

Christ at the Door
Revelation 3:14-22
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Revelation 3:20 has been a favorite memory verse of many people. And it provides an image that's been portrayed in many paintings. The idea and image of Christ knocking at the door is well-known. Several European artists painted versions of it. In America, the image that's maybe better known and popular is called "Christ at Heart's Door" by Warner Sallman.

Warner Sallman was a commercial artist in Chicago who did a series of religious paintings. His most famous picture is "Head of Christ." You've probably seen it. It was reproduced 500 million times as a portrait and on cards, buttons, stickers, magnets, lamps, etc. I had a card of it that I used to carry in my wallet. I told people it was my senior picture.

Sallman tried to capture the sense of Jesus as personal Lord and Savior. He wanted to show Jesus as human and divine. For a time he went around the country doing "chalk talks" where he would sketch his paintings and describe what they were showing about Jesus. Booklets were written to explain the paintings and what the various details in them mean.

The painting "Christ at Heart's Door" shows Jesus standing at the door of a house and knocking. It clearly represents the heart: notice the arch over the door and the light and shadows that form a heart. The house is dark inside and is surrounded by the thorns and thistles of sin. There's a little grill work in the door so the person inside can see who's knocking. One of the most famous, and most commented on, features of the picture is that there's no knob or latch on the outside of the door. The person inside must open to Jesus. Although, it seems to me that we just can't see the doorknob because it's on the left of the door behind Jesus. Notice the hinges on the right. (Information about Sallman is from David Morgan, *Icons of American Protestantism: The Art of Warner Sallman*, exhibit brochure, Valparaiso Univ., 1994; David Morgan, ed., *Icons of American Protestantism*, Yale Univ., 1996)

I can remember as a child seeing this picture in the home of a friend of our family and over the years I've seen it in various churches. It's always

been a reminder of the text in Revelation 3:20, "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me." I'm sure that verse and the idea of Christ knocking at my heart's door had a lot to do with the prayer I prayed to receive Christ: "Jesus, come into my heart."

Now, I think it's appropriate to use Revelation 3:20 that way. But that's a secondary application, not the verse's primary meaning. Rev 3:20 is not just about Christ knocking on the door of an individual's heart. This is not first an evangelistic word to unbelievers, but a call to a church to repent and be renewed. Let's look at the context and see what else God wants to say through this passage.

The Scripture we're reading today is the last of seven messages from the Lord to churches in the Roman province of Asia Minor (modern day western Turkey). They're written to real churches in a real place in the first century, but they also speak to the whole Church. There were many churches in Asia Minor, but these seven were chosen partly because seven is a number that represents completeness. The number seven is used several times throughout Revelation because it was believed to be a special number that meant complete or all-inclusive (Bruce Metzger, *Breaking the Code* 29). So messages to seven churches are also a message to the whole Church. At the end of each message, each church is encouraged to listen to what the Holy Spirit is saying to *all* the churches. So each church will hear Christ's messages to the other churches as well as all of them hearing the word of prophecy that follows in chapters 4-22.

In chapter one John says that while he was in exile on the isle of Patmos, he was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day. As he was worshiping, he heard a voice coming from behind him. The voice told John to write what he saw and send it to the seven churches: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.

When John turned to see who was speaking, he saw in a vision seven golden lampstands. Standing in the middle of them was the Son of Man. In 1:20 Jesus explains to John that the seven lampstands are the seven churches. So John has a vision of the risen and exalted Lord Jesus in the

midst of his people. The Lord stands among the churches. He stands among his people. He's with us as we gather in his name.

The features of John's vision call attention to certain qualities of Christ. He wears a robe like a king because he's the ruler. His white hair calls to mind Daniel's vision of the "Ancient of Days"—he's the eternal God. His blazing eyes can see how things really are—they can see right through you. His burnished feet display strength. His thundering voice recalls God's voice that Israel heard at Mt. Sinai and that later Ezekiel heard—it shows Christ's majesty. He holds seven stars in his hand. In 1:20 Jesus explains that the stars are the angels, or messengers, of the churches. This is possibly the church's guardian angel or the prevailing "spirit" of the church or the spiritual leader or prayer leader of the church. What it means is that the spiritual leadership and protection of the church are in the hand of our Lord. The sharp sword coming from his mouth depicts the word of God. His face shining bright as the sun portrays the radiance of Christ's glory. He is truly magnificent.

