

## The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

Revelation 2:1-3:22

By [Derek Thomas](#)

To the angel of the church in Thyatira write:

These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze. I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first.

Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling. So I will cast her on a bed of suffering, and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely, unless they repent of her ways. I will strike her children dead. Then all the churches will know that I am He who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds. Now I say to the rest of you in Thyatira, to you who do not hold to her teaching and have not learned Satan's so-called deep secrets (I will not impose any other burden on you): Only hold on to what you have until I come.

To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations--

"He will rule them with an iron scepter;  
he will dash them to pieces like pottery" --  
just as I have received authority from My Father. I will also give him the morning star. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

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

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

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. 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. 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. 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.

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

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. 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. 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. 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.

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.

### **Thyatira (2:18-29)**

The fourth letter is written to the church at Thyatira (2:18-29). It is, according to some, the least important of the seven cities, and yet it receives the longest letter! But it is not the city to which the letter is written, but the church. Whatever the relative size and influence of the city, the church is far more important. Thyatira lay some forty miles, south east of the previous city mentioned, Pergamum. Archeological work has uncovered the fact that the city was noted for its many trades, including clothiers, bakers, bronze-workers, cobblers, weavers, tanners, dyers and potters.

Readers of the New Testament will recall that Lydia, "a dealer in purple cloth" (Acts 16:14), came from Thyatira. In God's providence, she became important in the planting of the church at Philippi. Had she returned to Thyatira, and been instrumental in the establishment of a church there, too? By the time Revelation is written, the church seems to be flourishing: "I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance..." (2:19). Four essential qualities are singled out: love, faith, service and perseverance. In many ways, there could hardly be a better commendation of any church than to note these characteristics. Three of them, faith, hope and love are highlighted by Paul as constituting the very essence of spiritual maturity (1 Cor 13:13). Not only that, but they were *increasing* in virtue. Christians are meant to grow and Thyatira had done just that: "you are now doing more than you did at first" (2:19). Yet, despite the commendations, the church at Thyatira was tolerating "Jezebel" in its midst (2:20). Possibly an individual (female) teacher is in view, but this is unlikely to have been the case. More likely is the fact that the feminine reference here is to the entire church. The later expression "her children" (2:23), brings to mind something that John says elsewhere using the expression "the chosen lady and her children" in which he has in mind the church rather than particular individuals (2 John 1).

Jezebel was the one who incited her husband, King Ahab to compromise Israel by encouraging the worship of Baal (1 Kings 16:31). Her father, Ethbaal, priest of Astarte, became king of Sidon by murdering his predecessor. Astarte (or Ashtoreth) was the Phoenician equivalent of the Greek Aphrodite, or the Roman Venus. All three encouraged licentiousness beneath a cloak of morality. Jezebel had been responsible for the spiritual adultery of the Old Testament church. The Jezebel in view here may be a similar spirit of compromise that existed within the church that tolerated idolatry and license. Ashteroth and Baal formed the constant threat to Judaism throughout the Old Testament days of settlement in Israel, and now a similar idolatrous and immoral system threatened the church at

Thyatira. Perhaps this included attending various guilds at which offerings were given to pagan deities and ended in licentious riots "sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols" (2:20).

Interestingly, John picks up an oft used expression of the Jezebel cult at the end of the letter, referring to how they loved to speak of the "deep secrets" (2:24). An elitist claim to special knowledge and revelation, known only to the select few, has been a feature of many religions, including Christianity. To some extent, the epistle to the Colossians deals with this very issue, of those who claimed special experiences that gave them insight into the hidden secrets of God. Those who claimed such experiences were often bound together in fraternal relationships and sworn to secrecy. Gnosticism is perhaps the best known example of such a fraternity within the New Testament. But whatever claims they were making to knowing the "deep things," Jesus' words are forthright: they are "Satan's so-called deep secrets" (2:24). Within this church that demonstrated such love, faith, service and perseverance, Satan was busy at work! Like the Nicolaitans and Balaamites in the churches at Ephesus and Pergamum respectively, Jezebel had the potential of undoing the church at Thyatira.

