Rev 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.”**

Jesus is trying to shake them awake and out of a stupor. There are still some things in the church that are of God but they are about to die also. Jesus sees that their deeds are not pleasing to God.

*Isaiah 16:7 But the Lord said to Samuel, “Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.”*

I can think of several types of churches today that apparently fit this description: The Seeker-Friendly Church, The Worldly Prosperity Church, The Seek-First the Happiness in the World Church, etc. I am sure that you can add some to this list. Remember that we cannot see in the heart of a person or a church but if a church is not God-centered and striving to worship God on Sundays as God demands then I can say that I do not want to be a member of that church.

**Rev 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.”**

Jesus is giving them a chance. We know nothing of the origin of this church but Jesus says that they originally received and heard the truth. As we have previously seen, a church can be orthodox and still unclean. He then is not telling them to just remember the correct doctrines. To have been children of God they had to have been born again and received the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. So He is telling them to remember that truth, their born-again reality, their indwelling of the Holy Spirit and to keep it, and repent of having left it. He then gives them a warning as stern as the earthquake that destroyed that town at one time. He says that if they do not awaken He will come quickly at a time unexpected by them and come upon them.

*1Th 5:2 “For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night.”*

*2Pe 3:10 “But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up.”*

**Rev 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.”**

He Who can look into hearts sees a few people in the city who have not ruined their righteous garments. Perhaps they are bystanders who have not bought into this people-pleasing reputation of the church. He says that they will walk with Him in white because they are worthy. Although their garments are not white they are unsoiled by the blasphemous teachings and they will then be given white garments. When Jesus says that they are worthy, He only means that they have not forfeited any right to their justification, which would really mean that they are indeed chosen to be born again.

**Rev 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.**

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

The over comers will, in the end, be given white garments meaning pure because of the work of Jesus. One day I look forward to being given my white garments. I will not

enter with those garments but because of the righteousness of Jesus that has been appropriated to my account He will give me pure garments to wear. White symbolizes purity and I will be dressed with the purity of Jesus Christ. Praise the Lord!

We often read of the book in which are written the righteous people of God. References are in Ex 32: 32,33; Psa 69:28; Mal 3:16; Dan 12:1; Phil 4:3; Rev 20:15, 13:8, and 21:27. Jesus' promise to them is that if their names have ever been written in the book of life it will never be taken out (once saved, always saved). Jesus also promises to confess the names of the chosen ones before the Father and His angels. What a time that will be when the Lord proclaims that I am a child of God and He welcomes me into the courts of God! In formal worldly events often people are introduced to the group as they enter but this introduction will be the only one that matters for all time. This is a promise, not only to the people who are really His people then but also for all time. It is hard to sit still as I contemplate that coming event! We also need to remember both sides of this coin regarding His professing us before the Father:

*Luke 12:8 "And I say to you, everyone who confesses Me before men, the Son of Man shall confess him also before the angels of God;*

*Luke 12:9 but he who denies Me before men shall be denied before the angels of God."*

Promise of Jesus: The one who overcomes will be clothed in white garments, He will not erase his name from the book of life, and He will confess his name before God the Father and before His angels.

### **The Church at Philadelphia**

This was a very prosperous city that was damaged by the earthquake of 17 AD but rebuilt. It prospered because of its strategic location and the grape-growing business. It had temples to many gods including Dionysus. Like the church at Smyrna, it received only praise from the Lord and it had only external persecution rather than internal turmoil.

**Rev 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:"**

**Rev 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.**

Presentation of Jesus: He is the holy God, He is the true God, He has the promised descendent of David, He is the One who opens and nobody else can shut, and He is the One who shuts and nobody else can open.

