

Three Letters to Three Churches

MJCF

June 7, 2020

Revelation 3:1-22

Last week, we celebrated the 20th anniversary of MJCF. It was great to see pastor Yoshiyuki and hear his message, as well as see other guests. We continue to receive video greetings that I'll soon be putting together on our website. As I think back over the years that I've been here, I remember different changes and experiences. We moved location once, going from St. Helen's Anglican Church hall to our present location at Living Hope Christian Fellowship. Key people have come and served, then moved back to Japan. After the Yoshiyukis, different leaders have given support: Cho sensei, Pastor Park, and Sugimoto sensei. I believe our church has gifts in hospitality. I notice a general acceptance of guests, even people who seem different. And, we've been blessed with many children. Of course, there are also areas where we need to grow. I believe we need to continue to grow in our. We have a lot of room to grow in the area of prayer, and in understanding the Bible. And, we can continue to grow in our confidence in our relationship with Christ so that we can more naturally share his blessings with those around us. As a church, how do we see ourselves? Is our faith alive, or is it sleepy? Do we feel small and insignificant? Are we in need of repenting and making a change?

Today, we continue with the last three of seven letters from Jesus Christ to seven different churches. We can find in each of the letters words that would also apply to us. Let's take a walk through these letters, looking at just a few of the details.

Each letter ends with "Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches." We need to learn more and more how to listen to the Spirit. Listening takes effort. And, in our time, it may be one of the biggest challenges. Because of fast-paced media, internet and TV, our attention spans have declined. Even when we do take time for face-to-face conversation, it's not easy to keep the focus on listening well. We end up preparing our response before the other person has finished talking. What is the Spirit saying to our church, today?

For Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea, the letters continue with both positive affirmation and negative challenges. As in the other letters, they each begin with different titles for Christ reflecting his different characteristics. In the letter to the church in Sardis, Christ has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars (representing completeness of God's reign over the earth, and completeness in the church). The Sardians seem to be alive with all their good works, but unfortunately, they are almost dead, spiritually. Their works show evidence that they are only being faithful on a surface level. Christ challenges them to "Wake up!" It's as if they are falling asleep, rather than keeping energetic in their walk with Christ. The danger is that Christ will return to earth at an unexpected time and they will realise that they were not ready. They need the help of God's Spirit in order to remember the message they've heard, to repent, change their ways, and follow Christ again. The promise is that if they are true to their faith, even in difficult times, Christ will be true to them (support them).

In the letter to the church in Philadelphia, Christ is the "holy" and "true" one, who has the "key of David." Like God, Christ is separate from us. He is holy. He is also true, meaning he's the "real thing," the true revelation of God. Having the key of David symbolizes his authority. He is the one with the keys, controlling entrance to the kingdom of God. The church in Philadelphia receives the most praise out of all the churches, and actually receives no criticism. They saw themselves as having "but little power" but Christ tells them that they have an "open door." Because of their faithfulness they have the opportunity to spread God's mission. I'm reminded of our small group here with MJCF. We are also small and often feel like we have "but little power." "What can we do?" we may think. We don't have a lot of people. We don't have much money. But, have you ever thought about how big our God is? The creator of the universe is leading us! Imagine what God can do through us, if we are faithful! The question is, are we ready to follow? Are we ready to take a step through a door that Christ has opened? It means taking a risk. It means trusting in him as we take steps of faith into the

unknown. It means trusting that God leads us, that God listens to our prayers, that God will correct us if we make wrong decisions.

Because the Philadelphian church has been faithful, Christ says they will be kept from the time of trial (or tribulation). Some may think this has to do with the end-time, but more likely, it means Christ will help them through the difficult times and persecution that all the Christian churches were facing at that time. Christ says, those who conquer will be pillars in God's temple (the place where God lives). It is an image of a living temple where people are together with God. As we had seen from the other letters, the idea of conquering here most likely does not mean violently overthrowing the evildoers. In line with a key theme of Revelation, it can mean conquering evil through patient endurance, while suffering. Those who endure the trials will receive the names of God, the city of God, and the new name of Christ, meaning they would belong to God and God's kingdom, and they would share the victory of Christ.

Finally, we get to the last of the seven letters, sent to the church in Laodicea. I'd like to spend a bit of extra time on this one. It's from Christ, "the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the origin of God's creation." He is reliable and trustworthy. He is the source of all creation. His message, to them is a challenging one. The church in Laodicea is the only church that, unfortunately, receives no praise from Christ. Their faith is lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, and so Christ is ready to "spit them out." Spitting out sounds kind of harsh but actually, the original word could mean "vomit," which is even stronger.

