

Revelation 3:1–6

The Letter to Sardis: The Dead Church

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Introduction: A New Chapter, but the Same Section

As Revelation chapter 3 opens, the scene has not changed in the overall outline of the book. We are still in the middle division of Revelation 1:19: “the things which are.” This section deals with the seven churches of Asia Minor, seven literal first-century churches to whom Jesus dictated letters through the apostle John. These are not merely historical letters, though they are certainly that. They also speak to the church of all time and to believers personally. In addition, many see in these seven churches a prophetic panorama of church history.

In that understanding, Sardis corresponds to the era of the **Protestant Reformation**. That alone makes this letter especially striking, because Sardis had a reputation for life, while Jesus declared it to be dead. That is a sobering word for any church, any movement, any denomination, and any individual believer who has learned how to preserve an outward image while losing inward vitality.

The City of Sardis: Glory in the Past, Emptiness in the Present

Sardis was a city with a great name, a wealthy past, and a fading reality. It sat in the fertile Hermus Valley at the foot of Mount Tmolus and occupied a strategic position on major trade routes between the interior and the Aegean coast. It had once been the proud capital of the Lydian kingdom and the seat of the fabulously wealthy King Croesus. Sardis was famous for wealth, luxury, and even early coin minting. It was a city that had known greatness.

But by the end of the first century, Sardis was living largely on its former reputation. Though still affluent and active in commerce, its true political power and former brilliance had greatly diminished. It remained impressive outwardly, but much of its substance was gone. That makes Sardis the perfect setting for a church that also had a name that it was alive, but was actually dead.

The city itself illustrated the church’s condition.

Sardis was built on a steep acropolis about 1,500 feet high and was thought to be nearly impregnable. Yet twice in its history the city fell because of overconfidence and lack of vigilance. In 546 B.C., Cyrus of Persia captured it when his forces discovered a hidden access point after observing a Sardian soldier retrieve a dropped helmet. Later, in 214 B.C.,

Antiochus the Great took the city in similar fashion, exploiting an area left unguarded. The supposedly unconquerable city was conquered because it failed to watch.

Jesus uses that very history when He says, “Be watchful.”

A Comfortable City Produces a Comfortable Church

Sardis was wealthy, soft, pleasure-loving, and compromised. Its paganism was well established. Artemis was honored there, and emperor worship also flourished. Rome had rebuilt the city after the devastating earthquake of A.D. 17, and Sardis, grateful for imperial favor, embraced loyalty to Caesar.

This created pressure for Christians. Participation in civic religion, emperor devotion, and public accommodation would have been expected. In a city where comfort, wealth, and acceptance were readily available, compromise became tempting.

There also appears to have been a strong Jewish presence in Sardis, and archaeological discoveries have suggested a degree of cultural accommodation. The synagogue was enormous and ornate, yet it included unmistakably Roman decorative features. It appears that, at the very least, there was a tendency toward blending and appeasement rather than distinctiveness and separation.

The same spirit seems to have affected Christians in Sardis. It was apparently possible to live there, trade there, worship there, and prosper there — so long as one did not disturb the system too much. This may help explain why this letter contains no mention of persecution. Dead churches do not tend to be persecuted. They do not trouble the world because they have become too much like it.

Christ’s Introduction: The Answer Is the Spirit of God

Jesus introduces Himself as the One “who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars.”

As in each of the seven letters, Christ presents Himself in a way that directly addresses the church’s need. Sardis was dead, so Jesus presents Himself as the One who possesses the fullness of the Holy Spirit. The phrase “the seven Spirits of God” does not refer to seven separate Spirits, but to the fullness and completeness of the Holy Spirit.

Isaiah 11:1–2 is often seen as the background for this sevenfold description:

- The Spirit of the Lord
- Wisdom

- Understanding
- Counsel
- Might
- Knowledge
- Fear of the Lord

Whether one counts the description precisely that way or emphasizes the fullness symbolized by the number seven, the point remains the same: Jesus alone possesses and supplies the fullness of the Spirit. Sardis needed more than activity, organization, or reputation. Sardis needed life. And life comes by the Spirit.

Jesus still says the same to dead churches today. The answer is not better marketing, more committees, stronger branding, or increased busyness. The answer is the Spirit of God.

As Jesus said in John 6:63, “It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing.”

“You Have a Name That You Are Alive, But You Are Dead”

This is one of the most devastating statements in all seven letters.

Sardis had a **name** — that is, a reputation. Others thought well of them. They had the appearance of life. They may have had meetings, structure, programs, and activity. They may have looked orthodox, respectable, and established. But Jesus, who sees beyond appearance, declared the true condition: they were dead.

This is always the danger of formal religion. A church can have history without holiness, doctrine without devotion, structure without Spirit, and reputation without reality.

This is one reason many interpreters connect Sardis with the Protestant Reformation era. The Reformation recovered vital truths, especially justification by faith and the authority of Scripture. Yet many of the churches that came out of the Reformation hardened over time into state churches, formal systems, and denominational structures that often lacked spiritual life. Outwardly they were established and respectable. Inwardly many became lifeless.

The warning is timeless. It is possible to be known as a “good church,” an “active church,” a “Bible church,” or a “historic church,” and yet be spiritually dead.

Christ’s Command: Wake Up

Jesus says:

“Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God.”

This command is urgent. Sardis was not just unhealthy; it was dying. Yet there were still some things remaining. There were still traces of life, but those traces were fading. Jesus calls them to wake up and strengthen what remains before it dies completely.

The imagery is powerful in light of Sardis’ history. The city that once failed to keep watch is now told by Christ to watch. The church had become careless, sleepy, and dull. Their works were incomplete before God. They may have had visible religious works, but they were unfinished, hollow, and lacking spiritual substance.

