

The Church at Laodicea

By

Rev. Dr. Anthony J. Carr (2008) (c)

Revelation 3:14-22

14 "And to the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write, 'These things says the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God: 15 "I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. 16 So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth. 17 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 — 18 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, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see. 19 As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent. 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. 21 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. 22 "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'"

Introduction

Chief feature: Called the Medical City because they had success in treating eye complaints particularly well.

The city of Laodicea lay on the valley of Lycus. It was at the intersection of three important roads and controlled the approaches to Phrygia. It was one of the richest commercial centres in the world. This church was perhaps the wealthiest of them all.

History - The city was founded in 250 B.C. by Antipchus of Syria and was named after his wife Laodicê. Its importance was because of its position in that part of Asia Minor (Western Turkey).





Laodicea was noted for its banking and for its manufacturer of clothing from its local black wool. It also had a famous medical school situated in its borders. Its wealth was so great that when the city was devastated in A.D. 61 by an earthquake the citizens were so rich they refused help from Rome and rebuilt the city themselves with their own money.

Its medical school of world famous. It specialised in ear and eye complaints and the medicines they created were transported throughout the world. Finally the city had a large contingent of Jews. It was estimated at this time the Revelation was written there were some 7,000 Jewish men living in the city. They were powerful and had been granted rights to preserve their own customs.

The Christian church in Laodicea had been established by the preaching of Epaphras. (See Col 1:7, 4:12, 16). Interesting to note that Paul speaks of a letter to the Laodiceans. Many academics suggest that in fact it was the letter to the Ephesians that was passed onto these other churches in turn.

The city was unique in that it had no natural water supply. The Romans built a series of viaducts and pipes travelling over six miles to each the city. This picture shows Roman workmanship of the pipe system that existed at that time. The Romans used concrete to connect pipes made out of stone and bored to the diameter required to pass the water through by gravity. There is evidence that nearby Hierapolis provided them with the water. It would be warm on leaving its source then get hotter as it travelled in the heat of the day finally arriving in the homes of Laodicea. Large earthenware pots holding many gallons of water would be placed in cellars and allowed to grow cold before using.

Almost the only intact piece of building is what is known as the triple gate which was dedicated to Domitian (81-96). (Shown below).



Another view of the ruins of this once wealthy city.



Hierapolis

This city is about six miles away from Laodicea and very important for the continuance of its life. From here the Laodicean authorities obtained all of their water supplies.

The picture below shows the grand entrance to the city.



Water flowing constantly from the various rivers overspill with large calcium contents over the mountains into the valley. A sight that can be seen from miles away and is a stunning view.



The Result of thousands of years of water pouring from calcium drenched rivers over these high hills. Near to it can look vomit!

The deacon Philip and his four daughters who prophesied are said to have moved to this city (Acts 21:8-9). There is a church overlooking the city named after Philip built in about the 6th century with a baptism tank built into the main isle of the church. Its ruins can be explored even today. Below the picture shows a small number of the larger grouping of tombs spread over a wide area of the town.



There are only a few historical facts known about the origin of the city. No traces of the presence of Hittites or Persians have yet been found. However it was customary to build a temple on the site of such a natural phenomenon. The Phrygians built a temple dedicated to Hieron probably in the first half of the third century BC. This temple would later form the centre of Hierapolis. It was already used by the citizens of the nearby town Laodicea, a city built by Antiochus II Theos in 261-253 BC.



Coin of Eumenes II

Hierapolis was founded as a thermal spa early in the second century BC and given by the Romans to Eumenes II, king of Pergamum in 190 BC. The city was named after the name of the existing temple, or possibly to honour Hieras, wife of Telephos — son of Heracles by a Mysian princess Auge - the mythical founder of the Attalid dynasty. The city was expanded with proceeds from the booty from the Battle of Magnesia in 190 BC, where Antiochus the Great was defeated by Eumenes II who had sided with the Romans. Thus Hierapolis became part of the Pergamum kingdom.

Hierapolis became a healing centre where doctors used the hot thermal springs as a treatment for their patients. The city began issuing bronze coins in the second century BC. These coins give the name Hierapolis (town of the temple Hieron). This name eventually changed into Hierapolis (Holy city). ^[1]

In 133 BC, when Attalus III the last Attalid king of Pergamum died, he bequeathed his kingdom to the Rome. Hierapolis thus became part of the Roman province of Asia. The Hellenistic city was slowly transformed into a Roman town.