The key word which seems to highlight the spirit of the church at Thyatira is *toleration*: "you tolerate that woman Jezebel..." (2:20). This was in contrast to the church at Ephesus who did not "tolerate wicked men" (2:20). Perhaps this suggests a spirit of indifference to sin. It is not that they were eagerly embracing it; they were apathetic to its influence. There was an unwillingness to root it out from their midst. They had no desire to engage in the messy business of church discipline. So long as good things existed, things worthy of commendation and note, these things, they thought, would outshine any shortcomings in their midst. After all, no church is perfect. A *laissez faire* attitude to sin can be the ruination of a church, as we see in what Jesus goes on to say.

Jesus introduces Himself in terms which exalt the holiness of His character: "These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire" (2:18). With such eyes He "searches hearts and minds" (2:23). John had given testimony to this in his Gospel, saying of Jesus that "He knew what was in a man" (John 2:25). He knows each church, and each individual, intimately.

Like the church at Ephesus and Pergamum, repentance is what Jesus desires of Thyatira (2:5, 16, 21, 22). Evidently, he had been patient with them and had given time to repent already, but they had failed to do so (2:21). And the consequence can only be judgment. The reflex of Christ's holiness to sin which has not been repented of is certain judgment, either immediate or on the Day of accountability. "So I will cast her on a bed of suffering, and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely..." (2:22). Such punishment is what "you deserve" (2:23 new living translation). Any thought of harshness in the punishment is removed: the judgments of God are according to His justice. It is the realization of what sin deserves, no more and no less. The equity of God is

paramount. Beds of sin will become beds of sickness. The pleasures of sin will yield pain and tribulation. Perhaps, even more startling, are the words: "I will strike her children dead" (2:23). It is such words that bring home the utter seriousness of God's judgments and the folly of trifling with sin. This should bring a spirit of seriousness into the church and its oversight. The Corinthian church had experienced the reality of these threats: "That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep" (1 Cor 11:30).

To those in the church who had maintained a good testimony despite the presence of Jezebel, Jesus urges perseverance. They are to "hold on" (2:24). Interestingly he adds by way of parenthesis: "I will not impose any other burden on you" (2:24). Perhaps the instinctive reaction of the pious at Thyatira was to retreat into a legalistic and ascetic view of life. Not wishing to be tolerant of Jezebel's licentiousness, the temptation to ensure godliness by imposing a system of rules over and above that which the Bible had given was very great. But no such "burden" is to be imposed. They are to live by the standards of the revealed Word of God and no more. As John was to say elsewhere: "His commands are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3). To such conquerors he promises "the morning star" (2:28). Revelation 22:16 describes Jesus as "the bright morning star" and the assurance would then be that rejecting Jezebel will ensure the possession of Jesus Christ. That would be their greatest possession.

### **Sardis (3:1-6)**

The next church is Sardis, some thirty miles south-east of Thyatira, is Sardis. As with Thyatira, nothing is known of the origins of this city. The letter to this church is brief, but stinging (3:1-6). Finding itself at the base of Mount Tmolus and the valley of the River Hermus, Sardis became a focal point of much traffic. It was the capital of the kingdom of Lydia, where Croesus reigned until Cyrus the Persia eventually toppled him. Later, both Alexander the Great and Antiochus the Great captures this city.

There is hardly anything complimentary to read of the church at Sardis. In words that must have come as deeply shocking, Jesus says to them: "you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead" (3:1). It is hard to imagine what their reaction must have been upon hearing these words. There were "works" to be evidenced (3:1) but they were not "complete" (3:2). That is, they were incomplete, deficient in some way. They had no divine approval. Their business was not in accord with anything that God requires. Industry of itself is of no value. Despite their acquisition of "a name," it was all a pretence. Hypocrisy was written all over the walls of the church; it was all a sham. Nominal Christianity prevailed. Like those in Isaiah's day, "These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me" (Isa 29:13). Like the Pharisees, of whom Jesus uses these same words, they were "whitewashed tombs" (Matt 23:27).

