

REVELATION STUDY GUIDE

Chapter 3

As we continue to look at the 7 churches of Revelation one of the common statements that Jesus makes is “I know your works”. He makes this statement to 5 of the 7 churches and to the other two churches He says “I know where you dwell” (Pergamum) and “I know your tribulation” (Smyrna). Jesus knows. He knows what you have done and what you haven’t done. He knows the good and the bad and the ugly. As a true follower of Christ who is enduring persecution – Jesus knows. As a disingenuous follower who is simply going through the motions – Jesus knows. Jesus knows the churches. He knows the pastors. He knows the elders. He knows the people. He knows the churches and people of the first century and He knows the churches and people of the last century and He wrote a book and spoke words that were applicable and suitable for both. That is the God we serve and love. Regardless of the type of church or situation that you are apart of - God knows every detail, thought, and action of those in leadership as well as those in attendance. He knows the end from the beginning. He is the Alpha and the Omega.

This conversation about Jesus knowing our works reminds us that He knows the difference between the visible and invisible church. The visible church is the professing membership of the Christian Church which claim to follow Christ. The invisible church is commonly referred to as the true church and only Christ knows the difference. The visible church claims to follow Christ and the invisible church truly does follow, serve, and possess saving faith. These letters to these churches communicate to us that regardless of what the world thinks or sees that the Lord will judge righteously and judge based on the heart. As we are reminded about King David – “man looks at the outward appearance but God looks at the heart”. This is true of churches as well as individuals. We are told that sadly a majority of the churches addressed in the book of Revelation are found to be filled with the visible church but not the true church. We should be mindful of this today as well without unnecessarily judging other’s hearts. Jesus said that we will know them by their fruits.

The last days have the potential to be the most confusing and disillusioning days in the history of the world. Persecution, famine, and sword are all prevalent in Revelation’s description of the last days. We are reminded that there will be deception, suffering, and betrayal. The last days are purportedly more difficult and challenging than any other time as indicated by Jesus himself. (Matthew 24:21) This is a time when the church will need to know that God knows. Jesus affirms this in every letter to every church. He knows. There is something extremely encouraging to know that there is someone else who understands what you are going through and also someone who has faced it themselves. This is true in our human interactions and even more so to know that the Savior of the world understands our plight and has compassion for our circumstances. Take heart and be of good comfort. It doesn’t matter if anyone else understands, believes, or knows – Jesus does.

V.1-6 Sardis

The Sardis church is often referred to as the dead church because of Jesus blatant accusation toward them as such. He says “You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead.” This is the church that looks good on the outside but is a disaster on the inside. If you have ever seen a vehicle or a house that looked nice and was in good shape on the outside only to go in

and see that it was completely disheveled and alarming then you have a pretty good idea about what Jesus is saying about the church in Sardis. Historically, Sardis was a highly fortified city on an elevated landscape that made it difficult to attack and conquer. But this also made the city complacent and overconfident. We know from history that two different times this city was surprised by attack and overthrown because of their lethargy. Jesus used this well known fact as an illustration of what would happen to them spiritually if they didn't change. Jesus' command is to "wake up" and strengthen what little remains or that will die too. Jesus says that if they do not wake up then He will come like a thief and come against them. This language by Jesus is always referred to in Scripture as Jesus coming in judgment and never in consolation. This is severe language by the Lord of the church and should be jarring to all who are overconfident, prideful, and unprepared.

Jesus' one consolation for the church is that there are a few people who have not been corrupted by the other people's deadness and they will be preserved in white garments because of their perseverance. Jesus' final reminder to the church is that those who overcome will never have their names blotted out of the book of life in addition to their white garments. The picture that we get is that there is a book in heaven that contains the names of all people and that some are blotted out because of their unbelief. Regardless of whether God adds the names of His saints as they become part of the kingdom of God or whether everyone starts in the book and is removed it is important to find your name in the book of life. (Rev. 13:8; 17:8; 20:11-15; 21:27) Although God needs no book to record any historical facts this may be a literal way that provides confirmation for angels and saints alike. This may also be part of understanding Jesus' assurance that those who are victorious will be confessed before the Father and His angels. Salvation and the lack thereof will be publicly witnessed before the courts of heaven where hearts and intentions are all laid bare.

