

**The Facebook Commentary on Revelation**  
**Jon Paulien**

**Revelation Chapter 3**

**Rev 3 (Introduction)–**

There is not a lot that needs to be said about this chapter by way of introduction. The division between chapters two and three is an artificial one. Both chapters together form a single vision in seven parts. Chapter three of the Book of Revelation continues the messages to the seven churches that were introduced in chapter one (9-20) and begun in chapter two. The first four messages are found in chapter two and the last three of the seven are found here in chapter three.

A more natural division might have been between the message to Pergamum and the message to Thyatira, since that is where the author shifts from ending each message with promises to the overcomers to ending each message with a reminder about listening to the Spirit. In the first three messages this order is reversed.

**Rev 3:1-6 (Introduction)–**

The ruins of Sardis today surround the tiny Turkish village of Sart, about 60 kilometers (a little more than 35 miles) south/southeast of ancient Thyatira. Yet what is now a tiny village was once one of the greatest cities of the ancient world. It was the capitol of a kingdom (the kingdom of Lydia), and the home of Croesus, one of the richest people of his time. In fact, both the Greeks and Persians had a saying after his time, “rich as Croesus.” He is credited with issuing the first gold coins with a standardized purity for use in general circulation. But by John’s time, the glory of Sardis was largely a thing of the past. The history of Sardis was reflected in the condition of the church that gathered in that city.

The ancient acropolis of Sardis sat on top of a steep-sided hill and was a nearly impregnable fortress as a result. In the time of Alexander and beyond a mighty city grew up at the base of the acropolis. The ruins of that city include the giant Temple of Artemis (built at the direction of Alexander) and perhaps the most impressive synagogue known from the ancient world, supporting a population of some 5000 Jews in the centuries after Revelation. During the reign of Tiberius (time of Jesus) Sardis was devastated by a great earthquake and restored with assistance of the emperor.

In this message from Jesus, Sardis is described as a dying church with a reputation that is a lot higher than the reality deserves, much like the city at that time. One could say that it is a church of half-hearted obedience that gets started on things but doesn’t really see them through. As a result, the tone of this letter is immediately different from the earlier ones. There is no praise at the beginning. Instead there is harsh evaluation; the church is described in terms of a sleep that is close to death. Sardis is one of two churches (the other is Laodicea) that

receives no praise, but she is different from Laodicea in having a high spiritual reputation elsewhere. The church is spiritually lifeless.

There is, however, a faithful remnant in Sardis that has not participated in this spiritual decline. But they are addressed in the third person, so the message itself is addressed to the mainstream church with all of its problems. The church at Sardis has no Nicolaitans, no Balaam and no Jezebel, yet her conditions seems even more serious than any of the preceding churches. Spiritual indifference is even more hopeless than unwise toleration. Since there is no reference to internal division or persecution it was, perhaps, the absence of internal or external enemies that allowed such a condition.

### **Rev 3:1–**

On the concept “angel of the church” see notes on Revelation 1:20 and 2:1. The phrase “seven spirits” recalls the opening of the whole book (Rev 1:4). Since seven is the number of completeness in Revelation, it portrays Jesus as ministering to the church through the full power of the Holy Spirit, which has gone out into the world as a result of the cross (see Rev 5:6). Jesus is the one from whom the spiritual life force of the church proceeds. The problems in the church are, therefore, due to a failure to “listen to the Spirit” (3:6).

The name of the church’s location, Sardis (Greek: *Sardesin*), also represents a precious stone (Greek: *sardio*), reddish in color, that was used in the description of the one sitting on the throne in Revelation 4:3. It is likely that the original readers in Sardis would have noticed that connection and drawn encouragement from it. The divine author of Revelation signaled that the Sardians were not hopeless, but could yet become reflectors of the character of God.

The “seven stars” recalls the original vision of Jesus (Rev 1:16), the explanation of the seven stars in Revelation 1:20, and reference in Revelation 2:1. While in Revelation 2:1 Jesus is depicted as “holding” the seven stars in His hand, here is simply “has” (Greek: *echôn*) the seven spirits and the seven stars (reflecting the original vision in 1:16). See the notes on Revelation 1:20 and 2:1 for more detail. Even though the church is dying He is still described as in possession of the Spirit’s work for them. Jesus is not quick to cast off the church in spite of its decline. It is only through the Holy Spirit that the “angel” of the church can shine like a star. As with the other letters, the titles Jesus uses to introduce himself correspond to the spiritual condition of the church.

As with the other churches, Jesus knows all about this church and its works. “I know your works,” followed directly by the Greek *hoti* (that, or namely) indicates that His knowledge of the church is summarized by what follows (3:1, ESV): “You have the reputation (Greek: *onoma*– “name”) of being alive, but you are dead.” A similar use of the word “name” can be found in 1 Peter 4:16. The church at Sardis had the name or reputation of being Christian, but not the reality. In the words of Paul, they had a form of godliness but have denied the power that would come with true godliness (2 Tim 3:5).

The danger of a good reputation is that the possessor of it is often satisfied and does not pursue the exhausting activities that led to that reputation. In this verse it becomes clear that when Jesus says “I know your works,” the term “works” is not necessarily positive. It is a summary statement of a church’s whole actions, both positive and negative, not just the things

that Jesus can commend.

The KJV, in this case, exposes something about the original text that most English translations do not. It simply says, "Thou hast a name that thou livest, **and** art dead." Greek manuscripts of this verse are consistent in using "and" (Greek: *kai*) rather than "but" (Greek: *de* or "*alla*") before the reference to spiritual death. The strongly adversative "but" (*alla*) is used at the beginning of verse four but not here. This is consistent with Greek usage in the Gospel of John whenever a critical or tragic tone is introduced (see John 1:5, 10; 11; 3:11, 19, 32; 5:39-40, etc.). In the English, such a tone is normally introduced by "but" or "yet," but in John's style the "and" is preferred, and this is exposed consistently by the KJV and is a forceful and Hebraic way of expressing a dark turn of events.

As noted by Stefanovic, the New Testament often refers to sin in terms of death. Believers were described as formerly "dead" in "trespasses and sins" (Eph 2:1). They need to be "made alive" in Christ (Eph 2:5; see also Rom 6:13). The prodigal son does not die physically in the parable, but was "dead" to his father and upon his return has come to life again (Luke 15:24). The widow who lives for pleasure is considered dead by Paul even while she continues to live (1 Tim 5:6). So the metaphor here would be very recognizable to the original readers of this letter.

### **Rev 3:2–**

In this verse both sleep and death are metaphors of the church's spiritual condition. The verse opens with a remedy for the spiritually dead condition of Sardis. Jesus says, "Wake up!" If you are asleep spiritually, the best advice anyone can give you is to "wake up." The original language actually says "become wakeful" (Greek: *ginou grêgorôn*). The first word is an imperative in the middle or passive form. It implies the act of becoming without specifying who is doing the action. They are to become what they currently are not. The second word is a present participle. It implies an ongoing state of watchfulness, in contrast with their ongoing state of spiritual death. So instead of continual, spiritual death Jesus advises them to become continually awake spiritually. It is not enough for them to rouse themselves and sleepily move to action, the real remedy for their condition is a new wakeful habit. There is also a military overtone to the language. They are to arouse to their spiritual danger and continually stand guard against the enemies of spiritual life, such as false security, laziness, indifference and sin.

Many commentators have suggested that there is a connection between the admonition to "become wakeful" and the history of the city. When Cyrus the Persian surrounded Sardis (probably 547 BC), the defending army was not overly concerned because the main citadel was built on a hill so steep that the city's defenses seemed secure. One night during the siege, a Sardian soldier accidentally dropped his helmet over the city wall. Unaware that he was being observed by one of the Persian soldiers below, he climbed over the wall and made his way down the precipice to retrieve his helmet.

Under cover of night, the Persian soldier led a group of his colleagues up the same route he had observed the Lydian soldier take. Since the soldiers of Sardis had thought this part of the wall was impregnable, they had left it unguarded and the Persians entered the citadel and conquered the city. Sardis was captured because of the overconfidence of the citizens and the

failure of the guards to keep watchful. The carelessness of the city's inhabitants was a powerful analogy for the spiritual malady that had infected the church in the same city. The believers in the city needed to learn a lesson from the city's history.

The church at Sardis is admonished to strengthen "that which remains" (*ta loipa*). This is one of the eight occurrences of the Greek word for "remnant" in the book of Revelation. Six of those occurrences clearly refer to groups of people, three positive (Rev 2:24; 11:13; 12:17) and three negative (Rev 9:20; 19:21; 20:5). This reference is ambiguous in that it is neuter, implying "things which remain" rather than "those who remain." Stefanovic notes that neuter adjectives can refer to people (in 1 Cor 1:26-27 the "foolish things" [neuter, but referring back to the not many" of verse 26] confound the "wise people" [masculine], see also Heb 7:7). The fact that "what remains" is about to die might also suggest it is personal.

In this verse, however, reading "that which remains" as a reference to people seems stretching the possibility of the language. More likely it refers to the few good elements of faith and practice that remain in the church. "That which remains" in Sardis probably parallels "your works" (*sou ta erga*— also neuter) in the latter part of the verse. It refers to the spiritual condition of the believers rather than a specific group of them. Their works are incomplete and they are in danger of ceasing even the good works that they are doing. This warning from Jesus is the one thing standing between them and complete indolence.

In the last part of this verse, the works of the church at Sardis are judged incomplete from the viewpoint of Jesus. They are so far from measuring up to God's standard that "what remains" is on the verge of death. Most of the church is living in a way that calls into question whether or not they possess a genuine faith in Christ. Their spiritual core is on the verge of "death." They need a spiritual resurrection if they are to be prepared for the physical resurrection promised at the return of Jesus (see also Eph 5:14).

It is interesting that at the end of this verse Jesus refers to His Father as "my God." It is only here, in verse 12, in John 20:17 and in the quotation from the Old Testament in Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34 that Jesus speaks of His Father as "my God."

The situation of Sardis described in this verse can be compared with the letter to Thyatira. There Jesus is described as saying, "I don't put any more burdens on you—just hang on to what you have." The situation in Sardis is clearly worse than Thyatira. There is so little good to hang onto that its continuing existence as a church is in question.

### **Rev 3:3—**

This verse continues the admonitions of verse 2 without the analysis of the church's condition that is found there. The church that was told to "become wakeful" at the beginning of verse 2 is here called to "remember." The present imperative is positive in that it calls them to continue remembering. What are they to continue to remember? The way in which (Greek: *pôds*) they received and heard the gospel. It seems they remembered the "what" of the gospel, this is, perhaps, one of the good works that has not yet died. But the manner in which the gospel came to them, the actual event, had been forgotten. The original hearing of the gospel came with life-changing power (see also 1 Thess 1:5 and Col 2:6). This is what they most need to remember now. It is an invitation to think more deeply about the origins of their faith and

how they came to believe at first. In this sense there are some parallels here with the letter to Ephesus (Rev 2:4-5). Memory of how God has worked for us in the past is the first step along the road to repentance.

“Received” is in the perfect tense (Greek: *eilêphas*), which implies something that occurred in the past but has ongoing and permanent implications for the present. “Heard,” on the other hand, is an aorist indicative (Greek: *êkousas*) which focuses on a specific moment in past time, the moment when the gospel actually came to Sardis. But the words “received” and “heard” seem out of order here. One needs to hear the words of the gospel before they can be received by the mind and the heart. In Greek, however, to put one word in front of another is often a point of emphasis. Apparently, the Sardians did not need to hear the gospel again, receiving with the heart is what they needed most at this time.

Together, these words (“received” and “heard”) recall the gospel, as defined by Paul (1 Cor 15:1-5), and the way that gospel was transmitted by Jesus’ disciples, first in oral form and later in written form (1 John 1:1-3). Since the church at Sardis is not described as “seeing” the way John originally did (1 John 1:1) but as receiving (1 Cor 15:1,3), they are like the churches of Paul that received the gospel second-hand, through the apostles, without personal contact with Jesus. The fact that this is the only church of the seven that is reminded of the gospel transmission may suggest that there was something unusual about the way that they first received the gospel and were converted. Whenever spiritual life is flagging it is a good idea to “look to the place where you last saw the light.” Reviewing the original hearing of the gospel and commitment to it can help renew the spiritual journey that began at that time. Remembrance of the past can preserve faith into the future.

The church is encouraged to “keep” or “hold fast” (*têrei*) what they have received and heard. The present imperative implies “continue to keep.” This recalls the admonition at the beginning of the book (Rev 1:3, see also 1 Tim 6:14). One of the things that needs strengthening because it is ready to die (verse 2), is their remembrance and practice of the gospel. By way of contrast, the word for “repent” that follows is an aorist imperative (Greek: *metanoêsan*). The punctiliar nature (point in time) of the aorist implies that repentance is a thing that the church lacks, its spiritual sleep is characterized by lack of repentance. It is something they are called to begin or to set in place.

Stefanovic likens the condition of the church at Sardis to the prodigal son of Luke 15. The prodigal son needed to recall his former state and take a decisive change of direction in order to return to his father (Luke 15:17-19). Similarly, the church at Sardis needed to remember how the gospel came to it at first and use that as motivation to make a decisive turnaround away from their present sleepy condition.

In the second half of this verse, the focus turns to the consequences the church will suffer if it does not follow the advice of the first half. If the church does not wake up and repent, it will be unprepared for the return of Jesus, when He comes.

While often translated “but,” the transition in the middle of this verse is actually “therefore.” “If, therefore,” you don’t wake up, Jesus will come to you as a thief. In other words, the consequences being warned here are what will happen if they don’t take the advice of the first half of the verse seriously. The church does not need to remain in the condition it is

in. The outcome of the church at Sardis is conditional upon its response to the admonition of Jesus.

The condition of the church at Sardis is here described as “not watching” (Greek: *mê grêgorêsê*). The verb for “watching” here recalls the eschatological sermon of Jesus on the Mount of Olives (Matthew 24-25; Mark 13; Luke 21). The purpose of Jesus’ end-time prophecy was encouraging people “to watch” (Matt 24:42-43; Mark 13:37; Luke 21:34-36). What Jesus meant by watching was defined in a series of parables in Matthew. Watching has to do with how followers of Jesus treat their “brothers” (Matt 25:34-46) or “fellow servants” (Matt 24:43-51). Watching means obeying the words of Jesus (Matt 25:1-13, cf. Matt 7:24-27) and maximizing one’s talents in His service (Matt 25:14-30). The church at Sardis seems to have been ignoring the teaching of Jesus regarding preparation for His return.

There are two main words for “thief” in the ancient Greek. One is *kleptês*, from which we get the English word “kleptomaniac.” This applies to the burglar, who uses stealth and silence to take things when no one notices. The other word is *lêstês*, which means a robber or plunderer, someone who grabs things openly, often accompanied by violence. The word used here is the former, *kleptês*. Jesus uses the metaphor of the burglar to describe the unexpected and stealthy nature of the Second Coming. This makes a similar point to Matthew 24:42, where the ultimate outcome of Jesus’ eschatological sermon is the statement, “Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming (ESV)” (see also Rev 16:15; 1 Thess 5:2, 4; Matt 24:43; Mark 13:35-37; Luke 12:39; 2 Pet 3:10).

In this verse the point is underlined by the emphatic double negation, “you will not know,” (Greek: *ou me gnos*). The force of the Greek is that you will absolutely not, in any way, shape or form, know at what time (Greek: *poios*) Jesus will return. The general lack of knowledge referred to in Matthew 24:42 is here painfully expanded. Those in Sardis who do not repent will be totally clueless about the most important event in their future.

In Jesus’ eschatological sermon of Matthew 24 (and parallels in Mark 13 and Luke 21), the special judgment on Jerusalem stood as a model and foretaste of the eschatological judgment on the world. Here, likewise, the judgment of Sardis is a model and foretaste of the judgment related to Jesus’ return.

### **Rev 3:4–**

Although the word “remnant” is not used here, this verse describes a portion of the church who “have not soiled their clothes” (NIV), in other words, they have maintained a fervent and saving relationship with Jesus. They have stayed loyal to God.

The verse begins with a strong adversative (“but” – Greek: *alla*), although this is not often reflected in the translations. This means that what follows in this verse is in strong contrast with what preceded the “but” (verses 1-3). Notwithstanding the general apathy of the church, there are a few members who have not fallen into spiritual sleep or death. These are exceptions to the general rule, and they are commended by Jesus, even though they are few. They could be called a “faithful remnant,” that portion of the church which still has the original mission of the church clear in mind and action.

Instead of “persons” (NRSV) or “people” (NIV, NASB) the original text uses “names”

(KJV, ESV, Greek: *onomata*) here. In the Hebraic context names can substitute for the whole person (see Rev 11:13; Acts 1:15; Num 1:2,18,20). Some commentators understand this as a hint that the early church kept a register of members' names (see also 1 Tim 5:9-11). More likely it is a veiled reference to the Book of Life (see Rev 3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:15), the list of heavenly citizens. To have one's name retained in the Book of Life meant that one was marked for eternal fellowship with God and His people (Rev 13:8). To have one's name removed from the Book of Life meant exclusion from the heavenly kingdom (Rev 20:12). While the church at Sardis was close to death spiritually, Jesus has not yet removed their names from the Book of Life. God is portrayed here in terms similar to the Old Testament, as slow to anger and rich in mercy (see Exod 34:6-7, see also Neh 9:17; Psa 103:8; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; Nah 1:3). All who profess to follow Jesus are known by name to God.

