THE CITY

Forty miles southeast of Philadelphia, three famous cities clustered in the valley of the river Lycus. To the north of the river was the city of Hierapolis; to the south of the river were the cities of Laodicea and Colossae, about ten miles apart. Laodicea was founded about the middle of the third century B.C. by Antiochus II and named for his wife, Laodice.

Laodicea was the location of a very famous health resort. Hot mineral springs found in the area were reputed to be soothing and restorative. The famous medical center there was the source of a well-known Phrygian eye salve which was in great demand.

Having access to a fine soft wool from the black sheep of the valley, the city was famous for its wool industry. Because of its commercial prosperity, its health resort, and the medical facilities, Laodicea was a popular place for

THE LETTERS TO THE 7 CHURCHES OF ASIA

EACH OF these letters to the seven churches has had a different emphasis. In the letter to the church at Ephesus, the emphasis was the importance of returning to its first love. The church at Smyrna was warned against compromising and told to be ready to suffer. The emphasis in the letter to the church at Pergamum was the need to champion the truth in the face of error that was all around them. The Christians at Thyatira were told to follow righteousness even in the face of evil. The emphasis in the letter to the brethren at Sardis was that they should be on the inside what they appear to be on the outside. The letter to the church in Philadelphia stressed the open door of opportunity to evangelize that was available to them in spite of their size. To the church at Laodicea, the emphasis will be a combination of strong denunciation of their complacency and loving appeal for wholeheartedness. This letter is one of the sternest, if not the sternest, of the seven letters.
wealthy people to retire. Those things combined to make the city a famous banking center.

The wealth of the city caused her to be proud and self-sufficient, so much so that in A.D. 60 when she suffered a severe earthquake, she refused any outside help in rebuilding the city. We will see that pride, self-sufficiency and dependence upon material wealth were big factors in the Lord’s denunciation of the Laodicean church.

The Church at Laodicea
The church at Laodice is mentioned in Colossians 4:16. Paul apparently had written letters to both the church at Colossae and at Laodicea, and in his closing in the letter to the Colossians, he instructed that the two churches exchange and read each other’s letters.

The congregation at Laodicea was not infected with the poison of a specific sin, nor was it troubled with either heretics or persecution. Laodicea had one problem and one problem alone—she was halfhearted in her devotion to God. This letter has within it an important lesson for the twentieth-century church.

THE SALUTATION AND SELF-DESIGNATION (3:14)
This letter opens, as do the others, with a phrase that identifies the writer: “The Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God.”

The word “amen” affirms a statement as being absolutely true, absolutely reliable. We are familiar with statements of Jesus that begin, “Verily, verily,” or “Truly, truly.” In the original language it is “Amen, amen”—coming from Hebrew to Greek to English untranslated. We use “amen” to close prayers, affirming the truth of what has been expressed. Sometimes a preacher’s audience will say “amen” to indicate agreement with what has been said.

Jesus refers to Himself as “the Amen.” In John 14:6 He said He was the way, the truth, and the life. Jesus is not only the One who speaks the truth, He is the Truth itself. The idea is further expanded and defined by the phrase “the faithful and true Witness.”

“Beginning” is not the best understanding of the Greek word archē. Some people in the religious world have taken this passage along with a few others to teach that Jesus was created first and then He created everything else. This word does not mean that. Arche means “source or origin.” Jesus is the source or origin of all creation. In Colossians 1:15ff., Paul wrote that Jesus is preeminent over all creation, all things being created in Him, through Him, and unto Him. John expressed the same truth in John 1:3: “All things came into being by Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.” This is Jesus who is true, who is the very source or origin of all things that God has created, who is speaking and writing these words.

THE CONDEMNATION (3:15, 17)
The Lord has no words of commendation for the church at Laodicea. Even this first phrase, “I know your deeds,” cannot be understood as words of commendation as they were to the church at Ephesus when He told them He knew their deeds, toil, and perseverance (2:2).

Their Lukewarmness
He gets swiftly to the point: “I know your deeds, that you are neither cold [that is, icy cold] nor hot [the word means burning hot]; . . . Because you are lukewarm, . . . I will spit you out of My mouth.”

This vivid portrayal has long been interpreted against the local background. Hierapolis, six miles across the Lycus valley from Laodicea, was famous for its hot springs. The waters flowed over a wide plateau and were lukewarm by the time they reached the edge. The waters were considered medicinal and beneficial while they were hot but were nauseating when they were lukewarm.

The adjectives “hot” and “cold” are not to be taken as describing spiritual fervor or lack of fervor. The contrast is between the medicinal waters of Hierapolis and the cold pure waters of Colossae, another neighboring city. The hot waters were healing, the cold waters refreshing—both having value to those who drank them. The church in Laodicea “was providing neither refreshment for the spiritually weary, nor healing for the spiritually sick. It was totally ineffective, and thus distasteful to its Lord.”1 This explanation solves the problem of why the Lord would prefer a church to be “cold” rather than “lukewarm.”
Their Claims

The Laodiceans claimed to be rich, to have gotten riches, and to have need of nothing (3:17). They were finding their security in their wealth; they were complacent, self-satisfied, and self-sufficient. Not only were they smug in their trust in material wealth; they also arrogantly claimed to have accomplished it themselves, needing nothing more than what they had been able to gain.

Jesus’ parable of the rich fool speaks to the attitude of the Laodiceans (Luke 12:16-21). The rich fool, taking credit for the bounty and trusting it as his security, was also smug, complacent, and self-satisfied as he contemplated his wealth. His wealth did him no good when his soul was required, and that is to be the end of all who lay up treasure on earth instead of in heaven.

