

THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Lesson 10 - Chapter 3 Conclusion

We'll finish up Revelation chapter 3 today and study the last of the 7 letters to the Believing congregations of Asia: Laodicea. First, as is our custom, we'll review what we discussed in the previous lesson.

The 6th letter was to the so-called Church of Philadelphia. Let me remind you that to apply the word "Church" to any of these congregations is an anachronism because no such term existed in that era, and because in every case the house of worship was a Jewish synagogue. It's only that these particular synagogues accepted that Yeshua was the Messiah. Jewish Believers represented the bulk of the congregations with some unknown number of God-fearers joining them. God-fearers is a term that applied only to gentiles who worshipped the God of Israel. But these particular God-fearers took a further step in that they also accepted Jesus as Lord and Messiah.

Philadelphia was one of two Believing assemblies (the other being Smyrna) in whom God found no fault and so only commended them. But to Philadelphia the Lord made a special promise: He would protect them from the coming trial that the entire world would face. And yet, even though this promise is made to the Philadelphia congregation it seems to also extend beyond them and to all Believers at large. Perhaps the even bigger question for the Philadelphians beyond the "who ?" is the "when ?" When will this worldwide trial happen? Without going into great detail, we can find throughout the New Testament that all End Times expectations among the Jewish people (especially among Yeshua followers), as well as among the writers of the New Testament, was that it was imminent; the End Times could come any day. Any thought that the End Times was hundreds of years away, or only even decades away, is non-existent in Jewish writings including the New Testament. However with the advantage of hindsight we see that much of what they thought was about to happen, didn't. So now we look at those same expectations as imminent for us. How imminent are they? As we move through Revelation, and as we examine the Prophets that John will allude to, perhaps we'll get some answers.

One thing we've already discovered is that at some point there's going to be some name changes for Believers and for the City of God: Jerusalem. Not only that, but verse 12 of chapter 3 says that the divine being who is narrating this letter (and all the others) is also going to have His name changed. When a Jew of John's day hears this, he understands that a name symbolizes a set of attributes or defines a reputation. Thus it's not that these name changes are merely new ways that we call one another (Bob doesn't become Bill, and Sue doesn't become Sally), it is that there is some underlying fundamental change of nature that is going to occur. Ezekiel lends his voice to this by telling us that **Yerushalayim** will no longer be called the City of Peace but rather will be known as **Yehoveh Shama** meaning Yehoveh is there.

Let's move on now to the final letter: the letter to Laodicea. Open your Bibles to Revelation

chapter 3.

RE-READ REVELATION CHAPTER 3:14 - end

Laodicea is located about 40 miles southeast of Philadelphia. It's signature industry was the processing of wool. About 3 centuries old by John's day, the city got it's name from Laodice who was the wife of the city's founder, Antiochus II. This was a wealthy and influential city until the Muslims destroyed it in the Middle Ages. So the people living there, including the Believers, led a pretty good life with all the trappings of a wealthy city full of the best that life could offer in that era. That fact probably had much to do with what God says about the congregation.

As typical the letter opens with the divine being (God) giving us His characteristics but not His name. However in this instance, the description fits best (but not entirely) with standard attributes assigned to Yeshua. The words are: ***"Here is the message from the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the Ruler of God's creation: (Rev. 3:14 CJB).*** Let's dissect this description because I think you'll find it informative.

"Amen" is the way that Christians always end prayers. It is a Christian custom and not a biblical formula for ending prayer. So for an average Christian "amen" is kind of a religious sounding word that means "the end". However the Hebrew (and therefore biblical meaning) more means "truth" or "faithful". It is mostly used as a statement of affirmation by those hearing a prayer or saying a prayer. God the Father (or the Godhead in general) was called the Amen in some places in the Old Testament such as in Isaiah.

^{CJB} ***Isaiah 65:16 Thus someone on earth who blesses himself will bless himself by the God of truth, and someone on earth who swears an oath will swear by the God of truth; for past troubles will be forgotten, hidden from my eyes. (Isa. 65:16 CJB)***

Both times this verse speaks of the God of truth, the Hebrew word being translated as truth is "amen". So in the Old Testament saying "The Amen" is referring to the Father or the Godhead. Next the description calls the being "the faithful and true witness". Christ is called God's witness, and God the Father is not referred to as a witness. Therefore what Yeshua is witness to is the nature, will, and commandments of God the Father. He then brings that witness to the Jewish people, whose job it is to take it to the world at large.