The garments mentioned here represent the whole life of the person. These garments are portrayed as cleansed by the blood of the Lamb at the beginning of the Christian life (Rev 7:14). Those, therefore, who defile their garments are believers who have compromised with the pagan environment or lapsed back into sin since becoming believers (a possible allusion to Zech 3:3-5). The defiling of the garments represents an impure or unholy life. In the ancient context soiled clothes disqualified the one who came to worship and dishonored the god they were worshiping. The "few" in Sardis have kept themselves free from the prevailing corruption (see also Eph 5:27; Rev 19:8).

The "walking in white" here is not a reference to a renewed earthly garment, but to the purity of life in eternity, which is promised also in the next verse. Those who keep their "garments" uncontaminated on earth will appear in white garments in eternity. This is the fulfillment of the high priestly prayer of Jesus in John 17:24 (see also Luke 23:43; Rev 3:18; 7:9-17; 19:7-8). In the Hebraic sense, "walking" is a metaphor for the entire life and behavior. The word "white" in Revelation and the New Testament is generally a reference to Christian faithfulness and the purity of the gospel (see comments on Revelation 6:2). Priests and Roman nobility were often dressed in white and such garments were used anciently at times of joy and celebration. God (Dan 7:9), Jesus (Matt 17:2) and heavenly beings (Rev 4:4) are also described as dressed in white. The reward of the righteous is to be treated like nobility in eternity.

To be "worthy" (Greek: *axios*) is to be deserving or qualified for a position or a reward. See notes on Revelation 5: 2. In Revelation 16:6, the persecutors of the church are considered "worthy" to drink blood because they have shed much blood. The reward corresponds to the behavior. But the worthiness of the believer lies not so much in their behavior as in the righteousness available through the blood of Christ (Rev 7:14; Ezek 16:14; Rom 6:23; 1 John 2:2).

### **Rev 3:5-6–**

On the promises to the overcomer see Rev 2 (Introduction). On the concept of overcoming see notes on Rev 2:7. The one who overcomes is one who is finally victorious at the end of the judgment. What those in Sardis most need to overcome is spiritual deadness and imperfection.

The promise to the overcomer in verse 5 is threefold; to be dressed in white, that the

overcomer's name will not be erased from the Book of Life, and that his name would be acknowledged before Jesus' Father and his angels. The last of the promises in verse 4 is repeated here as the first of the overcomer series. This kind of repetition is common in the Gospel of John (John 1:1-2 10:11; 13:20; 15:19).

This particular promise to the overcomer adds a feature not found in the first four. A Greek adverb that means "in this manner" (Greek: *houtôs*) is inserted after the words "the one who overcomes" (Greek: *ho nikôn*). *Houtôs* occurs 208 times in the New Testament. It is normally placed before the verb it modifies (Matt 1:18; 3:15; Mark 13:29; Luke 10:21; John 3:8; Acts 1:11; 1 Cor 4:1; Gal 3:3, etc.), but sometimes comes after (Luke 2:48; 9:15; Acts 12:8). So in this verse, *houtôs* could qualify the preceding participle "overcomes" or the following verb "will be dressed" (Greek: *peribaleitai*).

Since the preceding is a participle (verbal noun) rather than a straight verb, *houtôs* ("in this manner") is more likely qualifying the finite verb that follows ("will be dressed"), and it is so interpreted in most English translations. That means this adverb points back to verse 4. The overcomers of verse 5 will be dressed in the same manner as the faithful few of the previous verse.

The word for "white" (Greek: *leukois*) is the same in verse 5 as in verse 4, but verse 5 adds the Greek word for garment or clothing (Greek: *himatiois*). The word is implied in verse 4 from the earlier reference to soiled "garments" (Greek: *himatia*), but is stated explicitly in verse 5. The promise here is fulfilled later in the book when we see God's end-time people dressed in white (Revelation 7:9 and 19:7-8). The color referred to here will be more than just white, it will be a dazzling white (see Matthew 13:43).

The second of the three promises to the overcomer also makes reference to what precedes, the few "names" in Sardis who have not soiled their garments. The implied reference to the Book of Life in verse 4 is here made explicit. It is promised that the overcomer will not have his name erased from the Book of Life. Evidently everyone who has ever professed to be a follower of Christ is entered into the book. The names are only removed in the judgment if it is clear that the profession has not been acted out in the life. But the overcomer is spared such exclusion at the end (Rev 20:12, see also Exod 32:32; Rom 9:3).

This second promise is expressed with an emphatic negative in the original (Greek: *ou mêt*). For those who overcome there is absolutely no chance of exclusion from the Book of Life. Names that are found in the Book on the day of final account, will remain there forever. On the other hand, some who are thought to be spiritual here, as many in Sardis were, will not be found in the Book then. Eternity will exhibit surprises in terms of who made it and who did not.

Something similar to the Book of Life in the Asian context was the roll of citizens kept in each Roman city. A person's name would be erased when they died or had their citizenship revoked. The overcomer's heavenly citizenship will never be revoked, even on account of death. The mention of this book in Scripture indicates that God has exact and continuing knowledge regarding those who are being saved.

In terms of doctrine, the fact that a name can be erased from the Book of Life goes counter to the idea of "once saved always saved." God respects the freedom of individuals to accept or reject the gospel and to be judged according to that decision. In other words, it is

possible to fall from grace after one has received it and return again to guilt, condemnation and wrath. This is a serious warning to all those in the condition of Sardis. Names remain in the Book on account of the free decisions and conduct of believers.

The last two promises to the overcomer are counterparts of each other. The first is negative. The name of the overcomer will NOT be erase from the Book of Life. The counterpart to this is the positive affirmation that the names of the same overcomers will be specifically acknowledged by Jesus before His Father and before His Father's angels. According to this promise, not only does the Book of Life testify that the overcomer is saved, but Jesus specifically recites each redeemed one by name. We know the names of people who are really important to us, and this affirmation assures the believer that he or she is important to Jesus. As the song says, "He knows my name." Such knowledge on the part of God will prove to be a great affirmation to each of the redeemed at the End (cf. Matt 10:32).

"Before (or in the presence of) my Father" is no doubt a reference to the day of judgment. This saying seems to be a combination of Matthew 10:32-33 and Luke 12:8-9. This is not surprising because a considerable portion of the letter to Sardis consists of sayings that the gospels attribute to Jesus during his ministry on earth, and this promise is no exception. While the messages to the churches are not included in the gospels, there is no question that the messages are formed in the very style that Jesus used while He was on earth. On the exhortation to listen to the Spirit, see the notes on Revelation 2:6.

On the call to listen to the Spirit (verse 6), see comments on Revelation 2:7.

### **Rev 3:1-6 (Spiritual Lessons)–**

First of all, the letter to Sardis suggests that a church can have a great name and yet die. Just because a church was faithful in times past doesn't mean it will always be faithful. God can approve of a religious movement and yet it can lose its way. There is an interesting example of this in biblical times. John the Baptist was a faithful prophet who baptized people, including Jesus, and pointed the people to Jesus when He came to the Jordan. There is no question that John the Baptist was carrying out God's mission and was approved by God. But toward the end of the first Christian century there was a whole movement of people who taught that John, rather than Jesus, was the Messiah. Remnants of that group, called Mandaean, continue to exist in Iraq and Iran today. They trace their religious movement back to the Jordan River and John the Baptist.

John the Baptist plays a major role in all four gospels. But in the Gospel of John, written perhaps thirty years later than the others, John the Baptist is described in more negative terms than in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. There are things in the Fourth Gospel that "put down" John the Baptist (for details see my commentary on John from Pacific Press [1995], pages 53-56). He is constantly confessing the greatness of Jesus and lowering his own standing. "He must increase but I must decrease" (John 3:30). "He is so great that I am not even worthy to untie the strap of His sandal" (John 1:27). "He ranks higher than me because He existed before me" (John 1:15, 30). These observations are relevant to the movement that came into existence after his death.

Why does John the Baptist make so many self-deprecating statements in the Gospel of

John when he is portrayed in such glowing terms in Matthew, Mark and Luke (Matt 11:7-14; 17:10-13; Mark 6:14-16,20; Luke 1:13-17,76-80; 3:15; 7:24-30; 16:16)? Why does John include them in the Gospel? Probably because many people were still following the Baptist rather than following his trail all the way to Jesus. To continue to follow the Baptist at the end of the first century was NOT to follow the Baptist. The followers of the Baptist had continued in a religious movement that was outmoded from God's point of view. The Baptist had pointed them to Jesus and stepped aside. They were to follow Jesus now as their teacher had said to do.

The church at Sardis had a great name and yet was spiritually dead. It started out with God's approval but then "burned out." Many followers of Jesus today have their hearts in the right place, desiring to do what is right, but deep down inside a light has gone out and they just don't have it anymore. They have lost their delight in the faith and find it difficult to serve God.

What do you do when you sense that the things of Christ are not as exciting to you as they once were and you face "burnout?" There are steps you can take to restore what you had before and reclaim a vibrant spiritual life. These steps are repeatedly seen throughout the letters to the churches of Revelation.

What do you do when you're spiritually burned out? In practical terms the first thing needed is a willingness to change. Without a willingness to change, there is little God can do for you, He respects your freedom to stay in your comfort zone, if that's what you really want to do.

The good news is that you can pray for a willingness to change, even if you're not sure you want it. Jesus talks about people being willing to be made willing (John 7:17). There have been times in my life when I felt divided in my loyalty to God. Perhaps 30% of me wanted to serve God with all my heart and 70% of me was simply tired and didn't feel like doing that. But God can work with that 30% if you'll dedicate it to Him. I remember a particular occasion where deep inside I knew I needed to surrender all but 70% of me was resisting. So in my prayers I kept placing that 30% in God's hands to be used by Him. A few days later I realized that things were more like 40/60. My desire to serve God was growing. A few days later, after I kept placing my 40% in God's hands, I realized things were 50/50. When My desire to serve God with all my heart hit 51% it was as if a dam broke and the rest of me yielded to God's control. At that point I was willing to do whatever God wanted me to do, or go wherever God wanted me to go, no matter what the cost. Put all that you can on the altar and God can bring you to the place where you can make a firm decision.

An all-out turn-around, a spiritual willingness to change no matter what the cost, is a crucial starting point in defeating spiritual burnout. A second factor is the repetition to the church at Sardis of the repeated call to repentance that is found in many other of the letters of Revelation. Spiritual burnout requires a radical and firm decision. A complete turnaround. Start something that you had not been doing before. Sometimes the only way forward is to take decisive action, to throw some things out of your life, and to embrace a radical new direction. Repentance is saying, "I am not going to let another day go by without taking decisive action to be where God wants me to be." The good news is that the Holy Spirit is available to support our smartest decisions and help us accomplish that which would be impossible on our own.

Dealing with spiritual burnout should include reviewing the highlights of the past, or as

Ellen White puts it, going back to the place where you last saw the light. Keeping a spiritual journal where you write down the high points of being close to God is one way to do that. When things are not going so well you can go back to the journal and be encouraged. I have a journal I call "The Book of Providence" where I can write down events and experiences where the hand of God was particularly evident in my life. Whenever I get discouraged or things get rough, I can go there to refresh myself by the mighty things that God has done for me in the past.

A final way to deal with spiritual burnout, according to Sardis, is a sense of eschatological accountability. There is a judgment in the last days. There every deed, both good and bad, is held to account. Jesus is returning and we all be held accountable for the lives we have lived. This awareness is more than just a sense of foreboding that we will be nailed for every mistake. Our good deeds are also brought to light there. Little acts of kindness, courage, and perseverance will all be remembered (Matt 10:42). Even the most menial acts now will prove to have meaning then. This means that every thought and action has value in the light of the larger picture of eternity. When we live each day in the light of the judgment and the end of the world, we will be motivated to move with decisive action. So the lessons to the church of Sardis not only apply to churches but to individuals suffering "burn-out".

### **Rev 3:1-6 (Church History Reading)–**

Is there a particular period of church history that the church of Sardis might represent? I think the period that fits best is probably what some scholars call "Protestant Scholasticism." In the Reformation there was a tremendous movement to put the church on the right path. There was a tremendous excitement to reform, strengthen, awaken, and resurrect all that God had intended for the church.

But after the original generation of reformers passed away, there came a period of "protestant scholasticism." People were more interested in arguing detailed points of doctrine than they were in living the faith. The sense of God's living presence in the church was often lost. It was a time when splitting theological hairs was more important than a commitment to Christ, and right thinking was more important than a relationship with God. The value of precise formulations of doctrine and institutional structures was over-estimated. There was a failure to continue the Reformation in terms of heart commitment to the God of those doctrines and structures.

The period of protestant scholasticism runs from the late 16<sup>th</sup> Century through the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. This covers particularly the generations after the first group of Reformers (Luther, Calvin, Zwingli). This period seems well represented by the message to the church of Sardis. The reputation of Protestantism at this time was great, after all, they were the "churches of the Reformation." But they had lost the deep spiritual life they had had in the time of the great Reformers. In part because of the spiritual weakness of the church in those years, secularism and atheism began to take increasing root in society. A whole new generation of reformers had to arise, like John Wesley and eventually William Miller.

It is interesting that the two churches (Sardis and Laodicea) that have no mention of either external or internal opposition are the least satisfactory of all the seven.

Rev 3:7-13 (Introduction)– The name “Philadelphia” is based on the Greek words for “familial love” (*philêo*) and “brother” (*adelphos*). Hence the meaning, “brotherly love.” The letter to Philadelphia is much more positive than the letters to Sardis or Laodicea. Philadelphia and Smyrna alone received praise without condemnation of any kind. There is much for Jesus to commend and little for Him to criticize. So Philadelphia gets more overcomer promises than any other church, six in all. We know from extra-biblical sources that there was a thriving church here in the early part of the Second Century because Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch (died *circa* 110 AD), also wrote a letter to this church on his way to martyrdom. Bishops from Philadelphia are also mentioned as attending the great church councils from the fourth to sixth centuries.

### **Rev 3:7-13 (Intro)–**

The name “Philadelphia” is based on the Greek words for “familial love” and “brother,” hence “brotherly love.”

Ancient Philadelphia was a little more than 25 miles south-southeast of Sardis (45 kilometers). The volcanic soil of the area is particularly favorable to the growing of grapes, so the city remained inhabited, in spite of frequent destructive earthquakes. It was the youngest of the seven cities in Revelation, founded on the slopes of Mount Tmolus by Attalus Philadelphus (220-138 BC), king of Pergamon, in the middle of the second century BC. Attalus earned the appellation “Philadelphus” (brotherly love) because of the remarkable love he demonstrated in behalf of his ailing brother and co-ruler Eumenes II. Attalus was the younger of the two and remained faithful to his brother in spite of Roman attempts to make him king instead. After Eumenes’ death, Attalus took care of Eumenes’ wife and promoted Eumenes’ son to succeed him upon his death.

Philadelphia was founded as a “missionary city,” for the promotion of Greek language and culture in the area around it. The ruins of ancient Philadelphia are largely gone now, buried under the modern city of Aleshehir in western Turkey. The main archeological attraction in the town is the Basilica of St. John, which was built around 600 AD and is represented by the remnants of four giant buttresses. The city was nearly destroyed by an earthquake in the time of Tiberias (AD 14-37). Judaism seems to have been particularly strong in the city at the time when Revelation was written.

### **Rev 3:7–**

Jesus introduces Himself to the church at Philadelphia as “the holy and true one” (Greek: *ho hagios, ho alêthinos*). “Holy” means consecrated or set apart for God. “True” is in contrast with that which is false, but even more means “genuine” or authentic in contrast with that which is imperfect or unreal.

This combined designation (holy and true) is not found anywhere in chapter one (an exception to the rule for Jesus’ self-introductions in these letters). It likely refers instead to the content of the letter that follows, as is the case with “key of David.” The phrase is repeated in Revelation 6:10, being placed in the mouths of the “souls under the altar.” There it probably

applies to God the Father (see Rom 1:32; 2:2-5; 1 Thess 1:5), rather than Jesus (although see John 5:22; Rom 14:10; 2 Cor 5:10). If Jesus was intended in Revelation 6:10, it would probably say “Lamb” rather than “Lord.” Jesus is also referred to as “the holy one” in Mark 1:24, Luke 1:35, John 6:69, and Acts 4:27,30. Jesus is called “faithful and true” in Revelation 3:14 and 19:11. Although the phrase “holy one” is rarely found in secular Greek, it is very frequent in the Septuagint (the Greek OT).

