

Letter To a Nice Church (God Spew)

Revelation 3:14-22

April 1, 2001

Peter Hiett

Time magazine this week came proclaiming good news, right on its cover, about the promising new cures for hundreds of phobias . . . how science is offering new hope.

When you open it up to where the article begins there is a Bible verse: “Fear not!” Science has us covered.

In the margins of the article they list hundreds of phobias now known to science. Phobias like . . .

- Alektorophobia — fear of chickens.
- Arachibutyrophobia — fear of peanut butter sticking to the roof of the mouth. (You can read the article!)
- Homilophobia — fear of sermons.
- Ophidiophobia — fear of snakes.

I quote:

For “Martin,” 21, a dental student in London, Ontario, his fear of snakes is so overwhelming that he stapled together pages in a textbook to avoid flipping to a photo of a snake. . . . “It’s odd,” he says, “because I’m not in situations where I would ever see snakes.” His brain, however—or at least the oldest parts of it—may have been.

The article goes on to talk about how all these fears may have been helpful at one point in our ancient past, but not now, because gosh!—We live in the United States of America! They’re *silly* now! This is a *nice place*.

So scientists have therapies to help us realize, “Look! It’s just a snake!” They have powerful, new medications to squelch all these irrational fears. Here are some more from the same list:

- Satanophobia — fear of Satan
- Pecatophobia — fear of sinning
- Hadeophobia — fear of hell
- Zeusophobia — fear of God
- Staurophobia — fear of Jesus hanging on a cross
- Thanatophobia — fear of death

Don’t worry. They can medicate all these fears away. How about this one?

- Emetophobia — fear of vomiting

Chapter 3 verse 14: *“And to the angel of the church of Laodicea write: ‘The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God’s creation. I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were cold or hot!*

‘So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth. For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing; not knowing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. . . .’”

Ow. Poor, blind, and naked? Laodicea?

Poor?

It was the center of commercial prosperity within the Empire.

Blind?

They were known around the world for producing a famous eye salve.

Naked?

All around the Empire people talked about the black, woolen textile garments from Laodicea.

They were so prosperous that when a devastating earthquake hit the area in 60 AD and the Empire offered assistance, they were the only city that refused it saying, “We have prospered, and we have need of nothing.”

The only thing anyone could really complain about in Laodicea was the water supply.

- Nearby Colosse was known for fresh, cold, clean drinking water.
- Hieropolos six miles to the north was known for hot, therapeutic mineral springs.

Because Laodicea had no water supply of its own, an aqueduct was built from Hieropolos to Laodicea. But once the water had traveled the six miles to Laodicea, it had become lukewarm . . . tepid . . . distasteful.

We haven’t had time to talk much about this, but each of the seven letters fits each of the ancient cities remarkably well. They aren’t just metaphors for the Church thousands of years later; they are real places.

So The Revelation has to be relevant
to them as well as to us.

Just as the town viewed themselves, so did the Church . . . spiritually rich. From the letter to the Colossians we know that the Laodiceans knew *Paul*. That’s big! Paul! Not only that, but the famous Epaphras was a hometown boy!

Their faith was organized,
 categorized,
certified,
 franchised,
homogenized.

But Jesus says, “You are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.” It kind of reminds me of the United States of America. I was thinking about these phobias . . . thanatophobia, for instance, — fear of death.

In my experience as I look at the world, I have come to realize that almost everybody *dies*. Yet we call thanatophobia a form of denial and insanity? Maybe the thanatobes are most sane. Maybe the people crouching under beds and hiding in closets are most in touch with reality! Maybe we really *will* die one day! Maybe there really are *great tribulations* at hand!

Maybe there is a God, and maybe He is mad (zeusophobia). Maybe there really is sin (pecatophobia), and Satan (Satanophobia), and a Hell (hadephobia); maybe ophidiophobia is about far more than reptiles in our ancient past. Maybe it’s about one hell of a Snake in our present day that we remember from our ancient past.

Maybe the *insane* are the most sane.

So then the only way we could really function well as this productive American society is to pretend that our fears are irrational phobias. If we didn’t deny our fears, deny death, and deny our conscience, we would be *paralyzed* with fear, hiding in closets, and crouching under beds, ice cold with terror.

Worse yet, we would become fiery hot, religious zealots who don’t care about the economy, Volvos, or the stock market. Fear could totally *screw up* this incredible economy of ours—this economy of conspicuous consumption!

So I was thinking . . . if *I* were in control of the economy, and if *I* wanted to control all the people in the economy . . . if I was evil, working for some Ancient Snake, for instance, then I’d try to get people to *ignore* their greatest fears and their greatest dreams.

