

The Church Age

Revelation 3: “Three Church Letters”



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Let's Get Started

Chapter 3 continues with the seven letters to the seven churches in Asia Minor. We will now study the last three letters. Keep in mind the fact that these last letters are personal messages from Jesus to each one of us, and that they represent a prophetic view of Church history beginning around 1517 a.d. and running to the Tribulation Period mid-point. There are some great messages here for all who will heed what the Holy Spirit has to say.

A Pretend Church

Revelation 3:1 "To the angel of the church in Sardis write: 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.

As we have seen, the seven spirits (Revelation 1:4) of God refers to the sevenfold nature of the Holy Spirit. The seven stars (Revelation 1:20) are the seven angels of the seven churches. Jesus is the one who possesses and gives the fullness of the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:15; 4:1; John 20:21, 22), but his authority is greater than that. He also controls these

angels. This is an awesome amount of power. It means the destiny of the Church is in his hands.

Jesus knew the works of these churches. Sardis is not like Thyatira. In Thyatira the last works were greater than the first, but in Sardis their works were decreasing. Jesus said Sardis had a reputation of being alive, but it was actually dead. It had become a church in name only, a pretend church, one that was just going through the motions.

What Others are Saying:

David Breese: What do the seven churches represent? The seven ages of Church history that bring us down to this very hour. ^{3:1}

Related Current Events

Church historians agree that the Sardis church period began when Martin Luther nailed his **Ninety-Five Theses** to the church door in Wittenburg, Germany. This began what is commonly called the **Reformation**. The changes, however, did not dislodge the old leadership. In a short time, the Reformation stalled, complacency set in, and the Church started living off its reputation.

Time For A Spiritual Overhaul

Revelation 3:2 Wake Up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God.

Jesus told the church in Sardis to, "Wake up, and stay awake." He told them that there were certain aspects of their faith and practice that were still alive, but they needed to be more serious about their worship, study, and ministry. He was calling on them to overhaul their relationship with God. The steps that they had already taken were good, but they had not yet reached God's standards. It is not enough for a church to hold right doctrines or go through a ritual or form of worship. For a church to have a valid relationship with God, it must back up its doctrines and words with devotion and works. When the apostle John received Revelation, it was not for his own personal knowledge. He was told to write it down for others. When a church receives a great revelation from God, it needs to put that revelation into practice. If it doesn't, it will die out. This is where the Sardis church failed.

Key Symbols:

Sardis

spiritually dead
the church should know

that Jesus possesses and gives the fullness of the Spirit
that Jesus controls the guardian angels of the church

What Others are Saying:

Ed Hindson: When we look at the trends of our times and the Biblical prophecies of the end of times, we see more and more that we may be running out of time to reach our generation for Christ. We cannot wait for somebody else to do the job. We must act now to reach the people around us. We can do it... we must do it... while there is still time. ^{3:2}

Related Current Events

Today the average age of members of the Presbyterian church is 62. Commentator Clark Morpew says this church will be **dead in 50 years** and perhaps much sooner. The Episcopal church has lost one-third of its membership since 1965. The United Methodists are losing 1,500 members a week. ^{3:3}

Surprise!

Revelation 3:3 Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent. 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.

Jesus wanted his followers to recall their better days; to reflect on what they had received and heard. They had received forgiveness of their sins, salvation, eternal life, and future rewards in heaven. They had heard the preaching of the true Word of God with its clear and correct teachings. Jesus wanted his followers to recognize that they had backslid and needed to return to his teachings.

History shows that on two separate occasions, when enemy armies had surrounded Sardis, her careless guards fell asleep. Each time the opposing army slipped in and captured the embarrassed city. Jesus seems to be using this example to teach this church a great truth. If we do not return to worshipping, believing, and living the way we once did, we will not recognize the prophetic signs of his coming. The Rapture will catch them asleep (1 Thessalonians 5:1-9), causing them to miss it. This is an important point.

Warning!

Those who have a good knowledge of Bible prophecy will not be caught by surprise when the Rapture occurs, but those who do not understand Bible prophecy will be surprised.

What Others are Saying:

John Scott: We can have a fine choir, an expensive organ, good music, great anthems, and fine congregational singing. We can mouth hymns and psalms with unimpeachable elegance, while our minds wander and our hearts are far from God. We can have pomp and ceremony, color and ritual, liturgical exactness and ecclesiastic splendor, and yet be offering a worship which is not perfect or "fulfilled" in the sight of God. ^{3:4}

Two Different Books of Life

Revelation 3:4, 5 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. He who overcomes 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.

