

ON THE EDGE



LEARNING FROM LAODICEA

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In some verses, I have amended some words to substitute
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Grace Into Transformation

The apostle John was given an awesome eye-opening view into the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ, along with many insights into “*the things which are, and the things which will take place after these things.*”¹ He recorded what he saw and heard in the last book of the Bible, which we call ‘The Revelation’. Much of this book is hard to understand, but it starts with seven fairly straightforward messages, ‘letters’ to seven churches in the Roman province of ‘Asia’, in what is now western Turkey.²

The message to each church reads very much like a school report; an assessment of how well or badly they are getting on. Each one starts with the Lord Jesus telling them that he knows their situation. Some are given things to repent of and see changed; some are commended for their faithfulness; all are given promises in the future, in the end times and in the establishing of the Kingdom of God on the earth, but these promises are targeted at those who ‘overcome’. In one case, a specific promise is given to a church which has been faithful; they will be vindicated before those who have opposed them, in the more immediate future.

But only one of these churches is given **promises of grace for the present time**, promises of change and transformation. It is the only one which Jesus refers to as “those whom I love”.³ He made these amazing offers by which their individual lives could be transformed and by which the standing and effectiveness of the whole church could change beyond recognition. We don’t know whether they responded to his offers, but those same offers remain open and available to all believers – and especially to *companies* of believers – right to the present day. They are available to us and so is the same transformation ! Do we want it?

Of all these seven churches of Asia, Laodicea is probably the one with the worst ‘report’ and the one that we would NOT like to be compared to! But if we look into the promises which the Lord Jesus makes to these people, we can see hope for us all and not only the prospect of forgiveness but the promise of transformation. We need to ask ourselves again: Do we want this? It will not be a comfortable process but the rewards are definitely worthwhile.

They were on the edge but didn’t know it, really thinking that they were doing well and didn’t need anything. They thought they had ‘arrived’, and had no clue how dangerous their position was. One of the other six churches was told that they might ‘have their candlestick removed’ – in other words, that they would cease to be a church at all if they didn’t repent – but Laodicea thought that they were a ‘superchurch’ in spite of the fact that the Lord Jesus said he was **outside the door** and waiting to be let in. We may come perilously close to the same idea, thinking perhaps that, actually, we don’t really need to grow spiritually – or not very much, anyway. Perhaps a few ‘tweaks’ here and there, some fine adjustments, will be all that are necessary for us to be at least mature *enough* ! The message to them from the risen and glorified Lord Jesus was that they made him want to vomit because they were tepid believers who thought they were wonderfully rich – while all the time they were actually ‘wretched, miserable, poor, blind and naked’. Could we possibly be fooling ourselves in the same sort of way? (See **Revelation 3:14-22**)

In his commentary on these verses, F B Meyer said “It is better to be cold than lukewarm . . . The Gospel has a better chance with the openly profane and godless than with those who have been brought up under its influence and are so far unaffected.”

For many of us, the prospect of spiritual growth may seem intimidating. Not necessarily because we really want to remain as spiritual infants, but because we are afraid of change. And so we find reasons to try to convince ourselves that we do not need to face change in anything about our lives, our understanding, our attitudes or our practices. We may say that we want spiritual growth, but secretly we want nothing to upset our (fairly) happy *status quo*. Pretty much exactly how the Laodicean believers thought of themselves!

The Lord Jesus had definitely not given up on those believers in Laodicea, though. They certainly were teetering right on the edge of a precipice but there was a way back. He says that they should **buy** from him – why? And how? That seems strange to us, and quite rightly. There is nothing that we can do to to buy favours from the Lord. He has made all the provision that we need. So **how** can we possibly buy from him?

¹ **Revelation 1:19**

² **Revelation 2:1-3:22**

³ **Revelation 3:19**

When we buy something, we make value judgments and decide whether we can afford to buy the thing we want. Will buying it mean that we need to do without something else? I remember when we had our first garden, we inherited an old spade in the shed, but what I really wanted was a garden fork. With just one low salary coming in, and with young children, we couldn't afford to buy one, so I had to do without for some time. It was a question of priorities. In the same way, Jesus doesn't need our payment, but he does require us to set aside other things which may look like priorities in order to take hold of what he offers: *"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."*¹

The eye salve is mentioned last but is the first vital requirement. As Watchman Nee has written: 'The only possibility of spiritual progress lies in our discovering the truth as God sees it; the truth concerning Christ, the truth concerning ourselves in Christ, and the truth concerning the Church, the Body of Christ.'² We shall come back later to look again at this restoration of sight, along with the richness of gold and pure white clothing.

