

Expository Jotting — Laodicea.

Rev.3: 14-22.

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Two things have to be carefully borne in mind in the attempt to ascertain the true character of Laodicea. The first is, that there was an actual assembly in Laodicea to which, or to the angel of which, this letter was addressed; and the second is, that this actually existent assembly was taken up by the Lord as a type of a state of things which would obtain at the close of the history of the Church on earth. In other words, there are the historical and prophetic Laodiceas — to say nothing now of the lessons contained in this letter for the Church in every age, continuously from the time of the assembly at Laodicea till the development of Laodicea which this prophetically foreshadowed. This being conceded, another thing follows; viz., that the character of Laodicea actual is the character of Laodicea prophetic. Were there then any Christians, those who were really saints of God in this assembly, in the apostolic days? It is quite true that John's ministry extended beyond that of Paul, but this fact does not forbid our gleaning the answer to our question from the writings of the latter. Turning then to the epistle to the Colossians, we find Paul saying, "For I would that ye knew what great conflict I have for you, *and for them at Laodicea,*" etc. (Col. 2: 1.) He also tells us that Epaphras had great zeal, or "laboured much" for the Colossians "and for them in Laodicea" (Col. 4: 13); and he directed that the epistle itself should be read to "the church of the Laodiceans." It is therefore impossible to doubt that God had saints at that time in this assembly; and this goes a long way to determine the question as to the state of things in John's day, seeing that only about thirty years elapsed between Paul's epistle and the letter sent through John.

But it is said that the language in the epistle itself forbids the supposition. Let us briefly examine it. Take, first, the warning that the Lord was about utterly to reject it because of its lukewarm condition. Can the Lord, it is asked, cast away His own people? Such a question, we submit, is altogether to lose sight of the nature of the epistle, and of the character in which the angel of this assembly is addressed. This assembly — as all the seven — is viewed as a light-bearer on earth, and is thus dealt with *in its responsibility as the vessel of testimony*. To be rejected in this way therefore has nothing whatever to say (for it is spoken of Laodicea collectively, or in its corporate character) as to the state of the individuals that composed the assembly. No one denies that the assembly as such was in a frightful condition from its self-complacent pride and boastfulness, and that as such it was loathsome to the Lord; but to apply this to the state of every individual in it is scarcely sober exposition.

Remark, in the next place, that down to the end of verse 18 the address is to the angel, the moral representative of the assembly. Bearing this in mind, in addition to what has been said, there will be little difficulty in the interpretation of the well-known symbols of "gold" and "white raiment." One distinction should, however, be carefully noted. While the Lord counsels the angel to buy of Him gold tried in the fire and white raiment, the angel is exhorted himself to anoint his

eyes with eye-salve (not to buy it) a distinction that has a most significant bearing upon the subject in hand.

Verse 19 contains the enunciation of a principle of divine importance. "As many as I love I rebuke and chasten." Is this principle applicable to unconverted professors? We turn to the Proverbs, and there we read, "My son, despise not the chastening of the Lord; neither be weary of His correction: for whom the Lord loveth He correcteth; even as a father the son in whom he delighteth." (Prov. 3: 11, 12.) Here undoubtedly the words are spoken to one in a known relationship, as the term "my son" plainly shows. So also in Heb. 12, where this scripture is cited, applied, and expanded (see vv. 5-11); and so also we unhesitatingly assert in the passage before us. Indeed, all possible doubt is removed by the words, "As many as I love" - *as many*, a distinct class, and, "*as I love*," marking out a special relationship to that class; viz., the Lord's own people. And it is on this basis that the exhortation is given to "be zealous therefore and repent." Is this the way God speaks to the unconverted? No; it is the method in which the Lord addresses those who have been brought into relationship with Himself; and here therefore applies to those who were mixed up with all this frightful formality, self-complacency, and indifference. It is the warning which He sounds out from the depths of His heart, in order that His people might heed it before the final rejection of the assembly, and judge themselves ere He might be compelled in His love to lift up His rod and deal with them in chastening in order to effect their restoration.

Verses 20, 21 are spoken to individuals. "If any man hear my voice." "To him that overcometh." First, then, we have the Lord's attitude: "Behold, I stand at the door, and knock." The Lord is here, without doubt, outside when He ought to have been enjoyed within. But is it that He is seeking admittance here for the first time — into the heart of an unconverted one? In other words, Is this the presentation of the gospel? The whole drift of the letter contradicts the thought, as well as the connection in which it stands. That the gospel might be preached from it to any who claimed to be Christians and yet were not is quite true; but the question now is, Is this the attitude in which Christ presents Himself as a Saviour to the unconverted? If so, it is without a parallel in the Scriptures. But it is said to answer to Luke 14. There is an important difference. The supper there, in its typical import, is God's supper, and, besides, is for all who will accept the invitation; whereas here it is the Lord who knocks for admittance, and promises that, if the door is opened, He will come in and sup with the one that opens, and that the opener shall also sup with Himself. It is the contrast to Luke 14 in every particular. To maintain this, moreover, is to suppose power on the part of the unconverted; for to open the door goes a long way beyond simple faith in the gospel message. No; what the Lord promises here is a secret and individual enjoyment. He will in His tender grace come in to any who may open the door and sup with them, and then they shall sup with Him — have fellowship with Him in His things; the expression on His part of His greatest grace, and on the part of those supping with Him of the most exalted enjoyment.

Thereon follows the promise to the overcomer; and if no saints of God are found in Laodicea, whence are to come the victors? To assert that there will be none is possible, but surely it is to forget the character both of the Lord's heart and of His ways. The overcomers indeed are especially those who hear the Lord's voice, and having opened the door — in contrast with the worldliness, pride, and self-sufficiency of the assembly as such — enter upon the enjoyment of the Lord's fellowship and of fellowship with Him. Thenceforward He dwells in

their hearts by faith, and they are cheered by the promise of association with the Lord in His throne. This is surely a much lower blessing than that promised to a Philadelphian overcomer; but when estimated in the light of the past indifference and unfaithfulness of those to whom it is pledged, its grace and power to cheer and sustain are at once perceived.

The letter closes with, "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches." On the above supposition, this proclamation would be made in vain as far as Laodicea is concerned. We can only repeat that such is not the way of the Spirit of God; and we add that the contention will in the end beget that spirit of Laodiceanism which already is asserting itself on every hand. For if the warnings in this letter only concern an empty profession, we may delude ourselves with the thought that we are in no danger from the evils here indicated. E. D.