

EXAMINING THE SEVEN CHURCHES OF REVELATION 2 & 3

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EPHESUS

Background

Ephesus was “a major port city that was home to the provincial proconsul (appointed governor) and to major temples devoted to the goddess Artemis and the emperor.”¹ The more than 100,000 ft² temple of Artemis is “one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.”² It was a city of 250,000, and “was wealthy and cosmopolitan...it bustled with commercial life.”³

Recall Acts 19 when Paul is in Ephesus for at least 2 years (v. 10). The city included a practicing Jewish synagogue, but at least a faction of the Jewish worshippers grew tired of Paul’s teaching about “the Way,” so Paul moved on to preach to the Gentiles (Acts 19:8-10). A portion of city’s commercial prominence was directly tied into its status as the center of worship of Artemis. In a city so devoted to its goddess, it should not surprise us that it was also a city of intense spiritual battle:

“God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, so that even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick, and their illnesses were cured and the evil spirits left them” (Acts 19:11-12).

“...the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honor...A number who had practiced sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly. In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power” (Acts 19:17-20).

(Unless otherwise noted, all photos here and following are taken from Accordance Bible Software’s Bible Lands Photo Guide 3)



Ruins from the Temple of Artemis



The theater seated 25,000—it’s the site where the rioting mob shouted, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” (v. 34)



A statue of the goddess Artemis.



A gate leading to the agora, and possibly the site where Demetrius sold his goods and started the riot.

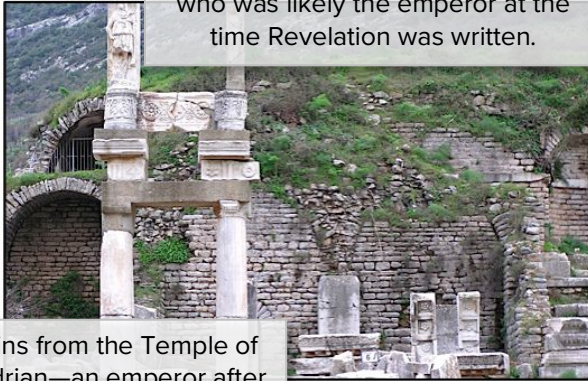
¹ Michael J. Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly: Uncivil Worship and Witness: Following the Lamb Into the New Creation* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011), 91.

² Bruce M. Metzger, *Breaking the Code: Understanding the Book of Revelation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 30-1.

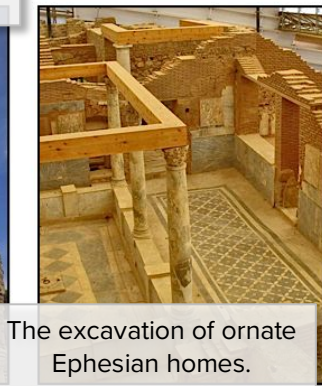
³ *Ibid.*, 30.

In the face of these positive events, opposition grew to the point of an intense riot when a silversmith, Demetrius, persuades his fellow businesspeople that Paul is threatening their livelihood by calling people to follow Jesus. The ensuing pandemonium (v. 32) was calmed only after the city clerk’s intervention. These events provide a sample of how closely the realms of religion and commerce were intertwined—and how passionately the Ephesians were opposed to even a perception of a threat to their livelihood.

Ruins from the Temple of Domitian, who was likely the emperor at the time Revelation was written.



Ruins from the Temple of Hadrian—an emperor after Revelation was written.



The excavation of ornate Ephesian homes.

In addition to these events, Ephesus was also the community where Paul’s disciple, Timothy, ministered. 1 and 2 Timothy also provide insight into the kind of struggles believers in Ephesus faced. Furthermore, the apostle John is thought to have gone to Ephesus following his time in Patmos, and possibly died there.⁴

The Message to Ephesus from Revelation 2:1-7

The message to Ephesus is mostly one of commendation for their steadfastness and intolerance of “wicked people...those who claim to be apostles but are not” (v. 2). The believers “have endured hardships for [Christ’s] name, and have not grown weary” (v. 3). It’s no surprise that those who were committed to Christ might face trials in a city so dominated by idolatry.

Everything is not positive, though. Jesus calls them to repent because they “had forsaken the love [they] had at first” (v. 4). Some believe this means the Ephesians lost their love for Christ; however, others find this to refer to losing a love for others. In this latter view, perhaps the ceaseless trials of opposition from others, the testing and exposure of false teachings, and the struggles with the Nicolaitans had calloused their hearts toward others. It’s not difficult to see how something like this could happen!