They needed to accept his diagnosis and acknowledge their needs. If they followed his directions in this, it would make the difference between shameful rejection and magnificent inclusion, between being on the scrap heap and sharing with him in the government of the coming Kingdom of God on earth.

In the same way, if we honestly mean business in our ongoing relationship with the living God through the Lord Jesus Christ, we need to be prepared to see and acknowledge any tendency that we may have to adopt a Laodicean attitude and allow the Holy Spirit to open our eyes to our needs **and** – most importantly – to God's provisions to move us forward in spiritual growth towards ever-increasing maturity. My own ongoing experience is that I only start to truly appreciate his provision when I have begun to acknowledge my need.

At first sight, the story of the church at Laodicea doesn't look like a story of grace. It may not start there, but that is certainly where it leads . . .

* * * * *

Our attitude to the church in Laodicea is revealing. Perhaps our easiest and commonest reaction is to condemn their unrealistic opinion of themselves, but wait a moment – have we noticed what we are doing? By condemning them, are we repeating the same mistake? "We're not like them, we are not fooling ourselves." Really? The example of Laodicea is not given to us as one to be condemned, even ridiculed. It is an offer of restoration for those who have the honesty to face their genuine needs. Of all these letters to the seven churches in the Roman province of Asia in what is now western Turkey, this letter is probably the one which speaks most loudly of the loving and restorative grace of our Lord, who deeply longs to see **all** his people share in his coming kingdom.

So, will we honestly and willingly face up to our needs and be prepared for radical change? Because, yes, it will be radical; Jesus promises nothing less. Will we look ahead, snatching a glimpse into our future in the coming rule of God on this earth and realising that those changes now are essential for our future effectiveness? Even seeing that there are benefits to be realised in the 'here and now', before that ultimate purpose is revealed?

We may not like to characterise ourselves as 'wretched, miserable, poor, blind and naked' but, if we will even begin to acknowledge that perhaps one or two of those words may come close to describing some aspects of our lives, we shall find ourselves at the brink of a vast ocean of God's provision for us **now**, riches that are already made over to us because we belong to Jesus.

We don't know how the believers in Laodicea responded but we can make sure that our own response is honest and realistic.

Let the voyage of discovery begin!

¹ All four gospel writers record Jesus' radical teaching on priorities: **Matthew 10:39, 16:25, Mark 8:35, Luke 9:24, 17:33, John 12:25**. In **each** of these verses, he uses a strong word for 'lose': literally, 'destroy utterly'. The word usually translated 'life' here is actually 'soul'. Our soul is what we really are, our personality, our mind, will and emotions. Challenging demands but with enormous promises!

² *What Shall This Man Do?* by Watchman Nee, 1961. Chapter 10: *John – and the Truth*.

Wretched ?

If we are believers in the Lord Jesus Christ but still feel wretched, it may help us to remember that those people in Laodicea were also believers. The Lord called them 'those whom I love' and addressed them as the Church in their town, his own outpost of the Kingdom of God in their area. Far from disowning them, he was holding out to them the offer of recovery, growth and glory.

The Greek word means '*afflicted, enduring trials and troubles, miserable*'. The only other place where this word is used in the New Testament is in **Romans 7:24**, where Paul is describing his own experience, when he was trying to please God by following laws – and failing miserably! "*Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?*" Paul found the way out but sadly many Christians are still fighting that battle and don't need to be reminded that they feel wretched!

But Jesus is blunt with these people. He doesn't say 'you **feel** wretched'; he says 'you **are** wretched'! In fact, these folk don't feel wretched at all; they think they are doing just fine. So, what does it mean to actually **be** wretched in God's eyes, whether we feel it or not?

Looking at Paul's experience which he describes in **Romans**, we see a man who was born again and knew that he had found forgiveness through the death of Jesus on the cross, but still he knew he was wretched. Perhaps we think that he should have felt better about himself? After all, he was a child of God with a glorious eternal inheritance. If he had spoken to us about how wretched he saw himself to be, we might have reminded him of these facts and told him to stop fretting and cheer up!

