

THE UNVEILING

# Session 3

*To the Churches, Part II*

Revelation 3: Sardis, Philadelphia, Laodicea

A Fourteen-Session Inductive Study for Young Adults

*Behold, I stand at the door and knock.* (Revelation 3:20, RSV2CE)

# Leader Preparation Guide

## Session Overview

*Discovery Aim.* The group discovers the last three letters as three diagnoses of the comfortable heart: reputation without life (Sardis), littleness with an open door (Philadelphia), and lukewarm self-sufficiency (Laodicea), and hears Revelation 3:20 in its true context: Christ knocking at the door of the baptized, asking to come in to supper.

*Catholic Touchstone.* Conversion is not a single past event but the continuing movement of the whole Christian life; the Church calls this second conversion an uninterrupted task for every baptized person (CCC 1428, 1430–1433). The door of 3:20 opens onto a meal, and the Catholic ear cannot miss the supper where Christ comes in to us most concretely.

## What You Need to Know

Sardis had been the proverbially impregnable capital of ancient Lydia, seat of King Croesus of legendary wealth; yet its acropolis was famously captured by surprise, attackers scaling an unguarded ascent. Commentators have long heard that history under the letter's warning: you have the name of being alive, and you are dead; if you will not awake, I will come like a thief. A city that fell asleep on its reputation hears a church doing the same.

Philadelphia, the youngest of the seven cities, sat in an earthquake-prone valley; after the great quake of A.D. 17 its people reportedly lived for years in fear of the ground moving again. To this small, faithful, socially powerless church, the letter promises what its city could not: I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God; never shall he go out of it (3:12). Philadelphia, like Smyrna, receives no rebuke. Notice the pattern: the two churches with the least power and the most pressure receive the two letters with no charge against them.

Laodicea was a banking and commercial center so wealthy that, as Tacitus records in the Annals, it rebuilt itself after the earthquake of A.D. 60 from its own resources, declining imperial assistance. It was known for its textile trade and, commentators propose from the ancient evidence, for a reputation in medicine including a remedy for the eyes. The letter's counsel lands on all of it: buy from me gold refined by fire, white garments to clothe your nakedness, and salve to anoint your eyes (3:18). Many commentators also observe that the city's water, piped in from a distance, arrived neither hot like the springs of nearby Hierapolis nor cold and fresh like the water at Colossae, but tepid. These local readings are influential scholarly proposals rather than doctrine; hold them lightly, but they make the letter's imagery vivid: the church's condition mirrored its plumbing.

The center of the session is 3:20. Popular Christian culture reads it as an evangelistic appeal to the unconverted. Its actual address is more piercing: it is spoken to a church, to the baptized, to Christians who have managed to shut Christ out of the very house he owns. And what he asks for is table fellowship: I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. Keep both truths together: the verse genuinely is an image of Christ's initiative and our free response (Catholic preachers and evangelists have often used it that way), and its first edge cuts toward comfortable believers, not outsiders.

Pastoral note. Lukewarmness is the most relatable sin in the seven letters, and the most discouraging to talk about. Keep the tone of 3:19 audible the whole evening: those whom I love, I reprove and chasten. This letter, the harshest of the seven, is also the one with the supper invitation. Nobody in your group should leave feeling spewed out; everyone should leave hearing the knock.

## Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

- Isaiah 22:20–22: Eliakim, the royal steward given the key of the house of David: he shall open, and none shall shut. Revelation 3:7 places that key in Christ's hand. This is a discovery passage tonight.
- Exodus 32:32–33 and Psalm 69:28: the book of life, from which names can be blotted; Revelation 3:5 promises the conqueror: I will not blot his name out of the book of life. The book of life returns at the judgment (Revelation 20:12, 15); plant it now.
- Proverbs 3:11–12: whom the LORD loves he reproves; Revelation 3:19 speaks it from Christ's own mouth (compare Hebrews 12:5–6).
- Song of Solomon 5:2: the bride hears her beloved knocking at the door, an ancient resonance behind 3:20 that many spiritual writers have heard: the knock of a lover, not a bill collector.

