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*A Bible teaching and preaching ministry  
for the Christian community*

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## **REVELATION 3 v 14 to 22 – The church at Laodicea**

This is the final letter of the seven addressed to various churches on the western side of Asia Minor (present-day Turkey) at the end of the first century, and which we find in chapters 2 and 3 of Revelation. Ephesus, on the coast, and to which the first letter was sent, appears to have been the leading church of the group by that time. This is where John the Apostle, through whom the whole book was delivered, had until recently been the leader. After the grand introduction to Revelation recorded in chapter 1, we have these seven letters, and can well ask why are they here in this book, at this point, and indeed even recorded in the Bible at all? Surely our desire in reading Revelation is to find out the prophetic details revealed throughout the rest of the book? Certainly, over the centuries these prophecies have generated a lot of excitement and controversy.

There is a general principle in scripture which we state simply as “Examination before Revelation”. In other words, before God reveals something of His glory, purposes, and presence to an individual or group of His people, there is always a time of cleansing, sanctification, preparation. This was so prevalent in the Old Testament rituals, and in 1 Corinthians 11 v 27 – 29 it is enjoined upon all who come to the Lord’s table. In this instance, before we can enjoy the revelation of God’s future plans, we need to examine our lives before His throne through what He says in these letters.

So, we need to be more specific about the relevance of these letters to Christians throughout the Church age. We can see three possible benefits that arise from their study.

1. Each letter had an immediate relevance to the specific churches they were sent to.
2. The lessons in all the letters are for all Christians throughout the Church Age. “If the cap fits, wear it!”
3. Many scholars feel that each letter refers prophetically to a different era of the Church Age (approximate dates), and we will look at this aspect of the church in Laodicea in some detail.

Ephesus: The Apostolic age, 30 – 100 AD.

Smyrna: The age of Roman persecution, 100 – 313 AD.

Pergamum: The age of Constantinian growth, 313 – 600 AD.

Thyatira: The church in the Dark Ages, 600 – 1517 AD.

Sardis: The church of the Reformation, 1517 – 1648 AD.

Philadelphia: The age of the Great Missionary Movement, 1648 – mid twentieth century AD.

Laodicea: The age of lukewarmness, mid twentieth century AD – Rapture.

Other general features we note from the letters:

- a) Each letter is addressed to the angel of that church. It is a solemn thought that each true church or fellowship has an angel assigned to it for guidance and care.
- b) The Lord is introduced in each letter with one aspect taken from the general description of Him in chapter 1.
- c) To each church there is a promise for those who “overcome”, i.e., individuals who sort themselves out in obedient response to the Lord’s comments.
- d) The onus for taking note is clearly put again on individuals who “have an ear to hear” – who are listening.

We will look at the letter to Laodicea verse by verse, but first consider the third benefit mentioned above regarding each of the letters. My own feeling is that there is a lot of merit in this understanding, provided the other two benefits are not forgotten, especially the second. We note that in chapter 1 there is a general emphasis that the message being given to John is for the present, what is to come, and the things that are yet to take place. In other words, the Lord has providentially included this book at the end of scripture in order to complete His instructions and plans for the whole of the rest of time and then into eternity. That means that this specific letter has important lessons for the period of church history which sees the severe decline that is prophesied several times elsewhere in scripture, and which will mark the end of the church age, leading to the Lord's return, which we call the Rapture. The prophetic signs that the Lord Himself has told us to look for, heralding His return, seem to be increasingly evident now, and it seems our present era of church history has been well described as the Laodicean age. This is the conviction that leads me to regard the study of this letter as of great importance today; it has a specific application from the Lord to us.

v 14. The aspect of the Lord Jesus drawn from chapter 1 for this church particularly presents His total Lordship over creation as the Word, the faithful and true witness (Revelation 1 v 5). Thus, the people here were to take note of His absolute sovereignty over all powers, whatever their native culture and belief systems might assert.

v 15 & 16. Laodicea was located where three great trade routes intersected in a broad river valley about 100 miles east of Ephesus, which was on the coast. The water supply came from hot springs in the mountains some distance away and was therefore lukewarm by the time it reached the city. Laodicea was very wealthy with a lot of professional people working in banking and finance; much commerce based on rather fine local woollen materials, leading to the creation of fashionable garments and carpets; and a medical faculty specialising in eye problems, dispensing a much sought-after eye ointment. These Christians were not criticised in this letter for immorality, open apostasy, or idolatry. It appears that they were well-behaved and orthodox. The Lord's main complaint was that they had become completely self-satisfied and self-sufficient in their spiritual lives, worship, and deeds. They were neither cold and distant, nor were they madly over-the-top in their spirituality. Like their water supply, they were lukewarm, and like the effect of lukewarm water, God had to tell them that they made Him sick.

v 17. Complacency in their church life was the order of the day, resting on their wealth, professional status and abilities, and no doubt displaying corrosive smugness. But, reflecting the attributes of their city, the Lord had to tell them they were completely bereft of all the fervent spirituality that characterises a powerful and spirit-filled church. Even if they did not realise it, they were in a wretched state and to be pitied – poor (not spiritually rich), blind (not blessed by spiritual vision), naked (not appropriating spiritual garments).

v 18. The answer, He counselled, was to let Him refine them in the fire so that they became like gold. That would give them spiritual wealth, garments of true righteousness, and spiritual sight. But the imagery is very clear; in scripture refined gold always speaks of faith tested in the fires of adversity, faith being the currency of true spirituality. In Job's trial he knew he would emerge as gold tried in the fire (Job 23 v 10). 1 Peter 1 v 6 & 7 links faith with refined gold. The conflict is between drifting in our Christian lives through unchallenging routine and ease of orthodox comfort, doing what we have always done with others who are doing what they always do, or on the other hand living on the edge of comfort, totally dependent on the Lord and His grace, rather than our own ability to cope and avoid difficulty. One leads to lukewarm uselessness; the other leads to the life of faith – “the just shall live by faith”. Time and time again when Jesus was here, He said that a person's faith was what led to the gracious exercise of His power and glory, and He often marvelled at those with “such a great faith”. He wanted the Laodiceans to buy from Him this faith that challenges. We either want Him to give us quiet, complacent lives, or to give us the faith that brings Him glory and moves mountains on earth. It is not the faith that is rooted in what we want, but the faith that rests in the outworking of what He wants, which brings us back to the opening comment; He is the sovereign Lord of all creation.

v 19 - 22. Contrary to much that we assume about the Laodicean church, these are people whom He loved; His rebuke proves that (Hebrews 12 v 7 & 8). The Lord may have been outside their cosy smug circle, but He still wanted to come in; He had not gone away. The response would be individuals who are listening to the knocking. As with the other churches, the Lord was waiting to see who was listening and would overcome. What would happen when they did? In verse 21 they were promised the place of usefulness in the millennial kingdom mentioned in Revelation 20.

Are we listening to what the Spirit is saying to the church today? As we live in a day when we are probably the wealthiest generation in history, and the Laodicean church era seems to prefigure our own, is the Lord asking us to buy the refined gold that alone pleases our Master? Increasingly, the props are all being knocked away from our historic ease and familiarity of fellowship, worship, and service. I am finding in a lockdown era that more and more Christians are facing challenges in their lives and churches that defy traditional responses and methods of resolution. The day of evil is upon us, and our only recourse is to seek the Lord's sovereign authority as the ultimate and faithful Word over everything. The day of worldly acceptance and forbearance is coming to an end and the Lord wants to take central place again, as we learn to trust Him for everything with the gold of faith that arises out of the fiery trials.