But that would have been cold comfort for Paul, just as it is in reality for any Christian believer who is faced with the desperation of their own wretchedness. What may sound like the 'right answers' can often be superficial and not address the deeply felt need. We need real and **honest** solutions which reach deep into our lives.

Why did Paul know that he was wretched? Could our own wretchedness spring from the same source? And can we find the same release from it?

Paul's cry from the heart comes at the end of **Romans 7**. In the earlier chapters of this letter, he has explored in depth the wonderful reconciliation that he has been given through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. There is no doubt that his understanding and experience are true and genuine. How else could he have written "*. . . being justified as a gift by his grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus*", "*Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ*", "*. . . we also exult in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation*" (**Romans 3:24, 5:1, 5:11**) – and many more similar passages – ? No, if we had tried to 'counsel' Paul in his wretchedness by telling him that he had not really taken hold of salvation, we would have been severely mistaken.

Paul had actually gone much further than taking hold of forgiveness and reconciliation, further than many Christians go. He had begun to see that his old life was dead and gone because he was joined to the death of Jesus, and that he had been released from slavery to sin and failure. Here is just a taste of the freedom in which he rejoiced: "*. . . knowing this, that our old self was crucified with him, . . . so that we would no longer be slaves to sin . . . Even so count yourselves to be dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus*" (**Romans 6:6-11**). He definitely knew that he had new life in Jesus, that he really had been liberated.

So, again we would want to ask him: "If you have this clear knowledge and experience of forgiveness and reconciliation, of release from the power of sin controlling your life, how can you possibly be wretched – you of all people?"

Paul gives us his explanation in **Romans 7**. Many people have found this chapter difficult, and I thoroughly recommend reading what Watchman Nee writes about it in *The Meaning and Value of Romans Seven* – chapter 9 of his classic book *The Normal Christian Life*. Here is a brief excerpt: '**Romans 7** is given to us to explain and make real the statement in **Romans 6:14**, that: "Sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under law, but under grace." The trouble is that we do not yet know deliverance from law. What, then, is the meaning of law? Grace means that God does something for me; law means that I do something for God. God has certain holy and righteous demands which he places upon me: that is law.

Now if law means that God requires something of me for their fulfilment, then deliverance from law means that he no longer requires that from me, but himself provides it.'

Paul had been **feeling** wretched because he **was** wretched; he could not meet those demands. He really wanted to, not least out of a response of gratitude to God for what he had done for him, and that may be where we have found ourselves, too. This was not Paul trying to earn salvation by good works; he had come beyond that and knew it was a non-starter. No, now he knew he was justified by faith but was trying to please God because he wanted to serve him, wanted to live a life that brought glory to him. His inability to do even the smallest thing to please God was what made Paul see his wretchedness. The more he tried, the more he discovered that he could not do it. No wonder he cried out: "Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (**Romans 7:24**)

Have we come to that point of utter frustration with our own inability to live a life that will please God? Have we begun, perhaps, to see that we are simply incapable of following God's law? To quote Watchman Nee again: "No, the Law was not given in the expectation that we would keep it. It was given in the full knowledge that we would break it; and when we have broken it so completely that we are convinced of our utter need, then the Law has served its purpose. It has been our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ, that in us he may himself fulfil it (**Galatians 3:24**)."

If, like many other believers, we have been making every effort to do as much as we can to please God, it will come as a shock to realise that we have in fact **already** been set free from this compulsion. God's approval of us is not 'performance-related'. It is entirely 'grace-related', through what he has done and not by the measure of how well we do.

So, how can we step into this freedom and release? As ever, our experience follows on from what we come to 'see', and that 'seeing' is a result of the revelation of the Holy Spirit. When we 'saw' that Jesus had paid the price for our forgiveness, we knew that it was the answer to our need and took hold of it in faith. Experience followed! In the same way, when we 'see' that we have been included in the death of Jesus – as Paul says "*you also were made to die to the Law through the body of Christ*" – then we are able to take hold of the fact and experience the reality of release. (**Romans 7:4**).

This death to law is only one aspect of what God has done by joining us to the death of his Son, but it is a vital one, right at the heart of our relationship with our Father. We may not have realised how far the tentacles of legalism often extend into our lives . . .

