

Session 06 Letters to the Churches Philadelphia and Laodicea Revelation 3:7-22

6) Philadelphia 3:7-13 A true and holy church

It was located at the junction of trade routes and on an imperial post route – “The gateway to the East”. The name is derived from the love of a younger man for his older brother. He refused to usurp him when the opportunity arose to do so. It was situated in a very fertile area for growing grapes and was prosperous. It had been active in spreading Greek culture and language in the region. There were many temples and it hosted many festivals. The chief cult was to Dionysus, the god of wine.

The message has marked similarities to the one to Smyrna – neither attracts criticism and each majors on encouragement.

- **Jesus is the One who has the keys. The picture in chapter 1 is expanded for the One who is holy and true has the keys to the entire future, 5:5. Jesus is the Holy One** – a supreme title for God, usually applied to the Father, 4:8, 6:10, c.f. Isaiah 6:1-3, 37:23, 40:25, 43:14, 45:11. **He is the True One** – He is the genuine Messiah and the One Who is faithful – the Faithful Witness.
- **He has the key of David – the symbol of absolute authority in the Kingdom of God, 5:5.** The background is in Isaiah 22:15-25. Shebna, an unfaithful and self serving royal official was deposed, v15-19, and Eliakim, called God’s servant v20, was appointed in his place and given the key of David, symbolic of his responsibility to rule and care for the people of God, v20-22. He represented the throne of David. Ultimately even the efforts of this faithful and godly man would fail, v24-25, but he remains as a prophetic symbol of the One who alone can bear the weight of that office (see Rev.5).

Jesus has the authority to exclude or admit to the Kingdom, and to set the conditions, Matt. 20. 1-16, 22:1-14, 25:1-46, Luke 13:24-27, 14:15-24, 18:17, John 3:3. ”. Jesus has opened the Kingdom to them and no one can put them out, as Jewish believers were put out of the synagogues, John 9:22, 12:42, 16:2. The visible church is not the same as the Kingdom.

- **He knows their works – and is pleased.** They have a little strength – probably a small congregation with limited human resources and without much influence, in the context of a large pagan city. **They have remained faithful under pressure and they have been true to His word – orthodox in belief, consistent in behaviour and obedient to His commands, including to one to persevere.**

A particular source of this pressure comes from “those of the synagogue of satan”, as in Smyrna. We need to be careful in how we interpret this and not place all “non-Messianic Jews” in this category – that is simply anti-Semitism and has had sad and tragic consequences for many centuries since. The reference is to Jews, such as Jesus and Paul encountered, who violently opposed and persecuted Jesus and His followers. Another false conclusion is that the church has replaced Israel in God’s covenant promises. The church is never referred to as “Israel” except as being grafted into the tree of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – enlargement rather than replacement theology, Romans 11.

- **“I have set before you an open door and no one can shut it.** Just as Philadelphia was a “missionary city” for Greek culture, so the church is a missionary enterprise for the New Jerusalem, 1Cor. 16:8-9, 2Cor. 2:12. Jesus is building His church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it, Matt. 16:18. Events in China and Iran bear this out.
- **The believers will be vindicated before their enemies.** No time scale is put on this. Similarly, the Gentile nations will finally acknowledge God’s choice of Israel as a Covenant nation, Isaiah 45:14-15, 49:22-23, 60:14. There is no contradiction – Israel, as a people, will be restored and renewed in the New Covenant, Ezek. 36:16-30, 37:15-28. The foundation of it all is God’s love for His people, Rev. 3:9, c.f. Jeremiah 31:3-15 (see v3). They know that God loves them – one day their enemies will also know, c.f. Pharaoh at the time of Passover and the Exodus.
- **“They have “kept the word of Christ’s patience”. Now they will be kept from the hour (time) of trial that will come to test those who dwell on the earth, v10.** This expression is used of the unbelieving world, 6:10, 8:13, 13:8, 12, 14, 17:2, 8. **Their part is to hold fast what they already have. Trial and pressure will continue until Jesus comes.** They suffer because of their loyalty to Jesus and also because they live in a world that is subject

to God's preliminary judgements, 7:1-3, 9:20-21, but they will ultimately be safe (even martyrs), 6:9-11, Luke 12:4-12, John 17:15, Romans 8:35-39. They have already been awarded a victor's wreath and must not surrender it to anyone.