Then comes the last part of the description that is "Ruler of God's creation". You'll find this interpretation in some Bible versions, but in more translations you'll find "Beginning of the creation of God". So one translation has this divine being ruling over God's Kingdom, and the other translation has Him as being the first thing God created. Why the difference? The Greek word being translated to either Ruler or beginning is ***arche*** and it has quite a wide range of meanings. However it seems that in this case what we have here is an expression that means the first to lead; the leader; the chief; the ruler. While I think this is what it means and best fits the context, either way it is a description that best fits God the Son. So while the emphasis of the 3-part description points toward Yeshua, we see elements of the Father (The Amen) in it as well. And we've noticed that this is the case with virtually every letter; that is, we have a mixture of characteristics that are usually assigned to the Father with characteristics that are usually

assigned to the Son. But never are we given a name.

Verses 15 and 16 are two of the best known verses in the New Testament. They read: ¹⁵ ***"I know what you are doing: you are neither cold nor hot. How I wish you were either one or the other!"*** ¹⁶ ***So, because you are lukewarm, neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of my mouth! (Rev. 3:15-16 CJB).*** In what can be either a help or a hindrance for us when trying to understand what a Bible author is trying to get across, is the fact that the ancient authors always thought in the context of life, culture and conditions in their time. Thus the metaphors and examples they might use were always based on everyday things that people of their era encountered and so they could easily identify with it. For example, if the Bible was written in our time very likely there would be a lot of metaphors and examples using traffic jams, iPhones, Islamic terrorism, computers, television, social media, etc. because that is the world we all recognize. What would NOT be used in our day are agricultural terms, or goat herding, or donkey riding, or the employment of slaves and bondservants because that is so distant and uncommon to all but a relative few. These metaphors and analogies can help us if we know the culture of biblical times, and it can hinder us if we don't. So that is why it is so vital that we use all possible means to understand Jewish culture and Middle Eastern society in whatever biblical era we might currently be studying. This statement in verses 15 and 16 is an excellent example of this. I'll flesh it out for you so that you can see it.

God says that even though "hot" is best, "cold" is actually second best since "lukewarm" is considered the worst. And lukewarm is so unacceptable to God that it gets spit out of His mouth in disgust. While hot, cold and lukewarm are being used metaphorically as a measure of faith for the Laodiceans, what is the mental picture that God is drawing on that will jog the conscience, and make a firm connection with a common everyday experience, for the people of Laodicea? In modern times, one would think that if hot is best, then cold would be worst and lukewarm is in the middle. And in some ways that would be preferable; but God says middle ground is the worst. Laodicea didn't have sufficient water locally to supply their growing and vibrant city so they built an aqueduct to pipe it in from some distance away. Cold water is actually very nice to drink. And, piping hot water, especially when it has tea in it, is also very nice to drink. But how about lukewarm water? Water that is neither cold nor hot? Lukewarm water is not pleasant to drink by itself, nor is tea very flavorful when only lukewarm. Water arriving by means of an above-ground aqueduct lost its natural coolness from the spring from whence it came, but it also never heated up enough to be hot and thus useful for tea or some other drink best used hot. Rather aqueduct water in Laodicea usually arrived rather distasteful, largely unusable in its current state; it was lukewarm and people would have tried to avoid drinking it as is. Thus lukewarm is, according to God, worth only to spit out onto the ground. The people of Laodicea would have grasped this readily. Thus what God is talking about is that the Believers of Laodicea are distasteful and therefore unusable by God. God can use a spiritually cold person, and He can use a spiritually hot person; but He can't use a spiritually lukewarm person; the lukewarm are fit only to be jettisoned by the Lord.

