

BACKGROUND AND MEANING OF THE TEMPERATURE WORDS IN REVELATION 3:15-16

Hot, Cold and Lukewarm

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Though it is not absolutely necessary for us to understand the historical background of a verse, we can often learn some interesting things about the passage, as well as some of the reasons it was written the way it is.

The people who first received the warning of Revelation 3:15-16 lived in the city of Laodicea, located in what is now southwest Turkey. This city obtained its water from a source several miles away. The water traveled through stone pipes, which resulted in a strong mineral taste. Furthermore, by the time it reached the city, it was the temperature of the surrounding environment (= lukewarm, tepid). Because of these factors, it was, at best, barely drinkable.

Interestingly, two nearby cities were known for the *desirable* qualities of their water: Colossae was supplied by a cold mountain spring; Hierapolis had medicinal hot springs.

INTERPRETING THE TEMPERATURE WORDS

There are two main views on how the words *hot* and *cold* should be interpreted in this passage. Both views have credibility, and could be supported by verses found elsewhere in Scripture. It should be noted that, regardless of how we understand the words *hot* and *cold*, the concept of *lukewarm* (which is the main focus of this passage) is nearly the same for both views.

VIEW 1: This view interprets the temperature words as referring to *three spiritual conditions*. Those who hold to this view believe that the word "hot" refers to someone who is "spiritually hot or fervent," whereas the word "cold" refers to someone who is "spiritually stagnant or dead" (unsaved). With this view, "lukewarm" would refer to someone who *claims* to be spiritually "rich" (or "hot"), but who *lives* like someone who is spiritually "cold." This person claims to be something that he isn't (see v. 17) - and to Jesus, this is totally repulsive.

VIEW 2: This view focuses on the *refreshing qualities of water*. Cold water can be quite refreshing to someone who is hot and thirsty. Hot water can be quite soothing, or even healing (in a hot bath). In contrast, lukewarm mineral water can be quite sickening. Those who support this view would say that the passage is teaching us that Jesus wants us to be *different* from the sinful world around us. He wants us to have a refreshing (cooling) or healing (hot) influence in the world (or in some other way have a positive spiritual impact on it). People who *claim* to be Christians, but who still live like the world around them (called "lukewarm" by Jesus) are in a condition that Jesus considers quite repulsive - and a denial of everything for which he died.

NOTE: Some people erroneously claim that these "lukewarm" people are saved. It is true that they *claim* to be saved - they may have even "prayed a prayer" or "walked an aisle" or become involved in "religious activities," and convinced themselves that they are saved. However, their day-to-day actions deny their words - and Jesus himself claims to be *outside* their lives. [When he makes this claim (3:20), he is *not* speaking to them as a group, but as individuals. He offers each person, individually, the opportunity to change and to become an "overcomer" (3:19-22).]