

# 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).]

## Additional Comments About Lukewarmness

Lukewarmness may show itself in many ways. It may express itself, quite simply, as a lack of concern for spiritual matters. Quite frequently, however, it will be characterized by a self-perception of "spirituality" that does not match one's true character. The church of Laodicea boasted about spiritual richness, but Jesus said they were spiritually impoverished. They claimed to be "Christians" but there was nothing in their lives to prove it. And they were so fully convinced of their views, that they couldn't see their true spiritual condition.

They had the "talk" without the "walk." Their boasts about spirituality went against the truth about their lives. For them, it had become a matter of "Rich" contrasted to "Wretched": *They* claimed they were rich; *Jesus* claimed they were wretched.

They had "religion," but not a genuine "relationship" (fellowship) with Jesus. They did not lack in religious activities - it's just that their religious activities were of no value in Jesus' eyes. Their activities had no meaning, because they were built on the wrong foundation.

They had an indifference to *true* spiritual values and conduct; hence they played a *passive* role in the "spiritual battle" - something which a genuine disciple of Jesus will be *active* in. They would have viewed themselves as spiritually active, but from Jesus' perspective, they had *compromised* true spirituality, by accepting the world's false definition of it. Since they could no longer recognize what was genuine, they became indifferent to it.

How did this happen to them? It was *not* by submission to the Bible and its values. Nor was it from building a friendship relationship with Christ - something that is necessary, in order to see things *his* way. *They did neither of these*. Instead, they defined spirituality based on the values they *already had* - which they had learned from the *world*. They focused on what was superficial, rather than on what was genuine. In many respects, they were like their surroundings - like the people around them (even though they boasted that they were *different*). They were like lukewarm water, which takes on the temperature of the surrounding environment. And like lukewarm water, Jesus was about to spit them out of his mouth.

## A FEW COMMENTS BY OTHERS

### *Albert Barnes' Notes on the Bible*

... the possession of great wealth tends to make a professed Christian self-complacent and satisfied in every respect; to make him feel that, although he may not have much religion, yet he is on the whole well off; and to produce, in religion, a state of just such lukewarmness as the Savior here says was loathsome and odious... In all respects their needs were satisfied; they had enough of everything. They felt, therefore, no stimulus to effort; they sat down in contentment, self-complacency, and indifference.

### *John Gill's Exposition on the Entire Bible*

A lukewarm professor [someone who professes to be a Christian] is one that serves God and mammon [wealth]; that halts between two opinions, and knows not what religion is best, and cares little for any, yet keeps in a round of duty, though indifferent to it, and contents himself with it; and is unconcerned about the life and power of godliness, and takes up with the external form of it; and has no thought about the glory of God, the interest of Christ and truth.