The Father is later described as “true and righteous” in Revelation 16:7 and 19:2, and His words are true and righteous in 15:3. The “Holy One” was an Old Testament designation for Yahweh. It was also a common expression in Judaism for God. In the Old Testament, God is often referred to as “the holy one” (Job 6:10; Psa 89:18-19; Isa 1:4; 5:19,24; 40:25; Jer 51:5; Ezek 39:7; Hos 11:9; Hab 3:3), and “the true one” ( 2 Chr 15:3; Isa 65:16; Jer 10:10, cf. John 17:3; 1 Thess 1:9). So the designation of “holy and true” in relation to Jesus here is further evidence of the exalted position of Jesus within the godhead throughout Revelation (see also Excursus on the Hymns of Revelation 4-5). Jesus is real, He is the one who genuinely represents the true God, and He faithfully carries out God’s promises to His people.

Jesus also introduces Himself as the one who holds the key of David. The “key of David” is the key to the king’s storehouse (see also Hebrews 3:6). This is a strong allusion to and modification of Isaiah 22:20-22. In Isaiah the key of David was in the hands of Shebna, who was over “the household” (Isa 22:15), presumably the household of Hezekiah, as he is mentioned also in 2 Kings 18-19 and Isaiah 36-37 (in the context of the Assyrian siege of Jerusalem during the reign of Sennacherib). In Isaiah 22, Shebna is proud of his position and builds an elaborate tomb and a collection of chariots (22:16-19) which results in his being deposed by God. He is then replaced in his role as holder of the “key of David” by Eliakim the son of Hilkiah (22:20-22). What is puzzling about this passage is the fact that in 2 Kings 18-19 and Isaiah 36-39 Eliakim is the one who is “over the household” but Shebna is right alongside him as “the recorder” or “secretary.” Evidently, Shebna was deposed from the higher position but retained in a lower position in the court of Hezekiah.

The Old Testament context need not detain us, as the details are not crucial to the interpretation of Revelation 3. What counts for our passage is that the holder of the key has full access to the house; authority and control over it. The “key of David” would ultimately belong to each successor in the royal line of David (of whom Hezekiah was one). So the holder of the key would be the person appointed to a position something like a presidential chief of staff today. In our passage, it is Jesus Christ that holds the key of David as Messiah. He has supplanted the proud one (Isa 14:12-19; Ezek 28:12-19), who had usurped this key in the garden of Eden (Rev 12:9; Gen 3:1-6). He is the one who decides who belongs in the household. He is now the regent of God’s kingdom on earth (Rev 5:9-12). He has the key to the heavenly storehouse.

Through Peter, to whom Jesus entrusted the “keys” in Matthew 16 (16-19) Jesus opened the door of His kingdom to the Gentiles (Acts 10-11), a door that Peter himself tried to shut later (Gal 2:11-18) and that some Jewish Christians in Philadelphia may have wanted to keep shut (see Rev 3:9). Peter’s key was the “key of knowledge” (Luke 11:52, cf. 24:32), the knowledge that through the Messiah, God had opened the way of salvation to all people. Jesus

also has the keys of hell and of death (Rev 1:18). The handover of God's kingdom to Jesus, the "son of David," was prophesied in texts like 2 Sam 7:12-14, Jer 30:9, Ezek 34:32 and 37:24.

The second half of verse 7 elaborates the tasks of the one who holds the key of David. He is the only one who can open or shut the door to the king's storehouse. His access to the storehouse is without peer and the only access others can have is the access they receive in relationship with him. So the key of David becomes a metaphor for the surpassing greatness of Jesus Christ and the access we can have to God through Him. Furthermore, no one else can exclude those he has invited into the kingdom, and no one can secure entrance for those He has declined to allow in. In a sense, the "house of David" (2 Sam 7:26; 1 Kings 8:16; 2 Chr 21:7; Isa 22:22; Zech 12:10) has become a metaphor for the church. The heavenly storehouse implied here is the source of all that is promised to the ones who overcome in all seven churches.

### **Rev 3:8–**

There's an aspect to the church in Philadelphia that is unique among these seven messages to the seven churches. For the other six churches, the text naturally falls into two parts: Jesus' analysis of their past and present condition and Jesus' counsel to them moving forward. But verse 8 of the letter to Philadelphia doesn't fit neatly into either of those two categories. It is "bonus material"— what Jesus is doing in their present. In this letter Jesus not only talks about their future, but He also describes actions He is taking in in their present situation.

On Jesus' knowledge of the works of each church see the Introduction to Revelation 2. This verse takes up the metaphor of the key from the previous verse and speaks about an open door that no one can shut. In verse 7 the door implied was the door to the kingdom of God in general, and by extension, the door into the church. Here the door is narrowed down to something that is specific and unique to the church at Philadelphia. So it is not immediately clear exactly what the open door means in the context of this particular church. The word for "open," however, is not a simple adjective in the Greek (*êneôgmenên*), it is a perfect participle. That means that the door was already "standing open" when Jesus placed the church before it. The opportunity was there before their attention was drawn to it.

Scholars have offered a number of options for understanding what the door means in this particular context. First, is the idea that Jesus Himself is the door. He was the door of the sheepfold (John 10:7 and 9) and certainly that door was opened forever at the cross. Salvation is available to the members of the church of Philadelphia because of what Jesus did on the cross. Second, this is a door of missionary opportunity for the church (1 Corinthians 16:9; 2 Corinthians 2:12; Colossians 4:3). It would be a door of evangelization; perhaps the hearers in Philadelphia were open to hear and receive the gospel in a way that Laodicea was not (Rev 3:20). Third, building on the previous verse, it could be the door of access to the heavenly storehouse. That would mean a particularly abundant opportunity for the believers in Philadelphia to secure salvation for themselves and others (Matthew 23:13; Luke 11:52). The door of salvation was never closed to them day or night. Fourth, it may have been an open door through which they could escape persecution. This idea is grounded on what follows. Assuming their persecutors were Jewish, these persecutors were about to be humbled (Rev 3:9). Fifth, it

could be an open door to the Scriptures, in other words, the church had a unique ability to understand God's word and proclaim it.

I think that it is possible for any of the five scholarly options for the "open door" to be correct. The text itself is ambiguous as to its meaning. Each of these suggestions is true in the broad sense, but one wonders why this concept has been introduced in such an ambiguous way, when the Greek language was capable of expressing each of the five options more clearly.

Only one of the five options seems specific enough to make general sense through the New Testament but also have a unique application to the context of ancient Philadelphia. That is the second one, that the open door is a door of missionary opportunity for the church. This is compatible with similar expressions in the New Testament. In Acts 14:27 the open door was the possibility of faith coming to the Gentiles. In 1 Corinthians 16:8-9 the open door related to Paul's decision to stay longer in Ephesus, not doubt because of a specific mission opportunity there at that time. In 2 Corinthians 2:12-13, the open door was the receptivity of people in Troas to the preaching of Paul. And in Colossians 4:3 the open door is an opportunity for Paul to preach the gospel even though he is in prison. So an open door in the New Testament, and particularly Paul, is a figure of speech for great opportunity to preach the gospel, it is a door of missionary opportunity.

The city of Philadelphia was strategically placed as a gateway to the East. As mentioned earlier, it was built as a missionary city for the spread of Greek language and culture among the barbarian tribes of central Asia Minor. Just as the inhabitants of the city had the opportunity to spread Greek ideas widely, so the members of the church had a unique opportunity to spread the gospel to the world. The open door of this verse, therefore, is likely the door of opportunity for mission and evangelism.

The last half of the sentence is in three parts. It is introduced by a major Greek conjunction (*hoti*) followed by two minor ones (*kai*). So the correct translation of this portion of the verse is along the lines of the NIV: "You have little strength, yet (Greek: *kai*) you have kept my word and (Greek: *kai*) have not denied my name." Although they have little strength now, they have been faithful in the past and these three reasons are the grounds for the open door that Jesus has set before them.

As mentioned, the last half of the sentence is introduced by the Greek *hoti*. In this context *hoti* can mean "because," or it can introduce the purpose or the result of something. Neither purpose nor result seem to be correct here. Jesus did not give them an open door "in order that" they might have little strength, nor is little strength the result of the open door. So the open door is provided for them "because" they have little strength on their own, yet have been faithful with the strength that they have. The open door represents God's gracious provision in the place of their weakness.

"You have little strength" is the closest this message comes to criticism of the Philadelphian church. The word translated "have" is present indicative, it is a current reality in the church. But what exactly does "little strength" mean? Are they few in numbers or low in spiritual power and energy? An argument for small in numbers is that the rest of the letter is so positive. The church seems to be strong spiritually, but even a spiritually strong church can be weak in numbers and external resources (wealth and power). In comparison with the numerous

and wealthy Jewish segment in the city, they don't come across as very strong. If "little strength" was qualitative, it would seem to contradict the next two parts of the clause, "you have kept my word and not denied my name." Lack of strength in numbers and resources would seem, then, the point of this phrase. But while their strength in numbers and resources is small, if they apply what they have in the direction of the open door, they can still accomplish great things. The fact that they know they have little strength causes them to lean all the more on the strength of God.

The last two phrases of this verse are a contrasting pair. The first focuses on doctrine, the second on the person of Jesus Christ. Having kept Jesus' word implies that their faith and doctrine have been kept pure. Not denying Jesus' name implies that they have not apostatized from their faith in Jesus, although given an opportunity to do so. Such a contrasting pair of clauses is consistent with John's Hebraic style elsewhere (John 1:3, 20; 3:16; 10:5, etc., 1 John 1:5-6; 2:4, etc., Rev 2:13).

Persecution in the Empire often occurred when Christians were required to renounce the name of Christ in a public manner. Since the Greek verbs (*etêrêsas*— "kept" and *ouk êrnêsô*— "not denied") are aorist indicatives (a point in past time), it is likely referring to a specific incident in the past. At some point in the recent past, members of the church at Philadelphia had faced a public trial of their faith and held firm. Since Jews seem to have been involved in that trial (Rev 3:9), it may have focused specifically on renouncing Jesus as the Messiah. The context of persecution is further echoed in verses 9-11.

The entire verse seems to be saying the following, by way of summary. The church at Philadelphia has kept the faith and not denied Jesus' name, in spite of its relatively little strength in numbers and resources. For this reason, Jesus has set before them an open door of missionary opportunity.

### **Rev 3:9—**

The entire verse is a complex sentence, its two halves each introduced by the word "behold" (KJV, NASB, ESV; Greek: *idou*). Most English translations follow the first "behold" with "I will make" or "I will cause," implying something that will happen in the church's future. But the opening verb in the Greek is actually a present subjunctive (Greek: *didô*— "give") which expresses probability in the present (this use of "give" may echo Hebrew grammar). That this present tense should actually be translated with a future becomes evident in the second half of this verse. After the second "behold" comes the verb "I will make" (Greek: *poiêsô*), a future indicative. Since the first half of this complex sentence (beginning with "I give") is incomplete, this second verb picks up the first, showing that the second half of the verse completes the incomplete sentence of the first half. So translating both verbs as "I will make" (ESV, KJV, NIV, NRSV) is appropriate.

Verse 9 is the second of three actions Jesus performs in behalf of the church at Philadelphia. The first was the provision of the open door (Rev 3:8). Here it is an action directed at their chief opponents. In verse 10 He promises to keep them in the hour of trial that is coming upon the world. The second action in this verse is to make the synagogue of Satan bow down before them. The subjunctive of the first verb (Greek: *didô*) implies that this is something

already in process and likely to happen. The “synagogue of Satan” will one day acknowledge that the church at Philadelphia was truly loved by Jesus. Regarding the figure of Satan, that lies behind the phrase “synagogue of Satan,” see the comments on Revelation 2:9.

Many translations have “**those** of the synagogue of Satan.” The word “those” is not in the Greek (literally “I will give [or cause] of the synagogue of Satan”) but is implied by the partitive (a part of the whole) construction. The use of a partitive genitive as the subject or object of the verb is common in the writings of John (John 1:24; 6:39; 7:40; 16:17; 21:10; 2 John 4). Some but not all of the synagogue of Satan will acknowledge the believers. The promise in this verse is larger than that made to Smyrna (Rev 2:9). The “synagogue of Satan” in Smyrna would not prevail against the church, but in Philadelphia, the church would even win over some of “the synagogue of Satan.” They would end up falling on their faces and confessing that God is truly in her. The concept of “falling down at your feet” echos a number of Old Testament contexts, particularly in Isaiah, where the conversion of the Gentiles to the religion of Israel was envisioned (Psa 72:9; Isa 2:3; 49:23; 60:14; Zech 8:20-23). The irony here is the implication that the church, with its many Gentile members, would now receive in reverse the honor the prophets had foreseen for Old Testament Israel.

The reference to Satan here foreshadows a figure who lurks in the background of Revelation, yet has a crucial role in the story. In the background of Revelation is a cosmic conflict, clearly outlined in Revelation 12:7-10 and strongly implied in the scenes of Revelation 4-5 and Revelation 20:1-10. Revelation 12:9 connects Satan with the dragon, the devil, and the serpent in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:1-15— see notes on Rev 12:9). According to hints in the prophets, Satan is a created being who was once the pinnacle of God’s creation, but allowed pride over his magnificence to lead him into rebellion against God (Isa 14:12-19; Ezek 28:12-19). His *modus operandi* is accusations against the people of God (Job 1-2; Rev 12:10), which are really veiled accusations against the character and government of God (Gen 3:1-5; Job 1-2). This cosmic conflict lies behind all the conflicts people experienced in the earthly realm. In every earthly context God is at work, but there is also another one at work, sowing dissension, rebellion and violence. Revelation will ultimately show that force and violence are not God’s methods of ruling the world or the universe. These are the methods of another who seeks to paint God into his own image.

The Greek word for “fall down” (*proskunêsousin*) is the same word translated “worship” (*proskunêôsîn*) in Revelation 13:15. There the entire world is forced, under pain of death, to worship the beast and its image. So this verse would seem to forecast the end-time reversal of the counterfeit trinity’s attempt to force all to worship the image of the beast. Long before the final events of Revelation 13, Jesus forecast the outcome in the message to Philadelphia. In other words, at the conclusion of the end-time struggle, some of those who make up the image of the beast, will fall down as if in worship and acknowledge that the faithful remnant were right after all. This is one of the few direct links between the seven churches and the final battle in Revelation 12-18. This link is also an indication that John was aware that the message to seven local churches also had end-time implications. In the historical sense, the church at Philadelphia continues until the end of Christian history.

This verse says that the members of the “synagogue of Satan” say they are Jews but are

not. As noted earlier (see comments on Revelation 2:9), the phrase “synagogue of Satan” is probably a satirical counter to the Jewish claim to be the “synagogue of the Lord.” From the standpoint of Revelation, the non-Christian Jews of Smyrna and Philadelphia were not the genuine followers of Judaism that they claimed to be. Non-Christian Jews as such are not rejected by Jesus (nor by Paul: Rom 11:1-2), but these are excoriated because they manifested hostility toward Him in their persecution of the churches who believe Jesus is the Messiah. A principle like the one expressed by Paul in Romans 2:28-29 may be in mind here.

In his letter to the Philadelphians, a decade or two later, the church father Ignatius confirms that the church at Philadelphia suffered from the negative attention of the synagogue in that city. The church at Philadelphia would one day have authority over the Jews in the same way the church at Thyatira would have authority over the Gentiles (Rev 2:26-27). By this means Jesus assures the church that He loves them in spite of their weaknesses and that He is already dealing with those who oppose them. When God opens the door of opportunity for this church, none of their enemies will be able to shut it. In fact, one day their enemies will acknowledge they were right. The present situation of weakness will not continue forever.

### **Rev 3:10–**

A third promise Jesus makes to the church is that He will keep them “from the hour of trial” (ESV, NIV, NRSV) that is about to come upon the whole inhabited world. The verse begins with the grounds for this promise, “Since you have kept my word (Greek: *logon*– sometimes translated “command”) to endure patiently.” “Since” (Greek: *hoti*) normally comes after an assertion explaining the reason for it (often translated “because”), in this case the explanation comes before the assertion. There is a word play in this sentence. Since they have kept (*etêrêsas*) Jesus’ command, He will keep (*têrêsô*) them from the hour of trial. The actions of the church and the reward promised correspond to each other. The reward of loyalty is to receive even greater ability to be loyal in the future.

Patience (*hupomonês*) has also been a characteristic of the churches at Ephesus (Rev 2:2-3) and Thyatira (2:19). The word translated “patience” in the Greek is a compound of “remaining” (*monês*) and “under” (*hupo*). It has the implication of remaining under a heavy weight or burden rather than seeking to escape it. Christians who suffer willingly for Christ’s sake have “remained under,” they have patiently endured. And this patient endurance will be a defining mark of the final remnant at the end of time (Rev 13:10; 14:12).

The Greek word for “my” (*mou*) occurs after “patience” rather than “word.” It is not “my word about patience” but “the word of MY patience.” The patient endurance Jesus asks of the churches is modeled on that which He Himself exhibited on the cross (Rev 1:9). We learn later in the book (Rev 12-20) that Jesus continues to patiently endure, He is waiting until Satan is finally defeated by the full exposure of his lies (Rev 12:9-10; 15:3-4). In a sense, this verse is a positive example of the biblical principle of “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” (Exod 21:24; Lev 24:20; Deut 19:21; Matt 5:38, see also Luke 6:37-38). Their protection in a later trial corresponds to their faithfulness in a preceding trial.