The Lord’s diagnosis was not based on human standards, but on divine inspection. A work may look impressive before men and still be incomplete before God.

That also fits the prophetic application to the Reformation era. The Reformers recovered much truth, and for that we are thankful. Yet the work was not complete. In many places, reform stopped short of full biblical restoration. In some cases, even those who broke from Rome still carried over unbiblical practices, coercive methods, and even persecution of dissenters. There were genuine recoveries, but imperfect works.

Jesus says plainly: “I have not found your works perfect before God.”

Remember, Hold Fast, and Repent

Verse 3 gives the remedy:

“Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent.”

They were to remember what they had received and heard — a likely reference to the gospel and the Word of God. Sardis had drifted from its original spiritual foundation. They needed to go back, not to dead tradition, but to living truth.

There is always a call in revival to return to what was received from God. Not innovation for its own sake, not accommodation to the culture, but return. Return to the gospel. Return to the Word. Return to dependence on the Spirit. Return to Christ.

The call to repentance proves that even a dead church is not beyond hope if it will truly turn back to the Lord.

But the warning is equally serious:

“Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you.”

Again, this fits Sardis historically because the city had twice fallen unexpectedly due to lack of vigilance. But it also echoes the language of Christ's sudden coming. Many understand this as connected to the doctrine of imminency. Jesus can come at an unexpected hour. Those who are spiritually asleep will be overtaken.

That makes Sardis especially sobering in the prophetic sense. If Sardis represents much of the Reformation tradition, then it is striking that the very churches that often deny imminency are addressed with warning language about Christ coming unexpectedly like a thief.

Whatever one's prophetic framework, the practical point is unmistakable: Christ calls His people to vigilance, readiness, and spiritual wakefulness.

A Faithful Remnant in Sardis

Though the church as a whole was dead, Jesus says:

“You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy.”

This is a beautiful encouragement. Even in Sardis, Jesus had His remnant.

There were a few who had not defiled their garments. In a city marked by compromise, softness, and accommodation, there were still some who remained clean. They had not blended in with the spirit of the age. They had not surrendered their holiness for comfort. They had not sold out truth for acceptance.

The Lord always knows His remnant.

The promise given to them is intimate and glorious: they shall walk with Him in white. White garments speak of purity, righteousness, victory, and acceptance. These faithful ones, though surrounded by deadness, belonged to Christ.

This reminds us that one can live in a compromised place without becoming compromised. One can remain faithful in a spiritually weak church. One can stand clean in a dirty culture. Jesus sees that faithfulness, and He honors it.

The Promise to the Overcomer

Verse 5 expands the promise:

“He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels.”

This is a threefold promise.

First, the overcomer will be clothed in white garments. This again speaks of righteousness, purity, and victory in Christ.

Second, Jesus says He will not blot out that person's name from the Book of Life. This has sparked much debate. Does this imply that some names are blotted out? Does it suggest loss of salvation?

The force of the statement, however, is best understood as a promise of assurance to the true overcomer. It is not meant primarily to terrify the faithful, but to comfort them. The emphasis is strong: Christ will never erase the true believer's name. This is security, not instability.

At the same time, the warning dimension should not be ignored. Scripture never encourages careless profession without abiding faith. Those who merely wear the name of Christian while remaining spiritually dead should not presume upon empty outward association. The Bible comforts the genuine believer, but it also exposes false assurance.

That is why passages such as 2 Corinthians 13:5 are so important: "Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith."

Third, Jesus promises to confess the overcomer's name before the Father and before His angels. What a staggering assurance. Those who are truly His will be publicly owned by Him in heaven. The church at Sardis may have treasured earthly reputation, but the only reputation that matters in the end is whether Christ confesses your name before the Father.

Final Exhortation: Hear What the Spirit Says

As with the other letters, Jesus ends by saying:

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

This letter is not only for Sardis. It is for all churches. It is for all believers. It is for every generation tempted to substitute appearance for reality, activity for life, and comfort for holiness.

Sardis warns us that it is possible to look alive without being alive. It warns us that comfort can kill vigilance, reputation can conceal ruin, and compromise can suffocate spiritual life.

But Sardis also reminds us that Jesus still calls dead things to wake up, still strengthens what remains, and still keeps a faithful remnant for Himself.

The call is simple and searching: wake up, remember, hold fast, repent, and be ready.

Teaching Outline

Revelation 3:1–6 — The Dead Church at Sardis

Title:

Sardis: The Church with a Name but No Life

I. The Setting of the Letter (Rev. 3:1a)

- A. A new chapter, but the same section
- B. The middle section of Revelation's outline
- C. A literal church, a personal message, and a prophetic picture
- D. Sardis as a picture of the Protestant Reformation era

II. The City Behind the Church (Background to Sardis)

- A. A city of wealth
 - 1. In the Hermus Valley
 - 2. Near major trade routes
 - 3. Famous for gold and coinage
- B. A city of past glory
 - 1. Capital of Lydia
 - 2. Seat of Croesus
 - 3. Living on a former reputation
- C. A city of false security
 - 1. Built on a steep acropolis
 - 2. Thought unconquerable
 - 3. Captured twice through lack of watchfulness
- D. A city of compromise
 - 1. Pagan temples
 - 2. Emperor worship
 - 3. Social and political pressure
 - 4. Comfortable, soft, and accommodating

