

BITTER HONEY: THE REVELATION

Rodger Dalman

CHAPTER 3: MORE LETTERS

Verses 1-6

Christ identified Himself to the church at Sardis as He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars. The seven Spirits of God are introduced in Revelation 1:4. They are a symbol for the Holy Spirit present among the exile community. This symbol can be understood by comparing Zechariah 4:1-10, Revelation 4:5, and 5:6. The seven stars refer back to Revelation 1:20. The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches. Christ walks among the churches. His Spirit is in the churches, and He holds the church's angels in His right hand. All these symbols testify to Christ's ability to know what is happening in His church.

Christ emphasized that He knew what was happening in Sardis because people there had a wrong opinion of themselves. The church had drifted into apathy and had quenched the Spirit. As is usually the case, when people were no longer filled with the Spirit, they fell into sin. Christ told this church that although they had a reputation for being alive, they were really dead. Jesus was speaking about spiritual death (I Timothy 5:6; Matthew 8:22). Faith had almost disappeared from the church at Sardis. Christ called on them to feed the spark that remained.

If the church refused to repent, her Lord would come in judgment like a thief in the night. The phrase “thief in the night” is a New Testament symbol. God's judgment came equally suddenly in the Old Testament. Christ said that His return would be like the days of Noah when no one understood until the flood came and carried them away (Matthew 24:37-39). People often fail to see their destruction coming until it is too late. Both Sodom and Babylon were destroyed suddenly and unexpectedly (Jeremiah 50:24). Men are destroyed suddenly because they do not listen to God's word. God always reveals what He will do through His prophets. God does not say the day or hour, but He gives enough information that His people can understand as things happen around them. Only rebels who will not listen are destroyed without warning. If the church at Sardis refused to listen to Christ, He will come to them in judgment, and they will not see Him coming until it is too late.

There were a few believers in Sardis who had not corrupted themselves. Christ promised in Revelation 3:5 that they would walk with Him clothed in white. Other places in Scripture record that Christ will take away the filthy garments of His people, and clothe them with righteousness in white garments (Zechariah 3:4-5; Matthew 17:2; Revelation 4:4). Christ also promised His people in 3:5 that He would not erase from the book of life those who walk with Him. Surprisingly, many verses in the Bible talk about books in heaven. Something like the book of life is fairly common. Psalm 69:28 prayed, “May they be blotted out of the book of life, and may they not be recorded with the righteous.” Similar references can be found in Exodus 32:32-33; Psalm 556:8; 139:16 and Daniel 12:1. The books were mentioned often enough that there may be actual written records in heaven. The idea of a book of life might also have grown out of the written genealogies of the Jews (Ezra 2:62).

Verses 7-23

Christ identified Himself to the church in Philadelphia as the One who had the key of David. In Revelation 1:18, Christ had the keys of death and of Hades. This was a closely related symbol. The key of David came originally from the Old Testament. Christ said through Isaiah that He would remove Shebna from being steward of the royal household, and replace him with Eliakim. Then, “I will entrust him with your authority, and he will become a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the house of Judah. Then I will set the key of the house of David on his shoulder, when he opens no one will shut, when he shuts no one will open” (Isaiah 22:21-22). In the New Testament, the key of David became the keys of the kingdom. Jesus gave these keys to Peter in Matthew 16:19, and to all of His disciples in Matthew

18:18 and John 20:23. The authority Christ gave in Matthew 18 was clearly the power to expel men from the church if they refused to repent. The keys lock or unlock the door of the kingdom (Acts 14:27). The door was locked in judgment for rebellion and unbelief, but the door was opened by teaching the word of God. The leaders of Israel in Christ's day also had these keys. They should have brought men into the kingdom, but Christ condemned the leaders saying, "Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the day of knowledge; you did not enter in yourselves, and those who were entering in you hindered" (Luke 11:52). Christ told His people that He had the key of David because He had all the authority in His kingdom. Men who exercise authority in His name must be only His representatives doing His will.

