

The World, The Church, And Laodiceanism

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It's in the World!

In August 1987, a well-known evangelist in the church of God said, "You would be surprised how often the Work internally mirrors the world externally. I don't think we realize how often this is true." Members of the church must take this observation into consideration because we have an urgent and critical responsibility to prevent the world from impressing itself upon us. Impossible to do before conversion when the world held full sway, preventing the world's encroachment is difficult under the best circumstances. Though contact with the world has perhaps diminished since conversion, it has not ceased.

Realistically, there is no way to get away from the world entirely. It presses in on us through television, radio, magazines, newspapers, business contacts and social intercourse. God's people just have to deal with it. Being converted makes no difference in the fact that the world is always there. It is always right outside the door, an ever-present reality. With modern technologies like television, it is right inside the house! It is almost impossible to escape!

Fortunately, God provides His people with a formula for escaping. With that formula, each person must do as best as he possibly can.

Flee from Babylon!

A prophecy against Babylon in Jeremiah 51:6 shows the basic formula. Speaking to the Israelite people regarding their responsibility, God warns, "Flee from the midst of Babylon, and every one save his life!" Remember that! To save one's life, one must *flee* from Babylon, go out from her, leave her in some way. "Do not be cut off in her iniquity, for this is the time of the LORD'S vengeance." Later, He says, "My people, go out of the midst of her! And let everyone deliver himself from the fierce anger of the LORD" (verse 45).

God often urges His people to "come out." He commands Abraham to come out from among his people (Genesis 12:1). Through two angels, He implores Lot to flee from Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:12). Even Noah, in receiving instructions about building the ark, is told to come out—that is, to get into the ark and leave the evil society of the time (Genesis 6:14-18). During Israel's wandering in the wilderness, God directs Moses to leave the dwellings of the wicked (Numbers 16:26). Isaiah echoes Jeremiah in saying, "Go forth from Babylon!" (Isaiah 48:20).

As the Bible frequently shows, His instruction pertains especially to those living in the end time. In a New Testament prophecy that may most directly apply to Christians living today, God commands His people to flee from the world, echoing Jeremiah 51. The apostle John writes, "And I heard another voice from heaven saying, 'Come out of her, my people, lest you share in her sins, and lest you receive of her plagues'" (Revelation 18:4).

Babylon, as an enemy of God, is used in several ways in the Bible. One is a literal city. A second is a worldwide system of government, trade, entertainment and so on. A third symbolizes a spiritual

entity. All three have to be considered together to understand Babylon. In Revelation 18:4, it is a city representing the worldwide way of life at the end time.

A time will come when the people of God must literally flee from Babylon to save their lives! During the Day of the Lord, God will move to destroy Babylon completely from the face of the earth. Christians then will need to leave it bodily, physically.

During other times the people of God must flee spiritually from Babylon to save their lives—to escape spiritually to avoid the plagues that will descend upon her. So it is with Christians today: one must leave Babylon spiritually. Because Christians have responsibilities such as providing for families and managing businesses, cloistering in a monastery is not the solution. God commands His people to fellowship and lead upstanding lives within their communities. One cannot be a light to the world hidden in a monastery.

Gathering into communities like the Mennonites and the Amish sounds appealing to Christians. Many groups of people have tried to do this. It appears attractive to true Christians because we want to get away from the things of the world, but it is not what God has in mind for His people. He wants us to be in the world, but not part of it (John 17:11-18). We have been called to go into all the world with a message, the gospel of the Kingdom of God. As long as His people live in the world, they always face the danger of getting caught up in it. Christians always have to be alert, on guard, so that the world does not reel them back in.

Though now is not the time to flee bodily from Babylon, it is definitely the time to come out spiritually. Coming out is an inner transformation, a change or conversion, from what Babylon represents to something that is far better and in agreement with God. It is replacing the way the world thinks, believes and acts with a better way.

The Harlot and the Head of Gold

Revelation 18:4 is God's exhortation to the churches to shun the treacherous beauty and charm of this theological and political prostitute, Babylon. God uses very specific wording in His description of her in Revelation 17, calling her a harlot, or prostitute. A prostitute can have beauty and charm. Any number of a harlot's attributes can snare a man's attention and divert him from his purpose. Because the world had already ensnared him before conversion, a Christian must be spiritually watchful that he does not return to it. Unfortunately, the world too easily reclaims the unwary, so the apostle counsels God's people to flee from it—to avoid the edge of the cliff.

But what must we flee? In Nebuchadnezzar's vision in Daniel 2, Babylon is the head of gold. Gold is attractive. People give their lives to the power and attractiveness of gold. The head of gold has a beauty that stimulates the eyes, the feelings, the desire for the good things of life. In addition, gold represents quality. In the prophetic image, the quality of metal degenerates or declines as time moves toward the end. Babylon represents a tolerable system, but through the ages, the system degenerates from gold to silver to brass to iron to a final mixture of iron and miry clay.

At its beginning, the system, represented by the whole image, is attractive. As in Paul's analogy of the body in I Corinthians 12, the head guides and directs the other parts of the body. In effect, this means that Babylon, the head of gold, has impressed its system, its ideas, its style, its qualities on all of civilization. Though the system is not acceptable to God, it nevertheless has stamped its mark on the whole world.

Everyone has participated in it. American culture is an Israelite adaptation of the head of gold. All other nations have absorbed its qualities, putting their own particular twists on them. The Germans put a German twist on them; the French, a French twist; the Italians, an Italian twist. The same basic system pervades the world—and as it is practiced, it is anti-Christ. Because of its attractiveness, its magnetism, and because all are defenseless before conversion, it has impressed itself upon God's people. Babylon is the world Christians must flee.

The Hallmarks of Babylon

From a theological point of view, Revelation 18 identifies the hallmarks of Babylon. The signs are idolatry, theological prostitution or spiritual adultery, self-sufficiency, self-glorification, pride, complacency, reliance on luxury and wealth, avoidance of suffering and violence against life. Reading Revelation 17 and 18 carefully, one finds each of those traits expressed in some way.

Interestingly, God emphasizes three in particular, presenting them in Revelation 18:7: "In the measure that she glorified herself and lived luxuriously, in the same measure give her torment and sorrow; for she says in her heart, 'I sit as queen, and am no widow, and will not see sorrow.'" Personifying Babylon as a woman, God reveals her innermost, secret thoughts and thus her true character.