Trying to follow Biblical rules in order to please God is obviously legalistic, but it is remarkably easy to slip into, usually for the best of motives. But, just like Paul, all too soon we find that we just can't do it; we keep on failing. As he puts it himself: "*I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members*" (**Romans 7:22**). It may help us to understand better if we realise that the word which is always translated as 'sin' actually means 'missing the target', so what Paul is saying is that failure is built into his humanity and he can't escape. 'Wretched' is a very accurate description!

Watchman Nee's definition of living under law is helpful: 'law means that I do something for God'. We may not have realised how much we do to seek approval, how much we are looking over our shoulders to make sure that we are seen to be doing well, patting ourselves on the back when we think we have done well and giving ourselves a hard time when we think that we have failed – again! Not just trying to do things to please God, but to do things which we think will gain approval from those who observe us, whether 'ordinary' people in the world around or (perhaps especially) our Christian brothers and sisters. All of that 'approval' (and especially the seeking of it) is performance-related – how well we have done – and is the direct opposite of grace: 'grace means that God does something for me.'

The great good news is that we have been set free from all that because our heavenly Father has joined our lives with the life of his Son, and joined us into his death as well: "*Therefore, my brethren, you also were made to die to the Law through the body of Christ, so that you might be joined to another, to Him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God*" (**Romans 7:4**). What is the purpose of his making us dead to law? So that, being joined to Jesus, we may have the freedom of a real resurrection life **now**, with the result that we 'bear fruit for God'. Yes, our lives **will** become filled with good results, but now for a completely different reason: not trying to please God, but as a result of the life of the Holy Spirit flowing in us and through us.

Take hold of this death to law! It is already ours because we are joined to Jesus!

Miserable ?

Not quite the same as 'wretched', but not very far away, yet with a rather different meaning. 'Pitiable' is probably closer to the meaning of the original Greek word. Again, this word only turns up in one other place in the New Testament: *"If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied" (1 Corinthians 15:19)*. One aspect of this is that others may see us and feel sorry for us, holding (as they see it) strange beliefs that stop us living life to the full (or so they think), in comparison with everyone else. When we feel like this about somebody else, our feelings may be expressed as 'how sad that they are in such a terrible situation'.

Don't forget, the believers in Laodicea didn't think of **themselves** as being miserable; this was the assessment of the glorified Lord Jesus as he looked at the way they lived and functioned. He saw their deep needs and said they were to be pitied. Their version was *"I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing"*. That really made it even worse! They were even more pitiable because they were unaware what sort of state they were in. Like them, we may not think of ourselves as being miserable or needing any pity, but how does our Lord see us?

If we feel pity for someone, they are often in a situation where we can see their plight but feel unable to do anything about it. With modern communications, we are frequently brought face to face with people in pitiable conditions who are so remote from our daily existence that the very most practical help that we can give is to contribute to a charity which aims to support them in their need. Little or no direct contact.

Living in India in the late 1960's and early 1970's, I was faced almost every day with people who were apparently in pitiable conditions: beggars on every street in every town and city. Seemingly unending need that I was in no position to do anything about; I had no personal resources to offer. With so much need around me and with no way to meet it, I could have been overwhelmed. The opposite and equally dangerous alternative was to become hardened to it because it was just a fact of life there. Some people I knew tried to give tiny amounts of money to **every** beggar they met, nowhere near enough to even buy a cheap roadside snack, but perhaps enough to make my friends feel less bad about the situation. They felt pity for the beggars and maybe felt a little guilty for having sufficient for their own needs. Giving even a tiny amount helped them to salve their consciences, but it certainly didn't meet the beggars' needs!

Sometimes, people would offer beggars food instead of money. If they were really in need, this was certainly most welcome but, strangely, sometimes offers of food were rejected. It turned out that some of these apparently destitute people were actually getting very rich by pretending to be needy. We even heard stories of parents who would deliberately maim their own children in order to appeal to the sympathy of passers-by and make them more effective as begging 'breadwinners'.

Thinking about people in need may help us to understand pity – from both sides, but especially from the view of the observer. It may also help us to appreciate a little more clearly what the Lord Jesus meant when he said that the believers in Laodicea were 'miserable', i.e. pitiable. They had needs which could seem insurmountable and, tragically, in this case they were not even aware of them! So he told them!