The Lord told His people in Philadelphia that He knew their deeds. Christ saw that His children did have a little power, kept His word, and had not denied His name. So Christ said that He had put an open door before them which no one could shut. That door was the door of the kingdom opened by the key of David. Since His people were not denying the Lord's name, no one could shut them out of the kingdom. Then Jesus promised that the Jews who refused to believe would one day bow at the feet of Christ's children and know that He loves them. If this verse spoke of Israel as a whole, these words could have pointed to the time when Jews and gentiles would make up one people of God. If Christ was talking about individual unbelievers, this verse could be fulfilled when Christ returned in judgment.

Christ commanded His people to hold fast because He was coming quickly. He who overcame would remain in the temple of God, and would have His mark on them. The mark that Christ placed on their foreheads was the seal of God in chapter seven. Christ was describing those who were victorious over the antichrist's persecution. The same promises were recorded in Revelation 7:14-17 for those who came out of the great tribulation. Christ promised that He would deliver His people from the tribulation because they persevered through it. In this passage, Christ was not describing a rapture before the tribulation began. The Revelation was written to prepare Christ's church for her suffering. However, Jesus promised in Matthew 24:22 to cut short the tribulation for the sake of His elect. Then He would return in judgment to deliver His people.

Verses 14-22

Christ introduced Himself to Laodicea as the Beginning of God's creation. This could mean that Christ's spiritual body was the first thing God created. This verse could also be taken in the context of Genesis 49:3 and Deuteronomy 21:17. As the firstborn of the dead, Christ is the beginning of God's strength. This description did not deny that Christ existed in God before anything was created. Christ also described Himself as the Amen, the faithful and true witness. This description was carried over from Revelation 1:5 where Jesus was called the faithful witness. God said that He was a witness in several places in the Old Testament (Jeremiah 29:23; 42:5; Micah 1:2) However, He is not an observer of neutral events. God is a witness against the sin of His people in Laodicea.

Christ was a witness that the Laodiceans were neither hot nor cold. The Lord had given them a comfortable life, but their riches had turned their hearts from God. This has been a common pattern through history. When men need God, or fear Him, they turn to Him. When men feel self-sufficient, they turn away. Ezekiel explained that the sin of Sodom was having an abundance of food and careless ease, but not using it to help the poor. From Sodom's arrogance came abominations, and God destroyed it (Ezekiel 16:49). Ezekiel also described the treachery which Israel perpetuated against God, "when they live securely on their own land with no one to make them afraid" (Ezekiel 39:26). In their comfort, the church at Laodicea thought they were rich, but they were spiritually bankrupt.

Christ advised the Laodiceans to buy from Him gold refined by fire to become truly rich. The Lord may have been reminding them of His command in Matthew 6:20-21, "say up for yourselves treasures in heaven where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." The treasures of heaven are refined by suffering, not by comfort. Christ's people in Laodicea had placed their hearts on the things of this world, so their love had

grown cold. Their Lord commanded them to repent or He would have to discipline them, because the Lord always disciplined those He loved. God often said that He dealt with His children like a Father. For example, Moses told Israel, “Thus you are to know in your heart that the Lord your God was disciplining you just as a man disciplines his son” (Deuteronomy 8:5). Like a Father, God will discipline the Laodiceans. Then Christ promised that if His people repented and opened their hearts to Him, He would come in and dine with them in true abundance.

Christ promised that, “He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne” (verse 21). It may be valid to take this verse in two ways. On the one hand, it speaks of the mystic union of Christ and believers. Just as all believers died with Christ on His cross and rose with Him from the grave, they would also reign with Christ on His Father's throne (Colossians 3:3-4; Romans 6:8). It is also true that in the Bible, the word throne is used as a symbol for authority and power. Thus Christ has the throne of His father David (Luke 1:32). This verse in Revelation does not mean that believers would take turns trying out God's throne. It does mean in part that men are to rule the earth in the name of their Lord (Gen 1:28), and that elders share Christ's authority (Matthew 19:28). This verse also served as a bridge into the next chapter which would describe at length Christ sitting on the throne of God.