In the year 17 A.D., during the rule of Emperor Tiberius, an earthquake destroyed the city. In 60 AD, during the rule of Emperor Nero, an even more severe earthquake left the city completely in ruins. Afterwards the city was rebuilt in Roman style with the financial support from the emperor. It was during this period that the city attained its present form. The theatre was built in 129 AD when Emperor Hadrian visited the town. It was renovated under Septimus Severus (193-211). When Emperor Caracalla visited the town in 215 he bestowed on the city the much coveted title of Neocoror, according the city certain privileges and the right of sanctuary.

This was the "golden age" of Hierapolis. Thousands of people came to town to benefit from the medicinal properties of the hot springs. New building projects were started: two Roman baths, a gymnasium, several temples, a main street with a colonnade and a fountain at the hot spring. Hierapolis became one of the most prominent cities in the field of the arts, philosophy and trade in the Roman Empire. The town grew to 100,000 inhabitants and became wealthy. According to the geographer Stephanus of Byzantium, the city was given its name because of the large number of temples it contained (again a sign of wealth).

Antiochus the Great had sent 2,000 Jewish families to Lydia and Phrygia from Babylon and Mesopotamia, later joined by Jews from Palestine. There grew a Jewish congregation in Hierapolis with their own more or less independent organizations. It is estimated that the Jewish population in the region was as high as 50,000 in 62 BC. ^[2] Several sarcophagi in the necropolis attest of their presence.

Through the influence of Paul the Apostle a Christian church was founded here while he was at Ephesus. Philip the Apostle spent the last years of his life here with his three daughters. In

80 AD he was martyred by crucifixion and was buried here. His daughters remained active as prophetesses in the region. The Martyrium was built on the spot where the apostle was crucified.

The city was visited for the last time by a Roman emperor in 370 by Emperor Valens during his campaign against the Sassanid king Shapur II.

During the 4th century the Christians filled the Plutonium (a sacred cave,) with stones, thus giving evidence that the paganism had been entirely supplanted by the Christian faith. In 531 the Byzantine emperor Justinian raised the bishop of Hierapolis to the rank of metropolitan. The town was made a See of Phrygia Pacatiana. The Roman baths were transformed to a Christian basilica. During the Byzantine period the city continued to flourish and also remained an important centre for Christianity. In the early 7th century, the town was devastated by Persian armies and again by a destructive earthquake. Afterwards came a slow recovery. In the 12th century, the area came under the control of the Seljuk sultanate of Konya. In the year 1190 crusaders under Frederick Barbarossa fought with the Byzantines and conquered the town of Philip the Apostle. About thirty years later, the town was abandoned and the Seljuks built a castle in the 1220s. The site was abandoned for good in the late 1300s.

Six miles away was a very important town for Laodicea. In fact its whole existence depended upon it. It was from here that water was transported some six miles into the city. The water I am told has been a constant temperature of 83 degrees F for at least a thousand years. A local hotel has capitalised on it and built four swimming pools before the water flows over the mountain into the valley leaving the rich deposits of calcium behind it.

Bible Text

Revelation 3:14

"And to the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write, 'These things says the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God:

This is the only church to come under the complete condemnation of the Lord. He cannot find any redeeming feature in it. To prepare them he establishes who he is in a unique way. To this Church only does he say that he is the Amen, that is, Truth. When he speaks or acts it is all the same. If he praises a church or blames them for some aspect the decision is always made in truth. No extra embellishments, no hiding the facts his advice and comment is absolute truth Isa 65:16 God twice refers to himself as the God of Truth.

"So that he who blesses himself in the earth Shall bless himself in the God of truth; And he who swears in the earth Shall swear by the God of truth; Because the former troubles are forgotten, And because they are hidden from My eyes. "

He continues with his titles to this despicable Church.

McArthur says that 'this was an appropriate way to begin the letter to the Laodiceans because it affirmed to them that Christ had accurately assessed their unredeemed condition. It also affirmed that His offer of fellowship and salvation in verse 20 was true, because God's promises were confirmed through His work.' In truth he could as well say that Christ is the faithful and true witness. He looks beyond the motivation of man and the sometimes evil intentions that produce and we see the perfect true witness of the Spirit in every situation.

Care has to be taken with the words 'the Beginning of the creation of God.' Those who do not believe in the deity of Christ will use this text to show a beginning of time when Christ was created. There is enough evidence in the NT to refute this claim conclusively. The text does not intend to incorporate Christ into the cosmos and the creation, but rather to designate him as the principle standing outside all time, as the origin of cosmos and creation. The same is true of the self-designation of Jesus. These epithets apply equally to God and signify not a temporal and worldly being, but rather the One existing before all time and into eternity.

