The seven churches of Revelation: Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.

The Promises to the Church of Sardis

We said Sardis had a reputation of being alive yet actually they were dead. Another thing to say about their reputation being alive: first, this may not have been only their evaluation but perhaps the evaluation of the other churches in the region. They had a reputation among them of being alive. It’s also possible that there is a little bit of hyperbole going on in Jesus’ statement and even irony by saying you have the name or reputation of being alive but you are actually dead.

White Garments

But, in any case, Jesus calls them to repent and “to those who overcome” we find at least two promises given to them. Again, these promises are clearly taken from the rest of the book, especially towards the end in chapters 19-22 which, in my opinion, all demonstrate or all refer to what happens when Jesus comes to bring history to its conclusion at his second coming. The first one is if they overcome they will be given white garments; they will be dressed in white. Probably again this language picks up what we find in texts, like chapter 7. In chapter 7 we find a sort of a preliminary reward. Revelation sort of cycles—it has anticipations of the future reward of God’s people in advance of the full exposition in chapters 21 and 22. Already in chapter 7 we see a vision of God’s people standing victorious before the throne. We find, especially in verse 9, it says, “After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could number or count, from every nation, tribe, people, language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb.” So here are God’s people standing victorious at the end of history and in God’s presence. “They were wearing white robes and holding palm branches in their hands.”

We find similar language in chapter 19 after the destruction of Babylon in chapter 18, which we will describe in beginning of chapter 19 and deal with later. In 19:8, again a
reference to the glorified saints, the people of God who now stand victorious in God’s presence.

Verses 7-8: “Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the lamb has come, and the bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear.” The Bride, being an image or symbol of the church, the glorified people of God, now they are given bright and white linen to wear.

So this promise now gets picked up in the promise made to the church at Sardis that they also will wear white garments if they overcome, that is if they refuse to compromise. Probably the garments then are simply a symbol of their final salvation and perfection. Probably, even more specifically, it is a symbol of victory and even vindication. Vindication because they have suffered at the hands of the Roman empire; they have maintained faithful witness in a hostile environment even to the point of death. They will receive white robes as a symbol of their victory and their purity that now they possess in their final salvation but also the vindication as well. So that’s the first promises made to them from later sections of Revelation: they will receive a white robe of purity, vindication, and victory.

Book of Life

Second, they also will have their names in the Book of Life, but with the assurance that their names will not be blotted out. When you read the rest of the book of Revelation we will be introduced to a number of books or scrolls, starting in chapter 5. Here we are introduced to a book called “The Book of Life.” It is probably again not a literal book but a book that is symbolic of the security of and the belonging of God’s people and to God himself. The book symbolizes their salvation, and the certainty of their salvation that now they possess. Interestingly, the author tells them that their names will not be blotted out. Now this raises the question, “is it possible that their names could be blotted out of this book?” That is, could it be in there but it could be taken out? That’s entirely possible. But the emphasis on this text is not so much that it hangs on the balance, “are they going to have their names taken out or not?” This fits the language of your names will not be blotted out. It is a figure of speech called “litotes” which is a way of saying something by
stressing its opposite or it’s negative. So someone might say, “How are you doing?” and you might reply, “Not bad,” which means you are doing well but you state the opposite. So not blotting one’s name out is a way of stating the opposite. God will keep you, you can be certain that you will reach the goal of your eschatological salvation if you overcome and persevere. By the way, the Book of Life we’ll see does appear later on in the book of Revelation. So again, John is drawing on images of final eschatological salvation in the rest of the book to provide a motivation for overcoming in the present for his churches. So for the church at Sardis, they would read the book of Revelation as, again like other churches, a warning not to participate in or not to be part of the pagan Roman empire and it’s idolatrous practices. They should not compromise and accommodate with that lest they find themselves the objects of the vision’s judgments and the visions of plagues and judgments that God pours out upon Rome and upon a wicked and godless world if they refuse to repent. Instead, again, for those who do maintain their purity, for those who do maintain their faithful witness then they have the promise that they will participate in the eschatological salvation that God promises for his people, that is, white robes and being victorious and being vindicated and also the certainty that they will inherit their eschatological salvation in the future.

