

The Synopsis

J. N. Darby

1847

1 THE REVELATION

1.1 Chapter 3

We have seen the close at the Lord's coming contemplated in Thyatira. Sardis begins a new collateral phase of the assembly's history. Save the having the seven stars, none of the ecclesiastical characters of Christ, none of those noticed in Him as walking in the midst of the assemblies, are noticed. Still the assembly is noticed as such. It is still the history of the assembly. But, the Lord's coming having been noticed, all characteristics of Christ refer to what He will have in the kingdom. Still He has yet the seven stars-supreme authority over the assembly. It is nothing peculiar to this assembly He has it over, and as to, all. It is in this character He has to do with Sardis. He has the seven spirits, the fulness of the perfection in which He will govern the earth. Thus He is competent to bless in the assembly, though there is no regular ecclesiastical connection. He has power over all, and the fulness of the Spirit; both in perfection. Whatever the assembly is, He is all this. This is a great comfort. The assembly cannot fail in the place of witness through want of fulness of grace in Him. Nor can He fail him who has ears to hear.

But the state of the assembly shewed that it was far from availing itself of it. It had indeed a name to live; it was superior in its pretensions to the evil of Thyatira; nor were there Jezebels and corruption. But there was practically death. There was no completeness in her works before God. It was not evil here, but lack of spiritual energy. But this did leave individuals to defile their garments in the world. She was called to remember, not her first works, but what she had received and heard, the truth committed to her, the gospel and word of God; if not, she would be treated as the world. The Lord would come as a thief; for the Lord's coming is now always in view.

There is no threat of removing the candlestick: that was settled. Judgment, setting aside the assembly, was fixed. But this body would be treated as the world, not ecclesiastically as a corrupt assembly (compare I Thess. 5). However, some had preserved their integrity, and would be owned; and they would walk with Christ as those that had done righteousness. This was the promise too. They had confessed His name practically before men, before the world, and theirs would be confessed before God when the nominal assembly was treated

as the world. They were real Christians in the midst of a worldly profession, and their names would not be struck out of the register, then ill-kept on earth, but infallibly rectified by heavenly judgment. It has been remarked that, simultaneously with bringing in the Lord's coming, the ear to hear comes after the distinguishing of the overcomers. Such a remnant only is looked for. I cannot doubt that we have Protestantism here.

The assembly of Philadelphia has a peculiarly interesting character. Nothing is said of its works, but that Christ knows them. But what is interesting in it is that it is peculiarly associated with Christ Himself. Christ, as in all these last assemblies, is not seen in the characters in which He walked in the midst of the assemblies, but in such as faith peculiarly recognises when ecclesiastical organisation has become the hot-bed of corruption. Here it is His personal character, what He is intrinsically, holy and true, what the word displays and requires, and what the word of God is in itself-moral character and faithfulness. Indeed this last word includes all : faithfulness to God within and without, according to what is revealed, and faithful to make good all He has declared.

Christ is known as the Holy One. Then outward ecclesiastical associations or pretensions will not do. There must be what suits His nature, and faithful consistency with that word which He will certainly make good. With this He has the administration; and opens and no man shuts, and shuts and no man opens. See what His path was on earth: only then graciously dependent, as we are. He was holy and true, to man's view had a little strength, kept the word, lived by every word that proceeded out of God's lips, waited patiently for the Lord, and to Him the porter opened. He lived in the last days of a dispensation, the holy and true One, rejected, and, to human eye, failing in success with those who said they were Jews, but were the synagogue of Satan. So the saints here: they walk in a place like His; they keep His word, have a little strength, are not marked by a Pauline energy of the Spirit, but do not deny His name. This is the character and motive of all their conduct. It is openly confessed, the word kept, the name not denied. It seems little; but in universal decline, much pretension and ecclesiastical claim, and many falling away to man's reasonings, keeping the word of Him that is holy and true, and not denying His name is everything.

And this element is noticed. Christ, the holy and true One, is waiting. Here on earth He waited patiently for Jehovah. It is the character of perfect faith. Faith has a double character -energy which overcomes, and patience which waits for God and trusts Him (see the first in Heb. II : 23-34; the latter in v. 8-22). It is the latter which is found here; the word of patience kept.

But as regards the former substantive qualities, keeping the word, and not denying Christ's name (though with a little strength) in presence of ecclesiastical pretension to a successional God-established religion, promises were given. Christ would force these pretentious claimants to divine succession to come and own that He had loved those who kept His word. An open door was given at present, and no man could shut it ; just as the porter had opened to Him, so that scribes and Pharisees and priests could not hinder it. In the future they would have to own themselves humbled, and that those who followed the word of the holy and true One were those He had loved. Meanwhile His approbation

was sufficient. This was the test of faith-to be satisfied with His approbation, content with the authority of His word.

But there was a promise also as to the Lord's judgments in the earth. Christ is waiting till His enemies be made His footstool. We must wait for it to see the world set right. We have to go on where the god of this world has his way, though under divine limitation. The thought that good is to have its rights in this world is to forget the cross and Christ. We cannot have our rights till He has, for we have none but His. Judgment (since Pilate had it, and Christ was the righteous One before him) has not yet returned to righteousness. Till then Christ waits, though at the right hand of God; and we wait. It is not persecution and martyrdom, as in Smyrna. It is as hard a task perhaps, or, at any rate, our task now patience and contentedness with Christ's approbation, keeping His word, not denying His name.

