

Letters to the 7 Churches

– Revelation 3

The letters to the churches continue . . .

Sardis (*Revelation 3:1-6*)

In sending this letter to the church at Sardis, the glorified Lord Jesus identifies himself as the one *“who has the seven spirits of God, and the seven stars”*. In **chapter 1**, we looked a little at the seven spirits of God, and found continuing links with Jesus as the Lamb in other parts of **Revelation**. The seven stars are the angels / messengers of the seven churches. As with all the others, this letter is addressed personally to the messenger of the church in question, Sardis.

We don't notice it in the English language but, in all these letters, the 'you' to whom each one is addressed is singular, not plural. The angel / messenger has a personal responsibility before the Lord, although obviously it is the conduct and condition of the whole church which is relevant.

Not a good opening message! A dire warning. The Lord knows this group of believers: both what they do, and their reputation, give every impression of them being alive. **But** the Lord says that they are actually dead! (**v.1**) . . .

. . . well, perhaps not quite completely dead! Certainly asleep and on the point of death, but with some qualities (*“the things that remain”*) that are just about rescuable. *“I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of my God”* sounds like they have started out OK but have not made any progress, or **very** little! The word translated 'completed' means 'filled up' (**v.2**)

“So remember how (not 'what') you have received and heard, and keep(it) and repent.” Several translations put 'what' in place of 'how' here, but it is not so much a question of remembering the information which we were given, as of receiving truth again, or going on receiving it, **in the same way** in which we first received it. In other words, not just storing it as correct information or sound doctrine, but receiving it as revelation from the Holy Spirit, revelation that reaches deep into our lives and brings about transformation.

Jesus often used the same word 'keep'. Here are just a few examples: *“If you **keep** my commandments, you will abide in my love; just as I have **kept** my Father's commandments and abide in his love” (John 15:10).* *“I have manifested your name to the men whom you gave me out of the world; they were yours and you gave them to me, and they have **kept** your word” (John 17:6).* *“I am no longer in the world; and yet they themselves are in the world, and I come to you. Holy Father, **keep** them in your name, the name which you have given me, that they may be one even as we are” (John 17:11).* The word's basic meaning is 'to keep watch'. It looks like those at Sardis had allowed their attention to slip.

'Repent'. A familiar word in Christian circles! It simply means to have a change of mind, a radical re-think! It's not the same as saying sorry, it means to embrace a whole new way of thinking. Obviously necessary here; they thought they were doing OK and they had a good reputation – but the Lord had to tell them that they were at least half dead!

'Time to wake up' says the Lord, 'and if you don't, I will come when you least expect me!' Again, like the warning to the church at Pergamos, this is not the Lord Jesus coming in glory but coming directly to the church there in Sardis, in judgment! (See **Revelation 2:16**) (**v.3**)

There is no list of wrong actions here in Sardis; there is no terrible and obvious crime that any of them have committed but, nonetheless, judgment is imminent unless they change

their ways. There are just a few there in Sardis (named individuals) who have not 'soiled their garments' and only they will walk around with the Lord Jesus in white clothing (**v.4**).

The promise to the one who overcomes is the same, plus quite a bit more; he/she will also be clothed in white ¹, his/her name will not be erased from the book of life and the Lord Jesus will acknowledge him/her **by name** in the presence of the Father and his angels / messengers. Wow! (**v.5**)

Do we have 'ears to hear'? Can we hear what the Holy Spirit is saying to the churches? (**v.6**)

Philadelphia (*Revelation 3:7-13*)

'Philadelphia' means 'brotherly love/friendship' and there is a story attached.²

In this letter, the Lord Jesus reveals names which we have not already seen in **chapter 1**. He is holy and true; he has the key of David; he opens and no-one can shut, and he shuts and no-one can open. 'Holy' we understand. 'True' may need some expansion. The word 'truth' in the New Testament is not some dry and theoretical thing. Better to translate it as 'reality'! ³ Jesus is 'The One Who Is'.

'The key of David' – ? The phrase 'the key of the house of David' turns up in **Isaiah 22:22**, in a passage that has no obvious connection to the promised Messiah, but it also includes "*When he opens no one will shut, when he shuts no one will open*"! This seems to link to Jesus' words to Peter in **Matthew 16:19**, repeated to the disciples (and all of us) in **Matthew 18:18** (and perhaps linked to **John 20:23**). This is particularly relevant to the church there in Philadelphia, as the next verses will show us (**v.7**) . . .

As he says to all these seven churches, the Lord says to Philadelphia "*I know . . .*". In their case, he says 'your deeds', and they are good: They have some power, they have kept his word (same word for 'keep' as in Sardis's letter before) and have not denied his Name (compare with the letter to Ephesus in **ch.2:3**). So, he says he **has already** put before them an open door. Not will do, or might do, but has already done! Maybe this was similar to the 'open door' that Paul experienced and wrote about. ⁴ (**v.8**)

Who are 'those of the synagogue of Satan' ? We saw another situation like this in Smyrna (**Revelation 2:9**). They claim to be Jews, probably meaning that they claim to be believers in Jesus, but possibly just simply claiming to be Jews. Either way, they are not what they profess to be, they deny truth and reality. They will come and acknowledge the genuineness of the Lord's love for his genuine followers (**v.9**).

A time of testing and/or temptation is coming to the whole inhabited world, to every one who makes their home on the earth. No need for these faithful followers to be concerned about that – the Lord promises to keep them away from it, **because** they have 'kept the word of my perseverance'. In other words, they have 'hung on in there', just as the churches in Ephesus (**Revelation 2:2-3**) and Thyatira (**2:19**) have done (**v.10**).