In this verse the preposition “from” (KJV, NASB, ESV, NIV, NRSV; Greek: *ek*) is the most decisive element in interpretation. Interpreters have disputed whether the promise of Jesus

keeps them “out of” the hour of trial or preserves and encourages them as they go through it. To put it in other words, is the deliverance in the hour of trial removing them from the experience or keeping them safe as they go through it? Grammatically, in this verse alone, it is not possible to decide between the two options.

The only significant parallel text (John 17:15), however, uses the same Greek terms in clearer fashion: "My prayer is not that you take them out of (Greek: *ek*) the world but that you protect (“keep” in KJV and ESV, Greek: *têrêsês*) them from (Greek: *ek*) the evil one." In the NIV, the same Greek word (*ek*) is translated in two different ways in the same sentence on account of the context. Jesus does not pray that they will be removed (*ek*– basic meaning “out of”) but that they will be “kept” away from (*ek*) the evil one. They are not removed from the world, but preserved from the evil one within it. So the translation “from” is as appropriate in Revelation 3:10 as it is in the second part of John 17:15.

Revelation 3:10 is one of the key texts in the rapture theory, the idea that before the second coming of Jesus God’s faithful ones will be raptured away from the earth to be removed from what is later called the Great Tribulation (Rev 7:14). In this way of reading, the promise to Philadelphia is that they will be removed “out of” the world before the Great Tribulation comes. While the basic meaning of the word *ek* is “out of,” most translators agree that that is not the thrust of the word in the context of Revelation 3:10. They will be preserved (kept) from losing their faithfulness in the midst of trial. Since the Greek word for “patient endurance” (*hupomonês*) is consistently associated with suffering and persecution in the New Testament (Rom 5:3-4; 2 Cor 6:4; 2 Thess 1:4; Jam 1:3-4; Rev 13:8-10), this verse does not imply that the Philadelphians will be spared the hour of trial. Rather they will experience the preserving presence of Jesus within it. Like Israel in Egypt, the church at Philadelphia will be kept safe in the midst of the plagues that will afflict the whole world at the end of time (Rev 16).

The word translated “trial” in this verse is *peiras mou* (from *peiras mos*). This word can be translated in two different ways. It can be translated as “trial” in the sense of a court proceeding (Acts 4:9; 16:37; 23:6; 24:21; 25:9,20; 26:6). By extension it can also mean “test” or “trial,” something that reveals the quality of the person being tested (Gal 4:14; Jam 1:3-4,12; 1 Pet 4:12). But it can also be translated as “to tempt” or “temptation” (Matt 6:13; 26:41; Mark 14:38; Luke 4:13; 11:4; 22:40, 46; 1 Cor 10:13; 1 Tim 6:9). Sometimes it is not clear which of the two meanings is intended (Matt 16:1; Luke 8:13; John 8:6; Gal 4:14; 2 Pet 2:9). In this context it is most likely “test” or “trial by suffering” that is intended. The same event can be a “test” of faith to the one who believes and a “temptation” to the one who is already inclined to follow the ways of Satan. The word (*peirasai*) is then used in the latter sense at the end of this verse.

The “hour of trial” (first reference– *peiras mou*) will be a “temptation” (second reference– *peirasai*) to “those who live on the earth.” This phrase is consistently used in Revelation for the wicked, those who oppose God and oppose His people on earth (Rev 6:10; 8:13; 11:10; 13:8, 14; 14:6). The faithful followers of God, therefore, are not affected by those plagues, they fall only on those who have refused the seal of God and have accepted the mark of the beast (Rev 16:4-7, 9). Jesus is faithful to the faithful (see also Dan 12:1).

This future hour of trial is to come upon the “whole inhabited world” (*oikoumenês holês*). This expression implies that in some way the church at Philadelphia will participate in

the time of trouble that will occur at the very end of the age. The great hour of eschatological trial is when plagues are poured out on the whole earth (Rev 16). This is, perhaps, one of the stronger arguments that the letters to the seven churches are not only applicable to John's day, but are also expressing guidelines and even timelines that will be relevant throughout Christian history and particularly at the End.

### **Rev 3:11-13–**

Having given the church at Philadelphia several assurances, Jesus now offers them three major items of counsel. First, hold on to what you have, let no one take your crown. The residents of this church were already assured of eschatological acceptance, but they still need to hold on to their crown. They have the assurance of salvation but their assurance is not a "once saved always saved" type of assurance.

Second, keep your eyes on the reward. Those who overcome will become a "pillar in God's temple," in other words, the weak ones will become strong. They will also be secure in the sense that they will never leave God's temple. This promise anticipates the great multitude who are redeemed from the great tribulation and are, therefore, in the temple day and night (Rev 7:15). In the temple their condition is stable and they are safe from danger. "Not going out" of the temple implies safety and security. Metaphorically, there is danger outside the temple. In addition to these promises, they are to be the recipients of God's name and the name of His city, the new Jerusalem. They will also receive Jesus' new name. This means that they will receive a new and magnificent identity if they overcome and let no one take their crown.

Finally, as with all the other churches, Jesus counsels them to listen to the Spirit. If they listen to the Spirit, they will retain their crown and be conscious of their everlasting reward.

### **Rev 3:11–**

Jesus begins His counsel to the church at Philadelphia with the assertion, "I am coming soon" (*erchomai tachu*). The word "soon" recalls Revelation 1:1, where the events in Revelation are expected to happen "soon" (Greek: *en tachei*). See comments on Revelation 1:1. The full expression (*erchomai tachu*) occurs five times in the Book of Revelation (Rev 2:16; 3:11; 22:7, 12, 20) and once more in a closely related form (*erchetai tachu*– Rev 11:14). In Revelation 2:16 Jesus is coming soon to judge the church if it does not repent. Here, in the context of the eschatological trial of verse 10, it is a reference to the Second Coming, the goal of their holding fast later in the verse. In Revelation 11:14 (*erchetai tachu*) it is not Jesus that is coming soon, but the third woe, an ironic use of the phrase. In Revelation 22:7 the promise of Jesus' soon coming encourages "keeping the words of the prophecy of this book." In Revelation 22:12 the coming of Jesus brings both positive and negative according to what everyone has done. And finally, in Revelation 22:20 the phrase is isolated from its context, a promise that Jesus will come soon. Of the six occurrences of "coming soon" this one follows closest to the three references in chapter 22. The church at Philadelphia is to keep the Second Coming of Jesus continually in mind. In Revelation 2:5 (without the "soon") and 2:16 Jesus' coming is a threat, here it is a promise that their suffering will not be long. This is an encouragement to persevere

in spite of trials.

The verse goes on to encourage the Philadelphians to hold fast (*kratei*) what they have (note similar expressions in Rev 2:6, 25). “What you have” seems to summarize verses 8-10, especially verse 8. What they do have is that they have kept Jesus’ word and not denied His name. These things they are to continue to do until He comes. “Holding fast,” usually with an object, also occurs in Revelation 2:1, 13-15, 25.

The crown that they are to hold on to here is the Greek *stephanos*. It is the crown of victory, something like an Olympic gold medal today, as opposed to the royal crown of authority. See comments on Revelation 6:2. Presumably this crown is the same one called the “crown of life” in Revelation 2:10. The phrase “let no one take your crown” is preceded by the Greek preposition of purpose (*hina*). The church is to hold on to what they have “in order that” no one will take away their crown. The crown is not something the Philadelphians actually possess, but is the reward they will have in the future if they prove faithful (see 1 Tim 4:8; 2 John 8).

The word for “take” here (Greek: *labê*, from *lambanô*) does not mean merely “take away” but also “receive for oneself.” So the plainest reading might suggest that when a person loses their spiritual inheritance, it is claimed by another in their place. It is not correct, however, that someone else could come along and take one’s heavenly inheritance for himself or herself. Note Colossians 2:18. One person could encourage another to disqualify themselves for heaven without that person necessarily receiving what the other lost. This choice of words is merely a metaphor that encourages diligent effort to maintain a saving relationship with Jesus. No one has the right to gain salvation at the expense of another, but it is very possible for one to get in the way of another’s salvation.

In the Babylonian Talmud (several centuries after Revelation) there is an interesting expansion of the Sinai narrative that may be relevant to the “taking” of the crown, if it reflects a much earlier tradition. According to the story, when Israel promised to obey all the commands of God in Exodus 24:7, 600,000 angels came and placed two crowns on each Israelite’s head. But after the rebellion of the Israelites in Exodus 32-33, 1,200,000 devils snatched off all these crowns. According to the Talmud, these crowns would be restored to the Israelites in the Messianic Age (based on Isaiah 35:10). While this story is not in the biblical record, it may provide a basis for the metaphor that appears in this verse.

The Bible does offer many examples of people who lost their place to someone else because they failed the task God gave to them (from Barclay). Esau lost his place to Jacob (Gen 25:34; 27:36). Reuben lost his place to Judah (Gen 49:4, 8). Saul lost his place to David (1 Sam 16:1, 13). Judas lost his place to Matthias (Acts 1:25), and the Jews lost their place to the Gentiles (Rom 11:11). When people don’t accept a task God gives them, He gives the task to someone else and the first person loses the blessing that they could have had. But these are not an exact parallels to this verse, they represent places of service rather than one’s salvation before God.

### **Rev 3:12–**

Each overcomer promise to this point adds one more promise to the number of the

preceding promise. The first has one promise, the second two, and so on. Here we see that the church of Philadelphia receives a full six promises from Jesus. The one who overcomes in Philadelphia will be (1) kept from the hour of trial (verse 10), (2) will be made a pillar in God's temple, (3) will never again leave the temple, and (4) will have written upon him God's name, (5) the name of the city of God, and (6) Jesus' own new name. The only church that gets a better promise is Laodicea. Receiving a place on God's throne (Rev 3:21) brings immediate access to all other promises. The mention of the New Jerusalem (chapters 21 and 22) makes it clear that the promises in this verse concern the time after the Second Coming of Jesus, whereas the promise in verse 10 will be fulfilled before the End.

The believer in Philadelphia is promised to become a pillar in God's temple and to never leave it. A pillar implies firmness and stability (Jer 1:18). Solomon's temple had two main pillars (1 Kings 7:15, 21; 2 Chr 3:17), called Jachin (Hebrew *yachin*— "he will establish") and Boaz (Hebrew *bôatz*— "in him is strength"). Such pillars cannot be removed from a building while the whole building stands. The Philadelphians relation to God is permanently secure and they play an important role in God's plans for eternity.

The term pillar is applied in the New Testament to leaders of the church (Gal 3:9), and to the church itself (1 Tim 3:15). All believers are living stones in the temple, each an important part of its completeness (Eph 2:20-22; 1 Pet 2:5, see also 1 Cor 3:16-17; 2 Cor 6:16). But pillars are even more impressive features of a temple than mere stones. Perhaps overcomers in Philadelphia will have earned special leadership roles. Since Philadelphia was prone to frequent and severe earthquakes, this promise would be especially meaningful. In the context of a reference to the New Jerusalem, the pillar reference points to a reward in eternity, not just special roles in the present (see also Matthew 19:28).

The temple concept here is related to Revelation 7:15, where the great multitude are before the throne and serve God day and night in his temple. On the other hand, in 21:22 there is no temple in the New Jerusalem after it has come down from heaven. There are two ways to address this apparent discrepancy. First, if one thinks of temple language as pointing to heavenly realities (a teaching tool) rather than as a literal descriptive of a heavenly building, such imagery can be used to make a point without contradicting a different one used in another place. Sanctuary imagery may be particularly appropriate to the point in one place, but its absence may make the point in another place. In the case of Revelation 21:22, there is no need for a temple in the New Jerusalem because the whole city is a temple, equivalent to the Most Holy Place (the New Jerusalem and the Most Holy Place are the only cubes in the Bible). Second, the view of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21-22 is after the millennium. Perhaps the references to God's temple in 3:12 and 7:15 are after the Second Coming but during the millennium (assuming the Second Coming is before the millennium). Thus the temple may have an important role in heaven during the thousand years, but no longer be needed after the final destruction of the cosmic rebellion in chapter 20.

The phrase "go no more out" is related to the previous clause about the pillar. "He" probably refers both to the "overcomer" and the "pillar," which are equated in the first clause. He will not go out "anymore" (NASB— Greek *eti*, "never more at all"). Once they have entered the temple, they are permanently secure. It has never been the plan of God to lose any of His

creatures or drive anyone away (John 6:37; 10:28-29; 1 John 2:19). Eternal security is not based on a change in God (2 Cor 5:18-19), it is based on our coming to trust God so completely that we cannot be moved. The above phrase does not imply that the saved will never change physical location; wherever in the universe they travel, they are still “in the temple of God,” since all things in the universe are now holy (Rev 21:2, 10; 22:10, 19, cf. Joel 3:17).

The rest of the overcomer promises have to do with Jesus writing on people; He writes the name of God, the name of God’s New Jerusalem, and also Jesus’ new name upon the believers in Philadelphia. Inscriptions on pillars were common in the ancient world, so this follows naturally from the first part of the verse. Writing the name was also associated with citizenship. According to the rabbinical book *Baba Bathra* (75.2) the name of God is found upon the righteous (Isa 43:7), the Messiah (Jer 23:6) and Jerusalem (Ezek 48:35). All three of these Old Testament ideas are combined in these writing promises, but take on a unique Christian flavor in the context of Revelation.

This idea of a divine “tattoo” is widespread in the Bible. The High Priest wore a headband upon which was written “holy to the Lord” (Exod 28:36-38). In Revelation the servants of God are sealed on their foreheads (Rev 7:3, see also Rev 9:4) and the followers of the Lamb have Jesus’ Father’s name written on their foreheads (14:1). In Revelation 22:4 it is not clear whether the name on the forehead is that of the Father or of Jesus. The counter image to the above is the forehead inscription of the great prostitute Babylon in Revelation 17:5 (see also Rev 13:16-17; 20:4). In ancient times when you wrote your name on something it meant it belonged to you. In this context the writing of the name means that they would be known and recognized as belonging to God. Since the name also reflects character, this would indicate that they will reflect the character of God (John 17:22,24).

Writing the name of the city of God on the forehead relates to citizenship in the New Jerusalem. What they had received as a foretaste in this life (Phil 3:20; Heb 12:22-23) would become openly seen and recognized in the next. That citizenship is hidden now but will be openly revealed then. The reference to the New Jerusalem anticipates the full description of that city at the end of the book (Rev 21-22). The reference to the city coming down out of heaven anticipates Revelation 21:2-3. Another parallel to this text is Revelation 22:14 where those who have washed their robes (or kept the commandments— manuscript difference) will have the right to enter the gates of the city and eat of the Tree of Life. In Ezekiel 48:35 the name of the city is “The Lord is There.” This is very appropriate to the description in Revelation 21:1-3. There the people of God will live in His presence (see also 22:4).

### **Rev 3:12-13—**

What is Jesus’ new name? The name is new in relation to His role in human salvation. He had a great name in eternity past, but this new name, whatever it is, is earned by His work in behalf of humanity (Phil 2:9-11). In Revelation 19:16 His name is “King of Kings and Lord of Lords.” But this does not seem to be the new name, as the same rider on the white horse has a name that no one knows be He himself. Another suggestion is that the new name is related to verse 7, where Jesus now holds the privileges of Messiahship, the key of David. It is new because Jesus’ divine rule is only made fully manifest at the close of the millennium (Rev 20:7-

15). A parallel text to this is Revelation 2:17, where believers received a new name that only they know. See comments on that verse. Since this concept is not fully explained in Revelation, it is evidently intended to become known only in the afterlife.

On the call to follow the Spirit (verse 13) see comments on Revelation 2:7.

### **Rev 3:7-13 (Summary and Conclusion)–**

The letter to the church at Philadelphia is one of the two most positive messages provided to the seven churches (along with the message to the church at Smyrna). The closest thing to a rebuke in this message is the comment that the church has little strength. But if this comment means the church is weak in numbers and external resources, it is not a spiritual criticism, but in fact heightens the impressiveness of the church's accomplishments and the many promises from Jesus. This letter describes the enemies of the church doing all they can to shut the door that Jesus placed before the Philadelphians, but even though the church had little strength, in human terms, no one could shut the door that Jesus had opened for them.

### **Rev 3:7-13 (Spiritual Lessons)–**

The last of several bonuses Jesus offers the church at Philadelphia is that He is coming soon (verse 11). In the letters to Ephesus, Pergamum and Sardis, Jesus coming to them was a threat, but in the letter to Philadelphia Jesus' coming is a blessing and also a time of reward (Rev 22:11-12). Throughout the Bible, the judgments of God are two-fold, both positive and negative. Judgment can bring severe consequences or destruction to those who have not been faithful, but to the faithful judgment brings reversal of present unfortunate state and a time of setting right and exaltation. Even in the negative judgment of the Flood story, God provides a way out through the ark. In the message to the church at Philadelphia, Jesus' coming for judgment is a blessing rather than a threat.

