

# THE LETTERS TO THE CHURCHES AT PHILADELPHIA AND LAODICEA

## THE CHURCH AT PHILADELPHIA – THE FAITHFUL CHURCH

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Revelation 3:7-13

### Background

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- Philadelphia, the modern city of Alasehir, is located about 28 miles southeast of Sardis
- Founded in 140 BC, it was named in honor of Attalus II, the king of Pergamum, whose loyalty to his older brother and predecessor, King Eumenes, won him the nickname *Philadelphus*
- The word *philadelphia* means “brotherly love” and is used 6 other times in the NT (Rom 12:10; 1 Thess 4:9; Heb 13:1; 1 Pet 1:22; 2 Peter 1:7a,b)
- The city stood on a terrace, the remnants of which are still visible today
- It was destroyed by an earthquake during the reign of Tiberius (17 AD) but was quickly rebuilt
- The land around the city had a rich agricultural value due to the deposits of volcanic ash in the area
- Grapes were one of its principal crops...as a result, Dionysius (the ancient Greek god of wine, winemaking, fertility; his Roman name was

Bacchu) was one of the chief objects of pagan worship

- It was called “little Athens” because of its numerous temples and festivals to pagan deities



### Commendation

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- Like the church in Smyrna, Christ’s words to Philadelphia contain no rebuke or condemnation
- Rather, he commends them for their faithfulness and promises them divine blessings to come

**Revelation 3:7** ~ And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: He who is holy, who is true, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, and who shuts and no one opens, says this:

- Christ identified Himself to the Philadelphian church with a number of incredible descriptions:
  1. He who is holy – this describes His utter separation from sin and points to His absolute perfection; just as the Lord is holy (cf. Is 43:3), so also is Christ
  2. He who is true – a reference to Christ as the true God, true in all He says and does; dependable, genuine; just as the Father is true so is His Son
  3. He who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, and who shuts and no one opens – a description of the authority and control of Christ in determining, by His sovereign will, who receives eternal blessing and who receives eternal judgment (cf. Rev 1:18; Is 22:22; John 14:6); in other words, He controls who enters the kingdom; Christ is the fulfillment of God’s promise to David in that He will rule on David’s throne (cf. Is 9:6-7; Luke 1:30-33)
- Christ used these majestic terms and phrases to assert His deity and depict His relationship with the church in Philadelphia

**Revelation 3:8** ~ I know your deeds. Behold, I have put before you an open door which no one can shut, because you have a little power, and have kept My word, and have not denied My name.

- In His divine omniscience, Christ knew everything about them, specifically their “deeds”
- Christ noted four qualities that marked the church out for their faithfulness, qualities which should be true of us and our church as well:
  1. They used opportunities given to them (“I have put before you an open door which no one can shut”) – implied in this phrase is not only the fact that the door of salvation had been opened to them (cf. vs. 7), but also that that they were faithful in service; an “open door” is often used in Scripture as opportunities for service and evangelism (1 Cor 16:8-9; 2 Cor 2:12; Col 4:2-3)
  2. They were small but powerful (“you have a little power”) – although some have seen in this phrase a word of rebuke rather than commendation (i.e. a statement of their spiritual ineptness), it is rather a recognition of a significant degree of spiritual power which can only come from God; they were small and few in number (and maybe unimpressive by worldly standards) but not lacking in spiritual power
  3. They were true to His Word (“you have kept my word”) – “they are commended for having kept His word; that is, they had guarded and kept the truth of God as it was committed to them and had not departed from the faith, that system of doctrine which was held by the apostolic church.”<sup>1</sup>; (cf. Job 23:12); in other words, they were marked by obedience to Christ’s Word (cf. John 14:21, 23-24; 1 John 2:3-5)
  4. They were loyal to Christ (“you have not denied My name”) – they were loyal to Christ in the face of persecution no matter the cost; they were unashamed of Christ
- “The power of the Holy Spirit was at work in and through them. They obeyed God’s Word. They were loyal to Christ in the face of persecution. And they endured trials and hostility, proving their love for Christ. Those were the qualities that united to create their faithfulness. And those remain the qualities every church must cultivate to be known by the Lord as faithful.”<sup>2</sup>

## Promises

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<sup>1</sup> John Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 85.