Jesus knew all his people in this church by name. Not many people in Sardis were faithful, but he could identify the ones who were. He said they were the ones who had refused to defile their garments, the ones who refused to be dirtied or influenced by the sins of those around them. He promised that they would walk with him in robes of white. Why? Because they had sincerely accepted Jesus as their Savior and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, lived holy lives.

Jesus promised never to blot out their names from the Book of Life. Many people confuse the *Book of Life* with the *Lamb's Book of Life*, but they are completely different. The **Book of Life** (Revelation 20:12-15) is a list of all who are born once; every person who ever lived. The **Lamb's Book of Life** (Revelation 21:27) is a list of all who are born twice; in other words, all who truly accept Jesus. It is possible to have one's **name blotted out** (Exodus 32:33) of the Book of Life for sinning against God, for denying Jesus, and for taking away from the words in Revelation. But many believe it is impossible for a saved person's name to be blotted out of the Lamb's Book of Life.

Jesus also promised to acknowledge the names of the saved before God and his holy angels. Wouldn't it be great to hear your name called out in heaven? Jesus said, *Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess before my Father which is in heaven. But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father which is in heaven* (Matthew 10:32, 33).

Key Symbols:

Book of Life
all who are born once
Lamb's Book of Life
only those born twice
believers

Remember This...

Jesus Promised:

- ✓ they would walk with him in robes of white
- ✓ he would never blot out their names from the Book of Life
- ✓ he would acknowledge the names of the saved before God and his holy angels

Hear With Your Ears

Revelation 3:6 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

It is no accident that Jesus keeps talking about hearing (Revelation 3:3; 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6). We cannot begin to understand how important this is. It is the Bible that teaches us to remember, repent, and be righteous. To live our lives with *glorification* (Romans 8:17, 18),

justification (Romans 5:16-18 kjv), and *sanctification* (1 Thessalonians 4:3,4 kjv). We must overcome, hold fast, and live holy lives. The great truths that sparked the Reformation started with people hearing what the Bible had to say. From the Bible they learned about the total depravity of man, justification by faith, and the authority of the Bible. When we hear the Word, we receive life, light, and truth; we learn God's commandments, judgments, and promises; we get to know his heart, mind, and will; and we find comfort, peace, and strength.

He who has an ear, let him hear... Hearing is of the utmost importance. It does us no good to spend years in church without change or without hearing. We should give careful consideration to what Jesus is saying. It would be a great tragedy to think we are saved only to discover that we have made a mistake. We would never eat from the tree of life, receive the crown of life, rule over nations, dwell in the presence of God, or share in Christ's throne. If your church is almost dead, if it seems like rigor mortis has set in, Jesus says, *strengthen the things which remain*.

Remember This...

The Bible's 3R's are:

- ✓ Remember (Revelation 2:5; 3:3; John 15:20; Jude 1:17)
- ✓ Repent (Luke 13:3; Acts 2:38; 26:20)
- ✓ Be Righteous (1 Timothy 6:11, 12)

The One True God

Revelation 3:7 "To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: 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.

Holy and true are attributes of God. He has the nature of deity. When put together, this means *Jesus is the true God*. He is not a false god like today's popular New Age gods such as Ishtar, Mother Earth, Gaia, Diana, and Sophia. He is the only real God.

Who holds the key of David takes us back to the Old Testament. There was a priest named Eliakim who held the office of *Key-holder* in King David's palace. His office gave him full authority to act on behalf of the king. If he unlocked a palace door, it remained unlocked. If he locked a palace door, it remained locked. Just like Eliakim, Jesus is the ultimate key-holder.

Key Point

No matter what door it is, if Jesus opens it, no one can close it. If he closes it, no one can open it.

Remember This...

The Church Needs to Know:

- ✓ Jesus is the holy and true God.

- ✓ Jesus is the Key-Holder.

God Plus One Is A Majority

Revelation 3:8 I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name.

The church in Philadelphia was more like what the Church should be than any of the other churches. It was a working, evangelistic, Bible-believing church.

Jesus is the one who opens and closes doors. We are totally dependent upon him. We cannot evangelize or expect God to send revival without Jesus. Satan cannot stop revival if Jesus is on our side. Jesus told this small church in Philadelphia, *I know that you have little strength*. All they needed was him behind them. God plus one faithful Church member is a majority.