The church at Philadelphia had very little strength but the door of opportunity was held open by Jesus Himself. He didn't demand that they push their way through the door. All they had to do was to put one foot in front of another and He would be with them. Providential opportunities are available to those who are faithful even if they are weak. Since humanity is frail and prone to wander by definition, this reality is a great spiritual encouragement. Often our greatest claim on the promises of God is our great need. It is not those who are rich in talent and natural abilities who receive the blessings of God, but those who know how much they need them. Philadelphia was just such a place.

Providential opportunities can take some of the sting out of troubles, persecution, and mockery. The Christian's life in this world is not a bed of roses in the abstract, distant sense. The beauty of this life is accompanied by thorns. Suffering and rejection is often at the center of reality, even for the those most faithful to the call of God. But even in the midst of suffering and rejection, seeing the hand of God working in your life can bring a tremendous amount of comfort. The only requirement is to focus on what God is doing rather than on the obstacles that we face every day. Believers can live in heavenly places in Christ Jesus (Eph 2:6) even while mired in the complications of earthly existence.

In the Old Testament the promises of God were often accompanied by conditions (see

Deuteronomy 28). But in the New Testament context, Jesus' life and sacrificial death met the conditions that God had placed before Israel. So the abundance that God has promised from the beginning is now available to all in Christ. Jesus is the One who is in complete control of heaven's storehouse. He has the "key of David." There is no need to fear a spiritual shortage, no matter the circumstances, because distribution of the promises of God are under Jesus' control. If you are in Christ, all of God's promises are "yes" and "Amen" (2 Corinthians 1:20). They do not have to be earned.

### **Rev 3:7-13 (Church History Reading)–**

Within the larger scheme of church history, the best fit for Philadelphia is the period of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Following the decline of Protestantism during the period of scholasticism and the Counter-Reformation (represented by Sardis), there was a great revival in Protestantism under the Wesleys and others beginning around the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. This was followed by the tremendous missionary expansion of Christianity in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, so one could look at this time as one of significant faithfulness.

If the door of opportunity in this message is a missionary opportunity--a door of outreach--or door of access to eternal salvation, it would fit a period when the Christian church had a unique--perhaps one-time opportunity--to take the gospel to the whole world. The 19th century experienced what was probably the greatest advancement of the gospel throughout Christian history, though aided to a large degree by colonialism, which we have come to realize had a much darker side. But colonialism and the expansion of Western culture to the "new world" (the Americas) did provide a unique opportunity for the message of the gospel to penetrate the entire world in a way that has not happened before or since. And the establishment of Christianity in North America provided a powerful base for continuing missionary effort in the present.

### **Rev 3:14-22 (Introduction)–**

The word Laodicea means "judgment of the people" in Greek. The ancient city of Laodicea was about fifty miles (80 kilometers) southeast of ancient Philadelphia and nearly a hundred miles (160 kilometers) east of Ephesus. It was situated in the Lycus Valley between Hierapolis and Colossae, with which it is associated in Colossians 4:13. Although Paul wrote a letter to Colossae, he does not seem to have visited either Colossae or Laodicea (Col 2:1). Located at a major intersection of the Roman road system, Laodicea became one of the greatest commercial and financial centers of the ancient world. It was known for producing a high quality of wool garments and also an eye medicine made of Phrygian powder mixed with oil. Due to a combination of location and in-demand products, the inhabitants of the city became very wealthy.

The city was named after Laodice (died around 240 BC), the wife of Antiochus II, who was descended from Seleucus, one of the four generals that divided up Alexander's empire after his death (the others were named Lysimachus, Cassander and Ptolemy). The wealth of the city enabled its citizens to develop an elaborate underground water system that provided running water throughout the city. But since the source of the water was the hot springs at

Hierapolis, a few miles away, the water of Laodicea was lukewarm in temperature with a high mineral content, not very palatable.

Scholars measure the population of an ancient city by the number of seats in its public building. At the site of Laodicea you can find are two large theaters, a hippodrome (for chariot races, etc.) and an odeon. The roughly 45,000 seats in these arenas suggest a population at its height of 250,000 to 300,000 people. One of the great church councils was held in Laodicea around 363-364 AD.

Although subject to frequent earthquakes, as were the other cities of Asia Minor, Laodicea's wealth allowed it to quickly recover from such events. They were proud that, unlike Ephesus and Sardis, they needed no Imperial support in order to recover their prosperity after a great earthquake dated around 60-62 AD. But when the harbor of Ephesus silted up a few centuries later, one of the main roads through Laodicea lost much of its traffic, and in the ensuing lack of prosperity, the ongoing burden of earthquakes caused the site to be abandoned until this day. Until a recent spate of excavation, the site was largely farmers' fields with bits of pottery and marble embedded in the soil and a few remaining ruins above the ground. Now the ancient Roman road through the center of the city has been restored and many other ancient landmarks have been partially reconstructed.

Matthew Henry dubbed Laodicea "the last and the worst" of the seven churches of Asia. The pride that the inhabitants of the city must have felt because of their prosperity seems to have permeated the church in Laodicea. The church is criticized in Jesus' message for lukewarmness (unwilling to take a stand), pride, self-sufficiency and inauthenticity. In spite of all its advantages at a human level, Jesus has absolutely nothing good to say about this church. Nevertheless, Jesus loves the church and stands just outside the door offering the church an intimate, personal relationship. Even for Laodicea, there is still hope.

### **Rev 3:14–**

Jesus introduces Himself to the church with three characteristics, He is the Amen, the faithful and true witness, and the ruler (or beginning– Greek: *archê*) of God's creation. While the first characteristic (the Amen) is not applied directly to Jesus in chapter one, the word "Amen" is used three times in the chapter (Rev 1:6, 7, 18). The other two characteristics of Jesus connect with Revelation 1:5, where Jesus is described as the "faithful witness" and the "ruler" (Greek: *archôn*) of the kings of the earth. So the connection between Jesus self-introduction in this letter and the first chapter of the book are not as direct as they are in the introductions to the other letters.

Jesus first introduces Himself as "the Amen" (Greek: *ho Amên*). In addition to the references earlier in the book (noted in the previous paragraph), the word is repeated seven more times later on (Rev 5:13-14; 7:12; 19:4; 22:20-21). But in this case, it is used as a proper name, the only instance of such an application in the book. This Greek term is a transliteration of the Hebrew (*âmên*). In the Hebrew Old Testament, "amen" can be the solemn formula by which a hearer accepts the validity of a curse or an oath (Deut 27:15-26), the delighted response to a positive message (Jer 28:6), or a fervent response to the praise of God in worship (Psa 106:48). It comes from the same Hebrew root as the words for "faith" (Hebrew: *emûnâh*)

and “truth” (Hebrew: *emeth*). In Isaiah 65:16, in fact, the “God of truth” is actually the “God of “amen.” The connection here of “amen,” “faithful” and “true” is particularly appropriate in that the Hebrew language uses a single root to express all three ideas. This is one of the examples of how the book of Revelation was written in Greek, but the author clearly thinks in Hebrew much of the time.

To be “The Amen” is appropriate to the reality that all the promises of God are fulfilled to those who are in Christ (2 Cor 1:20). This also ties in with Laodicea’s overcomer promise (Rev 3:21) where Jesus has joined the Father on His throne, having earned for Laodicea all the promises of all the earlier churches. The one who overcomes in Laodicea has a direct line to the throne whence come all the blessings (positive outcomes as a result of God’s action) of God. Calling Jesus “The Amen” is the equivalent of the “True One” in Revelation 3:7. Jesus often used the word “amen” to introduce His most solemn statements (dozens of times in the four gospels, for example: Matt 5:18, 26; Mark 3:28; 6:11; Luke 4:24; 11:51). In John He often uses the double amen (John 3:3, 5). In the King James Bible, this use of “amen” was often translated “verily,” meaning, “truly without a doubt.” In John 14:6 Jesus is the way, the “truth” and the life. In the words of Barnes, “What he affirms is true; what he promises or threatens is certain” (See Barnes on Rev 3:14). His constancy is in direct contrast with Laodicea’s wavering (Rev 3:16).

“The faithful and true witness” is an interesting structure in the Greek (*ho martus ho pistos kai alethinos*). It literally means “the witness, the faithful and true one.” This phrase is subordinate to “The Amen” and brings out the meaning of the title in more detail. As noted earlier, “amen,” “faithful” and “true” are all based on the same Hebrew root, a root expressing veracity, reliability, and consistency. So when Jesus introduces himself as “the faithful and true witness” it is essentially saying the same things as “The Amen” in more detail.

In the Old Testament, God is “faithful” (Hebrew: *âmân*) to the covenant (Deut 7:7-9), hence what God does is truth (Hebrew: *emeth*) and truth is what God does. In the New Testament the word “faithful” is used in two ways, it can mean “trustworthy” or “trusting” in another. In the first sense it can apply to God or to humans. In the latter sense it applies to humans in their relation to God. Since the word here is applied to Jesus, it has the former meaning. He is trustworthy in His witness to the truth (see also 1 Thess 5:24). Jesus will approve of nothing that the “God of truth” would not approve.

The focus in this text is not “truth” as such. Rather, Jesus is a “true” (a Greek adjective: *alêthinos*) witness, He exhibits what a witness is supposed to be (see also 1 Tim 6:13). A witness is expected to speak the truth as to what he or she has experienced. The testimony is supposed to be faithful to the reality, as it was seen and heard. In court such witness is usually offered under oath, to insure its veracity. There are three things necessary (according to Trench) for a witness to be true; he or she 1) must be an eyewitness of what is described, 2) must be competent to express what was seen or heard, and 3) must be willing to do so. Jesus here claims to exhibit all the qualities that a witness ought to possess. In the message to the church at Laodicea, Jesus comes to the church as a witness to that which is faithful and true. There was a great need for those, who were deceiving themselves that a lukewarm condition was acceptable, to hear the truth that trying to live in two worlds at once encouraged the worst of

all possible conditions. They needed the veil to be taken away from their eyes (Rev 3:18).

The last phrase of Jesus' self-introduction to the church is fascinating. The Greek word *archê* can be translated the "beginning" of God's creation (ESV, KJV, NRSV) or the "ruler" (NIV) of God's creation. This startling difference in translation is due to a certain ambiguity in the Greek word itself. Jesus is the *archê* (pronounced roughly as **ar-kay**) of God's creation. *Arche* can mean "old" or it can mean "beginning" (first), as in "**archaeology**," the study (*logos*) of old things (*archae*), the study of beginnings. In this meaning, it indicates primacy in time, the commencement of something (Matt 19:4, 8; 24:8, Mark 1:1; Luke 1:2; John 2:11; 8:44; Acts 11:15). But the word can also indicate primacy in rank, as in "**patriarch**," (rule by the father) and "**monarchy**," (rule of one). In this sense it refers to one who is the ruler or the boss (Luke 20:20; Rom 8:38; 1 Cor 15:24; Eph 1:21; 3:10; 6:12; Col 1:18; 2:10, 15; Tit 3:1). So the word "*archê*" has a double meaning, resulting in two different ways of translating it.

"*Archê*" (beginning, ruler) is the first major word in the Bible— "in the beginning (Greek OT: *en archê*) God created." The beginning or ruler of God's creation points us back to Genesis 1:1. Apparently, the combination of Jesus and creation is very important for the author of Revelation. But the combination is not unique to Revelation, it is common throughout the New Testament (John 1:1-3; Col 1:15-16; Heb 1:2). Jesus is the very one who formed the earth, said "Let there be light," created life, and made Adam out of the dust of the ground. It should not surprise us, therefore, that Jesus is also called the new or "second" Adam in the New Testament (Romans 5, 1 Corinthians 15). He is the counterpart of the old Adam as much as He is the counterpart of the original creation. As such, Jesus can be called "the image of God" (2 Corinthians 4:4, Colossians 1:15, Hebrews 1:3). Adam was the image of God in the original creation. But in the new creation portrayed by the New Testament, Jesus takes the place of Adam. He becomes Adam as Adam was intended to be.

If the phrase is to be understood as "the beginning of God's creation," the meaning is not that Jesus was the first creature that God made. That would completely contradict John 1:1-3, where Jesus Himself is the agent of the entire creation without exception. Rather this passage would then be a parallel to Colossians 1:15 where Jesus is the "firstborn" of all creation. The concept of firstborn has more of a focus on pre-eminence than on timing. After all, Isaac was pre-eminent over Ishmael, Jacob over Esau and Judah over Reuben, even though all three were born later. As the firstborn of creation Jesus was the agent through whom God created the world and the universe. If this is the meaning John intended, Jesus is the "beginner" author, or primary source of creation.

As the Second Adam, Jesus exhibited the same three basic relationships as Adam (Gen 1:26-28). In the story of Genesis 1 "the image of God" manifested itself in three basic relationships. (1) First of all, as the "image of God" Adam had great dignity but was clearly in an inferior position to God (Gen 1:26-27). He was dependent on God as his mentor or teacher. God was the Creator and Adam was the creature. (2) The image of God included both male and female (Gen 1:27). Adam and Eve were designed for relationship with each other. God did not create Adam to be alone. He created the human race for relationship. (3) The image of God also included dominion over the earth (Gen 1:26, 28). Adam ruled over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and the creatures that move along the ground. Adam and Eve were to

be like mentors to the animals, the plants and the whole environment. Creation was to relate to them the way they were to relate to God.

The New Testament describes Jesus as the second Adam. He is Adam as Adam was meant to be. Jesus' life in the gospels is described in the language of the original Adam and his experience. (1) **Relationship with God**. After the Fall Adam's relationship with God was broken. But Jesus came to restore the trusting, obedient relationship Adam originally had with God. As the second Adam, He willingly subordinated Himself to the Father (John 14:28). He spoke and acted according to His Father's will (John 8:28; 15:10). (2) **Relationship with Others**. Adam wasted no time putting the blame on his wife as soon as sin came in (Gen 3:12). In contrast, Jesus had a perfect relationship with others. His whole attitude to others was one of loving service (Mark 10:45; Phil 2:5-7; John 13:1-17). In His relation to others He was Adam as Adam was meant to be. (3) **Relationship with the Earth**. In addition to a perfect relationship with God and with others, Jesus also had a perfect relationship with the environment. Like Adam, He had dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the wind and the waves (Matt 8:26-27; Mark 11:1-7; John 21:2-11). Jesus was Adam as Adam was intended to be. So if Revelation 3:14 introduces Jesus as the "ruler of God's creation," this was another way of connecting with the Second Adam theme.

#### **Rev 3:15–**

This verse is fairly straightforward. As with the other messages to the churches, Jesus begins with a statement concerning His knowledge of what is going on in the church. Laodicea is not extreme in any way, it is neither cold nor hot. The language of cold and hot here is clearly figurative. In the spiritual sense, hot is usually associated with zeal for godliness and good works (Rom 12:11). One could argue that from Jesus' perspective hot is good (spiritual fervor) and cold is bad (spiritually dead), we often use such language figuratively for levels of relationship. We speak of warm hearts and cold or icy hearts, the former being positive and the latter negative. But if cold and hot water are the source of the metaphor, both cold and hot could be good. Hot water is pleasant in drinks and it is healing and comfortable to the body. Cold water can be a refreshing drink on a hot day or in the form of ice, it can help to reduce swelling after an injury. So it is not completely clear if Jesus is criticizing Laodicea for not going far enough (they have escaped cold but not committed to hot) or for being caught in an undesirable middle between two desirable conditions. If cold is negative, Laodicea has made a profession of religion, but lacks genuine, warm-hearted commitment. If cold is positive, Laodicea has failed to act in blessing toward others.

The latter phrase in the verse (I wish. . .) suggests that cold is preferable to lukewarm. That would be the case either because cold was positive, or because the negatives of cold are more redeemable than those of lukewarm. But if cold is better than lukewarm, why would Jesus prefer it if it is further from the ideal? Barnes suggests several reasons. 1) As sad as the cold state is, it is at least honest. There is no disguise, concealment or pretense in open opposition to the gospel. This is better than hypocrisy. 2) Even in opposition to the gospel, at least the "cold" opponent is taking a stand. Saul of Tarsus proved more redeemable than Judas. There is more hope of salvation in the committed opponent than in one who is a member of

the church but without true religion. 3) “Lukewarm” people are less susceptible to the preaching of the truth. Truth addressed to sinners is not applied to himself or herself, as they don’t consider themselves in that class. Grace cannot be applied where it is not needed.

The commentary by Jameison, Fausset and Brown puts another spin on the cold as positive theme. In their terms the cold Jesus is referring to is icy cold, as in never having been warmed. So the cold here is not the cold of apostasy (in contrast with Matthew 24:12), which is hard to redeem, but the cold of the outside world, those who have never been part of the church, who have not responded to the gospel because they have not heard it in a meaningful way. Such individuals are much, more promising for the gospel than those who have heard and responded in a half-hearted way. If the lukewarm state were a transition on the way to a warmer, more desirable state, it would be positive, as a little commitment is better than none at all. But if lukewarm is a decline from hot, it is a worse condition than that which has never been warmed. That kind of lukewarm has “religion enough to lull the conscience in false security, but not religion enough to save the soul.” It is better not to know the truth than to know it and turn away (Luke 12:48; 2 Pet 2:21). In the words of an ancient Greek proverb, “When water chokes, what do you wash it down with?” (Cambridge Bible notes). Evangelists often report that the least promising visitors to a series of meetings are those who have attended a series before.

