

## THE REVELATION OF JESUS CHRIST: THE KING

Seven Letters: Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea

Revelation 3

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*And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: "The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you. Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy. The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: "The words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens. I know your works. Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. Behold, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie—behold, I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and they will learn that I have loved you. Because you have kept my word about patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth. I am coming soon. Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown. The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. Never shall he go out of it, 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 down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: "The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God's creation. I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see. Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (Revelation 3).*

What is the book of Revelation about? Hopefully you are better prepared to answer that question now. I hope your answer is: “The book is about the Revelation of Jesus Christ.” From chapters 1 to 22, the book seeks to show us the connection between Jesus and the future. Revelation will be driving us toward the culmination of God’s plan through the death and resurrection of Jesus. It will show us how Jesus’ victory over sin, death, and devil results in the restoration of everything.

The hope-filled vision of Revelation concludes like this:

*And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away” (Rev. 21:3-4).*

I find something interesting and instructive. Revelation could have jumped right into the future-oriented material. Instead, it leads with two chapters (Rev. 2-3) about seven churches. They are in different cities. They have different strengths and weaknesses. But that’s where Revelation starts. Why?

Because the church collectively, and churches individually, are essential to the plan of God.

Eugene Peterson writes: “The only way from Christ to heaven and the battles against sin is through the church. And not just one church, but seven!”<sup>1</sup>

So, what happens inside our church Sunday after Sunday is really important. But it’s also important for every gospel-preaching church in our city. The plan of God involves every church in every city that is preaching the gospel and striving to be faithful. That’s why every Sunday matters. And it’s also helpful to be reminded that the church—with all its weaknesses, shortcomings, and need for growth—is still God’s plan, and it’s also the primary battleground against sin and the devil.

The only way from Christ to heaven and the battles against sin is through the church.

Today we are looking at the last three churches in Revelation 3. And next week we’ll move on to the more future-oriented material. But I hope that you’ve experienced how relevant these letters are to us in 2022. I’ve sensed an unusual movement of the Spirit among us as we’ve studied these churches. They are all relevant in some way to every church in every generation—including ours.

Once again, we’ll see pairings of words that summarize each letter:

- Sardis: Alive and Dying
- Philadelphia: Open Doors and Holding Fast
- Laodicea: Lukewarm and Desperate

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene Peterson, *Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination*, (New York: HarperOne, 1988), 45.

Let's see what we can learn from each of these churches.

### **Sardis: Alive and Dying**

The fifth letter is written to the church at Sardis, a church that had the appearance of success and health but was actually dying. Things looked good on the outside, but Jesus knew the real story. There's still hope, but the church needs to wake up to the reality of her condition.

Once again, we see Jesus described with words that take us back to chapter 1. In 3:1 we see the phrase "who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars." This imagery is designed to communicate the control and knowledge of Jesus related to this church. When it comes to Jesus, nothing escapes him. He knows what's really going on.

This may be a theme because of the history of the city of Sardis. Apparently, there was a famous battle for Sardis that was won because there was a portion of the wall that was left unguarded. Below this section of the wall was a steep cliff, and it seemed impossible to climb. But a brave soldier found a way to climb up to the wall. He led a small band of soldiers to this location. They secretly entered the city and opened the gates for the invading forces.<sup>2</sup> As a result "Sardis" became a cultural proverb in blindly trusting in one's strengths only to be defeated by a lack of vigilance. You might think of this as similar to the Trojan Horse. Or if someone said, "We don't want another Chernobyl, do we?" The city or event represents something more.

If that's the context, then it makes the letter even more poignant. It would seem that Jesus is concerned about the church at Sardis not being vigilant. The second half of verse one is really blunt: "I know your works..." This was often the introduction to a commendation. But what follows is a strong indictment: "You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead."

What does this mean? Verse 2 helps us. They're instructed to "wake up and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God." It would appear that Jesus, in calling them dead, is speaking in hyperbole. He's attempting to shock them.

The command is two-fold: 1) Be watchful / wake up and 2) strengthen what remains. It would appear that the church is guilty of being passive and weak. Some commentators suggest that they were shirking back from being willing to be identified as Christians. In other words, and from a spiritual perspective, they were playing dead or faking it.

Since there's no mention of idolatry or immorality, it might mean that they were trying to blend into the Jewish community and stay under the radar. Perhaps they were reluctant to confess the name of Jesus. That may be why this letter ends with the promise of the conqueror's name being named before the Father (v. 5) or why there are certain people who will walk with Jesus (v. 4) or why he mentions not having their names blotted out, referring to being banned from the Jewish synagogue registry (v. 5).

