Letters to Three Churches

Revelation 3

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| **Natural Divisions** | * Revelation 3:1-6 Jesus rebukes the church at Sardis, because although they appear to be alive, they spiritually dead, and He challenges them to wake up and strengthen what little life remains.
* Revelation 3:7-13 Jesus praises the church at Philadelphia for her patient endurance and faithfulness, and promises her future victory and honor in the Kingdom of God.
* Revelation 3:14-22 Jesus rebukes the church at Laodicea for their self-absorption and complacency and their loss of focus on Christ, and He challenges them to restore their fellowship with Christ.
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| **Summary Sentence** | Jesus assesses the strengths and weaknesses of the churches at Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. |
| **Central Idea** |  Our hope for the future enables us to be faithful in the present |

 I want to introduce all of you to a friend of mine—someone precious and dear to me. Jenni, will you come up here with me. This is Jenni Ellenniss. Jenni joined this Community Bible Study class in 1995. I remember that she always sat on the third row, in the center, next to her friend Elena Brown. Jenni was a part of our Leadership team for many years. She’s been a Children’s leader, a Core Group leader, and we’re looking forward to her return as a Children’s leader very soon.

If you look at Jenni, there’s something you know about her. Jenni is going to have a baby. This will be her fifth, and Jenni knows a lot about the process of childbirth.

But there’s a lot that Jenni doesn’t know. Jenni, when is your due date?

Is it likely that the baby will be born on that due date? Actually, it’s not likely. Statistically, it’s far more probable that the baby will be born close to that date, perhaps, but not on that date.

Jenni, when you give birth to that baby, your labor could be really painful, and it could last a long time. That sounds scary. Are you dreading the coming of that day? Are you dreading your experience of childbirth?

Why not? (Because at the end of it all there will be a baby).

Thank you.

The fact that so many of us, having given birth once, were thrilled to do it again, demonstrates our confidence that the joy of the outcome greatly exceeds the pain of the process. Our delight in the provision of a new baby enables us to embrace the pain of the process.

In the same way, when we come to the book of Revelation, we find in its pages a description of a painful process that will result in the provision of a glorious, eternal kingdom. Revelation describes scary realities that will culminate in a new creation, a new earth, a new quality of life in a perfect, eternal kingdom.

Our world today is not the way it’s supposed to be, but the Bible teaches that it won’t always be this way. Our world is not the way it’s supposed to be, but God’s eternal Kingdom is going to come, and that will be a glorious event. That will be a day of ultimate joy.

In the same way that Jenni’s anticipation of her new baby enables her to face the pain of childbirth with courage; even so, our anticipation of the coming Kingdom enables us to face the suffering of this life with firm faith. **Our hope for the future enables us to be faithful in the present**.

Open your bibles to Revelation chapter 3.

In our study of the book of Revelation, we’ve been looking at Jesus’ message to a set of seven churches in the Roman province of Asia—a region that is now modern-day Turkey.

In the first century, Christians throughout the Roman Empire had experienced varying degrees of suffering. Some had experienced terrifying natural disasters. There had been the eruption of Vesuvius. There had been devastating earthquakes. There had been long-term drought and famine. There had been political persecution and economic persecution. Life was hard; life was difficult. What was there to motivate the church to stand firm? What could possibly motivate Christians to publicly proclaim Christ when life was so painful—when the cost was so high?

In these letters to the churches, Jesus encouraged Christians to look beyond the suffering of today and to look forward to the incomparable blessings of the future Kingdom of God. Jesus reminded His people that **their hope for the future enables them to be faithful in the present**.

Last week we saw that Jesus had five things to say to each church; there were five elements in each message. First, Jesus gave a description of Himself. This description communicated some aspect of His authority. After that, Jesus gave praise to the church for something they were doing well. Jesus then identified any problem that He saw in the church, and He challenged each church regarding something He wanted them to change. Finally, Jesus gave a promise to each church—a promise of some aspect of glory that they would enjoy in the future Kingdom of God. In order to encourage and motivate each church, Jesus described some aspect of the coming Kingdom of God. Jesus reminded His people that **their hope for the future enables them to be faithful in the present**.

Today, we’ll begin by looking at Jesus’ message to the church at Sardis. Look at verses 1 and 2. Jesus says, *“These are the words of Him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God.”*

You’ll remember from our study of chapter 1 that the term *“seven spirits of God”* refers to the Holy Spirit. To the Hebrew, numbers often represented *concepts*, not *quantities*. The number *seven* was used to convey the concept of completeness, or fullness. So *the seven spirits of God* would be understood to be the God the Holy Spirit in His fullness. The seven stars represent the churches. In this description, Jesus proclaims His divine authority over the churches.