Even better, I’d attach my *merchandise* to their greatest fears and dreams. That way I could sell my merchandise, and better yet I could get them to be enslaved in bondage to me. I would come up with slogans like this:

“Volvos—It can save your soul.”

“Diamonds—last forever.”

“Levi—because you are what you wear.”

So then they would live with this vague dissatisfaction, a confused hope, and an unexamined fear . . . this idea that something’s wrong, “But I bet that next year’s *Volvos*

will take care of it!” “If I only got a *diamond*, I would be set!” “If I had a pair of *Levis*, I would *be* somebody.”

Addicted,
intoxicated,
blinded . . .
It would work like magic.

Well, that’s just a crazy, crazy thought. But when was the last time you saw a commercial that said something like this?

We have Volvos, diamonds, and jeans to sell, but we had a meeting this week, and all of the sudden we realized: We’re all going to die and we don’t know how to save your soul! We don’t even know why we exist! So we were thinking . . . cars, jeans, and rocks don’t seem all that important any more.

Have you ever seen a commercial like that? Of course not. It’s the truth. And we do a good job with our illusions here in America. We can afford to.

We even dress up dead people so they look nice. We spend thousands of dollars on embalming, nice suits, and beautiful caskets so dead people look alive. Maybe we ought to do it like they did in Romania when I was there. A lady had died, so they just . . .

put her *corpse*
on a *table*
in the *yard*.

There were dogs, flies, and weeping children; people were gathered around looking at this dead body on the table. Then they turned to me and said, “Pastor, do you have something to say?” (Fortunately I pointed at my friend who was a pastor and said, “*He* does.”)

Gary told me about a funeral he did in Cherry Creek . . . very nice . . . they had gone to the graveside, Gary in his robes . . . Gary loves liturgy, so beautiful liturgy . . . the deceased there in an expensive casket . . .

At the start of the graveside ceremony Gary somehow slipped and fell in the grave! And he couldn’t get out! So there he was in the ground under the casket. They had to come and pull him out of the grave!

- I was thinking . . . I bet everybody kind of *woke up!* It kind of broke the enchantment for a moment.
- I was thinking maybe the pastor ought to *always* fall in the grave as part of the new liturgy.

Zig Zigler tells about a guy who worked the night shift. Every night he would come home around midnight. He discovered a shortcut through a cemetery, and he was walking through the cemetery one night along the normal path where he had always gone. He didn't realize that during the day they had dug a fresh grave.

As he was walking he fell into the grave. He tried like crazy to get out, but it was the middle of the night with nobody around. Finally he gave up and sat down.

While he was half asleep sitting in the corner, an old drunk stumbled along and fell in the grave as well. The man woke up, looked at the drunk trying to get out of the grave, touched him on the thigh and said, "Friend, you can't get out of here."

But he *did*.

(Maybe he even stopped drinking. Maybe a little thanatophobia did him some good!)

Just as the town of Laodicea rubbed off on the church in Laodicea, maybe the United States of America somehow rubs off on *us*. So we tend to think we've got it all under control . . . we're rich . . . we've obtained prosperity and need nothing . . . nice church.

And if we *do* need something we know exactly what to do: go to a pastor, get a counselor, go down to the Christian bookstore, take a seminar, take a class on how to live the victorious Christian life . . . how to conquer this and how to conquer that . . . We have it all worked out like a science, even The Revelation.

So we have *very* nice churches and *very* nice people. "Don't worry about us, Jesus. We've got it all figured out. We don't need You."

When I think I have my wife all figured out, I'm in trouble. When I think I know exactly what I need to do for a very nice marriage, I'm in trouble. You know couples like that—very nice couples who never fight. Then one day they just split up. Why? They don't need each other; they don't care about each other.

The thing I have come to fear the most in my wife Susan is when she gets lukewarm . . . when she gives up the fight and settles for the status quo . . . a *nice marriage*. She smiles and acts nice, but . . . she won't look at me.

If she's screaming at me,
 furious at me,
 angry with me,
 she looks at me!

If she's hot with passion for me,
 she looks at me!

But lukewarm . . . she doesn't look at me. It's worse than hatred. It's almost as if unconsciously she's trying to convince herself, "He doesn't matter. I don't need him." Invariably I have to pick a fight.

I have to press the issue until she cracks,
And we each lose control, fight, then heal.

But apathy is blindness. "Would that you were cold or hot," says Jesus. "At least then you would look at me . . . abide in me. Looking at me is life, but lukewarm—you make me want to barf." (That's probably the closest to the Greek, but not vulgar enough.)