SUMMARIZING EPHEBUS

THE GOOD

- They are commended for their deeds—they have persevered in the face of great pressure.
- They have tested the teaching of others & have no tolerance for wickedness.

THE BAD

- They have regressed in the love they used to have—(either) for God and/or for others.

THE CALL TO ACTION

- They need to repent and return to doing “the things [they] did at first” (v. 5).

⁴ See, e.g., Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 438. Some also believe that Mary, Jesus’ mother, accompanied John and died there too.

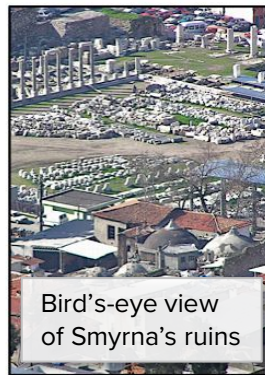
SMYRNA

Background

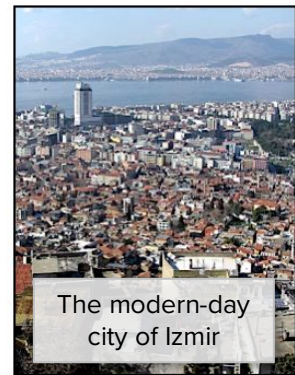
Like Ephesus, Smyrna (modern-day Izmir) was a port city full of activity as “a large and prosperous commercial center.”⁵ It was known as a city of great loyalty to Rome “expressed in a thriving imperial cult.”⁶ Smyrna was home to the world’s first temple dedicated to the goddess Roma, built some 300 years earlier; furthermore, it had also become the site of a temple dedicated to Emperor Tiberias just seven years before John’s Apocalypse.⁷ Only a few decades later (approx. A.D. 156), Smyrna would also become the city where the bishop Polycarp would be martyred for his faith.⁸ It is most likely that those who desired to participate in and benefit from Smyrna’s commercial activity needed to demonstrate loyalty to the imperial cult by “colluding with those possessing economic power (perhaps officials in the trade guilds, the networks of tradespeople similar to modern unions, or in the temples that served also as banks).”⁹ Economic and social status in Smyrna, then, was likely elusive for those who would not embrace the religious beliefs of the empire.



Close-up of the agora of Smyrna



Bird's-eye view of Smyrna's ruins



The modern-day city of Izmir

The Message to Smyrna from Revelation 2:8-11

The believers in Smyrna face economic and religious difficulties, yet they receive no rebuke in this letter. They are poor economically, but are rich in God’s eyes (v. 9). They face opposition—lies—from those claiming to be Jews, but are really “a synagogue of Satan” (v.10). While the church in Smyrna faced current trials, more severe persecution was on the horizon. Some will face persecution for a limited period—“prison” likely stands as a metaphor for that persecution, and “10 days” probably refers to some finite length of time.¹⁰ The challenge is “to remain fearless and faithful—to trust and obey.”¹¹

SUMMARIZING SMYRNA

THE GOOD

- They are commended for persevering in the face of great pressure all around them.

THE CALL TO ACTION

- They are about to face even greater persecution—remain faithful and receive eternal life.

⁵ Metzger, *Breaking the Code*, 33.

⁶ Gorman, *Reading Revelation*, 92.

⁷ Metzger, *Breaking the Code*, 33.

⁸ Gorman, *Reading Revelation*, 92.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 92-3.

¹⁰ Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, [NIC] rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 115.

¹¹ Gorman, *Reading Revelation*, 93.

PERGAMUM

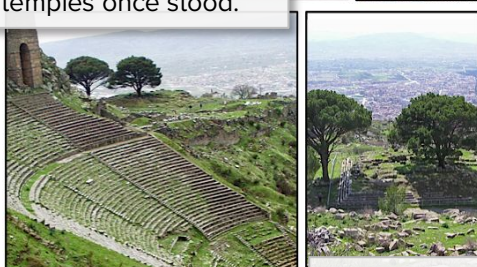
Background

Pergamum was the Roman capital of the province of Asia.¹² As such, it was known for an array of temples and altars that reflected the empire's beliefs and values. It was also the site of an impressive library where parchment (i.e., animal skins) was first utilized as a writing surface. It is likely that the most dominant feature of the city was "an immense altar to Zeus...[which] stood on an immense platform surrounded by colonnades, and the whole structure looked like an enormous throne."¹³ This imposing site was located on the acropolis (i.e., highest point) of the city, along with other government buildings. Sacrifices were made 24 hours each day, so that the smell of burning flesh and sight of smoke billowing into the air were constant reminders of Zeus's power.¹⁴ Furthermore, Pergamum was the "center for the worship of Asclepius, the god of healing."¹⁵ Asclepius's symbol, the serpent, is still found on the *caduceus* medical symbol today.