Jesus had no praise at all for this church at Sardis. He acknowledged that they had a *reputation* for spiritual vitality, but Jesus knew that essentially, they were dead. This church had become lethargic. The church had compromised with the pagan culture so completely that its Christian witness was essentially worthless. There was very little light—very little Christian witness—emanating from their lampstand.

Oftentimes we see the spiritual life as a mountain to be climbed. You know how mountain-climbing works: you climb for a while and then you set up a camp and you rest. And then, the next day, you climb a little higher, and then you set up camp again, and you rest. Unfortunately, that is not a good picture of the spiritual life, because when you’re climbing a mountain and you stop to rest, you don’t lose any of the altitude you’ve gained. The spiritual life isn’t like that at all.

The spiritual life is more like a battle. In battle, whenever you rest, you lose ground. You move your forces into enemy territory and you gain some ground, and then, if you decide to just take some time off, you’ll find that the enemy has regrouped. The enemy has found reinforcements. The enemy has gotten stronger. Inevitably, the enemy will attack again, and now you’re likely to lose your position. You’re likely to lose some ground.

For the church at Sardis, they had once been spiritually strong, but no more. They had compromised with the culture. They had grown weak in faith. They had lost a lot of ground.

Jesus said, in verse 2, *“Wake up! Strengthen what remains! I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God.”* This congregation was not fulfilling its God-given mission to shine forth the light of the gospel. This church had become so conformed to the culture that they no longer had impact in their community. Their deeds were not complete. They were not accomplishing their Christian mission of proclaiming the light of Christ.

Jesus challenged them, in verse 3, “*Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard* (He’s talking about the gospel)*; obey it, and repent.”* They had received the truth of the gospel and the teachings of the apostles and the prophets. Jesus was challenging them: *“Remember what you’ve learned from the Word of God, and obey it!”*

And then Jesus said, in verse 3, “*But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.”* This isn’t talking about the return of Christ at the end of the age. This is talking about Jesus’ coming against this church to bring disciplinary action. This is not a happy prospect. Unless the church at Sardis repents, Jesus will come as a thief—suddenly, with stealth—and they will find themselves under divine discipline.

Jesus then offered a glorious promise for their future. Jesus promised the blessing of fellowship with Himself. Look at verse 4. *“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.”* What a glorious prospect—to walk with Jesus! It’s a picture of intimate fellowship with our Savior and Lord.

There’s more. Look at verses 5-6. “*He who overcomes* (this refers to all believers) *will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and His angels.”* This is a promise of eternal citizenship in the Kingdom of God.

This reference to *“the book of life”* had special significance in that day. Cities typically maintained a *book of life*—a *book of the living*—which was a roster of the names of the citizens of the city. When a person died, his name would be erased from that book of life. If he committed a heinous crime, his citizenship could be revoked, and his name erased from the city’s book of life.

But this book of life—the book of life that Jesus referred to—is the book that lists the names of the citizens of the Kingdom of God. In Revelation 13:8 and in Revelation 17:8, this book of life is described as a book containing names written into the book before the foundation of the world. Jesus’ book of life is one that *never* has names removed. Jesus will *never* blot out your name from His book of life. Jesus will never blot out your name from the list of citizens of the Kingdom of God.

The final element of Jesus’ eternal promise is found at the end of verse 5. Jesus will claim each and every believer as His own. As each of our names is spoken in that day, Jesus will acknowledge us. Denise Cormia—she’s one of Mine. Tina Tsuei—she’s one of Mine. Helena Standifer—she’s one of Mine.

What a motivation for us. **Our hope for the future enables us to be faithful in the present**.

The next message is to the church at Philadelphia. Philadelphia was about 25 miles southeast of Sardis. Jesus said this, to the church at Philadelphia: look at verse 7. Jesus said, “*These are the words of Him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What He opens no one can shut, and what He shuts no one can open.”* Jesus is portrayed here as the one who opens doors. Your first thought would be that this might refer to a door of opportunity, or a door of ministry, but the context doesn’t support that. The door that He opens has something to do with the key that He holds. He holds the key of David.

In that day, the synagogues in Philadelphia were claiming that only Jews were the chosen people of God, and these Jews claimed to have shut the door to the Kingdom to Christians. These Jews had claimed that by their authority they were disqualifying Christians for access into the future Kingdom of God.