## VOICES OF THE CHURCH

### VOICE OF THE CHURCH

**St. Augustine** · *Confessions, Book I, ch. 1*

You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you. Augustine's most famous sentence is the deep diagnosis of Laodicea: lukewarmness is what a restless heart looks like when it has numbed itself with lesser comforts. The cure is not more effort at religion but the return of desire to its true object.

### VOICE OF THE CHURCH

**St. Francis de Sales** · *Introduction to the Devout Life (summary)*

St. Francis de Sales teaches, in substance, that devotion is not a special vocation for monks but prompt, ready love of God available to every state of life, and that the merely respectable Christian life, which avoids grave sin while loving God sluggishly, falls far short of the devotion he urges; the study adds that it is dangerous precisely because it feels safe. He wrote for laypeople in the world: Laodicea's people, and ours.

### VOICE OF THE CHURCH

**St. Teresa of Ávila** · *Lines found in her breviary*

The lines traditionally found written in St. Teresa's own breviary say, in substance: let nothing disturb you, let nothing frighten you; all things are passing; God never changes; patience obtains all things; whoever has God lacks nothing; God alone suffices. Give these lines to your Philadelphians: the ones with little power, holding fast, afraid of the next earthquake.

## Catechism Connection

- CCC 1428, 1430–1433: the call to ongoing conversion of the baptized; interior repentance as a radical reorientation of the whole life, drawn by grace. This is what repent and be zealous (3:19) asks of a lukewarm church.
- CCC 2544–2547: poverty of heart. Laodicea's I am rich, I have prospered, I need nothing is the exact inversion of the first beatitude; the letter's buy from me gold refined by fire is a call into that poverty.
- CCC 827: the Church holy yet always being purified (carried over from Session 2; the frame still governs).

#### **THREAD WATCH (LEADER ONLY)**

Book of life, planted tonight (3:5): do not resolve it; it returns at the great white throne in Session 13. If someone asks whether names can really be blotted out, be honest: the image itself warns that perseverance matters, which is Catholic teaching, and Session 13 will treat it fully.

New Jerusalem, planted tonight (3:12): the name of the city of my God. It resolves in Session 14.

Furniture of Heaven, entries tonight (silent): white garments (3:5, 18), a pillar in the temple of my God (3:12), and the entry to guard most carefully: I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me (3:20). Record the meal at the door and say nothing about it; Sessions 9 and 13 depend on it.

Conqueror thread continues: three more promises to him who conquers, including sitting with Christ on his throne (3:21), the last and greatest of the seven.

### **Session Goals**

1. The group discovers the three diagnoses: dead reputation, faithful littleness, lukewarm self-sufficiency.
2. The group finds Isaiah 22 behind the key of David by opening the passage.
3. The group hears Revelation 3:20 in context, addressed to the baptized, opening onto a meal.
4. The group can articulate why the letters to the weakest churches contain no rebuke.
5. Each participant names, privately, which letter tonight reads their mail.

### **Timed Plan (75–90 minutes)**

- Opening prayer: 5 min
- Win questions: 10 min
- Build (three letters, with discovery passages): 45–55 min
- Send questions: 8 min
- Live It This Week, memory verse, closing prayer, distribute Take-Home 3: 7–10 min

*Pre-chosen cuts if time runs short:* drop the Dig Deeper box, and compress Question 4 (Philadelphia) to the key of David discovery only.

# Discussion Guide

## Opening Prayer

Leader: Lord Jesus, holy and true, you hold the key of David; you open and no one shuts. Open our ears tonight, open our eyes, and if any door in us is shut against you, give us the will to open it. For you live and reign for ever and ever. Amen.

## Win

1. What is something in your life that looks healthier from the outside than it actually is right now (a habit, a friendship, a discipline)? No need to overshare; even naming the category counts.
2. When was the last time someone knocked on your actual door unexpectedly? What did you feel before you knew who it was?

## Build

*Read Revelation 3:1–6 (Sardis) aloud.*

3. Sardis gets almost no commendation. What exactly is its condition (3:1–2), and what five commands does Christ give it (3:2–3)? What would a church, or a Christian, with a name of being alive but actually dead look like today?