The Temple of Trajan—an emperor after Domitian.



View of the acropolis where several prominent temples once stood.



The theater seated 10,000 on the acropolis.

Foundation of the Temple of Zeus.

The Message to Pergamum from Revelation 2:12-17

The church in Pergamum faced great hostility. In fact, one believer, named Antipas, had been killed (v. 13).

The strong concentration of pagan worship and Roman political power make it a place of great evil—"where Satan has his throne" and "where Satan lives" (v. 13). Some have remained faithful in spite of persecution; however, some have not. At least some "hold to the teaching of Balaam," and to "the teaching of the Nicolaitans" (v. 15). The former refers to the Old Testament account of Balaam's effort to entice Israelite men to commit idolatry via the lure of foreign women.¹⁶ "Thus Balaam became a prototype," writes Robert Mounce, "of all corrupt teachers who betrayed believers into fatal compromise with worldly ideologies."¹⁷ The latter—the Nicolaitans—were resisted in Ephesus (recall 2:6), but are embraced by some in Pergamum. Suffice it to say that in both cases, the teaching of Balaam and of the Nicolaitans likely refers to those who claimed to be Christians, but who were favoring a level of accommodation to the Roman lifestyle that was incompatible with faithfulness to Christ. In this case,



Pergamum's Asclepieion was an ancient-world healing center.



¹² Metzger, *Breaking the Code*, 34.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ The story of Balaam and Balak is in Numbers 22-24. Numbers 31:16 provides the comment that Balaam was responsible for teaching the Midianite women to entice the Israelite men sexually, which also led them into idolatry—see Numbers 25. See Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 80-1.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 81.

these false teachings led some to commit sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols. Eating such food was not necessarily sinful according to Paul's argument in 1 Corinthians 8-10, but the situation here in Pergamum and the other six churches appears to be such that to eat this food at least implied an unholy association with the pagan sacrifices. The challenge for those who have compromised—either by direct participation in evil practices or by failing to confront those who did so—is to repent!

SUMMARIZING PERGAMUM

THE GOOD

- Many have been faithful to Christ even in the midst of great pressure to compromise.
- Their faithfulness has even withstood the martyrdom of one of their own—Antipas.

THE BAD

- Some have followed false teaching leading to moral compromise and idolatry.

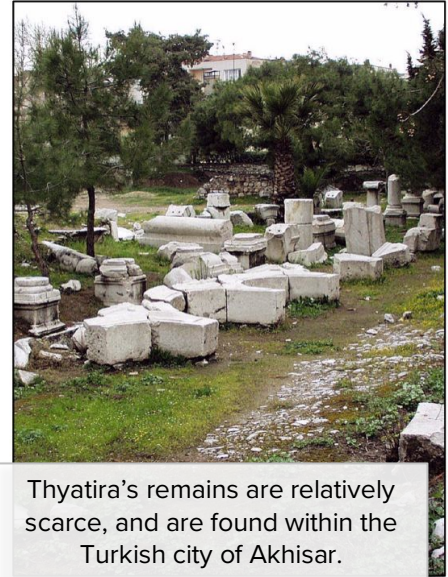
THE CALL TO ACTION

- They need to repent of blatant compromise or indifference toward those who have fallen.

THYATIRA

Background

This city was known for commerce, and was home for various trade guilds. For example, archaeologists have discovered evidence of “guilds of woolworkers, linen workers, makers of outer garments, dyers, leatherworkers, tanners, potters, bakers, slave dealers, and bronzesmiths.”¹⁸ Recall how Lydia, who Paul met in Philippi, was from Thyatira and was “a dealer in purple cloth” (Acts 16:14). While it is difficult to speak with great specificity about the relationship between the guilds—similar to modern-day unions—and areas of compromise, it is clear that these associations did not shy away from demonstrating loyalty to Rome and its pagan religion. In fact, Metzger points out how social gatherings, such as banquets, “often took place within a pagan temple or shrine, where an animal was offered to the gods and then eaten by the members of the guild.”¹⁹ To be a good businessperson, then, would likely require displays of loyalty that directly contradicted Christian faith.