<sup>2</sup> John MacArthur, *Christ’s Call to Reform the Church*, 147.

**Revelation 3:9-13** ~ Behold, I will cause those of the synagogue of Satan, who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie—I will make them come and bow down at your feet, and make them know that I have loved you. 10 Because you have kept the word of My perseverance, I also will keep you from the hour of testing, that hour which is about to come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth. 11 I am coming quickly; hold fast what you have, so that no one will take your crown. 12 He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he will not go out from it anymore; and I will write on him the name of My God, and the name of the city of My God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God, and My new name. 13 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

- As a result of their faithfulness, Christ promised them a number of privileges and blessings:
  1. Their enemies will be humiliated
    - The “synagogue of Satan” (cf. same phrase in Rev 2:9 in reference to the church at Smyrna) were Jews who opposed the believers in Philadelphia
    - The Jewish community in Philadelphia hated the Christians there
    - They took their bitter resentment of Christ out on anyone who worshipped Him
    - The apostate Jewish leaders did this repeatedly in the early part of the first century in order to stifle the progress of the gospel (cf. Acts 4:18; 5:17-18; 13:45, 50; 14:2, 5-6, 19; 17:5)
    - At the end of the first century, not much had changed
    - Their entire religious system was as bankrupt as that of the pagan gods, demonstrating that even though they “say they are Jews” they are not (cf. Romans 2:28-29)
    - A couple of implications:
      - All false religions are tools of Satan (cf. John 8:41, 44)
      - True churches will often face Satanic opposition seeking to thwart and hinder the work of God
    - But Christ promised the faithful Philadelphians that He would humble their enemies and make them overcome their opposition
    - For true believers, in the end there will be victory for the cause of Christ when their enemies experience humiliation
    - Christ will cause their enemies to recognize Jesus for who He is and His followers as true children of God
    - Ultimately, believers will prevail over their persecutors in the future Messianic kingdom (cf. Is 45:14; 49:23; 60:14)
    - This may also indicate that some of those Jewish persecutors will come to faith in Christ, when “all Israel will be saved” (Rom 11:26; cf. Zech 12:10)
  2. They will be delivered from the Tribulation (vs. 10)
    - Because of their faithfulness, Christ promised to keep them “from the hour of testing, that hour which is about to come upon the whole world”
    - While all believers experience trouble and trials in this life (John 16:33; Acts 14:22), this verse points to a special “hour of testing” which will be worldwide, most likely a reference to the Tribulation period (described in Rev 6-19)
    - “If this promise refers to an actual historical event, we don’t know what it was. It’s entirely possible that there was a wave of persecution or a natural disaster that occurred in the area, or some other catastrophe during which the Lord protected and preserved this church. But if this promise was for a specific hour of testing that faced the church at Philadelphia, we don’t know when it was or what happened. However, the language Christ uses here is vast and sweeping, pointing to a fulfillment beyond just the believers in Philadelphia. Many believe this is the Holy Spirit giving us a look down



- Jesus promises that He is coming “quickly” (vs. 11), namely suddenly and unexpectedly, not necessarily immediately
- This is not a threat of coming in judgment as in Rev 2:5, 16; 3:3 or the threat of coming in final judgment in Rev 19
- Rather, it is the promise of a hopeful event, when Christ comes to rapture His church out before the Tribulation
- Thus, the coming of Christ FOR His saints is imminent; whereas, the coming of Christ WITH His saints awaits the completion of the Tribulation period

### 3. They will be honored (vs. 12)

- Being a “pillar in the temple of God” is a figure of speech speaking of how believers will stand when all else has fallen, possibly an allusion to the frequent earthquakes in that area
- “This is of course symbolic of the permanent place in heaven for believers, referred to here as the temple of God. The entire New Jerusalem will be the ultimate temple (21:22). In contrast to earthly temples and earthly pillars which fall, believers will continue forever in the temple. Christ specified that He was referring to the city of My God, that is, the New Jerusalem (cf. 21:2)”<sup>5</sup>
- Believers will enjoy a permanent, secure, and unshakeable place in the presence of God forever

### 4. They will have God’s name (vs. 12)

- Christ will identify Himself with His people by writing His name on them, along with the name of the city of God, the new Jerusalem (cf. Rev 2:17; 14:1)
- This points to ownership and possession by Christ, marking out those who are His precious children

## Exhortation

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**Revelation 3:11** ~ I am coming quickly; hold fast what you have, so that no one will take your crown.