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<sup>2</sup> James M. Hamilton Jr., [\*Preaching the Word: Revelation—The Spirit Speaks to the Churches\*](#), ed. R. Kent Hughes (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 104.

James Hamilton suggests that they were alive by not conspiring with Rome, but they were avoiding persecution by staying close to the Jewish community and not confessing the name of Jesus.<sup>3</sup>

The invitation here is to “Remember what you received and heard...” In John’s Gospel this kind of language was linked to the message about Jesus’ death and resurrection. It refers to the good news about Jesus (see John 17:8 and 1 Cor. 11:23).

If we have this right, then the church at Sardis was guilty of trying to live in both worlds. They were acting alive, but they were really dying. Let me invite you to consider a few applications.

There may be some of you not really even “in the church” because you are not yet a follower of Jesus. Maybe you are curious about Revelation and so you’ve started attending recently. But you’ve not yet confessed Jesus as your Savior. What if today’s that day?

Others may have been raised in a Christian home or you’re around Christian people. You know the lingo and how to do the Christian “walk,” but you aren’t really a follower of Jesus. Or you may be a follower of Jesus, but you’ve never taken the step (as we’ll see next week) in believer’s baptism. Why not take that step?

Finally, you may have been a Christian for a while but there are certain spaces where you “play dead” when it comes to being a Christian. What if Jesus is calling you, today, to “wake up” and be bold in your witness? The church at Sardis warns us about having a good appearance but not really being alive – or at least as alive as we should be.

### **Philadelphia: Open Doors and Holding Fast**

The sixth church is in Philadelphia, and this letter is filled with opportunity. Like the second letter, to Smyrna, this church is only commended. There is no critique offered here. It’s a letter about divinely ordained open doors and the command to hold fast as they walk through them.

Jesus describes himself in verse 7 as “the holy one and true one...who has the key of David.” This is similar to what we read in chapter 1. In that text, Jesus has the key of Death and Hades. Now he has the key of David. In both cases the keys represent authority and control. The key of David is connected to Isa. 22:22. It’s a reference to Jesus’s opening and control over the kingdom. This is meant to be the beginning of a hope-filled text.

You can even see it in what follows. No one is able to shut or open any door like him. Jesus has absolute authority. He has the key, which means he’s in absolute control. Jesus is reminding this church that he’s the one who’s really orchestrating the events of their lives. When you are up against powerful forces or intimidating people, it’s helpful to be reminded that no one and nothing is more powerful than Jesus.

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<sup>3</sup> James M. Hamilton Jr., [\*Preaching the Word: Revelation—The Spirit Speaks to the Churches\*](#), ed. R. Kent Hughes (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 106.

Some of you may need to write this down somewhere: “Jesus holds the keys.”

Verse 8 goes even further. He has set before this church an open door that no one can shut. Throughout the New Testament, an open door introduces an opportunity for ministry and evangelism (see Acts 14:27; 1 Cor. 16:9; 2 Cor. 2:12; Col. 4:3).<sup>4</sup> So, apparently this church was presented with new ways in which the gospel could advance.

But notice that this forward movement of the gospel was not going to be easy. They have little power and they’re under pressure (v. 8). They must be experiencing some kind of opposition from religious people (v. 9). So, this open door is not without cost.

It’s important to stop here and consider this. Most open doors for the gospel are not lush fields that are easy to navigate or plow. Sometimes we might be tempted to confuse an open door with an easy door. In a few weeks (Oct. 2 and 9), we’ll turn our full attention to unreached people groups. As I’ve heard Nate say before, “Unreached people are hard to reach, expensive, and they often don’t want Christians there. But that’s why they’re unreached.” For the last several years, we’ve dreamed about ways to reach our five-mile radius. Community counseling and Family Advocacy Ministry are two ways this could happen. They are not straightforward or without risk.

But that doesn’t mean that they’re not worth it! Look at the incredible promises and assurances offered to God’s people:

- Persecutors will see how much these Christians are loved by Jesus (v. 10)
- They will be kept from the hour of trial coming on the whole world (v. 10)
- They will be secure in God’s house (v. 11)
- They will be marked with God’s name and live in a new city (v. 12)
- They will be identified with Jesus (v. 12)

Recently I’ve been thinking a lot about new opportunities and open doors. Part of it is coming from the fact that I felt like I’ve had to play defense for several years. And I think it might be time for all of us to start thinking not just about getting back to normal, but to start looking for open doors—playing offense.

But be ready. That doesn’t mean it will be easy. Open doors require holding fast.

### **Laodicea: Lukewarm and Desperate**

The final church is Laodicea – a church marked by being lukewarm and more desperate than they even knew. There are parallels between the seventh church and the first one in Ephesus.