The Church of Philadelphia

The next church that we encounter in the book Revelation is the church of Philadelphia in Revelation 3:7-13. The city of Philadelphia was an ancient city on this circular route. It would have been a little bit southeast of Sardis, the previous city we looked at. Along with Sardis then, it was also devastated with this earthquake in AD 17. It was also important because of the influence of the emperor cult in the city and also other pagan gods and religions. What is significant about Philadelphia is it is the only other church, along with Smyrna, that receives a positive evaluation and does not include any rebuke or condemnation. Like Smyrna it is a church of the suffering because it has maintained its faithful witness.

So when Jesus addresses the church in Philadelphia this is what he says, “To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: These are the words of him who is holy and
true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut and what he shuts no one can open. I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars—I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you. Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth. I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God the new Jerusalem which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on him my new name. He who has an ear, let him hear what the spirit says to the churches.” So he said to Philadelphia.

As we read those words, Philadelphia does not receive condemnation or negative evaluation but the evaluation is positive. The problem is the church is described as having little power. Probably that means that they are socially and economically of little influence in the city of Philadelphia; they are a church of little significance. Perhaps they are unable then to protect themselves from persecution that they are receiving, but they have remained faithful in their lives and in their witness. Therefore, notice the title that is given to Christ from chapter 1. In chapter 3 the message to the church in Philadelphia—Jesus is described as the one who is holy and true and he holds the keys of David. That is, the one who now addresses them as holy, he is faithful and he also holds the keys of David. This interestingly is another illusion back to the Old Testament.

Isaiah Parallels

Later on Jesus tells the Philadelphian church I have placed before you an open door. The key to understanding this is to understand the Old Testament background, which, once again, comes right out of the book of Isaiah chapter 22. In Isaiah chapter 22, we read these words addressed to Eliakim the King of Israel, the one who is the King on the throne in the line of David. In Isaiah chapter 22:20-24, “In that day I will summon my
servant, Eliakim son of Hilkiah. I will clothe him with your robe and fasten your sash about him.” Interestingly, a parallel to the way Jesus is described in chapter 1. “And hand your authority over to him. He will be a father to those who live in Jerusalem and to the house of Judah.” Notice that language of “father.”

“I will place on his shoulder the key to the house of David; what he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. I will drive him like a peg into a firm place: he will be a seat of honor for the house of his father. All the glory of his family will hang on him: its offspring and offshoots.” Notice again the language of offspring or seed. Also an important theme in the Old Testament and in the Davidic covenant as well. “All its lesser vessels, from the bowls to all the jars.”

The context of this then is Eliakim as king who sits on David’s throne, is now given the authority of David and is now given the keys to the entrance into the kingdom or entrance into the palace. Eliakim is almost portrayed as an administrator and who can permit entrance or exclusion into the palace itself and into the Davidic kingdom. The question then is how does this get applied to Christ? How does a text that is specific as Isaiah 22, in reference to Eliakim, now get applied to the person of Jesus Christ. First of all we’ve already noted a couple of times the connection with David. Often what was true of those who sat on the Davidic throne, and this is true of a number of the so-called “royal psalms” that get applied to Jesus later on in the New Testament; what often was true of those who sat on David’s throne was also true of David’s greater son who is Jesus Christ. So Jesus then would be seen as the ultimate one who has the keys and the authority. The keys being the symbol of authority of entrance into or exclusion from the Davidic kingdom that Jesus has now inaugurated. So Jesus, as the true son of David, now has the authority of entrance into or exclusion from the kingdom of God and from the Davidic kingdom that he is now inaugurated.