I find it fascinating how quickly some Pastors and Christian scholars jump to the defense of the once-saved-always-saved doctrine after speaking of this passage and declare that God spitting the lukewarm Believers out of His mouth of course couldn't mean those lukewarm of the Laodicea congregation are losing their salvation. So far the warnings of what happens to the

unrepentant Believers of the 7 congregations of Asia are: 1) they may not eat from the Tree of Life that gives eternal life; 2) they will not receive the crown that permits their entry into God's Kingdom; 3) God will make war against them with the sword of His mouth (that is, they will no longer be at peace with God); 4) each will receive what their deeds have earned them (instead of having their wrong deeds covered over by Christ's sacrifice); 5) they will be blotted out of the Book of Life that lists all those who had been granted eternal life with God; 6) they will not receive a new name, nor will they bear the name of God or the new name of the city of Jerusalem (that is, their identity with God and His kingdom will be removed); and 7) now God will spit them out of His mouth, rebuke them, and refuse to commune with them. In other words, every identifiable characteristic and advantage of being redeemed has been erased and taken away by God. But somehow this is supposedly not describing a loss of salvation. Folks that defies reasonable thinking and what the Word of God clearly warns.

So what has caused the Believers at Laodicea to become so lukewarm that it puts them at risk of having their salvation history reversed? It is their personal material wealth that has made them complacent and totally insensitive to their actual spiritual condition.

Verse 17 says that the Believers in Laodicea keep saying "I am rich!" As I said earlier, Laodicea was a city known for its citizens being generally well to do. The Believers there likely figured, as do many modern Westerner Christians, that our wealth is a measure of God's favor upon us. In fact the absolutely heretical Prosperity Doctrine favored by many TV evangelists and mega-church preachers (because it is so self-serving) is but a modern way to restate the spiritual condition of the Believers of Laodicea as found here in Revelation 3.

By the "I am rich" statement John is no doubt alluding to Hosea 12. As we've discussed in past lessons, to truly understand what a biblical writer is getting at when they quote or allude to a section of Scripture, we must not focus on the brief quote or allusion but rather on the larger context that surrounds it. So let's go to Hosea 12 and examine it (page 719 in the CJB).

READ HOSEA 12:1 - 11

Notice the context for the "I am rich" statement in Hosea. The people of the northern and southern kingdoms (Judah and Ephraim) were not only divided but also had gone far astray and were in God's doghouse. Ephraim is chasing the wind and thinks they have caught it because they declare: "I have gotten so rich! I have made me a fortune! And in all my profits no one will find anything wrong or sinful". So they not only fully believe that their standing with God is beyond reproach, they also think that this good standing is indicated by their wealth. But God says that soon you'll be once again living in tents. That is, God is going to reverse their redemption history and throw them back into endlessly wandering the wilderness of sin and desolation. Even more, God says that He spoke through Prophets to Judah and Ephraim to warn them of their destructive path, even giving the Prophets visions of what it would all be like if they did not repent and turn from their sins. And so in Revelation we see the same pattern. John, as Prophet, is given a vision from God as a warning to Laodicea. God says He will spit the Believers of Laodicea out of His mouth, rebuke them, and not allow them to share His throne (a prime promise made to all Believers) if they do not repent and turn from these sins.

Remember: Ephraim represents what is today called the 10 Lost Tribes. The Jews of John's day were well aware of this as it was embedded in Israel's history and culture. So the warning John alludes to in Hosea 12 was quite vivid to the Jewish Believers of Laodicea.

The "I am rich" statement of Revelation 3:17 can be contrasted with what was said in the 2nd letter, the letter to Smyrna, in 2:9. Here is the thing we must notice: the 1st letter to Ephesus and the 7th letter to Laodicea is God sternly dressing down the two assemblies that have the most grave problems and therefore are in the highest spiritual danger. The 2nd letter to Smyrna and the 6th letter to Philadelphia are addressed to the two Believing assemblies that God is most pleased with, and finds no fault in. So while in the letter to faithful Smyrna we read in chapter 2 verse 9: ⁹ **"I know how you are suffering and how poor you are (though in fact you are rich!), (Rev. 2:9 CJB),** we read in the letter to unfaithful Laodicea: ¹⁷ **For you keep saying, 'I am rich, I have gotten rich, I don't need a thing!' You don't know that you are the one who is wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked! (Rev. 3:17 CJB).** So while the Believers of Smyrna are humble and see themselves as materially poor, God sees them as spiritually rich because they are obedient and faithful. The haughty Believers of Laodicea see themselves as materially rich and without need, but God sees them as spiritually poor and utterly blind to their dire condition because they are disobedient and unfaithful.

