

Truth for Today

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The Seven Churches of Revelation - Revelation 3:14-22 - Laodicea

It is always easier to see mistakes made by other people, rather than ourselves. The letters to the seven churches of Asia, (Revelation 2:1-3:22) or Turkey, as it is nowadays, have very serious lessons for all Christians. We shall do well to pay heed to them ourselves, rather than thinking of other people to whom the lessons may also apply.

Spiritual decline

The Christian church was inaugurated on that remarkable day of Pentecost, the fiftieth day from when Christ was raised from among the dead. Sadly, from that auspicious start, and with the passage of time, we Christians, generally, have become increasingly worldly and much less Christ like or Christ centred. The letters to the seven churches give a prophetic outline of the history of the church, highlighting the origins and results of this spiritual decline. They trace things through from the day of Pentecost right up to the second coming of the Lord.

There can be little doubt that the letter to Laodicea (Revelation 3:14-22) gives us a very graphic picture of conditions in the Christian church immediately before the coming of the Lord. We can therefore expect that this letter, last in order of the seven, will describe things as they are in the present day, at the very end of the Christian church period, as far as its history on earth is concerned.

The Amen

Now, wherever the Lord is spoken of in the Bible, the name or title He is given is always significant and relevant to its own immediate context. Here to Laodicea, He calls Himself the Amen. (Revelation 3:14) We read in 2 Corinthians 1:20, "All the promises of God are Yea and Amen in Him." That is, everything that God has committed Himself to do is both affirmed and confirmed in Christ. Here, in the last church, Christ presents Himself once more as the One on Whom rests all the stability and assurance of what God will ever do.

The Faithful and True Witness

In Laodicean days, when the witness borne to God is worse than at any other time in the history of the Christian church, Christ is presented as the Faithful and True Witness (Revelation 3:14). The two marks of faithfulness and truth are largely missing from that which outwardly professes to be Christian nowadays. In such conditions, He Who is the living embodiment of faithfulness and truth can alone be relied on to maintain what is due to God. If we ourselves are to be faithful and true, it can only be by relying completely on Him.

The Beginning

He is also spoken of as the Beginning (Revelation 3:14), the true source and origin of everything that is of God and for God. If we Christians leave Him out of our plans, we are nothing and we have nothing.

I know thy works

Interestingly, in Revelation 3:15 the Lord says, "I know thy works." You know, the Laodiceans were not lazy by any means. They were quite willing to work. And their works were not pagan works. They even had a veneer of being true and good.

Thou art neither cold nor hot

Yet, there is nothing that could earn a commendation from the Lord. The details given in the following verses give the reasons for this. To begin with, there are two things the Lord said to the Laodiceans that merit our close attention:

- "Thou art neither cold nor hot." (Revelation 3:15)
- "I will spue thee out of My mouth" (Revelation 3:16)

Laodicea was built in the third century BC at a natural cross-roads in a low undulating plain. It was a good site in military terms, but with no natural source of drinking water. Supplies were brought in from the south via a stone aqueduct, which terminated in a water tower. From this, the water was distributed to the streets via pipes.

At Colossae, nine miles west, the water was cold, refreshing, pure, derived from melting snow on the nearby hills. At Hierapolis, six miles north, there was an abundant supply of hot spring water at 35°C (95°F), full of beneficial minerals, especially calcium, and considered to be therapeutic. Local people still bathe their eyes in the water.

At Laodicea, the water was neither cold and refreshing, as at Colossae, nor was it hot and therapeutic, as at Hierapolis. It was tepid and laden with unpalatable minerals. Visitors not used to its flavour would spit it out with revulsion. The church at Laodicea was in danger of being rejected in the same way by Christ.

I am rich

In Revelation 3:17, the Lord says, "Thou sayest, I am rich and increased with goods." It was certainly true that Laodicea had access to tremendous assets and resources. Firstly, the city was a rich banking centre, controlling the finances of a large, commercially vibrant region. Secondly, it had several sources of wealth - it wasn't vulnerable to the fluctuation in market trends by being over dependent on any one commodity or trade. Among its diverse trading activities, it certainly had a thriving woollen trade. There was, in the region, a special breed of long haired black sheep, with wool of exceptionally high quality. Warm cloaks, made from this local wool, were ideal for both shepherds out in the country and also fashion conscious business people in the commercial centre. There was also a healthy export trade.