The first of the three characteristics emphasized here is *pride, self-glorification*: "she glorified herself . . . 'I sit as queen. . .'" The second is *reliance on wealth, satiety, overindulgence*: she "lived luxuriously [extravagantly, lustfully, without restraint]." The third trait is *avoidance of suffering*, for she says, "[I] will not see sorrow." Because reliance on wealth can very easily lead to proud self-sufficiency and avoiding all suffering, these three are interrelated. What bothers God is that her self-sufficiency is aimed against Him. Who needs God when one has everything? Avoidance of suffering produces compromise with both conscience and law. It can severely damage one's character, and to God that is a serious matter.

These characteristics have much in common with Laodiceanism. Because Laodiceanism originates in the world, it is necessary to look closely at it. How does that attitude get into the church? It comes from the world! Church members bring it with them and never sufficiently get rid of it.

"Do Not Love the World . . ."

A familiar series of verses in I John 2 begins to explore the connection between Babylon and Laodiceanism. "Do not love the world . . ." (verse 15). Theologically, that makes sense after understanding what God says in Revelation 18 about pride, self-sufficiency, avoidance of suffering and the like. The apostle John, aware of the nuances of the concept of love, did not use *agape* here, but *phileo*, which means "have affection for, to cherish, a feeling of warm regard." *Agape* is a reasoned love, and there need not be any feeling or affection connected with it at all. That kind of love can very easily be done coldly, calculatedly, simply because it is right.

Here in I John 2:15, the apostle says, "Don't have a feeling of warm regard or affection toward the world." Why would he have to say anything like that unless the world was attractive? The world possesses a beauty that carnally we find very difficult to resist. Because Laodiceanism springs from this attractiveness, it becomes very critical to a Christian. Many members of God's church find the world irresistible. Somehow or another, many cannot avoid it spiritually.

"If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world" (verses 15-16). John uses these three spiritual terms to show that God is not concerned about attractive things, like automobiles or houses or clothing, but a spiritual power the world has that many find attractive. Something about the world is alluring, and most find it difficult to resist.

In the next verse John gives a major reason one should not love the world. "And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever" (verse 17). God is mostly concerned about the world's ideals, its standards, its concepts of right and wrong. These influence the way we look at everything, and produce inclinations, attitudes, feelings and the purposes for which we live. In the final tally, the world's standards are short-sighted and selfish unlike God's, which are eternal and outgoing.

Paul writes in Romans 12:2, "And do not be conformed to this world. . . ." The Phillips translation says, "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould," a vivid picture and excellent interpretation of what Paul really meant. If one is not alert and resisting its temptations, the world has the power to form and shape a person. It must be resisted!

In the previous verse Paul says we need to sacrifice ourselves, and strongly implies that such sacrifice involves pain. Babylon avoids suffering at all costs! If we fail to sacrifice ourselves, the world will have free sway and squeeze us into its mold. The world has an influence on the mind (called "the heart" in the Bible), on our emotions and on our attitudes, and this influence ultimately shows in our conduct. Conduct begins with our attitudes, with our points of view, with our values, standards and ideals. If those values, standards and ideals contradict the way of God, we cannot resist the world's constant pressure to squeeze us into its mold.

Worldliness Defined

Here is John Ritenbaugh's definition of worldliness: "the love of beauty—that which one finds attractive, appealing or desirable—without a corresponding love of righteousness." The product of worldliness is that, rather than "tend and keep" as he was commanded by God in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:15), man will "use and abuse." Undoubtedly, Eden was gorgeous, the best and most magnificent environment anyone on earth has ever lived in. What did Adam and Eve do? They used and abused it until God was forced to banish them from it, placing cherubim with flaming swords to guard against their return (Genesis 3:24).

The world is naturally attractive. Much of the earth is still strikingly picturesque. Despite all the abuse man has done to it, planet earth remains beautiful outside its cities. Man loves to gaze at the grandeur of snow-capped Alps or the warm ribbons of color in the Grand Canyon or the dazzling beaches of tropical islands. Mesmerized by the visual impact of vibrant jungles or stark deserts, he will travel thousands of miles to look at a beautiful landscape.

Now, what do we do when presented with something beautiful? Do we dress it and keep it? Or do we use and abuse it?

The general record of mankind is that wherever he has put his hand, man has not beautified, but used and abused the earth. God is more concerned about man's spiritual beautification than He is about the physical earth, but He warns very clearly in Revelation 11:18 that He will "destroy those who destroy the earth." Man does not have the right concept of beauty. He has the wrong standards and ideals

because Babylon impressed itself upon him. He uses and abuses virtually everything, and the results show everywhere on earth. This approach to life manifests Babylon's way and illustrates why God commands His people to come out of it.

God is most concerned about how we act toward other people, how we work within our relationships with our mates, our neighbors, and above all, our God. Do we use and abuse our relationships with God and other people? Do we do everything in our power to dress and keep? Do we have a love of beauty along with a love of righteousness? Although righteousness is indeed the keeping of God's commandments, God requires more of us in our lives. Unless we love the beauty of holiness, we will never become holy as God is holy (I Peter 1:13-16). The love of beauty must be encased in a love of righteousness.

The way of the world is 180 degrees removed from the love of beauty *and* righteousness. In I John 2 the apostle addresses this way of the world within the subject of love. Though keeping the commandments defines love, it includes a great deal more than that. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son . . ." (John 3:16). Jesus did not avoid suffering because suffering is an act of love. He loved beauty and righteousness so much that He was willing to follow the commands of God right to the cross. Beauty sustained Him, the beauty of holiness, the beauty of helping multitudes of sons and daughters to inherit the Kingdom of God.

Babylon would not do that. Those impressed by the way of Babylon will love beauty as much as we do, but they will not mix it with a love of righteousness. They will not "tend and keep" fellow man and God. The ever-repeating result is warfare on the field of battle, in the family, in the workplace, in society.

The reason for the state of this evil world is the lack of the love of beauty *and* the love of righteousness. It is simply a lack of the love of God. The love of God is a choice that is open to all Christians. If one does not choose to love, the only alternative is selfishness—self-concern. A selfish person *will* abuse. That is the worldly system. Worldliness is nothing more than self-centeredness. An individual chooses to be self-centered or show outgoing love—to be worldly or godly.