Oh what a warning this is for Believers in all ages! It is not that material wealth is being attacked or condemned or made to be an automatic indication of spiritual poverty. It is that wealth and abundance must be handled very carefully. We must depend on God to help us be good stewards over our prosperity or it can all too easily become our downfall and either the pursuit of it, or the attainment of it, can consume us. Unfortunately too often it IS automatic for wealthy Believers to think that their wealth must be an indicator that they are spiritually exceptional.....living their lives in tune with God's will... and therefore they become proud and see themselves as not only spiritually safe but also above those who are less fortunate. The lesson is that our material abundance or lack of abundance is not at all connected with our spiritual condition in God's eyes. We can be wealthy and faithful, or poor and faithful. We can be wealthy and disobedient, or poor and disobedient. So what is the solution to this condition that the Laodiceans suffer?

In verse 18 God gives us the antidote. Notice that three negative conditions arise in verse 17 from the Laodiceans' belief that their material wealth means that they are spiritually sound: they are poor, naked, and blind. Therefore the antidote involves solutions for each of these conditions. First to cure their spiritual poverty they should: "buy gold from Me, refined by fire". While we can buy gold with money, we cannot buy what God offers us with money. Thus God's gold refined by fire cannot be purchased at any price because no one can purchase the spiritual with the material. God's gold is symbolic of our redemption and of the grace He bestows upon us that is essentially free. It can only be bought at the price paid for by our Savior coupled with our sincere submission, allegiance and obedience to Him. The Bible shows us that fire can be used for two things: destruction and purification. Our dependence upon the material gold smelted by fire into money will lead to destruction; our dependence upon God's spiritual gold refined by holy fire will lead to our purification.

The second part of the antidote, to cure nakedness, is to purchase white clothing in order to

cover their nakedness so that they will not suffer shame. White clothing always signifies ritual purity. Nakedness can be just as we think of it; nudity. But it is also used as an expression that means an inward unclean spiritual condition most commonly associated with idolatry. So the idea here in Revelation is that the purity provided by God can act as a garment that covers over the unclean spiritual condition of a human thereby making him acceptable to God. Let's also be clear that the translation of the Greek word ***aischune*** should be "shame" and not "ashamed". While this is challenging for Western Christians to comprehend, Eastern societies understand this distinction because the basis of their cultures is shame and honor. Honor is a positive and sought after social status that everyone of that society seeks to maintain. Shame is a negative societal status to be avoided; it is so terrible that a shamed person will commit murder even of a close family member without hesitation to overcome it. Ashamed is an emotion of guilt and plays little to no role in an Eastern or Middle Eastern society. So it is the shame....a negative status.... the loss of honor.....due to our unclean spiritual condition that is the issue; not our feeling guilty about it.

The third part of the antidote to combat the Laodiceans' spiritual blindness is to purchase God's eye salve to rub onto their eyes in order that the spiritually blind might see the truth. So the eye medicine restores the wayward person's spiritual discernment.

Verse 19 explains an exceedingly important God principle: the Lord rebukes those that He loves. Thus for the Believers of Laodicea, and for all Believers in all ages, God rebuking us is not His deciding to hate us; but rather it is an action He takes in His hope to drive us back to a right relationship with Him. As in Hosea 12 when God says He will send unfaithful Ephraim back into tents (meaning back into the wilderness, indicating that their salvation history has been reversed), it doesn't have to be the end for them or for us. There is a means back into God's good graces; there is a means of rescue by a merciful God from eternal death and a return to eternal life. But in His omniscience, God knows when it is going to take some pretty severe action on His part to get someone's attention.

James 5:19-20 CJB ¹⁹ *My brothers, if one of you wanders from the truth, and someone causes him to return,* ²⁰ *you should know that whoever turns a sinner from his wandering path will save him from death and cover many sins.*

Clearly James is not talking about physical death since sinner or saint everyone dies. Rather the death that he and all Believers ought to be most concerned with is the so-called second death: eternal death...the death of our souls. So here is James talking to his brothers (meaning brothers in Christ) and saying that should a Believer fall away (renounce his salvation), and someone goes to him and convinces him to return to righteousness, then such an action has saved a former Believer who has wandered away but now re-embraced the Gospel truth, from eternal death. So a Christian who renounces Christ and/or the ways of Christ will be like Ephraim; he'll have his status as redeemed stripped from him and be thrown back into the wilderness. But all is not lost; God's hope by taking this action is to jar that person into examining his life, repenting, and returning through the door of grace that the Father has left open to all who would come to Him. However if that former Believer refuses to repent, then it will be as though he had never believed at all.