Furthermore, it is possible that Isaiah chapter 22 should also be read in light of Isaiah 9:6-7, you remember the well-known text we often read at Christmas time. Isaiah 9:6, “For to us a child is born. To us a son is given. And the government will be upon his shoulders.” This language appears in Isaiah 22. “And he will be called wonderful,
councilor, mighty God, everlasting Father (which is a term applied to Eliakim in 22) prince of peace, of the increase of his government in peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever.”

Now Isaiah 22 probably would have been read by John in light of Isaiah chapter 9— that is, the coming of a son to sit on the throne of David to establish his rule forever, to reign in righteousness, and the government will be upon his shoulders. So now Jesus Christ, in being that son of Isaiah 9 then also takes on the authority of chapter 22 as a Davidic king who has the right, the keys and the authority, to include, to give entrance to or to exclude from entrance into his kingdom.

The second reason is probably in Isaiah 22, John would have read Eliakim, sort of typologically. Typologically it anticipates a greater son, someone who would actually provide the climatic expression of someone who would come along and take the keys that would signify authority of inclusion and exclusion in the Davidic kingdom. So Eliakim is probably to be understood as a type or model or pattern of a greater son who is to come along. This again receives even more corroboration if we are to read chapter 22 of Isaiah in light of chapter 9.

Then finally notice interestingly in Isaiah 22:23, Eliakim is compared to a peg, “I will drive him like a peg into a firm place.” But notice later on in verse 25, “In that day, declares the Lord almighty, the peg driven into the firm place will give away. It will be sheared off.” It’s almost as if this anticipates a time when that peg must be restored. That peg must be driven back into it’s firm place, expecting that someone will come in the future to fulfill that. So given all these things: the connection between Christ and David, especially in light of Isaiah 9; the typological connection between Eliakim in Isaiah 22 and Jesus Christ; and then also even within the context of verse 22—the breaking off of this peg, almost anticipating this peg would be restored. All of this then, I think, leads to identifying Christ as the ultimate fulfillment of not only Isaiah 9 but now also Isaiah 22. Christ now comes as the final son of David who now takes up the keys and has the authority of including or excluding from the Kingdom of God that he is now established.
This will become important later on in Revelation chapter 20 and following when Jesus Christ comes to establish his kingdom, that ultimately establishes a new creation. It is Christ who has authority to include or exclude from entrance into his kingdom.

Interestingly, though, in Rev 1:8 Jesus is described not as having the keys of the kingdom but as the keys over death and Hades. Now in chapter 3, Christ is the one who has the keys of the kingdom of God. In other words, it appears to me the connection is Christ overcoming death and Hades is the means by which Christ grants entrance into the kingdom of God. But again, for those who refuse to acknowledge it, he excludes and, as we see in the end of Revelation, they suffered the second death and they ended up in the lake of fire. We will talk about those images later on, but it’s Christ overcoming death and Hades. He does so by granting entrance into the kingdom of God and he possesses the keys and the authority to do so. But he shuts it from those who refuse to acknowledge and who refuse to repent.

Connections to the Church in Philadelphia

But for the church who was suffering in Philadelphia this image would be good news that they having nothing to fear because it is Christ himself who holds the keys over death and Hades and who now holds the keys to the kingdom and grants them entrance. So this is how we are to understand Revelation 3:8, and the message to the church at Philadelphia.

Jesus says this, “I know your deeds, see I have placed before you an open door.” What is that open door? Traditionally this has been understood, especially in popular circles, as a reference to evangelism. He’s given them an open door of witness; an open door to evangelism. However, in light of verse 7, in light of the connection with Isaiah 22 with Christ having the keys as symbols of the authority to permit entrance into or exclude entrance into the kingdom of God, the Messianic Kingdom, the open door here is not a door of opportunity for evangelism. The open door is entrance into the kingdom of God. So now Jesus is assuring them that they have an open door. He is the one who holds the keys of death and Hades. He is the one who exclusively holds the keys that permit entrance. He is the only one who permits entrance into the Messianic Kingdom by
overcoming death and hell through his resurrection. Now he has given the Philadelphians an open door. So no matter what they suffer, no matter how insignificant they seem, no matter how powerless they are in their current situation, they have already been granted entrance into the Messianic Kingdom by the king, the son of David who holds the keys and who grants entrance into the kingdom of God. By the one who has, through his death and resurrection, conquered the power of death and Hades.

