“HERE I AM!”

Revelation 3:1–22

Key Verse: 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.”

Today’s passage covers letters to the last three of the seven churches of Asia Minor. Sardis is known as a dead church. Philadelphia is known as an obedient church. Laodicea is known as a lukewarm church. In each case Jesus reveals himself to them because he loves them and he wants to give them hope in him and in his kingdom. As we study these last three letters, we want to learn more about Jesus. We also want to reflect on ourselves and see how Jesus may be speaking to us today. Through this study may God open our hearts and help us accept Jesus’ words personally.

In verse 1a John the author is directed to write to the church in Sardis. Sardis was about 35 miles southeast of Thyatira on the Roman postal route (see map). Sardis was the oldest, most glorious city of Asia Minor. Sardis used to be the capital of the ancient kingdom of Lydia (see map). Sardis had a fortress built on a mountain 1,500 feet high, so armies could never conquer the city unless its watchmen fell asleep, which had happened only twice (see image). The ancient Greeks had an expression “capturing Sardis” which meant achieving the impossible. The Pactolus river ran through the city (see image). This river had gold dust running through it that made the city rich and Sardis the first place to use gold coins (see image). Sardis had an impressive gymnasium (see image). Under the Greek empire 2,000 Jews were taken to settle in Sardis and it had the largest known synagogue in the ancient world (see image). Many of these Jews would later become Roman citizens (see image). The city was devastated by an earthquake in A.D. 17 and received help from Rome to rebuild. But restoration of the famous ancient Greek temple of Artemis located in Sardis remained unfinished (see image).

How does Jesus introduce himself to them? He says in verse 1, “These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.” Because they lived in such a great ancient city, the believers in Sardis may have thought they were superior to all the other churches. So Jesus tells them, just as he told the Ephesian church, that he’s the one who’s in control of all his churches. Jesus is still the one who holds everything in his hands. Only as we remain in a relationship with Jesus can we remain alive spiritually.

What does Jesus say to this church? He says in verse 1, “I know your deeds; you have a reputation for being alive, but you are dead.” What a rebuke! Often we think of a dead church as a place where many people are leaving, where attendance is really low and maybe only a few white-haired people gather. But here, a dead church has a reputation for being alive. It means many people gathered at their services. So what does it mean that they were “dead”? Read verse 2. According to these words, to be dead means to be spiritually asleep. It means to be unaware of spiritual things. A church becomes dead when it’s people focus on getting together with other people, but without God’s word, without prayer, and without sharing their faith with the outside world. Jesus also says here that it is “about to die,” meaning it’s not fully dead, but almost dead. He adds that their deeds are “unfinished in the sight of my God.” Like the Artemis temple in their midst, these people’s spiritual lives remained unfinished. They started off in Christian life well, but then stopped struggling. People couldn’t see it, but God could.

What does Jesus say to them? In verse 2 he told them, “Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die…” “What remains and is about to die” may refer to their faith in Jesus. In verse 3 he warns them again to “wake up.” What does Jesus mean to “wake up”? In Greek the word means to be watchful. For what should we be watchful? A terrorist attack? A robbery? No. The Bible says that as Christians we should be watchful, believing that Jesus may come at any time. Our culture lulls us into thinking this world is everything, as if there is no such thing as God or the second coming of Jesus. It lulls us into losing our spiritual vigilance. Physically we’re wide awake, but spiritually, we’re sleeping. How can we wake up and be watchful? Jesus told his disciples, “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation.” Colossians 4:2 reads, “Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.” When our personal prayer life dies out, we fall asleep spiritually. But when we re-devote ourselves to personal prayer, we begin to wake up spiritually. The only way to wake up and be watchful spiritually is to pray.

