

05. Apocalypse 3:7-22 : Scene I continued

Letters to the churches of Philadelphia and Laodicea



Apocalypse 3:7

1. The glorified Christ addresses the community

And to the angel of the church
of Philadelphia write: The words of
the holy one, the true one,
who has the key of David,
who opens and no one shuts,
who shuts and no one opens.

‘I was dead, and see, I am alive forever
and ever; and I have the keys of Death
and of Hades’(1:18).

‘I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David;
he will open and none will shut;
he will shut, and no one will open’(Isaiah 22:22).





Theatre



Forum and Theatre



Odeon

Apocalypse 3:8

2. Christ's judgment of the community

I know your works. Behold, I have set before you an open door which no one is able to shut; I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and not denied my name.

It is Christ who has the authority to determine who may enter the holy city, the sanctuary of those who enjoy divine life. The Christians are being shut out of the synagogue and excluded from certain aspects of civic life, but the time will come when those who are now excluding them will recognise that true life comes through them.

Apocalypse 3:9

2. Christ's judgment of the community

Behold, I will make those of the **synagogue of Satan** [Smyrna, 2:9] who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie – I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and learn that I have loved you.

By their treatment of their brothers and sisters who have become disciples of Jesus, the members of the Jewish synagogue are demonstrating that they are acting for the great accuser, Satan. It is the Christian community which has inherited the promises which they have forfeited:

‘All the nations you have made shall come and bow down before you, O Lord’(Psalm 86:9).

Apocalypse 3:10

2. Christ's judgment of the community

Because you have kept my word of patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial which is coming on the whole world, to test the inhabitants of the earth.

The Christians of Philadelphia have proved faithful under persecution. Here they are assured that the exalted Christ will preserve them from failing the ultimate test which everyone has to undergo. We are reminded of the words of Jesus' prayer:

'Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil'(Matthew 6:13).

Apocalypse 3:11

3. Appeal addressed to the particular community

I am coming soon; hold fast to what you have, so that no one may seize your crown.

Jesus' promise to come soon picks up a theme that has been present since the opening verse of the Apocalypse. We are reminded of Jesus' words as recorded in the Gospel of John: 'A little while and you will no longer see me, and again a little while and you will see me'(John 16:16).

Apart from the coming that happens at the death of each Christian, Jesus comes to us constantly through the gift of his Spirit. Whatever the persecution they are suffering and however Jesus may appear to delay, he is assuring the Christians of Philadelphia that he has not abandoned them. They are being tested but they will always experience his coming.

Apocalypse 3:11

3. Appeal addressed to the particular community

I am coming soon; hold fast to what you have, so that no one may seize your crown.

Like the community in Thyatira, they are being asked to ‘hold fast to what you have’(compare 2:25), and like the community in Sardis, they are reminded of the crown that awaits them (compare 2:10).

Apocalypse 3:12-13

4. General appeal and promise of victory if appeal is heeded

If you conquer, I will make you a pillar in the temple of my God; you will never go out of it, and I will write on you the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem [the church] that comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name. Let anyone who has an ear, listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

Whoever remains faithful will be made a pillar in the temple of Jesus' God: standing for ever as a living sign of God's presence and choice. They will be given God's own name; they will be claimed by God as his own. They will belong to the holy city which is coming down from God, coming out of heaven. Heaven, throughout the Apocalypse, indicates the sphere of the divine. The holy city is the visible community on earth which is being constantly created by the divine initiative of grace. Christ also claims them as his own.

Apocalypse 3:12-13

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In 17AD in gratitude for the help given by the Emperor Tiberius in restoring the city after a devastating earthquake, the citizens of Philadelphia added a new name to their city: Neocaesarea.

The Christian community is the new Jerusalem, the city in which God, not the Roman emperor, reigns.

Apocalypse 3:14

1. The glorified Christ addresses the community

To the angel of the church in
Laodicea write:

In addressing his words to the angel of the church, here, as in the previous letters, John is addressing the historical community from the point of view of its relationship with the transcendent God.



Laodicea's importance lay in its position at the junction of the north-south road from Sardis to the coast and the west-east road from Ephesus to the interior.



Agora



Amphitheatre

Apocalypse 3:14

1. The glorified Christ addresses the community

The words of the Amen (ἀμήν, amen), **the faithful** [πιστός, pistos, 1:5] **and true** [ἀληθινός, alethinos] **witness** [μάρτυς, martyrs, 1:5], **the origin** [ἀρχή, arche] **of God's creation:**

In each of the letters we have seen that John highlights aspects of the risen Jesus that are of special significance for the particular community he is addressing. Here he introduces Christ as **the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the origin of God's creation.**

This takes us back to chapter one verse five where he introduced Christ as 'the faithful witness', and to verse seventeen where Jesus says of himself: 'I am the first and the last'.

Isaiah 65:16-18 speaks of God as the 'Amen-God'. He is claiming that the God of Israel is the real God, the faithful God, the God in whom we can place our trust.