Revelation 3:15-16

"I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. 16 So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of my mouth. "

There is more hope for someone to be either hostile or cold towards God than a Christian who is lukewarm. Not many people can tolerate drinking lukewarm water. The Lord is more content with an out and out opponent to Christianity like Saul who became Paul than a half-hearted Christian. The problem in Laodicea was money and position. There are always dangers about when the Church becomes prosperous. Did not Jesus say that it was more difficult for a wealthy person to enter heaven than any other sort? The Jews were very prosperous in this area and held considerable financial power. Some of these Jews had become Christian and gradually the previous life had eroded the Christian life. They became half-hearted about both the worldly and Christian issues. It is very difficult for the Holy Spirit to work in such circumstances.

John again uses an illustration that would be immediately recognisable to all those hearing the reading of this letter. The vision of the calcium deposits would become apparent as they looked like vomit. Their water would arrive lukewarm and needed to be cooled.

Revelation 3:17

"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 —

Often there is confusion in some Christian circles about being prosperous is part of the Christian testimony. There is some modern preaching about the Lord making his people prosperous and rich. If a careful analysis is made of the various texts and their contexts it can be seen that a changed life through conversion leads to a more focused and productive life. In my long Christian life I have seen many young people without purpose in life become converted and receive a new ambition to succeed in life particularly those from a disadvantaged background. Yes, the Lord is with them but it is combined with a new self desire to be self-sufficient and do well. The problem with some rich people is that they mistake their riches for spirituality. Possibly in this case the local church believed that as a person became wealthier so it was perceived he or she became more spiritual. The Holy Spirit comes straight to the point. 'You think you are rich in spiritual terms, wrong.' 'You are

wretched, miserable, poor, blind and naked.’ This text shows how deceived a church can become. So what we learn from this is that wealth is not necessarily the sign of spirituality.

Revelation 3:18

“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, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see.”

The Lord offers his people real gold. This gold has been subjected to intense heat. The gold spoken of here is the Christian life that has been tested in the most essential crucibles of life. [I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire] Pure gold; such as has been subjected to the action of heat to purify it from dross. As 1 Peter 1:7 explains “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, honour, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ,” This gold will make its owners extremely rich towards God. Rich in friendship and favour.

The Lord is willing to clothe his people with a garment of salvation so they will not appear naked when they finally meet him. The garment will be white as a sign of purity and they will be garments of salvation.

The anointing of the eyes is important in two respects both a natural one and a spiritual one. Close to this city were to be found the original optometrists. In Hierapolis there was a mud that contained healing properties for eyes and people from all over the world tried to purchase their mud made up into tablets to cure severe eye disorders. Using this as an illustration the Lord offers to give his people spiritual sight. What will they be able to see with their spiritual eyes anointed by the Holy Spirit? Barnes put it well when he said they would be able to see the grace of God, the beauty of the day of salvation, the loveliness of the person and work of Christ and so on.

Revelation 3:19

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

The writer no doubt had in mind the text from Hebrews “For whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives.” Heb 12:6.

The Lord entreats them to return to the life they once lived. Stir up zeal within them and repent. Repentance towards God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ was the original message of the Apostles. That foundational truth has never departed from the teaching of the Church. It is the place for a new beginning for all Christians. The Lord is gracious to hear us and forgive us of all our sin. What a grace Saviour we do have.

Revelation 3:20

“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.”

The state of this Church was dire. The picture we have is of Jesus standing outside the Church and knocking to be let in. Can there be a more pitiable state than this? What a spiralling down of the testimony there must have been. How deceived the people had become. They met week by week, offering worship, praise and listening to the preaching of the Word of God. Yet he is still outside pleading to come in.

The Holy Spirit seemed to have given up on the Church and now makes his appeal to the individual. "If anyone hears my voice and opens the door I will come in to him and dine with him" The Lord offers an intimate and enduring relationship. We only offer intimate meals with someone with either respect or love. Jesus loves us and offers intimate relationships with all and any who will open the door of their hearts to him.

Revelation 3:21

"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."

The promise to all believers is to have unbroken fellowship with Christ throughout eternity. That is a great privilege itself. But Christ offers more to those who overcome the many obstacles of life. He gives the right to sit with Christ on his throne. In the five churches out of seven he offers overcomers many privileges. They will eat of the tree of life(2:7), take the crown of life (2:10), be protected from the second death (2:11), take of the hidden manna, (2:17), a white stone with a new name written on it (2:17), be given the authority to rule nations (2:26-27), The morning star (2:28), white garments, symbolising purity and holiness (3:5), the honour of having Christ confess their names before God the Father and the holy angels in heaven (3:5), to be made a pillar in God's temple (3:12) and to have their names written on them the name of God, of the New Jerusalem and of Christ.

Revelation 3:22

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

The letter ends with the same admonishment as to all the other churches. It is essential that the Church listen to what the Spirit is saying to them. Otherwise ritual and formality takes over from the spontaneity of the moving of the Holy Spirit.