Paul's example, back in **1 Corinthians 15**, was that we would be most to be pitied if we had only hoped in Jesus for this life and not into 'life beyond life' – resurrection and the coming kingdom of God on this earth. It seems likely that the church in Laodicea may have fallen for the same short-sighted view, being content with enough to get by with on a day-to-day basis, even looking like a really effective body of believers, but lacking an eternal perspective. They thought they had everything, but Jesus knew that their apparent 'success' was only skin-deep. They were neither hot enough to provide healing, nor cold enough to provide refreshment.¹

Pitiable indeed! But we need to read on to find the remedy . . .

¹ Note from the NET Bible: "Laodicea was near two other towns, each of which had a unique water source. To the north was Hierapolis which had a natural hot spring, often used for medicinal purposes. To the east was Colossae which had cold, pure waters. In contrast to these towns, Laodicea had no permanent supply of good water. Efforts to pipe water to the city from nearby springs were successful, but it would arrive lukewarm. The metaphor in the text is not meant to relate spiritual fervour to temperature. This would mean that Laodicea would be commended for being spiritually cold, but it is unlikely that Jesus would commend this. Instead, the metaphor condemns Laodicea for not providing spiritual healing (being hot) or spiritual refreshment (being cold) to those around them."

Poor ?

We all know what being poor means. Sometimes we may feel that we are poor ourselves, when we don't quite have enough resources to meet our needs, but poverty in that sense is often relative, not absolute. What do I mean? Simply that we measure poverty by comparisons. In the simplest terms 'anyone who is better off than I am is rich; anyone who has less than me is poor'. Of course, that is a massive over-simplification, but it describes a very common understanding.

Poverty in the Bible is very different. The word 'poor' is a really common word in the New Testament. It means *'destitute of wealth and reduced to cringing like a beggar'*. Everybody knew then what poverty looked like, and the fear of it was very real, as it still is in many countries today. As Jesus himself said, 'the poor are always with you.' In Western society, we may now be more insulated from abject poverty, even feeling remote from what we see almost every day on the broadcast news. Perhaps it is most clearly summed up in the simple word **need**. Someone who is poor needs everything, they don't have enough of anything for them to survive properly. This is how Jesus described the church in Laodicea. How about us? Always needing a spiritual 'handout'? Never really having even proper survival rations?

Once again, it is useful to remind ourselves about the believers to whom this was written – and what they thought about their own position. They certainly didn't think that they were in abject spiritual poverty, quite the opposite: *"I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing"*!

Their 'wealth' was false. It was based on their own assessment of their situation. We don't know specifically what they thought were their 'riches', but here are some possibilities which can too easily deceive us into thinking ourselves to be spiritually wealthy, whether individually or corporately:–

- 1) Corporate Success. We might measure our success in different ways which could each be a heading in itself, such as financial stability, growth in numbers, standing in the community, activities, interesting speakers or enjoyable meetings. None of those things are wrong; they are all desirable. But they share one common factor: they are human measures of achievement and approval.
- 2) Personal Success. Not thinking about personal financial security or social standing, but how am I doing as a person? Am I 'doing OK'? Do I seem to have my life and relationships reasonably under control? Do other people respect me? I am reminded of what Jim Elliot wrote at college in 1947:– ". . . I seek the degree of A.U.G., 'approved unto God' ".¹
- 3) Bible knowledge. Another deeply desirable trait, but not an end in itself. Over the years, we develop memories of what the Bible says (and sometimes of where it says it!), but there are those who seem to have almost the whole Bible memorised and can give you chapter and verse for almost anything. I am not one of them. I want to know the truth in experience rather than being able to pin a reference to every quotation. And then, if a passage sums up clearly what I have begun to see and experience, of course I shall quote it – and hope to be able to share about it. Sharing the Gospel is "one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread." No status involved.
- 4) An impressive testimony. Can we recount how God has been at work in our lives in various different ways over a number of years and in sometimes difficult circumstances? Things we have done, successful projects which we have been part of, people we may have influenced, places where we have been. Is there just a hint of enjoying some reflected glory?

Maybe the list could go on, and the Laodicean believers could probably claim most of these and a few more besides, but Jesus still told them that they were poor, destitute of wealth and as needy as beggars.

What is he saying to us?

