



I AM

LETTERS TO THREE MORE CHURCHES

Revelation 3

The Daily Word from Laura Martin

The letters continue to unfold as John proclaimed his vision from the Lord to the three remaining churches: Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. Each had a different challenge: to be alert and strengthen what remained; to endure all things by keeping God's command with faithful, courageous, and humble love; and to repent from a lukewarm way of life and be committed to Jesus.

Specifically, the Lord declared to the church of Laodicea, "Listen! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and have dinner with him, and he with Me." *This message is for you.* Do you know the voice of the Shepherd? Jesus said, "My sheep hear My voice, I know them, and they follow Me." Today, do you hear the voice of the Lord? Do you hear the Lord knocking? Take time to pause from the busyness and sit quietly. Ask the Lord: *Jesus, what do You want me to know about You? If we were having dinner, what would You say to me?* When you ask these questions, sit and listen like you would to a friend. Today, listen to the One who guides you, knows you, and loves you. Remain alert and ready.

"As many as I love, I rebuke and discipline. So be committed and repent. Listen! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and have dinner with him, and he with Me."

— Revelation 3:19–20

FURTHER SCRIPTURE

- *John 10:3–4* — "The doorkeeper opens it for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought all his own outside, he goes ahead of them. The sheep follow him because they recognize his voice."
- *Revelation 3:2–3* — "Be alert and strengthen what remains, which is about to die, for I have not found your works complete before My God. Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; keep it, and repent. But if you are not alert, I will come like a thief, and you have no idea at what hour I will come against you."
- *Revelation 3:15–16* — "I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I am going to vomit you out of My mouth."



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Teaching Notes

INTRO

Today we continue by looking at the next three churches. In review, we've looked at the churches of: **Ephesus**—the loveless church; **Smyrna**—the stalwart church; **Pergamum**—the compromising church; and **Thyatira**—the moral compromise church. John used a uniform outline that was developed by Tenney: (1) commission; (2) character; (3) commendation; (4) condemnation; (5) correction; (6) call; and (7) challenge.¹ Today, the call and the challenge are inverted.

TEACHING

Revelation 3:1-6: John next addressed **the church in Sardis**. In verse 1 Jesus described Himself to John as, “the One who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.” The book of 1 Enoch 20:1–8, one of the Hebrew texts found in the Dead Sea Scrolls, names the seven angels: Uriel, Raphael, Raguel, Michael, Saraqael, Gabriel, and Remiel. In Revelation 8:2, these are the angels who blow the trumpets. Throughout Revelation the number seven is used. So far, we've seen seven spirits/seven stars; sevenfold operation of the Spirit (Isaiah 11:2); and seven archangels of Jewish tradition. There are more sevens to come in Revelation 4–5.

Jesus commended Sardis for their works and their reputation of being alive. Everything provided about each church gives information about its city and its context. You may note some similarities between the churches of Ephesus and Sardis. Sardis was located 50 miles northeast of Ephesus, and its geographic backdrop contained three main landmarks: (1) an acropolis that rose 800 feet above the city and had nearly perpendicular rock walls on three sides, creating a natural citadel; (2) the temple to Artemis, which was unfinished and built over the top of an older temple to Cybele (a god who was believed to possess special power of restoring dead to life); and (3) the Necropolis or cemetery of 1,000 hills—burial mounds that could be seen on the skyline seven miles from the city. John then gave the condemnation that although the church was believed to be alive, it was dead. The church had retained an outward appearance of life while being dead inside. Some regard this as the most severe condemnation of the seven churches (v. 3). Sardis was a city of pride, arrogance, and wealth that relied heavily on their past accomplishments and past reputation. The danger was that the church now reflected the city more than it reflected Christ.

Note that of the seven churches, five needed renewal, and that was only after 60 years into the history of the Church. The problem of church renewal is nothing new. Christ's heart broke when thinking of this congregation—who was a bride in name only. Jesus told them to wake up to the urgent need because they were under attack. They needed to stay alert (v. 3). Jesus reminded them of attacks against the city that they had already faced. One story told of how Cyrus captured the city by sending a climber up a crevice on one of the most perpendicular walls—most formidable to climb—of the fortress. Later the same thing happened with the Romans. The warning is that to consider oneself secure and then fail to remain alert was to court disaster. In A.D. 17, Sardis experienced a catastrophic earthquake. The city was later rebuilt with considerable help from Emperor Tiberias, but it never fully recovered. In fact, the city remained incomplete and was never totally rebuilt. If the church did not become alert, Jesus would come at an unforeseen moment to judge them.