Need of nothing

The next point the Lord draws attention to is, "You say you have need of nothing." (Revelation 3:17) This would certainly register with the Laodiceans. In the year AD 60, Laodicea was declared by the Imperial authorities in Rome to be a disaster area, after a severe earthquake devastated the city. The Roman authorities offered grants and subsidies to help with the reconstruction. The proud Laodiceans declined the offer, stating that they were quite capable of funding the project themselves, without outside help. They were extremely proud of their self sufficiency. The same spirit evidently marked the local church. The Christians at neighbouring Colossae were happy to receive from the Apostle Paul the message, "Ye are complete in Him." (Colossians 2:10). The affluent Laodiceans seemed to consider themselves to be complete in themselves, rather than in Christ.

Wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked.

Revelation 3:17 gives us the Lord's assessment of them, which was completely opposite to what they thought of themselves. "Thou knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked." Wealthy, well clothed, haughty, self satisfied Laodiceans would feel grossly insulted to be described in this way. The Lord was, of course, speaking about spiritual and moral values, not financial and economic ones.

It is most instructive that the Lord attributes blindness to the Laodiceans (Revelation 3:17). God always delivers blessing in pristine beauty and condition. Committed to man, things soon deteriorate and fall away. Eventually at the end of every phase of God's revelation to man, blindness is seen to set in. The last judge Samson, ended his days in blindness (Judges 16:21). The last priest, Eli, was blind (1 Samuel 4:15). The last King of Judah, Zedekiah, had his sight taken away (2 Kings 25:7). How salutary that the last condition of the Christian witness immediately before the coming of the Lord is described as including the distressing, helpless condition of blindness. The lesson is clear. The old adage is so apt. None is so blind as he who doesn't want to see.

To him that overcometh

Notwithstanding the appalling general condition, the Lord does not give them up. He calls for overcomers, even in Laodicea (Revelation 3:21). If the Lord appeals for an overcomer, there must be the prospect of there being at least one. But how can it be done?

Buy

In Revelation 3:18, the challenge comes, "Buy..." Everything that's valuable costs you something, in one way or another. From Whom could they buy what they needed? "Buy of Me..." the Lord says. He is the only One Who is able and willing to help. There is no one else to turn to.

Gold, tried in the fire

What were they to ask for and receive from the Lord? “Gold, tried in the fire,” they are told (Revelation 3:18). What does that tell us? In the Bible, gold is used as a picture of things that are considered valuable by God. There is no doubt that the most precious resource and asset at God’s disposal is the person and work of His beloved Son, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. “Gold, tried in the fire,” (Revelation 3:18) suggests that which is of Christ, proved in personal soul experience in the presence of God.

White Raiment

“White raiment” (Revelation 3:18). The Laodiceans were used to preening themselves in their rich, black cloaks. That was all very well and most impressive. The Lord directs them to acquire, from Him, white garments to cover their naked shame (Revelation 3:18). The allusion is quite clear. White is always a picture of purity and righteousness in the Bible. Clothing is what people first see of us, before they know us personally, or have any conversation with us. Revelation 19:8 tells us that the Lamb’s wife (another picture of the church, not now on earth, but in heaven with Christ) will be clothed in “fine linen, clean and white, for the fine linen is the righteousnesses [or righteous acts] of the saints.” There we have it. The righteous deeds of the Christian believers will be on display, as clearly as though they were worn as a suit of clothes. The Laodiceans were directed away from flashy clothing to doing what is right in the sight of God.

Anoint thine eyes with eyesalve

“Anoint thine eyes with eyesalve ...” (Revelation 3:18) Laodicea had a famous medical school, specialising in the treatment of eyes. Their surgeons were skilled in eye operations, including the removal of cataracts. Additionally, much revenue was gained locally from the sale of eye ointments and eyesalves. Local factories made good use of the nearby mineral salt deposits, which research had determined to be beneficial over a wide range of eye conditions. They would know full well what the Lord was talking about when He said, “Anoint thine eyes with eyesalve, that thou mayest see.” (Revelation 3:18)

In Revelation 3:19, the Lord states a universal truth. “As many as I love, I chasten.” The state is not ignored, it is judged. Nevertheless, the persons are still loved. A most important general teaching throughout the Bible is that all discipline has a positive aim. It is never a question of inflicting punishment in any sadistic or vindictive way. It is administered with a view to correction and restoration to full joy and fellowship. We know this from our own family experience. It is just because we love our children that we train them, discipline them, chasten them. How much more so with the Lord Himself As He says, “As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten.”