He is coming quickly, so he tells them to hold on tight (literally, 'use strength') to what they have, to make sure that no-one can take their crown. Philadelphia and Smyrna are the only two of the seven churches with whom the Lord has no outstanding issues; he has nothing

¹ More references to being clothed in white in **Revelation:– 3:18, 4:4, 6:11, 7:9,13-17, 19:8,14**

² The city of Alayehir was renamed Philadelphia in about 160 BC, to reflect the love between the king Eumenes and his brother Attalus. William Penn, a Quaker, used the same name for the city he founded in Pennsylvania, America in 1682. He envisioned a city where all people regardless of religion could worship freely and live together, hence the name.

³ For more details, see 'Truth' in the 'All Greek to Me' series at www.justonecandle.uk

⁴ **Acts 14:27, 1 Corinthians 16:9, 2 Corinthians 2:12, Colossians 4:3**

against either of them. They are the only two who are promised a crown (Smyrna in **2:10**) (**v.11**).

The promises to the one who overcomes: 1) He/she will be a pillar (i.e. a support) in the 'temple of my God' and he/she will never leave it. Paul tells us in **Ephesians 2:19-22** that the whole church is being built into a temple in the Lord. Overcomers have a permanent position of support within the church. 2) He/she will have three names written on them – he/she will be permanently identified with these identities: a) God himself, b) the new Jerusalem, God's new dwelling place with mankind ¹ and c) the Lord's own new name – what will that be? (**v.12**)

What an awesome inheritance! Are we listening? (**v.13**)

Laodicea (Revelation 3:14-22)

Laodicea does get a brief mention from Paul, as he writes to the folks in Colossae (**Colossians 4:15-16**). It seems that he had some involvement with them, but the letter he mentions is missing. I wonder what he said. Could it be that he also identified problems there, and so the (probably critical) letter was conveniently 'lost'? Apparently, it is said that the church in Laodicea resisted the inclusion of the book of **Revelation** in the Bible for some time, presumably because of this letter which cast them in a very unfavourable light!

Jesus identifies himself as *"The Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God"*. 'Beginning' means the origin or source; it doesn't mean that Jesus was the first thing that God created! **Colossians 1:13-20** is very clear on this (**v.14**).

Yes, he knows their deeds. They are neither cold nor hot. Just like the water which flowed from the hot springs at Hieropolis and was lukewarm by the time it reached Laodicea, five miles away. Hot water was useful; so was cold water. But tepid water was neither useful nor palatable, and the Lord Jesus says he will vomit them out of his mouth like that insipid water! (**v.15-16**)

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."

They have been blinded by their own opinion of themselves. "We are rich, we are doing fine; we have everything we need!" In fact, from the Lord's viewpoint, they are *"wretched, miserable, poor, blind and naked"*. Their spiritual 'eyesight' needs to be restored (**v.17**).

Amazingly, though, he has not given up on them. They can still be restored, but it will cost them; he says 'buy from me':—

1) Gold refined by fire reminds us of what Peter writes in **1 Peter 1:7** : *"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 honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ"*.

2) White clothing. The only way to get this is revealed in **Revelation 7:14**. They need to come to the Lord for forgiveness and cleansing. Then their shame will be removed from sight.

3) Eye salve! Their blindness does not need to be permanent – there is a cure available, even for them! (**v.18**)

"Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; therefore be zealous and repent." He still loves them! This is the only one of the seven letters which says this. The Greek word for 'discipline' is the word for training a child, and this loving rebuke and training is geared towards putting

¹ **Galatians 4:26, Hebrews 13:14, Revelation 21:2,10**

them back on the right track. The reassurance of his love should spur them on to new zeal and that vital radical re-think of repentance (**v.19**).

Verse 20 has so often been used as a 'gospel' verse, but it is directed to a church who had shut Jesus out! He promises renewed and close fellowship with anyone who will respond. There is some evidence that the church in Laodicea went on to flourish. So maybe they **did** respond . . . (**v.20**)

We can too easily see this letter as being negative and full of condemnation, but in reality it is a declaration of the Lord's continuing love and intense desire to see his people restored to full and real fellowship with him.

And still there is the potential to overcome! What a promise, to share in the rule of the Lord Jesus! Compare with the promise to the overcomers in Thyatira (**2:26-28**). Promised to all 'the saints' in **Daniel 7:18, 22 & 27**, plus in **Revelation 5:10** (**v.21**).

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These seven letters each contain a promise to 'him who overcomes'. Please take the time to look again at each of these for yourself. These are not empty promises, nor reserved for 'special people' (whoever they might be!!). They are for each one of us, just as they were for each individual member of those early churches.

How can we be among those who 'overcome'? See **Revelation 12:11** ! *"Then I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, 'Now the salvation, and the power, and the kingdom of our God and the authority of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down, he who accuses them before our God day and night. And they overcame him through the blood of the Lamb and through the word of their testimony, and they did not love their life even up to the point of death.' "*

Three vital ingredients here:

- 1) The blood of the Lamb. There is no other effective answer to the accusations of 'the accuser'. His assertions of our sin and failure cannot be contradicted, but we know that, because Jesus died in our place, 'the charges have been dropped'. **1 John 1:5-10**.
- 2) Our testimony. The word for giving evidence in court. In other words, 'this is what happened in my experience – and still happens.' Personal and up to date confirmation of truth. See **John 5:31-47**, where Jesus speaks about the testimony that he relies on. In his case, 'backup' from the Father himself!
- 3) Not loving our lives, even to the point of death. We have talked about this before, and the Lord was **very** clear about it in **Luke 9:23-26**. He said this to all his disciples, not just to a few supposedly 'special' ones!

Any follower of Jesus can be an overcomer.

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

Dave Taylor October 2024

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