

Cities of the New Testament: Laodicea

"I will spit you out of my mouth...you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked." Harsh words from a risen Jesus to a church that the Apostle Paul had spoken of warmly 40-some years earlier. What happened and what does it teach us today? This week, in the third installment of Cities of the New Testament (earlier installments discussed [Corinth](#) and [Ephesus](#)), we'll take a look at Laodicea.

Then

Location

Laodicea (pronounced *lay-odd-i-kee'-a*) was located approximately 100 miles east of Ephesus in the fertile valley of the Lycus River at 1300 feet on a spur of Mount Cadmus. It lay at the junction of two major highways—east-west between Syria and Ephesus and north-south between Smyrna and Attalia on the Mediterranean. Two other major early Christian cities, Colossae 8 miles to the west, and Hierapolis 6 miles to the north shared this agriculturally-rich region.



History

Laodicea was founded by Seleucid king Antiochus II of Syria in about 255 B.C., although the area had been previously settled under the names Diospolis and Rhoas.

Antiochus renamed the re-founded city after his wife, Laodike, whom he later divorced. In about 190 B.C., Laodicea became part of the kingdom of Pergamum and suffered greatly during the war with Mithradates. In 133 B.C., Laodicea (along with the rest of the Pergamum kingdom) became a Roman possession. At about the end of the first century B.C., Laodicea earned the title of "free city" and became the center of a *conventus juridicus* comprised of 24 other cities. In 26 A.D., the city competed for the honor of building a temple to the emperor Tiberius, but lost out to Smyrna. Domitian (81-96) made Laodicea the chief city of Phrygia and later, during the reign of Commodus (180-192), the city was finally named a "Temple Warden."

The Lycus River was an active volcanic area, and Laodicea was severely damaged by earthquakes in both 19 and 60 A.D. The city sought aid from the Roman Senate to help rebuild after the first of these, but according to the second century Roman historian Tacitus, *"One of the famous cities of Asia, Laodicea, was the same year (60 A.D.) overthrown by an earthquake, and, without any relief from us, recovered itself by its own resources."* [1]

The city continued to thrive in the Byzantine era, but it was eventually taken by the Seljuks in 1071. It was recovered by Byzantine emperor John Comnenus in 1119, but fell under Turkish dominion in the 13th century.



Main street ruins of Laodicea
www.holylandphotos.com



Triple gate dedicated to Domitian (81-96)
www.bibleplaces.com

Culture

By the dawn of the Christian era, Laodicea was populated not only by the indigenous Hellenized Syrians, but also by Greeks and Romans, as well as a substantial Jewish community. It was a wealthy community, but it does not appear to have distinguished itself culturally. It was the origin of two skeptic philosophers—Antiochus (1st century B.C.) and Theodas (2nd century A.D.)—but no philosophical school was ever established in the city. Archaeological evidence indicates that they worshipped Zeus, Apollo, and emperors.

Economy

Laodicea was one of the wealthiest cities of Asia, being blessed with several thriving industries and an advantageous position on the caravan trade routes. The fertility of the Lycus valley soil ensured a solid agricultural base, but Laodicea also became famous for its textile, banking, and medical industries.

Principal among its famous products were garments styled from the distinctive glossy black wool of its sheep. Small, cheap upper garments (*himatia*), *birros* (another style of upper garment), and several kinds of tunics were manufactured in Laodicea. One style of tunic called a *trimita* became so famous that the city was nicknamed *Trimitaria*. [2] Laodicea was also a noted banking center. In 51 B.C., Cicero cashed bank drafts there, and the city had its own mint.

Laodicea's second most famous and widely-exported product seems to have been an eye salve ((collyrium) referred as as "Phrygian powder." This came from the school of medicine located in the city and associated with the Temple of Men Karou some 13 miles west. Men was the original god of the Lycus valley, but by the first century, the people had associate him with the Greek god Zeus.

Two Laodicean coins. On the left, the image of Zeus. On the right, one celebrating its medical school. note the serpent-encircled staff held by Asklepios on the right, a medical symbol that continues to this day for medical groups, including the American Medical Association.



This Phrygian powder was so well-known in the ancient world that it is mentioned by Aristotle, as well as Galen, the famous 2nd century physician. The Laodicean school of medicine also produced an ointment for the ears made from spice nard.

All of these contributed to a thriving economy and substantial wealth in Laodicea. So self-sufficient was the city that it needed no aid from Rome to rebuild after the devastating earthquake in 60 A.D. Even Laodicea's biggest weakness, the lack of a good local water source, demonstrated its strength. The city built a five-mile aqueduct from Baspinar Springs in the village of Denizli, but the trip left the water lukewarm and calcium-rich by the time it reached Laodicea.



Ruins of the larger theater in Laodicea
www.ntimages.com



Remains of the aqueduct showing calcium deposits
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The Ekklesia

The church at Laodicea was almost certainly founded by Epaphras, a native of neighboring Colossae and a student of the Apostle Paul in Ephesus: "*you learned [the Gospel] from Epaphras, our beloved fellow bond-servant, who is a faithful servant of Christ on our behalf...*" [Colossians 1:7]. Paul spent upwards of 18 months teaching the Gospel in the School of Tyrannus in Ephesus, and Paul does not appear to have ever visited the churches of the Lycus Valley (Laodicea, Colossae, and Hierapolis), but he harbored a deep concern for them and may have sent Luke, Mark, Aristarchus, and Demas there to help Epaphras' missionary efforts.

