

Do We Still Really Believe In It?

Battling Laodiceanism

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Given 04-Aug-07; Tape #841B

After the Holy Bible, my favorite form of literature is that of the historical novel. I recently read an historical novel called *The Day of the Scorpion*, written by the late British novelist, Paul Scott. Most of the historical novels that I read are set in the seventeenth, eighteenth, or nineteenth century, but this one was set in India in the years immediately before, during, and after World War II. This was also the time of India's efforts towards independence from the British Empire and from colonialism. In my split-sermon today, I would like to read a short passage from *The Day of the Scorpion*, a passage that jumped out at me and reminded me of today's Laodicean era of God's true church. I would like to use this quote from the book as a framework to communicate to you some stern warnings from Jesus Christ to today's members of God's church.

This quote breaks into the middle of a conversation between two English sisters, Sarah and Susan Layton—two young adult women portrayed as living in India during that turbulent period, bewildered and confused by the huge changes that were taking place around them. As you listen to these words, please try to apply them in your own minds to the changing face of God's church today:

Susan repeated, "I try and try but I cannot see the answer. I suppose the trouble is that people like us were finished years ago and we know it, but pretend not to, and go on as if we thought we still mattered." Then, looking full at Sarah again, asked, "Why are we finished, Sarah? Why don't we matter?"

"Because," Sarah replied, "We don't really believe in it any more. Not really believe. Not in the way our grandfathers believed. And our not believing seems like our betrayal of them. So we can't any longer look each other in the eye and feel good—feel that even the good things some of us might do have anything to them that will be worth remembering. So we hate each other, but dare not speak about it, and hate whatever lies nearest to hand: the country, the people in it, our own changing history that we are part of."

Yes, what I just read is only a piece of fiction, but it is based on historical fact. What is brought out here is the huge changes that were taking place in India at that time, and those changes had huge effects on everyone living there. There really were young, upper-class English women like Susan and Sarah whose military families had ruled India for many generations and who found this transition period very difficult to understand and deal with.

The words of this section jumped out at me when I read them; and in my mind, I compared

these events of seventy years ago in India to the events in God's church over the past twenty years since Herbert Armstrong's death. Are we members of the Laodicean era of God's church in some ways like those British people in India back in the 1930's?

Please allow me to paraphrase my quote from *The Day of the Scorpion* and apply it to our situation in God's church today. Do we church of God members not matter anymore? Do we no longer feel good about what we are doing—about what the church is doing and our part in it?

Here is the big question: Do we not really believe in it any more? I mean, *really* believe, as our church forefathers did? For those who do not really believe in it anymore, is their lack of belief somehow a betrayal of our spiritual forefathers, a betrayal of their great efforts and sacrifices, of the blood, sweat, and tears they put into it? More importantly, is it a betrayal of our heavenly Father and Jesus Christ who have done so much for us? Perish the thought! These are big questions, brethren.

Is the work the church is doing today somehow mediocre or second-rate compared to the church's work during Herbert Armstrong's heyday? Will what the church is doing today not be worth remembering in the future compared to the church's work under Herbert Armstrong? Will it be remembered now and in the future? Do we hate "our own changing history that we are part of" in comparison with the church of yesteryear? Do we despise the scattered condition of the church as it is today? Are we ashamed of it?

What is the underlying problem here? Does the church of God in this twenty-first century suffer from the same causative problem that those British colonists suffered in India in the 1930's and 1940's? Please let me repeat: Do we not believe in it any more? Do we not believe in what we are doing—or are supposed to be doing? Do we not believe in what God's church is doing? Do we not believe it with the same level of belief and zeal as our church forefathers believed, as Herbert Armstrong and those other twentieth-century church pioneers believed?

I believe, as do many others, that there really are different applications of the seven churches of Revelation chapters 2 and 3. Call me old-fashioned, but I also still believe in the concept of seven church eras.

I find it interesting that some church of God branches—and I do not criticize them for this—seem to be striving to emulate and perpetuate the "golden years" of the Philadelphia era under Herbert Armstrong. I do not criticize them for doing this, but let us face it; let us be realistic. The main body of the Philadelphia era of God's true church is irretrievably over, and we are now well into the infamous Laodicean era. This being so, we very much need to be heeding the clear warnings that Jesus addresses directly to the church of the Laodiceans and to you and me, specifically.

Although we probably have all been through these scriptures many times before, I believe that it is critically important—especially when we ponder that question, "Do we still really believe in it?"—for us to go through them again. Let us take the time to go through these warnings.

Revelation 3:14 "And to the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write, 'These things says the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God.'"

Who is this "Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God"? We believe that it is Jesus Christ, the Captain and Commander of our salvation. This does not mean to say that Jesus Christ was a created being, not at all. Jesus Christ, our Captain and Commander, has clear answers to the dilemma of the Laodicean church, and the description of the Laodicean church here describes the general state of the church. Every condition and sin listed here may not necessarily apply to every member; but I say that if the cap fits, we must wear it, and I will wear the caps that I have to wear, too. Here is what our Captain says that we Laodiceans must do:

Revelation 3:15-16 "I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth."