Laodiceanism is the most subtle form of self-centeredness or worldliness. It is so subtle that it escapes the detection of those who should be most able to see it.

The Perilous Time of the End

"But know this, that in the last days perilous [menacing, violent, terrible, dangerous] times will come" (II Timothy 3:1). Why? "For men will be lovers of themselves . . ." (verse 2). Self-centeredness will produce the crisis at the close of this age. Its evils will reach a climax that can be compared to the time just before the Flood or to Sodom and Gomorrah. Self-centeredness, everyone having his own perception of beauty and pursuing it to the *n*th degree, is the driving force behind the perilous time of the end. It will be a time that fits the description in Judges 21:25 when "everyone did what was right in his own eyes." During the period of the judges no one could provide central leadership because people said, "This is what *I* believe; this is what *I'm* going to follow."

So it will be at the end. People will abuse one another to possess the things they hold to be beautiful, like money or power. "[Men will be] . . . lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good" (II Timothy 3:2-3).

The concept of "men will be lovers of themselves" (verse 2) continues in verse 5: "[H]aving a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away!" Verse 7 identifies them further: these people are "always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth."

Within God's warning of what it will be like at the end, He lists the traits that Christians must fight against when self-centeredness reaches its peak. But the Laodicean does not resist as he should, and that is his problem! Though converted, he has an attitude of self-centeredness, strong enough that his mind is diverted from more important spiritual concerns!

From such a world we have been drawn, and it *has* affected us to some extent. America reflects this attitude nationally as it moves toward isolationism, which is nothing more than national self-concern. Patrick Buchanan's major theme in his bid for the 1992 Republican nomination for President was, "America first!" Although his Democratic opponents did not speak openly about it, they agreed with the right-wing Buchanan on this point because they too want the United States to withdraw from its worldwide commitments to solve the problems at home. The same process happened before World War II, when the U.S. became isolationist. Now many Americans want to move in that direction again. They see part of the problem, but their solution is to turn inward.

Catholics do similarly in their monasteries. They think the solution is isolation from the rest of the world and all its ugliness. God has better answers to the world's problems.

Take Heed!

What does this have to do with Christians today? Luke's version of the Olivet Prophecy gives a background of the terrifying events leading to the return of Jesus Christ. In it Christ sternly warns us! He specifically addresses His disciples, but we should think of it personally, living in the end time, surrounded by extremes of self-centeredness. These extremes should be enough all by themselves to alert and sober us! Yet Jesus felt that we needed to be warned.

"But take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life, and that Day come on you unexpectedly" (Luke 21:34). Of itself, having a party is not wrong. But what happens when Babylon reaches the apex of its influence on men's lives? People fall into dissipation, into abuse of their God-given responsibilities. Christ worries that although we intellectually say the world is full of self-centeredness and excess, we will still find it attractive. Thus, He warns us to be careful because, if not, the consequence is that the Day will come on us unexpectedly. This is sobering.

"For it will come as a snare on all those who dwell on the face of the whole earth. Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man" (verses 35-36). He is not saying we should always pray, "Father, save me!" That would be self-centered. He says, "Develop this beautiful relationship with God that I've made possible for you. Remain in contact with Him."

Our prayers need to take on the quality of communication that is the ideal when a man and a woman date toward marriage. On the first date, they may not know much about each other, but with further contact their knowledge of each other grows. In talking back and forth, the relationship develops. They discover common interests. They find each other attractive and fascinating. As events progress,

they work to improve the relationship so that they can eventually marry, continuing the relationship with greater intimacy, pleasure and productivity. God desires this kind of relationship with His people.

Jesus Christ warns that the same factor that ruins a marriage—if one or the other begins to find another more attractive—can ruin this relationship with God. In these perilous times, divorce claims roughly 50 percent of marriages. An institution that God intends to be very beautiful is destroyed because a love of a beautiful relationship is not paired with a love of righteousness. The world has successfully squeezed the couple into its mold. Though it may have begun beautifully, the relationship has a horrible ending.

God intends prayer to be communication with Him to develop a beautiful relationship begun through the acceptance of Christ's sacrifice. As a product of keeping the relationship alive, we show our commitment by keeping our appointments with Him, upholding the vow we made at baptism, keeping His commandments, showing we are trustworthy by overcoming our sins.

While we work on this relationship, we are watching! We are on guard. We are alert, like a soldier on guard duty, making sure that what we hold to be beautiful is not destroyed. Imagine what would happen if a guard, while pacing at his post, was attracted by something to one side. If he goes over to inspect it, the enemy attacks! Babylon employs exactly the same strategy. And sadly, the duped guard exactly depicts a Laodicean, who gets distracted by desirable things. The rudiments of the cause of this distraction are illustrated in Luke 21. A Laodicean is lulled into a spiritual complacency and apathy by the attractiveness of the world. That is Christ's warning—stay alert, be on guard and pray!

The Message to the Laodiceans

And to the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write, "These things says the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God: 'I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of My mouth. Because you say, "I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing"—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked—I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see. As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. 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 dine with him, and he with Me. To him who overcomes I will grant to sit 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).

The seventh and last of the attitudes within the church, Laodiceanism is the attitude that dominates the era of the end time. It seems more natural to think that this attitude would be the least likely to dominate in such terrible times—that it ought to be obvious that the return of Christ is near. Though it seems contradictory for the church to become lukewarm during such a stimulating period, Christ prophesies that it will occur. It indicates the power of Babylon! Spiritually, she is so very alluring. To our eyes, the world may look ugly, but its spiritual charm distracts us from more important things.

Why does Babylon dominate the church in the end time? It dominates the world, and the Christian *permits* it to dominate him!

Recall the quotation that opened chapter 1: "You would be surprised how often the Work internally mirrors the world externally." Why? Church members bring the world's ways into the body. Laodiceanism is so subtle that those who seemingly are best-equipped to detect it are blind to it! This is Christ's major concern for these people. It is not only that they are Laodicean, but also that they are blind to their own state!

Ancient Laodicea

First-century Laodicea sat astride two major trade routes. The first road ran from Rome eastward into Asia Minor, then beyond to Cilicia where Paul was born. At Derbe it split: one leg went to the south through Damascus and on into Egypt; the other leg struck across the east to Mesopotamia, the ancient home of Babylon. Connecting the city to southern Europe through Byzantium, the second route entered Laodicea from the north and continued to the Mediterranean.