Then in chapters two and three are the actual messages or letters to the seven churches. These letters follow a common pattern or outline. First is the address, "To the angel of the church in _____." Then Christ identifies himself, using one of the images from the vision in chapter one. Then Jesus tells the church, "I know you, where you live, what you do." In five of the letters, Jesus commends the church for their faithfulness or good works. This is followed by a word of correction in five of the letters. There's a promise to those who overcome, who are victorious by staying true to Christ who conquered through a cross. These promises include features of the new creation from chapters 21 and 22. In most of the letters, there is affirmation, correction, and promise. We all need each of those (Eugene Peterson, *Reversed Thunder* 50). Finally, there's the challenge for everyone with spiritual perception to listen to what the Spirit of God is saying.

The Holy Spirit was active in various ways throughout Israel's history. The same Spirit was active in Jesus' life and ministry. The same Spirit was poured out at Pentecost, launching the church. The same Holy Spirit is still speaking to the church, guiding and empowering the people of God.

Laodicea would have been the last to receive the letter as a messenger starting in Ephesus moved around the area in the order that the letters appear. Christ identifies himself here as the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler or origin of God's creation. This is the one letter where Christ's self-identification doesn't come from the vision in 1:12-16. "Amen" here means basically true and faithful. It's an affirmation of the truth. Jesus is the faithful and true witness in contrast to the Laodicean Christians whose witness is unfaithful and ineffective. This is one of the letters where Christ doesn't commend the church for their good works. This letter doesn't have affirmation; it just has correction, followed by an invitation and the promise.

Jesus wants the Laodicean church to stop compromising, to stop accommodating to the surrounding culture, to stop living like they belong to Fallen Babylon instead of New Jerusalem. He wants them to imitate him so they'll be a zealous "faithful and true witness." If they ignore his warning to repent, they'll face him as a "faithful and true" judge (19:11) who will vomit them out (3:16). If they do become faithful witnesses, they'll show that they're part of the new creation that Jesus started.

The theme of the letter then is that the readers need to be renewed (vv. 18-20) as new creatures in their relationship with Christ by testifying to this relationship in an uncompromising manner. And the creative power of this resurrected Jesus can raise them from their spiritual [sluggishness] (vv. 15-17), strengthen them in faith (v 18) so that they will repent (v 19), and confirm them in their enduring relationship with him (v 20). If this happens, they will receive a reward (v 21). (G. K. Beale, *Revelation, New International Greek Testament Commentary*)

Laodicea was on a plateau that provided good grazing land. They raised sheep there that had been bred to produce a very fine black wool. The city was at the intersection of major trade routes that brought a lot of wealth to the area. One thing the city didn't have was a natural water supply. So water was brought in through pipes from six to ten miles away.

There were two sources of water Laodicea could use. Hierapolis had hot mineral springs and Colosse had cold, pure water. By the time the hot water reached Laodicea, it cooled and became lukewarm, tepid, and nauseating. By the time the cold water from Colosse reached Laodicea, it warmed up and became lukewarm and difficult to drink.

And Jesus stands outside the door of the church and says, "You are neither cold nor hot. You don't provide the refreshing, pure water of life for the spiritually thirsty. And you don't provide the warm healing waters for the spiritually sick. Your faith and witness are tepid. You're spiritually lukewarm. Just as the tepid water in your town makes you sick, I'm about to vomit you out of my mouth. Yet there is still time to repent and be the faithful and true witness I want my church to be, to do the works I have for you to do."

Laodicea was a wealthy town because it was located on the trade routes and because of the good grazing land where sheep were raised with special wool for expensive garments. There was also a medical school in the area that made an eye salve or ointment that was famous throughout the world. Laodicea was one of the wealthiest cities in the Roman Empire.

And Jesus stands outside the door of the church and cries, "You think that your material wealth means you have no spiritual needs. You think you've acquired everything by yourself and that you don't need anything. You think you're blessed and satisfied, but you're wretched and miserable. You think you're rich, but you're poor. You think you can see, but you're blind. You can't even see your spiritual condition. You think you have fancy clothes, but you're naked."