¹ Nine years later, at the age of 28, Jim and his four companions were killed by the Huaorani ('Auca') people of Ecuador as they went to take them the gospel of Jesus Christ. Many of the tribes people have since come to real faith. See *Through Gates of Splendour* and *Shadow of the Almighty*, both by Jim's widow, Elisabeth Elliot.

Blind ?

Sight is vital, and the majority of us – who can see – have little concept of what it must be like to have no sight at all. We may try to imagine it but we are left with only the most basic idea of what permanent blindness must be like.

Just as sight is essential for normal physical life, so the ability to ‘see’ spiritually is essential for spiritual life. At our most fundamental Christian experience, we began to ‘see’ what God had done for us in Christ and so were able to put our trust in it – in him! And as we have gone on and found more, how often have we come to truth that we have known in theory for a long while, and then it has come into sharp focus and reality for us, and we exclaim: ‘Now I see!’ The difference between theoretical knowledge and revelation is the difference between death and life.

Paul writes to the Ephesian believers that he is praying for them, *“that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, the eyes of your heart having been enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of his calling, what are the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints”* (**Ephesians 1:17-18** ^{**}). What we all need, more and more!

The need for spiritual ‘sight’ – linked to spiritual progress – is repeated in verses such as **2 Corinthians 3:18** and **1 John 3:2**. That Watchman Nee quote again: ‘The only possibility of spiritual progress lies in our discovering the truth as God sees it; the truth concerning Christ, the truth concerning ourselves in Christ, and the truth concerning the Church, the Body of Christ.’¹ Our ‘discovery’ like this enables us to see truth as God sees it.

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After he had healed a man who was blind from birth (**John 9**), Jesus had this to say to some of the Pharisees who were hanging around him: *“If you were blind, you would have no sin; but since you say, ‘We see’, your sin remains.”* The clear implication is that they were responsible for their own blindness and that, if they had been ready to confess it, even those Pharisees would have been able to start ‘seeing’.

It was apparently the writer John Heywood (1546) who first said “there are none so blind as those who will not see”. He echoes the prophet in **Jeremiah 5:21**: *“Now hear this, O foolish and senseless people, who have eyes but do not see; who have ears but do not hear.”*²

Part of the remedy Jesus offered to the Laodiceans was eye salve so that they could recover their sight. To accept that, they would have needed to acknowledge their blindness – and therefore their need. But so far, like those Pharisees in **John 9**, they thought that they were OK and could see perfectly. Hopefully, they took the Lord’s advice and recovered their vision. Yes, they had had vision once, but had lost it. Lost spiritual vision can be restored.

It would of course be ridiculous to be physically blind but to think that you could see, and therefore to suppose that you could guide other people who were blind. If we were to meet someone who thought like that, we would certainly be sympathetic to their disability but at the same time we would attempt to do two things most urgently: First to correct their delusion and second – most importantly – to protect other blind people from being deceived by them. Bear in mind that a blind person has no easy way of knowing or checking whether their supposed ‘guide’ is able to see!

The Lord Jesus made exactly this comparison to describe the Pharisees: *“Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if a blind man guides a blind man, both will fall into a pit.”* (**Matthew 15:14**)

Perhaps it is no surprise to find similarities between the Laodiceans and the Pharisees? Both groups thought they were doing fine. The Pharisees knew the Jewish Law inside out and back to front and prided themselves on precisely following every little detail (plus a few more laws that they had invented for themselves!). They were the fundamentalists of their day, staunchly upholding the Old Testament scriptures as being the inspired word of God. Like the Laodiceans, they thought they had ‘need of nothing’. Paul had thought the same of his own earlier lifestyle as a zealous Pharisee, as he describes in **Acts**

¹ *What Shall This Man Do?* by Watchman Nee, 1961. Chapter 10: *John – and the Truth*.

² Some other Bible references on this subject of wilful blindness, e.g.:– **Deuteronomy 29:4, Isaiah 6:9-10, 29:10-14, Isaiah 43:8, Matthew 13:14, Mark 8:18, John 12:40, Acts 28:26, Romans 11:8**.

22:3, 24:16 and **26:4-5**. But, as we have already seen, trying to please God by following laws just does not work.

As we look at this situation, it is all too easy for us to be spectators and to be quietly condemning the believers in Laodicea along with the Pharisees: 'We're not like that at all; we're not blind.' We need to be careful! That's exactly what the Pharisees said and what the Laodiceans thought. These things are written for us to take to heart for ourselves. The remedy offered to them is offered to us as well.