**ANSWER** · share after the discussion

The condition: a living reputation and a dead reality; even what remains is on the point of death, and its works are not complete in the sight of God, however complete they look to everyone else. The commands come rapid-fire: awake, strengthen what remains, remember what you received and heard, keep it, repent. Today it looks like religion running on reputation and autopilot: the ministry that still has the name, the Christian who still has the habits, with nothing alive underneath. Leader note on the city's history: Sardis, the unconquerable citadel, was famously taken by surprise up an ungarded ascent, which is why come like a thief would land hard in that town.

And yet, even in Sardis: you have still a few names, people who have not soiled their garments (3:4). Christ counts faithfulness by name, even inside a dying congregation. No one is doomed by their parish's temperature.

*Read Revelation 3:7–13 (Philadelphia) aloud.*

4. Christ introduces himself as the one who has the key of David (3:7). Discovery: open Isaiah 22:20–22 and read it aloud. Who originally held this key, what was his office, and what is Revelation claiming by putting the key in Christ's hand?

**ANSWER** · share after the discussion

In Isaiah, the key of the house of David is given to Eliakim, the royal steward, the officer who governed the palace on the king's behalf: he shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open. Revelation lifts the formula verbatim onto Christ: the son of David now holds his own house's key, with absolute authority to open and shut. For a church with little power (3:8), the point is everything: the door that matters is not opened by social standing, and the one who opened it for them cannot be overruled.

5. Philadelphia has but little power (3:8), and receives no rebuke, only promises (3:9–12). Read the promises again slowly. What does Christ promise the church that feels small, and what does the pillar image (3:12) answer in the life of an earthquake-country city?

**ANSWER** · share after the discussion

He promises vindication (even their opponents will learn that I have loved you), his promise to keep you from the hour of trial (3:10; whether through it or out of it, the text leaves open), his soon coming, and then the great promise: I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God; never shall he go out of it, with three names written on him: God's, the city of God's (the new Jerusalem: plant it, it resolves in our final session), and Christ's own new name. In a city that shook, whose people knew what it was to flee their homes when the ground moved, permanence in the temple of God is the deepest possible comfort. Notice the study's pattern completing itself: Smyrna and Philadelphia, the two weakest churches, are the two with no charge against them. Christ's arithmetic is not ours: little power plus kept word equals an open door no one can shut.

*Read Revelation 3:14–22 (Laodicea) aloud.*

6. Laodicea says one sentence about itself; Christ says five words about it (3:17). Set the two self-portraits side by side. Then look at 3:18: how does each item Christ counsels them to buy answer something the city was famous for supplying to itself?

**ANSWER** · share after the discussion

Their sentence: I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing. His: you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. The most self-sufficient church in Asia is the only one Christ describes as pitiable. Then the counsel, with local color many commentators have noted: to a banking city, buy from me gold refined by fire; to a textile city, white garments to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen; to a city known for its eye remedy, salve to anoint your eyes, that you may see. Everything Laodicea sold, it needed, and could not supply for itself. The lukewarm water image (3:15–16) likely worked the same way: many commentators note that the city's piped-in water arrived tepid, neither hot like Hierapolis's springs nor cold like Colossae's. On that proposal, the letter is asking less for emotional intensity than for usefulness and honesty: hot and cold water both serve; tepid self-satisfaction serves nothing.

7. Now the famous verse. Read 3:20 once more, slowly, and answer only from context: who is Christ speaking to, where is he standing, and what does he want?

**ANSWER** · share after the discussion

He is speaking to a church, to Christians, ordinarily the baptized, which means the shocking thing about the verse is the geography: Christ is outside his own church's door, knocking. He is not battering it down; the handle, in the later devotional image, is on the inside, though even the knocking and the voice are his grace at work. And what he wants is supper: I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. In the ancient world a shared table meant communion, friendship, covenant. The letter that began with spewing out ends with the offer of intimate table fellowship, if anyone (the corporate summons carrying a personal invitation to every hearer) hears and opens.