The founders built the city in the Lycus valley where these routes crossed. This provided Laodicea with unlimited opportunities for trade, but caused other significant problems. Ideally, prosperous cities are built close to abundant natural resources, especially water. Great cities are usually founded on deep natural harbors or on the banks of navigable rivers where water is abundant. Unfortunately, Laodicea was not established near an adequate water supply. More driven by trade, its builders located it where the roads crossed.

However, the city had much in its favor, and of special note were its three main industries. The Laodiceans produced a glossy, black wool that was prized by the wealthy all over the world. No one knows whether its rich color came from a particular strain of sheep that they bred in the area, or whether they dyed it, but the quality of the wool is indisputable. In fact, they cornered the market in this commodity, producing tremendous wealth.

Their second business was medicine. Laodicea boasted of one of the most renowned medical schools in the world, and with it came all of its associated industries like pharmaceuticals. They produced a world-famous salve, reputed to cure certain kinds of eye diseases. Another salve supposedly healed ear problems. People came from all over the Roman world in search of remedies for their ailments.

These two industries produced a third that multiplied their already vast wealth—banking. Laodicea became a center of currency exchange and money lending. Cicero, it is said, cashed huge bank drafts there. So huge were its assets that, when it was demolished by a first-century earthquake, the city refused Rome's offer of help, rebuilding with its own funds.

So Laodicea had a monopoly in textiles, a world-renowned medical industry, and a prosperous financial center. Writers of the ancient world speak openly of their envy of Laodicean wealth. Record after record attests to their status.

Their one weakness was their water supply. Water had to be piped in to Laodicea. Cold water could come from the abundant supply at Colossae, but by the time it traveled the ten or so miles from the cold springs, it was lukewarm. About six miles away in Hierapolis were hot springs, but that water, too, was lukewarm when it reached Laodicea. Whether they piped in the cold or the hot water, it arrived at Laodicea lukewarm.

What does Christ mean by this metaphor? Cold water stimulates and invigorates. Nothing refreshes more than drinking a glass of cold water on a hot day. And hot water? It is useful for health. Not only do we mix it with teas, herbs, broths and the like, but it also works as a solvent, good for cleaning just about anything.

What does lukewarm water do? Christ's complaint against the Laodiceans is revealed here: it is good for nothing! The Laodicean is useless to Him. Lukewarm water is an emetic: it makes one vomit. In terms of God's Work, a lukewarm Christian is useless. The other traits of Laodiceanism spring from this characteristic of uselessness. As Head of the church, Christ cannot use them in the spiritual state in which He finds them. We should think of this in terms of biblical symbolism: water represents God's Holy Spirit.

"The Faithful and True Witness . . ."

In verse 14 Jesus Christ calls Himself "the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness. . . ." We say, "Amen," at the end of a prayer. What is "amen"? It affirms that the prayer is true and one agrees with it. Here Jesus is the Amen. Descriptive terms follow it to help us understand—He is a "Faithful and True Witness." Christ is the faithful and true witness of God—His example is an exact representation of what God would be like if He were a man. Already, He is contrasting Himself with the Laodicean and what He finds so distasteful. They are faithless in carrying out their responsibilities to Christ. They are lukewarm—good for nothing but vomiting.

We have been called to be witnesses. Through the prophet Isaiah, God says, "[Y]ou are my witnesses . . . that I am God" (Isaiah 43:12). He has made witnessing our responsibility. We witness with our lives, but the Laodicean fails miserably as a witness because he is so worldly. The only witness Christ gets out of him is that he is worldly, which is spiritually useless.

The illustration described here is as if the Laodiceans were on trial and Christ, the Faithful and True Witness, is testifying against them. As the Source of all creation, He is not fooled by their diplomacy and compromise: He sees their witness is unfaithful and untrue. In fact, the word "Laodicea" means "judgment of the people," and the entire letter is a study in contrasting judgments, the Laodicean's and God's. The physical man looks at his material and social circumstances and evaluates himself as spiritually sound. On the other hand, the spiritual God looks at the same person and sees spiritual poverty.

Next, Christ, as the Amen, admits the truth about them. "I know your works [obedience and service], that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot" (Revelation 3:15). Why does He wish this? Because if they were either cold or hot, they would be useful to Him. Lukewarm Christians send confusing messages. In this state, being useless to Him, He spews them out of His mouth. All the messages to these seven churches highlight works because they are evidence of how Christians conduct their relationships with God. Works reveal the heart. They are a gauge of one's witness and spiritual state.

Metaphorically, what does lukewarmness signify here? To define it to this point, a rough definition might be "that which gives no refreshment, or that which has neither the cleansing properties of hot water nor the refreshing properties of cold." Modern synonyms of the word "lukewarm" give illuminating insights into its use in this letter: lacking ardor, enthusiasm or conviction; moderate; mild; unemotional; halfhearted; hesitant; indecisive; irresolute; uncertain; uncommitted; unresponsive; indifferent; impassive; languid; phlegmatic; apathetic; nonchalant; lackadaisical.

Recall the hallmarks of Babylon: pride, self-glorification, reliance on wealth, satiety, complacency, avoidance of suffering. Although he has the abilities and resources to be a great witness, the Laodicean is complacent, self-satisfied, bored with or indifferent to the real issues of life. For a Christian, the real issues are faith in Christ and our Christian responsibility. And to do the Work Christ has called us to, our loyalty and devotion must be to Him, first and foremost!

A Spiritual Condition

A problem arises, however, in "spotting" a Laodicean—these qualities do not necessarily show on the outside. Why? Remember Christ describes a spiritual condition. This is a matter of the heart. What does He want to see in him? He wants the Laodicean to get off the fence—to be one way or the other, cold or hot. Conversely, the Laodicean judges that he is balanced, right in the middle. But his concept of balance is skewed. Why will he not move off the middle? He feels he has it good there! If he moves left or right, he fears that he will suffer! Thus, he has no desire to move.

Then what happens? The Laodicean must compromise. This is interesting in light of what the history books record. Ancient Laodicea's main line of defense was conciliation and compromise! Why? Again, the answer lies in the city's inadequate water supply, making it very susceptible to the siege of an invading army. By having its tenuous water supply cut off, the city was at the mercy of its attacker. With no water, it could hold out for only a short while. The Laodicean solution? They became masters of appeasement, accommodation, conciliation and diplomacy. Peace at any cost! How did they appease? They bought their enemies off! Laodicea used its wealth to conciliate and compromise.