Naked ?

We probably all remember the children's story of 'The Emperor's New Clothes', where a vain emperor was told that the new clothes which two tricksters had made for him were invisible to simpletons and only visible to intelligent people. In reality, of course, those wonderful clothes did not exist and the emperor went in public procession completely naked, but no-one dared say so – except a small child, to whom the emperor's nudity was obvious! It has been said that this was a case of "no one believes, but everyone believes that everyone else believes." Think about that. It seems that the church in Laodicea had the same problem. They had somehow fooled each other that they were spiritually 'clothed' when they were actually shamefully naked! Only by facing the truth could the problem be put right, but yet again the Lord Jesus made that offer of restoration.

Throughout the Bible from **Genesis 3:7** onwards, public nakedness is always associated with shame. When one of King David's enemies wanted to humiliate David's servants, he shaved off half their beards and cut off the bottom halves of their clothes and sent them away from him shamefully exposed (**2 Samuel 10:1-5** says that they were 'greatly humiliated').

Modern sexualised culture tries to pretend that there is nothing shameful about nakedness, as if the Fall of Man never happened and we are all living blameless lives with nothing to be ashamed about. But we all know deep down that we don't want to be seen naked in public. It seems to be instinctive and we avoid such exposure at all costs.

So, when Jesus tells these believers that they are naked, he is declaring their shameful exposure, their lack of proper 'clothing'. Is he talking about actual physical nakedness? No, of course not. But what does he actually mean?

Before we get into the detail, it's worth noting that he holds them responsible for their own nakedness, just as he does for their wretchedness, pitiable state, poverty and blindness. But, as before, he offers them (and us) the remedy.

There are two distinct time frames here, the eternal and the present day. This message from the Lord Jesus is primarily about the present day, but looking at the eternal first may give us a better insight . . .

In **2 Corinthians 5:1-10**, Paul writes about 'our earthly tent' which will be torn down and our 'house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens'. He is referring to our present physical bodies and our future resurrection bodies, and says that while we are here, "*we groan, longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven, inasmuch as we, having **put it on**, will not be found naked. For indeed while we are in this tent, we groan, being burdened, because we do not want to be unclothed but to be clothed, so that what is mortal will be swallowed up by life.*" He is looking forward, not so much to losing his mortal body but to finding it clothed ('swallowed up' is even stronger) in the life of his eternal resurrection body. The same Paul, yet enveloped in a completely new dimension of life.

He says much the same in **1 Corinthians 15:51-54**: "*Behold, I tell you a mystery; we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable must **put on** the imperishable, and this mortal must **put on** immortality. But when this perishable will have **put on** the imperishable, and this mortal will have **put on** immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, 'death is swallowed up in victory'.*"

In both these passages, Paul uses the word *enduoō*, which simply means to put on clothing. A simple and exciting image of what will happen to our bodies if we are alive when the Lord Jesus returns. They will be 'swallowed up in victory', clothed in immortality, the same and yet not the same!

He uses the same word in his letter to the believers in Colossae, but here he is not writing about end-time promises but about present-day reality and experience:– "*Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old person with his practices, and have **put on** the new one who is being renewed into a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him – in which there is no Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman, but Christ is all, and in all. So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, **put on** a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone;*

*just as the Lord forgave you, so also (should) you. Beyond all these things (put on) love, which is the perfect bond of unity.” (Colossians 3:9-14**)*

The picture is graphic: he says that they had already ‘laid aside’ their old selves, and this time he is using a word that speaks of the **removing** of a layer of clothing. But this is removing old clothing in order to put on new – the newness of new life in Jesus. New and constantly being renewed, an ongoing process.¹

He is referring back to the beginning of their experience, which he already wrote about in the previous chapter:– “*See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, and not according to Christ. For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority; and in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the **removal** of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ; having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having cancelled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. When He had **divested Himself of the rulers and authorities**, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him (or ‘through it’, i.e. through the cross).” (Colossians 2:8-15**)*

In these verses, the same word for removing a layer of clothing is translated in two different ways: First, the ‘removal of the body of flesh’ – speaking again of taking off the old person, as symbolised in the ‘burial’ of the old person and the ‘resurrection’ of the new in immersive baptism. Then secondly, it is used of Jesus shedding the ‘rulers and authorities’ by his triumph on the cross. Another powerful image!

