

William Barclay's Daily Study Bible

Revelation 3

THE LETTER TO LAODICEA (Revelation 3:14-22)

3:14-22 And to the angel of the Church in Laodicea, write:

These things says the Amen, the witness on whom you can rely and who is true, the moving cause of the creation of God. I know your works; I know that you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were cold or hot! So, because you are tepid and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of my mouth. Because you say, I am rich and I have acquired riches, and I need nothing, and are quite unaware that it is you who are the wretched and the pitiable one, the poor and the blind and the naked one, I advise you to buy from me gold that has been refined by fire that you may be rich, white raiment that you may be clothed and that the shame of your nakedness may not be openly displayed, and eye-salve to anoint your eyes, that you may see.

I rebuke and discipline all those whom I love. Be eager, therefore, and repent.

Behold, I am standing at the door and knocking. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and will have my meal with him, and he with me.

I will give to him who overcomes to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame and took my seat with my Father in his throne.

Let him who has an ear hear what the Spirit is saying to the Churches.

Laodicea, The Church Condemned (Revelation 3:14-22)

Laodicea has the grim distinction of being the only Church of which the Risen Christ has nothing good to say.

In the ancient world there were at least six cities called Laodicea and this one was called Laodicea on the Lycus to distinguish it from the others. It was founded about 250 B.C. by Antiochus of Syria and was named after his wife Laodice.

Its importance was due entirely to its position. The road from Ephesus to the east and to Syria was the most important in Asia. It began at the coast at Ephesus and it had to find a way to climb up to the central plateau 8,500 feet up. It set out along the valley of the River Maeander until it reached what were known as the Gates of Phrygia. Beyond this point lay a broad valley where Lydia, Phrygia and Caria met. The Maeander entered that valley by a narrow, precipitous gorge through which no road could pass. The road, therefore, detoured through the Lycus valley. In that valley Laodicea stood.

It was literally astride the great road to the east which went straight through Laodicea, entering by the Ephesian Gate and leaving by the Syrian Gate. That in itself would have been enough to make Laodicea one of the great commercial and strategic centres of the ancient world. Originally Laodicea had been a fortress; but it had the serious handicap that all its water supply had to come by underground aqueduct from springs no less than six miles away, a perilous situation for a town besieged. Two other roads passed through the gates of Laodicea, that from Pergamum and the Hermus Valley to Pisidia and Pamphylia and the coast at Perga and that from eastern Caria to central and west Phrygia.

As Ramsay says: "It only needed peace to make Laodicea a great commercial and financial centre." That peace came with the dominion of Rome. When the Roman peace gave it its opportunity it became, as Pliny called it, "a most distinguished city."

Laodicea had certain characteristics which have left their mark on the letter written to it.

(i) It was a great banking and financial centre. When Cicero was travelling in Asia Minor it was at Laodicea that he cashed his letters of credit. It was one of the wealthiest cities in the world. In A.D. 61 it was devastated by an earthquake; but so rich and independent were its citizens that they refused any help from the Roman government and out of their own resources rebuilt their city. Tacitus writes: "One of the most famous cities of Asia, Laodicea, was in that same year overthrown by an earthquake and without any relief from us recovered itself by its own resources" (Tacitus: Annals 14: 27). No wonder that Laodicea could boast that it was rich and had amassed wealth and had need of nothing. It was so wealthy that it did not even need God.

(ii) It was a great centre of clothing manufacture. The sheep which grazed round Laodicea were famous for their soft, violet-black, glossy wool. It mass-produced cheap outer garments. It was specially connected with a tunic called the trimita, so much so, indeed, that it was sometimes called Trimitaria. Laodicea was so proud of the garments it produced that it never realized it was naked in the sight of God.

(iii) It was a very considerable medical centre. Thirteen miles to the west, between Laodicea and the Gate of Phrygia, stood the temple of the Carian god Men. At one time that temple was the social, administrative and commercial centre of the whole area. Until less than a hundred years ago great markets were regularly held on its site. In particular the temple was the centre of a medical school which was transferred to Laodicea itself. So famous were its doctors that the names of some appear on the coins of Laodicea. Two of them were called Zeuxis and Alexander Philaethes.