What is He opening? People have given several possible interpretations including the door of salvation but that does not seem to fit the scene. Jesus offers a lot of praise for

these people so they are already saved. But now that they are saved, they have a tremendous opportunity of effective service. Paul spoke of such a door:

*1Cor 16:8 "But I shall remain in Ephesus until Pentecost;  
1Cor 16:9 for a wide door for effective service has opened to me, and there are many adversaries."*

*2Cor 2:12 "Now when I came to Troas for the gospel of Christ and when a door was opened for me in the Lord,  
2Cor 2:13 I had no rest for my spirit, not finding Titus my brother; but taking my leave of them, I went on to Macedonia."*

*Col 4:2 "Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving;  
Col 4:3 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, for which I have also been imprisoned;  
Col 4:4 in order that I may make it clear in the way I ought to speak."*

God opens and closes doors of service and when one is open we need to go forth and spread the Word to those He has prepared to receive it. He could also be referring to Himself as the only way to the Father:

*John 14:6 "Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me.'"*

**Rev 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."**

Jesus had previously told Jewish Pharisees that they were of Satan:

*John 8:44 "You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature; for he is a liar, and the father of lies."*

Now He is telling the church that followers of Satan are claiming falsely to be Jews. It is very interesting that in the Old Covenant the Jews were told that the Gentiles would bow to them:

*Isaiah 60:14 "And the sons of those who afflicted you will come bowing to you, And all those who despised you will bow themselves at the soles of your feet; And they will call you the city of the Lord, The Zion of the Holy One of Israel."*

But now in the New Covenant, the Christian is the true Jew:

*Rom 2:28 "For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly; neither is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh.*

*Rom 2:29 But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God."*

*Gal 3:29 "And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise."*

These Jews will now be caused to bow before the church because the church is the body of Christ and all will bow before Him. All will know that Jesus loves the church.

**Rev 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.**

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

The meaning of keeping them from the hour of testing does not mean removal but protection. The same meaning was told by John when he was telling us of the great teachings by Jesus:

*John 17:15 "I do not ask Thee to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one."*

A great time of testing really has been happening over the entire world since the coming of the Kingdom but there will also be a time when there will be a greater testing and only those who have been born again will come through spiritually unscathed.

As discussed previously, when Jesus says that He is coming quickly He does not mean immediately but He means that when He comes there will be no warning. He will come at a time not expected. Remember that the word for crown here means wreath that is given a winner of a game so it is not the crown of righteousness. Neither we nor anyone else can take away our salvation but we can lose some victories for Christ and thus miss a reward.

**Rev 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.**

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

He is not talking of a literal temple for we are told in Rev 21:22 that there will be no temple because God is everywhere in heaven. The promise of being a pillar in God's temple is a promise of security. We who fight against evil within and without, and who persevere will be made totally unmovable in the life hereafter. We will then not even be tempted by evil. We will live forever in the presence of God and nothing will be able to ever remove us from His presence as we will continue to praise Him and learn of Him.

The three names are not of the Trinity. The written names will specify that we are the property of God and not to be touched by any other being. Having the name of God on us indicates that we belong to Him. Having the name of the city on us indicates that we belong in the city of God (chapters 21 and 22 of Revelation). Having the new name of Jesus on us will be the name of Him as the Judge of all and that we have passed out of that judgment. Those three names give us the permanence upon which we will depend forever. Of course He ends this letter by again saying that only those who have been born again can hear and understand His message.

It is interesting that this church will have a particularly clear understanding of the meaning of a new name for the town had previously been given two different names. One of the names of the town had been Neocaesarea as a result of the help of Tiberius in the rebuilding of the town. The other name had been Flavia after the family name of the emperor Vespasian.

Promise of Jesus: The person who overcomes the world will be made an integral part of the temple of God, he will never go out of the temple, and He will write upon the person the following: the name of God, the name of the city of God, the new Jerusalem, and the name of Jesus.

### **The Church at Laodicea**

Laodicea was one of the richest cities of the world so this church was in a very envious location. The city had 7,000 male Jews and they had been given the right to maintain all of their religious traditions. The church was probably established by Epaphras:

*Col 4:12-13 “Epaphras, who is one of your number, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, sends you his greetings, always laboring earnestly for you in his prayers, that you may stand perfect and fully assured in all the will of God. <sup>13</sup>For I bear him witness that he has a deep concern for you and for those who are in Laodicea and Hierapolis.”*

Paul also wrote the church a letter, which we have lost. He mentioned it in:

*Col 4:16 “And when this letter is read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and you, for your part read my letter that is coming from Laodicea.”*

In the day of the writing of this letter the church had badly deteriorated as we read here the harshest criticism from Jesus to all the churches.