How else does Jesus help them? Read verse 3a. Here, what they “have received and heard” means the Bible teachings, especially the good news of Jesus’ death and resurrection, the gospel (1Co15:1–4). This is the core of the Christian message. We need to be reminded of the gospel and hold fast to the gospel message to stay alive spiritually. The gospel is the good news of forgiveness through Jesus who died for us, and the good news of the the hope of God’s kingdom through Jesus who rose from the dead. When an individual believer or a church loses its grip on the gospel, it begins to die. The best way to wake up spiritually is to remember the good news of the forgiveness of sins and the hope of God’s kingdom through Jesus. Jesus also says in verse 3, “…and repent.” When we hear the good news, we need to repent; we need to repent of our sins and of our unbelief. To wake up, we can’t just hear the good news; we need to repent.

Read verse 3b. Here Jesus warns them that if they don’t wake up, he’ll come to them like a thief. The Bible repeatedly tells us that at the end of the world Jesus will come like a thief (Mt24:42,43; Lk12:39,40; 1Th5:2; 2Pe3:10). The Book of Revelation will also say later that Jesus will come again like a thief (16:15). But here, when he says he’ll come like a thief to the church in Sardis, it may also mean that he’ll come and visit them in a special way to discipline them.

Then Jesus says something very special to this church. Read verse 4. These are words of great comfort to a few people there. They had to live in a dead church. But they kept their devotion to Jesus, and Jesus saw what they were doing and promised to reward them. He says they had not “soiled their clothes.” What does this mean? It means they’d struggled before God to live a holy life. Those who give up the pursuit of holiness eventually become spiritually dead. But those pursuing personal holiness are spiritually awake and alive. This pursuit should not be for just some special Christians, but for all believers. 2 Corinthians 7:1 says, “Therefore, since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.” We can purify ourselves not through our effort or willpower, but only as we confess our sins and accept by faith the blood of Jesus that cleanses us from all sin (1Jn1:7,9).

Jesus promises these people a great hope. Read verse 4b again. What does “dressed in white” mean? Many believe it means to be pure and holy. But in the ancient Roman world, it also meant victory. When the Roman army won a battle, there would be a victory parade, and all those who were Roman citizens would put on a white robe to symbolize that they shared in the victory. When we walk with Jesus, dressed in white, it means we share in his victory over sin, over death, over the curse, and over all evil. Jesus says here, surprisingly, “…for they are worthy.” Who is worthy to walk with Jesus and share his victory? We’re only sinners; in ourselves we’re not worthy. Even all our efforts and hard work leave us unworthy. But we are worthy to walk with Jesus dressed in white when we accept his shed blood for our sins (7:14). When we accept his blood, it changes us and we begin to pursue holiness and do many righteous acts (19:8). We should make this our hope, to walk with Jesus, dressed in white, by his grace.

What else does Jesus say about this? Read verse 5. Just as he does in every church, Jesus again speaks to “the one who is victorious.” In the case of the church at Sardis, to be victorious means to wake up spiritually, to be cleansed by Jesus and to begin to pursue a close relationship with him. When we do, we can share in his victory. He also says he will “never blot out the name of that person from the book of life, but will acknowledge that name” before the Father in heaven. The book of life is found throughout the Bible, but especially here in Revelation. What is this book? It’s God’s special book, where he records the names of those whom he will allow into his eternal kingdom. There’s an old hymn called, “Is My Name Written There?” We may think it’s trivial to have our name recorded in the book of life, but someday we’ll realize it’s the most important thing ever. We all need acknowledgement in some way for what we do. Jesus says he’ll acknowledge before the Father the name of the person whose name is found in the book of life. It’s the greatest recognition there’ll ever be.

Next Jesus addresses the church in Philadelphia (7a). Philadelphia was the youngest of the seven cities, founded after 189 B.C. by King Attalus II for his brother and successor Eumenes II, and so it was called “the city of brotherly love” (see images). Philadelphia was on the same Roman postal route, about 30 miles further southeast from Sardis, and also on a main east-west trade route from Ephesus to Asia Minor (see map). Philadelphia was strategic both for the military and for commerce (see image). The earthquake in A.D. 17 that affected Sardis also devastated Philadelphia, and aftershocks continued for some time. Its city wall was full of cracks and so were many buildings. Many people left the city and went out to live in the immediately surrounding area, because they had no money to rebuild. According to verse 9, believers in Philadelphia had been cast out of the Jewish synagogue, and this had deeply wounded them.