A few months ago a member of our church mailed me a vision she'd been having for weeks. She kept seeing Jesus sitting on His throne, His robe glowing with incredible light. Then she would see him enormous, standing on the earth in a field ripe for harvest.

Then Jesus' expression is changed. He looks up to His Father with His eyes blazing with a red fire. She hears, "Jesus is pouring his glory upon the earth, and He is asking Lookout Mountain Community Church to join Him." She asks, "Where *is* Lookout Mountain Community Church?"

Then she sees only the backs of the congregation. Some enter the glory of His robe that is spilling out on the earth; others stand like statues. She always wondered why they wouldn't enter.

On November 25 she saw this in worship:

Jesus is standing in the middle of the harvest field. This time he draws me to his side, turns me around and shows me the faces of those who remain behind. I am shocked as I stammer, "They are blind!" They have no sight! They have no eyeballs at all. Their eyeballs have been gouged out. Where eyes once existed are only caverns, holes of darkness! On the verge of nausea, I cry out, "Lord, will they ever be able to see? Lord, give them sight!" I hear, "Those with eyes will see!"

Now, like we preached, that could be bad pizza or hormones. But I don't think so. I know this person and trust this person. Not only that, but I basically read the same thing right there in Scripture. So I imagine it's true. But this is the frustrating part for me—I can't make blind people see! I can't create eyeballs!

No class can do that.
No counselor can do that.
No program can do that.
No seminary can do that.

Worse than that, the blind Laodiceans don't even know they're blind. I may not even know where *I'm* blind.

Blind to my own blindness,
The blind leading the blind.

I take it on faith that we're all maybe a *bit* blind. For we are all at least a *bit* lukewarm. And there is no way you can look at the glory of the resurrected Christ and *stay lukewarm*.

So we're all at least a bit blind, a bit asleep, and a bit intoxicated; maybe that's because we kind of want to be. Sometimes lukewarm is pretty comfortable. Sometimes *not* seeing is rather nice. But then when we become blind to even being blind, what do we do?

All week I kept thinking about a scene in the Chronicles of Narnia. Maybe you remember it . . . it's in the book The Silver Chair. At one point the children find themselves, along with their friend Puddleglum (who is a Marshwiggle), in the Dark Underground Kingdom of the evil witch who is really the Great Serpent.

When the witch finds them she doesn't assault them as they expect her to; she enchants them. She appears lovely, she talks sweetly, she sings melodiously. Then Lewis writes this: "They were being enchanted, and of course the more enchanted you get the more certain you feel that you are not enchanted at all."

They tell the witch of the real world—the Overworld, the sun, and Aslan the Lion. She coos, "Oh silly. You made up the idea of a sun from the idea of one of my lamps. You made up this idea of Aslan, the Great Lion, from one of our housecats."

So the children mumble, "I suppose the other world must be a dream."
"Yes, it's a dream," coos the witch.

Their hopes are a dream; their fear is obviously a dream, because this woman is lovely. She is making them comfortable . . .

fire . . .
 music . . .
 food . . .
 wine . . .
 sweet smells . . .

. . . maybe Volvos, diamonds, and jeans. *Intoxicating*.

She says:

There is no Narnia, no Overworld, no sky, no sun, no Aslan. And now, to bed all. And let us begin a wiser life tomorrow. But first, to bed; to sleep; deep sleep, soft pillow, sleep without foolish dreams.

And Jesus says:

You're lukewarm. You think you're rich and prosperous, but you're wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.

How could that *be*? In Revelation 18 we see how it could be. According to Scripture, a great harlot rides the beast under the authority of the Great Serpent; the economies of the governments of this world are under the dominion of Satan.

In chapter 18 verse 3 we read: "All the nations have drunk the maddening wine of her adulteries. The kings of the earth committed adultery with her and the merchants of the earth grew rich from her excessive luxuries."

In verse 28: "By her magic spell all the nations were led astray."

*Even the Church—
Intoxicated, lukewarm, and blind.*

So what are we to *do*?

[Singing] Get all excited and
 Tell everybody that
 Jesus Christ is Lord;
 Get all excited and . . .

Do you remember that song we used to sing? It doesn't work.

What are we to do? This is what Puddleglum did, just as the enchantment was almost complete. Lewis writes that Puddleglum did a very brave thing. In a daze he walked to the fire and plunged his bare foot into the coals. He knew it would hurt, and it did, but immediately he knew exactly what he thought. "There is nothing like a good shock of pain for dissolving certain kinds of magic."

The enchantment is broken for all,
At the smell of burnt Marshwiggle feet;
Their eyes are opened,
And the witch becomes a serpent.