**Rev 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:”**

Presentation of Jesus: He is the One who has the final say to all of time, the One who alone is the faithful and true witness of God, and the One who created God’s universe.

This is the only presentation of Jesus not based upon the characteristics presented in chapter one. The Amen relates to the God of Truth and He is the faithful in contrast to the actions of this church. He is also called the Witness as He is the One who fulfilled the demands of the Father, again in contrast to the actions of this church. He also states that He is the one Who was in the beginning of God's creation:

- *John 1:3 "All things came into being by Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being."*
- *Col 1:15-18 "And He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation. <sup>16</sup>For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities-- all things have been created by Him and for Him. <sup>17</sup>And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. <sup>18</sup>He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the first-born from the dead; so that He Himself might come to have first place in everything."*

**Rev 3:15 "I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I would that you were cold or hot.**

**Rev 3:16 'So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth.**

**Rev 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,"**

It is interesting to note the probable analogy with the water supplied to the city. The water to Hierapolis was supplied by nearby hot springs that were considered healing and the water to Colossae was cold and refreshing. In contrast, the water to Laodicea was from some distance from either of those sources and was lukewarm. Jesus was perhaps comparing their deeds to those of their water and this is not a complement. The Greek word for cold means icy cold and the word for hot means boiling hot. So Jesus is saying that He would rather they be either without fire or with fire, but not tepid. To be tepid is to be without a drive to please Jesus. These people were calling themselves Christians but they did not have the attitude or deeds to prove that they were born again. I am afraid that there are many churches in America today that have a show of being a church but they do not radiate for Christ. This church had not died like a fire left without any oxygen but it was also not a blazing fire for evangelism and discipleship. There was no passion for the Gospel as there must be in a true church. Jesus is then threatening to spit it out of His mouth, which means that it will cease to have Him as the Shepard.

The town was one of the richest in the world so they thought that they were rich just because they had many worldly comforts and resources. They even thought that they had no need for anything that they did not have. They had great banks, a great medical school, and a great clothing industry. But Jesus says that they are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked! I cannot imagine a more pitiful condition especially since they were not even aware of their true condition. All of these spiritual conditions seem to be in contrast to their individual physical resources. I am reminded of the Beatitudes in



which Jesus says that those are blessed who are poor in spirit, mourn, and hunger and thirst for righteousness, among other things (Matt 5:1-12). To be so blessed we have to recognize our poverty, sinfulness, and starvation. These people were like many in America today who think that they have all that they need but in reality they also are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked.

The church of prosperity comes quickly to mind in a comparative sense.

**Rev 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.”**

Of course we have nothing with which to buy from Jesus. But He says that if they could buy from Him they should begin by buying gold that had been refined by the fire of judgment. Such gold would be like the pavement of the streets of Heaven. By buying that gold they would then be able to present it to Him:

*Mal 3:3 “And He will sit as a smelter and purifier of silver, and He will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, so that they may present to the Lord offerings in righteousness.”*

He says that only after they received the gold of Christ would they be rich. The white clothes would be in contrast to the prized garments made in this city of black wool. The salve for their eyes was probably in contrast to the salve made nearby that was supposed to be a cure for many eye ailments. However only Jesus can give sight:

*John 9:39 And Jesus said, "For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see; and that those who see may become blind."*

Being naked was a huge shame in their culture but they did not know that they really were naked spiritually and would be so revealed at the time of judgment.

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

**Rev 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.”**

There are no exceptions to God’s children being reproved and disciplined:

*Heb 12:7 “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?”*

*Heb 12:8 But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons.*

*Heb 12:9 Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live?”*

Jesus was saying that if they would exhibit a zeal for repentance then He would reprove and discipline them rather than throw them away as His church. He is referring to individuals when He says that if anyone hears His voice and opens the door. It may be that the church total will not repent but He is willing to take individuals into His family even if the church refuses. Of course if anyone hears the knock He has been born again to have ears to hear. It is a great invitation to be invited into a meal with our Lord. The Greek word for meal means the main meal of the day and not just a snack so this would be a very great honor to be invited to such a feast with Him.