Jesus refuted their claim. It is Jesus, not the synagogue, who holds the key of David. The key of David refers to the promises in the Old Testament about the future Kingdom of God—promises that had been revealed to David. Jesus now holds the key to that future Kingdom. It is Jesus who determines who may enter the Kingdom of God, and who may not.

Jesus praised this church for their faithfulness, and Jesus assured them that He had set before them an open door, which no one is able to shut. In this statement Jesus assured them that they will enter the Kingdom of God. The open door refers to the promise of the Kingdom of God.

Jesus gave this church personal encouragement. Look at verses 9 and 10. “*I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars--I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you.”*

The church at Philadelphia suffered the slander and rebuke of the Jews in the area. The Jews proudly proclaimed *themselves* to be the people of God, and these Christians, well, the Jews believed that Christians were frauds; they were blasphemers; they were proclaiming a false Messiah. But Jesus assured His church that these Jews who oppose Christ are unwittingly serving Satan. These Jews are not serving God, and one day they’ll see that it is followers of Christ who are the true people of God.

And then Jesus says, *“Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth.”*

This promise was written to the church at Philadelphia, and this particular church is being commended for their faithfulness. Jesus promises them that because *they* have been faithful, He is going to keep *them*—He’s going to protect them—from a time of temptation—a time of world-wide testing. If this promise has relevance to the church at Philadelphia, then the hour of trial must be a near-term event for them. This is a gracious promise that even though difficult times are coming, Jesus will protect their faith and enable them to remain faithful.

Jesus identified no problems with this church at all, but He did offer a challenge to them. Jesus challenged the church at Philadelphia to stand firm in faith. Jesus said this, in verse 11, *“I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown.”* The crown represents victory. Victory comes at the end of the race. They still have the course of their lives to finish. Jesus challenges them to stand firm and finish well.

Jesus then gave them His promise of an eternal place in worship in the Kingdom of God. Look at verse 12. *“The one who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on him my new name.”*

These are images of the Kingdom of God, the dwelling place of God. Jesus promised that the overcomer, the believer, will be a pillar in the presence of God. A pillar represents stability. A pillar represents permanence. Jesus promised that believers will have a permanent place in the eternal Kingdom of God. For them as for us, **our hope for the future enables us to be faithful in the present**.

The last message is to the church at Laodicea. Jesus describes Himself in verse 14 as *“the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation.”* Jesus is the ultimate authority.

For the church at Laodicea, Jesus has no praise, only rebuke. Look at verses 15-16. “*I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth.”*

What does Jesus mean by a lukewarm church? We have to be careful here. For us, in twenty-first century America, we tend to assume that temperature words refer to emotions. Think of the terminology we use. *“That politician leaves me cold.”* *“The new pastor is on fire for the Lord!”* For us, *hot* means fervor; *cold* means overt rejection. In the same vein, we consider *lukewarm* to mean unenthusiastic, passive, emotionally unresponsive. Lukewarm is the way your husband responds when you want him to watch *Sleepless in Seattle* with you.

We think of temperature words as referring to emotions, and with this presupposition we interpret, Jesus’ rebuke as challenging them to have more fervor, to have more excitement, to be more emotional.

That cannot be what Jesus was talking about. The application of the terms *“hot”* and *“cold”* to describe spiritual enthusiasm would have been completely foreign to first-century Christians. Furthermore, if you follow that logic, then you would have to conclude that Jesus would rather you be cold—unresponsive, an unbeliever—than be a believer who is lacking in fervor. We would be saying that Jesus would rather you reject Christ altogether than be a believer who’s not zealous for her faith. That doesn’t fit our theology. Lack of emotion is not what is being criticized here.

The bottom line is that Jesus is rebuking the Laodiceans for being self-absorbed, for neglecting the responsibilities of Christian faith, for failing to spread the message of the gospel. The Laodiceans were selfish and self-absorbed, and self-absorbed Christians are disgusting to Jesus.

We can gain insight into Jesus’ rebuke by considering some historical facts about the city itself. Laodicea was extraordinarily wealthy. The city was known as the banking capitol for the entire region of Asia Minor.

The Laodiceans also enjoyed world-wide fame because of a strain of prized wool that they had developed through cross-breeding certain kinds of sheep. This wool was heavy and black, but also silky, and it was very much in demand throughout the world. They were very proud of their wool.

Finally, there was a medical center at Laodicea, and this medical center was famous for having developed a salve for the eyes—an ointment that was very effective at curing certain eye conditions. This eye salve was used throughout the empire, and the city was famous because of its production of this salve.