They escape to Narnia and to Aslan, the Great Lion.

And Jesus says this: "' . . . *You say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing; not knowing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.*

'Therefore I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, that you may be rich, and white garments to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen,

and salve to anoint your eyes, that you may see. Those who I love, I reprove and chasten; so be zealous and repent.

'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. He who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'"

Like Puddleglum plunged his foot into the fire,
I think Jesus says,
"Buy gold from me, refined by fire."

Where will they find that gold in Laodicea? How will they get it?

Well, remember Smyrna? Over in Smyrna they thought they were wretched, pitiable, and poor, and Jesus says, "You're *rich*, Smyrna!" There are few illusions in Smyrna as Polycarp burns at a stake in the Roman coliseum and appears like gold there, together with Jesus! Few illusions.

"Laodicea, maybe you could get some gold in Smyrna . . . share in their sufferings, and when you see their sufferings, you will realize this *is* a fallen, God-damned world, and you need a savior.

Not a book,
Not a class,
Not a program;
But a Savior
To reach into the grave
And pull you out.

"Maybe you'll see what this world is, you'll call out in need, and He will cover you in His righteousness; He will anoint your eyes with salve. Jesus is the one who makes blind eyes see. He can make eyeballs, and then you'll believe in *Him* . . . not 'Christianity.'"

I Peter 1:7: "Our faith is more precious than gold which is refined, purified, tested, by fire." Our *faith in Him*.

Where do we buy gold refined by fire? You can ask around here.

- I have a friend in this church . . . very successful in business . . . really a prince to Laodiceans . . . he and his wife adopt hurting children from around the world, and he goes to *Africa* to "buy gold." He's trying to find ways to bring power to remote, African, suffering villagers. He *could* be content with his power and wealth, but he has chosen to share in other sufferings; he has chosen to go places where he has to call out in need, "Jesus, help me! Help me!"

- There is a woman in our church. She *could be* the queen of Laodicea, if she wanted to be. But she spends her weeks in downtown Denver ministering to homeless people, single mothers, kids stranded in poverty . . . She’s “buying gold.”
- I have a friend from college in our church. He graduated and started a business, and he and his wife became a huge success. Laodicea *worked* for them. But they know that Laodicea is a *lie*. So they bought a home for homeless people. That’s how they “buy gold.”

I could go on and on . . .

Our mission program is *set up* to help the wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked; that is, it is set up to help *us* buy gold.

When we weep with those who weep,
 When we pray with those who hurt,
 When we commune with other people in their sufferings,
 We buy gold refined by fire.

Where else could they buy gold in Laodicea? How about this? (next verse) John sees a door in Heaven, The Revelation opens up before him the throne of God Almighty, and the Lamb that was slain is sitting on the throne. He begins to open a scroll, and as He opens the seal four horsemen ride out bringing . . .

Conquest,
 Warfare,
 Famine,
 Pestilence;

The rider of the pale horse is death . . . there is a serpent and a beast and a great harlot . . . it’s all somehow to help us see Jesus in all His glory. It’s all to be like salve for the blind eyes of Laodicea.

“Laodicea, how *dare* you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing! You are seduced by the great harlot riding the beast under the dominion of Satan! You are up against powers beyond your *wildest* imaginations. *You need Jesus!*”

“Laodicea, the horsemen are riding right *now*.”

Conquest,
 Warfare,
 Famine,
 Pestilence,
 Death,
 Martyrs . . .

. . . or don't you get the paper? . . . or do you gloss over the stories that have 'Sudan' in the title? . . . or 'China' or 'Afghanistan' or 'Indonesia'?"

“Stop retreating, Laodicea, into your nice, comfortable, American churches, and hiding behind your water-tight Bible studies and your charts of the end times. The *time* is at *hand* (Chapter 1 verse 3).”

Now I need to come clean with you on something. There *is* one view of The Revelation that I struggle with more than the others, that I find *most* unbiblical and *most* difficult to defend exegetically. It's also the one interpretation most popular in America right now. It is peculiarly American; it is peculiarly recent.

It's this idea that *we* get *raptured* in the next verse.

Yes, we're going to be raptured—caught up in the clouds with Jesus; the Bible clearly tells us that. But in the *next verse*? So then the rest of The Revelation really isn't *about* us, but those left behind who have to go through the Great Tribulation?

It makes most of the book *irrelevant* to us,
And us irrelevant to a suffering world;
It turns us into *voyeurs*
Of other people's sufferings

And Jesus' sufferings;
For He suffers in His people.