The Message to Thyatira from Revelation 2:18-29

The believers in Thyatira receive a mix of commendation and harsh rebuke. They are praised for their positive actions, and, unlike those in Ephesus, are “now doing more than [they] did at first” (v. 19). The tone quickly shifts to confrontation, though, as they “tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet” (v. 20). In 1 Kings 16:31, King Ahab marries Jezebel, a Sidonian (i.e., a non-Israelite) princess. As queen, she would lead Israel into idolatry and murder the prophets of Yahweh (1 Kings 18:4) until her bloody death (2 Kings 9). The “Jezebel” of Thyatira refers to a false prophet who, like the Jezebel of old, is leading the people there “into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols” (v. 20). Repentance is demanded of her, yet she has refused; consequently, she and those who follow her will suffer greatly so that their evil ways will not endure. Those who have not followed her lies are called to “hold on to what [they] have until I come” (v. 25).

SUMMARIZING THYATIRA

THE GOOD

- They are increasingly taking part in the kind of good works that mark the Christian life.

THE BAD

- Some have tolerated “Jezebel’s” false teaching leading to moral compromise and idolatry.

THE CALL TO ACTION

- Those who follow “Jezebel” must repent; those who don’t follow her must keep on faithfully.

¹⁸ Metzger, *Breaking the Code*, 36.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

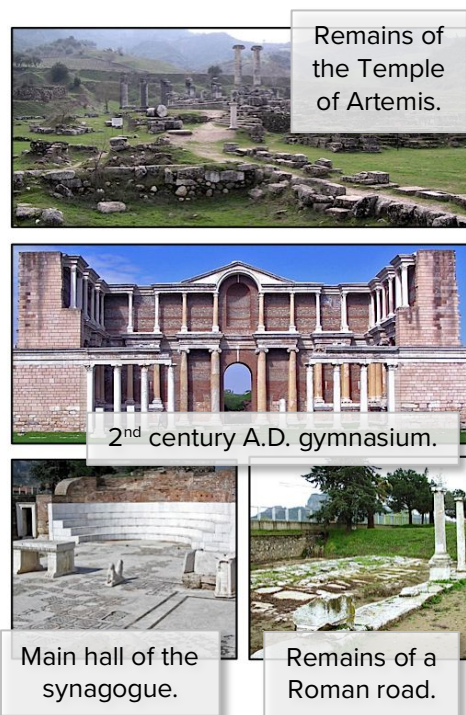
SARDIS

Background

The city of Sardis was once immensely prominent—the capital of the region and a center of commercial and industrial activity. It sat “on an almost impregnable hill with sheer cliffs of three sides that dropped some fifteen hundred feet to the valley below.”²⁰ In spite of its greatly advantageous geography, the city had suffered defeat both in the sixth century B.C. and in 214 B.C. through surprise attacks.²¹ To top it all off, the city suffered a major earthquake in A.D. 17, but was rebuilt with funding made available through the temporary relaxation of taxes by Emperor Tiberius.²² By the late first century, Sardis had returned to a level of prominence as a producer of wool, albeit with less standing than it enjoyed in previous decades and centuries.²³

The Message to Sardis from Revelation 3:1-6

Unlike the previous examples, the message to Sardis has no commendation at the beginning. Instead, the message is that “you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead,” and to “Wake up!” (vv. 1-2). In fact, if they don’t wake up (and repent), Christ “will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you” (v. 3). The unexpected nature of Jesus’s timing is consistent with passages about His return (e.g., Matthew 24:36-44 and Luke 17:26-29), but this warning to Sardis may not be referring only to the final judgment. Like the surprise attacks against the city referred to above, Christ will come unexpectedly against it. Only a few in the church have not soiled their garments—something that may have been easy to understand in a city known for its production of woolen garments. Furthermore, multiple Old Testament allusions can be found that reference clean garments as symbolizing purity or holiness (e.g., Zechariah 3 and Daniel 7:9).²⁴ Overall, the message to Sardis seems to be one that is intended to jolt them out of their comatose state of complacency and into vibrant action.



SUMMARIZING SARDIS

THE GOOD

- A few have not compromised their faith either through complacency or overt disobedience.