**Rev 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.**

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

To sit on the throne with Him is the highest honor we could have. When He says that we must overcome just as He overcame He is reminding us that what looked like His greatest defeat was His greatest victory. We also will face many trials and hardships for His name but we also will be blessed. Notice the conclusion is to all the churches rather than just to one church. The message to each church is different just as it is to our churches today but we must listen carefully and obey.

Promise of Jesus: The person who overcomes the world will be granted the ability to sit with Jesus on His throne.

## **Summary of The Presentations and Promises of Jesus**

### **The Church at Ephesus**

**Presentation of Jesus:** His description is of a preserver and watchman. He is present among all the churches.

**Promise from Jesus:** His warning to them is fierce. If they do not repent He will remove their lampstand and they will no longer be a Church of Jesus Christ. The tree of life was cut off from mankind after the sin of Adam but it will be freely available to those who will live with Him forever Rev 22:2).

### **The Church at Smyrna**

**Presentation of Jesus:** He is the One who has always existed, He is the One who let Himself become dead, and He is the One who was resurrected.

**Promise of Jesus:** The person who overcomes all tribulation and tests will not receive the final judgment of God.

### **The Church in Pergamum**

**Presentation of Jesus:** He is the One who possesses the two-edged sword that can render destruction or protection.

**Promise of Jesus:** The person who overcomes all that the world can hurl will be allowed to partake of the sustenance of God, he will receive a white stone of entrance into Heaven, and he will receive a new name appropriate for a child of God.

### **The Church in Thyatira**

**Presentation of Jesus:** He is the one who can see into the heart and soul of mankind and He is the one Who can stomp out all opposition to Him.

**Promise of Jesus:** The person who overcomes all the world and performs the deeds of Jesus will be given ruling authority of nations and will receive the presence of Jesus.

### **The Church at Sardis**

**Presentation of Jesus:** He presents Himself as the person Who has the Holy Spirit and the messengers to the seven churches.

**Promise of Jesus:** The person who overcomes the world will be made an integral part of the temple of God, he will never go out of the temple, and He will write upon the person the following: the name of God, the name of the city of God, the new Jerusalem, and the name of Jesus.

### **The Church at Philadelphia**

**Presentation of Jesus:** He is the holy God, He is the true God, He has the promised descendent of David, He is the On who opens and nobody else can shut, and He is the One who shuts and nobody else can open.

**Promise of Jesus:** The person who overcomes the world will be made an integral part of the temple of God, he will never go out of the temple, and He will write upon the person the following: the name of God, the name of the city of God, the new Jerusalem, and the name of Jesus.

### The Church at Laodicea

Presentation of Jesus: He is the One who has the final say to all of time, the One who alone is the faithful and true witness of God, and the One who created God's universe.

Promise of Jesus: The person who overcomes the world will be granted the ability to sit with Jesus on His throne.

### Overview

Church	Commendation	Criticism	Instruction	Promise
Ephesus	Reject evil, hard work, persevere, patience	Lost their first love for Jesus	Repent and return to their first love	Tree of Life
Smyrna	Gracefully bear suffering and poverty but rich	None	Be faithful unto death	Crown of Life, not hurt by second death
Pergamum	Loyalty to Christ, refuse to deny Him	Tolerate cults, immorality, idolatry and heresies	Repent	Hidden manna, stone with a new name
Thyatira	Love, service, faith, patience, endurance, deed increase	Some tolerate evil cult influences in the church	Judgment coming, persevere	Rule over nations and receive Jesus
Sardis	Some kept the faith	A dead church	Wake up, repent, strengthen what remains	Faithful honored, kept in book of life, clothed in white
Philadelphia	Perseveres in the faith	None	Jesus will keep from the hour of trial	Place in God's presence, a new name, new Jerusalem
Laodicea	None	Indifferent, don't recognize present condition	Be zealous and repent	Share Christ's throne