The verse continues with the Lord commanding the wayward Laodicean Believer to exert himself and turn from his sins! Christianity as viewed from afar by Jews and even by Muslims is seen as a cheap religion. It isn't; but a Hellenized Christianity has made it appear so. Despite what is too often taught from pulpits, repentance does not come to us like a kindly tooth fairy after we've placed a pushed-out molar under our pillow before we fall asleep. That is, all we have to do is wish and wait; any real effort is up to the tooth fairy. Repentance does not come from a passive attitude of all the responsibility for our forgiveness being placed upon the Lord. Rather it takes real effort to pull ourselves out of our spiritual lethargy and indifference and to turn from the sin that has become our way of life. And, I am convinced, it takes all the more effort to have first Believed, then fallen away, and then to come back. And that is the scenario being contemplated here. Therefore I am also convinced that the chances that a former Believer will return and believe again is less than for a person who has never before believed in the salvation of Christ. And thus James' comment that a brother in Yeshua that can somehow persuade one who has fallen away from the faith to return, has done an epic thing (and what is in reality a rare thing).

Verse 20 doubles down on what I just said. That is, God says to the one who has fallen away, "Here, I'm standing at the door, knocking". So just as a non-Believer, or former Believer, is to be active and not passive in repenting and turning from his sins, so will God be active and not passive in His efforts to rescue the fallen Believer. He will pursue those whom Him loves. But do not confuse "those whom He loves" with salvation.

John 3:16 CJB ¹⁶ "For God so loved the world that he gave his only and unique Son, so that everyone who trusts in him may have eternal life, instead of being utterly destroyed.

God created every human being and so He loves every human being. But His love for us does not equate to our salvation. Thus even when a former Believer is stripped of his salvation, God still loves him and longs for him to repent and turn back. Although some believe that this love for all, even those who have rebelled against Him, is a New Testament innovation in fact it is an Old Testament principle.

^{CJB} Zechariah 1:1 In the eighth month of the second year of Daryavesh, the following message from ADONAI came to Z'kharyah the son of Berekhyah, the son of 'Iddo, the prophet:

² "ADONAI was extremely angry with your ancestors. ³ Therefore, tell them that ADONAI-Tzva'ot says this: "'Return to me," says ADONAI-Tzva'ot, "and I will return to you," says ADONAI-Tzva'ot.

⁴ "Don't be like your ancestors. The earlier prophets proclaimed to them, 'ADONAI-Tzva'ot says to turn back now from your evil ways and deeds'; but they didn't listen or pay attention to me," says ADONAI.

⁵ "Your ancestors, where are they? And the prophets, do they live forever? ⁶ But my words and my laws, which I ordered my servants the prophets, overtook your

ancestors, didn't they? Then they turned and said, 'ADONAI has dealt with us according to our ways and deeds, just as he intended to do.''''' (Zech. 1:1-6 CJB)

Revelation 3:21 offers a reward for the wayward Laodiceans who repent and turn from the sins that God has identified in their congregation. It is that they will sit with Him on His throne. But then the words are added: "just as I myself also won the victory and sat down with My Father on His throne." This passage is the strongest evidence yet that the divine-being who has been narrating is Yeshua; Jesus the Christ. So Yeshua holds Himself up as the model for Believers to pattern ourselves after. However at the same time please notice, once again, the obvious distinction that is made between the Son and the Father. The throne belongs to the Father; the Son is only allowed to sit with the Father on the Father's throne because the Son won the victory by being so faithful as to go to His death on the cross. Once again in John's eyes the Father is preeminent and Yeshua, the Son, is under His authority. So the particular brand of the Trinity Doctrine that declares a co-equal status among the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is once again refuted by Scripture.

But what does it mean for a Believer to sit on the throne? It is the idea of participation in the Kingdom as well as royal authority, power and glory. Thus for those who fell away from Christ, but whose eyes have been opened and exerted themselves to return, a path leading to a door has been established. And the reward for their effort will be to share the rule over God's Kingdom with Messiah.

The letter ends with the standard closing protocol that urges the Believers of Laodicea to not just read or passively listen to the letter's contents, but also to act because being informed is not sufficient; real, tangible change is required.

As we have now completed the series of 7 letters to the 7 Asian congregations, next time we'll look at another vision received by John.