Christ uses the attitude of the surrounding environment to illustrate that those in the church of Laodicea are affected by the attitudes of the world. Without even realizing it, they behave exactly like their unconverted neighbors. They are worldly. Though they are not out on the streets robbing banks, raping, looting, murdering, mugging old grandmothers or abusing children, in their hearts they have the same general approach to life as Babylon has. Theologically, spiritually, they hold the same values as Babylon, proved by their works. Spiritually, they become very adept in avoiding the sacrifices that might be necessary to overcome and grow in character, wisdom, and understanding. In other words, they are skilled in appeasing Satan and their own consciences.

Christ says He will spew, or vomit, the Laodicean from His mouth! That is how He views this attitude of compromise with principles, ideals, standards and truth!

Lazy Laodiceans?

Some may expect Laodiceans to be lazy, but on the contrary they are often workaholics. Satan has foisted this false concept of Laodiceanism onto the church. One cannot become "rich and increased with goods" by being lazy! Their problem is a faulty setting of priorities. They are very vigorous people, but they are vigorous in areas that fail miserably to impress their Judge, Christ. Vigorous in conducting business and other carnal affairs, they are lackadaisical in pursuing the beauty of holiness, which is their calling. They are not vigorous or zealous in maintaining their prayer life with God or in studying. They are not energetic in making the sacrifices necessary to love their brethren or in developing their relationships with others. Nor are they enthusiastic about guarding the standards and principles of God. By erring in the setting of priorities, they victimize themselves.

Over the last fifteen years of his life, Mr. Herbert Armstrong expressed deep concern about the church becoming Laodicean. Because of the plethora of activities this world offers, he saw that ultimately they distract us, cause us to set wrong priorities and keep us from putting our time, energy, and vigor into godly things. He often cited Daniel 12:4 as a telltale sign of the last days: ". . . seal the book until the time of the end; many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall increase." Are we busy in this age? Satan is a slick strategist, and he really deceives anyone who allows himself to believe that busyness and prosperity are signs of righteousness.

Christ's Judgment

"Because you say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing'—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked—"(Revelation 3:17). The Laodicean may not necessarily say these things consciously, but he shouts it for all to see by his works and way of life! He thinks he lives in his "golden years." Being blind to his own spiritual poverty, however, is the real tragedy of his situation. He thinks he is in good standing with God. Christ judges differently, very concerned that he cannot see his spiritual condition. He is spiritually bereft.

Christ describes the Laodicean as "poor." Biblically, "poor" does not mean the same as our normal English usage of the word. It indicates someone who is weak, with no consideration of how wealthy he may be. To God, the Laodicean is spiritually weak, when he thinks he is strong.

Next, he is "blind." Of course, this is not physical blindness, but a lack of spiritual comprehension or judgment. Just as a blind person cannot use his eyes to judge a circumstance, the Laodicean is unaware, unknowing, unobservant, uncomprehending and heedless.

Christ also judges him as "naked." Clothing, or its lack, illustrates a person's state of righteousness, and here it shows converted people who are still carnal, as Paul called the Corinthians (I Corinthians 3:3). The Laodicean is dominated by his fleshly attitudes. Physically oriented, he is governed by human nature, rather than by God.

"Wretched and miserable" together provide further descriptions of "poor, blind, and naked." Because they are poor, blind and naked, they are wretched and miserable, even though they have not realized it. "Miserable" has been translated elsewhere as "pitiful" or "pitiabile." "Wretched" is especially interesting. In other places in the New Testament, it indicates destitution because of war. God means that while they may be wealthy, they are losing the spiritual war against Satan and their carnal nature.

"Buy From Me . . ."

I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see. (Revelation 3:18)

Gold, clothing and eye salve represent the three major industries of Laodicea: banking, textiles and medicines.

Gold, spiritual riches (I Peter 1:7), contrasts with the word "poor," and fire symbolizes trial. God advises them to obtain spiritual riches produced through trials, which the self-sufficient Laodicean avoids by compromising.

"White garments" contrast with their nakedness. Clothing helps us to distinguish people and groups. Because of the differences between men and women's clothing, sexual distinctions can be made. Clothes reveal status: a man in a well-tailored suit falls into a different category than a beggar in rags. Clothing provides a measure of comfort and protection from the elements. It hides shame and deformity. Biblically, God uses it to symbolize righteousness. He instructs the Laodicean to dress himself in the holiness of God to cover his spiritual nakedness, self-righteousness.

Their need of eye salve contrasts with their blindness. Commentators understand it to represent God's Spirit coupled with obedience. The combination of the two gives a Christian the ability to see—to understand spiritual things. "But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God. For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God" (I Corinthians 2:10-11). "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; a good understanding have all those who do His commandments" (Psalm 111:10).

"Zealous" means "earnest, enthusiastic, to seek or desire earnestly, to have an ardent love," in contrast to their spiritual indifference. God desires them to have a burning desire for Him and His way of life. Instead, Revelation 3:14-21 paints a clear picture of people who are successful by the world's standards, yet spiritually deficient. They are devoid of spiritual judgment while rich with material substance. Their problem is an internal attitude: the mechanism that drives them is neither godly nor ardent.

The Laodicean is not indifferent to making money or making his way in the world. He is not indifferent to improving himself through education or experience. Spending huge amounts of his time and energy pursuing his own interests, his problem is that he chooses the wrong priorities in life. He spends most of his time and energy achieving the wrong goals.

This pursuit of wrong goals restates the actual sin the Laodicean commits: idolatry, placing something above God in one's life. How? He serves himself within the church as if he did it for God. Perhaps he is involved in the Work, but only halfheartedly. Though probably attending Sabbath services faithfully, he is not personally involved with God on a day-to-day basis. He may serve within the church to be recognized, respected, maybe even ordained, forgetting that God called him to be a faithful and true witness of Him. Because he pays attention to the wrong things, his witness suffers terribly. Expending so much energy and enthusiasm in pursuing his own interests, he shows little or no interest in God or His goals. He is indifferent and lukewarm toward his relationship with God.