III. The Christ They Needed (Rev. 3:1b)

A. He has the seven Spirits of God

1. The fullness of the Holy Spirit
2. The Spirit gives life
3. Dead churches need the Spirit of God

B. He has the seven stars

1. He holds His messengers
2. He is Lord over His church
3. He sees the true condition of spiritual leadership

IV. The Condemnation They Deserved (Rev. 3:1c)

A. "I know your works"

B. "You have a name"

1. A reputation
2. An outward identity
3. An appearance of life

C. "But you are dead"

1. Active but empty
2. Busy but barren
3. Organized but lifeless

V. The Command They Needed (Rev. 3:2-3)

A. Be watchful

1. Wake up
2. Stay alert
3. Learn from Sardis' history

B. Strengthen what remains

1. Some signs of life were still present
2. But they were fading
3. Urgent action was needed

C. Remember what you received and heard

1. Return to the gospel
2. Return to the Word
3. Return to the truth once received

D. Hold fast and repent

1. Cling to truth
2. Reject compromise
3. Turn back to Christ

VI. The Warning They Could Not Ignore (Rev. 3:3b)

- A. "If you will not watch"
- B. "I will come upon you as a thief"
- C. A warning tied to Sardis' history
- D. A warning tied to Christ's unexpected coming
- E. A call to readiness, vigilance, and expectancy

VII. The Remnant They Still Had (Rev. 3:4)

- A. A few names remained
- B. They had not defiled their garments
- C. The Lord always has a remnant
- D. Faithfulness is possible even in a dead church

VIII. The Promises to the Overcomer (Rev. 3:4-5)

A. White garments

1. Purity
2. Righteousness
3. Victory

B. A secure name in the Book of Life

1. Assurance for the true believer
2. Warning against empty profession
3. Confidence for those abiding in Christ

C. A confessed name before the Father

1. Christ will own His people
2. Heaven will hear their name
3. The greatest reputation is Christ's approval

IX. The Call for Every Church (Rev. 3:6)

- A. Hear what the Spirit says
- B. This letter is for all churches
- C. This letter is for every believer
- D. We must be hearers and doers

Short Preaching Outline Version

Sardis: The Church with a Reputation but No Reality

1. **The City of Sardis** — wealthy, proud, comfortable, unwatchful
2. **The Christ of Sardis** — the One with the fullness of the Spirit
3. **The Condition of Sardis** — a name that it was alive, but dead
4. **The Command to Sardis** — wake up, strengthen, remember, hold fast, repent
5. **The Warning to Sardis** — Christ will come unexpectedly
6. **The Remnant in Sardis** — a few had not defiled their garments
7. **The Promise to Sardis** — white garments, secure names, confessed before the Father

Simple Application Section

Application: What Sardis Says to Us

1. **Examine your reality**
Do I merely wear the name Christian, or do I truly possess spiritual life?
2. **Guard against comfort**
Am I becoming sleepy, soft, and compromising because life is easy?
3. **Return to the essentials**
Have I drifted from the Word, the gospel, and dependence on the Spirit?
4. **Stay watchful**
Am I living with expectancy, readiness, and spiritual alertness?
5. **Be part of the remnant**
Even if others grow cold, I can still walk faithfully with Christ.

Revelation 3:7–13

The Letter to Philadelphia

The Faithful Church

Commentary

Introduction: The Sixth Church, and a Breath of Fresh Air

As we continue in Revelation chapter 3, we come to the sixth of the seven churches, the church in Philadelphia. Like the other letters, this one was written first to a real, literal, first-century church in Asia Minor. It had direct relevance to the believers living there at that time. But like the other letters, it also speaks beyond its immediate setting. It speaks to the church in every age, to believers personally, and prophetically to a particular era in church history.

Philadelphia is often understood as representing the **Missionary Church Era**. This makes the letter especially encouraging, because unlike most of the others, Jesus has nothing negative to say to this church. Only Smyrna shares that distinction, but Smyrna's letter is heavily marked by persecution and martyrdom. Philadelphia, while certainly acquainted with hardship, receives words of comfort, commendation, and some of the most precious promises in all seven letters.

This is why the letter to Philadelphia feels like a breath of fresh air. In a sequence of churches marked by compromise, deadness, corruption, and spiritual decline, here is a church that simply pleased Jesus.

The City of Philadelphia: Brotherly Love in a Shaken Place

The name Philadelphia means “**brotherly love.**” The city was founded around 189 B.C. and is associated with Attalus II Philadelphus of Pergamum, whose loyalty and affection toward his brother became famous. In an age when brothers often fought and killed one another for power, Attalus became known for his brotherly devotion. From that reputation came the city's name.

Philadelphia was not only founded as a military outpost, but also functioned as a kind of **cultural missionary city**. Its purpose was to spread Greek language and culture eastward into Lydia and Phrygia. Because of this role, it became known as a **gateway to the East**. That background is important, because Jesus will later speak of an **open door** — language that would have resonated deeply in a city known as a doorway or gateway.

The city sat in a fertile volcanic region sometimes called “the Burned Land.” The soil was excellent for agriculture, especially vineyards. But the same volcanic conditions that made

the land fertile also made the region unstable. Philadelphia was prone to earthquakes. The great earthquake of A.D. 17 devastated the city, along with others in the region. Ancient sources indicate that aftershocks continued for years, so much so that many residents lived outside rather than risk being crushed by collapsing structures.

This matters because later Jesus promises the overcomer that he will be made a **pillar** in the temple of God and will “go out no more.” To believers living in a city where buildings fell and people fled outside in fear, that promise of permanent stability would have been profoundly comforting.

Philadelphia also had reason to distrust imperial power. Though Rome gave some assistance after the earthquake, the support was limited and inconsistent. The city even briefly renamed itself in honor of Caesar, likely hoping for favor, but such hopes were disappointed. Later, under Domitian, the city’s vineyards were cut back to protect Roman wine interests, damaging the local economy. Philadelphia knew what it was like to be overlooked, betrayed, and economically squeezed.