- The only command given to the Philadelphian church is to hold fast so that no one would rob them of their rewards
- This is a call to persevere and to not let temporal concerns rob them of the eternal reward for their faithfulness

## THE CHURCH AT LAODICEA – THE LUKEWARM CHURCH

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**Revelation 3:14-22**

### Background

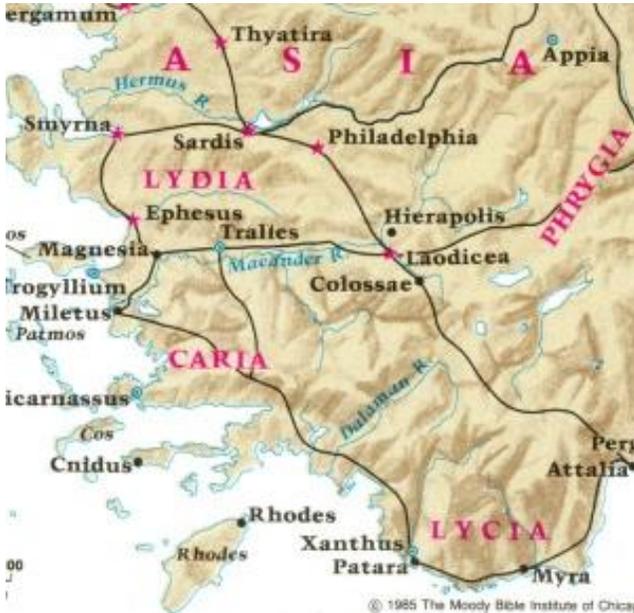
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- The city was located 10 miles west of Colossae, 6 miles south of Hierapolis, and 40 miles southeast of Philadelphia
- Antiochus II founded the city in the middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC and named it after his wife Laodice
- It was a wealthy city known primarily for 3 industries: 1) the production of black wool used in textiles; 2) banking; 3) a medical school which concocted an ointment for the treatment of ears and an eye salve
- Its wealth was evident in the fact that it was able to rebuild itself in AD 60 without the aid of Rome

<sup>5</sup> Walvoord, J. F. (1985). [Revelation](#). In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 2, p. 940). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

- Its major weakness was a lack of water supply, a problem that was solved by bringing water nearly 6 miles from Denizli through a system of underground stone pipes
- However, traveling through stone and clay pipes made the water tepid, filthy, and unpleasant to the smell and taste
- Although Paul never visited the city, he wrote a letter to the Laodiceans (Col 4:16), possibly warning them about the same heresy that infected the Colossian church

**Colossians 4:16** ~ When this letter is read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and you, for your part read my letter that is coming from Laodicea.



- Perhaps more than any other church in Revelation 2-3, this one, unfortunately, best represents the state of the church in America in the 21<sup>st</sup> century
- “Worse than any outspoken, over rejecter of God’s Word is the self-righteous hypocrite who believes he doesn’t need the gospel. He thinks that by his religion or morality he’s on God’s good side. Nothing is more spiritually deadly than false assurance of salvation. Nothing more rapidly inoculates a sinner to the Spirit’s work through his conscience than the erroneous assumption that his sins have already been forgiven.”<sup>6</sup>

## Condemnation

**Revelation 3:14** ~ To the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God, says this:

- In addressing Himself to this church, Christ mentioned 3 of His glorious attributes:
  1. The Amen – He is One in whom all the promises of God are fulfilled (cf. 2 Cor 1:20), the One in whom all that God said is true
  2. The faithful and true Witness – He is the perfect expression of the truth of God in that all He says and does is true (contra the Laodicean church)
  3. The Beginning of the creation of God – He existed before God’s creation and is sovereign over it (cf. John 1:3; Col 1:15-17); this indicates His priority over creation as the author and source of it

<sup>6</sup> MacArthur, 158.