We do not know exactly when Epaphras met Paul, but we do know that he shared a jail cell with the Apostle at some point: "*Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you*" [Philemon 1:23]. Traditionally, both Colossians and Philemon have been considered products of Paul's first Roman imprisonment, but it seems more likely, as some have suggested, that Paul may have been jailed for a time during his extended visit to Ephesus. Clearly, Paul was jailed in other places besides Rome (see 2 Corinthians 11), and he encountered major resistance in Ephesus (see Acts 19). Placing Epaphras in Rome is an assumption with little rationale, but his presence in Ephesus makes more sense. Regardless of their meetingplace, Paul must have recognized enormous potential in Epaphras and understood the value of native missionaries.

In Paul's Colossian letter, he tells them to send it along to the church in Laodicea and to read the one he sent to Laodicea. The letter to Laodicea is lost, although a forgery appeared that is included in some early Bible manuscripts, as well as 100 copies of the Latin Vulgate. It is little more than a short compilation of Pauline concepts found in other letters, but you can read the text [here](#).

Laodicea is probably best known to Christians, however, by the letter in Revelation 3:

"To the angel of the church in Laodicea write:

The Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God, says this:

'I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I wish that you were cold or hot. 'So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth. 'Because you say, "I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing," and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked, I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire so that you may become rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness will not be revealed; and eye salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see. 'Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; therefore be zealous and repent. 'Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me. 'He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne. 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'" [Revelation 3:14-22]

Laodicea has the distinction of being the only of the seven Asian churches addressed by the risen Jesus to have nothing positive mentioned. There are a number of important concepts in this passage:

- The deeds of the Laodiceans are "neither hot nor cold." Because of our modern vernacular, this is often interpreted as neither for (not) or against (cold) Jesus, but the context demands a different understanding. Most importantly, Jesus says "I wish that you were hot or cold," and He certainly wouldn't call for the Laodiceans to be against Him!
The appropriate interpretation involves a metaphor that certainly would have been understood by the Laodiceans and would have stung their civic pride—their water. Unlike the refreshingly cold water of neighboring Colossae and the healing hot spring waters of Hierapolis, the Laodicean's imported lukewarm water was ineffective. "Your deeds are neither spiritually refreshing nor healing," Jesus is saying. "They are worthless. I will spit you out of my mouth," probably much as a visitor to Laodicea would spit out its lukewarm, calcium-rich water on first taste.
- Their deeds are worthless because they are rooted in self-sufficiency, rather than on dependency on Christ. "You think you're rich!" Jesus says, probably referring specifically to material wealth but alluding more importantly to spiritual wealth. "But you're really poor, blind, and naked"—obvious references to the banking, medical, and textile industries in the city.
- There is a remedy. "Replace your own wealth with 'gold refined by fire,'" (perhaps a reference to suffering for Christ's sake as in 1 Peter 1:7). "Replace your black garments from your local wool with pure white." "Throw out your Phrygian powder and cure your spiritual blindness with my eye salve."
The church of Laodicea had forgotten its first love, just as the church at Ephesus had (Revelation 2:4). Jesus is standing at their doorway, insistently knocking to get back in (3:20), and He promises that anyone who repents will be allowed "to sit down with me on my throne (3:21)." This is a great lesson on church discipline rooted in love. Unlike other churches in the Revelation letters, Jesus doesn't threaten the Laodiceans; he offers them an incomparable reward.

The Laodiceans were apparently busy with church work, but they were pridefully ascribing their success to their own efforts (much as the city pridefully rebuilt itself in 60 A.D. without the help of Rome). "Give me the glory, as you should," Jesus says. "And you will be restored to the promise."

We cannot know how the Laodiceans responded when they heard the scathing indictment of their activity, but we do know that the church there survived for hundreds of years. Bishop Sagaris of Laodicea was martyred in 166, and during his tenure a controversy over the date of [Easter](#) raged. Still later (sometime in the 4th century, the date is disputed), a Synod was held which displayed some decidedly anti-Semitic leanings in the 60 canons that were issued.

[1] Tacitus. The Annals, Chapter 14

[2] W.M. Ramsay, The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia, 1904. Chap 29.

Now

The story of Laodicea (pronounced *a-mare'-i-ka*) offers a profound warning for today, as well as a profound reward. Something in excess of 80% of Americans claim to be Christian, but only 43% attend worship services in a typical week [3]. Among those, who knows how many are members of congregations who focus on Jesus as opposed to their own deeds.

Self-sufficiency, rugged individualism, self-made men (and women) — these ubiquitous American values are deeply ingrained in our national psyche, and it is certain that they influence Christians and their churches. And it certainly isn't always easy to separate our own motivations. I do a lot of "church work" myself, and while I don't actively seek the approval of people for these things, I have to admit, I too seldom put Jesus at the center of these activities.

Is *Ekklesia Then & Now* itself a lukewarm (ineffective) work? I have admitted before that I initially started *ET&N* as a marketing tool to promote my novel, [Peculiar People](#), but it quickly took on a life of its own. I hope that in researching and developing these newsletters, I have come closer to Christ and it glorifies Him.

[3] The Barna Group, "Church Attendance", <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=Topic&TopicID=10>



Unsure about or don't agree with something in *Ekklesia Then & Now*? First, be a Berean (Acts 17:10-11). If you still disagree, post a message so we can all share in the discussion!

NEXT ISSUE: New Testament Apocrypha: Introduction (April 27)

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