

## Revelation 3:20 and the Offer of Salvation

--

Daniel B. Wallace, Th.M, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of New Testament Studies  
Dallas Theological Seminary

---

This essay is part of a series of occasional short essays on "Scripture Twisting." The purpose of these very brief essays is to challenge certain popular interpretations of the Bible that really have little or no basis.

Revelation 3:20. Everyone knows this text. It's the verse we 'close' with when leading someone to the Lord. The picture we paint is that if someone invites Christ into their hearts, they will be saved. The only problem is that this is not what the verse is mostly likely talking about. The text reads: ἰδοὺ ἐστῆκα ἐπὶ τῆς θύρας καὶ κρούω: ἐάν τις ἀκούσῃ τῆς φωνῆς μου καὶ ἀνοίξῃ τὴν θύραν, καὶ εἰσελεύσονται πρὸς αὐτὸν καὶ δεῖνῃσιν μετ' αὐτοῦ καὶ αὐτὸς μετ' ἐμοῦ ("Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in **to** him and will dine with him and he [will dine] with me"). The crucial phrase for our purposes is "I shall come *in to* him." This text has often been taken as a text offering salvation to a lost sinner. Such a view is based on two assumptions: (1) that the Laodiceans, or at least some of them, were indeed lost, and (2) that εἰσελεύσονται πρὸς means "come *into*."

Both of these assumptions, however, are based on little evidence. Further, the *resultant* notion is anything but clear. To invite Christ into one's heart is hardly a clear picture of the gospel.

With reference to the first assumption, that those in the Laodicean church were not believers, note that in the preceding verse, the resurrected Lord declares, "Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline." Here φιλέω is used for "love"--a term that is *never* used of God/Jesus loving unbelievers in the NT. (Indeed, it would be impossible for God to have this kind of love for an unbeliever, for it routinely speaks of enjoyment and fellowship. ἀγαπάω, rather, is the verb used of God's love for unbelievers [cf. John 3:16], for it frequently, if not normally, speaks of commitment and, when used with God/Jesus as the subject, the idea is often of an unconditional love.<sup>1</sup>) This φιλέω must be applied to the Laodiceans here, for the verse concludes, "Be zealous, *therefore*, and repent." The inferential οὖν ("therefore") connects the two parts of the verse, indicating that the *Laodiceans* are to repent because Christ *loves* (φιλέω) *them!*<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>This is not to deny that there is some overlap between these two verbs, of course (such as seems to be the case in John 21). But when φιλέω, the rarer word, is used, and when it is used apart from ἀγαπάω, we would expect it bear its normal nuance.

<sup>2</sup>This, by the way, may have some implications for the perseverance of the saints, for it is impossible that God could have this kind of love for a person unless, in some sense, God could *enjoy* him. The implication, then, may be that the Laodiceans, even in their backslidden state, were still

The second assumption is that *ei̅sel̅ eusomai̅ proi̅'* means "come into." Such an assumption is based on a less than careful reading of the *English* text. The ASV, NASB, RSV, NRSV, for example, all correctly renders it "come in to." (Note the space between the prepositions.) The idea of "come into" would be expressed with *ei̅j̅'* as the independent preposition and would suggest a penetration into the person (thus, spawning the idea of entering into one's heart). However, spatially *proi̅'* means *toward*, not *into*. In all eight instances of *ei̅j̅er̅comai̅ proi̅'* in the NT, the meaning is "come in toward/before a person" (i.e., enter a building, house, etc., so as to be in the presence of someone), *never penetration* into the person himself/herself. In some instances, such a view would not only be absurd, but inappropriate (cf. Mark 6:25; 15:43; Luke 1:28; Acts 10:3; 11:3; 16:40; 17:2; 28:8).<sup>3</sup>

What, then, is this verse is affirming? First, it is *not* an offering of salvation. The implications of this are manifold. Among other things, to use this text as a salvation verse is a perversion of the simplicity of the gospel. Many people have allegedly "received Christ into their hearts" without understanding what that means or what the gospel means. Although this verse is picturesque, it actually muddies the waters of the truth of salvation. Reception of Christ is a *consequence*, not a condition, of salvation.<sup>4</sup> Second, as far as the *positive* meaning of this verse, it may refer to Christ having supremacy in the assembly or even to an invitation (and, consequently, a reminder) to believers to share with him in the coming kingdom. Either way, it is not a verse about salvation at all, for the Laodiceans were already saved.

Does this mean that those who have come to faith in Christ via Rev 3:20 are not saved? This answer needs some nuancing. First, if they have truly put their faith in Christ, and they understand that he *alone* can save them from their sins, then of course they are saved. The problem is that many people cling to the symbol but never understand the reality it is intended to represent. Most likely, tens of thousands of people have "invited Christ into [their] hearts," thinking that a mystical experience is what saves them. Then, they go on their merry way, living their lives as they did before. If you were to ask them, "How do you know that you are going to heaven?" they would respond, "Because I invited Christ into my heart." But if you probe, there is nothing beneath the shallowness of that reply. They did what someone told them to do, but never really embraced the Savior.

What then should we say when we are trying to lead someone to Christ? I think a better picture is simply what the New Testament uses as its normative word--

---

growing in some way.

<sup>3</sup> For more information, especially on the expression's usage in the LXX, see D. B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Zondervan, 1996) 380-82 (esp. 381).

<sup>4</sup>The idea that one is to receive Christ into one's heart is based on essentially two texts, Rev 3:20 and John 1:12. But neither passage addresses this. In John 1:12 those who *received* the word were Jews in Palestine who received Jesus into their homes and treated him as a true prophet. It is a historical statement, not a salvific one.

pisti"/pisteuw. The noun form (pisti") can be translated "faith," "belief," or "trust." The verb can be translated "I believe," "I have faith," "I trust." In some contexts the *object* of belief is emphasized (namely, Christ); in other contexts, the *kind* of belief is emphasized (namely, a genuine trust, an embracing). Thus, pisti" has this twofold force of content and conviction. To be saved, one must have the right object of faith (content); and one must truly put his trust entirely in that object (conviction).

If it causes us some measure of panic to have to use other than Revelation 3:20 when we share the gospel, keep in mind that the earliest Christians did not have this verse. Revelation is the last book of the Bible to be written. How was it possible for Peter and Paul and James to ever see anyone get saved without this verse? They never had it! But if I read the book of Acts correctly, they had a measure of success in sharing the gospel even in spite of this handicap.

---

**Fair Copyright Use:** These pages may be reproduced and used, without alteration, addition, or deletion, for any nonpecuniary or nonpublishing purpose without permission.