How does Jesus introduce himself to the church in Philadelphia? In verse 7 he says, “These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open.” Many thought the Jewish synagogue leaders were holy and true and could let people in and out of the synagogue to worship God. But Jesus introduces himself as the real one who is holy and true, who holds the key of David, who opens and shuts doors for believers. They were words of great comfort to these people.

What does Jesus say to them? Read verse 8b. These people were not humanly strong, but they had kept Jesus’ word and had not denied his name, despite the persecution (e.g. Lk12:9). For this reason, they were very precious to Jesus. They were precious because they had done their best to be obedient to him, regardless of what it cost them. He gives another description of them. Read verse 10a. “Since you have kept my command to endure patiently…” When they suffered, they did not give up; they again remembered Jesus’ command to endure patiently. Though it may have looked weak and foolish, through their patient endurance they were being faithful to Jesus. Their patient endurance amidst the evil world was exemplary for all believers of all time (1:9; 13:10; 14:12). Generally, people like quick and easy, not patient endurance. But what pleases Jesus is patient endurance.

Being excommunicated from the Jewish synagogue may not seem like such a big deal. But it was extremely hard to endure. Socially such people could not be accepted anywhere, for jobs or in leisure life. Their children could not easily marry. Excommunicated people would feel like a great failure. What does Jesus say to them? Read verse 9. Jesus is promising them total vindication. Even their worst enemies would have to acknowledge that Jesus loved them.

But what may stand out most in Jesus’ words to the church in Philadelphia is his promise of the open door. He introduces himself as the one who opens and shuts doors. And in verse 8 he says, “See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut.” What does it mean? First of all, it means that Jesus opens the door to God’s eternal kingdom to them. Though shut out of the synagogue, Jesus is welcoming them to their true, eternal home. But an “open door” may also mean something else. In other places in the New Testament, an open door refers to an open door for gospel ministry (e.g. 1Co16:9; 2Co2:12; Col4:3). Though persecution sometimes seems to shut that door, at other times, it’s especially during persecution that Jesus opens the door for us to share our faith, maybe because it’s during persecution that people start really listening.

What else does Jesus promise this church? Read verse 10. Here Jesus describes a coming “hour of trial” that’s going to come on the whole world to “test” the inhabitants of the earth. Later in Revelation it is described as “the great tribulation” (7:14). This great tribulation can refer to all the sufferings, persecutions and testing that Christians have to go through (Jas1:3,4,12). How would these believers in Philadelphia be “kept” from “the hour of trial”? By saying “keep,” Jesus isn’t promising to take them out of the hour of trial, but to protect them spiritually and enable them to keep their faith (cf. Jn17:15). Jesus still promises to keep us in his hands during times of intense suffering in our lives.

Next Jesus challenges them. Read verse 11. As we saw in chapter 1, his coming soon is a theme repeated in Revelation; it refers to his coming at the end of the world, but also to the fact that he can visit his church any day, at any time, to comfort, bless, and even discipline. Since he’s coming soon, he tells them to “Hold on to what you have.” He said the same thing to the believers in Thyatira (2:25). But Jesus has no rebukes for the church in Philadelphia; he just tells them to keep on keeping on. What does it mean to “hold on to what you have”? It means to hold on to a living, personal relationship with Jesus, and to faith in all his promises. When we hold onto this, no one can take away the crown that God will give us.