We must stop being spiritually lukewarm!

Please notice what I think is very interesting: that the Laodicean church is pictured as being in Jesus' mouth. The implication is that Jesus' mouth is a good, safe place to be! Perhaps Jesus' allusion here is to a refreshing or a comforting drink. On a warm day like today, we might enjoy a refreshing cold drink, such as water, juice, or a glass of Guinness. On a cool winter's day, we might prefer a comforting hot drink, such as coffee, tea, or cocoa. However, if our cold drink warms up to become lukewarm, it is not as refreshing, is it? If our hot drink cools down to become lukewarm, it is no longer nearly as effective or enjoyable, is it? Likewise, if we are not spiritually refreshing to Jesus by being filled with the water of His Holy Spirit, He warns us that He will spit us out!

It was always surprising to me that Jesus says here that He would rather see us cold than lukewarm. Maybe He feels that we would be better off totally uncalled and unconverted yet with a future opportunity for the Second Resurrection rather than being converted, lukewarm, and in danger of being spat out. However, since most of you who are listening to me today are already converted, we must heed this warning and return to being spiritually "hot" for God's work.

Revelation 3:17 Because you say, "I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing;" and know not that you are wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked.

We must admit the wretched spiritual condition of the Laodicean church. It may be true that, compared with the majority of the world's population, most of our church members are rich, increased with goods and toys, and have need of nothing—physically—but we need to admit that the Laodicean church today is generally spiritually wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked.

What about each member individually? I cannot speak for you. We must examine ourselves in these things—not just prior to the Passover each year—and again, if the cap fits, we must wear it. Then, once we recognize the fact, what must we do? Should we just make the excuse, "Woe

is me! I am a Laodicean; I live in the Laodicean era," but do nothing about it, like the man seeing his dirty face in the mirror and doing nothing? No. We must act upon the problem! We must take urgent steps to correct these pitiful conditions.

James 1:22-25 But be you doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves. For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass: for he beholds himself, and goes his way, and straightway forgets what manner of man he was. But whoso looks into the perfect law of liberty, and continues therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed.

Just what must we do to change from being wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked? Christ has answers, and here they are:

Revelation 3:18 I counsel you to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that you may be rich...

We are to buy spiritual gold from Jesus Christ, gold refined in spiritual fire. This gold will cure our spiritual poverty and will make us spiritually rich. When God allows severe trials to come upon us, He is, in effect, refining us. It is at these times that we seem better able to learn what the true priorities are. At these times, we come to realize that we need to get our minds off the desire for physical wealth and to get them onto the spiritual treasure that Jesus Christ offers us. Again, there is nothing wrong with physical wealth, nothing wrong with a nice home, nice car, and all of the rest of it. If it shuts out Jesus Christ and God the Father, though, it can be a problem.

Matthew 6:19-21 Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust does corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust does corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

Revelation 3:18 ...and white raiment, that you may be clothed, and that the shame of your nakedness does not appear...

We also must buy white spiritual raiment or clothing from Jesus Christ so that the shame of our spiritual nakedness may be cured. What is this white spiritual raiment? The Old Testament Levites wore white raiment (II Chronicles 5:12); so do the twenty-four elders and other angels (Matthew 28:3; Mark 16:5; John 20:12; Acts 1:10; Revelation 4:4; 15:6; 19:14). Jesus Christ does, as well (Matthew 17:2; Mark 9:3; Luke 9:29). We, too, are promised the same white raiment if we overcome. Go back to the Sardis era and see what Jesus Christ promises:

Revelation 3:5 He that overcomes, the same shall be clothed in white

raiment...

Just what is this white raiment?

Revelation 19:7-8 Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to Him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and His wife has made herself ready. And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints.

Conversely, then, the spiritual nakedness that Jesus talks about is unrighteousness. We must buy this white raiment of righteousness from Jesus Christ—but can righteousness really be bought? In some ways, yes, it can!

Proverbs 23:23 Buy the truth, and sell it not; also wisdom, and instruction, and understanding.

The things that lead to righteousness are truth, wisdom, instruction, and understanding

Revelation 3:18 ...and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see.

We must anoint our spiritual eyes with spiritual eye salve to cure our spiritual blindness and to restore our spiritual eyesight and vision. Just what is this spiritual eye salve that Jesus recommends? Mankind has all kinds of physical eye drops and lotions that can soothe sore eyes and alleviate various other symptoms; but, if you think about it, no such thing as a physical eye salve yet exists that can actually heal physical blindness.

What kind of eye salve did Jesus use when He healed blind people? When ministers anoint sick people and ask God to heal them, they apply a tiny dab of olive oil on the person's forehead in accordance to God's instructions in James 5:14. Was this anointing oil the eye salve that Jesus used when healing blind people? The answer is no.

Mark 8:23 So He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the town. And when He had spit on his eyes and put His hands on him, He asked him if he saw anything.

John 9:6 When He had said these things, He spat on the ground and made clay with the saliva; and He anointed the eyes of the blind man with the clay.