The city had only one problem. It had terrible water. They had to pipe water in from six miles away through a stone aqueduct, and by the time the water was collected into the cistern, it was a nasty, putrid, lukewarm water supply. Laodicea had terrible water, and everybody knew it.

But just a few miles away, in the city of Hierapolis, there was a natural hot mineral spring. People came from far and wide to bathe there, and the people of Laodicea were jealous of that soothing hot spring, and the water it provided to the city of Hierapolis.

Another nearby city, the city of Colossae, had spring water coming right down from the mountains, and their water was cool and refreshing. It was great for drinking. The people of Laodicea were jealous of the cool water that Colossae enjoyed. So there was soothing hot water in Hierapolis, and refreshing cool water in Colossae, but the city of Laodicea had really bad water. It wasn’t good for drinking; it wasn’t good for bathing.

So when Jesus said to Laodicea, *“you’re neither hot nor cold,”* He was saying *“hot is good! Hot is pleasant to me.” “Cold is good! Cold is pleasant to me.”* *“But you’re not either of those. Laodicea, there are different, good choices you could make about how you live your Christian life. You could be one who evangelizes; that would be good. Or you could be one who serves those in need; that would be good. But you’re not either of those. You could be a woman of prayer and praise; that would be good. Or you could be a Sunday School teacher; that would be good. But you’re not either of those. Your lack of involvement in Christian service is as distasteful to me as the putrid lukewarm water that you have to drink every day.”*

We’re really not talking about emotions here. We’re talking about deeds. We’re talking about commitment. We’re talking about Christian service.

The Christians at Laodicea were self-absorbed, self-centered Christians. They saw no need to invest themselves in the life of the church. They were complacent because of the resources they had. They had wealth; they had garments of fine wool; they had eye salve to cure vision problems. But Jesus said, *“You think you’re wealthy? You think you’re fabulously clothed? You think you have healthy eyesight? My verdict is this: in fact, you are poor; you are naked; you are blind.”*

Jesus challenged them to buy refined gold from Him. They already have material wealth, but they are sorely lacking in any kind of spiritual wealth. They need to invest in the things of God—fellowship with Christ, commitment, and service.

Jesus challenged them to buy white clothes from Him to cover their shameful nakedness. They had no awareness of their sinful self-centeredness. Jesus offered them white clothes—a picture of purity, holiness, and spiritual cleanness.

Jesus challenged them to obtain eye salve from Him so that they might see. He speaks of their need for spiritual vision and understanding. They need to see Jesus, and to focus their lives on Him.

Notice that none of these things have to do with emotions. They all have to do with commitment, with faithfulness, with being obedient and responsive to God.

Jesus says, in verse 19, *“Those whom I love, I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent.”* To be earnest is to be serious. It’s to be committed. It’s to be diligent.

The church at Laodicea was self-absorbed. Jesus challenged them to change their priorities, to re-focus their lives on Christ, to invest in their relationship with Him.

And then Jesus said to this church, to these believers, *“Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with Me.”*

We use this verse a lot in evangelism, but when we do, we’re taking it out of context and we’re investing it with meaning that it wasn’t intended to convey. Notice this: In Revelation 3:20, Jesus isn’t standing at the door of a non-believer’s heart entreating him to open the door and invite Jesus into his heart. That’s how we often explain this when we use the verse in evangelism, but that’s not what’s happening here in this passage.

Jesus isn’t talking to non-believers. He’s talking to believers. He’s talking to the church at Laodicea.

Revelation 3:20 is an allusion to the Song of Solomon, chapter 5, verse 2, where the bride says, *“I was asleep, but my heart was awake. Listen! My beloved is knocking: 'Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my perfect one!’”* This passage in the Song of Solomon pictures the husband knocking at the door of his bride, asking her to open the door so that he can come in and enjoy marital intimacy with her.

In Revelation 3:20, Jesus is inviting His sleeping church to restore their intimacy with Him, to restore their fellowship with Him. It’s a call to fellowship; it’s *not* a call to salvation. It’s a call to spiritual intimacy with Jesus; it’s *not* a call to place one’s faith in Him. It’s a call to a committed relationship.

Jesus then gives this glorious promise, in verses 21-22. “*To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with Me on My throne, just as I overcame and sat down with My Father on his throne.”* This is a promise of eternal relationship with Jesus.

As we’ve looked at these seven messages to seven churches, we’ve seen that Jesus cares about His church and Jesus cares how we live our lives. Our world is not the way it’s supposed to be, but there is a glorious future for us in the coming Kingdom of God. Living faithfully in this life is hard, but **our hope for the future enables us to be faithful in the present**.

Let’s close in prayer.