Another significant aspect of this message to the church at Philadelphia then is found in verse 9. He says, “I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan.” Recall back a couple of churches earlier those also struggled were the church of Smyrna, the other church that receives a positive evaluation. Now likewise, the Philadelphians seem to be suffering or receiving some measure of persecution because of the Jewish population in the city of Philadelphia. Probably, we are to understand this in a similar way that we did earlier. That is, it’s highly possible that the Jews who enjoyed protection under the Roman rule as a religion were keen to distance themselves from this new religion that we call Christianity. Some, especially local authorities, as we said the persecution so far was not yet empire wide or officially sanctioned, but there would have been many at the local level who would have seen Christians as subversive and refusing to accommodate, and refusing to conform acting in a way that would show lack of gratitude towards the gods in Rome. The Jews may have been keen to preserve their privileges under Roman rule and to distance themselves from Christians. So the reference here may be taken that way, as those who claim to be Jews but they really are not. That is, they claim to be God’s people but they really are not because of the fact that they actually persecute and slander the Christians who are in the city of Philadelphia.

Isaiah Connections

What is interesting is what is said about them. John says, “Actually, I will make them [that is, the Jews who claim they are Jews but really are not], “I will make them come and acknowledge that I have loved you.” This is actually taken, again, from the book of Isaiah. Several texts, Isaiah 45:14, 49:23, and 60:14. This idea that the nations will come to Israel, bow down and acknowledge them and acknowledge that God has
loved them. Now, interestingly, John reverses that and he says, “Actually, it won’t be just the nations who come and bow down to the nation of Israel and acknowledge that you are God’s people, now these Jews who persecute God’s people, they will come and bow down to the people of God—the church in Philadelphia and acknowledge that God loves them.” So John uses this text almost ironically to assure the Philadelphians not only that they have entrance into the Messianic Kingdom because Christ holds the keys but one day those who persecute them, even those who belong to the Jewish synagogue, will bow down and acknowledge, in the future, that they are truly God’s people.

The Promise to the Philadelphian Church

The promise then that Jesus gives to the Philadelphian church is twofold starting in verse 10. First of all, Jesus promises that if they overcome and again for the Philadelphian church to overcome means to maintain their faithful witness that they already have, to refuse the compromise. If they overcome, verse 10, Christ promises that he will keep them from the hour of trial. Probably, the hour of trial, we’ll see gets unpacked in more detail in Revelation 4:21. This probably then implies, in my opinion and there’s a lot of debate what this entails, that they will be kept in the hour of trial. John is not so much focusing on their physical removal from that but it could equally imply that God will simply keep them and preserve them, that even in the midst of trial, and even in the midst of what is to come in the rest of Revelation, God will preserve them so that they will not participate in that. Yes, the church is not promised preservation necessarily from persecution and especially at the hands of the Roman empire but when God pours out his judgment, this text promises that God will keep them, God will preserve them, in the midst of that.

Connection with Rev 21 and 22

Second, the author then appeals directly to Revelation 21 and 22 with both temple and new Jerusalem imagery. Notice he promises they will be a pillar in the temple of God and he also promises that they will participate in the New Jerusalem that comes out of heaven. Both of those images come right out of Revelation 21 and 22.