With the Laodiceans being neither hot nor cold, it could have meant they were trying to take the middle ground by worshiping both God and the Roman emperor. Where are we complacent or half-hearted in our faith? I know sometimes it's a challenge for me to move ahead and take steps of faith, rather than "play it safe" and stay away from things that may make me uncomfortable. Yet, we are often called to face challenges. It's where we learn how God can carry us through.

Laodicea was known as a financial centre for business. It was a wealthy city, famous for the production of black woolen cloth for clothing and carpets. Many clothes were cheaply mass-produced. Laodicea also had a medical centre and school nearby. Some say they were famous for a special kind of eye powder. Christ tells the Laodiceans that they think they are rich and need nothing, but they are actually "wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked." They are poor, and encouraged to "buy gold" from the Lord, gaining spiritual wealth. They are naked, and encouraged to put on white garments, gaining spiritual clothing, gaining purity and the proper clothing for the final banquet feast with Christ. And, they who produced the famous eye powder are really "blind" and so are encouraged to anoint their eyes with eye salve from Christ, so they can truly see and understand things, through him.

Christ then tells the Laodiceans, "I reprove and discipline those whom I love. Be earnest, therefore, and repent..." The trials and tribulations allowed by God are not for the purpose of condemning people, but instead they are for correcting. God loves us so much that God will not let us keep going in an unhealthy direction without allowing painful situations that can help us change. I know I sometimes get too comfortable with myself. There are times when I need to stop, repent and make a change. If God didn't give me a painful nudge now and then, I'd likely continue in unhealthy habits. It's often through the difficulties that we grow.

Near the end of this letter, we have the famous passage where Christ says, "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." This is often used to encourage people who do not yet know Christ to open the door of their hearts and let him in. It's true that Christ is waiting for all to accept him, but this letter is specifically sent to believers in the church of Laodicea. It's interesting that even though the church belongs to Christ, he's the one who is standing outside knocking, asking to be let back in!

The Laodiceans are encouraged to repent and return to Christ because their faith has become lukewarm. They lost passion for Christ and instead began relying on their wealth. Whether it be for believers or those who have not yet accepted him, Jesus Christ is the one knocking at our door. We

easily think that we are the ones who need to work hard to find truth, peace, and joy. We may think that we have to work hard to “reach God,” to get to heaven. But, it’s actually the opposite. Jesus is the one who is working hard to reach us! In fact, he’s already done the work to bridge the gap between us and God by hanging on the cross for our sin. Sin created that gap because we are not perfect but God is. Sinners and God can’t mix, but because God came to the world in Jesus Christ, we are now forgiven our sin and can live in God’s presence, enjoying peace, love, and joy. God desires for us to share this good news. God wants us to grow in a deeper relationship with him through Christ. We don’t always realise when we’ve gone ahead on our own way, and left Christ behind, standing outside. And so, Christ knocks at the door of our hearts. If we open the door, we can eat together and have fellowship with him. We can have a deeper relationship, symbolic of the final banquet we’d have in heaven. Is Christ knocking at your heart’s door? His love for us is shown in that he will never force his way in.

In contrast to this, I read a news article about a woman who was arrested for breaking into other people’s homes and cleaning them, without permission! She was labeled “the cleaning fairy.” But, after cleaning she’d leave a note charging the owner \$75! She said she thought she was doing them a favor, but to the homeowners and police it was seen more as an intrusion. Even if it’s a good thing, if it’s forced on us it doesn’t feel like a favor. God offers us the grace of Christ, but it’s not forced on us. Christ is knocking. We need to open the door. He wants us to invite him in, but do we really want fellowship with him? We’ll likely be challenged in some areas. When do you hear the “still small voice” of Christ? How much fellowship have you had with him today? Where did you maybe miss an opportunity? Let’s pray.

God of love, we confess that sometimes our faith is not very alive like the church in Sardis. Thank-you for the nudge of your Spirit that helps us wake up. We sometimes feel small and insignificant like the church in Philadelphia. Thank-you that your power can work through us, beyond anything we can imagine. Sometimes we try to take the comfortable middle road of compromise rather than standing strong, in faith. We may think we’re OK, but we aren’t always OK. Thank-you that you pursue us, that you knock on our heart’s door, ready to renew fellowship with us, even when we’ve strayed. Give us ears to listen, that we may realise those areas where we need to repent, that we may open the door and let you in. Fill us with your love, through Christ our Lord, we pray, Amen.