

## LAODICEA

Forty-three miles southeast of Philadelphia (and only one hundred miles from Ephesus), Laodicea closes the circle of the seven cities of Revelation. Laodicea was the gateway between the inland kingdom of Phrygia and the descent from the mountains down the Maeander River to Ephesus and Miletus. The Lycus Valley was in a cleft between two mountain ridges – the one to the south rising eight thousand feet; the one to the north, five thousand feet. Laodicea was built by Antiochus II in 250 B.C. to command and defend this important gateway to inland Turkey and all points east. He named the city after his wife, Laodice. (If you run out of candy and roses, there's another idea for you.)

The Lycus Glen (*lycus* means “wolf”) was a double glen. Laodicea was built on the lower glen; Colossae was ten miles east on the upper glen. Six miles north of Laodicea was Hieropolis, with its hot springs and gleaming white calcareous terraces – like at Mammoth Springs in Yellowstone. Today, Hieropolis draws more tourists than either Colossae or Laodicea, and it is now called Pamukkale – “Cotton Castle” – because of the white bluffs created by the hot springs.

You know Paul's letter to the Colossians, and another to Philemon. At least most of you have copies lying around your house somewhere. “*For I want you to know how greatly I strive for you, and for those at Laodicea,*” wrote Paul to the Colossians (2:1). He had sent three letters together with the runaway slave, Onesimus, and his very good friend Tychicus. Philemon, the master from whom Onesimus had run away, was a member of the church at Colossae. Paul's letter to Philemon begged for Onesimus to be freed. Paul asked that those in the Colossian church share their letter with the church at Laodicea and, likewise, that they read the letter Paul had written to the Laodiceans. Doubtless Paul wrote many letters that have not been preserved, but one we know of specifically is this letter to Laodicea that none of us have ever seen. Maybe we get hints about why the Laodiceans did not care enough to preserve Paul's letter when we hear the cryptic message to the Laodiceans in Revelation. Somebody lost it in the pile of junk on their desk ... or perhaps they didn't think it was very important ... or maybe Paul was a little too harsh, so they threw it away. How interesting it would be if we could see what Paul's concerns and opinions were about the church at Laodicea thirty or forty years before the scathing indictment we read in Revelation. Anyway, these three cities were within sight of each other. At the time of the writing of Revelation, Laodicea was the most important of the three.

When Antiochus II founded the city, he settled it with Syrians and Jews from Babylon. The Jewish community was large and influential (estimated to be about seventy-five thousand adult men in 43 A.D.). There is no mention of trouble, however, between the Jews and the Christians at Laodicea. In fact, there does not seem to be any trouble at Laodicea period. It had been a “melting pot” of many races, cultures, and religions from its beginning. The Laodiceans had learned to live in harmony and compromise. *We* would salute them. John does not salute them. He thinks they are insipid and disgusting. I am getting ahead of my story, perhaps, but many have suggested that John was just a raving fanatic who could not tolerate normal, healthy people. Indeed, from the first to the twenty-first centuries, there is a gap of language, culture, setting, and perspective. Whatever we conclude about that, however, it is very clear that John thinks the Laodiceans have melted their faith in the melting pot along with everything else. Whatever light they had once known has become “the night in which all cats are gray.” (T.S. Eliot)

Laodicea was built on an almost square plateau several hundred feet high. It might have become a famous fortress city, except for lack of water. If they had built the city closer to the river, the position would have been indefensible. As it was, they built two miles south of the Lycus River in a strong, defensible position, but the city’s water supply had to be brought from springs six miles to the south by way of a stone aqueduct. Though in the opposite direction from Hieropolis, the water still came from hot springs. You get the picture? The water that came into Laodicea was tepid. Every time somebody came to visit, they thought it was all wonderful – until they took a drink of water. And under siege, it was a simple thing for an enemy to cut off the water supply by wrecking the aqueduct and then just waiting. That happened many times in the city’s history. Under the protection of Rome, however, Laodicea had become a wealthy city of trade and commerce, and it had become the banking center for the entire region.

As we have come to expect, some very specific attitudes and situations are reflected in John’s letter. Tepid water, for instance. But aside from that, Laodicea was rich and prosperous and full of pride. The city had an easygoing confidence in its importance and in its ability to handle whatever came along. The earthquake of 17 A.D. destroyed much of Laodicea, as it had devastated Sardis and destroyed Philadelphia. In this crisis also, Tiberius had been generous in helping to rebuild the city. When again, in 60 A.D., Laodicea was devastated by an earthquake, she refused the help Rome offered. It was not anger toward Rome; quite the

reverse. The citizens simply said, “We have plenty of money and resources of our own – please don’t trouble yourself.” (Tacitus, the Roman historian, commented: “Laodicea rose from the ruins by the strength of her own resources, and with no help from us.”) There may be an interesting story here about self-sufficiency versus government welfare, but we will leave it for the historians.

What made Laodicea so economically strong? Aside from the obvious blessings of being the major city of a region, being on a major trade route, and sitting between two fertile valleys, Laodicea had some specific advantages. It was the seat of one of the most famous medical schools of ancient times. Aside from hot springs and the usual healing cults that go with them, Laodicea made a special ointment for ears, and it made and exported an eye remedy (Phrygian Powder) that was world-famous.