There are two main things the Sardis church is to do: First, there are those, even in this dead church, who are alive, "who have not soiled their clothes" (3:4), and able to heed a word of warning to "wake up!" and "strengthen what remains" (3:2). Here is the sweet doctrine of the holy remnant which crops up in Scripture again and again to encourage in the midst of what looks like doom and gloom (Gen 6:5-18; 1 Kings 19:18; Isa 1:9; 6:13; 7:3; 10:20-22; 2 Pet 2:7). These "few people" (3:4) are the ones who keep hope alive in a sepulcher. But, even these have succumbed to a torpid slumber. They, too, need to "wake up," having yielded to the soporific, mesmerizing vapors of the dead all around. Sardis had, in fact, twice fallen to surprise attacks: once, to Cyrus and yet again to Antiochus the Great. Failure to keep watch had been their undoing.

They were, in particular, to "strengthen" what remained. Using a technical word often used of nurturing and pasturing in the New Testament (Lk 9:51; 16:26; 22:32; Rom 1:11; 16:25; 1 Thess 3:2; 3:13; 2 Thess 2:17; 3:3; Jas 5:8; 1 Pet 5:10; 2 Pet 1:12). Christians needed support and encouragement, by providing motivation and reinforcement.

Failure to heed Christ's exhortation may result in them discovering that he has come in judgment against them, "like a thief" not knowing "at what time I will come to you" (3:2). They could find that the lampstand has been removed entirely and that not even a "few people" were left.

Second, they are to remember what it is they have received (3:3). Recollecting past blessings is at the heart of covenant life. Before Israel found themselves in the promised land, they were given a similar exhortation to "remember" (Deut 8:2). The power of advance would be hampered by a faulty memory of the Lord's blessings to them.

To those who comply, repenting of failure (3:3), soiled clothes will be replaced by "white" ones (3:5). "Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city" (22:14; cf. 7:14).

Additionally, in what at first looks as an encouragement, Jesus adds: "I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels" (3:5). But the encouragement contains a veiled threat, too. Failure to repent would incur such obliteration. Of course, there is no actual erasing of names from the Book of Life. The number of the elect is sealed, "their number so certain and definite," says the Westminster Confession, "that it cannot be either increased or diminished." (1) God stoops to our weakness and accommodates himself to our way of thinking in order to reinforce the point that what he desires is our compliance and obedience.

### Philadelphia (3:7-13)

The sixth letter comes to a town less than thirty miles south-east of Sardis (3:7-13). Like Sardis, Philadelphia, "the city of brotherly-love," was known for its earthquakes, one of which (in 17 a.d.) had almost destroyed the city of Philadelphia and severely damaged Sardis. Again, we have little idea as to how the church began in this city. But one thing is sure: it was fine church, for unlike the previous letter, this letter contains mostly commendation and praise.

Evidently, following some local persecution, the church at Philadelphia had kept the faith: "you have kept my word and have not denied My name" (3:8), and have "endured patiently" (3:10; cf. 1:9). Jesus has noted their trouble and approves of their continuing love for Him.

Three things stand out in this letter:

First, the words, "I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut" (3:8). Other uses of this expression in the New Testament suggest that what Jesus has in mind here is their service. Paul could say to the Corinthians, "a great door for effective work has opened to me" (1 Cor 16:9). Similarly, he could solicit the prayers of the Colossians that "God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ" (Col 4:3). Is Jesus thinking the same thing here? Had the Philadelphian Christians been given liberty to witness because of the *pax Romana* which permitted the church, for a while, to enjoy the same privileges as the Jews? We know from the history of this period that secular Philadelphia had great ambitions at becoming the most important city in the region. Perhaps the church had been fired with similar ambitions for the kingdom.