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<sup>4</sup> James M. Hamilton Jr., [\*Preaching the Word: Revelation—The Spirit Speaks to the Churches\*](#), ed. R. Kent Hughes (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 114.

Jesus describes himself as the Amen and the beginning of God's creation. He's not only the first and the last, but he's also the last and the first. What's more, he's the faithful witness. His words are trustworthy, and he's the ultimate example of faithfulness. Jesus is the conqueror that we can follow.

In verse 15 we see the problem. They are rebuked for being neither hot nor cold, but lukewarm. This kind of water is unappealing and not useful. Hot water and cold water are desirable and useful. It would appear that this church thought they were better than they really were. Looking at the rest of the text, it would seem that they were guilty of self-sufficiency.

Notice that Jesus puts words to this as if they are saying it:

*For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked (Rev. 3:17).*

Their assessment of their spiritual lives, versus what Jesus knew was true, were worlds apart. It seems that they were over-confident and self-reliant. In the same way that the letter to the church at Ephesus is uniquely applicable, I think this one is as well. I'm sure you can think why. As a large church in one of the wealthy areas of the country with decades of ministry impact, this is something we need on guard against. As a pastor in my fifties, this is something I need to fight against. When you are young and inexperienced or when you lack money or resources to do anything, dependency is more natural. And it's easy to become dependent on our lack of dependency.

Nancy Guthrie puts some additional application on this.

"Jesus had come to them offering the riches of his grace...and by their actions and attitudes, they had simply said to him in reply, "No thanks. We've got growing savings accounts and reliable insurance policies, so we don't really need treasure stored up for us in heaven. Jesus had come to them offering sight to see what is good and true and eternal, and they'd said, "No thanks, we're good. We've had good educations, and we've got some well-developed ideas and opinions. Really you could probably learn a few things from us, Jesus, about how to best run the world. Jesus had come to them offering to clothe them in the robes of his perfect righteousness, and they'd said, "No need here. We've spent a lifetime making donations to the right ministries and serving on important committees and leveraging our social-media profiles to promote the right positions, and we think that if you look more closely, you'll see that we're doing quite well in regard to personal righteousness on our own, Jesus."<sup>5</sup>

What a tragedy to be desperate and not really know it. How sad to be in a position where you don't even know how thirsty or hungry you really are. They'd not only left their first love, but they'd also made self-sufficiency normal and dependency rare. Do you know what this is like?

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<sup>5</sup> Nancy Guthrie, *Blessed: Experiencing the Promise of the Book of Revelation*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 2022), 79-80.

Jesus's call to repentance is directly linked to his ability to provide for them. Verse 18 highlights the need to receive resources from him. They needed the resources, but it seems that the real point is that they needed Jesus, who could provide it for them.

Notice how central Jesus is in verses 18-19. It's not just that they needed to buy things or that they needed discipline; it was the fact that Jesus was the one they were missing.

That's why Revelation 3:20 is so impactful. Jesus isn't on the inside of the church. He's on the outside! He's knocking, looking to be invited back in. And if anyone hears his voice and opens the door, there's an opportunity for fellowship and intimacy with the son of God. What's more, according to verse 21, this fellowship results in a deep connection with the victory that's in Jesus.

The church at Laodicea was resource rich but desperation poor. They weren't just lukewarm about spiritual things. They were lukewarm about Jesus. And yet Jesus is standing at the door, inviting them to change.

And as with all the letters, it ends the same: Let he who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says.

### **He Who Has Ears...**

As we draw this section of Revelation to a close, what have we learned—not just about Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea—but also all the churches? Let me suggest a few things for us to learn:

- Our church has a context, a history, and a mission to be faithful in our generation.
- There is much to commend, and I think there are things for which Jesus would say, "Well done."
- Like every church, ours is not a perfect church. There are many ways in which we need to grow.
- We are merely one expression of the body of Christ. We can celebrate the work of God around the city and around the world, knowing that Jesus is building his church.
- I think we should pay very close attention to the first and last letter.
- In particular, it seems to me that our mission of igniting a passion to follow Jesus might invite us to consider how much our love for Jesus is really behind what we're doing.
- Where might we need to invite him back into the mix of our lives and ministry?
- Where has our first love lost its lustre?

The Revelation of Jesus Christ leads with churches – seven of them. Why? Because whatever happens in the future unfolds through the life of the church. The bride of Christ isn't a back-up plan. It's the means by which God intends to change the world.

Every Sunday a miracle happens. Broken people who love Jesus gather together to remind themselves about what really matters, who's really in charge, and where history is headed. It's not perfect, but it is good. It's always messy, but it's how the Spirit moves. And at the end of these seven letters, it's good to be reminded that Jesus loves the church.

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