- **Promises to the over comers.**

- **"A pillar the temple of My God"**. Stable and secure, like Jachin and Boaz, 1Kings 7:21. No one could threaten them with expulsion, nor could earthquake destroy.
- **Three names – the Father, the Holy City. And Jesus' own new name.** It's all about relationship, citizenship, and protection, Num. 6:24-27, 7:3, 14:1, Gal. 4:26, Phil 3:30, Heb. 11:8-10.
- **"He who has an ear to hear ..."**

7) **Laodicea A deceived and complacent church** 3:14-22

Laodicea was at the junction of three great highways. It was situated in a fertile area where black sheep were reared for the manufacture of black woollen garments; they had a superstition that wearing white clothing could lead to death. It was known for its banking and was so prosperous that help from Rome was refused following a great earthquake in AD 60. There was a renowned medical school and an eye ointment was associated with the city.

The water supply came a distance from hot springs at Hierapolis and arrived lukewarm. By contrast the water in Colossi was cool and refreshing.

The church was mentioned in Col. 2:1-4. Paul refers to true riches and to the dangers of deception. He had not visited them but was battling on their behalf (presumably in prayer). Epaphras, from nearby Colossi, had been deeply concerned for their spiritual progress, Col. 4:12-13. His great zeal for them and his ambition for them contrasted with their present state.

Jesus is described in terms of His supreme identity, rather than by selecting an item from His manifestation to John.

- **The Amen**, c.f. 22:13. This is a Hebrew word from the same root as "emunah" (true/truth). He is the truth – the ultimate eternal truth, John 14:6. The Amen is one of the names of God, Isaiah 65:16. He is the guarantor of all the promises of God, 2Cor. 1:20, Rom. 8:32.
- **The Faithful and True Witness**, 1:5. He has revealed the fullness of the invisible glory of the Father, John 14:9, Heb. 1:3, 2Cor. 4:6. He did so at the cost of His life.
- **The Beginning of the creation of God (The Father)**. This does not mean that He was the first creature but that He was the Father's agent in creation, John 1:1-4, Col. 1:15-17, Heb. 1:1-2.
This is the One who has come to speak to His church. He has nothing good to say.
- **They were lukewarm – good for nothing**, c.f. Colossi and Hierapolis.
- **They were nauseous. Jesus is about to vomit them out of His mouth.** This is very strong language calculated to cause offence. He wants to shock them. They are on the edge of a precipice and are blissfully unaware. His expression is connected with Lev. 18:28, a reference to idolatrous, cruel, and immoral pagans who have polluted the land.
- **They were greatly deceived about their true condition**, c.f. Hosea 12:8, Luke 18:11-12. "I am ... I have ... I have" – all in the present continuing sense. Their self estimate meshed with the proud and self satisfied way in which the citizens of Laodicea looked on themselves. They had imbibed the spirit of the age and merged comfortably with surrounding society, religious practices apart. They assumed that their comfortable and prosperous condition indicated God's favour – **the prosperity gospel in full flow**, (contrast Smyrna, 2:9). They were not even worth persecuting, in contrast to Philadelphia, not far away.
 - **"Wretched"**. This is very strong – "The wretched one" – the supreme example of wretchedness!