In Revelation 21, John describes the New Jerusalem which comes down out of
heaven, to be inhabited and inherited by the people of God. But interestingly, this pillar imagery, the image of a pillar in the temple of God, also resonates with chapters 21 and 22 because there the New Jerusalem is not only portrayed as a city, it is clearly portrayed as a temple as well. The New Jerusalem is not only an in-time city, it’s an in-time temple. So, by using the image of a pillar in the temple of God and then turning right around and using the language of the New Jerusalem, John is saying the same thing: they will inherit the new Jerusalem/temple of God.

I wonder to what extent the pillar may also reflect the peg in the temple of Eliakim from Isaiah 22. Now they are promised that they will participate in the final kingdom of God. In the temple when Christ comes to restore it and to bring eschatological salvation to his people.

We also see here the anticipation of something we’ll see in other places in Revelation, and we find this elsewhere in the New Testament such as Ephesians 2 and 1 Corinthians 3 where temple imagery is applied to the people themselves. That is, the restored temple is not to be understood in terms of a physical structure but in terms of the people themselves. The people now constitute the true temple of God and it consists of other New Testament texts. So, the church in Philadelphia will read the rest of the book of Revelation as, number one, they are protected from the plagues and from the judgments that God pours out upon the earth. They will be protected from and they will receive the promise salvation because of their faithful witness and because of their endurance.

The Church of Laodicea: Background

That brings us to the last church, the church of Laodicea in chapter 3:14-22. This last church then, kind of lies at the end of this circular route, it’s about 45 miles or so from the city of Philadelphia (southeast of it). As I read this, this is probably one of the more disturbing messages to any of the seven churches in chapters 2 and 3. And we’ll see why. Laodicea is a church that was also destroyed by an earthquake. It was destroyed by an earthquake in AD 60, so only 30 years or so from the time that John is now addressing this church. The city was rebuilt, but interestingly, not by help from Rome but from its
own wealthy citizens, from the wealth of its own citizens and inhabitants. They personally funded the rebuilding of the city.

What is well known about the city of Laodicea, at least one factor that will come into play in another section of this message to the church in Laodicea is that the city of Laodicea lacked one well known requirement of any ancient city and that was a good water supply. One of the most important features for criteria for a city was not only a place that could be protected but it also must have a water supply. That’s one of the things that Laodicea lacked. In fact, as most realize (and you can even see pictures of the aqueduct system) is Laodicea got its water by piping it in through an aqueduct from elsewhere.

Also Laodicea was the center of worship of a number of foreign and pagan gods. Again, the emperor cult was also influential in the city of Laodicea. So here is what Jesus says to the city of Laodicea, or to the church of the city in Laodicea, “To the angel of the church in Laodicea write: ‘These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God’s creation. I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm--neither hot nor cold--I am about to spit you out of my mouth. You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put under your eyes, so you can see. Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and I knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’”

Although some of the churches in chapters 2 and 3 receive both a positive and a negative evaluation, Laodicea’s evaluation is solely negative. Christ has nothing good to say, such as, “I know where you are and I praise you for your faithfulness and I praise
you because you have done some good works. But I have this against you.” Instead, the entire evaluation of the church is negative. Christ has nothing good to say about the church at Laodicea. Interestingly there is no persecution, there is no suffering, instead the problem appears to be a complete lack of wisdom and the horrid spiritual condition of the church due to their complacency and compromise brought about by their wealth. It is interesting Jesus does not seem to say anything about their compromise with pagan worship and involvement in emperor worship, although that may be implied. Instead, Christ goes after their complete complacency, that is, they are so reliant on their own wealth and their comfort in their situation that they simply have no witness at all. In fact, notice some of the language of wealth where Jesus tells them to buy gold refined with fire so that you can really be rich. This is sort of the language of irony, that is, Jesus chides their physical wealth and their physical status and says in reality you are poor because you lack true wealth. You lack true wealth which is spiritual.

The city of Laodicea, as we’ve already seen, was known for its wealth that’s how it rebuilt itself after the earthquake in 60 AD. But also, the fact that the reference that I said may reflect the fact the Laodicea had a medicinal school that was well known for producing eye salve. Now John uses that ironically to say spiritually you are poor in contrast to your so called economic status you are actually poor and in contrast to the reputation for your medicinal center in that eye salve you are actually spiritually blind. So he counsels them instead to get those things that actually promote spiritual wealth and spiritual insight and spiritual sight.