- Christ’s description of Himself was in preparation for the stern word of rebuke which Christ would give the church in Laodicea
- “Like many unregenerate churches, the Laodiceans had a warped view of Christ. Their heresy was no different from that of the Mormon church, the Jehovah’s Witnesses, or any of the liberal churches today that reject Scripture and the deity of Christ. From the outset, Christ’s letter to the Laodiceans demonstrates that the church had erred disastrously in Christology, and their blasphemous beliefs were a grave offense to the Lord.”<sup>7</sup>
- In other words, perverting the truth about the person and work of Christ **always** leads to heresy in the ranks

**Revelation 3:15-17** ~ I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I wish that you were cold or hot. 16 So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth. 17 Because you say, “I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing,” and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked,

- Christ finds absolutely nothing to commend in this church; instead, He levels the most scathing rebuke of any of the 7 churches by indicting them in 2 areas:

#### 1. A gross indifference (vs. 15-16)

- Christ refers to 3 different possible spiritual states:
  - 1) Cold = being totally unmoved and uninterested in spiritual things; a spiritual deadness
  - 2) Hot = showing genuine spiritual fervor for the things of the Lord
  - 3) Lukewarm = “This state refers to those who have manifested some interest in the things of God. They may be professing Christians who attend church but have fallen far short of a true testimony for Christ and whose attitude and actions raise questions concerning the reality of their spiritual life. They have been touched by the gospel, but it is not clear whether they really belong to Christ.”<sup>8</sup>
- This latter category characterized the church in Laodicea in that it was neither cold (like the cold, pure waters of Colossae) nor hot (like the therapeutic hot springs of Hierapolis)
- Instead, it was like the lukewarm, putrid, nauseating water that flowed underground for miles
- Such people and churches Christ will “spit” out of His mouth, indicating how utterly revolting and intolerable those in this state are to Him
- It triggers the divine gag reflex, making Him sick to the point of wanting to vomit
- “It is apparent that there is something about the intermediate state of being lukewarm that is utterly obnoxious to God. Far more hopeful is the state of one who has been untouched by the gospel and makes no pretense of putting his trust in Christ than the one who makes some profession but by his life illustrates that he has not really honored the Christ whose gospel he has heard and professed. There is no one farther from the truth in Christ than the one who makes an idle profession without real faith. The church at Laodicea constitutes a sad picture of much of the professing church in the world throughout the history of the Christian era and serves as an illustration of those who participate in the outer religious worship without the inner reality. How many have outwardly conformed to requirements of the church without a true state of being born again into the family of God? How many church members are far from God yet by their membership in the professing church have satisfied their own hearts and have been lulled into a sense of false security.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> MacArthur, 164.

<sup>8</sup> Walvoord, 92.

<sup>9</sup> Walvoord, 93.

- No one is harder to reach for Christ than the church-going, moral, religious make-believer because they have lulled themselves into a false assurance that makes genuine salvation nearly impossible
- These are those who maintain an outward show of faith
- They claim to love the Lord but their hearts are far from Him
- They are pious hypocrites and spiritual pretenders, holding only to a form of godliness (2 Tim 3:5)
- Such people have no hope of eternity with the Lord because of their inability to assess their spiritual condition accurately

**Matthew 7:22-23** ~ Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’ 7:23 And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS.’

## 2. Spiritual poverty and self-deception (vs. 17)

- They were content with their material wealth, putting their trust in their earthly possessions
- They boasted of getting their wealth by their own effort
- As a result, their lack of economic need blinded them to their deep spiritual need
- They sensed no need for spiritual help...no need for Christ...no need for a new birth...no need for the Lord’s saving and transforming grace
- For this, Christ indicted them for being “wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked”
- Their spiritual condition was the exact opposite of what they supposed
- They were falsely comforted by a contentment in their own self-sufficiency
- They were in a horrible state spiritually but did not realize it
- “The Laodiceans are typical of the modern world, which revels in that which the natural eye can see but is untouched by the gospel and does not see beyond the veil of the material to the unseen and real eternal spiritual riches.”<sup>10</sup>
- “It’s a sickening condition of thinking you’re spiritually rich when you’re bankrupt, of thinking you’re beautiful when you’re ugly of imagining you’re to be envied when you’re utterly pitiable of believing you see everything clearly when you’re lost and blind, of believing you’re draped in spiritual finery when you’re filthy and naked.”<sup>11</sup>

## Admonition

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**Revelation 3:18-19** ~ I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire so that you may become rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness will not be revealed; and eye salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see. 19 ‘Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; therefore be zealous and repent.