Related Current Events

In the mid 1800's, people began to be converted at the rate of 10,000 a week in New York City. The movement spread throughout New England. Church bells would bring people to prayer at eight in the morning, twelve noon, and six in the evening. The revival went up the Hudson and down the Mohawk. Baptists had so many people to baptize, they couldn't get them into their churches. They went down to the river, cut a big square in the ice, and baptized them in cold water. In one year (1857), more than one million people were converted. The revival crossed the Atlantic, broke out in Northern Ireland and Scotland and Wales and England, South Africa, South India—anywhere there was an evangelical cause, there was revival—and its effect was felt for 40 years. ³⁻⁵

Iron Curtain—When the Soviet Union was founded, it created the Iron Curtain. It closed its doors to missionaries, spied on the church, killed millions of Christians, built nuclear weapons, and raised one of the largest armies in the world. Then it collapsed almost overnight. The Iron Curtain fell and new leaders opened the doors, allowing missionaries and pastors to go in and preach the gospel with multitudes accepting Christ.

Bamboo Curtain—When the Communists took over in China, they created the Bamboo Curtain to keep the non-Communists out. China has 330 million men of military age, and is spending billions to modernize its army. In spite of rapid growth in its economy and living conditions, China is increasingly cracking down on Christians and closing its doors to missionaries.

Key Symbols:

Philadelphia

evangelistic

the church should know

✓ that Jesus is the true God

- ✓ that Jesus has the keys to lock or unlock doors, and
- ✓ that Jesus controls the door to heaven, evangelism, etc.

The Synagogue of Satan

Revelation 3:9 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.

There were those who wanted the church in Philadelphia to deny the name of Jesus. These citizens of Philadelphia refused to believe in Jesus or the gospel. They worshipped at a synagogue and said they were Jews, but Jesus called them imposters. He called their place of worship the synagogue of Satan.

Jesus assured the Philadelphia church that these pretenders would pay for their misdeeds. He said they would be forced to bow down and worship at their feet acknowledging that Jesus is Lord of this church.

Related Current Events

This prophecy was fulfilled in Philadelphia when the Romans tried to wipe out the Jews. However, some also believe it is a prophecy that will be fulfilled during the Tribulation Period. Then, the Antichrist (1 John 2:18) will turn against the Jews. Many will be killed, and a remnant will flee into the wilderness before they realize that Jesus is indeed the Messiah.

More than 8 of every 10 Americans today believe that it's possible to be a good Christian or Jew even without attending a church or synagogue. [مذ](#)

Something to Ponder

People are not always what they claim to be. Jesus told a group of Jews who said God was their Father, *You belong to your father the devil* (John 8:44). Even the Apostle Paul said, *Not all who are descended from Israel are Israel* (Romans 9:6). Many people fail to live up to their spiritual claims. That was true of the Jews in Philadelphia, and it is still true of the Church today. Not everyone who claims to be a child of God (1 John 3:10) truly is.

An Hour of Trial

Revelation 3:10 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 church was following God's commandments in two ways: 1) it was working in the name of Jesus, and 2) it was patiently waiting for his return. Because of this, Jesus promised to keep these believers out of the hour of trial (Revelation 17:12) that would come in the future to test everyone. He will not permit this church or any who follow in their footsteps to go through the Tribulation Period. It will be a time of literal hell on

earth, replete with famine, natural disasters, epidemic sickness, war, and murder.

What Others are Saying:

John Hagee: The Rapture is the literal, physical "snatching away" of those who have placed their faith in Jesus Christ. The Rapture could come at any moment, and it will occur without warning. Every single member of the corporate body of Christ, the genuine believers, will be taken alive to *meet him in the air* (1 Thessalonians 4:17). Those who have suffered physical death will be resurrected with incorruptible, supernatural bodies. ³⁷

Twinkling of An Eye

Revelation 3:11 I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown.

Some think Jesus was telling the Philadelphia church he would come soon. That is not the case. He was telling them that when he comes back, it will happen very fast. *For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man* (Matthew 24:27). Both the Rapture and Second Coming will take place in the twinkling (1 Corinthians 15:52) of an eye.

Hold on to what you have, do not abandon your doctrines and deeds, keep believing the Bible, keep evangelizing, and keep sending out missionaries to tell the world about Jesus. *So that no one will take your crown*, let no one else have your reward (2 John 1:8). God's work will still be accomplished.