And immediately after the meal comes the throne (3:21): he who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne. Supper, then throne. The Catholic heart hears the shape of its own life in that order: the table of the Lord now, the reign of the saints hereafter. Session 4 opens on another door, standing open in heaven (4:1); the wordplay is the book's own invitation onward.

**BUILD, THEN PRESS: IS REVELATION 3:20 THE SINNER'S PRAYER?**

*Present this at full strength before answering.* In the revivalist tradition many evangelicals have read 3:20 as the gospel in one verse: Jesus stands at the door of every human heart, and salvation begins the moment a person repents, believes, and asks him in. The strongest forms are careful: they insist on real

faith and repentance, not a formula, and many (though not all) add that the one truly reborn will persevere. It is a powerful reading, it takes free will seriously, it has been the doorway to real conversion for millions, and it seems to be exactly what the verse says: if any one opens the door, I will come in.

8. What is right and even beautiful in that reading? And what does the verse's own context add that the popular use leaves out?

**ANSWER** · share after the discussion

What is right: Christ truly does take the initiative (he comes, he knocks) and truly does await free human response (if any one opens); grace does not force the door. The Church teaches exactly this cooperation of grace and freedom, and using this verse to call someone to Christ is legitimate; Catholic preachers and evangelists have often done exactly that.

What the context adds: the verse is spoken to a Christian congregation, ordinarily the baptized. Its first edge is not evangelistic but re-evangelistic: Christians can shut Christ out, which means the door is not a one-time hinge but a living relationship that can cool, close, and be reopened through repentance (3:19). And what opening the door leads to is not a transaction but a shared supper, ongoing table fellowship, which must then be persevered in: the promise two verses later is to him who conquers, the book's constant word for faithfulness to the end. So the verse teaches both more and less than the sinner's-prayer reading: less, because it is not describing a single settled moment; more, because it invites a lifetime of suppers with Christ, with the throne at the end of the road.

**DIG DEEPER**

The key of David and the keys of the kingdom. Isaiah 22 shows that the Davidic kingdom had an office of royal steward over the house (Catholics have compared it to a prime minister), marked by a key and the power to open and shut, an office that passed from man to man (Shebna to Eliakim) while the office endured. Christ holds the key of David absolutely (Revelation 3:7); and in Matthew 16:19 he gives the keys of the kingdom of heaven, with the power to bind and loose, to Simon Peter. Catholics read Matthew 16 through Isaiah 22: the King has appointed a steward in his house. The two passages reward being read side by side; our study Unless Someone Guides Me devotes a full module to it.

## Send

9. Sardis, Philadelphia, or Laodicea: which letter reads your mail right now? You do not have to say why.
10. Where, concretely, is Christ knocking in your life at the moment: what would opening the door actually look like this week?

## Live It This Week

- Answer the knock once, concretely: one act of zeal (3:19) chosen against your own lukewarm spot. Then share one unhurried meal this week and eat it as if Christ were the guest of 3:20: he is.
- Read Revelation 4 and 5 in preparation for next session: where the book hands us another open door, this time in heaven (4:1).
- Memorize the memory verse below.

## Memory Verse

*Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.* (Revelation 3:20, RSV2CE)

## **Closing Prayer**

Leader: Lord Jesus, you stand at the door and knock. We open to you: our routines, our reputations, our comfortable places. Come in and eat with us, and make us zealous. Those whom you love, you reprove; thank you for loving us that much. For you live and reign for ever and ever. Amen.

*Distribute Take-Home 3 as people leave.*

## Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in Session 3, in order:

- Revelation 3:1–6 (Sardis, read aloud)
- Revelation 3:7–13 (Philadelphia, read aloud)
- Isaiah 22:20–22 (discovery, read aloud)
- Revelation 3:14–22 (Laodicea, read aloud)
- Exodus 32:32–33 and Psalm 69:28 (leader background, book of life)
- Proverbs 3:11–12 and Hebrews 12:5–6 (leader background for 3:19)
- Song of Solomon 5:2 (leader background for 3:20)
- Matthew 16:19 (Dig Deeper)
- Memory verse: Revelation 3:20