In both of these examples, Jesus used saliva! I believe that it is significant that He used something that came out of His mouth to heal physically blind people. Likewise, it is also

something that comes out of Jesus' mouth that heals spiritually blind people. Further study on this shows that what comes out of Christ's mouth is powerful stuff. Just two examples are His Word—we need to study it—and His Spirit—we must use its power!

Revelation 3:19 As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten...

We must be willing to accept the just rebuke and chastening from our Elder Brother and our heavenly Father who love us so very much:

Hebrews 12:5-11 And you have forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you as to sons: "My son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; for whom the Lord loves he chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives." If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? But if you are without chastening, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate and not sons. Furthermore, we have had human fathers who corrected us, and we paid them respect. Shall we not much more readily be in subjection to the Father of spirits and live? For they indeed for a few days chastened us as seemed best to them, but He for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness. Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

Chastening and rebuke from Jesus Christ and God the Father are good for us. This is irrefutable proof that they love us dearly and that we are legitimate children of God the Father and legitimate siblings of Jesus Christ.

Revelation 3:19 ...be zealous therefore, and repent.

Repent of what? We must, of course, repent of many things; but in this instruction, specifically, we must repent of our lack of zeal. The Laodicean church is usually characterized by its lukewarmness and lack of zeal. Using God's Holy Spirit, we must get back to being hot and zealous.

Revelation 3:20 Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me.

At this time, it is unlikely that Jesus will come to any of us personally, as He did with the apostle Paul. He may very infrequently appear to a very few brethren in dreams or visions, as He did with the apostle John. Normally, however, in this day and age, we will hear His voice via

His written Word and through the voices of God's ministers. It is our responsibility to listen for Jesus' knock at our spiritual doors and to recognize His knock and His voice:

John 10:3, 10, 27 To him the doorkeeper opens, and the sheep hear his voice; and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out...The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly...My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.

We must recognize and shut out counterfeit shepherds. We must recognize and open the door to the True Shepherd, the Good Shepherd (John 10:11, 14). We must, as Abraham did (Genesis 18:1-8), invite the True, Good Shepherd in to dine with us—on spiritual food, of course. Jesus is that spiritual food; He is the Bread of life (John 6:35, 48).

Also, most of us are no longer babes in Christ, feeding on the milk of God's Word. Most of us have been in God's church for many years. We are mature children of God and we should be feeding on the strong meat of God's Word.

Revelation 3:21 To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.

Very frequently in the book of Revelation and in quite a few other scriptures, we are commanded to overcome. Here we are commanded to emulate Jesus' example of overcoming. We also see that, in the same way that Jesus' fabulous reward for His overcoming was to share His Father's throne, we have a fabulous reward promised to us for our overcoming, as well; and that is to share the throne of our Elder Brother, Jesus Christ.

Revelation 3:22 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Do we have ears? Of course we do! Do we have spiritual ears? If we do, are we using them? Are we listening intently? Are we listening for that knock of Jesus Christ? Are we hearing what He is saying to us—or are we selective listeners? Have we become spiritually deaf?

We have already seen that just hearing is not enough. We must be hearers and doers. We must act upon what we hear. We must hear and act upon what the Spirit is saying to the churches—yes, to all seven church eras, but specifically to our Laodicean church era today!

There we have it! We Laodiceans have been given our marching orders by our Master and Commander. What if some of our fellow Laodicean church members refuse to obey those orders? What if some fail to heed these stern warnings of Jesus Christ? Is their disobedience any excuse for us not to obey? Surprisingly, the answer comes from Sarah in the next section of *The Day of the Scorpion*. The last words we heard from young Susan were these:

"I suppose the trouble is that people like us were finished years ago, and we know it, but pretend not to and go on as if we thought we still mattered." Again she hesitated, then, looking full at Sarah again, asked, "Why are we finished, Sarah? Why don't we matter?"

The more mature Sarah replies wisely to her younger sister:

She asked, "Why do you say *we*? *We* may be finished or not matter, or whatever it is; but *you* matter. *I* matter. There's too much *we*. Too much *us*. I don't know what *we* are any longer, either. Start thinking like this: You're a person, not a crowd!"

What the fictional Sarah says to her confused younger sister here is also true for you and me. Yes, we are members of a church "crowd." We are members of one of many church of God groups, and that is good for us. That is beneficial for us.

Any one of us, like Sarah, could say, "I do not know what *we* are any longer either." The "we" of the Laodicean era church of God is very different from the "we" of Herbert Armstrong's Philadelphia era.

You and I individually are not directly or personally responsible for the sins, disobedience, or lack of zeal or action of our fellow church members. Each one of us, brethren, is responsible for our *own* actions. We are part of a church group, yes, but we are individuals. We stand before God as individual stones of His temple.

Yes, the church of God as a whole is in its Laodicean era. Let us face that fact! However, that does not mean that every member is compelled to remain in the negative Laodicean attitude. God has given us the power to break out of that attitude and Jesus has given us the clear solutions in Revelation 3. The time is very short for every one of us. Therefore, let us get zealous, and let us be putting these solutions to work!