Because he has had such great success in amassing wealth, the Laodicean judges himself to be self-sufficient, which reveals that his faith is in what he can see, whether his own abilities or his wealth. He is not living by faith, but by sight (II Corinthians 5:7). To put more money in his pocket, he can become energetic, hard-working and fervent, but he cannot seem to arouse himself about the things of God, which he cannot see. Such an attitude will incur the wrath of God every time!

A Warning From God

In this indictment of the Laodiceans, God, in His inimitable way, is warning us of what happens to a people's heart and mind just prior to a nation's collapse. Since we live so close to the time of the end, we need to take His warning and admonition to heart.

History documents the wild debauchery of Rome before its inglorious fall. The depths of its perversions and excesses make fascinating and disgusting reading, yet we need to consider it in terms of the present condition of America and Canada. We may not allow our sporting events to become as violent as gladiatorial contests, but our emphasis on sports and entertainment is reminiscent of Rome's. The condition of America's heart and mind is displayed in our raunchy and violent movies and music. The United States is being set up to collapse!

Much in the world remains attractive and appealing. If there is not a corresponding love of righteousness, those beautiful things can draw a Christian into Babylon's seductive trap, where the spiritual intellect becomes dulled and Laodiceans are produced. Only a love of righteousness will prevent a Christian from allowing his heart and mind to fall into Laodiceanism. If a Christian in ancient Rome did not have his heart anchored in a love of righteousness, Rome's debauchery, presented in an alluring package, would have gradually become acceptable in his own life. Without it, the Roman Christian would have had no protection from the deceptive charm of the world or the resistance to it that he would need to avoid its Laodicean results.

The Power of Wealth

A Laodicean deals with wealth on a scale few people have seen in the history of the world. Wealth has a power that produces an intriguing result. In a section of scripture Moses wrote in the last month before Israel crossed into the Promised Land, God warns us of it: "When you have eaten and are full, then you shall bless the LORD your God for the good land which He has given you" (Deuteronomy 8: 10). God is definitely not against His people prospering or even getting rich. Many of his servants, like Abraham and David, were wealthy beyond imagination (Genesis 13:2; I Chronicles 29:1-5).

Instead, He describes a general principle, a natural trend, which happens to most when they begin to accumulate wealth. Most people cannot handle prosperity, and though God wants us to have good things, He desires us to have them in a way that will not damage us spiritually. His concern for the Laodicean is that, as the world reaches a pinnacle of luxury and wealth, he will be distracted by the magnetic appeal of all those beautiful things. He says in effect, "Don't forget your first priority!"

"Beware that you do not forget the LORD your God by not keeping His commandments, His judgments, and His statutes which I command you today, lest—when you have eaten and are full, and have built beautiful houses and dwell in them; and when your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and your gold are multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied; when your heart is lifted up, and you forget the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage; who led you through that great and terrible wilderness, in which were fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty land where there was no water; who brought water for you out of the rock of flint; who fed you in the wilderness with manna, which your fathers did not know, that He might humble you and that He might test you, to do you good in the end—then you say in your heart, 'My power and the might of my hand have gained me this wealth.' And you shall remember the LORD your God, for it is He who gives you power to get wealth, that He may establish His covenant which He swore to your fathers, as it is this day. Then it shall be, if you by any means forget the LORD your God, and follow other gods, and serve them and worship them, I testify against you this day that you shall surely perish. As the nations which the LORD destroys before you, so you shall perish, because you would not be obedient to the voice of the LORD your God" (Deuteronomy 8:11-20).

Every Christian needs to be aware of this principle. God does not condemn wealth. He wants us to prosper, but He also wants us to be aware that wealth can powerfully distract us from Him. In one sense, it is dangerous for Him to give His people wealth because it can turn us away from Him without our being aware of it happening. The Laodicean looks at his wealth and thinks, maybe in all sincerity, "God has blessed me with this, and therefore, God is pleased with the way I am." But God is not pleased in the least! He is incensed by his self-satisfaction, not the fact that he has wealth.

When God says that Israel's "heart is lifted up," its sense is the same as the Laodicean saying, "I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing" (Revelation 3:17). He could just as well have said, "I don't need you, God!" When he looks at his wealth, he judges that God loves him. Does not his prosperity prove that God is with him? Christ judges just the opposite!

"But Jeshurun [Israel] grew fat and kicked [rebelled]; you grew fat, you grew thick, you are covered with fat; then he forsook God who made him, and scornfully esteemed the Rock of his salvation" (Deuteronomy 32:15). This prophecy regarding Israel confirms the power and influence of wealth. For a Christian today, living in a society whose wealth far exceeds the wildest dreams of most people on earth, this power of wealth cannot be ignored. We need to thank God for the opportunity to live in a nation receiving the blessings of Abraham, but we cannot allow its influence to change our attitudes toward God.

Does wealth or poverty have any intrinsic spiritual value? Physically, it is better to be wealthy, but riches can turn one's head spiritually. Incidentally, poverty has that same power because a poor person can become so busy with the cares of his daily existence, that he forgets God. That is why Solomon advises in Proverbs 30:8-9, "[G]ive me neither poverty nor riches—feed me with the food You prescribe for me; lest I be full and deny You, and say, 'Who is the LORD?' Or lest I be poor and steal, and profane the name of my God."

The wealth of the Laodicean is not the problem. His problem derives from allowing his wealth to lead him into self-satisfaction, self-sufficiency and complacency. His heart is lifted up. These attitudes lead him to avoid self-sacrifice by which he could grow spiritually. People normally use wealth to avoid the hardships of life, and although there is nothing intrinsically wrong with that, a person not spiritually astute will allow the comforts of wealth to erode his relationship with God. In his physical wealth, the Laodicean is poor in the things that really count and blind to his need. He no longer overcomes and grows. His witness is no good—and useless to Christ.

God reveals His love for the Laodicean when, rather than giving up on him, He gives him a punishing trial. He allows him to go through the fire, the Great Tribulation, to chasten him for his idolatry, to remind him of his true priorities and to give him the opportunity to repent.

Society Before a Nation's Fall

Just before Israel and Judah fell to the Assyrians and Babylonians, God called several prophets to warn His people and urge them to repent. In recording the events of their times, these prophets paid particular attention to the prevailing attitudes within their societies, no doubt inspired by God for the benefit of His church. If we compare their societies and attitudes with our own, we can gain insight into the problems we face in the collapse of this nation.