The church today struggles with apathy. What appearances do we have, to keep up? Is there a sneak attack coming where we don't even look? Are we dead on the inside? The church of Sardis had a few people (the remnant) who walked faithfully and would walk in white with Christ because they are worthy (v. 4). In Asia Minor, soiled clothes disqualified the worshipper and dishonored the gods. White garments were emblems of purity and victory (Revelation 19:8). White clothes are mentioned seven times in Revelation: 3:4-5; 4:4; 6:11; 7:9, 13; and 19:14. The challenge was to remain faithful and be victorious. They would have their name added to the Book of Life for their faithfulness (v. 5). His message is vital for all of us to hear. Note: The first reference to the Book of Life is in Exodus 32:32–33.

¹ Merrill C. Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Erdmans Publishing House, 1951), n.p.



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Teaching Notes

Revelation 3:7–13: John then addressed **the church in Philadelphia**, which was located at the eastern end of the same valley as the town of Sardis. Philadelphia was located at a junction of trade routes—the imperial post route from Rome passed through the city, earning the city the title “Gateway to the East.” The city had commercial importance. To the north of the city was a fertile plain on which grapes were grown. It was founded by the king of Pergamum to commemorate the sacrificial loyalty and devotion of his brother. However, the area was subject to earthquakes and also suffered terribly from the A.D. 17 earthquake. It also had so many temples that by the fifth century it was known as “Little Athens.” The chief god worshipped, because of the grapes grown there, was Dionysus, the god of wine and fertility?

Once again, Jesus, the *I AM*, addressed the church. This description includes Jesus as the One who holds the key of David. The word for key included the key and the doorknob as well (v. 7). That alludes to the fact that the Messiah controls access to the eternal kingdom. Jesus has undisputed authority to admit or exclude anyone from the New Jerusalem. This is also a direct reference to Isaiah 22:15–22, in which a promise was made to Eliakim the scribe of the court of Hezekiah. Jesus acknowledged their faithfulness by giving them access to the open door. In spite of feeble strength, the church had refused to deny the name of Christ and would not allow it to be removed (v. 8). Remember, in the event of an earthquake, the safest place to be is in the doorframe.

The Lord would make those who came from Satan bow before the feet of the Christians. Verses 9–10 point to the serious conflict between the church and the “synagogue of Satan.” However, the believers had persevered in times of trial. Dispensationalists have used this passage as proof for a rapture before the tribulation, but the Greek doesn’t lend to that interpretation. That doesn’t disprove their thoughts, but it cannot be proved by verse 10. Jesus promised that He was coming quickly and that His strength would be added to their weakness. It is interesting to note that a Christian witness remained in Pergamum through medieval and into modern times—despite the Muslim invasion and their pressure on the church. Jesus promised to make them the victors with the crown of life. Notice there was no condemnation or correction given. For the victor, there was a threefold inscription given: the name of His God because of their faithfulness; the name of God’s city because of their citizenship in New Jerusalem; and His own new name because they were related in a special way to Christ (Revelation 7:3; 14:1). The church at Philadelphia was the faithful, courageous, and humble church. Jesus therefore promised to use them in powerful ways. The key to effectiveness for any church is to realize how powerless we are without the power of the Holy Spirit, who exhibits His strength through us.

Revelation 3:14–22: John’s seventh and final letter was to **the church in Laodicea**. This church was in the wealthy Roman city that had acquired earthly power by wealth. Jesus was again described as the *I AM*—the amen. Jesus knew their works and said they were neither cold nor hot. Their faithfulness was lukewarm at best. Jesus said He would vomit them from His mouth. The word vomit here means to spit out with force. Their wealth became a limiting factor of what they were willing to do (v. 17). Lukewarm is best interpreted against the local geography. To the north were healthy hot springs at Hierapolis, and to the south were cold springs that were clean and refreshing to drink from. Laodicea had perpetual problems with its water supply, which came by aqueduct six miles from the south. The water was lukewarm, unclean, undrinkable, and could make a person sick. They were so prosperous and powerful that they assumed they had spiritual success. They were ignorant of God’s view of their prosperity. They were spiritually poor, blind, and naked because of being blinded by their wealth.

CLOSING

The condemnation and the call are God’s love languages to bring us back into relationship with Him. Repent! Jesus stands at the door and knocks. Anyone who hears His voice and opens the door to Him will be saved. We are called to be overcomers and victors and are promised eternal life with Him!



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Reading guide Questions

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1. Even though the church in Sardis seemed active and alive, inside they were spiritually dead. Do you know any churches like this today? What did John say will happen to them (Revelation 3:3)?
 2. Why was the Lord pleased with the church of Philadelphia? What did He promise them (Revelation 3:10)?
 3. What did the Lord say about the lukewarm church (Revelation 3:15–17)? What is the spiritual temperature of your church?
 4. What does Jesus promise to those who overcome and endure to the end? (Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21)
 5. Which message, to these churches, speaks most directly to you about your church and the condition of your own spiritual position? What will you do to change this?
 6. What did the Holy Spirit highlight to you in Revelation 3 through the reading or the teaching?