Pressure from Paganism and Pressure from the Synagogue

Like other cities in Asia Minor, Philadelphia was shaped by pagan religion and trade guild pressure. Because vineyards were central to its economy, Dionysus, the god of wine, held a prominent place in the city’s pagan identity. Trade guild life was often intertwined with pagan worship, which meant Christians could face exclusion from commerce if they refused to participate.

There was also serious pressure from the Jewish community. As in some of the other cities, Jewish believers in Jesus appear to have been expelled from the synagogue. This was not only emotionally devastating; it was socially and politically dangerous. Judaism had a recognized legal status under Rome, but if Christians were expelled from synagogue rolls, they lost that protected standing and became more vulnerable to official hostility.

So the believers in Philadelphia were likely small, poor, marginalized, and socially weak. They were not a powerful church. They did not have influence, wealth, or numbers. Yet they were a spiritually healthy church. Jesus commends them not for size, but for faithfulness.

That alone is a needed reminder: Jesus does not measure churches the way man does. He is not impressed by scale, status, or cultural power. He delights in faithful endurance.

Christ’s Introduction: Holy, True, and Holding the Key

Jesus introduces Himself in verse 7 with four powerful descriptions:

- He who is **holy**
- He who is **true**
- He who has **the key of David**
- He who **opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens**

As in every letter, Christ introduces Himself in the way the church most needs Him.

He Who Is Holy

The word “holy” speaks of being set apart, consecrated, sacred, and morally pure. It also carries the idea of belonging uniquely to God. In a compromised and unstable world, Jesus reminds Philadelphia that He is utterly pure, utterly separate from all corruption, and fully trustworthy.

He Who Is True

The word translated “true” here carries the sense not merely of “truthful” as opposed to false, but **genuine** as opposed to counterfeit. Jesus is the real one. He is no imitation, no false god, no hollow authority, and no empty promise-maker. In a city that had experienced betrayal and disappointment from both civic and religious institutions, Jesus presents Himself as the One who is absolutely genuine.

He Who Has the Key of David

This phrase reaches back to Isaiah 22:20–22, where authority over the house of David is symbolized by a key laid upon the shoulder. In that historical setting the language referred to Eliakim, but it points beyond him to the Messiah. Jesus claims this authority as His own.

He alone possesses rightful kingdom authority. He alone determines access. He alone opens doors no enemy can close, and He alone closes doors no man can force open. In a city known as a gateway, Jesus says, in effect, “I am the One who controls the true door.”

That would have comforted the believers in Philadelphia. They had doors shut in their faces by hostile Jews, by society, and by earthly power. But Christ says the final authority belongs to Him.

The Open Door: Opportunity and Prophetic Hope

Verse 8 says:

“I know your works. See, I have set before you an open door, and no one can shut it.”

Jesus begins with His usual declaration: “I know your works.” He sees their faithfulness, their labor, their endurance, and their weakness. Nothing is hidden from Him.

Then He says He has set before them an open door. This has both an immediate and a broader meaning.

On one level, it likely speaks of **ministry opportunity**. Philadelphia had been founded as a missionary city for Greek culture, but now Jesus gives His church a far better mission. He opens before them a door for gospel witness and kingdom service. Though they are weak in worldly terms, He grants them access and usefulness in His work.

On another level, in your prophetic framework, this also points forward to the **door standing open in heaven** in Revelation 4:1. Philadelphia, the faithful church, receives not only an open door of ministry, but a promise connected to the catching away of the church before the hour of trial.

That fits with the prophetic identification of Philadelphia with the great missionary era of church history. Following the deadness of Sardis, there came a period of renewed devotion to Scripture, evangelism, revival, and world missions. God opened doors to the nations. The gospel spread globally. Missionaries such as William Carey and Hudson Taylor, and revival preachers such as Whitefield, Wesley, and Edwards, stand as examples of a church that kept Christ's Word and did not deny His name.

“You Have a Little Strength”

Jesus does not flatter this church. He says plainly, “you have a little strength.” They were not strong by human standards. They were not influential, rich, or impressive. Yet Jesus is not disappointed in their littleness.

Their strength was small, but their faithfulness was great.

That is one of the great encouragements of this letter. Christ does not require that His church be spectacular. He calls it to be faithful. Philadelphia had little strength, but they used what strength they had well.

Jesus commends them for two simple things:

- **You have kept My word**
- **You have not denied My name**

That is the recipe. It is gloriously simple.

A faithful church is not defined first by size, budget, popularity, or innovation. A faithful church is a church that holds to Christ's Word and refuses to deny Christ's name.

Many churches lose their way because they become distracted by programs, systems, trends, marketing, and activity. Philadelphia reminds us that the essential issue is still the central issue: keep His Word, and do not deny His name.

The Synagogue of Satan and the Vindication of the Faithful

Verse 9 returns to a theme seen earlier in Revelation:

“Indeed I will make those of the synagogue of Satan, who say they are Jews and are not, but lie—indeed I will make them come and worship before your feet, and to know that I have loved you.”

This is not a blanket condemnation of Jewish people. It refers specifically to those who opposed Christ and persecuted His people, proving by their actions that they were not living as true covenant people before God. As elsewhere in Scripture, the issue is not ethnicity alone, but spiritual reality.

For the believers in Philadelphia, many of whom were likely deeply wounded by rejection from the synagogue and from family, this promise would have been deeply healing. The same people who cast them out would one day be forced to acknowledge that these despised believers were loved by Christ.

What a comfort that must have been. They were not abandoned. They were not forgotten. They were loved.

And that is often the deepest need of the faithful sufferer — not merely escape, but assurance: **“I have loved you.”**

Kept from the Hour of Trial

Verse 10 is one of the most discussed verses in Revelation:

“Because you have kept My command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth.”