Apocalypse 3:14

1. The glorified Christ addresses the community

The words of the Amen (ἀμήν), the faithful [πιστός, 1:5]
and true [ἀληθινός] witness [μάρτυς, 1:5],
the origin [ἀρχή] of God's creation:

John is reminding the Christians in Laodicea that they can place their trust in the risen Christ. It is he who has called them into community, and he will carry out the promise he has made of sustaining them in faith and bringing them to the goal of their yearning: the full communion with God which he now enjoys. Jesus has already been described as 'the Alpha and the Omega' (1:8), and 'the first and the last' (1:17).

Apocalypse 3:14

1. The glorified Christ addresses the community

The words of the Amen (ἀμήν), the faithful [πιστός, 1:5] and true [ἀληθινός] witness [μάρτυς, 1:5], the origin [ἀρχή] of God's creation:

‘The Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you ... was not Yes and No; but in him it is always Yes. For in him every one of God's promises is a Yes. For this reason it is through him that we say the Amen, to the glory of God’(2 Corinthians 1:19-20).

The expression ‘the origin of God's creation’ reminds us of the words of the prologue to John's Gospel: ‘All things came into being through him’(John 1:3).

Apocalypse 3:15-16

2. Christ's judgment of the community

I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to vomit you out of my mouth.

Laodicea was renowned for its undrinkable water. Neighbouring Colossae had a good source of fresh water, and the citizens of Laodicea built an expensive aqueduct to make their city self-sufficient. However Laodicea is not far from the high country of Hierapolis, which was noted for its hot and healing springs, and by the time the water from Colossae reached Laodicea it was lukewarm. The **water** was also renowned for causing stomach upsets: hence John's reference to their being lukewarm, and to causing the drinker to **vomit**.



Clay pipes carried water from Colossae



Travertine cliffs of Hierapolis in background

Apocalypse 3:17

2. Christ's judgment of the community

For you say, 'I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.' You do not realise that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked.

Laodicea had a reputation for being proudly **self-sufficient**, even to refusing all Roman aid in the reconstruction necessary after the earthquake of 60AD. It was noted for its prosperous agriculture, famous particularly for its **black wool**, and its position at the crossroads of two major trading routes made it a major **banking centre**. The medical school at Laodicea produced and marketed widely an **eye-ointment** which included chemicals from the neighbouring **hot springs**. They produce fine clothing. They are economically prosperous. They have a reputation for healing other people's eye complaints. However, they are naked, poor and blind.

Apocalypse 3:18

3. Appeal addressed to the particular community

Therefore I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire so that you may be rich.

The Christians are missing out on the wealth associated with the banks. The risen Christ offers them gold refined by fire. To grasp the significance of this, we must go back to where the symbols were first used. **Gold** first appeared in the portrait of the risen Christ where it symbolised divinity.

Fire first occurred in the portrait of Jesus, whose eyes are described as a flame of fire (1:14). Fire symbolises judgment. The divine life promised to the Laodiceans is one that has gone through the purifying fire of Christ's judgment: a judgment that is in view of forgiveness and salvation, and which holds out the promise of sharing his divine life.

Apocalypse 3:18

3. Appeal addressed to the particular community

and **white robes** [1:14] to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen; and **salve** to anoint your eyes so that you may see.

Instead of the black wool for which Laodicea was famous, the risen Christ offers them white robes. Clothing, as we saw earlier, symbolises the witness which they offer to others. That the clothing is **white** shows that Jesus is offering them a participation in his own luminous sharing in divine communion (see 1:14).

his head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow;

his eyes were like a flame of fire,

The medical school at Laodicea produced and marketed widely an **eye-ointment** which included chemicals from the neighbouring hot springs.

his feet were like brass, refined as in a furnace,

and his voice was like the sound of many waters

In his right hand he held seven stars, and

from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword [Hebrews 4:12-13]

and his face was like the sun shining with full splendour.

Apocalypse 3:19-20

3. Appeal addressed to the particular community

I reprove and discipline those whom I love. Love earnestly, therefore, and repent. Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.



Apocalypse 3:19-20

3. Appeal addressed to the particular community

I reprove and discipline those whom I love. Love earnestly, therefore, and repent. Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.

The letter is stern, but offered in a spirit of most profound love. We are left with the image of Jesus longing to share communion with them, knocking on the door, seeking entrance, but respecting their freedom to refuse him entry.

Since the Apocalypse is being read out to the community assembled for the Eucharist on the first day of the week, one cannot hear these words without thinking of the Eucharist.

Apocalypse 3:19-20

3. Appeal addressed to the particular community

I reprove and discipline those whom I love. Love earnestly, therefore, and repent. Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.

‘Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me’ (John 6:56-57).

‘Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them’ (John 14:23).

Song of Songs 5:1

I come to my garden, my sister, my bride;
I gather my myrrh with my spice,
I eat my honeycomb with my honey,
I drink my wine with my milk.

Eat, friends, drink,
and be drunk with love.

Apocalypse 3:21-22

4. General appeal and promise of victory if appeal is heeded

To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. Let anyone who has an ear, listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

This promise extends to all those who listen to the words of the risen Christ: they will sit with Christ on his Father's throne, participating in his mission of effecting God's will in the world.

If they are faithful to Jesus, the Christians of Laodicea, like the Christians of the other cities, will miss out on the supposed advantages that come to those who submit to Rome. They are promised the salvation that comes in the empire of God.



Lord, the light of your love is shining