What Others are Saying:

Ed Hindson: Rather than possessing an escapist mentality, prophecy students have an earnest desire to be ready at all times to meet the Lord, who could come at any moment to call us home. We want to be watching, ready, and serving. ³⁸

A New Jerusalem

Revelation 3:12, 13 Him who overcomes I will make 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. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Jesus' promises for those who overcome:

- ✓ *I will make you a pillar in the temple of my God*, Jesus will make his followers strong, durable and stable in the house of God.
- ✓ *Never again will he leave it*, Jesus will make his followers secure. They will desire to stay forever, and no one will move them.
- ✓ *I will write on him*, Jesus will write three things upon the foreheads of his followers:
 - the Seal (name) of God (Revelation 9:4) to designate them as a child of God;
 - the name of his eternal home which is New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:9-22:6);

- and a new name of Jesus (Revelation 22:4) signifying their personal relationship to the Lord of lords and King of kings. Those who overcome will belong to God. They will be citizens of the New Jerusalem and will have a special relationship with Jesus.

Once again, the entire Church is asked to pay attention to these things. The faithful will escape the terrible judgments, but the unfaithful will not unless they repent of their sins and fix their relationship with God.

The Great Amen

Revelation 3:14 "To the angel of the church in Laodicea write: These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation.

The Laodicea church period is the last period of the Church Age, and the last letter to the Church before the Rapture. We are living in the Laodicea church period today.

Jesus is the *Amen*, the Truth, the one we can trust. There is no greater person to believe in, no greater one to lean on.

Jesus is the *faithful and true* (John 14:6) witness, the one who faithfully serves God. His deeds and words accurately testify to God.

Jesus is *the ruler of God's creation* (John 1:3; Colossians 1:16, 17), the one who is the source of all things. Some people theorize that the universe began as an explosion that took place billions of years ago. Some think we came into being through evolution. But Jesus says he created all things.

Something to Ponder

If you search the entire Bible, examine every leader of every religion, and scour every period of history, you will find that Jesus is the *only* perfect and truly righteous man who ever lived.

Hot, Cold, or Lukewarm?

Revelation 3:15, 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.

Church members in Laodicea were neither *cold* nor *hot*, but *lukewarm*. Any church or church member can find itself in one of these three states: cold, lukewarm, or hot. Cold signifies formal or without spiritual life, lukewarm means indifferent or straddling the fence, and hot expresses passionate or zealous.

The church in Laodicea had become complacent. Its people were not being persecuted, but were comfortable, prospering, and self-satisfied. They were doing nothing to evangelize, grow, or glorify Jesus.

According to Jesus, this is the worst state of all. It would be easier to judge a cold or dead church and easier to bless a hot or spiritual church. But what do you do with an indifferent church that claims Christ's name? Jesus wished they would be hot or cold, but since they were neither, he would spit them out of his mouth.

Key Symbols:

Laodicea

- ✓ *lukewarm*
- ✓ *the church should know*
 - that Jesus is the truth
 - that the deeds and words of Jesus are reliable
 - that Jesus is the Creator

What Others are Saying:

John Hagee: There is a tomorrow that will usher in events that will completely change this planet and that will radically change your life and future. This is not the time to procrastinate. This is not the time for complacency. This is not the time to be lukewarm. This is the time to realize that one day time will be no more and the choices you have made in life will be irrevocably ratified for all eternity. ³⁻⁹

Related Current Events

The heir apparent to the British throne is Prince Charles. He will ultimately be the head of the Anglican church, the Church of England, and probably the most well-heeled Protestant church in the world. But the Anglican church is becoming increasingly liberal, and Prince Charles is a committed New Ager. Recently, his oldest son Prince William, also heir to the leadership of the Anglican church, made news around the world when he asked his dad what religion he was. ³⁻¹⁰

Warning!

The New Age movement came into being in the United States during the 1960's, but it is now a worldwide phenomenon. It originated as the umbrella for several groups: hippies, feminists, environmentalists, and others. New Agers are involved in many "consciousness raising" techniques such as channeling, transcendental meditation, astrology, and developing psychic powers. Basically, they see man as the sole designer and maker of his future. The movement dominates the United Nations and is greatly influencing public education, many politicians, corporations, and the U.S. military. Its greatest danger lies in its rejection of Jesus as the Savior, its promotion of false religions and doctrines, its corruption of the Church, and its support of "peace at any price." It is a major force behind the one-world religion movement that will help trigger the judgment of God on the world.

All The Money In The World Won't Save Your Soul

Revelation 3:17 You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But

you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked.

This church did not have a realistic view of itself. It saw itself in one light, but Jesus saw it in another. It prided itself in its bank accounts, buildings, and members of high standing. It said we have money and material things, so why do we need anything else. Obviously, they had lost sight of Jesus and what it means to be in **his kingdom** (Matthew 6:33).