Hot, Cold, and Lukewarm

The image from chapter 1 that is applied to Christ is he is seen as “the Amen and the faithful witness” which is the very thing that Laodicea was not. They were not a faithful witness, instead Jesus Christ is portrayed as the ruler of all creation. Interestingly, in language very similar to what one finds addressed to a neighboring church, the church of Colossae, in Colossians 1:15, 20. Christ is the ruler of the church and he is the power over the church. He is in the situation of authority over their lives and their wealth and their economic situation. So the condition of the church is, although one of physical
wealth and in a fluent prosperous environment, spiritually that has led to extreme complacency and complete spiritual ineffectiveness, and one might even say complete spiritual deadness.

This I think helps us to understand Jesus’ words in verses 13-16, as well as utilizing what we know of the background of the Laodicean community. This I think helps us understand Jesus’ words in verses 13-16, that is, that he condemns the church for being neither hot nor cold but instead being lukewarm.

Now, traditionally, we have understood this to mean the church in Laodicea is lukewarm, that is, lukewarm is to be understood in the middle of, or half way between hot and cold. We treat hot and cold as binary opposites with lukewarm in the middle. Usually we equate those, then we equate hot, lukewarm and cold with spiritual temperature. So hot would be to be on fire for Christ and to be effective and to be a witness. Cold would be the opposite: to be turned off and to be dead and just unresponsive to the gospel. Lukewarm is in between, it’s sort of uncommitted, it’s wishy-washy, it’s half-hearted, it’s sort of riding the fence, not wanting to take a stand for Christ but not wanting to reject him either, but just kind of being a wishy-washy, middle of the road Christianity, that’s usually how this metaphor is understood.

I am convinced and follow a number of others who suggest that this is not what John had in mind. The way to understand this is to read it in light of the cultural background of the Laodiceans. We already said one of the interesting, intriguing features of Laodicea is that it lacked one of the most important criteria for a city, and that is to have a good water supply. Instead through a system of an elaborate aqueducts it had its water piped in from elsewhere. Now, along with that, the other thing to recognize is two other cities very close to Laodicea were in fact known for their water supplies. One of those was a city named Hierapolis. It was known for its hot springs that were beneficial for medicinal purposes. People would come from all over to bathe in these springs. If you’ve ever seen pictures of them it looks a little bit like those of you who have ever visited Yellow Stone Park in the United States of America the mammoth hot springs with all the bubbling hot springs. Hierapolis was not far from Laodicea and was well-known
for its hot water supply. Again, people would come all over for their medicinal and healing value.

The other city, Colossae, also near Laodicea was also known for its water supply. It was known for it’s cold and refreshing water that was good to drink. So you have Laodicea surrounded by two cities Hierapolis and Colossae known for their water supplies, one for the hot water supply, one for the cold, refreshing water. But instead Laodicea has to pipe it’s water in and by the time it gets their it’s tepid, stale, lukewarm, not like the hot water of Hierapolis that’s good for healing. It’s not like the cold, refreshing water of Colossae that’s good for drinking and refreshment. Instead, it is lukewarm—it is good for nothing. In fact, it is so grotesque that Christ says I am about to vomit you out of my mouth.