Even more important economically, Laodicea raised a special breed of dark-wooled sheep. From this wool they made glossy, dark-purple garments that were, beyond dispute, the softest and most elegant attire of their kind in the known world. An outer tunic made from this wool (called a *trimita*) was the most coveted wearing apparel in the Roman Empire. The breeding secret for raising this kind of sheep belonged to one of the religious trade guilds. The secret was so closely guarded, in fact, that the secret has been lost. To this day, the modern world has no wool to match the excellence of that which came from ancient Laodicea. At least so I am told.

So a few important monopolies on top of a basically sound foundation meant that Laodicea was sitting pretty. Having the capital, she went on to become a center of banking and monetary exchange. Financially and materially speaking, things went very well indeed in Laodicea. And the high point of the city’s fame and pride centered around three things: wealth, good eyesight, and beautiful garments. (Material prosperity, health, and luxury.)

Listen again to what John writes, and watch the laser beam: “*You say, ‘How rich I am! And how well I have done! I have everything I want.’ In fact, though you do not know it, you are the most pitiful wretch: poor, blind, and naked. [Is he pushing any buttons?] So I advise you to buy from me [Christ] gold [purity] refined in the fire, to make you truly rich, and white clothes to put on to hide the shame of your [spiritual] nakedness, and ointment for your eyes so that you may see [what is truly important].*”

John is not being very nice! The Laodicean Christians, he says in Christ’s name, are desperately in need of refined gold from Christ – that

is, they lack true spiritual wealth and value. Instead of their famous dark-woolen garments, they need white garments (purity and truth) to cover their nakedness. And instead of their famous eye medicine, they need an ointment that will heal the blindness of their materialism and pride, which do not see or know the Christ or the Kingdom of God. The Laodiceans think they have it made – that they have it all. But from John’s perspective (and Christ’s), they are the most wretched congregation among the seven. And mostly it is *because* they think they have it all – and are content and spiritually lazy (“slothful” was the old word), and are no longer striving to grow, be faithful, or increase their spiritual worth and service.

Are we talking about Laodicea, or Corona del Mar? You can “fit the shoe” if you want to, but be careful. Because of Corona del Mar’s outer reputation, it would be easy to assume that I was intending potshots at Corona del Mar from behind the safety of John’s letters. There are some parallels, no doubt, from which none of us can entirely escape. But essentially I do not identify us with this seventh letter. There are exceptions, of course, but the Corona del Mar I know and deal with is not like its outer reputation – it is not at all like Laodicea. I want us to be clear about this. You may have a different opinion, of course. But speaking for myself, I do not experience Corona del Mar – certainly not the people of this church – as lukewarm, spiritually bored, too self-satisfied to learn or grow, or too prideful or small-minded to care what Christ might want from us or where Christ might be trying to lead us.

Lots of people take easy potshots at the well-to-do. But Jesus had many wealthy friends. The Bible has no problem with wealth, only with how we use it and to whom we are dedicated. Most of you know very well that I would preach against wealth if I really thought that was part of the message of the Gospel. People who give away money to prove themselves religious or holy are just as hung up on materialism as the greedy. Love and gratitude make us generous, and we cannot help but want to serve our Lord and bring increase and honor to His name and to His church. But we cannot trade the material for the spiritual – we cannot buy the spiritual with the material. Those who try to *buy* God’s favor star in some of the most scornful stories of the Bible. Most of you know, and I hope in this church we will never forget, that Covenant Sunday is not about fear or favor. It is about gratitude and devotion. We give in love and praise – or we keep it for a better day.

*“The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness.”* “Amen” is a difficult word to deal with. It means “So be it” or “Let it happen.” As used here, of Christ, it implies the One who speaks and it comes to be. In the

Gospels, Jesus sometimes begins a teaching with “Verily, verily” or “Truly, truly I say unto you.” The word being translated here is “amen.” “Amen, amen I say unto you ...” – “In the truth that will come to be, I say unto you ...” In John’s letter, remember, Christ IS The Amen: The Completer: The One who will bring it to be: The One who will finish it.

Christ is no beggar. Depend on it. Whatever does not match Christ’s truth and WAY will someday cease to be. We can depend on that too. And when we begin to know and believe it, that changes the way we see life, and the way we interpret everything that is going on here – including the way we try to participate in life itself.

But the Laodicean church has clearly ceased to bear witness to Christ or to the new order of life that Christ is bringing into being. The church at Laodicea is content to live in material prosperity – content to have compromised and adjusted its lifestyle and its beliefs to get along with everything and everyone. Reducing the message of salvation and eternal life in a lost and broken world to “people-pleasing” is not John’s idea of faithfulness or bearing witness to God’s truth. The letter begins by reminding the church that Christ is a faithful and true witness to God’s Kingdom, while they, on the other hand, have forsaken and deserted His cause. And the letter ends by reminding the Laodiceans that Christ is victorious (regardless of and despite all His ordeals), and that they will have no place with Him if they do not repent. (There was an old hymn we used to sing when I was a boy: “If you don’t bear the cross, then you can’t wear the crown.” I still hear the Marshallese congregation singing it from time to time. I think they might be from Smyrna.) John is not in the least interested in whether or not the church is *relevant* to the world of his time. He does not care if it is relevant to Rome, or the temple of Zeus, or Apollo, or even the emperor. He is concerned about the church being relevant to Christ, and to Christ’s time and purposes.