This medical school was famous for two things throughout the world, ointment for the ear and ointment for the eyes. The King James and Revised Standard Versions speak of eye-salve. The word for salve is kollourion (**Greek #2854**) which literally means a little roll of bread. The reason for the word is that this famous tephra Phrygia, Phrygian powder, was exported all over the world in solidified tablet form in the shape of little rolls. Laodicea was so conscious of its medical skill in the care of the eyes that it never realized that it was spiritually blind.

The words of the Risen Christ arise directly from the prosperity and the skill in which Laodicea took so much pride and which had in the minds of its citizens, and even of its Church, eliminated the need for God.

(iv) We add a final fact about Laodicea. It was in an area where there was a very large Jewish population. So many Jews emigrated here that the Rabbis inveighed against the Jews who sought the wines and baths of Phrygia. In 62 B.C. Flaccus, the governor of the province, became alarmed at the amount of currency which the Jews were exporting in payment of the Temple tax which every male Jew paid and put an embargo on the export of currency. The result was that twenty pounds weight of gold was seized as contraband in Laodicea and one hundred pounds in Apameia in Phrygia. That amount of gold would be equal to 15,000 silver drachmae. The Jewish Temple tax amounted to half a shekel, which was equal to two drachmae. This means that in the district there were at least 7,500 male Jews. In Hierapolis, six miles away from Laodicea, there was a "Congregation of Jews" which had power to levy and to retain fines, and an archive office where Jewish legal documents were specially kept. There can have been few areas where the Jews were wealthier and more influential.

Laodicea, The Claims Of Christ (Revelation 3:14-22 Continued)

Of all the seven Churches that of Laodicea is most unsparingly condemned. In it there is no redeeming feature. It is interesting to note that the third century work The Apostolic Constitutions (8: 46) says that Archippus was the first Bishop of the Church in Laodicea. When Paul was writing to the neighbouring Church of Colossae, he says sternly: "Say to Archippus, See that you fulfil the ministry which you have received in the Lord" (Colossians 4:17). It would seem that Archippus was somehow failing in his duty. That was thirty years before the Revelation was written; but it may be that as long ago as that the rot had set in in the Church in Laodicea and an unsatisfactory ministry had sown the seeds of degeneration.

Like all the letters it begins with a series of great titles of Jesus Christ.

(i) He is the Amen. This is a strange title and may go back to either of two origins.

(a) In Isaiah 65:16 God is called the God of truth; but in the Hebrew he is called the God of Amen. Amen is the word which is often put at the end of a solemn statement in order to guarantee its truth. If God is the God of Amen, he is utterly to be relied upon. This would mean that Jesus Christ is the One whose promises are true beyond all doubt.

(b) In John's gospel Jesus' statements often begin: "Truly, truly, I say to you" (e.g. John 1:51; John 3:3; John 3:5; John 3:11). The Greek for truly is Amen. It is possible that when Jesus Christ is called the Amen it is a reminiscence of his own way of speaking. The meaning would be the same, Jesus is one whose promises can be relied upon.

(ii) He is the witness on whom we can rely and who is true. Trench points out that a witness must satisfy three essential conditions. (a) He must have seen with his own eyes that of which he tells. (b) He must be absolutely honest, so that he repeats with accuracy that which he has heard and seen. (c) He must have the ability to tell what he has to say, so that his witness may make its true impression on those who hear. Jesus Christ perfectly satisfied these conditions. He can tell of God, because he came from him. We can rely on his words for he is the Amen. He is able to tell his message, for never did man speak as he did.

(iii) As the Revised Standard Version has it, he is the beginning of God's creation. This phrase, as it stands in English, is ambiguous. It could mean, either, that Jesus was the first person to be created or that he began the process of creation, as Trench put it, "dynamically the beginning." It is the second meaning which is intended here. The word for beginning is arche (**Greek #746**). In early Christian writings we read that Satan is the arche (**Greek #746**) of death, that is to say, death takes its origin in him; and that God is the arche (**Greek #746**) of all things, that is, all things find their beginning in him.

The connection of the Son with creation is frequently made in the New Testament. John begins his gospel by saying of the Word: "All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made" (John 1:3). "In him," says Paul, "all things were created" (Colossians 1:15; Colossians 1:18). The insistence on the Son's part in creation was due to the heretics who explained sin and disease by saying that the world had been created by a false and inferior god. It is the Christian insistence that this world is God's creation and that its sin and sorrow are not his fault, but are caused by the disobedience of men. As the Christian sees it, the God of creation and the God of redemption are one and the same.