In your prophetic understanding, this is one of the clearest promises of a **pre-tribulation rapture**. Jesus does not merely say He will keep them through trial, but **from the hour** of trial. The emphasis is not only protection in trouble, but exemption from a specific global period of testing.

This “hour of trial” is worldwide in scope. It is not a local persecution. It comes upon “the whole world,” and its purpose is “to test those who dwell on the earth.” That phrase, “earth

dwellers,” becomes a technical expression in Revelation for unbelievers rooted in this present world order.

So the promise is powerful: those who belong to Christ will be kept from that coming global hour of testing. This fits with the distinction between the church and the unbelieving world in Revelation’s tribulation scenes. The church is not the object of this testing. The world is.

In your framework, this corresponds to the coming tribulation described by Jesus in passages like Matthew 24 and unfolded in Revelation 6–18. Philadelphia receives the promise prophetically, but it extends to the faithful church awaiting Christ.

“Behold, I Am Coming Quickly”

Verse 11 says:

“Behold, I am coming quickly! Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown.”

The word here carries the sense of suddenness. Christ’s coming will not merely be soon in a chronological sense, but sudden, decisive, and without warning once it breaks upon the world.

This reinforces the doctrine of imminency. The church is to live in expectation, not date-setting, but readiness.

Jesus then exhorts them to **hold fast**. They were already faithful, but they were not to loosen their grip. Perseverance must continue to the end. The crown here is not the crown of royalty but the crown of reward and victory. Jesus is not teaching that salvation can be stolen away by another, but that believers must not allow distraction, compromise, or spiritual drift to rob them of the full reward of a faithful finish.

The message is simple: finish well.

The Promise of the Pillar

Verse 12 contains one of the richest promises in the letter:

“He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more.”

This imagery would have landed with particular force in Philadelphia. In a city where earthquakes drove people out of buildings in fear, Jesus promises absolute permanence and security. No more instability. No more fleeing. No more fear. No more uncertainty.

To be made a **pillar** means stability, permanence, honor, and belonging. In ancient cities, pillars were sometimes inscribed with the names of honored persons. Jesus draws on that imagery and promises that the overcomer will bear divine inscriptions.

He says:

- “I will write on him the name of My God”
- “and the name of the city of My God, the New Jerusalem”
- “and I will write on him My new name”

These promises speak beautifully of three things:

Ownership

The name of God written upon the believer declares that we belong to Him.

Citizenship

The name of the New Jerusalem declares our permanent belonging in heaven. Our true homeland is there.

Intimacy

Christ’s new name written upon us speaks of closeness, belonging, and relational nearness. It is language of shared identity and covenant love.

The overcomer is not merely spared danger; he is welcomed into permanent belonging with God forever.

Final Exhortation

As always, Jesus ends with the universal call:

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

This letter is not only for ancient Philadelphia. It is for every church and every believer. It calls us to embrace the same simplicity that marked this faithful congregation.

They were not strong, but they were steadfast.

They were not impressive, but they were obedient.

They were not powerful, but they were pleasing to Jesus.

And that is the kind of church we should want to be.

Teaching Outline

Revelation 3:7–13

Philadelphia: The Faithful Church

Title:

The Church Jesus Had Nothing Bad to Say About

I. The Character of This Letter

- A. The sixth church on Jesus' list
- B. A literal first-century church
- C. A message to all churches
- D. A prophetic picture of the Missionary Church Era
- E. A breath of fresh air among the seven letters

II. The City Behind the Church

- A. A city named for brotherly love
- B. A city founded with missionary purpose
 - 1. Greek cultural expansion
 - 2. A gateway to the East
 - 3. A doorway city
- C. A city shaken by earthquakes
 - 1. Destroyed in A.D. 17
 - 2. Marked by aftershocks
 - 3. People living in fear outdoors
- D. A city disappointed by Rome
 - 1. Limited help after disaster
 - 2. Economic hardship
 - 3. Vineyards cut back by imperial policy

III. The Pressure on the Church

- A. Pagan pressure through trade guilds
- B. Economic hardship for faithful Christians
- C. Rejection by the synagogue
- D. Loss of legal protection

- E. Family and social ostracism
- F. A small church with little strength

IV. The Christ They Needed (v. 7)

A. He who is holy

1. Set apart
2. Pure
3. Belonging to God alone

B. He who is true

1. Genuine
2. Not fake
3. Fully trustworthy

C. He who has the key of David

1. Messianic authority
2. Kingdom access
3. Absolute control over doors

D. He who opens and shuts

1. His authority is final
2. His decisions are irreversible
3. No man can override His will

V. The Commendation They Received (v. 8)

- A. "I know your works"
- B. "I have set before you an open door"
- C. "You have a little strength"
- D. "You have kept My word"
- E. "You have not denied My name"

VI. The Simple Recipe of a Faithful Church

- A. Hold to His Word
- B. Do not deny His name
- C. Faithfulness matters more than prominence
- D. Dependability matters more than visibility

VII. The Open Door

- A. An open door of ministry
- B. An open door no man can shut
- C. A missionary door to the nations
- D. A prophetic picture of the open door in heaven
- E. A reminder that Christ creates opportunity

VIII. The Comfort for the Rejected (v. 9)

- A. Christ sees the hurt of His people
- B. Their persecutors will one day be exposed
- C. Their rejection will be overturned
- D. Jesus assures them: "I have loved you"

IX. The Promise of Escape (v. 10)

- A. They kept His command to persevere
- B. He will keep them from the hour of trial
- C. A global time of testing is coming
- D. The testing is aimed at earth dwellers
- E. A prophetic promise of the pre-tribulation rapture

X. The Call to Persevere (v. 11)

- A. "I am coming quickly"
- B. His coming will be sudden
- C. Hold fast what you have
- D. Finish well
- E. Do not let anything hinder your reward

XI. The Promise to the Overcomer (v. 12)

- A. A pillar in the temple of God

- 1. Stability
- 2. Permanence
- 3. Security

- B. "He shall go out no more"

- 1. No more fear
- 2. No more fleeing
- 3. No more instability

C. The three names written upon him

1. The name of God — ownership
2. The name of New Jerusalem — citizenship
3. Christ's new name — intimacy

XII. The Final Call (v. 13)

- A. Hear what the Spirit says
- B. This message is for all churches
- C. Faithfulness is still the goal
- D. Be a Philadelphia church

Short Preaching Outline Version

Philadelphia: The Faithful Church

1. **The City of Philadelphia** — brotherly love, missionary gateway, shaken by earthquakes
2. **The Christ of Philadelphia** — holy, true, and holding the key
3. **The Condition of Philadelphia** — little strength, but great faithfulness
4. **The Commendation of Philadelphia** — they kept His Word and did not deny His name
5. **The Comfort of Philadelphia** — Jesus knows their rejection and declares His love
6. **The Promise to Philadelphia** — kept from the hour of trial
7. **The Hope of Philadelphia** — Christ is coming quickly
8. **The Reward of Philadelphia** — pillar, permanence, names, and belonging

Simple Application Section

Application: How to Be a Philadelphia Church

1. **Stay faithful even when you feel weak**
Jesus does not require worldly strength, only faithful endurance.
2. **Keep His Word**
Anchor everything in Scripture.
3. **Do not deny His name**
Stand openly for Christ, even when it costs you.

4. **Walk through the doors He opens**

Serve where He gives opportunity.

5. **Hold fast until He comes**

Do not grow weary. Do not let go. Finish well.

Very Short Summary Statement

Philadelphia was a small, weak, pressured church that simply held to Christ's Word and would not deny His name, and for that reason Jesus set before them an open door, promised to keep them from the coming hour of trial, and assured them of permanent belonging in His kingdom.

Revelation 3:14–22

The Letter to Laodicea

The Lukewarm Church

Commentary

Introduction: The Last Church on the Route, and the Worst on the List

As we come to the final church in Revelation 3, we also come to the final church on the Roman postal route. The letters began in Ephesus and moved in a great circular path through Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and now finally Laodicea.

And sadly, the last church is the worst church.

This is the church that had a name, a building, a gathering, and a religious identity, but spiritually it was in terrible condition. In fact, unlike the other churches, the most shocking thing about Laodicea is that Jesus is not even presented as being inside the church. He is outside, standing at the door and knocking.

Like the other six letters, this one applies in four ways. It applied first to the literal church in Laodicea in John's day. It applies to the church in every age. It applies personally to individual believers. And prophetically, many understand it to picture the final phase of church history: the **Apostate Church Age**, often associated with the modern era.

That does not mean every church today is Laodicean. God always has a remnant. But it does mean this letter is painfully relevant to the age in which we live.

The City of Laodicea: Wealthy, Comfortable, and Self-Sufficient

Laodicea was a remarkable city in the Lycus River Valley. It was strategically located between Hierapolis and Colossae and had become a major center of trade, banking, textiles, and medicine. It was prosperous, polished, and proud.

The city was founded by Antiochus II in the third century B.C. and named after his wife, Laodice. The name itself is revealing. It is commonly understood from roots meaning something like **“the people ruling”** or **“rule of the people.”** That is striking, because the spirit of Laodicea was exactly that: not Christ ruling the people, but the people ruling themselves.

Laodicea was a city of wealth. It was famous for banking. It was known for its glossy black wool, a prized textile product. It was also known for its medical school and especially for a well-known eye treatment. These three things — wealth, clothing, and eye salve — become the very things Jesus uses in His rebuke.

The city was so wealthy that when it suffered severe earthquake damage, it prided itself on rebuilding without depending on Rome. That self-sufficiency became part of its civic identity. They needed nothing. They could handle everything themselves.

And that same spirit had infected the church.

A City with Water Problems and a Spiritual Parallel

Laodicea also had a famous water issue. Unlike Hierapolis with its hot mineral springs, and Colossae with its cold mountain-fed streams, Laodicea had to import its water through an aqueduct system. By the time the water arrived, it was no longer hot, nor was it refreshingly cold. It was lukewarm, mineral-heavy, and unpleasant.

That local feature is crucial to understanding this letter.

Jesus is not merely using a random image when He says they are neither hot nor cold. He is drawing from the very geography and daily experience of the city. They knew exactly what lukewarm water was like. It was not useful like hot water. It was not refreshing like cold water. It was distasteful.

And that, Jesus says, is exactly what they were spiritually.

Christ's Introduction: The Remedy Is the Real Christ

Jesus introduces Himself in verse 14 as:

- **The Amen**
- **The Faithful and True Witness**
- **The Beginning of the creation of God**

As with the other letters, His self-description is the remedy for the church's condition.

The Amen

When Jesus calls Himself "the Amen," He is declaring Himself to be the certainty, confirmation, and final affirmation of God's truth. The word carries the sense of firmness, reliability, and certainty. He is the One in whom all God's promises are established and confirmed.

Laodicea was living in illusion. Jesus begins by saying, in effect, "I am reality. I am certainty. I am the final word."

The Faithful and True Witness

This title stands in direct contrast to Laodicea. They were not faithful. They were not true. They were compromised, self-deceived, and spiritually false. But Jesus is the faithful and true witness. He represents the Father perfectly, speaks truthfully, and sees all things as they really are.

This would have cut deeply. A church can lie to itself. A church can deceive others. But it cannot deceive Jesus.

The Beginning of the Creation of God

This phrase does not mean Jesus was created. The term points rather to Him as the source, origin, ruler, or first cause of creation. He is not part of creation in the sense of being made; He is the One through whom all things were made.

That truth was especially important in this region because false ideas about Christ had already circulated in nearby Colossae and Laodicea. Paul had addressed such issues in Colossians, emphasizing that Christ is before all things and that all things were made through Him and for Him.

So Jesus begins by reestablishing His supremacy. Laodicea had exalted itself. Christ now confronts them with who He really is.

The Report Card: Neither Hot nor Cold

Jesus says:

“I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot.”

This is often misunderstood. Some take it to mean Jesus would rather people be spiritually hostile than half-hearted. But in the context of Laodicea’s geography, the better sense is usefulness.

Hot water heals and soothes.

Cold water refreshes and revives.

Lukewarm water does neither.

So Jesus is saying, “I wish you were one or the other. I wish you were useful. I wish you were spiritually refreshing or spiritually healing. But instead, you are spiritually tepid, stale, and revolting.”

Then He says:

“Because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth.”

This is one of the most severe statements in the letters. The imagery is graphic on purpose. Jesus is not mildly displeased. He is expressing disgust. Their religion made Him sick.

That is the tragedy of lukewarmness. It is not open hostility. It is not blazing devotion. It is the false comfort of spiritual mediocrity, self-satisfaction, and empty profession.

Laodicea was not passionately opposed to Christ. It was worse in one sense: it was indifferent to Him while claiming His name.

Their Self-Diagnosis and Christ's Diagnosis

Verse 17 is the heart of the problem:

“Because you say, ‘I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing’—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked.”

Notice the contrast. They had one view of themselves; Jesus had another.

They said:

- I am rich
- I have become wealthy
- I need nothing

Jesus said:

- You are wretched
- Miserable
- Poor
- Blind
- Naked

What a devastating reversal.

This is why Laodicea is so dangerous. Sardis was dead, but Laodicea was deceived. It thought it was healthy. It thought it was blessed. It thought its prosperity proved its condition. But material prosperity is not the same as spiritual prosperity.

Smyrna had been materially poor but spiritually rich.
Laodicea was materially rich but spiritually bankrupt.

That is always the danger when money, comfort, success, and ease become substitutes for dependence upon God. The church begins to trust in its resources instead of Christ. It begins to prize image over truth, prosperity over purity, and comfort over consecration.

And that is why Laodicea so powerfully pictures the apostate church spirit of the last days — religion without surrender, wealth without worship, and Christianity without Christ at the center.

Christ's Counsel: Buy from Me What You Really Need

Jesus does not merely rebuke. He also counsels:

“I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed... and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see.”

Notice how perfectly Jesus addresses them using the very things their city prided itself in.

Gold Refined in the Fire

Laodicea was rich in banking and money, but Jesus says they need true riches. Gold refined in the fire speaks of genuine spiritual wealth, tested and purified. Their earthly riches had made them secure in themselves. Christ calls them to riches that come only through Him.

White Garments

Laodicea was famous for its black wool, but Jesus offers white garments. Their luxurious clothing could cover the body, but it could not cover spiritual shame. Only Christ can clothe a sinner in righteousness.

Eye Salve

Laodicea had medical fame, especially for eye treatment, but Jesus says they are blind. They could help others with physical sight, yet lacked spiritual perception themselves. Only Christ can open blind eyes.

This is the divine irony of the letter. Everything they thought they possessed in abundance, they lacked where it mattered most. So Jesus says, “Come to Me. Get from Me what you can never produce on your own.”

Fire, Purity, and the Urgency of Repentance

Jesus calls them to what they would never choose naturally: refinement through fire.

Their gold needed refining. Their blindness needed healing. Their shame needed covering. Their souls needed saving.

In your prophetic reading, this fits with the warning dimension of the letter. The Laodicean spirit, if left unrepented, faces fiery trial. A church that refuses purification now may encounter tribulation later. The call is urgent: repent before judgment forces the issue.

Whether applied corporately, prophetically, or personally, the point is the same: self-satisfied religion cannot save. Only Christ can.

Rebuke Rooted in Love

Then comes one of the most tender lines in the letter:

“As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent.”

This is important. Jesus is not harsh because He is cruel. He is sharp because He loves. His rebuke is mercy. His discipline is compassion. He is exposing their sickness because He desires their healing.

He tells them to be zealous and repent. Zeal had been absent in this lukewarm assembly. Indifference had ruled. But Christ still extends an invitation.

That is the grace of this letter. Even to a church this compromised, Jesus still calls. He still loves. He still rebukes in order to restore.

No one is beyond His reach if they will repent.

Jesus Outside the Church

Verse 20 is perhaps the most heartbreaking image in the seven letters:

“Behold, I stand at the door and knock.”

This is often used evangelistically, and rightly so in personal application. But first, in context, it is Christ speaking to a church. That is the shock. He is outside, not inside.

Laodicea had religion, structure, identity, and self-confidence — but Jesus was on the outside looking in.

What a tragic picture of apostate Christianity: a church so full of itself that there is no room left for Christ.

Yet even here, the invitation is personal:

“If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me.”

That is beautiful. Even if the whole church system is corrupt, the individual can still respond. Jesus moves from corporate rebuke to personal appeal. "If anyone..."

That means there is still hope for the individual in the midst of a compromised church age. There is still hope for the false professor, the backslider, the self-deceived, and the sinner. Christ knocks. Christ calls. Christ invites.

Dining with Him speaks of fellowship, communion, nearness, and restored relationship. He is not merely offering rescue from judgment, but restored intimacy.

The Tragedy of Self-Love

One of the saddest realities about Laodicea is that while Ephesus had left its first love, Laodicea had replaced Christ with self. They were their own first love.

That is the root of apostasy. It is not always open atheism. Sometimes it is self enthroned where Christ should be.

Laodicea represents religion that still uses Christian language, but where the true center is human comfort, human achievement, human image, and human control.

That is why this letter feels so current. It speaks directly to a modern age saturated with self-help spirituality, prosperity teaching, consumer religion, and churches built around personal preference rather than biblical surrender.

The Promise to the Overcomer

Jesus ends with an astounding promise:

"To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne."

What grace. Even after such a severe rebuke, Jesus still offers throne-room promise to the overcomer.

This is not a small reward. It is royal language. It speaks of reigning with Christ, sharing in His kingdom victory, and participating in His rule.

What a contrast:

Laodicea was enthroned in self.

Christ offers a throne with Himself.

They were content with earthly luxury.

He offers heavenly authority.

They ruled themselves.

He offers them the privilege of reigning under Him.

This is the mercy of Jesus. He warns severely because what is at stake is immense.

Final Exhortation

As always, the letter closes:

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

Laodicea is not just for Laodicea. It is for all churches, all ages, and all believers.

It warns us against the deadliness of comfort, the deception of wealth, the danger of self-sufficiency, and the horror of religion without Christ.

But it also offers hope. Christ still knocks. Christ still speaks. Christ still loves. Christ still invites. And Christ still promises unimaginable glory to the one who overcomes.

Teaching Outline

Revelation 3:14–22

Laodicea: The Lukewarm Church

Title:

The Church That Made Jesus Sick

I. The Final Church on the List

- A. The seventh and last church
- B. The end of the postal route
- C. The worst condition of all seven
- D. A prophetic picture of the apostate church age
- E. A warning for the last days

II. The City Behind the Church

- A. A wealthy and influential city
- B. A banking center
- C. A textile center
- D. A medical center
- E. A city proud of its self-sufficiency

III. The Character of Laodicea

- A. The name suggests rule by the people
- B. A people-centered spirit
- C. A self-governed mentality
- D. A church full of self-confidence
- E. A church with no real need for Christ

IV. The Local Features Jesus Uses

- A. Their wealth
- B. Their black wool
- C. Their eye salve
- D. Their lukewarm water
- E. Their proud independence

V. The Christ They Needed (v. 14)

- A. The Amen
 - 1. The certainty of God
 - 2. The final affirmation of truth
 - 3. The reliable one
- B. The Faithful and True Witness
 - 1. He tells the truth
 - 2. He sees reality
 - 3. He contrasts their false condition
- C. The Beginning of the creation of God
 - 1. The origin of creation
 - 2. The source and ruler
 - 3. Not created, but Creator

VI. The Condemnation They Deserved (vv. 15–16)

- A. Neither cold nor hot
- B. Not useful, not refreshing, not healing
- C. Spiritually lukewarm
- D. Distasteful to Christ
- E. In danger of being vomited out

VII. The Deception at the Core (v. 17)

A. Their self-evaluation

1. I am rich
2. I am wealthy
3. I need nothing

B. Christ's evaluation

1. Wretched
2. Miserable
3. Poor
4. Blind
5. Naked

VIII. The Counsel of Christ (v. 18)

A. Buy gold refined in the fire

1. True riches
2. Tested faith
3. Spiritual wealth

B. Buy white garments

1. Christ's righteousness
2. Covering for shame
3. Purity instead of appearance

C. Buy eye salve

1. Spiritual sight
2. Discernment
3. The ability to see reality

IX. The Love Behind the Rebuke (v. 19)

A. Christ rebukes those He loves

B. Chastening is mercy

C. Be zealous

D. Repent while there is time

X. Christ Outside the Church (v. 20)

- A. He stands at the door
- B. He knocks
- C. He is outside a church that claims His name
- D. Yet He still calls personally
- E. Fellowship is offered to anyone who opens

XI. The Hope for the Individual

- A. "If anyone hears My voice"
- B. Personal response matters
- C. The individual can still respond even in a corrupt church
- D. Christ offers fellowship, not mere survival

XII. The Promise to the Overcomer (v. 21)

- A. To sit with Christ on His throne
- B. Royal privilege
- C. Kingdom participation
- D. Reigning with the King

XIII. The Final Call (v. 22)

- A. Hear what the Spirit says
- B. This message is for every church
- C. This message is for every person
- D. Do not stay lukewarm

Short Preaching Outline Version

Laodicea: The Lukewarm Church

1. **The City of Laodicea** — wealthy, proud, self-sufficient
2. **The Christ of Laodicea** — the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the Creator
3. **The Condition of Laodicea** — lukewarm and nauseating to Christ
4. **The Delusion of Laodicea** — rich outwardly, bankrupt inwardly
5. **The Counsel to Laodicea** — true gold, white garments, spiritual sight
6. **The Love for Laodicea** — rebuke and discipline from Christ
7. **The Invitation to Laodicea** — Jesus stands at the door and knocks
8. **The Promise to Laodicea** — the overcomer will reign with Christ

Simple Application Section

Application: What Laodicea Says to Us

1. **Beware of self-sufficiency**
The moment we think we need nothing, we are already in danger.
2. **Do not confuse prosperity with spirituality**
A full bank account is not the same as a full heart.
3. **Let Christ define your condition**
Do not trust your own self-assessment over the Word of God.
4. **Respond to His rebuke as love**
Conviction is mercy.
5. **Open the door fully to Christ**
Do not leave Him on the outside of your life, your home, or your church.
6. **Live for the throne, not for comfort**
What Christ promises is far greater than anything this world can offer.

Very Short Summary Statement

Laodicea was a wealthy, self-satisfied, spiritually blind church that made Christ sick with its lukewarmness, yet even there Jesus lovingly called individuals to repent, open the door to Him, and overcome so they might reign with Him.