If you think about it, no one likes lukewarm water. A better analogy than spiritual temperature, I think would be this: when you go in a restaurant why does the waiter or waitress keep filling up your coffee cup, your hot coffee cup? Because no one likes lukewarm coffee. Or why do they keep coming by and filling up your water glass? Because no one likes lukewarm, or tepid, stale water. We like it fresh. In the same way, Jesus is calling on the church at Laodicea “I wish you were hot,” like the hot water of Hierapolis is good for healing. Or “I wish you were cold,” like the cold, refreshing water of Colossae. Both cold and hot are positive things for John and for his readers. “I wish you were like your neighboring cities which have good water: hot and cold.” They at least are good for something. “Instead, you are like your own water supply. It’s lukewarm. It is so gross and disgusting it’s good for nothing. And it’s so gross I am about to vomit you out of my mouth.” So lukewarm does not stand for wishy-washy middle-of-the-road Christianity. It stands for dead, ineffective, useless Christians. They have become so complacent in their wealth and in their situation so that they are completely useless and completely ineffective witnesses for the person of Jesus Christ.

The solution then, again, is unequivocally to repent and to find true wealth, to find true eye sight and to find true garments. Again even the language of garments, wearing white garments, as we said in Revelation symbolizes overcoming victory, and purity.
That may also reflect the commerce of the city of Laodicea. But John’s solution is repent. They have no other option to get out of their spiritual deadness, their spiritual uselessness, their spiritual poverty and blindness and impurity but to repent and act as God’s faithful witnesses.

Notice 3:20 as a final instruction to the church. Look at 3:20 which is one of the well known texts that often, again I think gets misread slightly because we fail to understand how it fits within the entire message to Laodicea. In 3:20 Christ describes himself in this way, “Here I am. I stand at the door and I knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door I will come in and eat with him and that person will eat with me.” Often we have read this verse more individualistically as an individualistic call to salvation and I certainly want to say that this imagery could provide a fitting description of that. But that’s not what John is talking about. John is not talking about a call to individual salvation—that Christ is standing, knocking at the door of our hearts wanting to come in, though that could be true. Instead, the picture here is more insidious. Jesus Christ is seen as standing outside of his church, not welcomed in it. So complacent and ineffective has the Laodicean church become so reliant on its wealth and its status and society and it’s surroundings that Jesus Christ is no longer welcome in this church and stands outside of the church. The only solution is they must open the door and allow him to come back in and share a meal.

Perhaps a reference to the fact that the church celebrated feasts including communion, maybe a reference of the love feast or something like that. Communion which is almost even more ironic if this is a reference to the church celebrating a feast and celebrating communion together, than Jesus Christ is all of a sudden left out of that and excluded from that. Now he is asking to be welcomed back into his church and to be present and at the center of his church again. The one who walks around the lamp stands is now asking to be at the center of his church.

So, for the Laodicean church, they must stop compromising, they must stop their sense of complacency, comfort and reliance on their wealth and their social economic status and instead they must let Christ, the ruler of creation, the faithful witness, come
into their midst and back in the center of the church. They too then must become Christ’s faithful witnesses no matter what the consequences.

Notice also the promise that is given to them if they overcome, “To the one who overcomes I will give the right to sit with me on my throne just as I overcame.” In other words, if the Laodiceans repent, that is, if they overcome by repenting, refusing to compromise by ceasing to live lives of complacency by allowing Christ back into their midst, by becoming Christ’s faithful witnesses; if they overcome in that way Christ promises that they will rule with him.

It’s sort of interesting that this promise of them doesn’t quite fit in some respects. You’ll wonder, how does it actually fit their situation? Well, in one sense, you can see by promising them rule that would be motivation for getting out of their spiritual stupor, but on the other hand, I wonder if perhaps this promise is deliberately meant as more of a general promise to prepare us for chapter 4 and 5. In these chapters we find God and the Lamb seated on the throne and ruling in heaven and their sovereignty acknowledged by all of heaven, ruling over the entire earth. Now in preparation for that, the church of Laodicea, and probably the other churches are promised participation in that as well if they overcome. So perhaps this is more of a general promise to the church of Laodicea in preparation for the vision that comes next in chapters 4 and 5 where God and the Lamb, on their throne, is at the center.