Laodicea, Neither One Thing Nor Another (Revelation 3:14-22 Continued)

The condemnation of Laodicea begins with a picture of almost crude vividness; because the Laodiceans are neither cold nor hot, they have about them a kind of nauseating quality, which will make the Risen Christ vomit them out of his mouth.

The exact meaning of the words is to be noted. Cold is psuchros (**Greek #5593**); and it can mean cold to the point of freezing. Ecclesiasticus (Sirach 43:20) speaks of the cold north wind which makes the ice congeal upon the waters. Hot is zestos (**Greek #2200**); and it means hot to boiling point. Tepid is chliaros (**Greek #5513**). Things which are tepid often have a nauseating effect. Hot food and cold food can both be appetizing, but tepid food will often make the stomach turn. Directly opposite Laodicea, on the other bank of the Lycus, and in full view, stood Hierapolis, famous for its hot mineral springs. Often hot mineral springs are nauseating in their taste and make the person who drinks them want to be physically sick. That is the way in which the Church at Laodicea affected the Risen Christ. Here is something to make us think:

(i) The one attitude which the Risen Christ unsparingly condemns is indifference. It has been said that an author can write a good biography if he loves his subject or hates him but not if he is coldly indifferent. Of all things indifference is the hardest to combat. The problem of modern evangelism is not hostility to Christianity; it would be better if it were so. The problem is that to so many Christianity and the Church have ceased to have any relevance and men regard them with complete indifference. This indifference can be broken down only by the actual demonstration that Christianity is a power to make life strong and a grace to make life beautiful.

(ii) The one impossible attitude to Christianity is neutrality. Jesus Christ works through men; and the man who remains completely detached in his attitude to him has by that very fact refused to undertake the work which is the divine purpose for him. The man who will not submit to Christ has necessarily resisted him.

(iii) Hard as it may sound, the meaning of this terrible threat of the Risen Christ is that it is better not even to start on the Christian way than to start and then to drift into a conventional and meaningless Christianity. The fire must be kept burning. There is an unwritten saying of Jesus: "He who is near me is near the fire." And the way to "maintain the spiritual glow" (Romans 12:11, Moffatt) is to live close to Christ.

Laodicea, The Wealth That Is Poverty (Revelation 3:14-22 Continued)

The tragedy of Laodicea was that it was convinced of its own wealth and blind to its own poverty. Humanly speaking, anyone would say that there was not a more prosperous town in Asia Minor. Spiritually speaking, the Risen Christ declares that there was not a more poverty-stricken community. Laodicea prided itself on three things; and each is taken in turn and shown at its true value.

(i) It prided itself on its financial wealth. It was rich and had acquired wealth and had need of nothing--so it thought. The Risen Christ advises Laodicea to buy gold refined in the fire. It may be that gold tried in the fire stands for faith for it is thus that Peter describes faith (1 Peter 1:7). Wealth can do much but there are things that it can never do. It cannot buy happiness nor give a man health either of body or of mind; it cannot bring comfort in sorrow nor fellowship in loneliness. If all that a man has to meet life with is wealth, he is poor indeed. But if a man has a faith tried and refined in the crucible of experience, there is nothing which he cannot face; and he is rich indeed.

(ii) Laodicea prided itself on its clothing trade. The garments made there were famous over all the world, and the wool of the sheep of Laodicea was a luxury article which all men knew, But, says the Risen Christ, Laodicea is spiritually naked; if it wants really to be clothed it must come to him. The Risen Christ speaks of "the shame of the nakedness of Laodicea."

This would mean even more in the ancient world than now. In the ancient world to be stripped naked was the worst humiliation. It was thus that Hanun treated the servants of David (2 Samuel 10:4). The threat to Egypt is that Assyria will lead her people naked and barefoot (Isaiah 20:4). It was Ezekiel's threat to Israel that her enemies would strip her of her clothes (Ezekiel 16:37-39; Ezekiel 23:26-29; compare Hosea 2:3; Hosea 2:9; Micah 1:8; Micah 1:11). God's threat passed on by Nahum to the disobedient people was: "I will let nations look on your nakedness, and on your kingdoms shame" (Nahum 3:5). On the other hand, to be clothed in fine raiment was the greatest honour. Pharaoh honoured Joseph by clothing him in vestures of fine linen (Genesis 41:42). Daniel is clothed in purple by Belshazzar (Daniel 5:29). The royal apparel is for the man whom the king honours (Esther 6:6-11). When the prodigal son returns, it is the best robe that is put upon him (Luke 15:22).