Despite these opportunities, they were pathetically weak: "I know that you have little strength" (3:8). Perhaps, they were few in number; perhaps they have gifted men able to proclaim the gospel with any power. Whatever the exact reason, the Jews took advantage of their weakness. Jesus calls them a "synagogue of Satan" (3:9). God has a way of turning the tables on those who oppress and harass. Those who persecute will be brought to confess the integrity of the persecuted: "I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you" (3:9). Centuries before, Isaiah had prophesied that "the sons of your oppressors will come bowing before you; all who despise you will bow down at your feet and will call you the City of the LORD, Zion of the Holy One of Israel" (Isa 60:14).

Tribulation was not far away for the church at Philadelphia and as we read in this letter of "the hour of trial that is going to come," (3:10) it sounds as though it might come at any moment. How will they cope? "I will...keep you," Jesus promises (3:10).

Second, we read of Christ and the key of David: "These are the words of Him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David," (3:7). The language is taken from Isaiah 22 where it used of Eliakim. One of three chosen to negotiate with Rabshakeh the Assyrian, Eliakim was given "the key of David" that is, the authority to speak and negotiate on David's behalf: "I will place on his shoulder the key to the house of David; what he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open" (Isa 22:22). Jesus has the key to the royal palace. When He opens no one can shut the door; when He closes, no one can open it. His word is supreme and powerful. By extension He gives the keys into the hands of Peter and the other disciples, and through the proclamation of the gospel, doors are opened and closed (Matt 16:19). Disobedience to Jesus Christ has fatal consequences. He is the One who is "holy and true" (3:7).

Third, Jesus exhorts the Church at Philadelphia to "hold on to what you have," in the knowledge that "I am coming soon" (3:11). Adding, "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" (3:12). Becoming a pilgrim in this life and Jesus promises that we shall be a pillar in the next. The promise is of something immovable and sturdy, part of the very fabric of the city of God.

### **Laodicea (3:14-22)**

The final letter of Jesus is addressed to the church at Laodicea (3:14-22). Situated yet another forty miles south-east of Philadelphia, in the Lycus Valley, near to the New Testament city of Colosse, the church at Laodicea was probably founded by Epaphras.

Unlike any of the letters that have gone before, this one contains no items of praise at all. The letter to Sardis had been deeply troubling, but at least the church there did contain some a "few people" who had kept the faith. In Laodicea, there was nothing, not even a remnant in which to find some consolation.

The trouble comes from neither persecutors or heretics. The trouble is *cold hearts*: "you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other!" (3:15). Laodicean is now a word we use to describe lukewarmness. Near to Laodicea were the famous hot springs of Hierapolis. Possibly this forms a background to the metaphor. Hezekiah could plead to the Lord that he had been wholehearted (Isa 38:3). Paul could say, "Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord" (Rom 12:11). Titus was said to be full of "enthusiasm" as he came to Corinth (2 Cor 8:17). The Laodiceans, by contrast, were none of these things. No warmth glowed in their hearts for the gospel. They had grown indifferent to its message.



Further diagnosis follows. Three claims s boasts s of the Laodiceans are picked up: their claim to being rich, prosperous and full. "I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing" they said (3:17). A prosperous city, the Laodicean Christians had no doubt fallen prey to the materialistic philosophy that gripped so many and held them as prisoners to avarice. Seeing this world as more important, they set their sight on the acquisition of things, forgetting that none of these are of value in the world to come. "...you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked," Jesus says to them.

Poor, blind and naked! Famous for its banking, medical schools (with a concentration on ophthalmology), and garment industry, Jesus' words seem designed to cut their boasting at every level. Pride had redirected their focus away from eternal issues and their hearts had grown indifferent to spiritual realities. "We do not need a thing" was their own assessment, but it was sadly misguided. They were in desperate need. It is all too possible to be in need without knowing it.

What does Jesus say to nominal Christianity? "I am about to spit you out of My mouth" (3:16). He is nauseated by their complacency. A visit to the regions of Laodicea today will reveal no evidence of the church. But, with such warnings comes the offer of mercy: "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" (3:18). He invites them to trade with Him for the free offer of mercy that He gives! Again, for this to be possible, repentance must take place. They must be "earnest, and repent" (3:19). Repentance has been a key feature of these letters from the start (2:5, 16, 21, 22; 3:3, 19). Jesus desires a repentant church.