Their True Condition

Jesus’ condemnation directly parallels the reasons for their self-satisfaction. In spite of living in a city noted for its health resort, they were “miserable.” They lived in a city noted for its wealth, but they were “poor.” Their medical center was world-renowned for its eyesalve, but they were “blind.” One of their sources of wealth was textiles, yet they were “naked.” Their material condition did not keep them from being spiritually destitute, and their reliance upon their material wealth resulted in spiritual poverty.

The Remedy

The Laodiceans thought they had everything they needed, when in reality, they desperately needed what the Lord had to offer. He says, “... buy from Me gold refined by fire, that you may become rich, ...” They needed the spiritual riches available through Christ to be genuinely rich. “... and white garments, that you may clothe yourself, ...” In contrast with the black wool of Laodicea’s textile industry, the Christians there needed the white garments of righteousness to cover their spiritual nakedness. “... and eyesalve to anoint your eyes, that you may see.” The famous eyesalve of Laodicea was not healing their spiritual blindness—they needed the healing of the Lord.

Possessing material wealth is not wrong in and of itself, but it can present a serious danger. The apostle Paul addressed this very situation in 1 Timothy 6:

But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith, and pierced themselves with many a pang.

Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy. Instruct them to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is life indeed (1 Timothy 6:9, 10, 17-19).

The mere possession of wealth did not get the Laodiceans in trouble. But their hope was set on their material riches instead of on God. The remedy was to turn to the Lord for the true riches.

THE EXHORTATION AND CONCLUSION (3:19-22)

Tough Love

Jesus continues, “Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; be zealous therefore, and repent.” “Tough love” is a popular phrase today. It means showing love for another in ways that are best for that person, even if it means correction, reproof, or punishment. The Lord said hard things to the Christians at Laodicea and called for their repentance, but He was doing it out of love for them and a desire for what was best for them.

The word for “love” in 3:19 is phileo, meaning feelings of affection. Jesus is expressing personal affection for them, and that love moves Him to do what is necessary to bring about a correction of their spiritual deficiencies. Their confidence in His love should motivate them to take His admonitions to heart, just as we can much more easily accept correction from one who loves us than from one who does not have our welfare at heart.

Hebrews 12:4-11 compares the chastening of the Lord to the discipline of an earthly father. Out of love for his son a father will discipline him for his good. The loving heavenly Father deals with us as His children as He disciplines us to bring about our righteousness and ultimate well-being. The writer to the Hebrews went so far as to say if we are not disciplined by God, we are not His children.
“Behold, I Stand at the Door”

Holman Hunt painted a picture of Jesus entitled “The Light of the World.” Jesus is pictured standing and knocking at a door with no knob. The door represents the door of the heart, and the knob is on the inside.

The Lord never forces Himself on anybody. He stands and knocks, patiently waiting for the door to be opened and for Him to be invited in. He says, “If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him, and will dine with him, and he with Me.” In the ancient world the first two meals of the day were functional—a hurried breakfast at the beginning of the day and some lunch caught during a break from the day’s activities. The evening meal, the supper meal, was that time a man spent eating leisurely and socially. The day’s activities had been taken care of. In a relaxed atmosphere he could enjoy dining with his family and friends at a meal that often took hours to eat. In Oriental lands eating together was very significant. It meant a strong bond of affection and companionship. That background caused the common meal to be used as a symbol of the intimacy to be enjoyed in the kingdom of the Lord. The Lord offers that kind of intimacy and fellowship to those who open the door for Him.

The Promise to the Overcomer

In this last letter as in the other six, a promise is given to the overcomer: “He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.” Christ was victorious over Satan and death and sat down with the Father to reign with Him. The Christian is promised the same reward. Overcoming persecution and overcoming Satan will result in victory and the opportunity to sit with Christ on His throne and reign with Him. Plato wrote: “It is a trustworthy statement: For if we died with Him, we shall also live with Him; if we endure, we shall also reign with Him; if we deny Him, He also will deny us” (2 Timothy 2:11, 12).

For the seventh time we read the exhortation from Jesus: “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” The messages to the churches in Asia were not just for them in their time but for the church through the ages. Laodicea had to overcome complacency, materialism, lukewarmness, and dependence on their material wealth. No one can deny that those ills plague the church of today. For the church to overcome and go on to victory, each Christian must overcome the attitudes that diminish enthusiasm and result in lukewarmness or no performance for the Lord. We cannot mistake the call to commitment sent out to each of these seven churches. The same call to commitment comes to us. The final reward is worth each Christian’s zealous, enthusiastic, faithful service.

—Edward P. Myers

ENDNOTE


QUOTATIONS

“Moral nausea is roused by tepid religion. It is best to be warm, and energetic; but a frank repudiation of religion is more promising from an ethical standpoint than a half-and-half attachment, complacently oblivious of any shortcoming. The outsider may be convinced and won over; there is hope of him, . . . But what can be done with people who are nominal Christians, unable to recognize that they need repentance and that Jesus is really outside their lives?”

W. Robertson Nicoll, ed., The Expositor’s Greek Testament

“The unexamined life is the life not worth living.”

Plato

“God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”

C.S. Lewis, The Problem of Pain

“It is in that stubborn staying power most preachers fail. Gradually, imperceptibly, they lose heart and expectancy, come at last to put things through with the feeling it had better be done, but nothing much will come of it.”

A. J. Gossip