Laodicea prides itself on the magnificent garments it produces but spiritually it is naked and nakedness is shame. The Risen Christ urges it to buy white raiment from him. This may well stand for the beauties of life and character which only the grace of Christ can give. There is little point in a man adorning his body, if he has nothing to adorn his soul. Not all the clothes in the world will beautify a person whose nature is twisted and whose character is ugly.

(iii) Laodicea prided itself on its famous eye-salve; but the facts of the case show that it was blind to its own poverty and nakedness. Trench says: "The beginning of all true amendment is to see ourselves as we are." All eye-salves in the ancient world caused the eyes to smart at their first application, and Laodicea had no wish to see itself as it was.

Laodicea, Love's Chastisement (Revelation 3:14-22 Continued)

Revelation 3:19 is one whose teaching runs throughout Scripture. "I rebuke and discipline all those whom I love." There is a very lovely thing about the way this is put. It is a quotation from Proverbs 3:12, but one word is altered. In the Greek of the Septuagint the word for love is agapan (**Greek #25**) which indicates the unconquerable attitude of goodwill which nothing can turn to hate; but it is a word which maybe has more of the head than the heart in it; and in the quotation the Risen Christ changes agapan (**Greek #25**) to philein (**Greek #5368**) which is the most tender affection. We might well paraphrase it: "It is the people who are dearest to me on whom I exercise the sternest discipline."

Let us first take the word rebuke. The Greek is *elegchein* (**Greek #1651**) and it describes the kind of rebuke which compels a man to see the error of his ways. *Elegchos* (**Greek #1650**) is the corresponding noun, and Aristotle defines it: "Elegchos (**Greek #1650**) is the proof that a thing cannot be otherwise than we say." The most vivid example of this kind of rebuke is the way in which Nathan opened David's eyes to his sin (2 Samuel 12:1-14). The rebuke of God is not so much punishment as illumination.

Let us see how the idea of discipline runs through the Bible.

It is very characteristic of the teaching of Proverbs. "He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him" (Proverbs 13:24). "Withhold not correction from the child; for, if you beat him with a rod he will not die. If you beat him with the rod you will save his life from Sheol" (Proverbs 23:13-14). "Faithful are the wounds of a friend" (Proverbs 27:6). "The rod and reproof give wisdom; but a child left to himself brings shame to his mother. . . . Discipline your son and he will give you rest; he will give delight to your heart" (Proverbs 29:15; Proverbs 29:17). "Blessed is the man whom thou dost chasten, O Lord, and whom thou dost teach out of thy law" (Psalms 94:12). "Behold, happy is the man whom God reproves; therefore, despise not the chastening of the Almighty" (Job 5:17). "We are chastened of the Lord that we may not be condemned along with the world" (1 Corinthians 11:32). "For the Lord disciplines him whom he loves and chastises every son whom he receives. It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is testing you as sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons" (Hebrews 11:6; Hebrews 11:8). "He that loveth his son will continue to lay stripes upon him, that he may have joy of him in the end. He that chastiseth his son shall have profit of him and shall glory of him among his acquaintances" (Ecc 30:1).

It is, in fact, God's final punishment to leave a man alone. "Ephraim is joined to idols; let him alone" (Hosea 4:17). As Trenchard has it: "The great Master-builder squares and polishes with many strokes of the chisel and hammer the stones which shall find a place at last in the walls of the heavenly Jerusalem.... It is the crushed grape, and not the untouched, from which the costly liquor distils." There is no surer way of allowing a child to end in ruin than to allow him to do as he likes. It is a fact of life that the best athlete and the finest scholar receive the most demanding training. The discipline of God is not something which we should resent, but something for which we should be devoutly thankful.

Laodicea, The Christ Who Knocks (Revelation 3:14-22 Continued)

In Revelation 3:20 we have one of the most famous pictures of Jesus in the whole New Testament. "Behold," says the Risen Christ, "I am standing at the door and knocking." This picture has been derived from two different sources.