The structure for the Sardis letter follows:

Christ – The one who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars (Rev. 3:1)

Commendation – Works that are incomplete are the only saving grace (Rev. 3:1b-2)

Correction – They are a dead church that needs to wake up, remember, keep, and repent. (Rev. 3:1a & 3a)

Consequence – If they don't wake up Jesus will come like a thief. (Rev. 3:3b)

Concession – There are a few people who have not soiled their garments (Rev. 3:4)

Conquering – Those who conquer will be clothed in white, forever located in the book of life, and their faith confessed before the Father by Jesus himself. (Rev. 3:5)

V.7-13 Philadelphia

The church in Philadelphia is one of the limited bright spots in Jesus' assessment of the 7 churches. This church is often referred to as the faithful or true church. Jesus starts by addressing himself in a powerful way in the first description we see that is not included in John's vision of the Son of Man. He declares that He is the holy one, the true one, the one who has the key of David, and the one who controls both open and closed doors. Part of this is a direct quote from Isaiah 22:22 where we see Eliakim receiving the authority of King Hezekiah and Jesus then taking this verse and revealing that the ultimate fulfillment is present in His own work and

personhood. This reminds us that the letters to the churches were not just historical documents that were only written to churches in ages past. They are as true and relevant today as they have ever been because God is able to contextualize information for all people for all time.

Jesus commends this church that they have kept God's Word and have not denied His name. He declares that He has placed before them an open door which no one is able to shut. Many commentators interpret this to be an open door to share the Gospel, but we have no confirmation of this or way of knowing Christ's intention although it is a tremendous opportunity that can't be denied. The second benefit that Jesus declares for this church is that its enemies will be judged and will have to publicly come to terms with the realization that Jesus has loved and favored them. I picture something similar to the encounter that Joseph in the Old Testament has with his brothers who have rejected him and sold him into slavery only to find themselves indebted to him for their own survival. The final blessing that we see Jesus declaring over this church comes in v.10 "Because you have kept my word about patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world." There is way more information and discussion concerning this topic than is intended for this brief commentary, but I will at least help us ask some pertinent questions and provide some resources for further study. As I have studied this verse and its topic there are a few important questions that should direct our study: Is the hour of trial the same thing as the Day of the Lord? Is Jesus implying that He will keep His church from the hour of trial in its entirety or is He indicating that He will preserve them through it similar to the other significant trials that we see throughout Scripture? (i.e. The Exodus) How does John 17:15 relate to Jesus' promise where He asks the Father not to take His disciples out of the world but to keep them from the evil one? These questions and more should direct your study in determining Jesus' intentions about this promise that He makes to the church. This verse is widely debated in its interpretations and support of when Jesus will return. The three primary options that have been exhibited by scholars and commentators concerning the rapture of the church are Pre Tribulation, Mid Tribulation, and Post Tribulation. Will Jesus return before the tribulation, in the middle of the tribulation or after the tribulation? For further study:

<https://www.pre-trib.org/articles/all-articles/message/the-rapture-in-revelation-3-10/read> (Pre Trib)

https://www.academia.edu/93432130/The_Church_and_the_Tribulation (Post Trib)

<https://docslib.org/doc/2828598/the-biblical-case-for-mid-tribulationism-the-biblical-case-for-mid-tribulationism> (Mid Trib)

Regardless of your conclusions and theological pontifications I think that it is very interesting that in Chapter 2 verse 10 we see Jesus' commendation to "be faithful unto death and you will receive the crown of life" and then in Chapter 3 verse 10 we see His commitment to keep the Philadelphian church from the hour of trial. It is a great reminder for us that we can't control who Jesus will keep and how Jesus will keep His people from trial, but we can control our faithfulness unto death. If we are given a choice of which one is more important for us to focus on in the church it is certainly on determining how we can effectively influence faithfulness and not establishing exact intentions of Christ's words. Jesus repeated commendation to the church is "I know your works" not I know your interpretive ability. Certainly, Christ has made clear all that is necessary for life and salvation. Let us not miss the certainty of our need for faithfulness in our search for the jot and tittle.