Jesus gives them one final word of encouragement. Read verse 12. Again Jesus is encouraging these excommunicated believers. They will be pillars in the temple of God and will never again leave it. They’ll have God’s name, the name of God’s city, the new Jerusalem, and the new name of Jesus our Savior written on them, to indicate forever to whom they really belong. Having God’s name written on us is another theme in Revelation (14:1; 22:4; cf. Isa56:5). We can have either the mark of the beast, Satan, or the name of Jesus written on us.

Finally, Jesus addresses the church in Laodicea (14a). On the Roman postal route Laodicea was another 45 miles south (see map). It was 100 miles east of Ephesus on another major east-west trade route. It was the most important city in a three-city region including Hieropolis six miles north and Colosse ten miles east (see map). Laodicea was founded by a Greek king Antiochus II and named after his wife Laodice, whom he later divorced. Under the Roman Republic Laodicea became a judicial and banking center for the area. Laodicea also became famous for its soft, raven-black wool, which was most expensive and made the city exceedingly rich. It had a famous medical school and a famous eye salve called “Phrygian powder.” Laodicea had no direct water supply, and so it built aqueducts to bring hot water from the hot springs in Hieropolis and cold water from the Lycus River in Colosse (see map again). The church in Laodicea is mentioned in Apostle Paul’s letter to the Colossians; it had likely been started by Paul’s disciple Epaphras (Col4:13,16). Unlike the other churches, Jesus has nothing good to say about the church in Laodicea; he seems to have saved the worst for last; he only rebukes them. But first, how does he introduce himself to them? Read verse 14b. Amen! means True! Jesus, unlike them, is true; he’s also the faithful and true witness and the ruler of God’s creation, something the believers there may have stopped believing.

What does he say to them? Read verses 15,16. It’s a reference to their water supply. Evidently, when water arrived from both sources, it arrived lukewarm and full of lime, and drinking it made people sick. Jesus takes something familiar to these people and tells them it describes their spiritual condition. They were lukewarm. It means they lost their zeal and spiritual fervor (Ro12:11). They became apathetic and indifferent. Maybe their motto was “Whatever” or “who cares?”

How does Jesus feel about it? Read verse 16. Here, “spit” literally means “vomit.” So the Message Bible translates it as, “You make me want to vomit.” Pretty harsh. Jesus doesn’t want us to be lukewarm in our relationship with him, but passionate. He wants us to love and serve him with an undying, fervent love. What was wrong with this church? Read verse 17. Their wealth led them to be spiritually blind and deceived about their real spiritual condition. They thought they were fine and didn’t realize they were wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. How could they get better? Read verse 18. They needed the gold of a refined faith, real purity through the blood of Jesus, and healing to open their spiritual eyes—which are things only Jesus can give.

Jesus seems so harsh with this church. But then he says something else. Read verse 19. He’s rebuking and disciplining them not because he despises or hates them, but because he loves them that much. Real love is not to spoil, but to rebuke and discipline. Jesus wants us to be earnest and to repent.

Then Jesus gives perhaps his most gracious invitation to this worst church. Read verse 20. Here we learn how humble and patient Jesus is. He’s standing at the door and knocking at this church. Though these people are so arrogant, blind and hard to bear, he really wants to have an intimate relationship with them, by his grace. He refuses to give up on them. He sets the example for us to be humble, patient and persistent with others as well. And he shows us how we can be renewed spiritually, no matter how wretched we may be. All we need do is invite Jesus in. Jesus never forces us into a relationship with him; he offers it to us, and we have to respond by opening the door of our hearts. If we do, he promises to come in and eat with us, to have the most intimate fellowship. Personal fellowship with Jesus is the core of Christian living. If we’re not close to Jesus, we can’t be faithful, we can’t patiently endure, we can’t please him. It’s not hard to have this personal fellowship; we just have to hear his voice, “Here I am!” open the door of our hearts and let him in, meaning accept his forgiving grace and love personally.

Today we saw how Jesus helped a dead church, a persecuted but obedient church, and a lukewarm church. May God show us our real spiritual condition and help us accept Jesus’ life-giving words, so that we can have a most intimate relationship with him.