In this verse Jesus may be taking a cue from the actual geographical situation of Laodicea. About six miles from ancient Laodicea was the ancient city of Hierapolis, something like the Yellowstone Park of the ancient middle east. There are geysers, bubbling springs, and extensive terraces made from mineral deposits and containing hot spring water. In fact, even on a hazy day the brilliantly white terraces stand out and can be seen from the site of ancient Laodicea. The water at Hierapolis was and is hot, something like 130-135 degrees, but as it traveled through the water pipes to Laodicea it became lukewarm. By the time it reached Colossae, a few miles past Laodicea, it was cold or at least air temperature. Not only that, since the water had a high mineral content, it did not have a pleasant flavor, and the flavor was made worse by the lukewarm temperature.

In the three or four times I have visited Hierapolis, now the Turkish town of Pamukkale, I have stayed in the Hotel Pam. What I love about hotel is the artificial terrace pool on a hillside close to the hotel rooms. The terrace pool is modeled after the natural ones. At the top is a fountain drawing water directly from the hot spring. The water comes out at 56° Celsius, roughly 130° Fahrenheit. As the pool nearest the fountain fills, the hot water spills over in a series of cascades from terrace to terrace, with each pool a little cooler than the one above it. At the end of the terraces is a waterfall of lukewarm water that pours over into a cool pool complete with artificial stalactites and stalagmites. Next to that is the unheated pool that is roughly air temperature. I noticed something interesting: it seemed that people flocked to the hot water and the cold water pools because they were relaxing and refreshing, respectively. But nobody was in the parts of the pool that were lukewarm. Whether for drinking or bathing, lukewarm water is not desirable.

It is interesting that according to Dante, the most numerous among the lost angels were those who were neither rebellious nor faithful in the battle between good and evil. I find this

also an apt analogy to the message to Laodicea.

### **Rev 3:16–**

This verse begins with a repetition and clarification of the previous verse. The church at Laodicea is neither cold nor hot, it is lukewarm (Greek: *chliaros*). It is interesting that the adjectives for “cold” (Greek: *psuchros*) and “hot” (Greek: *zestos*) both here and in verse 15 are masculine, which agree with the word “angel” in 3:14 (*angellō*) rather than “church” (*ekklēsias*). This could mean that the lukewarmness was more characteristic of the church’s leadership than the church as a whole.

The last clause of this verse adds an additional element to what had already been said in 3:15. Jesus is about to spit them out of His mouth. What exactly does that figure of speech mean? The Greek word often translated “spew” (KJV, RSV) or “spit” (ESV, NASB, NIV, NRSV) is based on the Greek *emesai*, from which English gets the word emetic. The basic meaning is to “vomit” or “throw up.” Jesus’ response to Laodicea’s lack of commitment is along the lines of : “I want to throw up when I look at you.” He is “sick of” their lukewarmness. To vomit them out would be to no longer acknowledge them as followers of His. The image of vomiting is intended to be offensive, in contrast to the self-satisfied refinement of Laodicea.

This reaction, vomiting Laodicea out, is more of a threat than a reality, however. Jesus is “about to” (*mellō*) vomit them out. They still have an opportunity to turn the situation around. The language may have Leviticus 18:28 in mind. There the land of Canaan is said to have “vomited out” (Hebrew: *qaah*) its inhabitants. We have noticed a deterioration and decline as we have journeyed through these seven churches. But Laodicea is a church that is **really** in trouble. If it does not act on this message immediately, there is no guarantee that it will remain among the candlesticks.

### **Rev 3:17–**

Here Jesus delves more deeply into Laodicea’s lukewarm condition. The root problem of Laodicea is inauthenticity. What she says and what she is are two different things. In many ways Laodicea, literally rich and spiritually poor, is the opposite of Smyrna, which was literally poor but spiritually rich. Commentators claim that when Laodicea was leveled by an earthquake (around 60 A.D.), the emperor offered to help them but Laodicea was rich enough to decline. “We can take care of ourselves, thank you.” Verse 17 is in two parts, the first part is Laodicea’s analysis of herself, the second part is Jesus’ analysis of the church, which is the opposite of her own self-assessment. Laodicea’s opinion of herself is a form of self-deception (Jer 17:9).

The verse opens with Laodicea’s analysis of itself. This is provided in three phrases; she is rich, her riches are truly extensive and came through her own effort, and she no longer needs anything from anybody (not even the emperor). Laodicea is not only proud of its wealth, it is proud of the way it achieved its wealth, through ingenuity and effort rather than the intervention of God. There appears to be an intentional gradation here in these three points. The church is rich, those riches have been actively increased through effort, and now the church has reached saturation, there is no longer need to grow the riches further. Somehow the city-wide attitude of self-satisfaction has filtered into the church of that same city. A similar

sense of self-satisfaction was characteristic of Ephraim in Hosea 12:8.

The first word of the verse is “because” (KJV, NASB, Greek: *hoti*). That tells us that this verse is at least one of the reasons that Jesus is about to vomit them out of His mouth. Laodicea’s three-fold self-assessment is parallel to verse 16 where it says, “because (*hoti*) you are lukewarm.” Thus the lukewarmness and the inauthenticity are like two sides of the same coin. What Laodicea says and what she is are two different things. She is not hot or cold, she is a mixture of both. But above all else, she is blind to her own condition. The construction of 3:16-17 is similar to Revelation 18:7-8. There also the outcome is given first then the reason for that outcome.

Although it is coincidental, the Greek *hoti* (translated “because” or “for” at the beginning of this verse) appears two more times in the verse, but in a different way than the first occurrence. The first time it is a causative conjunction with the meaning “because.” But the other function of *hoti* is to introduce direct or indirect discourse, something like a substitute for quotation marks. “Because you say (that— *hoti*) ‘I am rich. . .’, and do not know (that— *hoti*) you are wretched. . .” The first occurrence is direct discourse (like a quotation), expressing in first person what they think, and the second is indirect, describing in second person what they do not know. The two statements are parallel, actually opposites; the first is the assertion of Laodicea about itself, the second is the assertion of Jesus about the true condition of Laodicea. This is worth noting, because while this introductory use of *hoti* is fairly rare in the book of Revelation (see also Revelation 18:7), it is very common in the rest of the New Testament.

The first item mentioned in Laodicea’s self-deception is that she is rich. The word for “rich” here (Greek: *plousios*) means abundantly wealthy. Laodicea is not just rich she is “filthy rich.” Is the wealth of the church (in its own mind) literal or spiritual? Is this actual riches, like the riches of the city as a whole, or is it a reference to spiritual riches from the past that the church is trusting are still top of the line? The clearly spiritual nature of the hot, cold and lukewarm in 3:15-16 suggests that the riches in view here are spiritual rather than temporal. But it should not be overlooked that spiritual decline is often associated with temporal prosperity. So it may not be “either/or.” In the case of Ephraim (Hos 12:8), spiritual pride was closely associated with temporal wealth. Those who are rich temporally have a tendency to think that they are well-off in every area of life, including the spiritual.

The second item in Laodicea’s self-assessment is that she has “acquired riches” (Greek: *peploutêka*). “Wealth” (NASB, NIV) here is really the same Greek word as “rich,” but in a different form. The two phrases are Greek cognates. It is a more emphatic and intensive way of saying essentially the same thing as the previous phrase. So this repeat of the first word signals a form of gradation, as noted above. The first reference (“I am rich”) focuses on the reality, the second (“I have become wealthy,” NASB, or “acquired wealth,” NIV) focuses on the process by which the reality was attained. It focuses on the continued accumulation of wealth. Rich and getting richer.

On the one hand, being in need of nothing is just another way of saying that one is rich enough to no longer be concerned about one’s financial future. This expression is the climax of the gradation of emphasis in the first part of the verse. For the Laodiceans, accumulation of wealth, whether spiritual or temporal, is no longer an incentive to effort, they are content, self-

satisfied, and spiritually indifferent. In a way, this is a bizarre counterfeit of the gospel. The gospel should bring contentment, as all of our needs are being met in Christ. But here the needs of the church are not being met by Christ (or He would acknowledge that), they are being met by a sense of material and spiritual wealth, which is inherently transitory.

Jesus' response to Laodicea's self-assessment is to point out Laodicea's ignorance, "you do not know" (*ouk oidas*). Laodicea's self-analysis proves to be a self-deception. Jesus' analysis involves five items: She is "wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked" (ESV, RSV, NRSV). These five items are linked together. In the Greek there is a single article (before "wretched") that governs all five terms. This is signaled by "and" (Greek: *kai*) and the lack of the article before the other four words. This combination in Greek links all five words into a single summary of Laodicea's condition. Some interesting parallel constructions in Revelation are found in 5:12 and 9:15.

The term "wretched" (most major translations— Greek: *talaipôros*) occurs elsewhere in the New Testament only in Romans 7:24, where Paul considers his lack of self-control and says, "wretched man that I am." It refers to a human condition of great misery and suffering, whether material, psychological or spiritual. At least Paul recognized his wretched condition, Laodicea clearly does not. The Greek word is a compound of a word that by itself means "endure" (Greek: *tlaô*) and a word for "trial" (Greek: *peira*).

The next word (Greek: *eleeinos*) is usually translated "miserable," or "pitiable," someone whose condition is worthy of pity. It is not so much that the Laodiceans feel miserable, but that their condition is such as to excite pity and compassion in others. The two words (wretched and pitiable) are similar in meaning, but the first focuses on the condition itself ("wretched"), and the second focuses on how others look on that condition ("pitiable"). "Worthy of pity" is a far cry from "having need of nothing."

The last trio of Jesus' statements about Laodicea correspond to the three remedies He offers in verse 18. They are "poor, blind and naked," and He will recommend that they buy gold for their poverty, clothing for their nakedness, and eye-salve for their blindness. The true situation of the church is one of spiritual poverty, lack of understanding (blindness) and lack of protection (naked). According to 1 Tim 6:6-9, the basis for material contentment is to have food and "covering," which would include both housing and clothing. Laodicea was content with a spiritual situation that should have led to a great lack of spiritual contentment.

The word for "poor" (Greek: *ptôchos*) here, of course, is the opposite of rich. It actually means extremely poor or destitute, like a beggar. From a spiritual perspective, it means that the Laodiceans did not have enough spiritual resources to support them in times of crisis or when death is approaching. To be spiritually "blind" (Greek: *tuphlos*) means that one cannot see the reality of one's spiritual condition. The Laodiceans did not understand the character of God, and they were ignorant of the way to salvation. It would certainly be silly for a blind person to say, "I have need of nothing." Regarding nakedness (Greek: *gumnos*), garments are often used as metaphors of salvation in the New Testament (Matt 22:11-12; Rev 6:11; 7:9, 13-14). The existence of a church implies salvation, but the members of this church are found to be without the clothing of salvation. Metaphorically, they had no protection against cold, heat, storms or shame.

### Rev 3:18–

This verse builds on verse 17. The previous verse outlines the condition of Laodicea, this verse offers the remedy to Laodicea's condition. The remedy is addressed to "you" (Greek: *soi*), singular. As noted earlier, the message is addressed to the "angel" of the church, presumably the church's leadership. Due to the severity of the diagnosis in verse 17, Jesus here offers three points of counsel (gold, white clothes and eye salve). These three items are clearly metaphorical. He is not speaking about physical gold, clothing or eye medicines. Jesus counsels the leadership of Laodicea to buy spiritual things they don't think they need.

That the focus of this verse is spiritual rather than material is underlined by the striking parallel between this verse and Revelation 16:15. The latter text is placed in the middle of the narrative about a final battle in the place called Armageddon. There are four major parallels between Revelation 16:15 and Revelation 3:18: words of seeing (3:18: *blepês*, 16:15: *blepôsin*), shame (3:18: *aischunê*, 16:15: *aschêmosunên*), nakedness (3:18: *gumnotêtos*, 16:15: *gumnos*) and clothing (3:18: *himatia*, 16:15: *himatia*). This four-word combination in the original language occurs nowhere else in the Bible. Revelation 16:15 is a call to readiness for the second coming, as seen in the numerous New Testament parallels (see notes on Rev 16:15). So the message to Laodicea is not only a spiritual one, it has special relevance at the end of history.

The verse opens with the ironic counsel to "buy." The Greek verb for "buy" (*agorasai*) is a cognate of *agora*, which meant the market place or shopping mall of the ancient world. That Jesus invites them to buy suggests that they have something to give in exchange for what He offers. Obviously, material wealth cannot buy what Jesus is offering. But they do need to give up their pride and self-sufficiency. So while the gospel itself is free, it does cost something to receive it. The ones who have become so wealthy in material things that they feel no need to buy anymore are counsel to buy goods of a different kind.

In the metaphor of this text, the market place is Jesus Himself. According to Ephesians 3:8, Jesus is the source of "boundless riches" (NRSV). The purchases Laodicea is requested to make are based on relationship with Jesus rather than the fruits of their own independent efforts. Laodicea has just been described as a poor, blind, naked beggar (3:17). To counsel a beggar to buy is meaningless, unless they can do it in a market that doesn't require money and doesn't involve price tags (Isa 55:1). Laodicea's problem cannot be solved by human merit (see Luke 17:10). The goods of Jesus Christ are freely given. Having said that, however, there is a sense in which they are very costly as well. They involve the renunciation of the very kind of selfish accumulation that Laodicea had abundantly exhibited. Because it requires the renunciation of self and its ambition, the free offer of the gospel is frequently refused.

Jesus counsels Laodicea to buy "gold refined by fire" (ESV, NRSV, RSV– Greek: *chrusion pepurômenon ek puros*). The refining process is described with cognate words, literally: "gold fired out of fire." The verb means to burn or to be on fire. In the perfect passive, as here, it implies the glow that happens when a metal is melted down in the fire. That means that the resulting product is free of any alloy or impurity. This is 24-carat gold, the real deal.

The counsel to buy gold is ironic on the face of it. Laodicea perceives no need of gold, she thinks she is rich. But here Jesus offers gold as a metaphor of spiritual wealth. In the book

of Revelation elsewhere, on the other hand, references to gold are to be taken literally: it mentions idols made of gold (Rev 9:20), the decorations on the prostitute (17:4), one of the products Babylon trades (18:12, 16), and one of the materials out of which the new Jerusalem is built (21:18, 21). So these other texts in Revelation don't help us understand gold in relation to Laodicea. Since banking was a major industry in Laodicea, the mention of gold may be an allusion to the extensive money transactions that took place there.

There is only one other place in the New Testament where gold is used figuratively, 1 Peter 1:7: "These have come so that your faith--of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire--may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed." According to Peter, gold is a metaphor of tested, trustworthy faith that can last until the end; the end of life, on one hand, and the end of the world, on the other. So the parallel with Peter suggests that when Jesus offers the Laodiceans "gold," He is offering genuine faith, tested in the fires of adversity. On the other hand, the self-absorption of Laodicea (3:17) indicates the church is seriously lacking also in love. Pure gold would represent the kind of love that is completely devoid of self-interest. This faith and love is designed to bring Laodicea out of the lukewarm state in which Jesus finds it. Fervent love and strong faith are more precious in Jesus' eyes than gold.

The word for "purified by fire" (Greek: *pepurômenês*) occurs also in Revelation 1:15. There Jesus' feet are like burnished bronze that has been "refined in a furnace." The goal of buying the gold tried in the fire is that Laodicea "might become rich." The irony here is that the same word is used here (Greek: *ploutêsês*) as was used to describe the process of Laodicea's self-satisfied richness in verse 17 (Greek: *peploutêka*). They have been successful in the process of developing their material wealth. Now Jesus calls them to enter into a process with Him that would result in spiritual wealth.

Laodicea was a well-known center for the manufacture of clothing. It was particularly noted for the deep blackness of the wool that was harvested and dyed there. The second item Jesus counsels them to buy, on the other hand, is "white raiment" (Greek: *himatia leuka*). Throughout Revelation (Rev 3:4-5; 6:11; 7:9, 13-14; 19:8) white tends to represent the things of God and the purity of the church, in contrast with dark, which represents ignorance and sin. But it should be noted that the color "black" (Greek: *melas*) is not actually mentioned in this message, although it is mentioned in the relation to the third horse of the seals (Rev 6:5) and the disasters of the end-time (6:12).

The meaning of the white clothes that Jesus offers to Laodicea is found earlier in Revelation. "Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy" (Rev 3:4, NIV). There is an interesting contrast between Laodicea and the message to Sardis. In Sardis there are still a few people walking in white (Rev 3:4-- the word for "garment" is implied from earlier in the verse). By way of contrast, no one in the church of Laodicea is walking in white, so Laodicea is even worse off than Sardis, which was in the worst condition of all the churches up until the last. In Sardis, Jesus was dealing with spiritual death. In Laodicea He is dealing with indifference. Apparently, it is easier to deal with spiritual death than with spiritual indifference. A similar call is found in Revelation 16:15. White garments are also offered to the last generation of earth's history

during the battle of Armageddon. This is powerful evidence that the message to Laodicea has particular relevance to the church at the end of history.