THE BAD

- They’re dead in contrast to their reputation of being alive, and have “soiled their garments.”

THE CALL TO ACTION

- They must wake up and repent, remembering what they’ve been taught and holding to it.

²⁰ Ibid., 38.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 39-40. Metzger also explains the significance of the book of life (v. 5) in the context of ancient cities and in both the Old and New Testaments (e.g., Exodus 32:32, Psalm 69:28, Daniel 7:10 and 12:1, Luke 10:20, Philippians 4:3, and multiple places in Revelation).

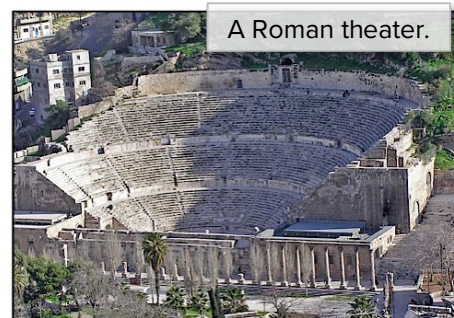
PHILADELPHIA

Background

Philadelphia was a city devoted to Rome, but was also known for being ravaged by earthquakes. Metzger recounts how the earthquake of A.D. 17 that severely damaged Sardis “almost completely demolished Philadelphia.”²⁵ As with Sardis, Philadelphia received assistance from Rome in order to rebuild. This city, whose name means “one who loves his brother,” was the youngest of the seven, as it was founded only in the second century B.C.²⁶

The Message to Philadelphia from Revelation 3:7-13

As with Smyrna, and in stark contrast to Sardis, the church in Philadelphia receives no rebuke. In addition, the church in Philadelphia “was poor, small, and harassed both by pagan citizens and by the local synagogue.”²⁷ Although speculative, Gorman asks, “is it perhaps the case that when pursued not merely by idolatrous Gentile neighbors and/or officials, but by their close siblings in monotheistic faith [i.e., the Jews], these early Christians [in Smyrna and Philadelphia] more fully understood the meaning of their commitment and the necessity of publicly maintaining it, no matter the consequences?”²⁸ The “synagogue of Satan” (v. 9), like in Smyrna, refers to those who claimed to be Jews, but whose actions proved them otherwise. In spite of the believers’ “little strength” (v. 8), they have remained faithful, and an “open door” of opportunity to spread the gospel was before them.²⁹ The believers have “kept [Jesus’s] command to endure patiently,” so Jesus “will also keep [them] from the hour of trial that is going to come on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth” (v. 10). It should be pointed out that this verse most likely means that the church in Philadelphia will be kept or guarded *in* or *through* the trials as opposed to being kept *from* them. The call for them to be victorious (v. 12) would seem to support this.³⁰



SUMMARIZING PHILADELPHIA

THE GOOD

- They have not compromised in spite of intense opposition from pagan and Jewish sources.

THE CALL TO ACTION

- They must persevere in the face of pending trials and can look forward to great reward.

²⁵ Ibid., 41.

²⁶ Ibid., 40-1.

²⁷ Ibid., 41.

²⁸ Gorman, *Reading Revelation*, 95.

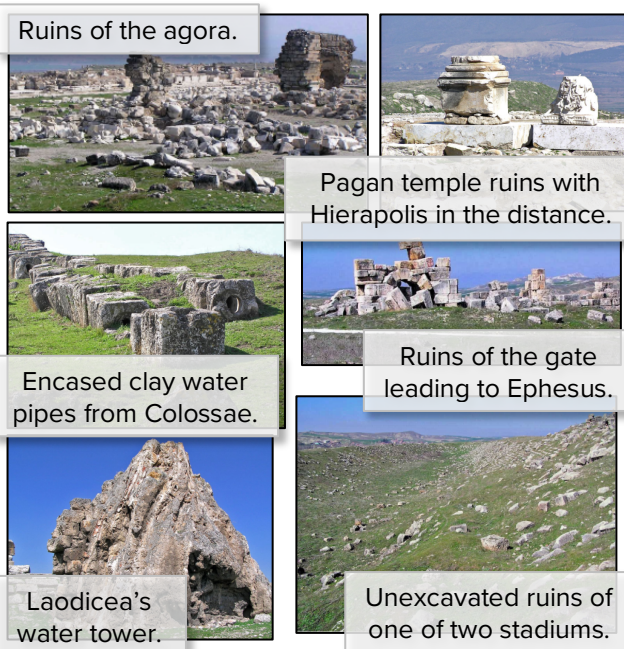
²⁹ Metzger, *Breaking the Code*, 41.