What was the dominant attitude of the people in Israel and Judah just before their fall? In virtually every book by these prophets, warnings against attitudes of self-sufficiency, spiritual indifference, complacency and self-satisfaction—Laodiceanism—are a major part of God's message!

Amos and Israel

One of these prophets, Amos, prophesied about 40 years before the Assyrians, tired of Israel's constant rebellion, finally overran the nation and took its people into captivity. Jeroboam II (c. 793-753 BC), the king during Amos' preaching, had made Israel powerful and very wealthy. By the end of his reign, the nation's might had increased to its greatest extent since Solomon's day, and its economic clout had grown in proportion. Amos displays both the nation's wealth and its attitudes in his prophecy.

The conduct of the average Israelite becomes glaringly apparent. In ancient Israel the social conditions during the reign of Jeroboam II had reached the proportions of what is extant in the United States today. A tremendous disparity between the rich and the poor existed just as in modern America, where most of the wealth is concentrated in only about 2 percent of the population. Soon, if the elimination of the middle class continues on course, only two classes of people will live in the U. S., the rich and the poor. A similar situation was developing in Israel during Amos' day.

Thus says the LORD: "For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not turn away its punishment, because they sell the righteous for silver, and the poor for a pair of sandals. They pant after the dust of the earth which is on the head of the poor, and pervert the way of the humble. A man and his father go in to the same girl, to defile My holy name. They lie down by every altar on clothes taken in pledge, and drink the wine of the condemned in the house of their god." (Amos 2:6-8)

Amos shows that those who had the money and power treated the weak, called "the poor," very harshly. Though they were not destitute, the poor had no strength in society. They had no power to change their situation for the better, while the rich and powerful manipulated the government and the courts to their advantage. The rich squeezed every penny out of the poor, even requiring them to relinquish overnight their outer garments, often used as a cover when sleeping. To top off the list, they were also guilty of sexual perversions and idolatry.

The prophet adds charge upon charge throughout his book. He says more about their wealth in chapter 3. "I will destroy the winter house along with the summer house; the houses of ivory shall perish, and the great houses shall have an end," says the LORD" (Amos 3:15). Some of these people owned two or more houses, at least one for the summer and one for the winter. These homes must have been luxurious! Certainly, they were not completely made of ivory, but the woodwork must have been inlaid with ivory, a symbol of costly items affordable only by the wealthy.

Directed primarily at the rich women of Israel, chapter 4 begins with Amos calling them an uncomplimentary name, then indicting them on the same charges as the men. "Hear this word, you cows of Bashan, who are on the mountain of Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to your husbands, 'Bring wine, let us drink!'" (Amos 4:1). He describes these women as sleek, well-fed creatures, who, for the satisfaction of their own appetites, constantly make demands on their husbands. Willing to crush anyone who gets in the way of their greed for luxury and personal adornment, they tyrannize the already powerless poor.

The people of Israel, even in their wealth, were interested in religion.

"Come to Bethel and transgress, at Gilgal multiply transgression; bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every three [years]. Offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving with leaven, proclaim and announce the freewill offerings; for this you love, you children of Israel!" says the Lord GOD. (Amos 4:4-5)

Three cities of Israel had become religious centers and places of pilgrimage: Bethel, Gilgal and Beersheba. What is intriguing is that, even in their spiritual indifference, the Israelites loved to go to church! Since Amos indicates that their social lives may have revolved around the church, their purely social, not religious, motives may have been the problem.

This is intriguing in light of Laodiceanism. God says, "You may be coming to church regularly and enjoying it, but while you are there, you are sinning!" The scriptures are unclear about what the exact sins were. They may have been breaking the Sabbath somehow, or they may have been indifferent to the messages they heard. What their sins were makes no difference because God's judgment of their show of religion is that their hearts were not in it.

Justice Turned to Wormwood!

For thus says the LORD to the house of Israel: "Seek Me and live; but do not seek Bethel, nor enter Gilgal, nor pass over to Beersheba; for Gilgal shall surely go into captivity, and Bethel shall come to nothing. Seek the LORD and live, lest He break out like fire in the house of Joseph, and devour it, with no one to quench it in Bethel—you who turn justice to wormwood, and lay righteousness to rest in the earth!" (Amos 5:4-7)

The word "justice" used in verse 7 is associated with end-time circumstances in nearly every prophecy where social conditions are described in a nation on the verge of collapse. The Hebrew word is *mishpat*, translated justice, judgment or ordinance. Because he is spiritually blind, the Laodicean, too, has lost his ability to judge between right and wrong. He can no longer discern, as the Bible phrases it, "between the clean and the unclean."

God speaks of this lack of judgment in terms of their courtship, their relationship, with Him. Similar to the situation today in the church, Christians need discernment, the ability to distinguish right from wrong, to make true judgments. The Laodicean lacks this ability and it shows in the decisions he makes.

Amos illustrates this principle when it is applied to society, particularly the courts. "For I know your manifold transgressions and your mighty sins. You afflict the just and take bribes; you divert the poor from justice at the gate. Therefore the prudent keep silent at that time, for it is an evil time" (Amos 5:12-13). The common man on the street, the poor, finds it is useless to take his case to court because he will not get a fair hearing—there is no justice. The judges have poor judgment.

"Seek good and not evil, that you may live; so the LORD God of hosts will be with you, as you have spoken. Hate evil, love good; establish justice in the gate. It may be that the LORD God of hosts will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph" (Amos 5:14-15). Here is another incident showing poor judgment and the Laodicean attitude linked. God has to return to the most basic instruction—what is good and evil—since the people have lost the ability to discern it.

"I Hate . . . Your Feast Days"

I hate, I despise your feast days, and I do not savor your sacred assemblies. Though you offer Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings, I will not accept them, nor will I regard your fattened peace offerings. Take away from Me the noise of your songs, for I will not hear the melody of your stringed instruments. But let justice run down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream. (Amos 5:21-24)

To be on the safe side, we will assume that Israel kept God's Holy Days, or thought they were. These verses contain three essential elements of worship: festivals, sacrifice and praise. And God in disgust cries, "I don't want any of them!" Their worship, though it was done in His honor and in His name, repulsed Him. It was repugnant to Him.