With repentance, the New Testament marries faith. The two go together as husband and wife. "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" (3:20). Although it is tempting to interpret these words evangelistically, and personally, as Jonathan Edwards and C. H. Spurgeon did, the mention of eating and drinking might suggest that what is view here is something different. These are letters to churches. The mode of expression has been corporate rather than individual. Is Jesus thinking here of His spiritual (Spiritual!) presence at the Lord's Table? Could it be that their nominalism had driven Him away from the sacrament of the Supper, giving attention to their nominal nature? Perhaps. The Lord's Supper is, after all, an anticipation of the "wedding supper" of the Lamb (Rev 19:9, 17). Feasting without Jesus is a meaningless activity.

Jesus stands outside the door. It is not so much a picture of weakness and inability as of accusation and contempt. He will only come on invitation. Only warm hearts can bring him in. Coldness, s even lukewarmness s drives Him outside.

A promise is offered to the conqueror. A place at the throne! That is what He offers: "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" (3:21).

Can anything be more wonderful or unexpected?

## Summary

There is a pattern in each of these seven letters. Jesus makes a spiritual assessment of these churches based on two fundamental issues:

- i. Each letter tells us something that Jesus "knows" about the church. Five of them spell it out as "I know your deeds" (2:2, 19; 3:1, 8, 15). His assessment is based not simply on their knowledge of the gospel, but on what they *do* with that knowledge. "What have you done with the gospel?" is the measure by which the church is judged. Faith is expressed in terms of *faithfulness*.
- ii. A willingness to suffer for the gospel is one of the principal ways of measuring spiritual faithfulness (2:3, 13, 19; 3:8). The cross has to be more than a symbol of what Jesus did in the past; it must also represent the way the church suffers *for Jesus sake!* From the very beginning, the cross is the way to life, and death the way to victory. Suffering for righteousness sake and spiritual maturity are always married together. The church walks in the footsteps of a crucified Saviour.

How do the churches fare? Only two churches avoid criticism, Smyrna and Philadelphia. The rest receive stinging rebukes. In summary, we can say that Jesus is concerned about three things:

- i. Many of the churches emerge as compromised rather than committed. There is praise, too. But there are serious areas of concern. Sexual immorality and idolatry are the chief problems in at least two of the churches (Pergamum, Thyatira). In both, false teaching had led to false behaviour, as it always does
- ii. Two of the churches have developed a concern for reputation. (Sardis, Laodicea). When the church thinks more of how the world perceives her rather than how Jesus perceives her, she is on the verge of apostasy. Size, numbers, financial balances, these are statistics that can damn the church.
- iii. Ephesus, together with Laodicea had become content with mediocrity. They had "forsaken their first love" (2:4). Laodicean church was typical of this, in that was "neither warm nor hot." These churches had abandoned the zeal that had insisted on nothing but the best for Jesus. Their approach to discipleship had become minimalist. "How little can I get away with?" rather than, "What more can I do?"

What are we to do to ensure glory? "Overcome." Seven times Jesus says, "To him who overcomes..." (2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21). What is he talking about? *Conquering!* The same word comes again at the end of the book of Revelation: "He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be My son" (21:7). The thought is that of perseverance in the face of massive obstacles and opposition. What North-Americans call "stick-to-it-iveness." Keeping going when things get tough. "Where there's life there's hope" folk say, but the real truth is, "where there's hope, there's life!" It is the prevailing message of the book of Hebrews, especially chapter 12. Keep on running the race that is set before you and don't look back! Keep on looking to Jesus to the very end. That is the only way to live for Jesus Christ.

What are the consequences of failure for the church? These letters reflect Jesus' commitment to his covenant. He blesses, but he also curses. To those who overcome, he promises his presence and guidance. To those who do not, he threatens extinction. He removes the candlestick from those who fail to walk in his ways. Can anything be more sobering than that?

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