(i) It has been taken as a warning that the end is near, and that the Coming of Christ is at hand. The Christian must be ready to open whenever he hears his Lord knocking (Luke 12:36). When the signs come, the Christian will know that the last time is near, even at the doors (Mark 13:29; Matthew 24:33). The Christian must live well and live in love because the judge is standing at the doors (James 5:9). It is true that the New Testament uses this picture to express the imminence of the coming of Christ. If that is the picture here, this phrase contains a warning and tells men to have a care, for Jesus Christ the Judge and King is at the door.

(ii) We cannot say that that meaning is impossible and yet it does not seem to fit the context, for the atmosphere of the passage is not so much warning as love. It is much better to take this saying of Christ as expressing the appeal of the lover of the souls of men. The origin of the passage is much more likely to be in Solomon's Song when the lover stands at the door of his beloved and pleads with her to open. "Hark! my beloved is knocking. Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, perfect one" (SS 5:2-6). Here is Christ the lover knocking at the door of the hearts of men. And in this picture we see certain great truths of the Christian religion.

(a) We see the pleading of Christ. He stands at the door of the human heart and knocks. The unique new fact that Christianity brought into this world is that God is the seeker of men. No other religion has the vision of a seeking God.

In his book *Out of Nazareth* Donald Baillie cites three witnesses to the uniqueness of this conception. Montefiore, the great Jewish scholar, said that the one thing which no Jewish prophet or Rabbi ever conceived

of is the "conception of God actually going out in quest of sinful men, who were not seeking him, but who were turned away from him." The National Christian Council of Japan in a document found the distinctive difference of Christianity from all other religions in, "Man not seeking God, but God taking the initiative in seeking man." St. Bernard away back in the twelfth century used often to say to his monks that, "However early they might wake and rise for prayer in their chapel on a cold mid-winter morning or even in the dead of night, they would always find God awake before them, waiting for them--nay, it was he who had awakened them to seek his face."

Here is the picture of Christ searching for sinful men who did not want him. Surely love can go no further than that.

(b) We see the offer of Christ. As the King James Version has it, "I will come in and sup with him." The word translated "sup" is deipnein (**Greek #1172**) and its corresponding noun is deipnon (**Greek #1173**). The Greeks had three meals in the day. There was akratisma, breakfast, which was no more than a piece of dried bread dipped in wine. There was ariston (**Greek #712**), the midday meal. A man did not go home for it; it was simply a picnic snack eaten by the side of the pavement, or in some colonnade, or in the city square. There was deipnon (**Greek #1173**); this was the evening meal; the main meal of the day; people lingered over it, for the day's work was done. It was the deipnon (**Greek #1173**) that Christ would share with the man who answered his knock, no hurried meal, but that where people lingered in fellowship. If a man will open the door, Jesus Christ will come in and linger long with him.

(iii) We see human responsibility. Christ knocks and a man can answer or refuse to answer. Christ does not break in; he must be invited in. Even on the Emmaus road, "He appeared to be going further" (Luke 24:28). Holman Hunt was right when in his famous picture *The Light of the World* he painted the door of the human heart with no handle on the outside, for it can be opened only from within. As Trench has it: "Every man is lord of the house of his own heart; it is his fortress; he must open the gates of it," and he has "the mournful prerogative and privilege of refusing to open." The man who refuses to open is "blindly at strife with his own blessedness." He is a "miserable conqueror."

Christ pleads and offers; but it is all to no avail if a man will not open the door.

This Means You (Revelation 3:14-22 Continued)

The promise of the Risen Christ is that the victor will sit with him in his own victorious throne. We will get the picture right if we remember that the eastern throne was more like a couch than a single seat. The victor in life will share the throne of the victorious Christ.

Every letter finishes with the words: "Let him who has an ear hear what the Spirit is saying to the Churches." This saying does two things.

(i) It individualizes the message of the letters. It says to every man: "This means you." So often we listen to a message which comes through a preacher and apply it to everyone but ourselves. In our heart of hearts we believe that the stern words cannot possibly be meant for us and that the promises are too good to be true for us. This phrase says to every one of us: "All these things are meant for you."

(ii) It generalizes the message of the letters. It means that their message was not confined to the people in the seven Churches nineteen hundred years ago, but that through them the Spirit is speaking to every man in every generation. We have set these letters carefully against the local situations to which they were addressed; but their message is not local and temporary. It is eternal and in them the Spirit still speaks to us.

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