

# The Lost Letter To Laodicea

At the end of Paul's letter to the Colossian church he told them that when they were finished reading his letter they should send it to the church at Laodicea. Once they did that they should read the letter he wrote to the Laodicean church:

**Colossians 4:16:** "And when this epistle is read among you, cause that it be read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and that ye likewise read the epistle from Laodicea."

That in itself makes sense. Paul wasn't writing his letters solely for the benefit of the individual churches. He intended for his letters to be passed around (which is exactly what we do with them today). He wanted the Laodiceans to read his letter to the Colossians, and he wanted the Colossians to read his letter to the Laodiceans.

The problem is that the Bible doesn't contain a letter that Paul wrote to the Laodiceans! The only letter to the Laodicean church that's in the Bible is located in the book of Revelation, which was written long after Paul was martyred. So what was Paul talking about?

There are a couple different possibilities. First of all, it's possible that the letter which the Laodiceans held in their possession wasn't actually written to them. They might have had a copy of the book of Ephesians, and perhaps that's what Paul wanted the Colossians to read. If Paul's letters were being passed around then it wouldn't be surprising if they had a copy of someone else's letter.

Another possibility is that Paul really did write a letter to the Laodiceans church but it wasn't included in the canon of the Bible. This may seem disturbing, but it wouldn't be the first time the Bible referred to a book that wasn't included in its text. The

Old Testament refers to a number of books that have been lost. For example, there's the *Book of Jasher*:

**Joshua 10:13:** "And the sun stood still, and the moon stayed, until the people had avenged themselves upon their enemies. Is not this written in the book of Jasher? So the sun stood still in the midst of heaven, and hasted not to go down about a whole day."

There's the *Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Israel*:

**1 Kings 15:31:** "Now the rest of the acts of Nadab, and all that he did, are they not written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Israel?"

The *Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Judah*:

**1 Kings 14:29:** "Now the rest of the acts of Rehoboam, and all that he did, are they not written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Judah?"

The *Book of the Wars of the Lord*:

**Numbers 21:14:** "Wherefore it is said in the book of the wars of the LORD, What he did in the Red sea, and in the brooks of Arnon,"

The *Book of the Acts of Solomon*:

**1 Kings 11:41:** "And the rest of the acts of Solomon, and all that he did, and his wisdom, are they not written in the book of the acts of Solomon?"

The *Book of Jehu*:

**2 Chronicles 20:34:** “Now the rest of the acts of Jehoshaphat, first and last, behold, they are written in the book of Jehu the son of Hanani, who is mentioned in the book of the kings of Israel.”

The *Book of the Decree of Esther*:

**Esther 9:32:** “And the decree of Esther confirmed these matters of Purim; and it was written in the book.”

In addition, there's evidence that Paul wrote several letters to the Corinthian church that aren't included in the Bible either. All of this means that it's not unreasonable to think that Paul may have written a letter to the Laodiceans that wasn't preserved. It wouldn't be the first time.

Keep in mind that just because a letter was inspired does *not* mean that it couldn't have been lost. Everything that Jesus Christ has ever said was inspired, but I'm positive He said many things that aren't included in the gospels. The Bible is *not* a complete collection of everything that has ever been inspired. Instead it's a collection of inspired writings that God has decided to give to us and preserve through time.

If there really was a letter to Laodicea then we obviously didn't need it because *if we had needed it then God would have made sure that it didn't get lost!* 2 Timothy 3:16-17 tells us that the Scriptures we've been given are enough to equip us to do *all* good works:

**2 Timothy 3:16-17:** “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in

righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.”

If the Scriptures are enough to enable us to do all good works, then that means they contain everything we need. God gave us a complete set of instructions.

It's true that Paul's letter to the Laodicean church was not preserved in the text of the Bible. However, some scholars believed that at least part of his letter to Laodicea survived. Dr. William Cooper (in *Old Light on the Roman Church*) argues that the letter to Laodicea which John Wycliffe included in his 1388 edition of the New Testament is actually authentic. Although what Wycliffe included is incomplete and somewhat fragmented, Dr. Cooper argues that it seems to be genuine. This is how he sums up his rather lengthy defense of the letter:

“Assuming that the original Greek text of the Laodicean letter will remain undiscovered, we have reached the end of the road as far as direct evidence is concerned regarding the letter's historical authenticity. We have considered many objections and suppositions that have been put forward since the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> century that seek to discredit the letter as a blatant forgery, yet we have also seen that each objection is in turn discredited under the light of hard evidence.

“Marcion, we have seen, could not have composed the letter, as it bears nothing of his stamp or philosophy. Neither can any post-apostolic Latin or Roman author have written it, as it contains not one of the sentiments or ideas which so quickly infected the Roman church once the apostles were dead. It stands apart

from what we call the New Testament Apocryphal writings, lacking (unlike them) the slightest deviation in doctrine or innovation. It is certainly not what many nowadays claim it to be, namely a mis-mash of New Testament verses. The Latin text alone differs so much from the Latin New Testament verses with which it shares some similarity of sentiment, that it is plain that the Greek verses of the original differed from the Greek verses of the New Testament just as much...