It is because He so loves us and cares for us that He must at times discipline us. This does not make it any easier at the receiving end while we are “going through the mill”. As we read in Hebrews 12:11, “Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby.”

Repent

What does that mean? “Unto them which are exercised thereby.” The Lord makes the matter perfectly plain. “Repent.” Unless our hearts are right before God, we will never take the right action. So, with the Laodiceans, repentance must precede the answer to the Lord’s knocking. They must have a real change of mind before God. They must agree with God about the poor spiritual condition in which they were. If they could not do that as a church or a group, each individual was responsible to the Lord to do so on a personal basis. And so with us. In Revelation 3:20, a tremendous opportunity opens up. In one of the best known and most loved statements in the Bible, the Lord makes His appeal to any individual who is willing to listen, “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.”

I stand

“I stand ...” (Revelation 3:20) Not a casual stance, but one which is adopted continually until the object is achieved, that is, the personal response of the individual overcomer. This term overcomer, by the way, is used about any individual who refuses to be swept along by the tide of unfaithfulness rampant just before the Lord’s coming, and is determined to seek help and grace from God so as to remain true to his Lord and Master, at whatever personal cost.

I knock

Why refer to a door, or gate? (Revelation 3:20) As part of the reconstruction of the city after the earthquake mentioned earlier, a local wealthy benefactor paid for the erection of an impressive new “gate” for the city. Nocturnal visitors to

the city found the gate locked, so as to safeguard the city's wealth and treasures. They had to knock and be subjected to close scrutiny before gaining admittance.

They were treating the Lord in the same way, keeping Him outside. Individuals responding to His knocking would themselves gain access to and receive all the spiritual treasure they would ever need or could enjoy. This comes out clearly in the text. "I am knocking." (Revelation 3:20) The Lord is calling attention to the fact that He is there, on the outside. The Laodiceans had shut themselves in to themselves, without Him. As far as the general mass was concerned, it would seem that they were so busy with their own activities inside that they could not even bear the knocking that was going on, on the outside. They were not only going on without Him, they were not conscious that He was outside.

If any man

"If any man..." (Revelation 3:20) The mass will never turn. The response must be individual.

Open the door

"Open the door." (Revelation 3:20) This is one door the overcomer must open for himself, The knock is imperative. The voice is appealing. If there is no response to this appeal, there can be no more. "I will come in to him." How gracious the Lord is. He expresses His willingness to come in to our hearts, our lives, but He doesn't force Himself upon us.

I will sup with him and he with Me

"I will sup with him and he with Me." (Revelation 3:20) What joy, what communion, is available to us if we allow Him to have His true place, the chief place, in our plans, our ambitions, our motives.

With Me on My throne

Revelation 3:21 gives us the rewards granted to those who make room for Him in this way; "To Him that overcometh will I grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame, and am set down with My Father in His throne."

Here again we have a reference to a well known local practice. Public thrones, there and then, were not designed for single occupancy. They were more like benches, with sufficient room for those summoned by special invitation of the occupant of the throne. Such dignitaries, selected on account of high office or spectacular achievement, were summoned to sit on the throne alongside the visiting sovereign or president of the function to view the proceedings of the day at the arena, theatre or stadium. A great honour indeed.

As always, the Lord Himself is both the source and the standard for everything He offers us. When He lived on the earth, He was always faithful to His Father in heaven, whatever the opposition, whatever the personal cost to Himself. Having gone back to heaven, He is now seated in honour alongside His Father, awaiting His day of glory, when He shall sit on His throne, and receive universal honour and acclaim. He now says to those who have committed themselves to be faithful to Him on earth while He is in heaven, "When I appear in power and great glory, you will be alongside Me sharing that glory." As we read, "Them that honour Me, I will honour." (1 Samuel 3:20)

In closing, we must go back to where we started. Christ is coming again. He has left Christians on earth until then with the privilege and responsibility of being true and faithful to Him while we wait for Him to come. We must be good stewards of whatever has been entrusted to us in the meantime. May we seek grace to do so.

Let us pray.

Lord Jesus, Thy word says, "It is required in stewards that a man be found faithful." (1 Corinthians 4:2) Help us, Lord, to be faithful to Thee, till Thou shalt come again. Amen.

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