It is not enough to build showy sanctuaries, great gymnasiums, and paved parking lots. **Worldly treasure** (Matthew 6:21) is not God's measuring stick. The church in Laodicea thought they were high on the social register, but Jesus said they were wretched. They thought they were happy, but Jesus said they were miserable. They thought they were rich, but Jesus said they were poor.

It is unfortunate, but many churches today are making the same mistake. They do not recognize the **writing on the wall** (Daniel 5). Unfortunately, they will never know the **fullness of Jesus** (Colossians 1:19; 2:9) if they don't wake up. **God did not spare the Jews** (Romans 11:21, 22) when they abandoned him, so he will not spare churches that do the same.

What Others are Saying:

Hal Lindsey: There is this health and wealth gospel that is out today that is a flat out error... that's leading many astray... that says that God is going to make you rich, and if you are not, you are just not believing God. [3-11](#)

God's Furnace

Revelation 3:18 I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see.

Mined gold is placed into a red-hot furnace not to destroy it, but to purify it. The ore is melted, the impurities are drawn out, and the residue is left, pure gold. We are put into God's furnace of testing not to destroy our faith, but to refine it (1 Peter 1:7). Trials humble us, our sins are drawn out (through repentance), and the residue is left, an improved Christian.

If we really want to be rich, we must buy from Jesus, with a spiritual currency, a faith that grows stronger with every test. Without this spiritual currency, we are paupers. We came into this world with nothing (1 Timothy 6:3-10), and apart from a faith in Jesus, we will leave this world with nothing.

This church was naked and had no covering for their sins. He told them they should put on spiritual garments—*white clothes*—the righteousness of Christ. The finest earthly clothes cannot hide the tiniest sin from God's eyes. When we stand before the judgment throne, the only thing that will hide our spiritual nakedness is the righteousness of Jesus.

Jesus said this church is blind and has no spiritual discernment. He desired that they seek him for the salve to cure their spiritual blindness. To Nicodemus (John 3:1-21), he said, *I*

tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again (John 3:3). The Apostle Paul said, The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned (1 Corinthians 2:14).

Open Your Heart

Revelation 3:19–22 Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. 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. 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. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

The Lord will not allow anyone he loves to escape discipline (Hebrews 12:5-8). Even the harshest discipline is a sign of his love. It is done for two reasons: 1) to cause people to be honest about their sins, and 2) to bring them to repentance.

Jesus could have demanded that the church in Laodicea come to his door. He could have required them to knock, beg, cry, and plead for salvation, but instead, he was the one who knocked, begged, and pleaded. He gave them their own free will to accept or reject him. He did not force them to open the door.

Here lies the final promise to the overcomer: Just as Jesus overcame Satan by his life of obedience to God and his ultimate sacrifice on the cross, and just as he now sits in an exalted position on his Father's throne, the overcomer will sit on the throne of Jesus and reign with him. And for a seventh and last time, all are invited to hear what the Holy Spirit has to say to the churches.

Key Point

- The overcomer will sit on the throne of Jesus and reign with him.

What Others are Saying:

David Reagan: Receiving Jesus into your life is not just a way of preparing for his soon return. It will have an impact upon your life here and now. He will give you the gift of his Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5), and the Spirit will begin to empower and strengthen you for victorious living as an "overcomer." [3-12](#)

Something to Ponder

There is a famous painting by the artist Holman Hunt of Jesus standing at the door and knocking. People say when he painted it, he asked friends to come by and critique it. One friend told him he left out something very important, the door handle. Holman Hunt replied, "This door is a picture of the human heart, and the handle is on the inside."

Study Questions

- ✓ What false reputation did the church at Sardis have?
- ✓ Why was the church at Philadelphia so weak?
- ✓ What was the admonition to the church at Laodicea?
- ✓ Which letter probably applies to today's church?
- ✓ How does one avoid being lukewarm?

[Go to Answers](#)

Chapter Wrap-up

- ✓ The last three church letters are to Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. Each letter explains further problems for the Church and offers solutions.
- ✓ Jesus promises to keep the names of overcomers in the Lamb's Book of Life, and he will acknowledge the believers' names before God. ([Revelation 3:4, 5](#))
- ✓ Christ holds the keys to our lives. What doors he opens for us cannot be shut and those he shuts can't be opened. ([Revelation 3:7](#))
- ✓ For a Christian, the worst state to be in is lukewarm—neither on fire for the Lord nor ignorant of him. Indifference leads to Christ's anger. ([Revelation 3:15, 16](#))
- ✓ Jesus comes to us (our door) and knocks to be let in. Those who let him in will be allowed to eat (fellowship) with him. ([Revelations 3:20](#))

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