As chapter 6 begins, He strikes very close to home. "Woe to you who are at ease in Zion, and trust in Mount Samaria, notable persons in the chief nation, to whom the house of Israel comes!" (Amos 6:1). Zion is often used as a symbol of God's church. Is the Laodicean at ease within the church? He is surely not at ease when he has an opportunity to make money! He will work all day and all night to fatten his purse. He loves to pursue his distracting hobbies and interests. But God spits him out in disgust! He is distasteful to God like lukewarm water, unable to be used for any real, spiritual, eternal purpose! The Laodicean, according to Amos, puts his trust in his own wealth and power, his nation and its leaders. Where is his trust in God?

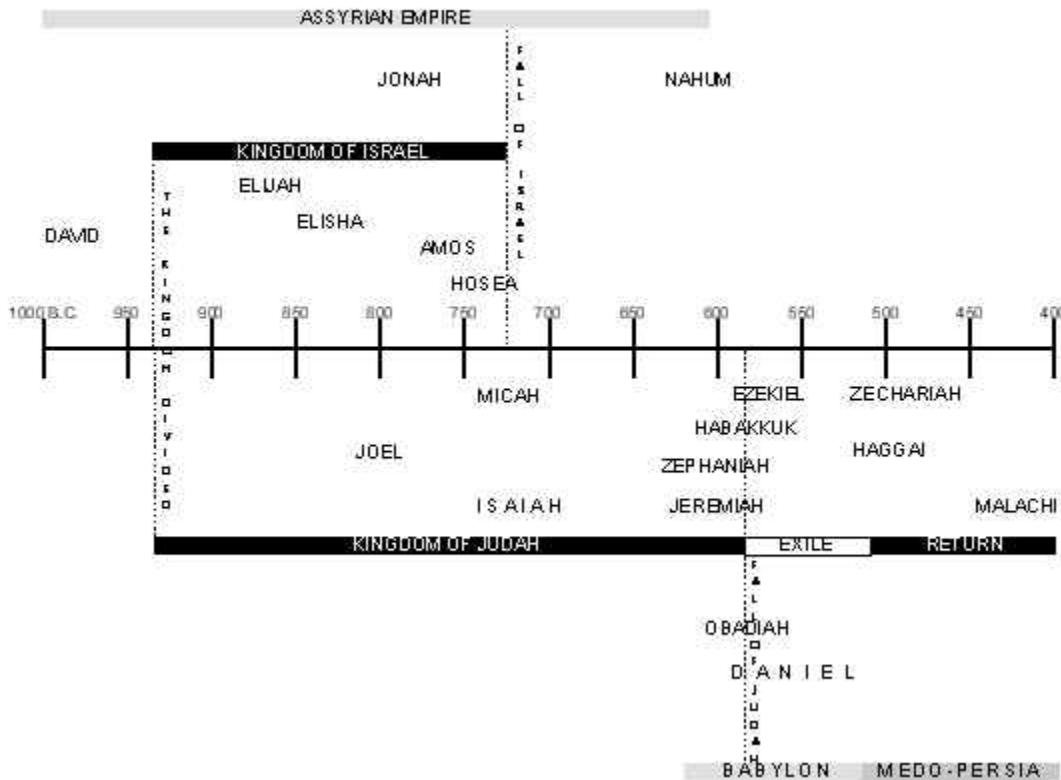
The prophet then pronounces God's judgment. Notice the many parallels to Babylon and Laodicea. "Woe to you who put far off the day of doom, who cause the seat of violence to come near" (Amos 6:3). Now notice what Jesus says in a parable concerning the time just before His return: "But if that evil servant says in his heart, 'My master is delaying his coming,' and begins to beat his fellow servants, and to eat and drink with the drunkards . . ." (Matthew 24:48-49). Amos and Christ speak about the same sequence of events. The attitude of putting off the day of Christ's return promotes violence and injustice toward one's fellow man. Appeasement, a "strength" of the Laodicean, virtually guarantees violence and war, as happened in the years leading to World War II.

[W]ho lie on beds of ivory, stretch out on your couches, eat lambs from the flock and calves from the midst of the stall; who chant to the sound of stringed instruments, and invent for yourselves musical instruments like David; who drink wine from bowls, and anoint yourselves with the best ointments, but are not grieved for the affliction of Joseph. (Amos 6:4-6)

What a picture of excess and uselessness! Like Babylon, these people live in indolent luxury, surrounding themselves with the latest creature comforts, overindulging in rich and expensive food and drink. A glass or a cup is not enough for them—they must drink wine from bowls to satisfy their addictions! They sing songs that mean nothing, but in their hearts they think their songs and music equal to David's! Life is a party! And all they have to show for their lives is a lack of judgment.

"Therefore they shall now go captive as the first of the captives, and those who recline at banquets shall be removed" (Amos 6:7). The first to go into captivity are the ones who live in excess, who seem unaware of the times. What happens to the Laodicean? He is thrown into the fire, a severe trial, which could very well be captivity (Revelation 3:18-19; 12:17).

The Prophets and Their Times



Hosea and Israel's Drunkenness

The prophet Hosea, a younger contemporary of Amos, prophesied to the same generation, only a few years later. Because Israel had not repented at the preaching of Amos, God sent Hosea to warn them again as they sank further into their attitudes and sins. The younger prophet approached the situation differently than Amos, giving us deeper insight into a nation as it falls.

My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. . . . Harlotry, wine, and new wine enslave the heart. My people ask counsel from their wooden idols, and their staff informs them. For the spirit of harlotry has caused them to stray, and they have played the harlot against their God. (Hosea 4:6, 11-12)

Undoubtedly, the Israelites of Hosea's day were literally getting drunk and involved in harlotry, but for us today the application is spiritual. At the end time, God predicts, His people will be deceived by a force near demoniacal in its deceptive power. Because of their closeness to the world, they will share the great harlot's attitude, "drunk with the wine of her fornication" (Revelation 17:2).

Hosea's word-picture illustrates the effect a drug like alcohol has on a person's mind. Under the influence of alcohol, one's reactions slow, even though the person thinks he has better control. Most fatal accidents in the United States involve automobiles and roughly half of them occur with at least one driver under the influence. In driving while intoxicated, one's ability to make right decisions is severely hampered. Alcohol obscures judgment. When one cannot think clearly, a sound judgment