But then there were other and blessed encouragements. There was an hour of temptation coming upon all the world to try those who belonged to earth, who dwelt there as belonging to it. Some might be spared, victorious in the trial; but those who kept the word of Christ's patience would be kept from it. On the whole world it would come; and where were they ?-Out of the world. They had not belonged to it when in it. They had been waiting for Christ to take His power-waiting His time to have the world. They belonged to heaven, to Him who was there; and they would be taken to be with Him when the world was to be in the time of terrible trial. There was a special time before He took His power; and not only would they reign with Him in result, but they would be kept from that hour, and had the assurance of it in the time of their trial. And hence the Lord points them to His coming as their hope; not as warning that the unrepentant would be treated as the world when He appeared. He came quickly, and they were to look for the crown then, holding fast what they had, feeble but spiritually associated with Him as they were, lest any should take it.

We have now the general promise in heavenly places marked by special association with Christ; and they are publicly owned in that in which they seemed on earth to have nothing. Others had the pretension to be the people of God, the city of God-to have divine religious title; these were only consistent with His word, and they waited for Christ. Now, when Christ takes His power, when things are real, according to Him in power, they have this place according to God. It was the cross and contempt below; it is the display of God's name and heavenly city above.

Let us examine the promise to the overcomers here. He who had but a little strength is a pillar in the temple of the God in whom and with whom he is blessed. He was held perhaps as outside the ecclesiastical unity and order; he is a pillar in it in heaven, and will go no more out. On him who was hardly owned to have a part in grace has the name of his rejected Saviour's God been stamped publicly in glory. He who was hardly accounted to belong to the holy city has its heavenly name written on him too, and Christ's new name-the name not known to prophets and Jews according to the flesh, but which He has taken as dead to this world (where the false assembly settles down) and risen into heavenly glory. The careful association with Christ is striking here, and gives

its character to the promise. "The temple of my God," says Christ; "the name of my God"; "of the city of my God," " my new name." Associated in Christ's own patience, Christ confers upon him what fully associates him in His own blessing with God. This is of peculiar blessing, and full of encouragement for us.

Laodicea follows. Lukewarmness characterises the last state of profession in the assembly. It is nauseous to Christ; He will spue it out of His mouth. It was not mere want of power, it was want of heart-the worst of all ills. This threat is peremptory, not conditional. It brought irremediable rejection. With this want of heart for Christ and His service, there was much pretension to the possession of resources and competency in themselves; "I am rich," whereas they had nothing of Christ. It is the professing assembly accounting itself rich without having Christ as the riches of the soul by faith. Therefore He counsels them to buy of Him true and approved righteousness, clothing for their moral nakedness, and what gave spiritual sight; for they were, as respects what Christ is and gives before God, poor, naked, and miserable, and specially so. This is Christ's judgment of their pretended acquisitions according to man. However, as long as the assembly subsists, Christ continues to deal in grace, stands at the door and knocks, presses reception of Himself in the closest way on the conscience. If anyone, still in what He was going to spue out, heard His voice and opened, He would give him admission to be with Him, and a part in the kingdom.

There is no coming here; nor was there for the judgment of Jezebel. That was practically Babylon; and she is judged before Christ comes. This is spued out of Christ's mouth, cast off as worthless to Him; but the general body is judged as the world. The Lord's coming is in Thyatira for the saints, and in Philadelphia too. That is its aspect as to the assembly, and that only. Sardis is reduced, if unrepentant, to the condition of the world, and judged as such. When the state of Laodicea arrives, the assembly is disowned and rejected of Christ in that character: but for that His coming is not to be spoken of. Although Thyatira goes down to the end and closes ecclesiastically the assembly's history, yet only in the first three is the assembly at large treated as the subject of repentance. In Thyatira space had been given Jezebel to repent, and she did not: and the scene is to close and be replaced by the kingdom. In this respect the last four assemblies go together. There is no prospect of repentance of the whole assembly, or restoration. Sardis is called to hold fast and repent, and remember what she had received; but, if she does not watch, is to be treated as the world. Hence, as we have seen, the call to hear is addressed to overcomers after the promise.

The character of Christ in connection with this assembly must not be passed over. It brings out the passage from the various conditions of the assembly to His authority above and beyond it over the world. Christ personally takes up what the assembly has ceased to be. He is the Amen, the fulfilment and verifier of all the promises, the real witness and revealer of God and of truth, when the assembly is not; and the beginning of the creation of God-Head over all things, and the glory and witness of what it is as from God-as the new creation. The

assembly ought to have displayed the power of the new creation by the Holy Ghost; as if any man is in Christ, it is a new creation, where all things are of God. We, as its firstfruits, are created again in Him. The assembly has thus the things which remain (2 Cor. 3 : II). But she has been an unfaithful witness of it. Does she possess a part in it? It is because Christ does, and He is the true beginning of it as really displayed. The responsible witness of it by the Holy Ghost having failed, Christ now takes it up, coming in for its effectual display.

But the series of preparatory events in the world must first be gone into. And it is to be remarked, that there is no mention here of the fact of the Lord's coming in reference to the assembly. It is promised that He will come quickly; and the assembly is threatened with being spued out of His mouth. But the fact of His coming for His own, or the assembly's rapture at any time, is not stated. This falls in fully with what we have seen of John's ministry ¹ -his being occupied with the manifestation of the Lord on earth, and scarce touching (and only when needed on leaving the disciples) on heavenly promises. In John 14 and 17 he does it exceptionally. Here it is left out. Even in Revelation 12, which remarkably confirms what I say, the rapture is only seen as identified with the catching up of the man-child, Christ Himself. Hence we have no specific relative epoch noted for the taking away the saints here, save that they are taken before the war in heaven which leads to the last three years and a half. But on the other hand the saints belonging to the assembly, or before, are always seen above when the epistles to the assemblies are ended. They are waiting for judgment to be given to them for the avenging of their blood; but they are never seen on earth.

¹His character too was for judgment among the assemblies and the assembly on earth; not His own bride, but the outward body here on earth.