Jesus says to his church, "I advise you to buy from me pure gold, refined in the fire. Then you'll be truly rich. I offer you clean, spotless clothes that will cover your shame. I offer you ointment for your eyes that will make you see truly."

He's calling the church to separate ourselves from our culture's idolatry that entangles and stains us. The church's feebleness and sickness can't be cured by the resources of an idolatrous society or by their own resources. The only remedy for the church's illness is a renewed relationship with Christ.

A pastor told about attending a Christian conference full of lively worship, big-name speakers, and numerous workshops. At the end of the day he was exhausted. He'd been taking notes all day—five steps to this, ten to that. How to do various tasks of ministry and do them better than you are now.

That night he had a dream. In the dream, God spoke to him and asked, "Do you want to know the steps to a vital life and a vital church?"

"Yes, Lord!" he said. In his dream, he grabbed his notebook and a pen and wrote "Steps to a Vital Life and a Vital Church." Then he put a number one under the heading.

In the dream, God said, "Come back to Jesus."

He wrote, "Come back to Jesus," then penciled in a number two on the line below and looked up to hear the next step.

Then he woke up. "No!" he exclaimed. "Please, Lord! What are the rest of the steps?"

The next day, he again was at the conference, but he kept thinking about and praying about the dream. Finally he realized there is no step two, three, or four. There's just the one: "Come back to Jesus" (Christopher Gehrz and Mark Pattie III, *The Pietist Option* 1-2).

The Lord called the Laodicean church to renew their commitment to Christ and become an effective witness. Part of doing that would mean submitting to the Lord's rebuke and discipline. The word for discipline here speaks of a process of training. They needed, and we need, to learn to live as God's people while in the fallen world. Even if renewing relationship with Christ leads to persecution, tribulation, and loss of possessions, we find that Jesus is all we really need. Only in Christ do we find true riches, clothing, and insight.

I heard about two pastors who had been imprisoned for nearly twenty years by communist revolutionaries simply because they preached the gospel. They told an American minister of their commitment "to pray about the poverty of the wealth of the American church." They feared that riches and comforts were too much of a burden for Christians to carry. "How can we be free to love and to worship and to serve Jesus when

weighed down with the things of this world" they lovingly asked (Scotty Smith and Michael Card, *Unveiled Hope* 58).

Jesus came down hard on the Laodicean church, but he said it was because he loved them. They were so entangled in the idolatry around them and unaware of their compromise and ineffectiveness that they needed this harsh word from the Lord to open their eyes.

Jesus called them to be diligent, to be zealous, and to repent. They needed to turn from their indifference and return to their Lord.

Repentance acknowledges the "poverty" of our dependence on Fallen Babylon/the world's way of seeing and doing things and abandons that way of seeing and doing.

Repentance acknowledges the "nakedness" of our poor, distorted, and broken lives in the light of God's purpose for our wholeness or holiness.

Repentance acknowledges the "blindness" of our way of being that enables us to be comfortable in the midst of poverty and injustice.

To repent opens the closed door to the presence of Christ (Robert Mulholland, *Journey Through the Bible*, Vol. 16, p. 28).

Jesus stands outside the door of the church and calls out, "Look! Listen! Here I am. I am the one knocking at your door. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in. We'll have fellowship again. We'll show our closeness and commitment to each other by eating together. Then you can join me in being an overcomer and I'll let you sit with me on my throne. You can share in how I rule through sacrificial love. Please listen to what the Spirit is saying."

Opening the door to Christ is how we repent and receive what he offers us. The true riches, real righteousness, clear insight are in Christ. We receive them when we receive him. Renewing our relationship with Jesus leads to our sharing in his victory and his rule. We begin to share those now, but we'll enter into them fully when he appears again.

Will we hear Christ's voice and open up to him? This brings us back to where we started. I hope our whole congregation will open up to Christ. Maybe one person opening up to Jesus will set the pace for the whole

church. Jesus stands at the door, knocking and calling to you. Will you let him into your life?

He stands at the door of whatever part of your life you shut him out of and trap yourself in. He wants to come in with his glorious riches, his righteousness, his vision. He wants to renew us in our relationship with him and make us to be faithful and true witnesses and servants of our faithful and true Lord.