³⁰ See both Metzger, *Breaking the Code*, 42 and Gorman, *Reading Revelation*, 95. “The one who is victorious” (NIV) can also be translated as “The one who conquers” (ESV) or “He who overcomes” (NKJV). In addition, the expression “I also will keep you from the hour” (NIV) in v. 10 can also be translated as “I also will guard you from the hour,” (thre,w) which seems to express a sense of protection more than a sense of escape or wholesale avoidance. This point is significant given the currently popular view that Revelation teaches—or at least is consistent with—the notion that believers can expect to experience a kind of “rapture” out of trials and tribulation.

LAODICEA

Background

Laodicea was located at the intersection of two prominent trade routes, and once was the



wealthiest city in the region of Phrygia.³¹ A major source of economic strength came from the successful grazing and breeding of sheep so that they produced “a soft, glossy black wool...that was much in demand and brought fame to the region.”³² The economic prosperity attracted additional industry to the city, so that banking also became a major source of vitality.³³ Perhaps the clearest display of Laodicea’s wealth is that the city rebuilt itself without assistance from Rome following a major earthquake in A.D. 60.³⁴ Laodicea was also known for being home to a major medical school with famous teachers. Physicians developed various remedies, including “an ointment from spice nard for the ears, and an eye-salve made from ‘Phrygian powder’ mixed with oil.”³⁵ In spite of all of these strengths,

Laodicea had a significant weakness—lack of a dependable and sufficient water supply. Mounce points out how the city’s location “had been determined by the road system rather than by natural resources.”³⁶ Hot springs were found nearby in Hierapolis, but cold water was piped into the city from springs located six miles away through a system of stone pipes; however, these springs could prove to be insufficient sources when precipitation was scarce.³⁷ Laodicea was a major location for the imperial cult, and home to a large population of Jews.³⁸

The Message to Laodicea from Revelation 3:14-22

The message to the church in Laodicea begins with a rebuke. The reference to “neither cold nor hot,” (vv. 15-16) but lukewarm, is sometimes understood to mean that *Jesus would rather have us completely “on fire” for Him or not at all.* What He cannot stand are people who are “lukewarm fence-sitters.” While it is true that following Christ is not something we should do half-heartedly, this line of thinking likely misses the point of this passage. Gorman proposes that, “Lukewarmness is not an ancient metaphor for indifference...[it] means so prosperous and supposedly self-sufficient (3:17) as to be completely out of fellowship with Jesus. This is not a middle-of-the-road church but the most accommodating...fully embracing the lifestyle and values of the elite and powerful.”³⁹ In addition, Mounce identifies these verses as a metaphor

³¹ Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 106-7.

³² *Ibid.*, 107.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid* and Gorman, *Reading Revelation*, 96.

³⁸ Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 107.

³⁹ Gorman, *Reading Revelation*, 96.

“between the hot medicinal waters of Hierapolis and the cold, pure waters of Colossae”⁴⁰ whereby the church in Laodicea “was providing neither refreshment for the spiritually weary, nor healing for the spiritually sick. It was totally ineffective.”⁴¹ The church has become useless, then, as it is like water that is neither good for drinking or for bathing. The rebuke continues with a contrast between the material wealth the Laodiceans boasted about and the true spiritual poverty that marked their lives. They are blind to their own true state, and need a spiritual eye salve to see clearly. They need to find a new fervor for Christ and to repent of their ways. V. 20 is well-known as an inspiration for evangelism, but here it is in the context of a message to the church. These are people who at least claim to be Christians, and Jesus is graciously and mercifully offering them an opportunity for genuine fellowship. As it is, though, Christ stands outside waiting for the door of the Laodicean church to open.

SUMMARIZING LAODICEA

THE GOOD

- Christ rebukes and disciplines out of love and has not yet spit the church out of his mouth.

THE BAD

- Their material prosperity has blinded them to their own spiritual poverty and uselessness.

THE CALL TO ACTION

- They must recapture a spiritual fervor and repent, inviting Christ in to have true fellowship.

⁴⁰ Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 109.

⁴¹ Rudwick and Green, “*The Laodicean Lukewarmness*,” *ExpTim* 69 (1957-58), 178 as quoted in Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 109.