The structure for the Philadelphia letter follows:

Christ – The holy and true one who has the key of David and controls all the doors. (Rev. 3:7)

Commendation – You have kept my word and not denied my name. (Rev. 3:8b)

Correction – None

Consequence – None

Concession – Jesus has provided an open door, the humbling of enemies, and protection from trial (Rev. 3:8a, 9-11)

Conquering – You will be a pillar in God's temple and you will receive the name of God. (Rev. 3:12)

V.14-22 Laodicea

As positive as Jesus appears to be with the previous church it seems to be the degree to which He is concerned for this church. Laodicea is often known or referred to as the Lukewarm Church. This church in many ways is the opposite of the church in Smyrna that Jesus commends deeply despite their persecution. The Laodiceans seem to exhibit no such persecution and in fact according to Jesus they are rich, prosperous, and in need of nothing (materially speaking). We see throughout the New Testament how difficult it is to be materially prosperous and spiritually faithful. We are reminded of the rich young ruler, the rich man and Lazarus, the camel through the eye of the needle, and Jesus comments about having two masters. This church in Laodicea evidently encapsulates all of the dangers associated with financial prosperity and the resulting failure that is too often present. The scary thing for us in the Western Church is that we are by all accounts the most prosperous church that has ever existed and it is with this determination that we heed the sobering warnings of Christ for this church and these people.

Jesus' accusation is that they are neither hot nor cold and because they are lukewarm He will spit them out His mouth. This is a scary consequence that is being proposed by Jesus since He is indicating that He will remove them from relationship with Him. Jesus' comparison to being lukewarm reminds us that there is no middle ground with God and that you are either with Him or against Him. There is no middle option and there is no middle ground before the judgment seat of Christ. We can all identify with the distastefulness of a lukewarm cup of coffee. Iced coffee is pleasurable and refreshing and hot coffee is comforting and alerting but lukewarm is neither refreshing or comforting. I don't think we should overspeculate about Jesus comment that it is preferable to be cold rather than to be lukewarm other than to understand that it is necessary to know one's coldness before there can be an attempt to become hot. When one is lukewarm there may be a tendency to think that it is good enough and believe that one is in an acceptable state or relationship with God when the opposite is true. We are reminded of the reality of this for those who will ask - Lord did I not cast out demons in your name, have I not done miracles in your name and His response will be depart from me because I never knew you. That is the danger of being lukewarm and provides the veracity of Jesus adamant declaration. When someone is lukewarm there is a tendency to think that if I can just make

myself a little warmer then I will be acceptable to God but when someone is cold there is a clear realization that the warmth of Christ is needed for any change in temperature.

Jesus' solution for the problem of lukewarmness is to be zealous and repent. (Rev. 3:19) His implication is that it would be much better to suffer and endure hardship so that you could be refined rather than go on in a spiritual stupor. He says that those whom He loves He reproves and disciplines. He indicates His patience and ardent desire for these individuals to see their current condition and immediately and fervently turn to Christ instead of their earthly riches, comforts, and pleasures. He concludes by describing the urgency of His request pictured in Jesus standing at the door knocking and beckoning to those on the other side. The marriage supper of the Lamb is ready for your arrival. Your place is set and available – open the door and receive my invitation to come to the banquet table of my love.

The structure for the Laodicea letter follows:

Christ – The faithful and true witness, the Amen, and the beginning of God's creation. (Rev. 3:14)

Commendation – None

Correction – You are lukewarm. You are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. (Rev. 3:16a & 17)

Consequence – I will spit you out of my mouth. Be zealous and repent to receive reproof and discipline. (Rev. 3:16 & 19)

Concession – Jesus is standing at the door knocking and beckoning. (Rev. 3:20)

Conquering – You will sit on Jesus' throne. (Rev. 3:21)