So for the Laodiceans they will read the rest of the book of Revelation as a rather stern warning of judgment. They will read the rest of the plagues and the judgments of God in Revelation as falling on them if they refuse to repent. They will read the rest of the book of Revelation as an attempt to shock them out of their complacency, and to get them to pursue true wealth and true sight and true purity that comes only by faithfulness to Jesus Christ and being a faithful witness for Christ no matter what the cost.

Christ’s Diagnoses

So, at this point first of all we’ve seen Christ has diagnosed the situation of his churches. Only two of them have been faithful to the point of suffering for their faithfulness. Most of the others have something they’ve done right but most of them
receive a rather negative evaluation. Most of them are lacking something that Christ
draws attention to. One of them, the Laodicean church, receives a wholly negative
evaluation. The problem with all of these to some degree is compromise and
accommodation with the pagan Roman environment, that is, the idolatry, worship of
pagan gods, involvement in emperor worship, and often in connection with their
commercial life. The difficulty is refusal to separate from that and some of them may
have been willing to compromise precisely to avoid persecution, being ostracized and
perhaps even losing jobs. Others may have simply been so complacent that they needed
to be woken up and shocked into understanding and seeing the gravity of the situation in
what it was they were doing. But most of them were compromising, to some degree, with
the pagan Roman Empire and the pagan society and what they found themselves.

So chapters 2-3 then speak to various situations that the church in the first century,
and I would add the church today and every other century, finds itself in, not just
persecution, and I would say at least for many churches today especially in the west,
seldom is persecution the main problem they face.

Second, then it is seen that chapters 2 and 3 will determine how each of the
churches read the rest of the book of Revelation or how the rest of Revelation applies
specifically to each church. Then finally we’ve said, starting with chapter 4 and
continuing into chapters 5-22 they will reinterpret it from a symbolic, an apocalyptic,
perspective. Chapters 4-22 will, from a visionary perspective, interpret what John has
actually said in chapters 2 and 3.

He Who Has An Ear

The last scene I want to mention is the phrase that we have overlooked and that is
at the end, along with the promises although sometimes before, sometimes right after,
along with the promise we have the message, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the
Spirit says of the churches.” That is with chapters 2 and 3 we find the need for spiritual
discernment to see what is wrong with the churches. The only way for the churches to
wake up from their situation; the only way for the churches to maintain their faithful
witness, even in the face of persecution, the only way for the church to understand it’s
complacency; it’s compromise, it’s spiritual blindness, it’s need to maintain it’s a faithful
witness, is by having spiritual insight into the situation of the church. Chapters 2-3
provide the insight that is necessary for the church especially the churches that
compromise to wake up and discern their situation and to discern what the rest of the
book of Revelation says to the people of God.

This simply reinforces that chapters 4-22 are not meant to simply predict the
future and to provide us with information to help us figure out what’s going to happen in
the future and where we are to plot our existence in some timeline that shows how close
we are to the end. Instead, Rev 4-24 requires spiritual insight. It requires understanding
and the spirits, the eyes of the spirits, the seven-fold spirit, to help us to grasp and
understand the true situation of the church and what is at stake and what God requires of
his church, if they are to respond to him in obedience and if they are to maintain their
faithful witness in a hostile, pagan environment and to maintain that witness no matter
what the cost.

Introduction to Chapters 4-22

Having looked at the messages to the seven churches in chapters 2-3, we are now
prepared to move ahead and to begin to read and consider the visionary, kind of the
apocalyptic portion of chapters 4-22. What I propose we do then is we will continue to
move through 4-22 and, starting with chapters 4-5 as the entry point or the beginning
point of John’s vision, we’ll look overall what is the main function of the vision and we’ll
also ask how it might relate back to the situation of the churches in chapters 2-3. But
we’ll look at the overall function and it’s context but then also look at some of the details
and especially some of the more important or interesting, or problematic details in the
form of the languages, symbols and images. In doing this we will try to come to a greater
understanding of the main function and purpose of the different sections and parts of the
vision that we find in the remainder of the book.