“What we do have in the Laodicean letter is an admittedly damaged text, caused perhaps by the material (papyrus) upon which it was written. For that reason it might be more accurate to refer to the letter as the Laodicean fragment. But what little does remain of its contents is entirely “primitive” in doctrine and sentiment, which not one phrase, sentence or verse being in conflict with any part of the Bible, Old Testament or New. The vocabulary and syntax of the Latin text are entirely in keeping with a document that has been translated from the Greek... and it allows a most plausible reconstruction to be made of the probably Greek text...

“In short, when we consider the claims made by the opposing camps concerning the genuineness or otherwise of this letter, we are forced to the conclusion that those who would claim that it is a forgery, enjoy not the smallest item of credible evidence to support their view. Opinions and suppositions they have a-plenty, but no evidence.

“On the other hand, when we consider the arguments for the letter's historical authenticity, we must confess ourselves mightily impressed with the array of both internal and external items of evidence that together compel the view that this fragment is what it claims to be, namely a portion of a letter once written by Paul to the Laodicean church. As such it is a unique and precious item of immense archaeological, literary and theological importance concerning our Christian heritage, and it is this view of the present writer that nothing should be allowed to rob us of that.”

The letter which was reprinted in Wycliffe's Bible was translated from Latin into Middle English, which I found almost impossible to understand. Before I provide a “modern English” version, here's the “Middle English” version:

“Poul, apostle, not of men, ne by man, but bi Jhesu Crist, to the britheren that ben at Laodice, grace to you, and pees of God the fadir, and of the Lord Jhesu Crist. I do thankyngis to my God bi al my preier, that ye be dwelling and lastyng in him, abiding the biheest in the day of doom. For neithir the veyn spekyng of summe vnwise men hath lettide you, the whiche wolden turne you fro the treuthe of the gospel, that is prechid of me. And now hem that ben of me, to the profiyt of truthe of the gospel, God schal make disseruyng, and doyng benygnyte of werkis, and helthe of euerlasting lijf. And now my boondis ben open, which Y suffre in Crist Jhesu, in whiche Y glade and ioie. And that is to me to euerlastyng helthe, that this same thing be doon

by youre preiers, and mynystryng of the Holi Goost, either bi lijf, either bi deeth. Forsothe to me it is lijf to lyue in Crist, and to die ioie. And his mercy schal do in you the same thing, that ye moun haue the same loue, and that ye be of oo will. Therefore, ye weel biloued britheren, holde ye, and do ye in the dreede of God, as ye han herde the presence of me; and lijf schal be to you withouten eende. Sotheli it is God that worchith in you. And, my weel biloued britheren, do ye without eny withdrawyng what euer thingis ye don. Joie ye in Crist, and eschewe ye men defoulid in lucre, either foul wynnyng. Be alle youre askyngis open anentis God, and be ye stidefast in the witt of Crist. And do ye tho thingis that ben hool, and trewe, and chaast, and iust, and able to be loued; and kepe ye in herte tho thingis that ye haue herd and take; and pees schal be to you. Alle holi men greten you weel. The grace of oure Lord Jhesu Crist be with youre spirit. And do ye that pistil of Colocensis to be red to you.”

Here's a version I found that was updated to modern English. (The website where I found this translation said it was done by “M.D.M”<sup>1</sup>, who didn't believe the letter was authentic. However, from what I could tell it seemed like an accurate rendition of what the original Middle English version was saying.)

1 Paul, an apostle not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ, to the brethren who are of Laodicea.

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1 Source: <https://www.bible-researcher.com/laodiceans.html>

2 Grace to you and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

3 I give thanks to Christ through all my prayers, that you are continuing in him and persevering in his works, looking forward to the promise [of salvation] in the day of judgment.

4 Neither does the vain prattling of some intruders beguile you, that they may divert you from the truth of the Gospel which is preached by me.

5 And now God will cause that those who are [disciples] of mine will continue serving, to the increase of the truth of the Gospel, and performing goodness and the work of salvation of eternal life.

6 And now well known are my bonds which I suffer in Christ, in which I rejoice and am glad.

7 And this to me is for everlasting salvation, which also is wrought by your prayers, and by the superintendance of the Holy Spirit, whether through life or through death.

8 For to me, to live is to be in Christ, and to die is joy.

9 And likewise he will work his mercy in you that you may have the same love, and may be of one mind.

10 Therefore, dearly beloved, as you have heard in my presence, so hold fast and work in the fear



of God, and it will be life eternal for you.

11 For it is God who works in you.

12 And do without retreating whatever you do.

13 And for the rest, dearly beloved, rejoice in Christ, and beware of those who are sordid in worldly gain.

14 Let all your petitions be made openly before God, and be firm in the thinking of Christ.

15 And do those things that are sound, and true, and sober, and just, and amiable.

16 And what you have heard and received, retain in your heart.

17 And peace shall be with you.

18 The saints salute you.

19 The grace of the Lord Jesus be with your spirit.

20 And cause [this letter] to be read to the Colossians and that of the Colossians to you.

So there you have it. It's possible that what we have in those 20 verses is a portion of Paul's letter to the Laodicean church.

One thing that strikes me about this letter is that it doesn't cover any new ground. If that letter had been entirely lost we wouldn't have been any worse off because everything that's mentioned in this letter is covered in greater detail elsewhere in

the Bible. The Word of God that was preserved for us in the Old and New Testament really is complete, and does enable us to carry out all good works (2 Timothy 3:16-17). If this is indeed one of the “lost books” then it don't add anything important – which is exactly what I would have expected.