- **“Miserable”**. This is the opposite of their own subjective experience. It is Jesus’ objective assessment. It really means “pitiful” – in need of mercy.
- **“Poor”**. There are two Greek words for poverty/poor; this one means “nothing at all, (as in the case of Smyrna), rather than “nothing superfluous”. **They consider that they have need of nothing**, c.f. 1Cor. 4:8, like the city, following the earthquake, but they are absolutely bankrupt.
- **“Blind”**. They are unaware of any of the above. The city offered healing for physical eye problems. They did not know that they were blind and that the Great Physician could heal them, c.f. John 9:1-7, 39-44.
- **“Naked”**. Ever since loss of innocence, nakedness was a mark of shame and vulnerability, Gen. 3:7-11, 2Sam. 10:4-5, Isaiah 20, esp.v4, Ezek. 16:37-39, Nahum 3:5. They were in the same state of illusion as the emperor who had no clothes!
- **He revealed His attitude; hope remains - “I counsel you ... I love (you) ... I stand at the door and knock”.**
This is truly amazing, revealing the heart of the God of Israel, Hosea 11:1-9, Lam. 3:22-33, Luke 13:34-35.
- **His strong rebuke was an evidence of love**, Heb. 12:6, 1Cor. 11:31-32. “I, Myself” (emphatic). The rebuke and chastening that will affect their lives in a painful way will come, not from adverse circumstances, but from Jesus Himself. They should not interpret it otherwise. It applies to all who are loved – “As many as ...”
He will not allow us to go on unchecked, pursuing what we consider to be in our interests.
He loved Jacob so much that He allowed him to suffer in Laban’s house for at least 20 years. He loved Judah so much that He sent them to Babylon for 70 years to cure them of idolatry.
- **He counselled them – advised them. It was a surprisingly gentle and tender approach**, c.f. Paul’s relationship with the wayward Corinthians, 1Cor. 4:14-17, 6:11-13, 10:1, 11:2-3, 12:14-15, and with the Thessalonians, 1thess. 2:4-9.
- **His prescription**, c.f. Isaiah 55:1-3a, Rev. 22:17. **“Buy ... without money or price” He has already paid the price**, 2Cor. 8:9, 1Pet. 18-19.
 - **Gold refined in the fire**, 1Pet. 6-9, Heb. 13:12-14. It was a call to join Him in a willingness to suffer rather than being conformed to the world, c.f. Moses Heb. 11:24-26.
 - **White garments – holiness, honour** . This contrasted with local superstition and custom (identity).
 - **Spiritual eye salve to restore sight**, c.f. John 9:4-7, 2Pet. 1:5-9.
- **The required response – “therefore”, in view of this gracious revelation and surprising offer – Grace!** See Rom. 2:4, Titus 2:11-14, 33-7, 2Pet. 3:9.
 - **Be zealous** – the verb is in the continuous tense. **Keep on responding without slackening.** This was in direct contrast to their complacent attitude. Mercy is on offer but is time-limited, “I am about to” v16, c.f. Prov. 29:1.
Repent – a decisive action in time. Their zeal should result in this, but is not a substitute for confronting their sin and failure. In first place God requires worshippers, then workers.
 - **An amazing invitation “Behold – Here I am”.**
 - **We need to rewind to v14 to remind us of the identity of the One who was speaking (and still is).** This is the One who is knocking. He is not standing almost passively and giving a simple gentle knock. **He is repeatedly knocking, pressing against the door, requiring attention and response.**

- **This is not primarily a message for the world** (although it is appropriate to apply it in this way).
- **It is addressed to individuals** – “**If anyone**”, whatever the others choose to do.
- **It depends on hearing His voice** – recognizing **Who is speaking**, John 10:16 – **and responding**.
- **It opens the way to table fellowship** – intimacy, Psalm 23:5, Luke 22:15-16, **and nourishment in His presence**, c.f. 2:17. It anticipates 19:9.
- **An awesome destiny for those who overcome** – overcome complacency and false ideas. **They will reign with Him, sharing His throne**, Luke 22:28-30. What a contrast to their current state!
- **The unchanging condition.** “**He who has an ear to hear let him hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches.**”