The garments in all three cases (Sardis, Laodicea, Armageddon) seem to be the garments of salvation. To be dressed in the garment is to be right with God. This is reminiscent of the wedding garment in Matthew 22:11-14. It also anticipates the wedding garment of Revelation 19:7-8. There the bride of the Lamb wears “fine linen, bright and pure” (ESV), which is the righteous acts of the saints. Laodicea has plenty of clothes but it doesn't have the one garment that will enable entrance in to the kingdom of God, which is represented by the wedding feast at the end of the book. This kind of language is consistent with the Old Testament, where God's robe wraps people in righteousness (Job 29:14; Isa 11:5; 61:10, see also Isaiah 59:2, 64:6).

Jesus speaks of covering the shame of Laodicea's nakedness. In the ancient context, putting on garments was often associated with honor (Gen 41:42; 2 Kings 25:29; Dan 5:29; Zech 3:3-5; Luke 15:22; Col 3:10-14), while having them stripped off is associated with shame and humiliation (2 Sam 10:4-5; Isa 20:4; Ezek 16:37-39; Hos 2:3, 9; Matt 22:11-13; Rev 16:15). Clothing provides warmth and protection for the body, it beautifies and adorns, but it also serves for decency and modesty.

The aorist subjunctive of “appear” (*phanerothe*) points to the future, particularly at the Second Coming, when the brightness of God's presence will make the nakedness glaringly obvious. One might get away with the spiritual nakedness now, no one may even notice, but at the *parousia* everyone's spiritual condition will become obvious to all. It is then that the spiritual covering will be most needed. It is in the Last Day that everyone without the wedding garment will be exposed (Matt 22:11-13).

Jesus' third piece of counsel was to for the believers in Laodicea to anoint (Greek: *engchrisai*) their eyes with eye-salve (Greek: *kollurion*). The word for “eye-salve” occurs nowhere else in the New Testament. Apparently the eye medicine was shaped in the form of *kollura*, a course bread that could even be called a cracker, hence the name. It was a compound of various substances that were thought to have a healing quality. There is a Laodicea connection in this. The famous medical school of Laodicea was known for its “Phrygian powder” to treat eye ailments. Once again, the strengths of Laodicea in the temporal sense highlight its weaknesses in the spiritual realm.

In the Old Testament, the law and the commandments “enlighten the eyes” (Psa 19:8; 119:18). As is so often the case in the New Testament, Jesus here provides what the Torah provided in the past. True self-knowledge is gained only in relation to Christ (Eph 1:18; Col 1:27). Laodicea prided itself in its spiritual insight, but its blindness could only be remedied with the eye-salve that Jesus gives.

One wonders if the healing of the blind man in John 9 is in mind here. Jesus provided an “anointing” there as well (John 9:6-7). The physical healing of the blind man in John 9 is placed in contrast to the spiritual blindness of the Pharisees (John 9:39-41), which can be paralleled to that of the Laodiceans. Another possible parallel text is the anointing that comes from the Spirit in 1 John 2:20.

The meaning here, once again, is spiritual rather than physical. Gill suggests that the

eye-salve itself is the gospel or the Word of God. In that case, to anoint one's eyes would be to apply the gospel and the scriptures for the gaining of spiritual light and knowledge. The use of this "eye-salve" would have the kind of effect on the Laodicean's spiritual life that eye medicine has on diseased eyes. The gospel, rightly understood, helps people see clearly the character of God, the loveliness of Jesus, the defects in their own character, and the beauty of salvation. Jameison, Fausset and Brown suggest that the eye in Jesus' message actually represents the conscience, the inner light of the mind.

In conclusion, Laodicea is a church and yet is outside the kingdom. Laodicea needs faith, righteousness, and above all else, discernment. Laodicea's greatest problem is inauthenticity and Jesus offers the solution so that they can see their condition. Jesus offers salve for them to put on their eyes so that they can see and understand their true condition and become authentic.

### **Rev 3:19—**

This verse is strongly parallel to Hebrews 12:5-11, especially verse 6a, so it may reflect a widespread saying in the early church. Jesus uses it in this context to conclude His counsel to Laodicea with a couple of appeals. First, He invites Laodicea to be earnest and repent. This appeal comes in the context of a rebuke that is grounded in love. He can speak strongly because love is the source of His discipline. It is interesting that Jesus mentions His love for only two of the churches, one the most faithful and the other the least faithful. Of all the seven churches, love is offered only to Philadelphia and Laodicea. In fact, outside of the seven churches, the only mention of Christ's love for His people is found in Revelation 1:5, where the strong continuous present summarizes an ongoing reality without limit. In the two earlier instances (Rev 1:5; 3:9) the word for love is based on the Greek *agapê*, Christ's self-sacrificing love. In this case the word is from *phileô*, which emphasizes grace-based affection and love within a family.

To Philadelphia, the message of love sustains and safeguards those who are loyal. But, to Laodicea the message of love comes in the form of discipline and a rebuke in a desire to regain their loyalty. This is what some would call "tough love." An important aspect of love is confrontation, letting the other party know that their actions are threatening the relationship. Without confrontation, the accumulation of little hurts and irritations can eventually scuttle a relationship. Jesus cares too much to let Laodicea's behavior go unrebuked. Their self-complacency is destroying them and true love will not act as if nothing is wrong.

In the Greek sentence structure, the point of emphasis is on the word "I" (Greek: *egô*), "as many as I love." It is the faithful and true witness (Rev 3:14), the one from whom Laodicea can buy gold, white garments and eye-salve (3:18), who now reproves and disciplines, in order that the relationship might be restored. The phrase ("as many as") is all-inclusive, not a single person that God loves escapes His chastening (Heb 12:8). While many afflictions of this life are directly caused by Satan or are the natural consequence of human rebellion, some afflictions are instigated by God for our ultimate good. If we did not suffer any troubles at all, therefore, it would be a sign that God doesn't love us! So difficulties, at least the milder ones, can be understood as tokens of God's love. The good news is that all members of Laodicea are still

considered part of God's family, their indifference to God does not change anything on God's part. God does not reject the "bad children," they remain part of the family unless they themselves choose to leave it. In that case, God still considers them part of the family, but may one day sadly "let them go" to live the life apart from God they think they want (see Rom 1:24, 26, 28).

According to this text, Laodicea is still loved by God. While she is indifferent, she is not hardened in rebellion. The disciplinary actions arise from love and are intended to change her metaphorical heart and bring her back to Jesus. Since there is no limit to Jesus' love ("as many as"), there is no limit to the opportunity for repentance. Even the most indifferent member of the church is still within the circle of His love and His rebuke. Repentance is still possible for all. Discipline is evidence of affection, not rejection. The censure of God does not arise from hostility.

The word translated "rebuke" (Greek: *elengchô*) implies drawing attention to a wrong in such a way that the wrongdoer has to acknowledge it. The word can have multiple meanings. It can mean to expose something, particularly wrongdoing, to light (John 3:20; Eph 5:11, 13). It can also mean to convict or convince somebody that they have been doing wrong (John 8:46; James 2:9; Jude 15, see also Matt 18:15; Luke 3:19; 1 Tim 5:20). It also takes on an element of discipline or punishment when combined with the Greek word for educational discipline (*paideuô*— Heb 12:5; Rev 3:19, English equivalent is pedagogy). It is not empty censure, it is designed to bring conviction. In the Gospel of John, this is the work of the Holy Spirit.

"Rebuke" is here paired with "discipline" (Greek: *paideuô*), from which we get the English word "pedagogue" or "pedagogy." This Greek word also has multiple meanings. It can simply mean to instruct, educate or train (Acts 7:22; 22:3). By extension it implies correction wherever a student has adopted erroneous beliefs or practices (1 Tim 2:25; Tit 2:12). This can be expanded to the idea of severe punishment with the goal of correction (1 Cor 11:32; 2 Cor 6:9; Heb 12:6-7, see also Luke 23:16, 22).

It is sometimes suggested that the "rebuke" implies more of a verbal correction while the "discipline" implies more the idea of physical correction, as parents might do with a child. But when the full scope of each of the words is explored, they seem remarkably parallel. So using the words together might be an artistic way of using two different words to say essentially the same thing. Or the author may wish reader to see a slight difference between them. "Rebuke," perhaps, focuses on bringing a person to conviction, while the "discipline" focuses more on the means by which the conviction occurs. Jameison, Fausset and Brown mention the illustration of David and Nathan. Nathan brought David to conviction with a story (2 Sam 12:1-13). The "discipline" or consequences of David's action came home when the baby produced by adultery died (2 Sam 12:14).

These two words, "rebuke and discipline," express exactly what Jesus has been doing in verses 15-17, the language here is a summary of what has already been said earlier. He has completely disclosed the faults of the church, but it has been done in a spirit of love.

The last part of the verse focuses on the desired outcome of Jesus' loving rebuke and discipline. He invites Laodicea to be zealous and repent. The word translated zealous (Greek: *zêleue*) signals alliteration. Because they are not hot (*zestos*), they need to be zealous (*zêleue*).

Zealous (Greek: *zêleue*) is linguistically related to the word for “hot” in 3:15-16 (Greek: *zestos*, both are related to the verb *zeô*). In a good sense “zealous” means to desire and strive for something, to be deeply concerned about it. In a more negative sense it can mean to be filled with jealousy or envy toward someone else (didn’t get a chance check Bauer’s lexicon before posting). It is the spiritual opposite of lukewarmness. In this context it means to be eager, earnest and ardent in pursuing repentance. When they realize that they are lukewarm, Laodiceans are to lose no time in changing course and seeking the favor of Jesus once more.

While “zealous” reflects an ongoing state of mind (it is a present imperative), “repent” signifies a major change of direction (aorist imperative). The impression is that in the context of right knowledge, the one will lead to the other. On the meaning of the Greek word for repentance (*metanoêson*), see notes on Revelation 2:5.

### **Rev 3:20 (Introduction)–**

In this verse, Jesus comes and knocks on Laodicea’s door, hoping they will invite Him in. In their blind self-sufficiency, the church has shut Jesus out. The church at Philadelphia had an open door, probably the door of salvation. Here we have the opposite. The shut door is not shut by Jesus but by Laodicea itself. Jesus is asking to be invited in to a mutual meal of love and fellowship. It is an allusion to the Song of Solomon and actually has sexual overtones. Notice the echos in this verse of Song of Solomon 5:2-6, NIV:

"I slept but my heart was awake. Listen! My lover is knocking: 'Open to me, my sister, my darling, my dove, my flawless one. My head is drenched with dew, my hair with the dampness of the night.' 'I have taken off my robe--must I put it on again? I have washed my feet--must I soil them again?' My lover thrust his hand through the latch-opening; my heart began to pound for him. I arose to open for my lover, and my hands dripped with myrrh, my fingers with flowing myrrh, on the handles of the lock. I opened for my lover, but my lover had left; he was gone. My heart had gone out to him when he spoke. I looked for him but did not find him. I called him but he did not answer."

This is one of numerous images in the New Testament where the relation of Christ and the church is paralleled to marriage (see also Matt 25:1-13; 2 Cor 11:2-3; Eph 5:21-31).

In the later years of Solomon the king had many wives who were housed in a harem--a house with bedroom doors (perhaps even with placarded names) on both sides of a long hallway. In Song of Solomon, we have the story of his first and favorite wife. Knowing that he was in town, this particular wife had been hoping he would come for her. She waited, waited, and finally gave up and went to sleep. Then he comes! But in her sleepiness, she did not jump up and invite him in. "No, not now." Then she has a change of heart and runs to the door and opens it. The tragedy is that he is gone. He's not there and he has gone somewhere else. This scene is the background for this verse in Revelation. While the king (Jesus) has not given up on her, the implication of the allusion to Song of Solomon is that the situation is dire and she may not get another chance. This text is also support for the idea that Laodicea is not only the last of the seven First-Century churches, it is a model for the last church of Christian history as well.

### **Rev 3:20–**

The perfect tense of “I am standing” (Greek: *estêka*) implies that Jesus has been there knocking for some time. This means that the condition of the church at Laodicea is longstanding and difficult to turn around. The good news is that in spite of its flaws, Laodicea is still counted as a church and Jesus is still willing to be engaged with it. Laodicea is not rejected, the invitation to relationship remains open. While the standing of Jesus is portrayed as a past act that continues into the present, the knocking (Greek: *krouô*) is both present and continuous.

One minor point, there are several Greek words for knocking, and this particular one (*krouô*) is very appropriate to the context; it is a rapping on a door with the use of the knuckles as to signal a desire to enter. It is not an angry pounding. In spite of the church’s condition, Jesus is courteous in His approach.

In the gospels, Jesus Himself is the door (John 10:1-10). He teaches his disciples to knock at the door of God and expect a friendly response (Matt 7:7; Luke 11:9; 13:25). But here Jesus is the one knocking on the door. The condition of the church is such that He knows she would never come knocking at His door, therefore, He initiates and comes knocking on the church’s door. Likewise, in many religions the standard metaphor would be humans at the door of God, begging for mercy. But in this passage, the reverse is seen, Jesus doesn’t abide in His place and summon the church to come to Him, He goes out from His place to seek the ones that he loves. This is a beautiful and surprising picture of God, especially in the Greco-Roman context where people need to bribe or placate the gods.

It is possible that the mention of a door here suggests the eschatological sermon of Jesus, where He foretells that there would come a time when the *parousia* would be “near, even at the door” (Matt 24:33; Mark 13:29; Luke 12:35-38). But although there are eschatological overtones to Jesus’ standing at the door and knocking, He is not there in judgment, he is there as a friend, desiring renewed fellowship. So it is not surprising that in the Lukan passage mentioned above, the opening of the door is followed by a feast of fellowship between the master and his servants.

Knocking at the door implies two things. First, it implies the desire of the person knocking to gain admittance to the house. Second, it recognizes the freedom of the one who lives in the house to open the door or not, as he or she pleases. In this verse it is the superior honoring the freedom of the inferior to determine his or her own destiny. Jesus does not employ force to enter the house. It is clear by this that reconciliation begins with God rather than with human beings. The knock on the door is the first step in reconciliation, and that step is not taken by the church, it is taken by the Son of God Himself (see also 2 Cor 5:18-20). Jesus is persistent in His desire to enter the door and have fellowship with Laodicea. But the alarming side of this metaphor is that even though Laodicea remains a church in Jesus’ eyes, He is not at that point welcome there. This verse exhibits the great patience of Christ, who is not deterred by the church’s disinterest.

“If anyone should hear my voice” is subjunctive (Greek: *akousê*), as is the opening (Greek: *anoixê*) of the door. The language is universal, the invitation is freely offered to everyone reading the message. The voice interprets the knock and allows those inside to recognize who it is that is knocking. They will not be opening the door on account of curiosity. They know before they open the door who is there and why He is there. So the opening of the

door is truly a free choice, a spiritual choice. Those inside the house are allowed the freedom to listen and respond or to ignore the invitation. There is no “once saved always saved” operating here. Opening the door is both an easy thing to do and it is the reasonable thing, assuming that the person at the door does not have hostile intentions. It is for this reason that Jesus identifies Himself as the one knocking.

The language Jesus uses to describe the way He will respond to anyone who opens the door is future indicative rather than subjunctive. Jesus’ reaction to the open door is not in doubt, he **will** enter in (Greek: *eiseleusomai*) and He **will** dine (Greek: *deipnêsô*– the word is particularly associated with the supper hour) with anyone who opens the door. Supper in the ancient world was the primary social meal, so the imagery of this verse would have implied a welcoming commitment on the part of Jesus. This invitation to a meal of mutual fellowship is also consistent with the allusion to the Song of Solomon, as the bride invites the king to sample “choicest fruits” in SoS 4:16.

A meal of mutual fellowship implies intimate relationship with Jesus in the everyday experience of the church, but is also a foretaste of the heavenly wedding banquet promised in Revelation 19:7-9. Ironically, in this case the visitor to the house is portrayed as the host of the banquet. There is a single experience of communion between Jesus and the church, but it is experienced in two different historical stages, in the church’s response at the time it hears the message and in the heavenly celebration at the Second Coming.

The language of “I with him” and “he with me” is strikingly singular. There are two possible ways to view this language. First, if the individual implied by the singular is the “angel of the church,” the invitation is particularly to the leadership, with implications for the whole. Evidence for this is the fact that throughout the message the whole church has been addressed in the person of its leader (the angel of the church). Since singular has been used up to this point (Rev 3:14-19), this view suggests that the singular language is to be taken with a collective force. Jesus wants to dine with the whole church. But there is a second possibility. If, as many commentators believe, the language here is specifically directed to the individual members of the church, it would indicate that Jesus does not desire to cast aside a single person affiliated with Laodicea. In that sense, the church as a whole has shut Jesus out, but Jesus is appealing to individuals in the church to respond to the invitation that the larger body has spurned. And the meal, in that case, would be an intimate two-person affair. As the representative of Yahweh, Jesus signals that God desires deep and intimate relationship with each believer.