- Using three metaphors for genuine salvation, each of which corresponded to a major industry in Laodicea which they trusted in, Christ urgently warned them to truly come to Him:
  1. Buy from me gold (to deal with their spiritual poverty)
  2. Buy from me white garments (to deal with their spiritual nakedness) – note the contrast between the black wool of Laodicea and the white garment provided by Christ
  3. Buy from me eye salve (to deal with their spiritual blindness)
- Ironically, none of these things could be “bought” with earthly means but only through Christ, who has already paid the price

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<sup>10</sup> Walvoord, 94.

<sup>11</sup> MacArthur, 167.

- Christ rebuked them and urged them to repent because He loved them (vs. 19)
- Although He could have judged them immediately, He holds out the offer of salvation to them
- Although it may sound like He is speaking to believers here, it is best to take Christ's words as being to the unregenerate in the Laodicean church
- They must "repent"...as repentance is always a genuine part of receiving the Gospel (Matt 4:17; Acts 2:38; 11:18; 17:30-31; 2 Cor 7:10)

## Promises

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**Revelation 3:20-22** ~ Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me. 21 He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne. 22 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

- Christ promises that, to those who respond in repentance, He will give the right to sit with Him on His throne and share His victory

## A Note on Revelation 3:20

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- This well-known verse is often the favorite of preachers, camp speakers, evangelists, and anyone else who wants to stress the need for a person to respond to the Gospel call upon their life
- The need for an immediate response to the Gospel is emphasized as Christ is pictured as standing at the doorstep of each person's heart, knocking on the door of their heart, and pleading to come in

### Here I Am Knocking

- Here I am standing At the door of your heart, Won't you let me come in And flood light where there's dark?
- For I have been knocking For such a long time, Don't leave it much longer To become a child of mine
- I just want you to know That I love you so much And can fill your heart within That once was starved of love
- So please don't delay In responding to me, For I may not keep knocking And I have not a key
- I will never force you To open the door, It's all up to you, my friend, To receive me as Lord.

- Such an understanding of this text fits well with the "Ask Jesus into your heart" type of evangelism that is so characteristic of our Christian culture
- This Gospel approach, while it may have some vague biblical connections, fails to demonstrate the need for sinners to repent of their sin and believe in Christ...it muddies the waters of what clear conversion looks like and dulls the sharp edges of the Gospel
- Such language confuses the real message of salvation and results in a man-centered version of the Gospel message
- Such ambiguity in evangelism has resulted in many "unsaved believers," many false conversions, many people with false assurance, and many churches filled with people who associate with Christ in name only
- In the context of Revelation 3, Christ was standing at the door of the Laodicean church, eager to reenter the congregation through the genuine repentance and salvation of its members
- This indicates that there was probably not one true believer in that church
- But if even one of them would repent and truly believe Him as Lord and Savior, He would enter that church through that individual
- Thus, the door on which Christ is knocking is not the door to a single human heart, but to the Laodicean church...He was outside this apostate church and wanted to reenter it through their repentance

- Furthermore, Jesus never begs or badgers anyone into the kingdom of heaven
- Salvation is not a matter of the Lord getting a foothold in the door of someone's heart...it is a work of sovereign grace in which He draws and completely transforms the sinner
- Salvation is never a result of our will but rather it is the work of God's regenerating grace that rescues us from the penalty of our sin

**John 3:5-8** ~ Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. 6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Do not be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' 8 The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit."

**John 6:44** ~ No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day

**John 6:65** ~ And He was saying, "For this reason I have said to you, that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted him from the Father."

**John 10:27-28** ~ My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; 28 and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand