

## Revelation: Because the Time Is Near

### Study #8: "Laodicea—The Nauseating Church"

Some time ago, *Newsweek* magazine printed an article called "The Super-Churches of Houston." It was an analysis of a trend that has become more and more common in big churches. The direction is towards ecclesiastical entertainment centers that not only offer Broadway quality musical productions as worship services, but also multi-million dollar sports complexes and huge professional staffs who provide everything from exercise classes to meal services.

One church, for example, boasted 17,000 members and a budget of more than \$10 million. At the time of the article, they were nearing completion of a facility that features two full-size basketball courts, a roller rink, six bowling lanes, four glassed-in racquetball courts, a suspended jogging track, saunas, whirlpools, and a cafe called "The Garden of Eatin." Their pastor explained: "There's a phenomenal amount of money here, and that makes for a catalyst to do great things for the kingdom of God." His associate added, "America does things in a big way, and the Lord is not going to be left in the backseat." Of course, their crosstown rival wasn't about to be left behind either. Their plans? A \$34 million facility with two more bowling lanes than the first church and a state-of-the-art sports complex outrivaling all their competitors.

So let me ask you. What do you think of this trend? More importantly, what does our Savior think about it? Is He cheering them on to ever greater levels of bigness? Or is He about to judge them for their pride? The late Ken Chafin, pastor of Houston's second biggest church, gave his opinion. Refusing to be caught up in the competition, he said: The super-church cult is tied to something larger. It's tied to the success syndrome of American business. Its pastor is like the chief executive of a large corporation, growth is the bottom line, and that puts extreme pressure on the church to measure itself with a different measuring stick than God."

Why do I mention this trend? Because most churches want to grow. But the question is: What kind of growth are we after, and what methods will we use to make it happen? When we started our fellowship, we could have tried to attract people attending church somewhere else. But we didn't do that because that's sheep-stealing and superficial growth. Instead, the people we've added have come the old-fashioned way—by one sinner telling another sinner where he found spiritual food. There are always two extremes to avoid when it comes to growth. One we discovered in our study of the church at Sardis—no growth. Why didn't they grow? They were dead, and dead things do not grow. But the other extreme is just as bad, and that's the problem exemplified in this study—superficial growth. The church of Laodicea was the super-church of its day. They were big, active, and wealthy. But in the things that mattered, Jesus called them "poor, blind, and naked." Let's find out why by looking at the problem of this church.

### 1. THE PROBLEM

The most striking thing about this letter is its lack of commendation. In each of the other letters, Jesus found something to praise. But not in this one! For there was nothing good to say about this church.

#### A. Hinted at in the Description of Christ

You can see a hint of their problem in verse 14. Jesus begins with a description of Himself intended to challenge their behavior. He begins, "These things says the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God."

"Amen" is a very significant word in the Bible. Jesus used it in the Gospels whenever He introduce a key thought or emphasize His point. "Verily, verily I say to you." That's the word "Amen." "God said it. That settles it. The matter is beyond dispute!" Yet I want you to notice, this is more than a loud "Amen!" tacked onto the end of a sentence. This says that Jesus is the "Amen." What does that mean? It means, as 1 Corinthians 1:20 says, that all the promises of God are "yes" and "amen" in Jesus Christ. Or to say it another way, not one word of this Book will ever fail. Why not? Because Jesus Christ is the guarantee and fulfillment of it all. Why was that important for the Laodiceans to remember? Because lukewarm Christians do not take the Word of God seriously. They may give mental assent to the major teachings and warnings of the Bible, but they compromise in those "gray areas" which they consider nice but not necessary. After all, a little bit of carelessness and neglect never hurts anyone. Or does it?

The story is told of an ocean liner that sank off the coast of Ireland. Divers were sent down to investigate how the tragedy happened. One item recovered was the ship's compass, inside of which they found the tip of a knife. Apparently, while cleaning it, one of the sailors had broken off the point, which then lodged inside. It was just a little thing, but sometimes that's all it takes to throw a life off course—just a little bit of spiritual unfaithfulness and neglect.

And He continues in verse 14, "These things says the Faithful and True Witness." Why emphasize that? Because this was a church full of hypocrites. You hear that sometimes, that the church is full of hypocrites, but in this case it was true. The members claimed to be Christians, but their lives said something different. Jesus talked about this in Matthew 7:21. "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven."

And He adds, "These things says the Beginning of the creation of God." Jehovah's Witnesses love this verse. In fact, I've found it's one of the first things they point to in denying the deity of Christ. "See," they say. "Jesus is not Jehovah God. He's only a created being!" But that's not what the verse means. It actually means just the opposite. The word "Beginning" is the Greek word *arche* and the phrase should be translated "the Originator or Beginner of the creation of God." It's emphasizing that Jesus is the Creator of the universe, that "all things were made by Him and without Him was not anything made that was made." (John 1:3)

Why was that important for the Laodiceans to hear? Because they thought they had it all together, and they prided themselves on it. They prided themselves on their wealth. They prided themselves on their success. They prided themselves on their intelligence. So Jesus reminds them, "The only reason you enjoy any of these things is because I, your Maker, gave them to you. And I can take it away in a moment. Because I'm the Origin of it all!

We need to remember that too! Think of how much we enjoy. Certainly far more than the Laodiceans dreamed of having – hot and cold running water, telephones, televisions, fast food, automobiles, word processors, hot tubs, RVs. Every creaturely comfort we could want and more! And that's dangerous. Because when you have so much, why do you need God?

Some of you may have read about the eagle that attacks seals. The bird swoops down and fixes its claws in the creature's back, pulling it to shore and killing it. But sometimes the seal proves too strong for the bird, and with a mighty lunge heads for deep water. The eagle shrieks and struggles to release its grip, but the helpless bird is slowly pulled beneath the waves to its death. That's the way it is with the things of this world if we become attached to them. They drag us away from Christ towards spiritual and sometimes eternal disaster.

## **B. Stated Plainly in the Correction of Christ**

You say, "I am not sure I see all of that in these few phrases. Then read on in verse 15 where Jesus corrects them, "I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I wish that you were cold or hot. So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth. Because you say, 'I am rich, and have become wealthy and have need of nothing,' and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked."

Christ found two major faults in this church. The first was spiritual lukewarmness. That was a concept the Laodiceans could immediately understand. Because the city had no water supply of its own, they had to pipe in mineral water through an underground aqueduct from several miles away, which made it almost undrinkable by the time it arrived. In fact, those who visit the spring today say it tastes so bad that their immediate reaction is to spit it out.

You say, "What's that supposed to represent?" Some say the "cold" refers to unbelievers, the "hot" to Spirit-filled believers, and the "lukewarm" to carnal Christians who are no longer living for Christ. But there's a problem with that interpretation. It is this. Jesus says He's about to vomit these people out of His mouth. But that is inconsistent with other things He has said to Christians. Listen, for example to John 6:37. "All the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means (That is the strongest negative statement available in the Greek language, meaning "I will never, no never") cast out."

"Then," you ask, "who is He talking to?" It must be unbelievers in the church—people who professed to be Christians, but had never actually committed their lives to Christ. You say, "Is that possible? Can a person faithfully attend church and still not be a Christian?" Of course, the devil himself often visits churches, and we know that he is not a true worshiper of God.

In fact, I grew up in a church like this—filled with lots of nice people who believed in God, but never was there any emphasis on the Gospel. Rarely did anyone mention sin or that Jesus had died on the cross to pay for them. Nor do I recall even one time hearing someone say with conviction, "I believe Jesus rose from the dead!" In fact, the only time I ever heard the gospel in that church was during a confirmation class I was taking. One of my friends asked the minister, "How can I be sure that I'm going to heaven?" In response, the pastor quoted John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." Other than that, I never heard the plan of salvation. Nor did the other members of the church. And how can a person be saved without hearing the Word of God? Oh, we believed in God and professed to be Christians, but I wonder, "How many of us actually had faith in Jesus Christ?" I didn't. And that's scary! Attending church for years and years and still not being right with God. And why not? Because you have never invited His Son into your life and yielded your heart to His Holy Spirit.

Earlier I quoted Matthew 7:21. Now let me quote the next verse, Matthew 7:22. Jesus added, "Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers.'"

Their first fault was that they were spiritually lukewarm. Their second fault was that they were spiritually proud. In 60 AD, just 30 years before this letter was written, the province of Phrygia was struck by a devastating earthquake. But guess what! Of all the cities in the region, only Laodicea was able to rebuild itself without the help of Rome. How? Because of their money. Laodicea was one of the major banking center of its day, bringing the city enormous wealth. And they took pride in that fact. But, unfortunately, so did the church. They looked at their resources and said to themselves, "We are rich and have need of nothing! Not even Christ."

How could that be? How could a Christian be so influenced by the world that he finds his value and significance in something other than Christ? Friends, it happens all the time, and not only in Houston. Rightly understood, this is the challenge of the ages. To find our security and significance in Christ alone. But how many of us truly do that? Not many. Most of us spend most of our time in mad pursuit of recognition and image thinking, "This is what makes me matter! This is what makes me valuable!" When, in fact, Christ may be saying to us, "You wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked." Jeremiah put it in poetic terms. Speaking for the Lord, he wrote: "For My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, and hewn themselves cisterns—broken cisterns that can hold no water."

The superficial nature of our growth came to mind when reading about the *Queen Mary*, once the largest oceangoing vessel on earth, now a floating museum in Long Beach, California. Those who've seen it know how impressive it is! But before her conversion, something interesting happened to her. They removed her smoke stacks for painting, and when they set them down on the dock, what happened? They crumbled. Why? Because there was nothing left of the  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch steel from which they were made. All that remained were thirty coats of paint that had collected over the years. That's the danger we face if what we're concerned about is what others think of us. The danger is that we can have an impressive outer image, but empty be on the inside. Because we've never allowed Jesus to remake us from within. But He has a remedy.

## **2. THE REMEDY**

And here I want to keep it simple and straightforward, because it is easy to make the solution more complicated than it is. The Savior says in essence, "You need to be real. You need to exchange your hypocrisy for three genuine articles." First, you need to replace it with—

### **A. Genuine Faith**

Verse 18 continues, "I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire so that you may become rich." What's Jesus talking about? Here is a case when it's helpful to compare Scripture with Scripture, for 1 Peter 1:7 explains it like this. He says, "In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ." Instead of working like

crazy to solve all your problems and merely confessing Jesus as your Savior, you need to accept your hardships as opportunities to trust Christ as your problem-solver and thereby grow strong in your faith in Him. Proverbs 3:5-6 say, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will direct your paths."

## **B. Genuine Righteousness**

Verse 18 continues, "And white garments so that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness will not be revealed." This was something else the church would have immediately understood, because one of the major industries in Laodicea was garment-making. The sheep raised in the area produced a high quality wool that was raven black and glossy. But Jesus corrects them, "What you need are new garments made not from black wool, but of pure white linen." What does that represent? The righteousness of Christ. Revelation 19:8 says of the church, "To her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white, for the fine linen is the righteousness of the saints." Of course, our righteousness is a derived righteousness, in that it doesn't come from us. It is given as a gift to those who put their faith in Christ. "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." (Rom. 4:5)

Colossians refers to the same thing. Paul urges us, "Put on the new nature, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its Creator." We are to put on the character of Christ like a beautiful new garment. You say, "I've been trying to do that. I've been trying to be like Christ for years." I know. That's the problem. You've been trying. The good news is you don't have to try anymore. What you need to do is accept the righteousness of Christ by faith. How? The Bible says there are two steps. First, you need to take off the old. What many believers try to do is wear two coats at the same time. They try to put on the new coat of Christ's righteousness over the filthy coat of their self-righteousness. But you cannot wear both. To wear the coat of Christ's righteousness, you have to quit trying to patch up that smelly coat of self-effort, because that will never be accepted in God's presence. You have to recognize your ragged garments, ask Christ to remove them, and then trust Him to give you the coat of His righteousness as a gift.

## **C. Genuine Insight**

Verse 18 adds, "And eye salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see." That was the third industry for which Laodicea was famous. It was the site of a medical school that boasted an eye powder which could heal all sorts of visual problems. And Jesus agrees. You need an anointing, but not of eye powder. You need the anointing of My Holy Spirit, so that the eyes of your understanding may be opened and you can understand the things of God.

Let me liken it to a visual problem I have. Doctors call it color deficiency. It used to be called color blindness. But that's no longer considered polite. So now I'm color deficient, which means there are some colors in the spectrum I cannot see. The primary colors I recognize—red, blue, yellow, orange. But many of the shades—pinks, purples, greens, browns—are hard for me to distinguish. Why? Because there is something lacking in my rods and cones. And something similar can be said of the unbeliever. You can talk to him day and night about spiritual things, and he just doesn't get it. Why not? Because he does not have the anointing of the Holy Spirit.

### 3. THE PROMISES

You might assume from all the harsh things said to this church that Jesus doesn't like them. But nothing could be farther from the truth! He assures them in verse 19, "As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore, be zealous and repent." Why? Because of two wonderful promises He makes to them in verses 20 to 21. The first is directed to unbelievers in the church.

#### A. To Unbelievers

He says in verse 20, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me." This is one of the most beautiful yet controversial verses in all of Scripture. Millions of soul-winners have used it over the years to invite their friends to accept Jesus the Lord as their Savior, while other Bible "experts" smile knowingly and say to themselves, "That's fine, if you want to use it that way. But that's not the proper interpretation. After all, this wasn't written to unbelievers; this was written to the church." And in so doing, they rob the soul-winner of one of the most powerful tools in his spiritual arsenal. I myself have had people tell me I can't use this verse like that.

So who is right? The soul-winners! Two facts make this clear. First, the context. Our study has shown that though this was a promise to the church of Laodicea, most of its members were unbelievers who professed to be Christians, but had never opened their hearts to Christ. Furthermore, where is Jesus in this verse? He's standing outside the door, clearly indicating that He is neither in their lives or inside their church. However, His gracious promise is if just one person in the church opens her heart to Him, He will come and have fellowship with them.

So let me encourage you, my dear evangelistic friend, use this verse as freely and as often as you like. For it was written with your ministry in mind. In fact, the word "dine" in this passage is the Greek word for the last meal of the day, implying what? That the time is short for receiving Christ. So use every opportunity He gives you to tell others about Him. Of if you yourself have never received Christ as your Savior, please open your heart to Him today!

Perhaps you've seen the painting by Holman Hunt with Christ standing outside a home, gently rapping on the door. But there's something unusual about the door. The handle is on the inside, reminding us that Christ will not force His way into our lives. If you want Jesus in your life, you must invite Him to come in. How can you do that? In prayer. Say something like this—

***Lord Jesus, I need You in my life. Thank you for dying on the cross for my sins and rising again to give me new life. I open the door of my life and invite You to come in. Please forgive me and make me the kind of person You want me to be. I turn from my sins and trust You as my Savior. I pray in Your name. Amen.***

#### B. To Believers

Finally, Jesus promises us that if we make room for Him in our hearts, He'll make room for us in heaven. Verse 21, "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. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." You may feel small and insignificant right now, but you won't for long. For the Bible promises, "If we endure, we shall also reign with Him."

Some time ago, I read an article about the residents of a Louisiana apartment building who awoke one more morning to a terrifying sight outside their windows. The ground beneath the street in front of their building had literally collapsed, creating a massive depression called a sinkhole. Tumbling into the ever-deepening pit were automobiles, sidewalks, and all manner of goods from nearby businesses. The building itself would obviously be next to go.

Scientists say that sinkholes occur when underground streams drain away in times of drought, causing the ground at the surface to lose its underlying support. Suddenly everything caves in, leaving people with the terrifying feeling that nothing—not even the earth beneath their feet—is trustworthy. Unfortunately, there are many people whose lives are like that sinkhole. They have accumulated a plethora of possessions as well as important assets like academic degrees, work experiences, influential friendships, and physical beauty or strength. But they discover too late that their inner world is on the verge of collapse.

That was the case in Laodicea. On the surface, they looked substantial. But beneath the veneer, where only Jesus can see, they were “miserable, wretched, poor, blind, and naked.” Do not make that mistake! Ask Christ this very moment for “gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover the shame of your nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see.”