I can see why it's so popular in the United States of America. I'm sure it would have been popular in Laodicea too, but I think it was their medicine—The Revelation. And I think it's to be *our* medicine—The Revelation.

And Jesus *did* say this: “In this world you *will* have tribulation.” Why? What we find out later is that His Father subjected this world to futility in *hope*. Tribulation is there for a reason.

He said, “In this world you *will* have tribulation, but be of good cheer, because *I* have overcome the world.” It's in the tribulation that our eyes are opened and we see He *has* overcome the world. We can have cheer!

It's interesting, isn't it, that it is the United States of America and Western Europe which lead the world in suicide?

So maybe we should stop *hiding* from tribulation . . . stop *hiding* from your fears . . . stop *managing* your fears, and *face* your fears . . . even walk right *into* your fears, and realize all your control, management, and ability has been an illusion all along!

And you need Jesus every second.

Behold, He has been standing, knocking, all along. And communion with *you* is what He has been *wanting* all along. So He will press the issue.

Go to those places; don't *run* from them. Then call on Him in need. Behold, it is the very place of your *greatest fear* that He reveals His *greatest glory!* Unless Jesus somehow takes you first, one day they are going to drop you in a grave, six feet down.

- Thanatophobia
- Zeusophobia
- Satanophobia
- Hadeophobia
- Pecatophobia
- Staurophobia

Oh yeah. They'll drop you in a grave. Then you'll feel a touch on your thigh, and a voice will say, "Friend, let's get out of here! Now you can see it, can't you? I *beat* this place!" And then you'll see Him.

Gold refined by fire.

Where do you buy gold refined by fire? On the night that Jesus was betrayed, the night before He went to the cross and bore the sins of the world and bore the curses—the wrath—of God Almighty, He took the bread and He broke it; He said, "This is my body broken for you. Do *this* in remembrance of me."

Do *this*. See it? It breaks evil enchantments.

In this same way after supper He took the cup of the new covenant and said, "This is the new covenant in my blood shed for the forgiveness of sins."

Body broken; blood shed.
The only good man that ever lived.
This is a *scary table*,
But He says "Come."

Come to this table,
with all your fears,
with all your anxieties,
with all your worries,
but come and surrender.

Come saying, "I need You, Jesus." If you come to this table, you are saying, "I am wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked on my own. I *need* a Savior, so Jesus, *save me!*" Then listen to what He says:

Fear not, for I have overcome the world.

[Prayer] “Thank You, Lord Jesus, that You love us so much, that You so long for us to share in Your glory, that You would go to such extreme measures as this to wake us up.”

Close your eyes and listen to a story of long, long ago, far, far away.

Two people lived in a perfect garden. They walked with God and knew God. Everything was beautiful. But a Great Serpent enchanted them with something that was good but something that was taken in the wrong way. And they fell asleep.

But God loved them so much He would stop at nothing to wake them. He cursed the world, subjected the world to futility in hope, and they *still* wouldn't wake up.

Then He had a marvelous idea, from before the foundation of the world: A second Adam who would come and stick His foot in the fire. They would see Him, and He would dwell in them. He would wake them up, and they would love Him even more than they did at first, because they would have seen His glory and grace.

A pretty great story.

If you were thinking during the sermon, “I just don't know if I have the courage to plunge my foot into the fire,” do you see it now?—

You *don't*. But *He* does, and He did.

If you came to this table you took His body broken and blood shed, and His Spirit inhabits you. His Spirit, I believe, even listens to the rebuke from Jesus the Risen Christ. His Spirit in you helps you to go to those places where you are afraid to go . . . face those things you are afraid to face . . . see what you were frightened to see—the glory of God the Father in Christ Jesus our Lord.

He will do it. Trust Him. Every day come to Him and say, “Jesus, I *need* you. I don't even *know* the places where I am blind; I don't even *know* the ways that I am asleep. Where I *do* see it and where I know it, I struggle to have the strength to even do anything about it. I even doubt that You exist. Help me! Help me, Jesus!”

That is music to His ears. That is what He has been waiting to hear. You see, once upon a time when we became enchanted we loved apples more than life.

Trust Him even in the scariest places. Amen.

A couple last things:

1. Puddleglum didn't plunge his foot into every fire he saw. But he plunged his foot into a fire when he needed to. "Let him who has ears to hear hear what the Spirit says to the churches."
2. If you were offended about what I said about the "pre-tribulation rapture" . . . maybe I'm wrong . . . I don't know. If I am, bonus! We're out of here before things get bad! But believe me — in this world you *will* have tribulations. But be of good cheer. He has overcome this world. Amen.

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