Paul had gone out of his way to write this very ‘concentrated’ letter to the church in Colossae, a place that he never visited. He wanted to make sure that these vital truths became part of their experience. Anyone reading this letter would have all the information they needed to take hold of their present-day inheritance in Christ, and perhaps especially the fact that they could each of them ‘put on’ Christ and truly lead their lives ‘clothed’ **in** him.

But this was a letter written to Colossae! Did the church in Laodicea have this vital information? Yes, we can be pretty sure that they did, because Paul asked the Colossian believers to pass their letter on to Laodicea (just a few miles down the road) and to read the letter which he had sent there as well (**Colossians 4:16**). So the Laodiceans had been shown all that they needed to make sure that they would not be found naked. Their spiritual nakedness was their own responsibility, a result of their lack of response in ‘the obedience of faith’.

¹ Paralleled in two other verses: **2 Corinthians 3:18** and **1 John 3:2**.

Restoration !

The situation in Laodicea looked pretty dire. Perhaps, when we have read this letter before, we may have tended to write this church off as a total failure on so many different fronts. But here is grace extended to them in the depths of their failure, the promise of glory and shared authority with the Lord Jesus Christ in his coming kingdom. Not simply recovery from their abysmal condition but exaltation to sharing Jesus' own throne! What an offer! Could they possibly not take hold of it? What about us?

They are tepid and self-satisfied and it seems that the Lord Jesus is outside their lives, not included. So he makes his appeal to them to listen to his advice . . .

'Buy from me . . .'

Gold. What can they give to buy 'gold' from Jesus? All the other things which they have regarded as valuable now fade into insignificance and can be laid aside in order to gain the true treasure, riches in God's sight. Real faith which stands up to testing, as Peter writes: *" . . . you have been distressed by various trials, so that the proof of your faith, more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honour at the revelation of Jesus Christ . . ."* (**1 Peter 1:6-7**). Like the man in Jesus' parable who found what his true priority was: *"The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in the field, which a man found and hid again; and from joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field."* (**Matthew 13:44**). Real riches, not their invented ones!

White clothing. 'Clothed' in Christ, and so clothed in purity, washed from sin and failure and so blameless before God, like those described in **Revelation 7:14**, who have *"washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb"*. How can they buy these from Jesus? Again, everything else has to go, especially any idea that they were pure and acceptable in themselves ('We have need of nothing'). When that is all put aside for the overwhelming treasure of being clothed in Christ, they – and we – can say with Paul: *"But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss through the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, **not having a righteousness of my own derived from law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.**"* (**Philippians 3:8-10****). Nakedness covered.

Eye salve. Giving up any idea that we can see things for ourselves and 'buying in' to God's way of bringing light into our lives, the revelation of the Holy Spirit. *"It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life."* (**John 6:63**). *"But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of Mine and will disclose it to you. All things that the Father has are Mine; therefore I said that He takes of Mine and will disclose it to you."* (**John 16:13-15**). *"Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God"* (**1 Corinthians 2:12**). Is this what we want but do not have? *" . . . eye salve to anoint your eyes **so that you may see.**"*

Those whom I love . . . The list of all of their faults may look like condemnation, but it is the opposite. Jesus deals with us in love, showing us what is wrong in order to train us, to bring us to zealous repentance, a really full-hearted change of mind about our situation. Don't let us miss this crucial turning point! The radical re-think of repentance is where it all begins to be transformed.
. . . and then come the promises . . .!

The invitation is personal. The well-known verse about Jesus standing at the door and knocking, though often used as a first invitation to faith in Christ, is actually addressed to the whole church, but **the invited response is personal**. In order for Jesus to have his way in this church, he needs response from individuals and makes promises to individuals. *"If **anyone** hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to **him** and will dine with **him**, and **he** with me."* For this church to be restored, it needs individual men and women to hear what Jesus is saying and then respond by inviting him in for ongoing personal sustenance, growth and relationship. Out of that will come the gold, white clothes and eye salve for the benefit of the whole church.

And for those who overcome, the promise to share in Jesus' reign, actually sitting with him on his throne!
What a turnaround for a church that has been so self-deceived and self-satisfied!

"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

Dave Taylor May 2026

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