Many people have been intrigued by the anger of John toward this lukewarm congregation. The Laodiceans are not charged with any specific evil. They are not cold – they are not the indifferent enemies of Christ. Neither are they hot antagonists or zealots – *zestos* means “right at the boiling point.” They have no fire of enthusiasm, or dramatic conviction or purpose. They just sort of take it all in stride, like most of us would like to be able to do. “Be cool,” we used to say. Christ does not have much problem with His friends and, strangely enough, He loves and often admires His enemies. They often turn into His best friends. In both cases, there is passion and caring – something to work with – a chance to increase or to convert. So you can go on working with a Peter, and you can convert

a Paul – and either way, there is dynamism and drama and lots happening. But what can you do with the “neutral,” the mild, the uninspired and uninspirable – the insipid, the flaccid, the vapid? “*I will spew you out of my mouth.*” It sounds rather harsh, but in fact this is a very gentle translation for *vomitar*: You make me sick! **The church is the body of Christ.** How would you like to be told that you are the part of the body that makes Christ throw up? No, John is not being very nice. The Golden Mean may be the Greek Way, but it is not the Christian Way. We care too much! And we follow a Lord and Master who cares too much.

The last section of our passage may be the end of the letter to Laodicea, or it may be an epilogue to all seven churches: “*All whom I love I reprove and discipline.*” Interesting, I think, that the word used for “love” is not *agapan* – not *agape* – the high, unconquerable benevolence of the Almighty. It is *phileo* – the warmest and most tender affection. “All whom I personally cherish and care about as friends – those who are really close to me – I reprove and discipline.” (I wonder if there is a sermon in there somewhere. But I leave that to your meditations.) In John’s view of things, it is a *very* bad sign to discover that God is not asking or expecting very much from us. Jerome, one of the famous early church fathers, said, “The greatest anger of God is when God withdraws his anger.”

The greater the leader – and the higher the vision – the greater the burden that is laid on the followers. How long does it take us to figure out that JOY and HOPE do not come with being lukewarm – with being safe and secure and comfortable all the time? And who wants to be left out of building a kingdom, if that kingdom is true and real? Through John’s faith, we see again that each Christian and each church is part of a movement – a vast and crucial campaign on the part of Christ to redeem ALL the children on earth. And not just in a few minor ways or in a couple of areas, but to make ALL THINGS NEW!

The love of Christ is outrageous – exceedingly different. So is the kind of living and loving we are being called into. To be part of and faithful to this movement is the only important thing in life. There is no compromising with it. It requires everything – or nothing. To act in any manner that does not honor and show allegiance to this movement, and to the Christ who leads it, is every Christian’s and every church’s constant and watchful concern. To “bear witness to Jesus Christ” is likewise every Christian’s and every church’s highest desire, and the only true freedom there is in this world. And of course, it has the potential to get us all killed. I remind you that *martyrios* – to be a martyr – simply means “to bear witness.” Getting killed for it is just one of the possible side effects.

In that light, The Revelation keeps saying: If you are not in trouble, something is wrong. But do not fear faithful trouble. The turmoil of the great changeover – from physical power and domination, to the Lamb’s Kingdom coming – will embroil us all. But the coming Kingdom of Christ is all that truly matters, and it will be the only reality in the end. That message, I suppose, we can never get too clear or hear too often.

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And so we come to the favorite scene in all of the seven letters: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock ....” Laodicea, for all practical purposes, has excommunicated Christ. He is out of their attention, out of their hearts and minds, out of their living and their choices, out of their lives. Jesus is ever and always the most likely member of any church to get excommunicated (excluded from communion).

Despite it all, no matter how many times He has been disowned, ignored, locked out ... yet He stands knocking – unwilling to coerce – waiting for the light to break, a change of heart, a door to reopen. And when the door is opened, He comes in to eat ... to reinstate the communion meal ... to restore relationships ... to reestablish the love-force. Despite all the use and abuse this passage has received, it is indeed a beautiful parable.

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And so, we have taken a tour of the seven cities to whom John has written. Hearing their stories, in some ways we hear our own. I leave you to ponder which of the seven is most like our own church. Some of you will be wise enough to see bits of us in all of them, but which bits? And together we are left, as all who read The Revelation are left, to decide how we will bear our own witness in our own day and time.

I cannot resist: Some of you have a lot of prejudice against the zealous. You are terribly afraid that you might get fanatical if you aren’t careful. I’m not sure why you are worried about it. The message to Laodicea is: REPENT! Become zealous and walk in a New WAY. *Be zestos!* Get hot! In many, many ways, that is a good summary of the entire Revelation of John.