In ancient times, eating a meal together was an outward sign of brotherly affection and, where needed, of reconciliation. Jesus is willing to share such a meal with anyone who does not turn Him away. It is possible that this meal is an allusion to the Lord’s Supper, in which the believer is reconciled to Christ and which is a foretaste of the eternal banquet ( 1 Cor 11:26). There is also a potential parallel to John 21:9-13. To open the door is to willingly receive Jesus and direct to Him the attention that a friend deserves. Anyone who opens the door is receiving Jesus as a friend.

### **Rev 3:21 (Introduction)–**

One thing that Jesus does in each of the seven church messages is to counsel the

believers to keep their eye on the reward. Life is often hard. Temptation and opposition often derail the spiritual journey. But God has amazing things in store for those who remain in a trusting relationship with Him in spite of obstacles. In many ways Laodicea's path has been the most difficult of all the churches. Indifference is more difficult to cure than apostasy or theological confusion. And so Laodicea is offered the most amazing reward of all, to sit with Jesus on His throne. Each of the first six churches receives a reward largely than the preceding church. Ephesus received one promise (Rev 2:7), Smyrna receives two (2:10-11), Philadelphia receives six (3:12) and Laodicea received the promise that ends all promises (3:21). To sit with Jesus on His throne is to receive everything that God can offer.

This verse contains a series of four statements, with the latter two providing the foundation for the first two. The foundation statements are aorist indicative, which emphasizes a point in past time. Jesus overcame (Greek: *enikêsa*) and sat down (Greek: *ekathisa*) with His Father on the Father's throne. This is the model ("just as"—Greek: *hôs*) upon which the promise to the overcomer in Laodicea is based. "To the one who overcomes" (a Greek present participle: *ho nikôn*) Jesus gives the right (Greek future indicative: *dôsô*) to sit with Him on His throne. At some point in the past (presumably the cross) Jesus overcame and this overcoming was the basis for the point in time (presumably Revelation 5:6) when He joined the Father on His throne. So the promise to the overcomer in Laodicea is based on Jesus' prior actions. In the future, they will be able to sit with Jesus on His throne, just as He has already joined the Father on His throne. In a real sense, this promise to Laodicea includes all the promises given to the other six churches.

The immediate impression here is that Jesus and the Father have different thrones. The Father's throne would be the governing center of the entire universe, while the throne of Jesus would probably be the throne of Adam and David over this world which Jesus' won back at the cross (see dissertation of Stefanovic). But the two thrones are ultimately one, as becomes clear later on in the book. In Revelation 4 there is "One sitting on the throne," which throne is the center of all the activity that takes place in the heavenly council room (Rev 4:2, 3, etc.). That "One" clearly corresponds to the Father in Revelation 3:21. But in chapter 5 the Lamb appears, is declared to have overcome (aorist indicative— Rev 5:5— see also John 16:33), and joins the Father on His heavenly throne (Rev 5:6-7, see comments on these verses). By the end of the chapter, worship is directed to the Father and the Lamb together (Rev 5:13-14). While Revelation 5:13-14 does not specifically state that the throne now has two occupants, this is clarified in Revelation 22:1, where the same throne is called "the throne of God and of the Lamb." So the believer is promised to ultimately join Jesus on the one and only throne of the universe. This three-fold scheme of Father, Christ and the believer is found also in John 14:23, 15:9 and 20:21, it is a "Johannine" concept.

Since the reference in Revelation 22:1 comes after the millennium (when the New Jerusalem comes down to earth (Rev 21:2: 20:9), the dual thrones implication of 3:21 may be a temporary arrangement while the fate of the world and the human race is finally decided during the millennium. But one must keep in mind that throne language is an ancient metaphor for power and authority and may not conform to the post-parousia reality in every detail. Similarly, the reference to a temple in 7:15-17 (in contrast with 21:22) may hint at a temporary

worship arrangement during the millennium. Some things happen during the millennium that prepare the way for even greater realities after the final destruction of sin, Satan and death.

### **Rev 3:21–**

In the Greek the sentence begins with “the one who overcomes” (*ho nikôn*). The preposition “to,” with which the sentence begins in the KJV, NIV and many other translations, is supplied to make sense of the English. But the actual opening of the sentence is simply “the one who overcomes,” a Greek present participle. So the NASB (along with the ESV and the RSV) correctly opens with simply “He who overcomes.” As a result this sentence is most accurately rendered in the ESV, even though that comes across a little awkward in the English: “The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne.” So the sentence begins with a present participle. “The one who overcomes” is extremely continuous in Greek usage. It implies both continuity of opportunity and continuity of overcoming. Overcoming is not a one-time event, it is an ongoing process of relationship. You can’t “do it and forget it,” overcoming involves a steady commitment to God and the things that matter to Him. Note the similar Greek constructions in the overcomer promises of Revelation 2:26 and 3:12.

To the one who overcomes Jesus says “I will give” (Greek: *dôsô*), a future tense. As with all the others, this promise looks forward to the earth made new, the New Jerusalem portrayed in chapters 21 and 22. The ultimate outcome of “overcoming” is seen only after the destruction of sin and death (Rev 20:11-15). To understand this text it is important to know that in the ancient Roman world thrones were more like couches than armchairs. One could be seated at the right hand of the king and yet not be on a separate throne. Many thrones were big enough for two or even three (Rom 8:34; Eph 1:20; Col 3:1; Heb 1:3, 13; 8:1; 1 Pet 3:22). God’s people are already elevated to heavenly places (Eph 2:6), but in the future they will be further elevated to the throne of Christ itself.

It is interesting that the Greek expression in this verse is “*in* my throne” (*en tô thronô*) rather than “*on* my throne” (as in Revelation 4:2– *epi ton thronon*). If this expression is intentional, rather than a grammatical error, it would imply an even more intimate relationship with Jesus than sharing the same seat. Jesus promised His disciples that they would sit on twelve thrones (Matt 19:28– Greek: *epi dôdeka thronous*) along with Him. But the promise here is even greater, the overcomer in Laodicea shares Jesus’ throne and is even included “in” the throne. Joining Jesus’ throne implies that the overcomer in Laodicea will receive the honor, power, dignity and inheritance of Jesus Christ (see also Romans 8:17). Everything that belongs to Christ as a result of the cross is made available to those who overcome. The same ones that Jesus threatened to vomit out of His mouth earlier are now promised the ultimate reward!

Believers join Jesus on His throne in the same way that He joined His Father on His throne. The overcoming of Jesus is the model for the overcoming of the believer in Laodicea. As an indicative aorist (Greek: *enikêsa*) the overcoming of Christ is a point in past time. That this point in past time is the cross is confirmed by Revelation 5:5. There the Lion of the Tribe of Judah (Jesus Christ) overcame (Greek: *enikêsa*) and joined His Father’s throne. The basis of that overcoming is the slaughter of the Lamb (the cross: Rev 5:6). So it is the cross that is the place and the time where Jesus overcame. At the cross, Jesus gained the victory over sin, Satan, the

world (see John 16:33) and death.

The sitting down on the Father's throne is also an indicative aorist (Greek: *ekathisa*). From the standpoint of John's vision on Patmos, both the cross and the enthronement of Jesus Christ were in the past, roughly 31 AD. And the Lamb remains on the throne of God from that time forward (Rev 7:17). This enthronement of Christ is parallel to the account in Philippians 2:6-11, where the death of Christ results in His supreme exaltation, which includes even the bestowal of the "name that is above every name (Phil 2:9)," Yahweh (translated into Greek as *kurios*— Phil 2:9-11, cf. Isa 45:23-24).

The scope and warmth of the promise to Laodicea may seem out of place in light of its severe condition. Yet this is appropriate to the larger picture of the churches and ultimately the character of God. As one moves through the seven messages to the seven churches, the deeper the problems get the greater the promises to overcome them. See comments in Rev 2 (Introduction) on how the general decline as one moves through the churches is matched by increasing promises. It is as if God is motivated to increase grace wherever sin or indifference abound (Rom 5:20). So the superlative promise to Laodicea is the fitting climax to the increasing number of promises given to each of the first six churches.

One of the most significant literary strategies in the Book of Revelation is what I call duodirectionality. The author places the introduction to the following section of the book in the conclusion of the previous section. The seven seals are the fulfillment of Revelation 3:21 and it is the explanation of the seven seals. The throne of the Father is described in Revelation 4. Jesus joins the Father on His throne in Revelation 5. The saints join Jesus on His throne in chapter 7. The one remaining element of Revelation 3:21 is the overcoming of God's people on earth. That corresponds to Revelation 6. The breaking of the seals reveals the events on earth that accompany the overcoming of the saints. Thus Revelation 3:21 is the key to the following section of Revelation, the Seven Seals.

### **Rev 3:22—**

For more on the admonition to listen to the Spirit see the comments on Revelation 2:7 and the admonitions in the other five churches (Rev 2:11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13). These seven admonitions to listen to the Spirit indicate that each of these seven messages are intended for all the churches. Whoever has an ear, whoever is human, is invited to listen to the Spirit and gain the blessing that comes from attending to each of the seven church letters. What will happen if Laodicea listens to the Spirit? She will forsake her lukewarm condition, accept the gold, white raiment and eye salve, open the door to Jesus and accept His discipline. The result will be to realize her true condition and become authentic.

### **Rev 3:14-22 (Church History Reading)—**

Does the church at Laodicea have a connection with church history? If we are in anyway correct about the way the previous churches represent eras of church history, then the Laodicean church represents the era we live in now, an era that struggles with issues of authenticity and image-making. We have already noticed that there is a connection between the message to Laodicea and the battle of Armageddon (Rev 3:17-18, cf. Rev 16:15). That

connection suggests that John himself saw in Laodicea a model of what the church would be like just before Jesus comes. The church today often goes through the motions and does many great things and yet a heart relationship with God is often absent. There is much more emphasis on the head than on the heart. It is sobering to realize that the last church of earth's history may be the most troubled one. If you are part of that church, it is clearly time to get serious. And one thing is for sure, if you believe you are part of God's end-time remnant, boasting and arrogance are excluded by this passage.

### **Rev 3:14-22 (Spiritual Lessons)–**

In Revelation everything finds meaning in the light of Christ and how He fulfills the entire experience of God's Old Testament people. When the New Testament writers present the Gospel, they describe it in the language, experience, and history of the Old Testament. As we gain a better understanding of this principle, the book of Revelation becomes a new book. We can begin to experience the revelation of Jesus Christ at a deeper level than we ever imagined. In the book of Revelation, "all the books of the Bible meet and end." (Ellen White, *Acts of the Apostles*, 585)

As the ruler of God's creation Jesus functions as the Second Adam. As the second Adam Jesus walked over the ground we all experience. Like Adam, we have a history of failure, dysfunction and disgrace. But the story of the second Adam tells me that Jesus has walked the ground that Adam and I have walked, and made it possible for me to succeed where my ancestor Adam failed. My flawed personal history can be replaced by His perfect history. That leaves me the hope that I can be more like the second Adam and less like the first Adam.

But there is more. Jesus not only redeemed Adam's failure He also reaped the consequences of Adam's failure. When Adam sinned, he suffered the consequences of sin—thorns, sweat, nakedness, and death. All of these were also experienced by Jesus, the second Adam. Jesus wore a crown of thorns (Gen 3:18; Matt 27:29), He sweat great drops of blood in Gethsemane (Gen 3:19; Luke 22:44), and He hung naked on the cross (Gen 3:10-11; John 19:23-24). The final result of the cross, of course, was death (Gen 2:17; 5:5; John 19:30-34), the second death (Rev 20:11-15). So the second Adam not only redeemed Adam's history (and thereby ours) but accepted its consequences so that, in Christ, we can walk in newness of life (Rom 6:3-6).

The New Testament as a whole ties the fullness of Jesus' experience to Adam. Revelation does not need to repeat all of the above. When the book of Revelation speaks of Jesus as the beginning of God's creation, it alludes to a whole sequence of ideas that would have been readily recognized by first-century Christians. When Jesus offers Himself as the "ruler of God's creation" to the church at Laodicea (Rev 3:14) the whole second Adam background is brought into play. As the second Adam He is well able to redeem His church from the lukewarmness of Laodicea. If we didn't understand how the book of Revelation brings the whole Bible into focus, we would miss a great deal.

What can we do personally if we recognize ourselves in the message to Laodicea? The best solution is to go back to basics and take the advice that Jesus offers (verse 18). First of all, talk faith because faith can be encouraged. Spend time with people who are full of faith (I have

friends who bubble with faith and I like to be around them because they encourage me). Everyday, remind yourself to accept the garment of righteousness that Jesus offers. If you have any doubts about the mercy and grace of God, look carefully at the substitute life and death that Jesus experienced on your behalf. Because of what happened at the cross, He accepts you as you are and no matter what you have done or where you have been, He will make of you something beautiful.

The third remedy offered by Jesus in Revelation 3:18 is the spiritual eye medicine. We need clear insight into our true spiritual condition. In the words of Jeremiah 17:9, NIV: "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" I believe Jeremiah is talking about your heart and mine. One of our biggest challenges is that our spiritual hearts are deceitful and so much is that the case that we don't even know how deceitful they are. Our natural state is inauthenticity and our greatest need is accurate knowledge of our own depravity. Confession is simply telling the truth about yourself. But before you can confess the truth you need to know the truth. In future posts I will share some strategies that I have found helpful along the path to greater authenticity.

How do we gain clearer knowledge of our own depravity? One tool that I have found useful is authentic prayer. Authentic prayer goes something like this, "Lord, I want to know the truth no matter what the cost." Truth can cost you a lot; your job, your reputation, even your life. But if you want the truth that badly, you will receive it (John 7:17). That is a great starting point. But I sometime extend the prayer even further by saying, "Lord, I want to know the truth about myself no matter what the cost. Help me to see myself as others see me." A great irony is that we are often the last to discover what everyone else already knows about our character and personality. Laodicea and I need that kind of self-awareness.

A second tool that I find helpful for building authenticity is broad reading of the stories in the Bible, preferably in an easy-reading translation. The Bible does not describe people in heroic terms or as great ideals to be followed. On the other hand, even the great saints of the Bible are often described as they are with all their faults. I think of Abraham who lies to rulers he is afraid of and throws his wife "under the bus." I think of Moses who flies off the handle when his people get annoying. I think of David who commits adultery with a friend's wife and then signs the order for his death. I think of Peter, who regularly says and does dumb things. The Bible is full of real people with real faults. This tells me that God can have a relationship with people who stumble, fall, and make mistakes. That give me the courage to face my own problems and to keep trying when I don't live up to even my own standards.

Journaling is also extremely helpful in the battle toward authenticity. For me, journaling means sitting down each morning with a piece of paper or a computer screen and saying to God, "How did things go yesterday? Where am I in my relationship with You? What do you think of the way I am treating my wife, my colleagues at work? That incident that happened last week, was that according to Your will for me? Were You pleased with how I treated my children yesterday?" After asking a question or two like that just begin to write whatever comes to your mind. In my experience, I may not be halfway down the first page before I find myself writing about deep things I hadn't even been thinking about. The writing process seem to bring things up from deep down inside. It gives you insight into your true condition that you would not learn

in any other way. And with experience, you can get better and better at it.

Perhaps the best path to authenticity is accountability. Accountability happens when you have friends that are so close that you can say, "Look, if you had the opportunity to tell me anything you wanted to tell me and you knew I wouldn't react with anger, what would you tell me? Is there something that I'm doing to hurt people or myself that I need to know about? Are there mistakes that I'm making that I don't seem aware of?" Having a close circle of friends that can tell you anything about yourself is one of the greatest supports in Christian life. Obviously, that can be a painful process. None of us could handle knowing the truth about ourselves unless we knew the gospel. When we know that God, in Christ, accepts people with flaws, it gives us the courage to face the truth about ourselves and to embark on the path toward authenticity.

What counts in the battle for authenticity is not so much the method as the result. When we know the truth about ourselves, we can be more honest and open with God and that will allow God to make the kinds of changes in our lives that can change the world. Laodicea was in dire need of such authenticity. The church today is not very different.

A final spiritual lesson I see clearly in the message to Laodicea is that knowledge and orthodoxy are no substitutes for a genuine relationship with God. The sexual overtones of the counsel to Laodicea suggest the passionate kind of relationship that Jesus longs for in His church. He is looking for a church that wants to please Him more than anything else, a church that has Jesus as its total focus of attention.

On the other hand, every time we neglect to open the door to His knock, we become more like Laodicea until we come to a place where we don't even realize our lack of focus or how much we have fallen away from Him. Even in subtle forms, continuing to say "No!" to Jesus can bring you to the place where you do not know your true condition and you think that things are much better than they actually are. This is the great danger of the church today. The kind of love for Jesus that Laodicea needs, however, occurs when we are fully aware of our value in His eyes and of the difference He makes in our lives. As we have a deeper appreciation of what He had done for us, we will love Him more and more with that passionate kind of love He asks for in the letter to the Laodiceans. Such love cannot be forced. It can only be won by a clear revelation of who Jesus really is and how He thinks of us. Discovering that revelation of Jesus (and through Him of God) in the Scriptures is our first and most important work.